

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

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

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

Prim is not to take any tesserae. They can get by, if

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

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

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

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

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

She pulls her arm from my grasp, moved to anger herself

now. "I was ill. I could have treated myself if I'd had the medicine I have now."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then I can't think of anything else, so we sit in silence until a Peacemaker summons him. He rises and coughs to

clear his throat. "I'll keep an eye on the little girl. Make sure she's eating."

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

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

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

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

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

Finally, Gale is here and maybe there is nothing romantic between us, but when he opens his arms I don't hesitate to go into them. His body is familiar to me — the way it moves, the smell of wood smoke, even the sound of his heart

beating I know from quiet moments on a hunt — but this is the first time I really feel it, lean and hard-muscled against my own.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, there's usually some," I say.

"Katniss, it's just hunting. You're the best hunter I know," says Gale.

"It's not just hunting. They're armed. They think," I say.

"So do you. And you've had more practice. Real practice," he says. "You know how to kill."

"Not people," I say.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Peeta Mellark, on the other hand, has obviously been crying and interestingly enough does not seem to be trying to cover it up. I immediately wonder if this will be his

strategy in the Games. To appear weak and frightened, to reassure the other tributes that he is no competition at all, and then come out fighting. This worked very well for a girl, Johanna Mason, from District 7 a few years back. She seemed like such a sniveling, cowardly fool that no one bothered about her until there were only a handful of contestants left. It turned out she could kill viciously. Pretty clever, the way she played it. But this seems an odd strategy for Peeta Mellark because he's a baker's son. All those years of having enough to eat and hauling bread trays around have made him broad-shouldered and strong. It will take an awful lot of weeping to convince anyone to overlook him.

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

The speed initially takes my breath away. Of course, I've never been on a train, as travel between the districts is forbidden except for officially sanctioned duties. For us, that's mainly transporting coal. But this is no ordinary coal train. It's one of the high-speed Capitol models that average 250 miles per hour. Our journey to the Capitol will take less than a day.

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

Somehow it all comes back to coal at school. Besides basic reading and math most of our instruction is

Mockingjay as character

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

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

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

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

\* They're funny birds and something of a slap in the face to the Capitol. During the rebellion, the Capitol bred a series of genetically altered animals as weapons. The common term for them was *muttations*, or sometimes *mutts* for short. One was a special bird called a jabberjay that had the

ability to memorize and repeat whole human conversations. They were homing birds, exclusively male, that were released into regions where the Capitol's enemies were known to be hiding. After the birds gathered words, they'd fly back to centers to be recorded. It took people awhile to realize what was going on in the districts, how private conversations were being transmitted. Then, of course, the rebels fed the Capitol endless lies, and the joke was on it. So the centers were shut down and the birds were abandoned to die off in the wild.

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

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

her father

with me, protecting me. I fasten the pin onto my shirt, and with the dark green fabric as a background, I can almost imagine the mockingjay flying through the trees.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The pair last year were two kids from the Seam who'd never, not one day of their lives, had enough to eat. And when they did have food, table manners were surely the last

thing on their minds. Peeta's a baker's son. My mother taught Prim and me to eat properly, so yes, I can handle a fork and knife. But I hate Effie Trinket's comment so much I make a point of eating the rest of my meal with my fingers. Then I wipe my hands on the tablecloth. This makes her purse her lips tightly together.

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

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

One by one, we see the other reappings, the names called, the volunteers stepping forward or, more often, not. We examine the faces of the kids who will be our competition. A few stand out in my mind. A monstrous boy who lunges forward to volunteer from District 2. A fox-faced girl with sleek red hair from District 5. A boy with a crippled foot from District 10. And most hauntingly, a twelve-year-old girl from District 11. She has dark brown skin and eyes, but other than that, she's very like Prim in size and demeanor. Only when she mounts the stage and they ask for volunteers, all you can hear is the wind whistling through the

decrepit buildings around her. There's no one willing to take her place.

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

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

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

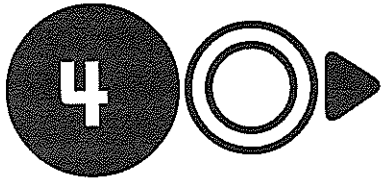
"Every day," I add. I can't help smirking a little. Effie Trinket makes it sound like Haymitch just has somewhat rough manners that could be corrected with a few tips from her.

"Yes," hisses Effie Trinket. "How odd you two find it amusing. You know your mentor is your lifeline to the world in these Games. The one who advises you, lines up your sponsors, and dictates the presentation of any gifts.

Haymitch can well be the difference between your life and your death!"

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The idea pulls me up short. A kind Peeta Mellark is far more dangerous to me than an unkind one. Kind people have a way of working their way inside me and rooting there. And I can't let Peeta do this. Not where we're going. So I decide, from this moment on, to have as little as possible to do with the baker's son.

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

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

I had just turned away from Peeta Mellark's bruised face when I saw the dandelion and I knew hope wasn't lost. I



plucked it carefully and hurried home. I grabbed a bucket and Prim's hand and headed to the Meadow and yes, it was dotted with the golden-headed weeds. After we'd harvested those, we scrounged along inside the fence for probably a mile until we'd filled the bucket with the dandelion greens, stems, and flowers. That night, we gorged ourselves on dandelion salad and the rest of the bakery bread.

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

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

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

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

Mom's war sickness

I'd shot a few rabbits before, with my father's guidance. But this I'd done on my own.

We hadn't had meat in months. The sight of the rabbit seemed to stir something in my mother. She roused herself, skinned the carcass, and made a stew with the meat and some more greens Prim had gathered. Then she acted confused and went back to bed, but when the stew was done, we made her eat a bowl.

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

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

On May 8th, I went to the Justice Building, signed up for my tesserae, and pulled home my first batch of grain and oil in Prim's toy wagon. On the eighth of every month, I was entitled to do the same. I couldn't stop hunting and gathering, of course. The grain was not enough to live on, and there were other things to buy, soap and milk and

major - <sup>major</sup> ~~major~~  
baker - <sup>baker</sup> ~~baker~~

thread. What we didn't absolutely have to eat, I began to trade at the Hob. It was frightening to enter that place without my father at my side, but people had respected him, and they accepted me. Game was game after all, no matter who'd shot it. I also sold at the back doors of the wealthier clients in town, trying to remember what my father had told me and learning a few new tricks as well. The butcher would buy my rabbits but not squirrels. The baker enjoyed squirrel but would only trade for one if his wife wasn't around. The Head Peacekeeper loved wild turkey. The mayor had a passion for strawberries.

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

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

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

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

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

Prim will undoubtedly sleep with my mother tonight. The thought of that scruffy old Buttercup posting himself on the bed to watch over Prim comforts me. If she cries,

Buttercup

he will nose his way into her arms and curl up there until she calms down and falls asleep. I'm so glad I didn't drown him.

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

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

If I'm going to cry, now is the time to do it. By morning, I'll be able to wash the damage done by the tears from my face. But no tears come. I'm too tired or too numb to cry. The only thing I feel is a desire to be somewhere else. So I let the train rock me into oblivion.

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

\* I put the green outfit back on since it's not really dirty, just slightly crumpled from spending the night on the floor. My fingers trace the circle around the little gold mocking-jay and I think of the woods, and of my father, and of my mother and Prim waking up, having to get on with things.

I slept in the elaborate braided hair my mother did for the reaping and it doesn't look too bad, so I just leave it up. It doesn't matter. We can't be far from the Capitol now. And once we reach the city, my stylist will dictate my look for the opening ceremonies tonight anyway. I just hope I get one who doesn't think nudity is the last word in fashion.

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

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

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

I take a sip of the hot, sweet, creamy liquid and a shudder runs through me. Even though the rest of the meal beckons, I ignore it until I've drained my cup. Then I stuff down every mouthful I can hold, which is a substantial amount, being careful to not overdo it on the richest stuff. One time, my mother told me that I always eat like I'll

never see food again. And I said, "I won't unless I bring it home." That shut her up.

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

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

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

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

"That's very funny," says Peeta. Suddenly he lashes out at the glass in Haymitch's hand. It shatters on the floor,

sending the bloodred liquid running toward the back of the train. "Only not to us."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

lodges in the seam between two panels, making me look a lot better than I am.

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

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

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

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

“Fine,” says Peeta.

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

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

“But —” I begin.

“No buts. Don’t resist,” says Haymitch. He takes the bottle of spirits from the table and leaves the car. As the door swings shut behind him, the car goes dark. There are still a few lights inside, but outside it’s as if night has fallen again. I realize we must be in the tunnel that runs up

through the mountains into the Capitol. The mountains form a natural barrier between the Capitol and the eastern districts. It is almost impossible to enter from the east except through the tunnels. This geographical advantage was a major factor in the districts losing the war that led to my being a tribute today. Since the rebels had to scale the mountains, they were easy targets for the Capitol’s air forces.

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

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

The people begin to point at us eagerly as they recognize a tribute train rolling into the city. I step away from

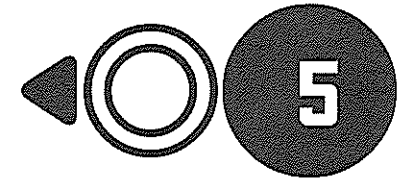
the window, sickened by their excitement, knowing they can't wait to watch us die. But Peeta holds his ground, actually waving and smiling at the gawking crowd. He only stops when the train pulls into the station, blocking us from their view.

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

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

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

Venia



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

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

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

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

Remake Center

Cinna

don't like it. My skin feels sore and tingling and intensely vulnerable. But I have kept my side of the bargain with Haymitch, and no objection has crossed my lips.

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

Venia and Octavia, a plump woman whose entire body has been dyed a pale shade of pea green, rub me down with a lotion that first stings but then soothes my raw skin. Then they pull me from the table, removing the thin robe I've been allowed to wear off and on. I stand there, completely naked, as the three circle me, wielding tweezers to remove any last bits of hair. I know I should be embarrassed, but they're so unlike people that I'm no more self-conscious than if a trio of oddly colored birds were pecking around my feet.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hello," I venture cautiously.

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

"My-mother," I say.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Pulling on my robe, I follow him through a door into a sitting room. Two red couches face off over a low table. Three walls are blank, the fourth is entirely glass, providing a window to the city. I can see by the light that it must be around noon, although the sunny sky has turned overcast. Cinna invites me to sit on one of the couches and takes his place across from me. He presses a button on the side of the

table. The top splits and from below rises a second tabletop that holds our lunch. Chicken and chunks of oranges cooked in a creamy sauce laid on a bed of pearly white grain, tiny green peas and onions, rolls shaped like flowers, and for dessert, a pudding the color of honey.

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

*I'll be naked for sure*, I think.

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

*Naked and covered in black dust*, I think.

"And what do we do with coal? We burn it," says Cinna.

Portia

"You're not afraid of fire, are you, Katniss?" He sees my expression and grins.

A few hours later, I am dressed in what will either be the most sensational or the deadliest costume in the opening ceremonies. I'm in a simple black unitard that covers me from ankle to neck. Shiny leather boots lace up to my knees. But it's the fluttering cape made of streams of orange, yellow, and red and the matching headpiece that define this costume. Cinna plans to light them on fire just before our chariot rolls into the streets.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The opening music begins. It's easy to hear, blasted around the Capitol. Massive doors slide open revealing the crowd-lined streets. The ride lasts about twenty minutes and ends up at the City Circle, where they will welcome us, play

the anthem, and escort us into the Training Center, which will be our home/prison until the Games begin.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Someone throws me a red rose. I catch it, give it a

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

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

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

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

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

The president, a small, thin man with paper-white hair, gives the official welcome from a balcony above us. It is traditional to cut away to the faces of the tributes during the speech. But I can see on the screen that we are getting way more than our share of airtime. The darker it becomes, the more difficult it is to take your eyes off our flickering. When the national anthem plays, they do make an effort to do a quick cut around to each pair of tributes, but the camera holds on the District 12 chariot as it parades around the

circle one final time and disappears into the Training Center.

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

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

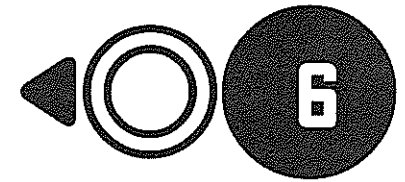
"Thanks for keeping hold of me. I was getting a little shaky there," says Peeta.

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

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

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

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



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

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

Apparently, Effie Trinket's duties did not conclude at the station. She and Haymitch will be overseeing us right into the arena. In a way, that's a plus because at least she can be counted on to corral us around to places on time whereas we haven't seen Haymitch since he agreed to help us on the train. Probably passed out somewhere. Effie Trinket, on the other hand, seems to be flying high. We're the first team she's ever chaperoned that made a splash at the opening

ceremonies. She's complimentary about not just our costumes but how we conducted ourselves. And, to hear her tell it, Effie knows everyone who's anyone in the Capitol and has been talking us up all day, trying to win us sponsors.

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

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

"Everyone has their reservations, naturally. You being from the coal district. But I said, and this was very clever of me, I said, 'Well, if you put enough pressure on coal it turns to pearls!'" Effie beams at us so brilliantly that we have no choice but to respond enthusiastically to her cleverness even though it's wrong.

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

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

"Unfortunately, I can't seal the sponsor deals for you.

Only Haymitch can do that," says Effie grimly. "But don't worry, I'll get him to the table at gunpoint if necessary."

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

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

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

Good. I'm starving.

Peeta, Cinna, and Portia are standing out on a balcony that overlooks the Capitol when we enter the dining room. I'm glad to see the stylists, particularly after I hear that Haymitch will be joining us. A meal presided over by just

Effie and Haymitch is bound to be a disaster. Besides, dinner isn't really about food, it's about planning out our strategies, and Cinna and Portia have already proven how valuable they are.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What's an Avox?" I ask stupidly.

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

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

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

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

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

"Something about the eyes, too," says Peeta.

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

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

"Whose idea was the hand holding?" asks Haymitch.

"Cinna's," says Portia.

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

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

"Tomorrow morning is the first training session. Meet me for breakfast and I'll tell you exactly how I want you to play it," says Haymitch to Peeta and me. "Now go get some sleep while the grown-ups talk."

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

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

I realize I do want to talk to someone about the girl. Someone who might be able to help me figure out her story.

Gale would be my first choice, but it's unlikely I'll ever see Gale again. I try to think if telling Peeta could give him any possible advantage over me, but I don't see how. Maybe sharing a confidence will actually make him believe I see him as a friend.

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

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

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

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

"Sure, come on," says Peeta. I follow him to a flight of stairs that lead to the roof. There's a small dome-shaped room with a door to the outside. As we step into the cool, windy evening air, I catch my breath at the view. The Capitol twinkles like a vast field of fireflies. Electricity in District 12 comes and goes, usually we only have it a few hours a day. Often the evenings are spent in candlelight. The only time you can count on it is when they're airing the Games or some important government message on

television that it's mandatory to watch. But here there would be no shortage. Ever.

Peeta and I walk to a railing at the edge of the roof. I look straight down the side of the building to the street, which is buzzing with people. You can hear their cars, an occasional shout, and a strange metallic tinkling. In District 12, we'd all be thinking about bed right now.

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

"What'd he say?" I ask.

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

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

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

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



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

"You and your father?" he whispers back.

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

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

"The hovercraft appeared out of nowhere," I continue to Peeta. "I mean, one moment the sky was empty and the next it was there. It didn't make a sound, but they saw it. A net dropped down on the girl and carried her up, fast, so fast like the elevator. They shot some sort of spear through the boy. It was attached to a cable and they hauled him up as well. But I'm certain he was dead. We heard the girl scream once. The boy's name, I think. Then it was gone, the hovercraft. Vanished into thin air. And the birds began to sing again, as if nothing had happened."

"Did they see you?" Peeta asked.

"I don't know. We were under a shelf of rock," I reply.

But I do know. There was a moment, after the birdcall, but before the hovercraft, where the girl had seen us. She'd locked eyes with me and called out for help. But neither Gale or I had responded.

"You're shivering," says Peeta.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He's covered again. If that's all you'd heard it would just

sound like the words of a scared tribute, not someone contemplating the unquestionable goodness of the Capitol.

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

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

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

"No, we're not related," I say.

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

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

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

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

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

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

We're at my door. I give back his jacket. "See you in the morning then."

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

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

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

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

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

Just like I was watching the Games.

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

I wonder if she'll enjoy watching me die.