

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 The face of the redheaded girl intertwines with gory images from earlier Hunger Games, with my mother withdrawn and unreachable, with Prim emaciated and terrified.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

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

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

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

capes. Just me. Looking like I could be headed for the woods. It calms me.

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

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

Haymitch and Peeta come in, bid me good morning, fill their plates. It makes me irritated that Peeta is wearing exactly the same outfit I am. I need to say something to

Cinna. This twins act is going to blow up in our faces once the Games begin. Surely, they must know this. Then I remember Haymitch telling me to do exactly what the stylists tell me to do. If it was anyone but Cinna, I might be tempted to ignore him. But after last night's triumph, I don't have a lot of room to criticize his choices.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Sorry, I don't. Katniss. I already know you're handy with a knife," says Haymitch.

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

"And you're good?" asks Haymitch.

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

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

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

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

I don't know why, but this rubs me the wrong way. "What about you? I've seen you in the market. You can lift

hundred-pound bags of flour,” I snap at him. “Tell him that. That’s not nothing.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No more than you,” I say.

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

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

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

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

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

“That may be significant in terms of food,” says Haymitch. “And, Peeta, she’s right, never underestimate strength in the arena. Very often, physical power tilts the

advantage to a player. In the Training Center, they will have weights, but don't reveal how much you can lift in front of the other tributes. The plan's the same for both of you. You go to group training. Spend the time trying to learn something you don't know. Throw a spear. Swing a mace. Learn to tie a decent knot. Save showing what you're best at until your private sessions. Are we clear?" says Haymitch.

Peeta and I nod.

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

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

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

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

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

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

As soon as we join the circle, the head trainer, a tall, athletic woman named Atala steps up and begins to explain the training schedule. Experts in each skill will remain at their stations. We will be free to travel from area to area as we choose, per our mentor's instructions. Some of the stations teach survival skills, others fighting techniques. We are forbidden to engage in any combative exercise with

another tribute. There are assistants on hand if we want to practice with a partner.

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

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

The slight advantage I held coming into the Training Center, my fiery entrance last night, seems to vanish in the presence of my competition. The other tributes were jealous of us, but not because we were amazing, because our stylists were. Now I see nothing but contempt in the glances of the Career Tributes. Each must have fifty to a

hundred pounds on me. They project arrogance and brutality. When Atala releases us, they head straight for the deadliest-looking weapons in the gym and handle them with ease.

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

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

"Suppose we tie some knots," I say.

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

"I do the cakes," he admits to me.

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

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

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

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

"It's lovely. If only you could frost someone to death," I say.

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

"Say we move on," I break in.

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

and weightlifting though, wanting to save those for our private sessions.

The Gamemakers appeared early on the first day. Twenty or so men and women dressed in deep purple robes. They sit in the elevated stands that surround the gymnasium, sometimes wandering about to watch us, jotting down notes, other times eating at the endless banquet that has been set for them, ignoring the lot of us. But they do seem to be keeping their eye on the District 12 tributes. Several times I've looked up to find one fixated on me. They consult with the trainers during our meals as well. We see them all gathered together when we come back.

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

It's not easy to find a topic. Talking of home is painful. Talking of the present unbearable. One day, Peeta empties our breadbasket and points out how they have been careful to include types from the districts along with the refined bread of the Capitol. The fish-shaped loaf tinted green with seaweed from District 4. The crescent moon roll dotted with

seeds from District 11. Somehow, although it's made from the same stuff, it looks a lot more appetizing than the ugly drop biscuits that are the standard fare at home.

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

"You certainly know a lot," I say.

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

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

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

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

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

I try and animate my face as I recall the event, a true story, in which I'd foolishly challenged a black bear over the rights to a beehive. Peeta laughs and asks questions right on cue. He's much better at this than I am.

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

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

with her arms slightly extended to her sides, as if ready to take wing at the slightest sound. It's impossible not to think of a bird.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I make a sound that is somewhere between a snort and a

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

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

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

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

"Thanks. I will," he says. "You . . . shoot straight."

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

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

There's nothing I can do but continue with the plan. I

walk to the archery station. Oh, the weapons! I've been itching to get my hands on them for days! Bows made of wood and plastic and metal and materials I can't even name. Arrows with feathers cut in flawless uniform lines. I choose a bow, string it, and sling the matching quiver of arrows over my shoulder. There's a shooting range, but it's much too limited. Standard bull's-eyes and human silhouettes. I walk to the center of the gymnasium and pick my first target. The dummy used for knife practice. Even as I pull back on the bow I know something is wrong. The string's tighter than the one I use at home. The arrow's more rigid. I miss the dummy by a couple of inches and lose what little attention I had been commanding. For a moment, I'm humiliated, then I head back to the bull's-eye. I shoot again and again until I get the feel of these new weapons.

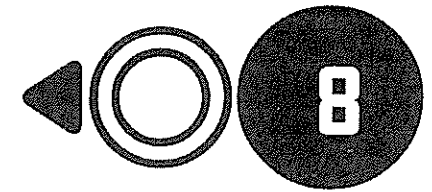
Back in the center of the gymnasium, I take my initial position and skewer the dummy right through the heart. Then I sever the rope that holds the sandbag for boxing, and the bag splits open as it slams to the ground. Without pausing, I shoulder-roll forward, come up on one knee, and send an arrow into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

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

Suddenly I am furious, that with my life on the line, they don't even have the decency to pay attention to me. That I'm being upstaged by a dead pig. My heart starts to

pound, I can feel my face burning. Without thinking, I pull an arrow from my quiver and send it straight at the Gamemakers' table. I hear shouts of alarm as people stumble back. The arrow skewers the apple in the pig's mouth and pins it to the wall behind it. Everyone stares at me in disbelief.

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



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

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

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

my mother to prison and Prim to the community home, or kill them? They wouldn't kill them, would they? Why not? What do they care?

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

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

At first, I expect guards to come for me. But as time passes, it seems less likely. I calm down. They still need a girl tribute from District 12, don't they? If the Gamemakers want to punish me, they can do it publicly. Wait until I'm in the arena and sic starving wild animals on me. You can bet they'll make sure I don't have a bow and arrow to defend myself.

Before that though, they'll give me a score so low, no one in their right mind would sponsor me. That's what will happen tonight. Since the training isn't open to viewers, the Gamemakers announce a score for each player. It gives the audience a starting place for the betting that will continue throughout the Games. The number, which is between one and twelve, one being irredeemably bad and twelve being unattainably high, signifies the promise of the tribute. The mark is not a guarantee of which person will win. It's only an indication of the potential a tribute showed in

training. Often, because of the variables in the actual arena, high-scoring tributes go down almost immediately. And a few years ago, the boy who won the Games only received a three. Still, the scores can help or hurt an individual tribute in terms of sponsorship. I had been hoping my shooting skills might get me a six or a seven, even if I'm not particularly powerful. Now I'm sure I'll have the lowest score of the twenty-four. If no one sponsors me, my odds of staying alive decrease to almost zero.

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

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

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

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

I threw around some heavy objects until they told me I could go.”

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

“And you, sweetheart?” says Haymitch.

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

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

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

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

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

“Without being dismissed?” gasps Effie.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’ll get a very bad score,” I say.

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

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

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

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

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

Eleven!

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

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

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

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

"More flames?" I ask.

"Of a sort," he says mischievously.

Peeta and I congratulate each other, another awkward moment. We've both done well, but what does that mean for the other? I escape to my room as quickly as possible and burrow down under the covers. The stress of the day, particularly the crying, has worn me out. I drift off, reprieved, relieved, and with the number eleven still flashing behind my eyelids.

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

I had been struggling along on my own for about six months when I first ran into Gale in the woods. It was a Sunday in October, the air cool and pungent with dying things. I'd spent the morning competing with the squirrels for nuts and the slightly warmer afternoon wading in shallow ponds harvesting katniss. The only meat I'd shot was a squirrel that had practically run over my toes in its quest for

acorns, but the animals would still be afoot when the snow buried my other food sources. Having strayed farther afield than usual, I was hurrying back home, lugging my burlap sacks, when I came across a dead rabbit. It was hanging by its neck in a thin wire a foot above my head. About fifteen yards away was another. I recognized the twitch-up snares because my father had used them. When the prey is caught, it's yanked into the air out of the reach of other hungry animals. I'd been trying to use snares all summer with no success, so I couldn't help dropping my sacks to examine this one. My fingers were just on the wire above one of the rabbits when a voice rang out. "That's dangerous."

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

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

"Katniss," I said, barely audible.

"Well, Catnip, stealing's punishable by death, or hadn't you heard?" he said.

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

He scowled at me, not convinced. "So where'd you get the squirrel?"

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

Gale's eyes fastened on the bow. "Can I see that?"

I handed it over. "Just remember, stealing's punishable by death."

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

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

Gale gave me a sense of security I'd lacked since my

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

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

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

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

Effie's knocking at the door, reminding me there's another "big, big, big day!" ahead. Tomorrow night will be

our televised interviews. I guess the whole team will have their hands full readying us for that.

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

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

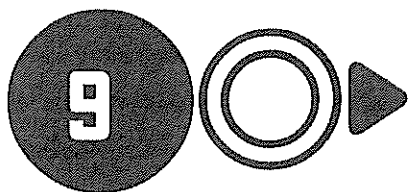
"That's right," says Haymitch.

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

I can't imagine what Effie will have to teach me that could take four hours, but she's got me working down to

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

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

"And you don't think they will?" I ask.

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

"They're betting on how long I'll live!" I burst out. "They're not my friends!"

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

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

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

"What?" I finally ask.

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

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

"What's Peeta's approach? Or am I not allowed to ask?" I say.

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

"I do not!" I say.

"Please. I don't know where you pulled that cheery, wavy

girl on the chariot from, but I haven't seen her before or since," says Haymitch.

"And you've given me so many reasons to be cheery," I counter.

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

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

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

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

"Then lie! Make something up!" says Haymitch.

"I'm not good at lying," I say.

"Well, you better learn fast. You've got about as much charm as a dead slug," says Haymitch.

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

"Humble," I echo.

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

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

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

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

I hate her, too, with her knowing reproachful eyes that call me a coward, a monster, a puppet of the Capitol, both

now and then. For her, justice must finally be happening. At least my death will help pay for the life of the boy in the woods.

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

"I should have tried to save you," I whisper.

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

"No, it was wrong," I say.

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

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

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

The team works on me until late afternoon, turning my skin to glowing satin, stenciling patterns on my arms,

painting flame designs on my twenty perfect nails. Then Venia goes to work on my hair, weaving strands of red into a pattern that begins at my left ear, wraps around my head, and then falls in one braid down my right shoulder. They erase my face with a layer of pale makeup and draw my features back out. Huge dark eyes, full red lips, lashes that throw off bits of light when I blink. Finally, they cover my entire body in a powder that makes me shimmer in gold dust.

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

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

"Can I open my eyes?" I ask.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Well, you are . . . around Haymitch," says Cinna with a grin. "I don't find you so. The prep team adores you. You even won over the Gamemakers. And as for the citizens of the Capitol, well, they can't stop talking about you. No one can help but admire your spirit."

My spirit. This is a new thought. I'm not sure exactly what it means, but it suggests I'm a fighter. In a sort of

brave way. It's not as if I'm never friendly. Okay, maybe I don't go around loving everybody I meet, maybe my smiles are hard to come by, but I do care for some people.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When the elevator opens, the other tributes are being lined up to take the stage. All twenty-four of us sit in a big arc throughout the interviews. I'll be last, or second to last since the girl tribute precedes the boy from each district. How I wish I could be first and get the whole thing out of the way! Now I'll have to listen to how witty, funny, humble, fierce, and charming everybody else is before I go up. Plus, the audience will start to get bored, just as the Gamemakers did. And I can't exactly shoot an arrow into the crowd to get their attention.

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

What? I thought we abandoned that when Peeta asked for separate coaching. But I guess that was a private, not a public thing. Anyway, there's not much chance for

interaction now, as we walk single-file to our seats and take our places.

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

Caesar Flickerman, the man who has hosted the interviews for more than forty years, bounces onto the stage. It's a little scary because his appearance has been virtually unchanged during all that time. Same face under a coating of pure white makeup. Same hairstyle that he dyes a different color for each Hunger Games. Same ceremonial suit, midnight blue dotted with a thousand tiny electric bulbs that twinkle like stars. They do surgery in the Capitol, to make people appear younger and thinner. In District 12, looking old is something of an achievement since so many people die early. You see an elderly person, you want to

congratulate them on their longevity, ask the secret of survival. A plump person is envied because they aren't scraping by like the majority of us. But here it is different. Wrinkles aren't desirable. A round belly isn't a sign of success.

This year, Caesar's hair is powder blue and his eyelids and lips are coated in the same hue. He looks freakish but less frightening than he did last year when his color was crimson and he seemed to be bleeding. Caesar tells a few jokes to warm up the audience but then gets down to business.

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

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

I sit like a lady, the way Effie showed me, as the districts slip by. 2, 3, 4. Everyone seems to be playing up some angle. The monstrous boy from District 2 is a ruthless killing machine. The fox-faced girl from District 5 sly and elusive. I spotted Cinna as soon as he took his place, but even his presence cannot relax me. 8, 9, 10. The crippled

boy from 10 is very quiet. My palms are sweating like crazy, but the jeweled dress isn't absorbent and they skid right off if I try to dry them. 11.

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

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

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

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

And then they're calling Katniss Everdeen, and I feel

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

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

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

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

"The lamb stew," I get out.

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

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

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

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

Big laugh. A real one from the audience.

"Yes. Start then," says Caesar.

Cinna, my friend, I should tell him anyway. "I thought

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

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

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

"Oh, do that again!" says Caesar, and so I lift up my arms and spin around and around letting the skirt fly out, letting the dress engulf me in flames. The audience breaks into cheers. When I stop, I clutch Caesar's arm.

"Don't stop!" he says.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"She have another fellow?" asks Caesar.

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

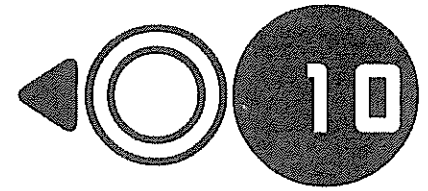
"So, here's what you do. You win, you go home. She can't turn you down then, eh?" says Caesar encouragingly.

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

"Why ever not?" says Caesar, mystified.

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

PART II "THE GAMES"



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

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

"It's not good," agrees Peeta.

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

Peeta shakes his head. "Not until now."

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

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

The roar of the crowd is deafening. Peeta has absolutely

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

But I know better.

After the anthem, the tributes file back into the Training Center lobby and onto the elevators. I make sure to veer into a car that does not contain Peeta. The crowd slows our entourages of stylists and mentors and chaperones, so we have only each other for company. No one speaks. My elevator stops to deposit four tributes before I am alone and then find the doors opening on the twelfth floor. Peeta has only just stepped from his car when I slam my palms into his chest. He loses his balance and crashes into an ugly urn filled with fake flowers. The urn tips and shatters into hundreds of tiny pieces. Peeta lands in the shards, and blood immediately flows from his hands.

"What was that for?" he says, aghast.

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

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

"What's going on?" says Effie, a note of hysteria in her voice. "Did you fall?"

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

Haymitch turns on me. "Shoved him?"

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

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

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

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

"He made me look weak!" I say.

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

"But we're not star-crossed lovers!" I say.

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

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

Cinna comes over and puts his arm around me. "He's right, Katniss."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The others chime in, agreeing.

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

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

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

"Are your hands okay?" I ask.

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

In the silence that follows, delicious smells of our dinner waft in from the dining room. "Come on, let's eat," says Haymitch. We all follow him to the table and take our places. But then Peeta is bleeding too heavily, and Portia leads him off for medical treatment. We start the cream and rose-petal soup without them. By the time we've finished, they're back. Peeta's hands are wrapped in bandages. I can't help feeling guilty. Tomorrow we will be in the arena. He has done me a favor and I have answered with an injury. Will I never stop owing him?

After dinner, we watch the replay in the sitting room. I seem frilly and shallow, twirling and giggling in my dress, although the others assure me I am charming. Peeta actually is charming and then utterly winning as the boy in love. And there I am, blushing and confused, made beautiful by

Cinna's hands, desirable by Peeta's confession, tragic by circumstance, and by all accounts, unforgettable.

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

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

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

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

Haymitch crosses his arms and looks us both over.

"Any final words of advice?" asks Peeta.

"When the gong sounds, get the hell out of there. You're
g neither of you up to the blood bath at the Cornucopia. Just

clear out, put as much distance as you can between yourselves and the others, and find a source of water," he says. "Got it?"

"And after that?" I ask.

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

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

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

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

It's no good. One hour, two, three pass, and my eyelids refuse to get heavy. I can't stop trying to imagine exactly what terrain I'll be thrown into. Desert? Swamp? A frigid wasteland? Above all I am hoping for trees, which may

afford me some means of concealment and food and shelter. Often there are trees because barren landscapes are dull and the Games resolve too quickly without them. But what will the climate be like? What traps have the Gamemakers hidden to liven up the slower moments? And then there are my fellow tributes . . .

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

The roof is not lit at night, but as soon as my bare feet reach its tiled surface I see his silhouette, black against the lights that shine endlessly in the Capitol. There's quite a commotion going on down in the streets, music and singing and car horns, none of which I could hear through the thick glass window panels in my room. I could slip away now, without him noticing me; he wouldn't hear me over the din. But the night air's so sweet, I can't bear returning to that stuffy cage of a room. And what difference does it make? Whether we speak or not?

My feet move soundlessly across the tiles. I'm only a

yard behind him when I say, "You should be getting some sleep."

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

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

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

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

"Thinking about your family?" he asks.

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

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

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

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

"And what?" I say.

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

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

"No, when the time comes, I'm sure I'll kill just like everybody else. I can't go down without a fight. Only I keep wishing I could think of a way to . . . to show the Capitol they don't own me. That I'm more than just a piece in their Games," says Peeta.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I don't see Peeta in the morning. Cinna comes to me before dawn, gives me a simple shift to wear, and guides me to the roof. My final dressing and preparations will be done in the catacombs under the arena itself. A hovercraft appears out of thin air, just like the one did in the woods the day I saw the redheaded Avox girl captured, and a ladder drops down. I place my hands and feet on the lower rungs and instantly it's as if I'm frozen. Some sort of current glues me to the ladder while I'm lifted safely inside.

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

Still? I'm a statue. But that doesn't prevent me from

feeling the sharp stab of pain as the needle inserts the metal tracking device deep under the skin on the inside of my forearm. Now the Gamemakers will always be able to trace my whereabouts in the arena. Wouldn't want to lose a tribute.

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

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

Everything is brand-new, I will be the first and only tribute to use this Launch Room. The arenas are historic sites, preserved after the Games. Popular destinations for Capitol residents to visit, to vacation. Go for a month, rewatch the

Games, tour the catacombs, visit the sites where the deaths took place. You can even take part in reenactments.

They say the food is excellent.

I struggle to keep my breakfast down as I shower and clean my teeth. Cinna does my hair in my simple trademark braid down my back. Then the clothes arrive, the same for every tribute. Cinna has had no say in my outfit, does not even know what will be in the package, but he helps me dress in the undergarments, simple tawny pants, light green blouse, sturdy brown belt, and thin, hooded black jacket that falls to my thighs. "The material in the jacket's designed to reflect body heat. Expect some cool nights," he says.

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

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

"Where did you get that?" I ask.

"Off the green outfit you wore on the train," he says. I remember now taking it off my mother's dress, pinning it to the shirt. "It's your district token, right?" I nod and he fastens it on my shirt. "It barely cleared the review board. Some thought the pin could be used as a weapon, giving you an unfair advantage. But eventually, they let it through," says Cinna. "They eliminated a ring from that District One girl, though. If you twisted the gemstone, a spike popped

out. Poisoned one. She claimed she had no knowledge the ring transformed and there was no way to prove she did. But she lost her token. There, you're all set. Move around. Make sure everything feels comfortable."

I walk, run in a circle, swing my arms about. "Yes, it's fine. Fits perfectly."

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

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

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

"Do you want to talk, Katniss?" Cinna asks.

I shake my head but after a moment hold out my hand to him. Cinna encloses it in both of his. And this is how we sit until a pleasant female voice announces it's time to prepare for launch.

Still clenching one of Cinna's hands, I walk over and stand on the circular metal plate. "Remember what Haymitch said. Run, find water. The rest will follow," he says. I nod. "And remember this. I'm not allowed to bet, but if I could, my money would be on you."

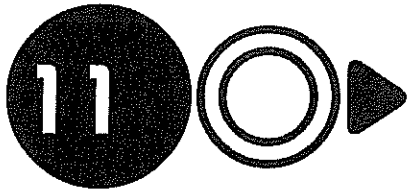
"Truly?" I whisper.

"Truly," says Cinna. He leans down and kisses me on the forehead. "Good luck, girl on fire." And then a glass cylinder is lowering around me, breaking our handhold, cutting him off from me. He taps his fingers under his chin. Head high.

I lift my chin and stand as straight as I can. The cylinder begins to rise. For maybe fifteen seconds, I'm in darkness and then I can feel the metal plate pushing me out of the cylinder, into the open air. For a moment, my eyes are dazzled by the bright sunlight and I'm conscious only of a strong wind with the hopeful smell of pine trees.

Then I hear the legendary announcer, Claudius Templesmith, as his voice booms all around me.

"Ladies and gentlemen, let the Seventy-fourth Hunger Games begin!"



Sixty seconds. That's how long we're required to stand on our metal circles before the sound of a gong releases us. Step off before the minute is up, and land mines blow your legs off. Sixty seconds to take in the ring of tributes all equidistant from the Cornucopia, a giant golden horn shaped like a cone with a curved tail, the mouth of which is at least twenty feet high, spilling over with the things that will give us life here in the arena. Food, containers of water, weapons, medicine, garments, fire starters. Strewn around the Cornucopia are other supplies, their value decreasing the farther they are from the horn. For instance, only a few steps from my feet lies a three-foot square of plastic. Certainly it could be of some use in a downpour. But there in the mouth, I can see a tent pack that would protect from almost any sort of weather. If I had the guts to go in and fight for it against the other twenty-three tributes. Which I have been instructed not to do.

We're on a flat, open stretch of ground. A plain of hard-packed dirt. Behind the tributes across from me, I can see nothing, indicating either a steep downward slope or even a cliff. To my right lies a lake. To my left and back, sparse piney woods. This is where Haymitch would want me to go. Immediately.

I hear his instructions in my head. "Just clear out, put as much distance as you can between yourselves and the others, and find a source of water."

But it's tempting, so tempting, when I see the bounty waiting there before me. And I know that if I don't get it, someone else will. That the Career Tributes who survive the bloodbath will divide up most of these life-sustaining spoils. Something catches my eye. There, resting on a mound of blanket rolls, is a silver sheath of arrows and a bow, already strung, just waiting to be engaged. *That's mine*, I think. *It's meant for me.*

I'm fast. I can sprint faster than any of the girls in our school although a couple can beat me in distance races. But this forty-yard length, this is what I am built for. I know I can get it, I know I can reach it first, but then the question is how quickly can I get out of there? By the time I've scrambled up the packs and grabbed the weapons, others will have reached the horn, and one or two I might be able to pick off, but say there's a dozen, at that close range, they could take me down with the spears and the clubs. Or their own powerful fists.

Still, I won't be the only target. I'm betting many of the other tributes would pass up a smaller girl, even one who scored an eleven in training, to take out their more fierce adversaries.

Haymitch has never seen me run. Maybe if he had he'd tell me to go for it. Get the weapon. Since that's the very weapon that might be my salvation. And I only see one bow in that whole pile. I know the minute must be almost up

and will have to decide what my strategy will be and I find myself positioning my feet to run, not away into the surrounding forests but toward the pile, toward the bow. When suddenly I notice Peeta, he's about five tributes to my right, quite a fair distance, still I can tell he's looking at me and I think he might be shaking his head. But the sun's in my eyes, and while I'm puzzling over it the gong rings out.

And I've missed it! I've missed my chance! Because those extra couple of seconds I've lost by not being ready are enough to change my mind about going in. My feet shuffle for a moment, confused at the direction my brain wants to take and then I lunge forward, scoop up the sheet of plastic and a loaf of bread. The pickings are so small and I'm so angry with Peeta for distracting me that I sprint in twenty yards to retrieve a bright orange backpack that could hold anything because I can't stand leaving with virtually nothing.

A boy, I think from District 9, reaches the pack at the same time I do and for a brief time we grapple for it and then he coughs, splattering my face with blood. I stagger back, repulsed by the warm, sticky spray. Then the boy slips to the ground. That's when I see the knife in his back. Already other tributes have reached the Cornucopia and are spreading out to attack. Yes, the girl from District 2, ten yards away, running toward me, one hand clutching a half-dozen knives. I've seen her throw in training. She never misses. And I'm her next target.

All the general fear I've been feeling condenses into an immediate fear of this girl, this predator who might kill me

in seconds. Adrenaline shoots through me and I sling the pack over one shoulder and run full-speed for the woods. I can hear the blade whistling toward me and reflexively hike the pack up to protect my head. The blade lodges in the pack. Both straps on my shoulders now, I make for the trees. Somehow I know the girl will not pursue me. That she'll be drawn back into the Cornucopia before all the good stuff is gone. A grin crosses my face. *Thanks for the knife*, I think.

At the edge of the woods I turn for one instant to survey the field. About a dozen or so tributes are hacking away at one another at the horn. Several lie dead already on the ground. Those who have taken flight are disappearing into the trees or into the void opposite me. I continue running until the woods have hidden me from the other tributes then slow into a steady jog that I think I can maintain for a while. For the next few hours, I alternate between jogging and walking, putting as much distance as I can between myself and my competitors. I lost my bread during the struggle with the boy from District 9 but managed to stuff my plastic in my sleeve so as I walk I fold it neatly and tuck it into a pocket. I also free the knife — it's a fine one with a long sharp blade, serrated near the handle, which will make it handy for sawing through things — and slide it into my belt. I don't dare stop to examine the contents of the pack yet. I just keep moving, pausing only to check for pursuers.

I can go a long time. I know that from my days in the woods. But I will need water. That was Haymitch's second instruction, and since I sort of botched the first, I keep a sharp eye out for any sign of it. No luck.

The woods begin to evolve, and the pines are intermixed with a variety of trees, some I recognize, some completely foreign to me. At one point, I hear a noise and pull my knife, thinking I may have to defend myself, but I've only startled a rabbit. "Good to see you," I whisper. If there's one rabbit, there could be hundreds just waiting to be snared.

The ground slopes down. I don't particularly like this. Valleys make me feel trapped. I want to be high, like in the hills around District 12, where I can see my enemies approaching. But I have no choice but to keep going.

Funny though, I don't feel too bad. The days of gorging myself have paid off. I've got staying power even though I'm short on sleep. Being in the woods is rejuvenating. I'm glad for the solitude, even though it's an illusion, because I'm probably on-screen right now. Not consistently but off and on. There are so many deaths to show the first day that a tribute trekking through the woods isn't much to look at. But they'll show me enough to let people know I'm alive, uninjured and on the move. One of the heaviest days of betting is the opening, when the initial casualties come in. But that can't compare to what happens as the field shrinks to a handful of players.

It's late afternoon when I begin to hear the cannons. Each shot represents a dead tribute. The fighting must have finally stopped at the Cornucopia. They never collect the bloodbath bodies until the killers have dispersed. On the opening day, they don't even fire the cannons until the initial fighting's over because it's too hard to keep track of the fatalities. I allow myself to pause, panting, as I count

the shots. One . . . two . . . three . . . on and on until they reach eleven. Eleven dead in all. Thirteen left to play. My fingernails scrape at the dried blood the boy from District 9 coughed into my face. He's gone, certainly. I wonder about Peeta. Has he lasted through the day? I'll know in a few hours. When they project the dead's images into the sky for the rest of us to see.

All of a sudden, I'm overwhelmed by the thought that Peeta may be already lost, bled white, collected, and in the process of being transported back to the Capitol to be cleaned up, redressed, and shipped in a simple wooden box back to District 12. No longer here. Heading home. I try hard to remember if I saw him once the action started. But the last image I can conjure up is Peeta shaking his head as the gong rang out.

Maybe it's better, if he's gone already. He had no confidence he could win. And I will not end up with the unpleasant task of killing him. Maybe it's better if he's out of this for good.

I slump down next to my pack, exhausted. I need to go through it anyway before night falls. See what I have to work with. As I unhook the straps, I can feel it's sturdily made although a rather unfortunate color. This orange will practically glow in the dark. I make a mental note to camouflage it first thing tomorrow.

I flip open the flap. What I want most, right at this moment, is water. Haymitch's directive to immediately find water was not arbitrary. I won't last long without it. For a few days, I'll be able to function with unpleasant symptoms

of dehydration, but after that I'll deteriorate into helplessness and be dead in a week, tops. I carefully lay out the provisions. One thin black sleeping bag that reflects body heat. A pack of crackers. A pack of dried beef strips. A bottle of iodine. A box of wooden matches. A small coil of wire. A pair of sunglasses. And a half-gallon plastic bottle with a cap for carrying water that's bone dry.

No water. How hard would it have been for them to fill up the bottle? I become aware of the dryness in my throat and mouth, the cracks in my lips. I've been moving all day long. It's been hot and I've sweat a lot. I do this at home, but there are always streams to drink from, or snow to melt if it should come to it.

As I refill my pack I have an awful thought. The lake. The one I saw while I was waiting for the gong to sound. What if that's the only water source in the arena? That way they'll guarantee drawing us in to fight. The lake is a full day's journey from where I sit now, a much harder journey with nothing to drink. And then, even if I reach it, it's sure to be heavily guarded by some of the Career Tributes. I'm about to panic when I remember the rabbit I startled earlier today. It has to drink, too. I just have to find out where.

Twilight is closing in and I am ill at ease. The trees are too thin to offer much concealment. The layer of pine needles that muffles my footsteps also makes tracking animals harder when I need their trails to find water. And I'm still heading downhill, deeper and deeper into a valley that seems endless.

I'm hungry, too, but I don't dare break into my precious store of crackers and beef yet. Instead, I take my knife and go to work on a pine tree, cutting away the outer bark and scraping off a large handful of the softer inner bark. I slowly chew the stuff as I walk along. After a week of the finest food in the world, it's a little hard to choke down. But I've eaten plenty of pine in my life. I'll adjust quickly.

In another hour, it's clear I've got to find a place to camp. Night creatures are coming out. I can hear the occasional hoot or howl, my first clue that I'll be competing with natural predators for the rabbits. As to whether I'll be viewed as a source of food, it's too soon to tell. There could be any number of animals stalking me at this moment.

But right now, I decide to make my fellow tributes a priority. I'm sure many will continue hunting through the night. Those who fought it out at the Cornucopia will have food, an abundance of water from the lake, torches or flashlights, and weapons they're itching to use. I can only hope I've traveled far and fast enough to be out of range.

Before settling down, I take my wire and set two twitch-up snares in the brush. I know it's risky to be setting traps, but food will go so fast out here. And I can't set snares on the run. Still, I walk another five minutes before making camp.

I pick my tree carefully. A willow, not terribly tall but set in a clump of other willows, offering concealment in those long, flowing tresses. I climb up, sticking to the stronger branches close to the trunk, and find a sturdy fork for

my bed. It takes some doing, but I arrange the sleeping bag in a relatively comfortable manner. I place my backpack in the foot of the bag, then slide in after it. As a precaution, I remove my belt, loop it all the way around the branch and my sleeping bag, and refasten it at my waist. Now if I roll over in my sleep, I won't go crashing to the ground. I'm small enough to tuck the top of the bag over my head, but I put on my hood as well. As night falls, the air is cooling quickly. Despite the risk I took in getting the backpack, I know now it was the right choice. This sleeping bag, radiating back and preserving my body heat, will be invaluable. I'm sure there are several other tributes whose biggest concern right now is how to stay warm whereas I may actually be able to get a few hours of sleep. If only I wasn't so thirsty . . .

Night has just come when I hear the anthem that proceeds the death recap. Through the branches I can see the seal of the Capitol, which appears to be floating in the sky. I'm actually viewing another screen, an enormous one that's transported by one of their disappearing hovercraft. The anthem fades out and the sky goes dark for a moment. At home, we would be watching full coverage of each and every killing, but that's thought to give an unfair advantage to the living tributes. For instance, if I got my hands on the bow and shot someone, my secret would be revealed to all. No, here in the arena, all we see are the same photographs they showed when they televised our training scores. Simple head shots. But now instead of scores they post only district numbers. I take a deep breath as the faces

of the eleven dead tributes begin and tick them off one by one on my fingers.

The first to appear is the girl from District 3. That means that the Career Tributes from 1 and 2 have all survived. No surprise there. Then the boy from 4. I didn't expect that one, usually all the Careers make it through the first day. The boy from District 5 . . . I guess the fox-faced girl made it. Both tributes from 6 and 7. The boy from 8. Both from 9. Yes, there's the boy who I fought for the backpack. I've run through my fingers, only one more dead tribute to go. Is it Peeta? No, there's the girl from District 10. That's it. The Capitol seal is back with a final musical flourish. Then darkness and the sounds of the forest resume.

I'm relieved Peeta's alive. I tell myself again that if I get killed, his winning will benefit my mother and Prim the most. This is what I tell myself to explain the conflicting emotions that arise when I think of Peeta. The gratitude that he gave me an edge by professing his love for me in the interview. The anger at his superiority on the roof. The dread that we may come face-to-face at any moment in this arena.

Eleven dead, but none from District 12. I try to work out who is left. Five Career Tributes. Foxface. Thresh and Rue. Rue . . . so she made it through the first day after all. I can't help feeling glad. That makes ten of us. The other three I'll figure out tomorrow. Now when it is dark, and I have traveled far, and I am nestled high in this tree, now I must try and rest.

I haven't really slept in two days, and then there's been

the long day's journey into the arena. Slowly, I allow my muscles to relax. My eyes to close. The last thing I think is it's lucky I don't snore. . . .

Snap! The sound of a breaking branch wakes me. How long have I been asleep? Four hours? Five? The tip of my nose is icy cold. *Snap! Snap!* What's going on? This is not the sound of a branch under someone's foot, but the sharp crack of one coming from a tree. *Snap! Snap!* I judge it to be several hundred yards to my right. Slowly, noiselessly, I turn myself in that direction. For a few minutes, there's nothing but blackness and some scuffling. Then I see a spark and a small fire begins to bloom. A pair of hands warms over flames, but I can't make out more than that.

I have to bite my lip not to scream every foul name I know at the fire starter. What are they thinking? A fire lit just at nightfall would have been one thing. Those who battled at the Cornucopia, with their superior strength and surplus of supplies, they couldn't possibly have been near enough to spot the flames then. But now, when they've probably been combing the woods for hours looking for victims. You might as well be waving a flag and shouting, "Come and get me!"

And here I am a stone's throw from the biggest idiot in the Games. Strapped in a tree. Not daring to flee since my general location has just been broadcast to any killer who cares. I mean, I know it's cold out here and not everybody has a sleeping bag. But then you grit your teeth and stick it out until dawn!

I lie smoldering in my bag for the next couple of hours,

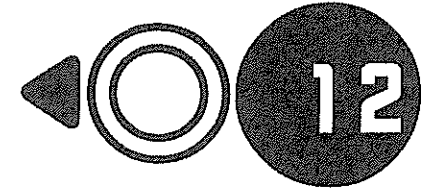
really thinking that if I can get out of this tree, I won't have the least problem taking out my new neighbor. My instinct has been to flee, not fight. But obviously this person's a hazard. Stupid people are dangerous. And this one probably doesn't have much in the way of weapons while I've got this excellent knife.

The sky is still dark, but I can feel the first signs of dawn approaching. I'm beginning to think we — meaning the person whose death I'm now devising and I — we might actually have gone unnoticed. Then I hear it. Several pairs of feet breaking into a run. The fire starter must have dozed off. They're on her before she can escape. I know it's a girl now, I can tell by the pleading, the agonized scream that follows. Then there's laughter and congratulations from several voices. Someone cries out, "Twelve down and eleven to go!" which gets a round of appreciative hoots.

So they're fighting in a pack. I'm not really surprised. Often alliances are formed in the early stages of the Games. The strong band together to hunt down the weak then, when the tension becomes too great, begin to turn on one another. I don't have to wonder too hard who has made this alliance. It'll be the remaining Career Tributes from Districts 1, 2, and 4. Two boys and three girls. The ones who lunched together.

For a moment, I hear them checking the girl for supplies. I can tell by their comments they've found nothing good. I wonder if the victim is Rue but quickly dismiss the thought. She's much too bright to be building a fire like that.

"Better clear out so they can get the body before it starts



stinking.” I’m almost certain that’s the brutish boy from District 2. There are murmurs of assent and then, to my horror, I hear the pack heading toward me. They do not know I’m here. How could they? And I’m well concealed in the clump of trees. At least while the sun stays down. Then my black sleeping bag will turn from camouflage to trouble. If they just keep moving, they will pass me and be gone in a minute.

But the Careers stop in the clearing about ten yards from my tree. They have flashlights, torches. I can see an arm here, a boot there, through the breaks in the branches. I turn to stone, not even daring to breathe. Have they spotted me? No, not yet. I can tell from their words their minds are elsewhere.

“Shouldn’t we have heard a cannon by now?”

“I’d say yes. Nothing to prevent them from going in immediately.”

“Unless she isn’t dead.”

“She’s dead. I stuck her myself.”

“Then where’s the cannon?”

“Someone should go back. Make sure the job’s done.”

“Yeah, we don’t want to have to track her down twice.”

“I said she’s dead!”

An argument breaks out until one tribute silences the others. “We’re wasting time! I’ll go finish her and let’s move on!”

I almost fall out of the tree. The voice belongs to Peeta.

Thank goodness, I had the foresight to belt myself in. I’ve rolled sideways off the fork and I’m facing the ground, held in place by the belt, one hand, and my feet straddling the pack inside my sleeping bag, braced against the trunk. There must have been some rustling when I tipped sideways, but the Careers have been too caught up in their own argument to catch it.

“Go on, then, Lover Boy,” says the boy from District 2. “See for yourself.”

I just get a glimpse of Peeta, lit by a torch, heading back to the girl by the fire. His face is swollen with bruises, there’s a bloody bandage on one arm, and from the sound of his gait he’s limping somewhat. I remember him shaking his head, telling me not to go into the fight for the supplies, when all along, all along he’d planned to throw himself into the thick of things. Just the opposite of what Haymitch had told him to do.

Okay, I can stomach that. Seeing all those supplies was tempting. But this . . . this other thing. This teaming up with the Career wolf pack to hunt down the rest of us. No one from District 12 would think of doing such a thing! Career tributes are overly vicious, arrogant, better fed, but only because they’re the Capitol’s lapdogs.

Universally, solidly hated by all but those from their own districts. I can imagine the things they're saying about him back home now. And Peeta had the gall to talk to me about disgrace?

Obviously, the noble boy on the rooftop was playing just one more game with me. But this will be his last. I will eagerly watch the night skies for signs of his death, if I don't kill him first myself.

The Career tributes are silent until he gets out of ear-shot, then use hushed voices.

"Why don't we just kill him now and get it over with?"

"Let him tag along. What's the harm? And he's handy with that knife."

Is he? That's news. What a lot of interesting things I'm learning about my friend Peeta today.

"Besides, he's our best chance of finding her."

It takes me a moment to register that the "her" they're referring to is me.

"Why? You think she bought into that sappy romance stuff?"

"She might have. Seemed pretty simpleminded to me. Every time I think about her spinning around in that dress, I want to puke."

"Wish we knew how she got that eleven."

"Bet you Lover Boy knows."

The sound of Peeta returning silences them.

"Was she dead?" asks the boy from District 2.

"No. But she is now," says Peeta. Just then, the cannon fires. "Ready to move on?"

The Career pack sets off at a run just as dawn begins to break, and birdsong fills the air. I remain in my awkward position, muscles trembling with exertion for a while longer, then hoist myself back onto my branch. I need to get down, to get going, but for a moment I lie there, digesting what I've heard. Not only is Peeta with the Careers, he's helping them find me. The simpleminded girl who has to be taken seriously because of her eleven. Because she can use a bow and arrow. Which Peeta knows better than anyone.

But he hasn't told them yet. Is he saving that information because he knows it's all that keeps him alive? Is he still pretending to love me for the audience? What is going on in his head?

Suddenly, the birds fall silent. Then one gives a high-pitched warning call. A single note. Just like the one Gale and I heard when the redheaded Avox girl was caught. High above the dying campfire a hovercraft materializes. A set of large metal teeth drops down. Slowly, gently, the dead tribute girl is lifted into the hovercraft. Then it vanishes. The birds resume their song.

"Move," I whisper to myself. I wriggle out of my sleeping bag, roll it up, and place it in the pack. I take a deep breath. While I've been concealed by darkness and the sleeping bag and the willow branches, it has probably been difficult for the cameras to get a good shot of me. I know they must be tracking me now though. The minute I hit the ground, I'm guaranteed a close-up.

The audience will have been beside themselves, knowing I was in the tree, that I overheard the Careers talking,

that I discovered Peeta was with them. Until I work out exactly how I want to play that, I'd better at least act on top of things. Not perplexed. Certainly not confused or frightened.

No, I need to look one step ahead of the game.

So as I slide out of the foliage and into the dawn light, I pause a second, giving the cameras time to lock on me. Then I cock my head slightly to the side and give a knowing smile. There! Let them figure out what that means!

I'm about to take off when I think of my snares. Maybe it's imprudent to check them with the others so close. But I have to. Too many years of hunting, I guess. And the lure of possible meat. I'm rewarded with one fine rabbit. In no time, I've cleaned and gutted the animal, leaving the head, feet, tail, skin, and innards, under a pile of leaves. I'm wishing for a fire — eating raw rabbit can give you rabbit fever, a lesson I learned the hard way — when I think of the dead tribute. I hurry back to her camp. Sure enough, the coals of her dying fire are still hot. I cut up the rabbit, fashion a spit out of branches, and set it over the coals.

I'm glad for the cameras now. I want sponsors to see I can hunt, that I'm a good bet because I won't be lured into traps as easily as the others will by hunger. While the rabbit cooks, I grind up part of a charred branch and set about camouflaging my orange pack. The black tones it down, but I feel a layer of mud would definitely help. Of course, to have mud, I'd need water. . . .

I pull on my gear, grab my spit, kick some dirt over the coals, and take off in the opposite direction the Careers

went. I eat half the rabbit as I go, then wrap up the leftovers in my plastic for later. The meat stops the grumbling in my stomach but does little to quench my thirst. Water is my top priority now.

As I hike along, I feel certain I'm still holding the screen in the Capitol, so I'm careful to continue to hide my emotions. But what a good time Claudius Templesmith must be having with his guest commentators, dissecting Peeta's behavior, my reaction. What to make of it all? Has Peeta revealed his true colors? How does this affect the betting odds? Will we lose sponsors? Do we even *have* sponsors? Yes, I feel certain we do, or at least did.

Certainly Peeta has thrown a wrench into our star-crossed lover dynamic. Or has he? Maybe, since he hasn't spoken much about me, we can still get some mileage out of it. Maybe people will think it's something we plotted together if I seem like it amuses me now.

The sun rises in the sky and even through the canopy it seems overly bright. I coat my lips in some grease from the rabbit and try to keep from panting, but it's no use. It's only been a day and I'm dehydrating fast. I try and think of everything I know about finding water. It runs downhill, so, in fact, continuing down into this valley isn't a bad thing. If I could just locate a game trail or spot a particularly green patch of vegetation, these might help me along. But nothing seems to change. There's just the slight gradual slope, the birds, the sameness to the trees.

As the day wears on, I know I'm headed for trouble. What little urine I've been able to pass is a dark brown, my

head is aching, and there's a dry patch on my tongue that refuses to moisten. The sun hurts my eyes so I dig out my sunglasses, but when I put them on they do something funny to my vision, so I just stuff them back in my pack.

It's late afternoon when I think I've found help. I spot a cluster of berry bushes and hurry to strip the fruit, to suck the sweet juices from the skins. But just as I'm holding them to my lips, I get a hard look at them. What I thought were blueberries have a slightly different shape, and when I break one open the insides are bloodred. I don't recognize these berries, perhaps they are edible, but I'm guessing this is some evil trick on the part of the Gamemakers. Even the plant instructor in the Training Center made a point of telling us to avoid berries unless you were 100 percent sure they weren't toxic. Something I already knew, but I'm so thirsty it takes her reminder to give me the strength to fling them away.

Fatigue is beginning to settle on me, but it's not the usual tiredness that follows a long hike. I have to stop and rest frequently, although I know the only cure for what ails me requires continued searching. I try a new tactic — climbing a tree as high as I dare in my shaky state — to look for any signs of water. But as far as I can see in any direction, there's the same unrelenting stretch of forest.

Determined to go on until nightfall, I walk until I'm stumbling over my own feet.

Exhausted, I haul myself up into a tree and belt myself in. I've no appetite, but I suck on a rabbit bone just to give

my mouth something to do. Night falls, the anthem plays, and high in the sky I see the picture of the girl, who was apparently from District 8. The one Peeta went back to finish off.

My fear of the Career pack is minor compared to my burning thirst. Besides, they were heading away from me and by now they, too, will have to rest. With the scarcity of water, they may even have had to return to the lake for refills.

Maybe, that is the only course for me as well.

Morning brings distress. My head throbs with every beat of my heart. Simple movements send stabs of pain through my joints. I fall, rather than jump from the tree. It takes several minutes for me to assemble my gear. Somewhere inside me, I know this is wrong. I should be acting with more caution, moving with more urgency. But my mind seems foggy and forming a plan is hard. I lean back against the trunk of my tree, one finger gingerly stroking the sandpaper surface of my tongue, as I assess my options. How can I get water?

Return to the lake. No good. I'd never make it.

Hope for rain. There's not a cloud in the sky.

Keep looking. Yes, this is my only chance. But then, another thought hits me, and the surge of anger that follows brings me to my senses.

Haymitch! He could send me water! Press a button and have it delivered to me in a silver parachute in minutes. I know I must have sponsors, at least one or two who could

afford a pint of liquid for me. Yes, it's pricey, but these people, they're made of money. And they'll be betting on me as well. Perhaps Haymitch doesn't realize how deep my need is.

I say in a voice as loud as I dare. "Water." I wait, hopefully, for a parachute to descend from the sky. But nothing is forthcoming.

Something is wrong. Am I deluded about having sponsors? Or has Peeta's behavior made them all hang back? No, I don't believe it. There's someone out there who wants to buy me water only Haymitch is refusing to let it go through. As my mentor, he gets to control the flow of gifts from the sponsors. I know he hates me. He's made that clear enough. But enough to let me die? From this? He can't do that, can he? If a mentor mistreats his tributes, he'll be held accountable by the viewers, by the people back in District 12. Even Haymitch wouldn't risk that, would he? Say what you will about my fellow traders in the Hob, but I don't think they'd welcome him back there if he let me die this way. And then where would he get his liquor? So . . . what? Is he trying to make me suffer for defying him? Is he directing all the sponsors toward Peeta? Is he just too drunk to even notice what's going on at the moment? Somehow I don't believe that and I don't believe he's trying to kill me off by neglect, either. He has, in fact, in his own unpleasant way, genuinely been trying to prepare me for this. Then what is going on?

I bury my face in my hands. There's no danger of tears now, I couldn't produce one to save my life. What is

Haymitch doing? Despite my anger, hatred, and suspicions, a small voice in the back of my head whispers an answer.

Maybe he's sending you a message, it says. A message. Saying what? Then I know. There's only one good reason Haymitch could be withholding water from me. Because he knows I've almost found it.

I grit my teeth and pull myself to my feet. My backpack seems to have tripled in weight. I find a broken branch that will do for a walking stick and I start off. The sun's beating down, even more searing than the first two days. I feel like an old piece of leather, drying and cracking in the heat. Every step is an effort, but I refuse to stop. I refuse to sit down. If I sit, there's a good chance I won't be able to get up again, that I won't even remember my task.

What easy prey I am! Any tribute, even tiny Rue, could take me right now, merely shove me over and kill me with my own knife, and I'd have little strength to resist. But if anyone is in my part of the woods, they ignore me. The truth is, I feel a million miles from another living soul.

Not alone though. No, they've surely got a camera tracking me now. I think back to the years of watching tributes starve, freeze, bleed, and dehydrate to death. Unless there's a really good fight going on somewhere, I'm being featured.

My thoughts turn to Prim. It's likely she won't be watching me live, but they'll show updates at the school during lunch. For her sake, I try to look as least desperate as I can.

But by afternoon, I know the end is coming. My legs are shaking and my heart is too quick. I keep forgetting exactly what I'm doing. I've stumbled repeatedly and managed to regain my feet, but when the stick slides out from under me, I finally tumble to the ground unable to get up. I let my eyes close.

I have misjudged Haymitch. He has no intention of helping me at all.

This is all right, I think. This is not so bad here. The air is less hot, signifying evening's approach. There's a slight, sweet scent that reminds me of lilies. My fingers stroke the smooth ground, sliding easily across the top. *This is an okay place to die, I think.*

My fingertips make small swirling patterns in the cool, slippery earth. *I love mud, I think.* How many times I've tracked game with the help of its soft, readable surface. Good for bee stings, too. Mud. Mud. Mud! My eyes fly open and I dig my fingers into the earth. It is mud! My nose lifts in the air. And those are lilies! Pond lilies!

I crawl now, through the mud, dragging myself toward the scent. Five yards from where I fell, I crawl through a tangle of plants into a pond. Floating on the top, yellow flowers in bloom, are my beautiful lilies.

It's all I can do not to plunge my face into the water and gulp down as much as I can hold. But I have just enough sense left to abstain. With trembling hands, I get out my flask and fill it with water. I add what I remember to be the right number of drops of iodine for purifying it. The half an hour of waiting is agony, but I do it. At least,

I think it's a half an hour, but it's certainly as long as I can stand.

Slowly, easy now, I tell myself. I take one swallow and make myself wait. Then another. Over the next couple of hours, I drink the entire half gallon. Then a second. I prepare another before I retire to a tree where I continue sipping, eating rabbit, and even indulge in one of my precious crackers. By the time the anthem plays, I feel remarkably better. There are no faces tonight, no tributes died today. Tomorrow I'll stay here, resting, camouflaging my backpack with mud, catching some of those little fish I saw as I sipped, digging up the roots of the pond lilies to make a nice meal. I snuggle down in my sleeping bag, hanging on to my water bottle for dear life, which, of course, it is.

A few hours later, the stampede of feet shakes me from slumber. I look around in bewilderment. It's not yet dawn, but my stinging eyes can see it.

It would be hard to miss the wall of fire descending on me.