

My first impulse is to scramble from the tree, but I'm belted in. Somehow my fumbling fingers release the buckle and I fall to the ground in a heap, still snarled in my sleeping bag. There's no time for any kind of packing. Fortunately, my backpack and water bottle are already in the bag. I shove in the belt, hoist the bag over my shoulder, and flee.

The world has transformed to flame and smoke. Burning branches crack from trees and fall in showers of sparks at my feet. All I can do is follow the others, the rabbits and deer, and I even spot a wild dog pack shooting through the woods. I trust their sense of direction because their instincts are sharper than mine. But they are much faster, flying through the underbrush so gracefully as my boots catch on roots and fallen tree limbs, that there's no way I can keep apace with them.

The heat is horrible, but worse than the heat is the smoke, which threatens to suffocate me at any moment. I pull the top of my shirt up over my nose, grateful to find it soaked in sweat, and it offers a thin veil of protection. And I run, choking, my bag banging against my back, my face cut with branches that materialize from the gray haze without warning, because I know I am supposed to run.

This was no tribute's campfire gone out of control, no accidental occurrence. The flames that bear down on me have an unnatural height, a uniformity that marks them as human-made, machine-made, Gamemaker-made. Things have been too quiet today. No deaths, perhaps no fights at all. The audience in the Capitol will be getting bored, claiming that these Games are verging on dullness. This is the one thing the Games must not do.

It's not hard to follow the Gamemakers' motivation. There is the Career pack and then there are the rest of us, probably spread far and thin across the arena. This fire is designed to flush us out, to drive us together. It may not be the most original device I've seen, but it's very, very effective.

I hurdle over a burning log. Not high enough. The tail end of my jacket catches on fire and I have to stop to rip it from my body and stamp out the flames. But I don't dare leave the jacket, scorched and smoldering as it is, I take the risk of shoving it in my sleeping bag, hoping the lack of air will quell what I haven't extinguished. This is all I have, what I carry on my back, and it's little enough to survive with.

In a matter of minutes, my throat and nose are burning. The coughing begins soon after and my lungs begin to feel as if they are actually being cooked. Discomfort turns to distress until each breath sends a searing pain through my chest. I manage to take cover under a stone outcropping just as the vomiting begins, and I lose my meager supper and whatever water has remained in my stomach. Crouching on

my hands and knees, I retch until there's nothing left to come up.

I know I need to keep moving, but I'm trembling and light-headed now, gasping for air. I allow myself about a spoonful of water to rinse my mouth and spit then take a few swallows from my bottle. *You get one minute*, I tell myself. *One minute to rest*. I take the time to reorder my supplies, wad up the sleeping bag, and messily stuff everything into the backpack. My minute's up. I know it's time to move on, but the smoke has clouded my thoughts. The swift-footed animals that were my compass have left me behind. I know I haven't been in this part of the woods before, there were no sizable rocks like the one I'm sheltering against on my earlier travels. Where are the Gamemakers driving me? Back to the lake? To a whole new terrain filled with new dangers? I had just found a few hours of peace at the pond when this attack began. Would there be any way I could travel parallel to the fire and work my way back there, to a source of water at least? The wall of fire must have an end and it won't burn indefinitely. Not because the Gamemakers couldn't keep it fueled but because, again, that would invite accusations of boredom from the audience. If I could get back behind the fire line, I could avoid meeting up with the Careers. I've just decided to try and loop back around, although it will require miles of travel away from the inferno and then a very circuitous route back, when the first fireball blasts into the rock about two feet from my head. I spring out from under my ledge, energized by renewed fear.

The game has taken a twist. The fire was just to get us moving, now the audience will get to see some real fun. When I hear the next hiss, I flatten on the ground, not taking time to look. The fireball hits a tree off to my left, engulfing it in flames. To remain still is death. I'm barely on my feet before the third ball hits the ground where I was lying, sending a pillar of fire up behind me. Time loses meaning now as I frantically try to dodge the attacks. I can't see where they're being launched from, but it's not a hovercraft. The angles are not extreme enough. Probably this whole segment of the woods has been armed with precision launchers that are concealed in trees or rocks. Somewhere, in a cool and spotless room, a Gamemaker sits at a set of controls, fingers on the triggers that could end my life in a second. All that is needed is a direct hit.

Whatever vague plan I had conceived regarding returning to my pond is wiped from my mind as I zigzag and dive and leap to avoid the fireballs. Each one is only the size of an apple, but packs tremendous power on contact. Every sense I have goes into overdrive as the need to survive takes over. There's no time to judge if a move is the correct one. When there's a hiss, I act or die.

Something keeps me moving forward, though. A lifetime of watching the Hunger Games lets me know that certain areas of the arena are rigged for certain attacks. And that if I can just get away from this section, I might be able to move out of reach of the launchers. I might also then fall straight into a pit of vipers, but I can't worry about that now.

How long I scramble along dodging the fireballs I can't say, but the attacks finally begin to abate. Which is good, because I'm retching again. This time it's an acidic substance that scalds my throat and makes its way into my nose as well. I'm forced to stop as my body convulses, trying desperately to rid itself of the poisons I've been sucking in during the attack. I wait for the next hiss, the next signal to bolt. It doesn't come. The force of the retching has squeezed tears out of my stinging eyes. My clothes are drenched in sweat. Somehow, through the smoke and vomit, I pick up the scent of singed hair. My hand fumbles to my braid and finds a fireball has seared off at least six inches of it. Strands of blackened hair crumble in my fingers. I stare at them, fascinated by the transformation, when the hissing registers.

My muscles react, only not fast enough this time. The fireball crashes into the ground at my side, but not before it skids across my right calf. Seeing my pants leg on fire sends me over the edge. I twist and scuttle backward on my hands and feet, shrieking, trying to remove myself from the horror. When I finally regain enough sense, I roll the leg back and forth on the ground, which stifles the worst of it. But then, without thinking, I rip away the remaining fabric with my bare hands.

I sit on the ground, a few yards from the blaze set off by the fireball. My calf is screaming, my hands covered in red welts. I'm shaking too hard to move. If the Gamemakers want to finish me off, now is the time.

I hear Cinna's voice, carrying images of rich fabric and

sparkling gems. "Katniss, the girl who was on fire." What a good laugh the Gamemakers must be having over that one. Perhaps, Cinna's beautiful costumes have even brought on this particular torture for me. I know he couldn't have foreseen this, must be hurting for me because, in fact, I believe he cares about me. But all in all, maybe showing up stark naked in that chariot would have been safer for me.

The attack is now over. The Gamemakers don't want me dead. Not yet anyway. Everyone knows they could destroy us all within seconds of the opening gong. The real sport of the Hunger Games is watching the tributes kill one another. Every so often, they do kill a tribute just to remind the players they can. But mostly, they manipulate us into confronting one another face-to-face. Which means, if I am no longer being fired at, there is at least one other tribute close at hand.

I would drag myself into a tree and take cover now if I could, but the smoke is still thick enough to kill me. I make myself stand and begin to limp away from the wall of flames that lights up the sky. It does not seem to be pursuing me any longer, except with its stinking black clouds.

Another light, daylight, begins to softly emerge. Swirls of smoke catch the sunbeams. My visibility is poor. I can see maybe fifteen yards in any direction. A tribute could easily be concealed from me here. I should draw my knife as a precaution, but I doubt my ability to hold it for long. The pain in my hands can in no way compete with that in my calf. I hate burns, have always hated them, even a small

one gotten from pulling a pan of bread from the oven. It is the worst kind of pain to me, but I have never experienced anything like this.

I'm so weary I don't even notice I'm in the pool until I'm ankle-deep. It's spring-fed, bubbling up out of a crevice in some rocks, and blissfully cool. I plunge my hands into the shallow water and feel instant relief. Isn't that what my mother always says? The first treatment for a burn is cold water? That it draws out the heat? But she means minor burns. Probably she'd recommend it for my hands. But what of my calf? Although I have not yet had the courage to examine it, I'm guessing that it's an injury in a whole different class.

I lie on my stomach at the edge of the pool for a while, dangling my hands in the water, examining the little flames on my fingernails that are beginning to chip off. Good. I've had enough fire for a lifetime.

I bathe the blood and ash from my face. I try to recall all I know about burns. They are common injuries in the Seam where we cook and heat our homes with coal. Then there are the mine accidents. . . . A family once brought in an unconscious young man pleading with my mother to help him. The district doctor who's responsible for treating the miners had written him off, told the family to take him home to die. But they wouldn't accept this. He lay on our kitchen table, senseless to the world. I got a glimpse of the wound on his thigh, gaping, charred flesh, burned clear down to the bone, before I ran from the house. I went to the woods and hunted the entire day, haunted by the

gruesome leg, memories of my father's death. What's funny was, Prim, who's scared of her own shadow, stayed and helped. My mother says healers are born, not made. They did their best, but the man died, just like the doctor said he would.

My leg is in need of attention, but I still can't look at it. What if it's as bad as the man's and I can see my bone? Then I remember my mother saying that if a burn's severe, the victim might not even feel pain because the nerves would be destroyed. Encouraged by this, I sit up and swing my leg in front of me.

I almost faint at the sight of my calf. The flesh is a brilliant red covered with blisters. I force myself to take deep, slow breaths, feeling quite certain the cameras are on my face. I can't show weakness at this injury. Not if I want help. Pity does not get you aid. Admiration at your refusal to give in does. I cut the remains of the pant leg off at the knee and examine the injury more closely. The burned area is about the size of my hand. None of the skin is blackened. I think it's not too bad to soak. Gingerly I stretch out my leg into the pool, propping the heel of my boot on a rock so the leather doesn't get too sodden, and sigh, because this does offer some relief. I know there are herbs, if I could find them, that would speed the healing, but I can't quite call them to mind. Water and time will probably be all I have to work with.

Should I be moving on? The smoke is slowly clearing but still too heavy to be healthy. If I do continue away from the fire, won't I be walking straight into the weapons of the Careers? Besides, every time I lift my leg from the water,

the pain rebounds so intensely I have to slide it back in. My hands are slightly less demanding. They can handle small breaks from the pool. So I slowly put my gear back in order. First I fill my bottle with the pool water, treat it, and when enough time has passed, begin to rehydrate my body. After a time, I force myself to nibble on a cracker, which helps settle my stomach. I roll up my sleeping bag. Except for a few black marks, it's relatively unscathed. My jacket's another matter. Stinking and scorched, at least a foot of the back beyond repair. I cut off the damaged area leaving me with a garment that comes just to the bottom of my ribs. But the hood's intact and it's far better than nothing.

Despite the pain, drowsiness begins to take over. I'd take to a tree and try to rest, except I'd be too easy to spot. Besides, abandoning my pool seems impossible. I neatly arrange my supplies, even settle my pack on my shoulders, but I can't seem to leave. I spot some water plants with edible roots and make a small meal with my last piece of rabbit. Sip water. Watch the sun make its slow arc across the sky. Where would I go anyway that is any safer than here? I lean back on my pack, overcome by drowsiness. *If the Careers want me, let them find me*, I think before drifting into a stupor. *Let them find me*.

And find me, they do. It's lucky I'm ready to move on because when I hear the feet, I have less than a minute head start. Evening has begun to fall. The moment I awake, I'm up and running, splashing across the pool, flying into the underbrush. My leg slows me down, but I sense my pursuers

are not as speedy as they were before the fire, either. I hear their coughs, their raspy voices calling to one another.

Still, they are closing in, just like a pack of wild dogs, and so I do what I have done my whole life in such circumstances. I pick a high tree and begin to climb. If running hurt, climbing is agonizing because it requires not only exertion but direct contact of my hands on the tree bark. I'm fast, though, and by the time they've reached the base of my trunk, I'm twenty feet up. For a moment, we stop and survey one another. I hope they can't hear the pounding of my heart.

*This could be it*, I think. What chance do I have against them? All six are there, the five Careers and Peeta, and my only consolation is they're pretty beat-up, too. Even so, look at their weapons. Look at their faces, grinning and snarling at me, a sure kill above them. It seems pretty hopeless. But then something else registers. They're bigger and stronger than I am, no doubt, but they're also heavier. There's a reason it's me and not Gale who ventures up to pluck the highest fruit, or rob the most remote bird nests. I must weigh at least fifty or sixty pounds less than the smallest Career.

Now I smile. "How's everything with you?" I call down cheerfully.

This takes them aback, but I know the crowd will love it.

"Well enough," says the boy from District 2. "Yourself?"

"It's been a bit warm for my taste," I say. I can almost

hear the laughter from the Capitol. "The air's better up here. Why don't you come on up?"

"Think I will," says the same boy.

"Here, take this, Cato," says the girl from District 1, and she offers him the silver bow and sheath of arrows. My bow! My arrows! Just the sight of them makes me so angry I want to scream, at myself, at that traitor Peeta for distracting me from having them. I try to make eye contact with him now, but he seems to be intentionally avoiding my gaze as he polishes his knife with the edge of his shirt.

"No," says Cato, pushing away the bow. "I'll do better with my sword." I can see the weapon, a short, heavy blade at his belt.

I give Cato time to hoist himself into the tree before I begin to climb again. Gale always says I remind him of a squirrel the way I can scurry up even the slenderest limbs. Part of it's my weight, but part of it's practice. You have to know where to place your hands and feet. I'm another thirty feet in the air when I hear the crack and look down to see Cato flailing as he and a branch go down. He hits the ground hard and I'm hoping he possibly broke his neck when he gets back to his feet, swearing like a fiend.

The girl with the arrows, Glimmer I hear someone call her — ugh, the names the people in District 1 give their children are so ridiculous — anyway Glimmer scales the tree until the branches begin to crack under her feet and then has the good sense to stop. I'm at least eighty feet high now. She tries to shoot me and it's immediately evident that she's incompetent with a bow. One of the arrows gets lodged

in the tree near me though and I'm able to seize it. I wave it teasingly above her head, as if this was the sole purpose of retrieving it, when actually I mean to use it if I ever get the chance. I could kill them, every one of them, if those silver weapons were in my hands.

The Careers regroup on the ground and I can hear them growling conspiratorially among themselves, furious I have made them look foolish. But twilight has arrived and their window of attack on me is closing. Finally, I hear Peeta say harshly, "Oh, let her stay up there. It's not like she's going anywhere. We'll deal with her in the morning."

Well, he's right about one thing. I'm going nowhere. All the relief from the pool water has gone, leaving me to feel the full potency of my burns. I scoot down to a fork in the tree and clumsily prepare for bed. Put on my jacket. Lay out my sleeping bag. Belt myself in and try to keep from moaning. The heat of the bag's too much for my leg. I cut a slash in the fabric and hang my calf out in the open air. I drizzle water on the wound, my hands.

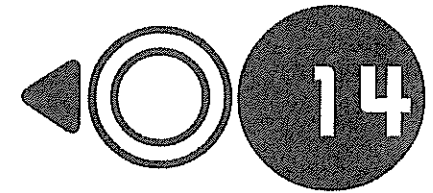
All my bravado is gone. I'm weak from pain and hunger but can't bring myself to eat. Even if I can last the night, what will the morning bring? I stare into the foliage trying to will myself to rest, but the burns forbid it. Birds are settling down for the night, singing lullabies to their young. Night creatures emerge. An owl hoots. The faint scent of a skunk cuts through the smoke. The eyes of some animal peer at me from the neighboring tree — a possum maybe — catching the firelight from the Careers' torches. Suddenly, I'm up on one elbow. Those are no possum's eyes, I know

their glassy reflection too well. In fact, those are not animal eyes at all. In the last dim rays of light, I make her out, watching me silently from between the branches.

Rue.

How long has she been here? The whole time probably. Still and unobserved as the action unfolded beneath her. Perhaps she headed up her tree shortly before I did, hearing the pack was so close.

For a while we hold each other's gaze. Then, without even rustling a leaf, her little hand slides into the open and points to something above my head.



My eyes follow the line of her finger up into the foliage above me. At first, I have no idea what she's pointing to, but then, about fifteen feet up, I make out the vague shape in the dimming light. But of . . . of what? Some sort of animal? It looks about the size of a raccoon, but it hangs from the bottom of a branch, swaying ever so slightly. There's something else. Among the familiar evening sounds of the woods, my ears register a low hum. Then I know. It's a wasp nest.

Fear shoots through me, but I have enough sense to keep still. After all, I don't know what kind of wasp lives there. It could be the ordinary leave-us-alone-and-we'll-leave-you-alone type. But these are the Hunger Games, and ordinary isn't the norm. More likely they will be one of the Capitol's mutations, tracker jackers. Like the jabberjays, these killer wasps were spawned in a lab and strategically placed, like land mines, around the districts during the war. Larger than regular wasps, they have a distinctive solid gold body and a sting that raises a lump the size of a plum on contact. Most people can't tolerate more than a few stings. Some die at once. If you live, the hallucinations brought on by the venom have actually driven people to madness. And there's another thing, these wasps will hunt down anyone

who disturbs their nest and attempt to kill them. That's where the tracker part of the name comes from.

After the war, the Capitol destroyed all the nests surrounding their city, but the ones near the districts were left untouched. Another reminder of our weakness, I suppose, just like the Hunger Games. Another reason to keep inside the fence of District 12. When Gale and I come across a tracker jacker nest, we immediately head in the opposite direction.

So is that what hangs above me? I look back to Rue for help, but she's melted into her tree.

Given my circumstances, I guess it doesn't matter what type of wasp nest it is. I'm wounded and trapped. Darkness has given me a brief reprieve, but by the time the sun rises, the Careers will have formulated a plan to kill me. There's no way they could do otherwise after I've made them look so stupid. That nest may be the sole option I have left. If I can drop it down on them, I may be able to escape. But I'll risk my life in the process.

Of course, I'll never be able to get in close enough to the actual nest to cut it free. I'll have to saw off the branch at the trunk and send the whole thing down. The serrated portion of my knife should be able to manage that. But can my hands? And will the vibration from the sawing raise the swarm? And what if the Careers figure out what I'm doing and move their camp? That would defeat the whole purpose.

I realize that the best chance I'll have to do the sawing without drawing notice will be during the anthem. That

could begin any time. I drag myself out of my bag, make sure my knife is secured in my belt, and begin to make my way up the tree. This in itself is dangerous since the branches are becoming precariously thin even for me, but I persevere. When I reach the limb that supports the nest, the humming becomes more distinctive. But it's still oddly subdued if these are tracker jackers. *It's the smoke*, I think. *It's sedated them*. This was the one defense the rebels found to battle the wasps.

The seal of the Capitol shines above me and the anthem blares out. *It's now or never*, I think, and begin to saw. Blisters burst on my right hand as I awkwardly drag the knife back and forth. Once I've got a groove, the work requires less effort but is almost more than I can handle. I grit my teeth and saw away, occasionally glancing at the sky to register that there were no deaths today. That's all right. The audience will be sated seeing me injured and treed and the pack below me. But the anthem's running out and I'm only three quarters of the way through the wood when the music ends, the sky goes dark, and I'm forced to stop.

Now what? I could probably finish off the job by sense of feel but that may not be the smartest plan. If the wasps are too groggy, if the nest catches on its way down, if I try to escape, this could all be a deadly waste of time. Better, I think, to sneak up here at dawn and send the nest into my enemies.

In the faint light of the Careers' torches, I inch back down to my fork to find the best surprise I've ever had. Sitting on my sleeping bag is a small plastic pot attached to



a silver parachute. My first gift from a sponsor! Haymitch must have had it sent in during the anthem. The pot easily fits in the palm of my hand. What can it be? Not food surely. I unscrew the lid and I know by the scent that it's medicine. Cautiously, I probe the surface of the ointment. The throbbing in my fingertip vanishes.

"Oh, Haymitch," I whisper. "Thank you." He has not abandoned me. Not left me to fend entirely for myself. The cost of this medicine must be astronomical. Probably not one but many sponsors have contributed to buy this one tiny pot. To me, it is priceless.

I dip two fingers in the jar and gently spread the balm over my calf. The effect is almost magical, erasing the pain on contact, leaving a pleasant cooling sensation behind. This is no herbal concoction that my mother grinds up out of woodland plants, it's high-tech medicine brewed up in the Capitol's labs. When my calf is treated, I rub a thin layer into my hands. After wrapping the pot in the parachute, I nestle it safely away in my pack. Now that the pain has eased, it's all I can do to reposition myself in my bag before I plunge into sleep.

A bird perched just a few feet from me alerts me that a new day is dawning. In the gray morning light, I examine my hands. The medicine has transformed all the angry red patches to a soft baby-skin pink. My leg still feels inflamed, but that burn was far deeper. I apply another coat of medicine and quietly pack up my gear. Whatever happens, I'm going to have to move and move fast. I also make myself eat a cracker and a strip of beef and drink a few cups of water.

Almost nothing stayed in my stomach yesterday, and I'm already starting to feel the effects of hunger.

Below me, I can see the Career pack and Peeta asleep on the ground. By her position, leaning up against the trunk of the tree, I'd guess Glimmer was supposed to be on guard, but fatigue overcame her.

My eyes squint as they try to penetrate the tree next to me, but I can't make out Rue. Since she tipped me off, it only seems fair to warn her. Besides, if I'm going to die today, it's Rue I want to win. Even if it means a little extra food for my family, the idea of Peeta being crowned victor is unbearable.

I call Rue's name in a hushed whisper and the eyes appear, wide and alert, at once. She points up to the nest again. I hold up my knife and make a sawing motion. She nods and disappears. There's a rustling in a nearby tree. Then the same noise again a bit farther off. I realize she's leaping from tree to tree. It's all I can do not to laugh out loud. Is this what she showed the Gamemakers? I imagine her flying around the training equipment never touching the floor. She should have gotten at least a ten.

Rosy streaks are breaking through in the east. I can't afford to wait any longer. Compared to the agony of last night's climb, this one is a cinch. At the tree limb that holds the nest, I position the knife in the groove and I'm about to draw the teeth across the wood when I see something moving. There, on the nest. The bright gold gleam of a tracker jacker lazily making its way across the papery gray surface. No question, it's acting a little subdued, but the wasp is up

and moving and that means the others will be out soon as well. Sweat breaks out on the palms of my hands, beading up through the ointment, and I do my best to pat them dry on my shirt. If I don't get through this branch in a matter of seconds, the entire swarm could emerge and attack me.

There's no sense in putting it off. I take a deep breath, grip the knife handle and bear down as hard as I can. *Back, forth, back, forth!* The tracker jackers begin to buzz and I hear them coming out. *Back, forth, back, forth!* A stabbing pain shoots through my knee and I know one has found me and the others will be honing in. *Back, forth, back, forth.* And just as the knife cuts through, I shove the end of the branch as far away from me as I can. It crashes down through the lower branches, snagging temporarily on a few but then twisting free until it smashes with a thud on the ground. The nest bursts open like an egg, and a furious swarm of tracker jackers takes to the air.

I feel a second sting on the cheek, a third on my neck, and their venom almost immediately makes me woozy. I cling to the tree with one arm while I rip the barbed stingers out of my flesh. Fortunately, only these three tracker jackers had identified me before the nest went down. The rest of the insects have targeted their enemies on the ground.

It's mayhem. The Careers have woken to a full-scale tracker jacker attack. Peeta and a few others have the sense to drop everything and bolt. I can hear cries of "To the lake! To the lake!" and know they hope to evade the wasps by taking to the water. It must be close if they think they can

outdistance the furious insects. Glimmer and another girl, the one from District 4, are not so lucky. They receive multiple stings before they're even out of my view. Glimmer appears to go completely mad, shrieking and trying to bat the wasps off with her bow, which is pointless. She calls to the others for help but, of course, no one returns. The girl from District 4 staggers out of sight, although I wouldn't bet on her making it to the lake. I watch Glimmer fall, twitch hysterically around on the ground for a few minutes, and then go still.

The nest is nothing but an empty shell. The wasps have vanished in pursuit of the others. I don't think they'll return, but I don't want to risk it. I scamper down the tree and hit the ground running in the opposite direction of the lake. The poison from the stingers makes me wobbly, but I find my way back to my own little pool and submerge myself in the water, just in case any wasps are still on my trail. After about five minutes, I drag myself onto the rocks. People have not exaggerated the effects of the tracker jacker stings. Actually, the one on my knee is closer to an orange than a plum in size. A foul-smelling green liquid oozes from the places where I pulled out the stingers.

The swelling. The pain. The ooze. Watching Glimmer twitching to death on the ground. It's a lot to handle before the sun has even cleared the horizon. I don't want to think about what Glimmer must look like now. Her body disfigured. Her swollen fingers stiffening around the bow . . .

The bow! Somewhere in my befuddled mind one thought connects to another and I'm on my feet, teetering

through the trees back to Glimmer. The bow. The arrows. I must get them. I haven't heard the cannons fire yet, so perhaps Glimmer is in some sort of coma, her heart still struggling against the wasp venom. But once it stops and the cannon signals her death, a hovercraft will move in and retrieve her body, taking the only bow and sheath of arrows I've seen out of the Games for good. And I refuse to let them slip through my fingers again!

I reach Glimmer just as the cannon fires. The tracker jackers have vanished. This girl, so breathtakingly beautiful in her golden dress the night of the interviews, is unrecognizable. Her features eradicated, her limbs three times their normal size. The stinger lumps have begun to explode, spewing putrid green liquid around her. I have to break several of what used to be her fingers with a stone to free the bow. The sheath of arrows is pinned under her back. I try to roll over her body by pulling on one arm, but the flesh disintegrates in my hands and I fall back on the ground.

Is this real? Or have the hallucinations begun? I squeeze my eyes tight and try to breathe through my mouth, ordering myself not to become sick. Breakfast must stay down, it might be days before I can hunt again. A second cannon fires and I'm guessing the girl from District 4 has just died. I hear the birds fall silent and then one give the warning call, which means a hovercraft is about to appear. Confused, I think it's for Glimmer, although this doesn't quite make sense because I'm still in the picture, still fighting for the arrows. I lurch back onto my knees and the trees around me begin to spin in circles. In the middle of the sky, I spot the

hovercraft. I throw myself over Glimmer's body as if to protect it but then I see the girl from District 4 being lifted into the air and vanishing.

"Do this!" I command myself. Clenching my jaw, I dig my hands under Glimmer's body, get a hold on what must be her rib cage, and force her onto her stomach. I can't help it, I'm hyperventilating now, the whole thing is so nightmarish and I'm losing my grasp on what's real. I tug on the silver sheath of arrows, but it's caught on something, her shoulder blade, something, and finally yank it free. I've just encircled the sheath with my arms when I hear the footsteps, several pairs, coming through the underbrush, and I realize the Careers have come back. They've come back to kill me or get their weapons or both.

But it's too late to run. I pull a slimy arrow from the sheath and try to position it on the bowstring but instead of one string I see three and the stench from the stings is so repulsive I can't do it. I can't do it. I can't do it.

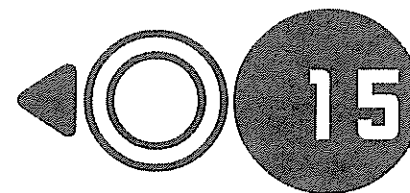
I'm helpless as the first hunter crashes through the trees, spear lifted, poised to throw. The shock on Peeta's face makes no sense to me. I wait for the blow. Instead his arm drops to his side.

"What are you still doing here?" he hisses at me. I stare uncomprehendingly as a trickle of water drips off a sting under his ear. His whole body starts sparkling as if he's been dipped in dew. "Are you mad?" He's prodding me with the shaft of the spear now. "Get up! Get up!" I rise, but he's still pushing at me. What? What is going on? He shoves me away from him hard. "Run!" he screams. "Run!"

Behind him, Cato slashes his way through the brush. He's sparkling wet, too, and badly stung under one eye. I catch the gleam of sunlight on his sword and do as Peeta says. Holding tightly to my bow and arrows, banging into trees that appear out of nowhere, tripping and falling as I try to keep my balance. Back past my pool and into unfamiliar woods. The world begins to bend in alarming ways. A butterfly balloons to the size of a house then shatters into a million stars. Trees transform to blood and splash down over my boots. Ants begin to crawl out of the blisters on my hands and I can't shake them free. They're climbing up my arms, my neck. Someone's screaming, a long high-pitched scream that never breaks for breath. I have a vague idea it might be me. I trip and fall into a small pit lined with tiny orange bubbles that hum like the tracker jacker nest. Tucking my knees up to my chin, I wait for death.

Sick and disoriented, I'm able to form only one thought:  
*Peeta Mellark just saved my life.*

Then the ants bore into my eyes and I black out.



I enter a nightmare from which I wake repeatedly only to find a greater terror awaiting me. All the things I dread most, all the things I dread for others manifest in such vivid detail I can't help but believe they're real. Each time I wake, I think, *At last, this is over*, but it isn't. It's only the beginning of a new chapter of torture. How many ways do I watch Prim die? Relive my father's last moments? Feel my own body ripped apart? This is the nature of the tracker jacker venom, so carefully created to target the place where fear lives in your brain.

When I finally do come to my senses, I lie still, waiting for the next onslaught of imagery. But eventually I accept that the poison must have finally worked its way out of my system, leaving my body wracked and feeble. I'm still lying on my side, locked in the fetal position. I lift a hand to my eyes to find them sound, untouched by ants that never existed. Simply stretching out my limbs requires an enormous effort. So many parts of me hurt, it doesn't seem worthwhile taking inventory of them. Very, very slowly I manage to sit up. I'm in a shallow hole, not filled with the humming orange bubbles of my hallucination but with old, dead leaves. My clothing's damp, but I don't know whether

pond water, dew, rain, or sweat is the cause. For a long time, all I can do is take tiny sips from my bottle and watch a beetle crawl up the side of a honeysuckle bush.

How long have I been out? It was morning when I lost reason. Now it's afternoon. But the stiffness in my joints suggests more than a day has passed, even two possibly. If so, I'll have no way of knowing which tributes survived that tracker jacker attack. Not Glimmer or the girl from District 4. But there was the boy from District 1, both tributes from District 2, and Peeta. Did they die from the stings? Certainly if they lived, their last days must have been as horrid as my own. And what about Rue? She's so small, it wouldn't take much venom to do her in. But then again . . . the tracker jackers would've had to catch her, and she had a good head start.

A foul, rotten taste pervades my mouth, and the water has little effect on it. I drag myself over to the honeysuckle bush and pluck a flower. I gently pull the stamen through the blossom and set the drop of nectar on my tongue. The sweetness spreads through my mouth, down my throat, warming my veins with memories of summer, and my home woods and Gale's presence beside me. For some reason, our discussion from that last morning comes back to me.

*"We could do it, you know."*

*"What?"*

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

And suddenly, I'm not thinking of Gale but of Peeta and . . . Peeta! *He saved my life!* I think. Because by the time

we met up, I couldn't tell what was real and what the tracker jacker venom had caused me to imagine. But if he did, and my instincts tell me he did, what for? Is he simply working the Lover Boy angle he initiated at the interview? Or was he actually trying to protect me? And if he was, what was he doing with those Careers in the first place? None of it makes sense.

I wonder what Gale made of the incident for a moment and then I push the whole thing out of my mind because for some reason Gale and Peeta do not coexist well together in my thoughts.

So I focus on the one really good thing that's happened since I landed in the arena. I have a bow and arrows! A full dozen arrows if you count the one I retrieved in the tree. They bear no trace of the noxious green slime that came from Glimmer's body — which leads me to believe that might not have been wholly real — but they have a fair amount of dried blood on them. I can clean them later, but I do take a minute to shoot a few into a nearby tree. They are more like the weapons in the Training Center than my ones at home, but who cares? That I can work with.

The weapons give me an entirely new perspective on the Games. I know I have tough opponents left to face. But I am no longer merely prey that runs and hides or takes desperate measures. If Cato broke through the trees right now, I wouldn't flee, I'd shoot. I find I'm actually anticipating the moment with pleasure.

But first, I have to get some strength back in my body. I'm very dehydrated again and my water supply is dangerously

low. The little padding I was able to put on by gorging myself during prep time in the Capitol is gone, plus several more pounds as well. My hip bones and ribs are more prominent than I remember them being since those awful months after my father's death. And then there are my wounds to contend with — burns, cuts, and bruises from smashing into the trees, and three tracker jacker stings, which are as sore and swollen as ever. I treat my burns with the ointment and try dabbing a bit on my stings as well, but it has no effect on them. My mother knew a treatment for them, some type of leaf that could draw out the poison, but she seldom had cause to use it, and I don't even remember its name let alone its appearance.

*Water first, I think. You can hunt along the way now.* It's easy to see the direction I came from by the path of destruction my crazed body made through the foliage. So I walk off in the other direction, hoping my enemies still lie locked in the surreal world of tracker jacker venom.

I can't move too quickly, my joints reject any abrupt motions. But I establish the slow hunter's tread I use when tracking game. Within a few minutes, I spot a rabbit and make my first kill with the bow and arrow. It's not my usual clean shot through the eye, but I'll take it. After about an hour, I find a stream, shallow but wide, and more than sufficient for my needs. The sun's hot and severe, so while I wait for my water to purify I strip down to my underclothes and wade into the mild current. I'm filthy from head to toe. I try splashing myself but eventually just lie down in the water for a few minutes, letting it wash off the soot and

blood and skin that has started to peel off my burns. After rinsing out my clothes and hanging them on bushes to dry, I sit on the bank in the sun for a bit, untangling my hair with my fingers. My appetite returns and I eat a cracker and a strip of beef. With a handful of moss, I polish the blood from my silver weapons.

Refreshed, I treat my burns again, braid back my hair, and dress in the damp clothes, knowing the sun will dry them soon enough. Following the stream against its current seems the smartest course of action. I'm traveling uphill now, which I prefer, with a source of fresh water not only for myself but possible game. I easily take out a strange bird that must be some form of wild turkey. Anyway, it looks plenty edible to me. By late afternoon, I decide to build a small fire to cook the meat, betting that dusk will help conceal the smoke and I can quench the fire by nightfall. I clean the game, taking extra care with the bird, but there's nothing alarming about it. Once the feathers are plucked, it's no bigger than a chicken, but it's plump and firm. I've just placed the first lot over the coals when I hear the twig snap.

In one motion, I turn to the sound, bringing the bow and arrow to my shoulder. There's no one there. No one I can see anyway. Then I spot the tip of a child's boot just peeking out from behind the trunk of a tree. My shoulders relax and I grin. She can move through the woods like a shadow, you have to give her that. How else could she have followed me? The words come out of my mouth before I can stop them.

"You know, they're not the only ones who can form alliances," I say.

For a moment, no response. Then one of Rue's eyes edges around the trunk. "You want me for an ally?"

"Why not? You saved me with those tracker jackers. You're smart enough to still be alive. And I can't seem to shake you anyway," I say. She blinks at me, trying to decide. "You hungry?" I can see her swallow hard, her eye flickering to the meat. "Come on then, I've had two kills today."

Rue tentatively steps out into the open. "I can fix your stings."

"Can you?" I ask. "How?"

She digs in the pack she carries and pulls out a handful of leaves. I'm almost certain they're the ones my mother uses. "Where'd you find those?"

"Just around. We all carry them when we work in the orchards. They left a lot of nests there," says Rue. "There are a lot here, too."

"That's right. You're District Eleven. Agriculture," I say. "Orchards, huh? That must be how you can fly around the trees like you've got wings." Rue smiles. I've landed on one of the few things she'll admit pride in. "Well, come on, then. Fix me up."

I plunk down by the fire and roll up my pant leg to reveal the sting on my knee. To my surprise, Rue places the handful of leaves into her mouth and begins to chew them. My mother would use other methods, but it's not like we have a lot of options. After a minute or so, Rue presses a gloppy green wad of chewed leaves and spit on my knee.

"Ohhh." The sound comes out of my mouth before I can stop it. It's as if the leaves are actually leaching the pain right out of the sting.

Rue gives a giggle. "Lucky you had the sense to pull the stingers out or you'd be a lot worse."

"Do my neck! Do my cheek!" I almost beg.

Rue stuffs another handful of leaves in her mouth, and soon I'm laughing because the relief is so sweet. I notice a long burn on Rue's forearm. "I've got something for that." I set aside my weapons and anoint her arm with the burn medicine.

"You have good sponsors," she says longingly.

"Have you gotten anything yet?" I ask. She shakes her head. "You will, though. Watch. The closer we get to the end, the more people will realize how clever you are." I turn the meat over.

"You weren't joking, about wanting me for an ally?" she asks.

"No, I meant it," I say. I can almost hear Haymitch groaning as I team up with this wispy child. But I want her. Because she's a survivor, and I trust her, and why not admit it? She reminds me of Prim.

"Okay," she says, and holds out her hand. We shake. "It's a deal."

Of course, this kind of deal can only be temporary, but neither of us mentions that.

Rue contributes a big handful of some sort of starchy root to the meal. Roasted over the fire, they have the sharp sweet taste of a parsnip. She recognizes the bird, too, some

wild thing they call a groosling in her district. She says sometimes a flock will wander into the orchard and they get a decent lunch that day. For a while, all conversation stops as we fill our stomachs. The groosling has delicious meat that's so fatty, the grease drips down your face when you bite into it.

"Oh," says Rue with a sigh. "I've never had a whole leg to myself before."

I'll bet she hasn't. I'll bet meat hardly ever comes her way. "Take the other," I say.

"Really?" she asks.

"Take whatever you want. Now that I've got a bow and arrows, I can get more. Plus I've got snares. I can show you how to set them," I say. Rue still looks uncertainly at the leg. "Oh, take it," I say, putting the drumstick in her hands. "It will only keep a few days anyway, and we've got the whole bird plus the rabbit." Once she's got hold of it, her appetite wins out and she takes a huge mouthful.

"I'd have thought, in District Eleven, you'd have a bit more to eat than us. You know, since you grow the food," I say.

Rue's eyes widen. "Oh, no, we're not allowed to eat the crops."

"They arrest you or something?" I ask.

"They whip you and make everyone else watch," says Rue. "The mayor's very strict about it."

I can tell by her expression that it's not that uncommon an occurrence. A public whipping's a rare thing in District 12, although occasionally one occurs. Technically, Gale and

I could be whipped on a daily basis for poaching in the woods — well, technically, we could get a whole lot worse — except all the officials buy our meat. Besides, our mayor, Madge's father, doesn't seem to have much taste for such events. Maybe being the least prestigious, poorest, most ridiculed district in the country has its advantages. Such as, being largely ignored by the Capitol as long as we produce our coal quotas.

"Do you get all the coal you want?" Rue asks.

"No," I answer. "Just what we buy and whatever we track in on our boots."

"They feed us a bit extra during harvest, so that people can keep going longer," says Rue.

"Don't you have to be in school?" I ask.

"Not during harvest. Everyone works then," says Rue.

It's interesting, hearing about her life. We have so little communication with anyone outside our district. In fact, I wonder if the Gamemakers are blocking out our conversation, because even though the information seems harmless, they don't want people in different districts to know about one another.

At Rue's suggestion, we lay out all our food to plan ahead. She's seen most of mine, but I add the last couple of crackers and beef strips to the pile. She's gathered quite a collection of roots, nuts, greens, and even some berries.

I roll an unfamiliar berry in my fingers. "You sure this is safe?"

"Oh, yes, we have them back home. I've been eating them for days," she says, popping a handful in her mouth. I



tentatively bite into one, and it's as good as our blackberries. Taking Rue on as an ally seems a better choice all the time. We divide up our food supplies, so in case we're separated, we'll both be set for a few days. Apart from the food, Rue has a small water skin, a homemade slingshot, and an extra pair of socks. She also has a sharp shard of rock she uses as a knife. "I know it's not much," she says as if embarrassed, "but I had to get away from the Cornucopia fast."

"You did just right," I say. When I spread out my gear, she gasps a little when she sees the sunglasses.

"How did you get those?" she asks.

"In my pack. They've been useless so far. They don't block the sun and they make it harder to see," I say with a shrug.

"These aren't for sun, they're for darkness," exclaims Rue. "Sometimes, when we harvest through the night, they'll pass out a few pairs to those of us highest in the trees. Where the torchlight doesn't reach. One time, this boy Martin, he tried to keep his pair. Hid it in his pants. They killed him on the spot."

"They killed a boy for taking these?" I say.

"Yes, and everyone knew he was no danger. Martin wasn't right in the head. I mean, he still acted like a three-year-old. He just wanted the glasses to play with," says Rue.

Hearing this makes me feel like District 12 is some sort of safe haven. Of course, people keel over from starvation all the time, but I can't imagine the Peacekeepers murdering a simpleminded child. There's a little girl, one of Greasy

Sae's grandkids, who wanders around the Hob. She's not quite right, but she's treated as a sort of pet. People toss her scraps and things.

"So what do these do?" I ask Rue, taking the glasses.

"They let you see in complete darkness," says Rue. "Try them tonight when the sun goes down."

I give Rue some matches and she makes sure I have plenty of leaves in case my stings flare up again. We extinguish our fire and head upstream until it's almost nightfall.

"Where do you sleep?" I ask her. "In the trees?" She nods. "In just your jacket?"

Rue holds up her extra pair of socks. "I have these for my hands."

I think of how cold the nights have been. "You can share my sleeping bag if you want. We'll both easily fit." Her face lights up. I can tell this is more than she dared hope for.

We pick a fork high in a tree and settle in for the night just as the anthem begins to play. There were no deaths today.

"Rue, I only woke up today. How many nights did I miss?" The anthem should block out our words, but still I whisper. I even take the precaution of covering my lips with my hand. I don't want the audience to know what I'm planning to tell her about Peeta. Taking a cue from me, she does the same.

"Two," she says. "The girls from Districts One and Four are dead. There's ten of us left."

"Something strange happened. At least, I think it did. It

might have been the tracker jacker venom making me imagine things," I say. "You know the boy from my district? Peeta? I think he saved my life. But he was with the Careers."

"He's not with them now," she says. "I've spied on their base camp by the lake. They made it back before they collapsed from the stingers. But he's not there. Maybe he did save you and had to run."

I don't answer. If, in fact, Peeta did save me, I'm in his debt again. And this can't be paid back. "If he did, it was all probably just part of his act. You know, to make people think he's in love with me."

"Oh," says Rue thoughtfully. "I didn't think that was an act."

"Course it is," I say. "He worked it out with our mentor." The anthem ends and the sky goes dark. "Let's try out these glasses." I pull out the glasses and slip them on. Rue wasn't kidding. I can see everything from the leaves on the trees to a skunk strolling through the bushes a good fifty feet away. I could kill it from here if I had a mind to. I could kill anyone.

"I wonder who else got a pair of these," I say.

"The Careers have two pairs. But they've got everything down by the lake," Rue says. "And they're so strong."

"We're strong, too," I say. "Just in a different way."

"You are. You can shoot," she says. "What can I do?"

"You can feed yourself. Can they?" I ask.

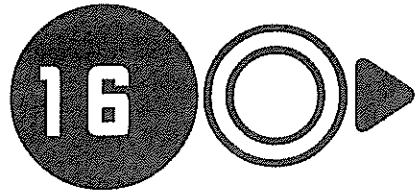
"They don't need to. They have all those supplies,"

Rue says.

"Say they didn't. Say the supplies were gone. How long would they last?" I say. "I mean, it's the Hunger Games, right?"

"But, Katniss, they're not hungry," says Rue.

"No, they're not. That's the problem," I agree. And for the first time, I have a plan. A plan that isn't motivated by the need for flight and evasion. An offensive plan. "I think we're going to have to fix that, Rue."



Rue has decided to trust me wholeheartedly. I know this because as soon as the anthem finishes she snuggles up against me and falls asleep. Nor do I have any misgivings about her, as I take no particular precautions. If she'd wanted me dead, all she would have had to do was disappear from that tree without pointing out the tracker jacker nest. Needling me, at the very back of my mind, is the obvious. Both of us can't win these Games. But since the odds are still against either of us surviving, I manage to ignore the thought.

Besides, I'm distracted by my latest idea about the Careers and their supplies. Somehow Rue and I must find a way to destroy their food. I'm pretty sure feeding themselves will be a tremendous struggle. Traditionally, the Career tributes' strategy is to get hold of all the food early on and work from there. The years when they have not protected it well — one year a pack of hideous reptiles destroyed it, another a Gamemakers' flood washed it away — those are usually the years that tributes from other districts have won. That the Careers have been better fed growing up is actually to their disadvantage, because they don't know how to be hungry. Not the way Rue and I do.

But I'm too exhausted to begin any detailed plan tonight. My wounds recovering, my mind still a bit foggy from the venom, and the warmth of Rue at my side, her head cradled on my shoulder, have given me a sense of security. I realize, for the first time, how very lonely I've been in the arena. How comforting the presence of another human being can be. I give in to my drowsiness, resolving that tomorrow the tables will turn. Tomorrow, it's the Careers who will have to watch their backs.

The boom of the cannon jolts me awake. The sky's streaked with light, the birds already chattering. Rue perches in a branch across from me, her hands cupping something. We wait, listening for more shots, but there aren't any.

"Who do you think that was?" I can't help thinking of Peeta.

"I don't know. It could have been any of the others," says Rue. "I guess we'll know tonight."

"Who's left again?" I ask.

"The boy from District One. Both tributes from Two. The boy from Three. Thresh and me. And you and Peeta," says Rue. "That's eight. Wait, and the boy from Ten, the one with the bad leg. He makes nine."

There's someone else, but neither of us can remember who it is.

"I wonder how that last one died," says Rue.

"No telling. But it's good for us. A death should hold the crowd for a bit. Maybe we'll have time to do something before the Gamemakers decide things have been moving too slowly," I say. "What's in your hands?"

"Breakfast," says Rue. She holds them out revealing two big eggs.

"What kind are those?" I ask.

"Not sure. There's a marshy area over that way. Some kind of waterbird," she says.

It'd be nice to cook them, but neither of us wants to risk a fire. My guess is the tribute who died today was a victim of the Careers, which means they've recovered enough to be back in the Games. We each suck out the insides of an egg, eat a rabbit leg and some berries. It's a good breakfast anywhere.

"Ready to do it?" I say, pulling on my pack.

"Do what?" says Rue, but by the way she bounces up, you can tell she's up for whatever I propose.

"Today we take out the Careers' food," I say.

"Really? How?" You can see the glint of excitement in her eyes. In this way, she's exactly the opposite of Prim, for whom adventures are an ordeal.

"No idea. Come on, we'll figure out a plan while we hunt," I say.

We don't get much hunting done though because I'm too busy getting every scrap of information I can out of Rue about the Careers' base. She's only been in to spy on them briefly, but she's observant. They have set up their camp beside the lake. Their supply stash is about thirty yards away. During the day, they've been leaving another tribute, the boy from District 3, to watch over the supplies.

"The boy from District Three?" I ask. "He's working with them?"

"Yes, he stays at the camp full-time. He got stung, too, when they drew the tracker jackers in by the lake," says Rue. "I guess they agreed to let him live if he acted as their guard. But he's not very big."

"What weapons does he have?" I ask.

"Not much that I could see. A spear. He might be able to hold a few of us off with that, but Thresh could kill him easily," says Rue.

"And the food's just out in the open?" I say. She nods. "Something's not quite right about that whole setup."

"I know. But I couldn't tell what exactly," says Rue. "Katniss, even if you could get to the food, how would you get rid of it?"

"Burn it. Dump it in the lake. Soak it in fuel." I poke Rue in the belly, just like I would Prim. "Eat it!" She giggles. "Don't worry, I'll think of something. Destroying things is much easier than making them."

For a while, we dig roots, we gather berries and greens, we devise a strategy in hushed voices. And I come to know Rue, the oldest of six kids, fiercely protective of her siblings, who gives her rations to the younger ones, who forages in the meadows in a district where the Peacekeepers are far less obliging than ours. Rue, who when you ask her what she loves most in the world, replies, of all things, "Music."

"Music?" I say. In our world, I rank music somewhere between hair ribbons and rainbows in terms of usefulness. At least a rainbow gives you a tip about the weather. "You have a lot of time for that?"

"We sing at home. At work, too. That's why I love your

pin," she says, pointing to the mockingjay that I've again forgotten about.

"You have mockingjays?" I ask.

"Oh, yes. I have a few that are my special friends. We can sing back and forth for hours. They carry messages for me," she says.

"What do you mean?" I say.

"I'm usually up highest, so I'm the first to see the flag that signals quitting time. There's a special little song I do," says Rue. She opens her mouth and sings a little four-note run in a sweet, clear voice. "And the mockingjays spread it around the orchard. That's how everyone knows to knock off," she continues. "They can be dangerous though, if you get too near their nests. But you can't blame them for that."

I unclasp the pin and hold it out to her. "Here, you take it. It has more meaning for you than me."

"Oh, no," says Rue, closing my fingers back over the pin. "I like to see it on you. That's how I decided I could trust you. Besides, I have this." She pulls a necklace woven out of some kind of grass from her shirt. On it, hangs a roughly carved wooden star. Or maybe it's a flower. "It's a good luck charm."

"Well, it's worked so far," I say, pinning the mockingjay back on my shirt. "Maybe you should just stick with that."

By lunch, we have a plan. By early afternoon, we are poised to carry it out. I help Rue collect and place the wood for the first two campfires, the third she'll have time for on her own. We decide to meet afterward at the site where we

ate our first meal together. The stream should help guide me back to it. Before I leave, I make sure Rue's well stocked with food and matches. I even insist she take my sleeping bag, in case it's not possible to rendezvous by nightfall.

"What about you? Won't you be cold?" she asks.

"Not if I pick up another bag down by the lake," I say. "You know, stealing isn't illegal here," I say with a grin.

At the last minute, Rue decides to teach me her mockingjay signal, the one she gives to indicate the day's work is done. "It might not work. But if you hear the mockingjays singing it, you'll know I'm okay, only I can't get back right away."

"Are there many mockingjays here?" I ask.

"Haven't you seen them? They've got nests everywhere," she says. I have to admit I haven't noticed.

"Okay, then. If all goes according to plan, I'll see you for dinner," I say.

Unexpectedly, Rue throws her arms around me. I only hesitate a moment before I hug her back.

"You be careful," she says to me.

"You, too," I say. I turn and head back to the stream, feeling somehow worried. About Rue being killed, about Rue not being killed and the two of us being left for last, about leaving Rue alone, about leaving Prim alone back home. No, Prim has my mother and Gale and a baker who has promised she won't go hungry. Rue has only me.

Once I reach the stream, I have only to follow it downhill to the place I initially picked it up after the tracker jacker attack. I have to be cautious as I move along the

water though, because I find my thoughts preoccupied with unanswered questions, most of which concern Peeta. The cannon that fired early this morning, did that signify his death? If so, how did he die? At the hand of a Career? And was that in revenge for letting me live? I struggle again to remember that moment over Glimmer's body, when he burst through the trees. But just the fact that he was sparkling leads me to doubt everything that happened.

I must have been moving very slowly yesterday because I reach the shallow stretch where I took my bath in just a few hours. I stop to replenish my water and add a layer of mud to my backpack. It seems bent on reverting to orange no matter how many times I cover it.

My proximity to the Careers' camp sharpens my senses, and the closer I get to them, the more guarded I am, pausing frequently to listen for unnatural sounds, an arrow already fitted into the string of my bow. I don't see any other tributes, but I do notice some of the things Rue has mentioned. Patches of the sweet berries. A bush with the leaves that healed my stings. Clusters of tracker jacker nests in the vicinity of the tree I was trapped in. And here and there, the black-and-white flash of a mockingjay wing in the branches high over my head.

When I reach the tree with the abandoned nest at the foot, I pause a moment, to gather my courage. Rue has given specific instructions on how to reach the best spying place near the lake from this point. *Remember*, I tell myself. *You're the hunter now, not them.* I get a firmer grasp on my bow and go on. I make it to the copse Rue has told me

about and again have to admire her cleverness. It's right at the edge of the wood, but the bushy foliage is so thick down low I can easily observe the Career camp without being spotted. Between us lies the flat expanse where the Games began.

There are four tributes. The boy from District 1, Cato and the girl from District 2, and a scrawny, ashen-skinned boy who must be from District 3. He made almost no impression on me at all during our time in the Capitol. I can remember almost nothing about him, not his costume, not his training score, not his interview. Even now, as he sits there fiddling with some kind of plastic box, he's easily ignored in the presence of his large and domineering companions. But he must be of some value or they wouldn't have bothered to let him live. Still, seeing him only adds to my sense of unease over why the Careers would possibly leave him as a guard, why they have allowed him to live at all.

All four tributes seem to still be recovering from the tracker jacker attack. Even from here, I can see the large swollen lumps on their bodies. They must not have had the sense to remove the stingers, or if they did, not known about the leaves that healed them. Apparently, whatever medicines they found in the Cornucopia have been ineffective.

The Cornucopia sits in its original position, but its insides have been picked clean. Most of the supplies, held in crates, burlap sacks, and plastic bins, are piled neatly in a pyramid in what seems a questionable distance from the camp. Others are sprinkled around the perimeter of the

pyramid, almost mimicking the layout of supplies around the Cornucopia at the onset of the Games. A canopy of netting that, aside from discouraging birds, seems to be useless shelters the pyramid itself.

The whole setup is completely perplexing. The distance, the netting, and the presence of the boy from District 3. One thing's for sure, destroying those supplies is not going to be as simple as it looks. Some other factor is at play here, and I'd better stay put until I figure out what it is. My guess is the pyramid is booby-trapped in some manner. I think of concealed pits, descending nets, a thread that when broken sends a poisonous dart into your heart. Really, the possibilities are endless.

While I am mulling over my options, I hear Cato shout out. He's pointing up to the woods, far beyond me, and without turning I know that Rue must have set the first campfire. We'd made sure to gather enough green wood to make the smoke noticeable. The Careers begin to arm themselves at once.

An argument breaks out. It's loud enough for me to hear that it concerns whether or not the boy from District 3 should stay or accompany them.

"He's coming. We need him in the woods, and his job's done here anyway. No one can touch those supplies," says Cato.

"What about Lover Boy?" says the boy from District 1.

"I keep telling you, forget about him. I know where I cut him. It's a miracle he hasn't bled to death yet. At any rate, he's in no shape to raid us," says Cato.

So Peeta is out there in the woods, wounded badly. But I am still in the dark on what motivated him to betray the Careers.

"Come on," says Cato. He thrusts a spear into the hands of the boy from District 3, and they head off in the direction of the fire. The last thing I hear as they enter the woods is Cato saying, "When we find her, I kill her in my own way, and no one interferes."

Somehow I don't think he's talking about Rue. She didn't drop a nest of tracker jackers on him.

I stay put for a half an hour or so, trying to figure out what to do about the supplies. The one advantage I have with the bow and arrow is distance. I could send a flaming arrow into the pyramid easily enough — I'm a good enough shot to get it through those openings in the net — but there's no guarantee it would catch. More likely it'd just burn itself out and then what? I'd have achieved nothing and given them far too much information about myself. That I was here, that I have an accomplice, that I can use the bow and arrow with accuracy.

There's no alternative. I'm going to have to get in closer and see if I can't discover what exactly protects the supplies. In fact, I'm just about to reveal myself when a movement catches my eye. Several hundred yards to my right, I see someone emerge from the woods. For a second, I think it's Rue, but then I recognize Foxface — she's the one we couldn't remember this morning — creeping out onto the plain. When she decides it's safe, she runs for the pyramid, with quick, small steps. Just before she reaches the circle of

supplies that have been littered around the pyramid, she stops, searches the ground, and carefully places her feet on a spot. Then she begins to approach the pyramid with strange little hops, sometimes landing on one foot, teetering slightly, sometimes risking a few steps. At one point, she launches up in the air, over a small barrel and lands poised on her tiptoes. But she overshot slightly, and her momentum throws her forward. I hear her give a sharp squeal as her hands hit the ground, but nothing happens. In a moment, she's regained her feet and continues until she has reached the bulk of the supplies.

So, I'm right about the booby trap, but it's clearly more complex than I had imagined. I was right about the girl, too. How wily is she to have discovered this path into the food and to be able to replicate it so neatly? She fills her pack, taking a few items from a variety of containers, crackers from a crate, a handful of apples from a burlap sack that hangs suspended from a rope off the side of a bin. But only a handful from each, not enough to tip off that the food is missing. Not enough to cause suspicion. And then she's doing her odd little dance back out of the circle and scampering into the woods again, safe and sound.

I realize I'm grinding my teeth in frustration. Foxface has confirmed what I'd already guessed. But what sort of trap have they laid that requires such dexterity? Has so many trigger points? Why did she squeal so as her hands made contact with the earth? You'd have thought . . . and slowly it begins to dawn on me . . . you'd have thought the very ground was going to explode.

"It's mined," I whisper. That explains everything. The Careers' willingness to leave their supplies, Foxface's reaction, the involvement of the boy from District 3, where they have the factories, where they make televisions and automobiles and explosives. But where did he get them? In the supplies? That's not the sort of weapon the Gamemakers usually provide, given that they like to see the tributes draw blood personally. I slip out of the bushes and cross to one of the round metal plates that lifted the tributes into the arena. The ground around it has been dug up and patted back down. The land mines were disabled after the sixty seconds we stood on the plates, but the boy from District 3 must have managed to reactivate them. I've never seen anyone in the Games do that. I bet it came as a shock even to the Gamemakers.

Well, hurray for the boy from District 3 for putting one over on them, but what am I supposed to do now? Obviously, I can't go strolling into that mess without blowing myself sky-high. As for sending in a burning arrow, that's more laughable than ever. The mines are set off by pressure. It doesn't have to be a lot, either. One year, a girl dropped her token, a small wooden ball, while she was at her plate, and they literally had to scrape bits of her off the ground.

My arm's pretty good, I might be able to chuck some rocks in there and set off what? Maybe one mine? That could start a chain reaction. Or could it? Would the boy from District 3 have placed the mines in such a way that a single mine would not disturb the others? Thereby protecting the supplies but ensuring the death of the invader. Even



if I only blew up one mine, I'd draw the Careers back down on me for sure. And anyway, what am I thinking? There's that net, clearly strung to deflect any such attack. Besides, what I'd really need is to throw about thirty rocks in there at once, setting off a big chain reaction, demolishing the whole lot.

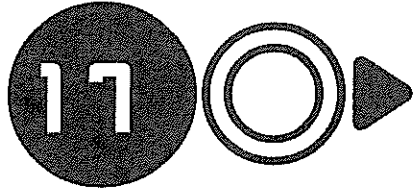
I glance back up at the woods. The smoke from Rue's second fire is wafting toward the sky. By now, the Careers have probably begun to suspect some sort of trick. Time is running out.

There is a solution to this, I know there is, if I can only focus hard enough. I stare at the pyramid, the bins, the crates, too heavy to topple over with an arrow. Maybe one contains cooking oil, and the burning arrow idea is reviving when I realize I could end up losing all twelve of my arrows and not get a direct hit on an oil bin, since I'd just be guessing. I'm genuinely thinking of trying to re-create Foxface's trip up to the pyramid in hopes of finding a new means of destruction when my eyes light on the burlap bag of apples. I could sever the rope in one shot, didn't I do as much in the Training Center? It's a big bag, but it still might only be good for one explosion. If only I could free the apples themselves . . .

I know what to do. I move into range and give myself three arrows to get the job done. I place my feet carefully, block out the rest of the world as I take meticulous aim. The first arrow tears through the side of the bag near the top, leaving a split in the burlap. The second widens it to a gaping hole. I can see the first apple teetering when I let the

third arrow go, catching the torn flap of burlap and ripping it from the bag.

For a moment, everything seems frozen in time. Then the apples spill to the ground and I'm blown backward into the air.



The impact with the hard-packed earth of the plain knocks the wind out of me. My backpack does little to soften the blow. Fortunately my quiver has caught in the crook of my elbow, sparing both itself and my shoulder, and my bow is locked in my grasp. The ground still shakes with explosions. I can't hear them. I can't hear anything at the moment. But the apples must have set off enough mines, causing debris to activate the others. I manage to shield my face with my arms as shattered bits of matter, some of it burning, rain down around me. An acrid smoke fills the air, which is not the best remedy for someone trying to regain the ability to breathe.

After about a minute, the ground stops vibrating. I roll on my side and allow myself a moment of satisfaction at the sight of the smoldering wreckage that was recently the pyramid. The Careers aren't likely to salvage anything out of that.

*I'd better get out of here, I think. They'll be making a beeline for the place.* But once I'm on my feet, I realize escape may not be so simple. I'm dizzy. Not the slightly wobbly kind, but the kind that sends the trees swooping around you and causes the earth to move in waves under your feet.

I take a few steps and somehow wind up on my hands and knees. I wait a few minutes to let it pass, but it doesn't.

Panic begins to set in. I can't stay here. Flight is essential. But I can neither walk nor hear. I place a hand to my left ear, the one that was turned toward the blast, and it comes away bloody. Have I gone deaf from the explosion? The idea frightens me. I rely as much on my ears as my eyes as a hunter, maybe more at times. But I can't let my fear show. Absolutely, positively, I am live on every screen in Panem.

*No blood trails,* I tell myself, and manage to pull my hood up over my head, tie the cord under my chin with uncooperative fingers. That should help soak up the blood. I can't walk, but can I crawl? I move forward tentatively. Yes, if I go very slowly, I can crawl. Most of the woods will offer insufficient cover. My only hope is to make it back to Rue's copse and conceal myself in greenery. I can't get caught out here on my hands and knees in the open. Not only will I face death, it's sure to be a long and painful one at Cato's hand. The thought of Prim having to watch that keeps me doggedly inching my way toward the hideout.

Another blast knocks me flat on my face. A stray mine, set off by some collapsing crate. This happens twice more. I'm reminded of those last few kernels that burst when Prim and I pop corn over the fire at home.

To say I make it in the nick of time is an understatement. I have literally just dragged myself into the tangle of bushes at the base of the trees when there's Cato, barreling

onto the plain, soon followed by his companions. His rage is so extreme it might be comical — so people really do tear out their hair and beat the ground with their fists — if I didn't know that it was aimed at me, at what I have done to him. Add to that my proximity, my inability to run or defend myself, and in fact, the whole thing has me terrified. I'm glad my hiding place makes it impossible for the cameras to get a close shot of me because I'm biting my nails like there's no tomorrow. Gnawing off the last bits of nail polish, trying to keep my teeth from chattering.

The boy from District 3 throws stones into the ruins and must have declared all the mines activated because the Careers are approaching the wreckage.

Cato has finished the first phase of his tantrum and takes out his anger on the smoking remains by kicking open various containers. The other tributes are poking around in the mess, looking for anything to salvage, but there's nothing. The boy from District 3 has done his job too well. This idea must occur to Cato, too, because he turns on the boy and appears to be shouting at him. The boy from District 3 only has time to turn and run before Cato catches him in a headlock from behind. I can see the muscles ripple in Cato's arms as he sharply jerks the boy's head to the side.

It's that quick. The death of the boy from District 3.

The other two Careers seem to be trying to calm Cato down. I can tell he wants to return to the woods, but they keep pointing at the sky, which puzzles me until I realize, *Of course. They think whoever set off the explosions is dead.*

They don't know about the arrows and the apples. They assume the booby trap was faulty, but that the tribute who blew up the supplies was killed doing it. If there was a cannon shot, it could have been easily lost in the subsequent explosions. The shattered remains of the thief removed by hovercraft. They retire to the far side of the lake to allow the Gamemakers to retrieve the body of the boy from District 3. And they wait.

I suppose a cannon goes off. A hovercraft appears and takes the dead boy. The sun dips below the horizon. Night falls. Up in the sky, I see the seal and know the anthem must have begun. A moment of darkness. They show the boy from District 3. They show the boy from District 10, who must have died this morning. Then the seal reappears. So, now they know. The bomber survived. In the seal's light, I can see Cato and the girl from District 2 put on their night-vision glasses. The boy from District 1 ignites a tree branch for a torch, illuminating the grim determination on all their faces. The Careers stride back into the woods to hunt.

The dizziness has subsided and while my left ear is still deafened, I can hear a ringing in my right, which seems a good sign. There's no point in leaving my hiding place, though. I'm about as safe as I can be, here at the crime scene. They probably think the bomber has a two- or three-hour lead on them. Still it's a long time before I risk moving.

The first thing I do is dig out my own glasses and put them on, which relaxes me a little, to have at least one of

my hunter's senses working. I drink some water and wash the blood from my ear. Fearing the smell of meat will draw unwanted predators — fresh blood is bad enough — I make a good meal out of the greens and roots and berries Rue and I gathered today.

Where is my little ally? Did she make it back to the rendezvous point? Is she worried about me? At least, the sky has shown we're both alive.

I run through the surviving tributes on my fingers. The boy from 1, both from 2, Foxface, both from 11 and 12. Just eight of us. The betting must be getting really hot in the Capitol. They'll be doing special features on each of us now. Probably interviewing our friends and families. It's been a long time since a tribute from District 12 made it into the top eight. And now there are two of us. Although from what Cato said, Peeta's on his way out. Not that Cato is the final word on anything. Didn't he just lose his entire stash of supplies?

*Let the Seventy-fourth Hunger Games begin, Cato, I think. Let them begin for real.*

A cold breeze has sprung up. I reach for my sleeping bag before I remember I left it with Rue. I was supposed to pick up another one, but what with the mines and all, I forgot. I begin to shiver. Since roosting overnight in a tree isn't sensible anyway, I scoop out a hollow under the bushes and cover myself with leaves and pine needles. I'm still freezing. I lay my sheet of plastic over my upper body and position my backpack to block the wind. It's a little better. I begin to

have more sympathy for the girl from District 8 that lit the fire that first night. But now it's me who needs to grit my teeth and tough it out until morning. More leaves, more pine needles. I pull my arms inside my jacket and tuck my knees up to my chest. Somehow, I drift off to sleep.

When I open my eyes, the world looks slightly fractured, and it takes a minute to realize that the sun must be well up and the glasses fragmenting my vision. As I sit up and remove them, I hear a laugh somewhere near the lake and freeze. The laugh's distorted, but the fact that it registered at all means I must be regaining my hearing. Yes, my right ear can hear again, although it's still ringing. As for my left ear, well, at least the bleeding has stopped.

I peer through the bushes, afraid the Careers have returned, trapping me here for an indefinite time. No, it's Foxface, standing in the rubble of the pyramid and laughing. She's smarter than the Careers, actually finding a few useful items in the ashes. A metal pot. A knife blade. I'm perplexed by her amusement until I realize that with the Careers' stores eliminated, she might actually stand a chance. Just like the rest of us. It crosses my mind to reveal myself and enlist her as a second ally against that pack. But I rule it out. There's something about that sly grin that makes me sure that befriending Foxface would ultimately get me a knife in the back. With that in mind, this might be an excellent time to shoot her. But she's heard something, not me, because her head turns away, toward the drop-off, and she sprints for the woods. I wait. No one, nothing shows

up. Still, if Foxface thought it was dangerous, maybe it's time for me to get out of here, too. Besides, I'm eager to tell Rue about the pyramid.

Since I've no idea where the Careers are, the route back by the stream seems as good as any. I hurry, loaded bow in one hand, a hunk of cold groosling in the other, because I'm famished now, and not just for leaves and berries but for the fat and protein in the meat. The trip to the stream is uneventful. Once there, I refill my water and wash, taking particular care with my injured ear. Then I travel uphill using the stream as a guide. At one point, I find boot prints in the mud along the bank. The Careers have been here, but not for a while. The prints are deep because they were made in soft mud, but now they're nearly dry in the hot sun. I haven't been careful enough about my own tracks, counting on a light tread and the pine needles to conceal my prints. Now I strip off my boots and socks and go barefoot up the bed of the stream.

The cool water has an invigorating effect on my body, my spirits. I shoot two fish, easy pickings in this slow-moving stream, and go ahead and eat one raw even though I've just had the groosling. The second I'll save for Rue.

Gradually, subtly, the ringing in my right ear diminishes until it's gone entirely. I find myself pawing at my left ear periodically, trying to clean away whatever deadens its ability to collect sounds. If there's improvement, it's undetectable. I can't adjust to deafness in the ear. It makes me feel off-balanced and defenseless to my left. Blind even. My head keeps turning to the injured side, as my right ear tries to

compensate for the wall of nothingness where yesterday there was a constant flow of information. The more time that passes, the less hopeful I am that this is an injury that will heal.

When I reach the site of our first meeting, I feel certain it's been undisturbed. There's no sign of Rue, not on the ground or in the trees. This is odd. By now she should have returned, as it's midday. Undoubtedly, she spent the night in a tree somewhere. What else could she do with no light and the Careers with their night-vision glasses tromping around the woods. And the third fire she was supposed to set — although I forgot to check for it last night — was the farthest from our site of all. She's probably just being cautious about making her way back. I wish she'd hurry, because I don't want to hang around here too long. I want to spend the afternoon traveling to higher ground, hunting as we go. But there's nothing really for me to do but wait.

I wash the blood out of my jacket and hair and clean my ever-growing list of wounds. The burns are much better but I use a bit of medicine on them anyway. The main thing to worry about now is keeping out infection. I go ahead and eat the second fish. It isn't going to last long in this hot sun, but it should be easy enough to spear a few more for Rue. If she would just show up.

Feeling too vulnerable on the ground with my lopsided hearing, I scale a tree to wait. If the Careers show up, this will be a fine place to shoot them from. The sun moves slowly. I do things to pass the time. Chew leaves and apply them to my stings that are deflated but still tender. Comb

through my damp hair with my fingers and braid it. Lace my boots back up. Check over my bow and remaining nine arrows. Test my left ear repeatedly for signs of life by rustling a leaf near it, but without good results.

Despite the groosling and the fish, my stomach's growling, and I know I'm going to have what we call a hollow day back in District 12. That's a day where no matter what you put in your belly, it's never enough. Having nothing to do but sit in a tree makes it worse, so I decide to give into it. After all, I've lost a lot of weight in the arena, I need some extra calories. And having the bow and arrows makes me far more confident about my future prospects.

I slowly peel and eat a handful of nuts. My last cracker. The groosling neck. That's good because it takes time to pick clean. Finally, a groosling wing and the bird is history. But it's a hollow day, and even with all that I start daydreaming about food. Particularly the decadent dishes served in the Capitol. The chicken in creamy orange sauce. The cakes and pudding. Bread with butter. Noodles in green sauce. The lamb and dried plum stew. I suck on a few mint leaves and tell myself to get over it. Mint is good because we drink mint tea after supper often, so it tricks my stomach into thinking eating time is over. Sort of.

Dangling up in the tree, with the sun warming me, a mouthful of mint, my bow and arrows at hand . . . this is the most relaxed I've been since I've entered the arena. If only Rue would show up, and we could clear out. As the shadows grow, so does my restlessness. By late afternoon, I've resolved to go looking for her. I can at least visit the

spot where she set the third fire and see if there are any clues to her whereabouts.

Before I go, I scatter a few mint leaves around our old campfire. Since we gathered these some distance away, Rue will understand I've been here, while they'll mean nothing to the Careers.

In less than an hour, I'm at the place where we agreed to have the third fire and I know something has gone amiss. The wood has been neatly arranged, expertly interspersed with tinder, but it has never been lit. Rue set up the fire but never made it back here. Somewhere between the second column of smoke I spied before I blew up the supplies and this point, she ran into trouble.

I have to remind myself she's still alive. Or is she? Could the cannon shot announcing her death have come in the wee hours of the morning when even my good ear was too broken to pick it up? Will she appear in the sky tonight? No, I refuse to believe it. There could be a hundred other explanations. She could have lost her way. Run into a pack of predators or another tribute, like Thresh, and had to hide. Whatever happened, I'm almost certain she's stuck out there, somewhere between the second fire and the unlit one at my feet. Something is keeping her up a tree.

I think I'll go hunt it down.

It's a relief to be doing something after sitting around all afternoon. I creep silently through the shadows, letting them conceal me. But nothing seems suspicious. There's no sign of any kind of struggle, no disruption of the needles on the ground. I've stopped for just a moment when I hear it. I

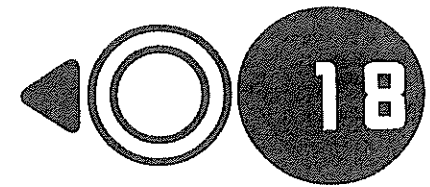
have to cock my head around to the side to be sure, but there it is again. Rue's four-note tune coming out of a mockingjay's mouth. The one that means she's all right.

I grin and move in the direction of the bird. Another just a short distance ahead, picks up on the handful of notes. Rue has been singing to them, and recently. Otherwise they'd have taken up some other song. My eyes lift up into the trees, searching for a sign of her. I swallow and sing softly back, hoping she'll know it's safe to join me. A mockingjay repeats the melody to me. And that's when I hear the scream.

It's a child's scream, a young girl's scream, there's no one in the arena capable of making that sound except Rue. And now I'm running, knowing this may be a trap, knowing the three Careers may be poised to attack me, but I can't help myself. There's another high-pitched cry, this time my name. "Katniss! Katniss!"

"Rue!" I shout back, so she knows I'm near. So, *they* know I'm near, and hopefully the girl who has attacked them with tracker jackers and gotten an eleven they still can't explain will be enough to pull their attention away from her. "Rue! I'm coming!"

When I break into the clearing, she's on the ground, hopelessly entangled in a net. She just has time to reach her hand through the mesh and say my name before the spear enters her body.



The boy from District 1 dies before he can pull out the spear. My arrow drives deeply into the center of his neck. He falls to his knees and halves the brief remainder of his life by yanking out the arrow and drowning in his own blood. I'm reloaded, shifting my aim from side to side, while I shout at Rue, "Are there more? Are there more?"

She has to say no several times before I hear it.

Rue has rolled to her side, her body curved in and around the spear. I shove the boy away from her and pull out my knife, freeing her from the net. One look at the wound and I know it's far beyond my capacity to heal. Beyond anyone's probably. The spearhead is buried up to the shaft in her stomach. I crouch before her, staring helplessly at the embedded weapon. There's no point in comforting words, in telling her she'll be all right. She's no fool. Her hand reaches out and I clutch it like a lifeline. As if it's me who's dying instead of Rue.

"You blew up the food?" she whispers.

"Every last bit," I say.

"You have to win," she says.

"I'm going to. Going to win for both of us now," I

promise. I hear a cannon and look up. It must be for the boy from District 1.

“Don’t go.” Rue tightens her grip on my hand.

“Course not. Staying right here,” I say. I move in closer to her, pulling her head onto my lap. I gently brush the dark, thick hair back behind her ear.

“Sing,” she says, but I barely catch the word.

Sing? I think. *Sing what?* I do know a few songs. Believe it or not, there was once music in my house, too. Music I helped make. My father pulled me in with that remarkable voice — but I haven’t sung much since he died. Except when Prim is very sick. Then I sing her the same songs she liked as a baby.

Sing. My throat is tight with tears, hoarse from smoke and fatigue. But if this is Prim’s, I mean, Rue’s last request, I have to at least try. The song that comes to me is a simple lullaby, one we sing fretful, hungry babies to sleep with. It’s old, very old I think. Made up long ago in our hills. What my music teacher calls a mountain air. But the words are easy and soothing, promising tomorrow will be more hopeful than this awful piece of time we call today.

I give a small cough, swallow hard, and begin:

*Deep in the meadow, under the willow  
A bed of grass, a soft green pillow  
Lay down your head, and close your sleepy eyes  
And when again they open, the sun will rise.*

*Here it’s safe, here it’s warm  
Here the daisies guard you from every harm  
Here your dreams are sweet and tomorrow brings  
them true  
Here is the place where I love you.*

Rue’s eyes have fluttered shut. Her chest moves but only slightly. My throat releases the tears and they slide down my cheeks. But I have to finish the song for her.

*Deep in the meadow, hidden far away  
A cloak of leaves, a moonbeam ray  
Forget your woes and let your troubles lay  
And when again it’s morning, they’ll wash away.*

*Here it’s safe, here it’s warm  
Here the daisies guard you from every harm*

The final lines are barely audible.

*Here your dreams are sweet and tomorrow brings  
them true  
Here is the place where I love you.*

Everything’s still and quiet. Then, almost eerily, the mockingjays take up my song.

For a moment, I sit there, watching my tears drip down on her face. Rue’s cannon fires. I lean forward and press my



lips against her temple. Slowly, as if not to wake her, I lay her head back on the ground and release her hand.

They'll want me to clear out now. So they can collect the bodies. And there's nothing to stay for. I roll the boy from District 1 onto his face and take his pack, retrieve the arrow that ended his life. I cut Rue's pack from her back as well, knowing she'd want me to have it but leave the spear in her stomach. Weapons in bodies will be transported to the hovercraft. I've no use for a spear, so the sooner it's gone from the arena the better.

I can't stop looking at Rue, smaller than ever, a baby animal curled up in a nest of netting. I can't bring myself to leave her like this. Past harm, but seeming utterly defenseless. To hate the boy from District 1, who also appears so vulnerable in death, seems inadequate. It's the Capitol I hate, for doing this to all of us.

Gale's voice is in my head. His ravings against the Capitol no longer pointless, no longer to be ignored. Rue's death has forced me to confront my own fury against the cruelty, the injustice they inflict upon us. But here, even more strongly than at home, I feel my impotence. There's no way to take revenge on the Capitol. Is there?

Then I remember Peeta's words on the roof. "*Only I keep wishing I could think of a way to . . . to show the Capitol they don't own me. That I'm more than just a piece in their Games.*" And for the first time, I understand what he means.

I want to do something, right here, right now, to shame

them, to make them accountable, to show the Capitol that whatever they do or force us to do there is a part of every tribute they can't own. That Rue was more than a piece in their Games. And so am I.

A few steps into the woods grows a bank of wildflowers. Perhaps they are really weeds of some sort, but they have blossoms in beautiful shades of violet and yellow and white. I gather up an armful and come back to Rue's side. Slowly, one stem at a time, I decorate her body in the flowers. Covering the ugly wound. Wreathing her face. Weaving her hair with bright colors.

They'll have to show it. Or, even if they choose to turn the cameras elsewhere at this moment, they'll have to bring them back when they collect the bodies and everyone will see her then and know I did it. I step back and take a last look at Rue. She could really be asleep in that meadow after all.

"Bye, Rue," I whisper. I press the three middle fingers of my left hand against my lips and hold them out in her direction. Then I walk away without looking back.

The birds fall silent. Somewhere, a mockingjay gives the warning whistle that precedes the hovercraft. I don't know how it knows. It must hear things that humans can't. I pause, my eyes focused on what's ahead, not what's happening behind me. It doesn't take long, then the general bird-song begins again and I know she's gone.

Another mockingjay, a young one by the look of it, lands on a branch before me and bursts out Rue's melody.

My song, the hovercraft, were too unfamiliar for this novice to pick up, but it has mastered her handful of notes. The ones that mean she's safe.

"Good and safe," I say as I pass under its branch. "We don't have to worry about her now." Good and safe.

I've no idea where to go. The brief sense of home I had that one night with Rue has vanished. My feet wander this way and that until sunset. I'm not afraid, not even watchful. Which makes me an easy target. Except I'd kill anyone I met on sight. Without emotion or the slightest tremor in my hands. My hatred of the Capitol has not lessened my hatred of my competitors in the least. Especially the Careers. They, at least, can be made to pay for Rue's death.

No one materializes though. There aren't many of us left and it's a big arena. Soon they'll be pulling out some other device to force us together. But there's been enough gore today. Perhaps we'll even get to sleep.

I'm about to haul my packs into a tree to make camp when a silver parachute floats down and lands in front of me. A gift from a sponsor. But why now? I've been in fairly good shape with supplies. Maybe Haymitch's noticed my despondency and is trying to cheer me up a bit. Or could it be something to help my ear?

I open the parachute and find a small loaf of bread. It's not the fine white Capitol stuff. It's made of dark ration grain and shaped in a crescent. Sprinkled with seeds. I flashback to Peeta's lesson on the various district breads in the Training Center. This bread came from District 11. I

cautiously lift the still warm loaf. What must it have cost the people of District 11 who can't even feed themselves? How many would've had to do without to scrape up a coin to put in the collection for this one loaf? It had been meant for Rue, surely. But instead of pulling the gift when she died, they'd authorized Haymitch to give it to me. As a thank-you? Or because, like me, they don't like to let debts go unpaid? For whatever reason, this is a first. A district gift to a tribute who's not your own.

I lift my face and step into the last falling rays of sunlight. "My thanks to the people of District Eleven," I say. I want them to know I know where it came from. That the full value of their gift has been recognized.

I climb dangerously high into a tree, not for safety but to get as far away from today as I can. My sleeping bag is rolled neatly in Rue's pack. Tomorrow I'll sort through the supplies. Tomorrow I'll make a new plan. But tonight, all I can do is strap myself in and take tiny bites of the bread. It's good. It tastes of home.

Soon the seal's in the sky, the anthem plays in my right ear. I see the boy from District 1, Rue. That's all for tonight. *Six of us left*, I think. *Only six*. With the bread still locked in my hands, I fall asleep at once.

Sometimes when things are particularly bad, my brain will give me a happy dream. A visit with my father in the woods. An hour of sunlight and cake with Prim. Tonight it sends me Rue, still decked in her flowers, perched in a high sea of trees, trying to teach me to talk to the mockingjays. I see no sign of her wounds, no blood, just a bright, laughing

girl. She sings songs I've never heard in a clear, melodic voice. On and on. Through the night. There's a drowsy in-between period when I can hear the last few strains of her music although she's lost in the leaves. When I fully awaken, I'm momentarily comforted. I try to hold on to the peaceful feeling of the dream, but it quickly slips away, leaving me sadder and lonelier than ever.

Heaviness infuses my whole body, as if there's liquid lead in my veins. I've lost the will to do the simplest tasks, to do anything but lie here, staring unblinkingly through the canopy of leaves. For several hours, I remain motionless. As usual, it's the thought of Prim's anxious face as she watches me on the screens back home that breaks me from my lethargy.

I give myself a series of simple commands to follow, like "Now you have to sit up, Katniss. Now you have to drink water, Katniss." I act on the orders with slow, robotic motions. "Now you have to sort the packs, Katniss."

Rue's pack holds my sleeping bag, her nearly empty water skin, a handful of nuts and roots, a bit of rabbit, her extra socks, and her slingshot. The boy from District 1 has several knives, two spare spearheads, a flashlight, a small leather pouch, a first-aid kit, a full bottle of water, and a pack of dried fruit. A pack of dried fruit! Out of all he might have chosen from. To me, this is a sign of extreme arrogance. Why bother to carry food when you have such a bounty back at camp? When you will kill your enemies so quickly you'll be home before you're hungry? I can only

hope the other Careers traveled so lightly when it came to food and now find themselves with nothing.

Speaking of which, my own supply is running low. I finish off the loaf from District 11 and the last of the rabbit. How quickly the food disappears. All I have left are Rue's roots and nuts, the boy's dried fruit, and one strip of beef. *Now you have to hunt, Katniss*, I tell myself.

I obediently consolidate the supplies I want into my pack. After I climb down the tree, I conceal the boy's knives and spearheads in a pile of rocks so that no one else can use them. I've lost my bearings what with all the wandering around I did yesterday evening, but I try and head back in the general direction of the stream. I know I'm on course when I come across Rue's third, unlit fire. Shortly thereafter, I discover a flock of grooslings perched in the trees and take out three before they know what hit them. I return to Rue's signal fire and start it up, not caring about the excessive smoke. *Where are you, Cato?* I think as I roast the birds and Rue's roots. *I'm waiting right here.*

Who knows where the Careers are now? Either too far to reach me or too sure this is a trick or . . . is it possible? Too scared of me? They know I have the bow and arrows, of course, Cato saw me take them from Glimmer's body. But have they put two and two together yet? Figured out I blew up the supplies and killed their fellow Career? Possibly they think Thresh did this. Wouldn't he be more likely to revenge Rue's death than I would? Being from the same district? Not that he ever took any interest in her.

And what about Foxface? Did she hang around to watch me blow up the supplies? No. When I caught her laughing in the ashes the next morning, it was as if someone had given her a lovely surprise.

I doubt they think Peeta has lit this signal fire. Cato's sure he's as good as dead. I find myself wishing I could tell Peeta about the flowers I put on Rue. That I now understand what he was trying to say on the roof. Perhaps if he wins the Games, he'll see me on victor's night, when they replay the highlights of the Games on a screen over the stage where we did our interviews. The winner sits in a place of honor on the platform, surrounded by their support crew.

But I told Rue I'd be there. For both of us. And somehow that seems even more important than the vow I gave Prim.

I really think I stand a chance of doing it now. Winning. It's not just having the arrows or outsmarting the Careers a few times, although those things help. Something happened when I was holding Rue's hand, watching the life drain out of her. Now I am determined to avenge her, to make her loss unforgettable, and I can only do that by winning and thereby making myself unforgettable.

I overcook the birds hoping someone will show up to shoot, but no one does. Maybe the other tributes are out there beating one another senseless. Which would be fine. Ever since the bloodbath, I've been featured on screens more than I care.

Eventually, I wrap up my food and go back to the stream to replenish my water and gather some. But the heaviness from the morning drapes back over me and even though it's only early evening, I climb a tree and settle in for the night. My brain begins to replay the events from yesterday. I keep seeing Rue speared, my arrow piercing the boy's neck. I don't know why I should even care about the boy.

Then I realize . . . he was my first kill.

Along with other statistics they report to help people place their bets, every tribute has a list of kills. I guess technically I'd get credited for Glimmer and the girl from District 4, too, for dumping that nest on them. But the boy from District 1 was the first person I knew would die because of my actions. Numerous animals have lost their lives at my hands, but only one human. I hear Gale saying, "How different can it be, really?"

Amazingly similar in the execution. A bow pulled, an arrow shot. Entirely different in the aftermath. I killed a boy whose name I don't even know. Somewhere his family is weeping for him. His friends call for my blood. Maybe he had a girlfriend who really believed he would come back. . . .

But then I think of Rue's still body and I'm able to banish the boy from my mind. At least, for now.

It's been an uneventful day according to the sky. No deaths. I wonder how long we'll get until the next catastrophe drives us back together. If it's going to be tonight, I want to get some sleep first. I cover my good ear to block

out the strains of the anthem, but then I hear the trumpets and sit straight up in anticipation.

For the most part, the only communication the tributes get from outside the arena is the nightly death toll. But occasionally, there will be trumpets followed by an announcement. Usually, this will be a call to a feast. When food is scarce, the Gamemakers will invite the players to a banquet, somewhere known to all like the Cornucopia, as an inducement to gather and fight. Sometimes there is a feast and sometimes there's nothing but a loaf of stale bread for the tributes to compete for. I wouldn't go in for the food, but this could be an ideal time to take out a few competitors.

Claudius Templesmith's voice booms down from overhead, congratulating the six of us who remain. But he is not inviting us to a feast. He's saying something very confusing. There's been a rule change in the Games. A rule change! That in itself is mind bending since we don't really have any rules to speak of except don't step off your circle for sixty seconds and the unspoken rule about not eating one another. Under the new rule, both tributes from the same district will be declared winners if they are the last two alive. Claudius pauses, as if he knows we're not getting it, and repeats the change again.

The news sinks in. Two tributes can win this year. If they're from the same district. Both can live. Both of us can live.

Before I can stop myself, I call out Peeta's name.

## PART III "THE VICTOR"