

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Deep in the meadow, under the willow*

*A bed of grass, a soft green pillow*

*Lay down your head, and close your sleepy eyes*

*And when again they open, the sun will rise.*

*Here it’s safe, here it’s warm*

*Here the daisies guard you from every harm*

*Here your dreams are sweet and tomorrow brings*

*them true*

*Here is the place where I love you.*

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

*Deep in the meadow, hidden far away*

*A cloak of leaves, a moonbeam ray*

*Forget your woes and let your troubles lay*

*And when again it’s morning, they’ll wash away.*

*Here it’s safe, here it’s warm*

*Here the daisies guard you from every harm*

The final lines are barely audible.

*Here your dreams are sweet and tomorrow brings*

*them true*

*Here is the place where I love you.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I open the parachute and find a small loaf of bread. It's not the fine white Capitol stuff. It's made of dark ration grain and shaped in a crescent. Sprinkled with seeds. I flash-back to Peeta's lesson on the various district breads in the

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

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

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

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

Sometimes when things are particularly bad, my brain will give me a happy dream. A visit with my father in the woods. An hour of sunlight and cake with Prim. Tonight it sends me Rue, still decked in her flowers, perched in a high sea of trees, trying to teach me to talk to the mockingjays. I

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It's been an uneventful day according to the sky. No deaths. I wonder how long we'll get until the next catastrophe drives us back together. If it's going to be tonight, I

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

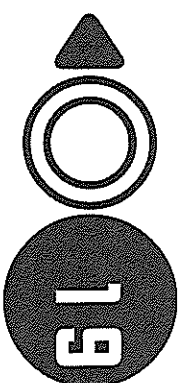
For the most part, the only communication the tributes get from outside the arena is the nightly death toll. But occasionally, there will be trumpets followed by an announcement. Usually, this will be a call to a feast. When food is scarce, the Gamemakers will invite the players to a banquet, somewhere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

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

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

## PART III

### "THE VICTOR"



I clap my hands over my mouth, but the sound has already escaped. The sky goes black and I hear a chorus of frogs begin to sing. *Stupid!* I tell myself. *What a stupid thing to do!* I wait, frozen, for the woods to come alive with assassins. Then I remember there's almost no one left.

Peeta, who's been wounded, is now my ally. Whatever doubts I've had about him dissipate because if either of us took the other's life now we'd be pariahs when we returned to District 12. In fact, I know if I was watching I'd loathe any tribute who didn't immediately ally with their district partner. Besides, it just makes sense to protect each other. And in my case—being one of the star-crossed lovers from District 12—it's an absolute requirement if I want any more help from sympathetic sponsors.

The star-crossed lovers . . . Peeta must have been playing that angle all along. Why else would the Gamemakers have made this unprecedented change in the rules? For two tributes to have a shot at winning, our “romance” must be so popular with the audience that condemning it would jeopardize the success of the Games. No thanks to me. All I've done is managed not to kill Peeta. But whatever he's done in the arena, he must have the audience convinced it was to

keep me alive. Shaking his head to keep me from running to the Cornucopia. Fighting Carot to let me escape. Even hooking up with the Careers must have been a move to protect me. Peera, it turns out, has never been a danger to me.

The thought makes me smile. I drop my hands and hold my face up to the moonlight so the cameras can be sure to catch it.

So, who is there left to be afraid of? Foxface? The boy tribute from her district is dead. She's operating alone, at night. And her strategy has been to evade, not attack. I don't really think that, even if she heard my voice, she'd do anything but hope someone else would kill me.

Then there's Thresh. All right, he's a distinct threat. But I haven't seen him, not once, since the Games began. I think about how Foxface grew alarmed when she heard a sound at the site of the explosion. But she didn't turn to the woods, she turned to whatever lies across from it. To that area of the arena that drops off into I don't know what. I feel almost certain that the person she ran from was Thresh and that is his domain. He'd never have heard me from there and, even if he did, I'm up too high for someone his size to reach.

So that leaves Carot and the girl from District 2, who are now surely celebrating the new rule. They're the only ones left who benefit from it besides Peera and myself. Do I run from them now, on the chance they heard me call Peera's name? *No*, I think. *Let them come*. Let them come with their

Right into the range of my arrows. But I know they won't. If they didn't come in daylight to my fire, they won't risk what could be another trap at night. When they come, it will be on their own terms, not because I've let them know my whereabouts.

*Stay put and get some sleep, Katniss, I instruct myself, although I wish I could start tracking Peera now. Tomorrow, you'll find him.*

I do sleep, but in the morning I'm extra-cautious, thinking that while the Careers might hesitate to attack me in a tree, they're completely capable of setting an ambush for me. I make sure to fully prepare myself for the day — eating a big breakfast, securing my pack, readying my weapons — before I descend. But all seems peaceful and undisturbed on the ground.

Today I'll have to be scrupulously careful. The Careers will know I'm trying to locate Peera. They may well want to wait until I do before they move in. If he's as badly wounded as Carot thinks, I'd be in the position of having to defend us both without any assistance. But if he's that incapacitated, how has he managed to stay alive? And how on earth will I find him?

I try to think of anything Peera ever said that might give me an indication as to where he's hiding out, but nothing rings a bell. So I go back to the last moment I saw him sparkling in the sunlight, yelling at me to run. Then Carot appeared, his sword drawn. And after I was gone, he wounded Peera. But how did Peera get away? Maybe he'd



Maybe that was the variable that allowed him to escape. But he'd been stung, too. So how far could he have gotten, stabbed and filled with venom? And how has he stayed alive all these days since? If the wound and the stingers haven't killed him, surely thirst would have taken him by now.

And that's when I get my first clue to his whereabouts. He couldn't have survived without water. I know that from my first few days here. He must be hidden somewhere near a source. There's the lake, but I find that an unlikely option since it's so close to the Careers' base camp. A few spring-fed pools. But you'd really be a sitting duck at one of those. And the stream. The one that leads from the camp Rue and I made all the way down near the lake and beyond. If he struck to the stream, he could change his location and always be near water. He could walk in the current and erase any tracks. He might even be able to get a fish or two.

Well, it's a place to start, anyway.

To confuse my enemies' minds, I start a fire with plenty of green wood. Even if they think it's a ruse, I hope they'll decide I'm hidden somewhere near it. While in reality, I'll be tracking Peeta.

The sun burns off the morning haze almost immediately and I can tell the day will be hotter than usual. The water's cool and pleasant on my bare feet as I head downstream. I'm tempted to call out Peeta's name as I go but decide against it. I will have to find him with my eyes and one good ear or he will have to find me. But he'll know I'll be

to think I'd ignore the new rule and keep to myself. Would he? He's very hard to predict, which might be interesting under different circumstances, but at the moment only provides an extra obstacle.

It doesn't take long to reach the spot where I peeled off to go to the Careers' camp. There's been no sign of Peeta, but this doesn't surprise me. I've been up and down this stretch three times since the tracker jacker incident. If he were nearby, surely I'd have had some suspicion of it. The stream begins to curve to the left into a part of the woods that's new to me. Muddy banks covered in tangled water plants lead to large rocks that increase in size until I begin to feel somewhat trapped. It would be no small matter to escape the stream now. Fighting off Caro or Thresh as I climbed over this rocky terrain. In fact, I've just about decided I'm on the wrong track entirely, that a wounded boy would be unable to navigate getting to and from this water source, when I see the bloody streak going down the curve of a boulder. It's long dried now, but the smeary lines running side to side suggest someone — who perhaps was not fully in control of his mental faculties — tried to wipe it away.

Hugging the rocks, I move slowly in the direction of the blood, searching for him. I find a few more bloodstains, one with a few threads of fabric glued to it, but no sign of life. I break down and say his name in a hushed voice. "Peeta! Peeta!" Then a mockingjay lands on a scruffy tree and begins to mimic my tones so I stop. I give up and climb back down to the stream thinking, *He must have moved on.*

My foot has just broken the surface of the water when I hear a voice.

"You here to finish me off, sweetheart?"

I whip around. It's come from the left, so I can't pick it up very well. And the voice was hoarse and weak. Still, it must have been Peetra. Who else in the arena would call me sweetheart? My eyes peruse the bank, but there's nothing. Just mud, the plants, the base of the rocks.

"Peetra?" I whisper. "Where are you?" There's no answer. Could I just have imagined it? No, I'm certain it was real and very close at hand, too. "Peetra?" I creep along the bank.

"Well, don't step on me."

I jump back. His voice was right under my feet. Still there's nothing. Then his eyes open, unmistakably blue in the brown mud and green leaves. I gasp and am rewarded with a hint of white teeth as he laughs.

It's the final word in camouflage. Forget chucking weights around. Peetra should have gone into his private session with the Gamemakers and painted himself into a tree. Or a boulder. Or a muddy bank full of weeds.

"Close your eyes again," I order. He does, and his mouth, too, and completely disappears. Most of what I judge to be his body is actually under a layer of mud and plants. His face and arms are so artfully disguised as to be invisible. I kneel beside him. "I guess all those hours decorating cakes paid off."

Peetra smiles. "Yes, frosting. The final defense of the

"You're not going to die," I tell him firmly.

"Says who?" His voice is so ragged.

"Says me. We're on the same team now, you know," I tell him.

His eyes open. "So, I heard. Nice of you to find what's left of me."

I pull out my water bottle and give him a drink. "Did Caro cut you?" I ask.

"Left leg. Up high," he answers.

"Let's get you in the stream, wash you off so I can see what kind of wounds you've got," I say.

"Lean down a minute first," he says. "Need to tell you something." I lean over and put my good ear to his lips, which tickle as he whispers. "Remember, we're madly in love, so it's all right to kiss me anytime you feel like it."

I jerk my head back but end up laughing. "Thanks, I'll keep it in mind." At least, he's still able to joke around. But when I start to help him to the stream, all the levity disappears. It's only two feet away, how hard can it be? Very hard when I realize he's unable to move an inch on his own. He's so weak that the best he can do is not to resist. I try to drag him, but despite the fact that I know he's doing all he can to keep quiet, sharp cries of pain escape him. The mud and plants seem to have imprisoned him and I finally have to give a gigantic tug to break him from their clutches. He's still two feet from the water, lying there, teeth gritted, tears cutting trails in the dirt on his face.

"Look, Peetra, I'm going to roll you into the stream. It's

"Excellent," he says.

I crouch down beside him. No matter what happens, I tell myself, don't stop until he's in the water. "On three," I say. "One, two, three!" I can only manage one full roll before I have to stop because of the horrible sound he's making. Now he's on the edge of the stream. Maybe this is better anyway.

"Okay, change of plans. I'm not going to put you all the way in," I tell him. Besides, if I get him in, who knows if I'd ever be able to get him out?

"No more rolling?" he asks.

"That's all done. Let's get you cleaned up. Keep an eye on the woods for me, okay?" I say. It's hard to know where to start. He's so caked with mud and matted leaves, I can't even see his clothes. If he's wearing clothes. The thought makes me hesitate a moment, but then I plunge in. Naked bodies are no big deal in the arena, right?

I've got two water bottles and Rue's water skin. I prop them against rocks in the stream so that two are always filling while I pour the third over Peeta's body. It takes a while, but I finally get rid of enough mud to find his clothes. I gently unzip his jacket, unbutton his shirt and ease them off him. His undershirt is so plastered into his wounds I have to cut it away with my knife and drench him again to work it loose. He's badly bruised with a long burn across his chest and four tracker jacker stings, if you count the one under his ear. But I feel a bit better. This much I can fix. I decide to take care of his upper body first, to alleviate some

Since treating his wounds seems pointless when he's lying in what's become a mud puddle, I manage to prop him up against a boulder. He sits there, uncomplaining, while I wash away all the traces of dirt from his hair and skin. His flesh is very pale in the sunlight and he no longer looks strong and stocky. I have to dig the stingers out of his tracker jacker lumps, which causes him to wince, but the minute I apply the leaves he sighs in relief. While he dries in the sun, I wash his filthy shirt and jacket and spread them over boulders. Then I apply the burn cream to his chest. This is when I notice how hot his skin is becoming. The layer of mud and the bottles of water have disguised the fact that he's burning with fever. I dig through the first-aid kit I got from the boy from District 1 and find pills that reduce your temperature. My mother actually breaks down and buys these on occasion when her home remedies fail.

"Swallow these," I tell him, and he obediently takes the medicine. "You must be hungry."

"Not really. It's funny, I haven't been hungry for days," says Peeta. In fact, when I offer him groosling, he wrinkles his nose at it and turns away. That's when I know how sick he is.

"Peeta, we need to get some food in you," I insist.

"I'll just come right back up," he says. The best I can do is to get him to eat a few bits of dried apple. "Thanks. I'm much better, really. Can I sleep now, Katniss?" he asks. "Soon," I promise. "I need to look at your leg first."

and then very slowly inch his pants off of him. I can see the tear Caro's sword made in the fabric over his thigh, but it in no way prepares me for what lies underneath. The deep inflamed gash oozing both blood and pus. The swelling of the leg. And worst of all, the smell of festering flesh.

I want to run away. Disappear into the woods like I did that day they brought the burn victim to our house. Go and hunt while my mother and Prim attend to what I have neither the skill nor the courage to face. But there's no one here but me. I try to capture the calm demeanor my mother assumes when handling particularly bad cases.

"Pretty awful, huh?" says Peeta. He's watching me closely.

"So-so." I shrug like it's no big deal. "You should see some of the people they bring my mother from the mines." I refrain from saying how I usually clear out of the house whenever she's treating anything worse than a cold. Come to think of it, I don't even much like to be around coughing. "First thing is to clean it well."

I've left on Peeta's undershorts because they're not in bad shape and I don't want to pull them over the swollen thigh and, all right, maybe the idea of him being naked makes me uncomfortable. That's another thing about my mother and Prim. Nakedness has no effect on them, gives them no cause for embarrassment. Ironically, at this point in the Games, my little sister would be of far more use to Peeta than I am. I scoot my square of plastic under him so I can watch down the rest of him. With each bottle I pour

over him, the worse the wound looks. The rest of his lower body has fared pretty well, just one tracker jacker sting and a few small burns that I treat quickly. But the gash on his leg . . . what on earth can I do for that?

"Why don't we give it some air and then . . ." I trail off. "And then you'll patch it up?" says Peeta. He looks almost sorry for me, as if he knows how lost I am.

"That's right," I say. "In the meantime, you eat these." I put a few dried pear halves in his hand and go back in the stream to wash the rest of his clothes. When they're flattened out and drying, I examine the contents of the first-aid kit. It's pretty basic stuff. Bandages, fewer pills, medicine to calm stomachs. Nothing of the caliber I'll need to treat Peeta.

"We're going to have to experiment some," I admit. I know the tracker jacker leaves draw out infection, so I start with those. Within minutes of pressing the handful of chewed-up green stuff into the wound, pus begins running down the side of his leg. I tell myself this is a good thing and bite the inside of my cheek hard because my breakfast is threatening to make a reappearance.

"Karniss?" Peeta says. I meet his eyes, knowing my face must be some shade of green. He mouths the words. "How about that kiss?"

I burst out laughing because the whole thing is so revolting I can't stand it.

"Something wrong?" he asks a little too innocently.

"I . . . I'm no good at this. I'm not my mother. I've no idea what I'm doing and I hate pus," I say. "Euh!" I allow

myself to let out a groan as I rinse away the first round of leaves and apply the second. "Euuuh!"

"How do you hurt?" he asks.

"Trust me. Killing things is much easier than this," I said. "Although for all I know, I am killing you."

"Can you speed it up a little?" he asks.

"No. Shut up and eat your peats," I say.

After three applications and what seems like a bucket of pus, the wound does look better. Now that the swelling has gone down, I can see how deep Caro's sword cut. Right down to the bone.

"What next, Dr. Everdeen?" he asks.

"Maybe I'll put some of the burn ointment on it. I think it helps with infection anyway. And wrap it up?" I say. I do and the whole thing seems a lot more manageable, covered in clean white cotton. Although, against the sterile bandage, the hem of his undershorts looks filthy and reeking with contagion. I pull out Rue's backpack. "Here, cover yourself with this and I'll wash your shorts."

"Oh, I don't care if you see me," says Peeta.

"You're just like the rest of my family," I say. "I care, all right?" I turn my back and look at the stream until the undershorts splash into the current. He must be feeling a bit better if he can throw.

"You know, you're kind of squeamish for such a lethal person," says Peeta as I beat the shorts clean between two rocks. "I wish I'd let you give Haymitch a shower after all."

I wrinkle my nose at the memory. "What's he sent you

"Not a thing," says Peeta. Then there's a pause as it hits him. "Why, did you get something?"

"Burn medicine," I say almost sheepishly. "Oh, and some bread."

"I always knew you were his favorite," says Peeta.

"Please, he can't stand being in the same room with me," I say.

"Because you're just alike," mutters Peeta. I ignore it though because this really isn't the time for me to be insulting Haymitch, which is my first impulse.

I let Peeta doze off while his clothes dry out, but by late afternoon, I don't dare wait any longer. I gently shake his shoulder. "Peeta, we've got to go now."

"Go?" He seems confused. "Go where?"

"Away from here. Downstream maybe. Somewhere we can hide you until you're stronger," I say. I help him dress, leaving his feet bare so we can walk in the water, and pull him upright. His face drains of color the moment he puts weight on his leg. "Come on. You can do this."

But he can't. Not for long anyway. We make it about fifty yards downstream, with him propped up by my shoulder, and I can tell he's going to black out. I sit him on the bank, push his head between his knees, and pat his back awkwardly as I survey the area. Of course, I'd love to get him up in a tree, but that's not going to happen. It could be worse though. Some of the rocks form small cave-like structures. I set my sights on one about twenty yards above the stream. When Peeta's able to stand, I half-guide, half-carry

better place, but this one will have to do because my ally is shot. Paper white, panting, and, even though it's only just cooling off, he's shivering.

I cover the floor of the cave with a layer of pine needles, unroll my sleeping bag, and tuck him into it. I get a couple of pills and some water into him when he's not noticing, but he refuses to eat even the fruit. Then he just lies there, his eyes trained on my face as I build a sort of blind out of vines to conceal the mouth of the cave. The result is unsatisfactory. An animal might not question it, but a human would see hands had manufactured it quickly enough. I tear it down in frustration.

"Karniss," he says. I go over to him and brush the hair back from his eyes. "Thanks for finding me."

"You would have found me if you could," I say. His forehead's burning up. Like the medicine's having no effect at all. Suddenly, out of nowhere, I'm scared he's going to die.

"Yes. Look, if I don't make it back —" he begins.

"Don't talk like that. I didn't drain all that pus for nothing," I say.

"I know. But just in case I don't —" he tries to continue.

"No, Peeta, I don't even want to discuss it," I say, placing my fingers on his lips to quiet him.

"But I —" he insists.

Impulsively, I lean forward and kiss him, stopping his words. This is probably overdue anyway since he's right, we *are* married in his mind in love. It's the first time I've ever

guess, but all I can register is how unnaturally hot his lips are from the fever. I break away and pull the edge of the sleeping bag up around him. "You're not going to die. I forbid it. All right?"

"All right," he whispers.

I step out in the cool evening air just as the parachute floats down from the sky. My fingers quickly undo the tie, hoping for some real medicine to treat Peeta's leg. Instead I find a pot of hot broth.

Haymitch couldn't be sending me a clearer message.

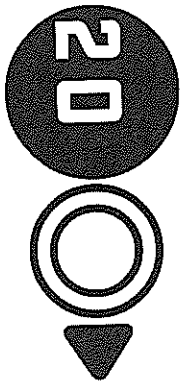
One kiss equals one pot of broth. I can almost hear his snarl. "You're supposed to be in love, sweetheart. The boy's dying. Give me something I can work with!"

And he's right. If I want to keep Peeta alive, I've got to give the audience something more to care about. Star-crossed lovers desperate to get home together. Two hearts beating as one. Romance.

Never having been in love, this is going to be a real trick. I think of my parents. The way my father never failed to bring her gifts from the woods. The way my mother's face would light up at the sound of his boots at the door. The way she almost stopped living when he died.

"Peeta!" I say, trying for the special tone that my mother used only with my father. He's dozed off again, but I kiss him awake, which seems to startle him. Then he smiles as if he'd be happy to lie there gazing at me forever. He's great at this stuff.

I hold up the pot. "Peeta, look what Haymitch has



Getting the broth into Peetra takes an hour of coaxing, begging, threatening, and yes, kissing, but finally, sip by sip, he empties the pot. I let him drift off to sleep then and attend to my own needs, wolfing down a supper of groosling and roots while I watch the daily report in the sky. No new casualties. Still, Peetra and I have given the audience a fairly interesting day. Hopefully, the Gammemakers will allow us a peaceful night.

I automatically look around for a good tree to nest in before I realize that's over. At least for a while. I can't very well leave Peetra unguarded on the ground. I left the scene of his last hiding place on the bank of the stream untouched — how could I conceal it? — and we're a scant fifty yards downstream. I put on my glasses, place my weapons in readiness, and settle down to keep watch.

The temperature drops rapidly and soon I'm chilled to the bone. Eventually, I give in and slide into the sleeping bag with Peetra. It's roasty warm and I snuggle down gratefully until I realize it's more than warm, it's overly hot because the bag is reflecting back his fever. I check his forehead and find it burning and dry. I don't know what to do.

fever? Take him out and hope the night air cools him off? I end up just dampening a strip of bandage and placing it on his forehead. It seems weak, but I'm afraid to do anything too drastic.

I spend the night half-sitting, half-lying next to Peetra, refreshing the bandage, and trying not to dwell on the fact that by reaming up with him, I've made myself far more vulnerable than when I was alone. Tethered to the ground, on guard, with a very sick person to take care of. But I knew he was injured. And still I came after him. I'm just going to have to trust that whatever instinct sent me to find him was a good one.

When the sky turns rosy, I notice the sheen of sweat on Peetra's lip and discover the fever has broken. He's not back to normal, but it's come down a few degrees. Last night, when I was gathering vines, I came upon a bush of Rue's berries. I strip off the fruit and mash it up in the broth pot with cold water.

Petra's struggling to get up when I reach the cave. "I woke up and you were gone," he says. "I was worried about you."

I have to laugh as I ease him back down. "You were worried about me? Have you taken a look at yourself lately?"

"I thought Caro and Clove might have found you. They like to hunt at night," he says, still serious.

"Clove? Which one is that?" I ask.

"The girl from District Two. She's still alive, right?" he says.

"Yes, there's just them and us and Thresh and Foxface," I say. "That's what I nicknamed the girl from Five. How do you feel?"

"Better than yesterday. This is an enormous improvement over the mud," he says. "Clean clothes and medicine and a sleeping bag . . . and you."

Oh, right, the whole romance thing. I reach out to touch his cheek and he catches my hand and presses it against his lips. I remember my father doing this very thing to my mother and I wonder where Peeta picked it up. Surely not from his father and the witch.

"No more kisses for you until you've eaten," I say.

We get him propped up against the wall and he obediently swallows the spoonfuls of the berry mush I feed him. He refuses the groosling again, though.

"You didn't sleep," Peeta says.

"I'm all right," I say. But the truth is, I'm exhausted.

"Sleep now. I'll keep watch. I'll wake you if anything happens," he says. I hesitate. "Karniss, you can't stay up forever."

He's got a point there. I'll have to sleep eventually. And probably better to do it now when he seems relatively alert and we have daylight on our side. "All right," I say. "But just for a few hours. Then you wake me."

It's too warm for the sleeping bag now. I smooth it out on the cave floor and lie down, one hand on my loaded bow in case I have to shoot at a moment's notice. Peeta sits beside me, leaning against the wall, his bad leg stretched

to sleep," he says softly. His hand brushes the loose strands of my hair off my forehead. Unlike the staged kisses and caresses so far, this gesture seems natural and comforting. I don't want him to stop and he doesn't. He's still stroking my hair when I fall asleep.

Too long. I sleep too long. I know from the moment I open my eyes that we're into the afternoon. Peeta's right beside me, his position unchanged. I sit up, feeling somehow defensive but better rested than I've been in days.

"Peeta, you were supposed to wake me after a couple of hours," I say.

"For what? Nothing's going on here," he says. "Besides I like watching you sleep. You don't scowl. Improves your looks a lot."

This, of course, brings on a scowl that makes him grin. That's when I notice how dry his lips are. I rest his cheek. Hot as a coal stove. He claims he's been drinking, but the containers still feel full to me. I give him more fever pills and stand over him while he drinks first one, then a second quart of water. Then I tend to his minor wounds, the burns, the stings, which are showing improvement. I steel myself and unwrap the leg.

My heart drops into my stomach. It's worse, much worse. There's no more pus in evidence, but the swelling has increased and the tight shiny skin is inflamed. Then I see the red streaks starting to crawl up his leg. Blood poisoning. Unchecked, it will kill him for sure. My chewed-up leaves and ointment won't make a dent in it. We'll need



the cost of such potent medicine. If Haymitch pooled every donation from every sponsor, would he have enough? I doubt it. Gifts go up in price the longer the Games continue. What buys a full meal on day one buys a cracker on day twelve. And the kind of medicine Peeta needs would have been at a premium from the beginning.

"Well, there's more swelling, but the pus is gone," I say in an unsteady voice.

"I know what blood poisoning is, Karniss," says Peeta.

"Even if my mother isn't a healer."

"You're just going to have to outlast the others, Peeta.

They'll cure it back at the Capitol when we win," I say.

"Yes, that's a good plan," he says. But I feel this is mostly for my benefit.

"You have to eat. Keep your strength up. I'm going to make you soup," I say.

"Don't light a fire," he says. "It's not worth it."

"We'll see," I say. As I take the pot down to the stream, I'm struck by how brutally hot it is. I swear the Gamemakers are progressively ratcheting up the temperature in the daytime and sending it plummeting at night. The heat of the sun-baked stones by the stream gives me an idea though. Maybe I won't need to light a fire.

I settle down on a big flat rock halfway between the stream and the cave. After purifying half a pot of water, I place it in direct sunlight and add several egg-size hot stones to the water. I'm the first to admit I'm not much of a cook. But since soup mainly involves tossing everything in a pot

and waiting, it's one of my better dishes. I mince groosling until it's practically mush and mash some of Rue's roots. Fortunately, they've both been roasted already so they mostly need to be heated up. Already, between the sunlight and the rocks, the water's warm. I put in the meat and roots, swap in fresh rocks, and go find something green to spice it up a little. Before long, I discover a tuft of chives growing at the base of some rocks. Perfect. I chop them very fine and add them to the pot, switch out the rocks again, put on the lid, and let the whole thing stew.

I've seen very few signs of game around, but I don't feel comfortable leaving Peeta alone while I hunt, so I rig half a dozen snares and hope I get lucky. I wonder about the other tributes, how they're managing now that their main source of food has been blown up. At least three of them, Caro, Clove, and Foxface, had been relying on it. Probably not Thresh though. I've got a feeling he must share some of Rue's knowledge on how to feed yourself from the earth. Are they fighting each other? Looking for us? Maybe one of them has located us and is just waiting for the right moment to attack. The idea sends me back to the cave.

Peeta's stretched out on top of the sleeping bag in the shade of the rocks. Although he brightens a bit when I come in, it's clear he feels miserable. I put cool cloths on his head, but they warm up almost as soon as they touch his skin.

"Do you want anything?" I ask.

"No," he says. "Thank you. Wait, yes. Tell me a story."

"A story? What about?" I say. I'm not much for storytelling. It's kind of like singing. But once in a while, Prim wheedles one out of me.

"Something happy. Tell me about the happiest day you can remember," says Peera.

Something between a sigh and a huff of exasperation leaves my mouth. A happy story? This will require a lot more effort than the soup. I rack my brains for good memories. Most of them involve Gale and me out hunting and somehow I don't think these will play well with either Peera or the audience. That leaves Prim.

"Did I ever tell you about how I got Prim's goat?" I ask. Peera shakes his head, and looks at me expectantly. So I begin. But carefully. Because my words are going out all over Panem. And while people have no doubt put two and two together that I hunt illegally, I don't want to hurt Gale or Greasy Sae or the butcher or even the Peacekeepers back home who are my customers by publicly announcing they're breaking the law, too.

Here's the real story of how I got the money for Prim's goat, Lady. It was a Friday evening, the day before Prim's tenth birthday in late May. As soon as school ended, Gale and I hit the woods, because I wanted to get enough to trade for a present for Prim. Maybe some new cloth for a dress or a hairbrush. Our snares had done well enough and the woods were flush with greens, but this was really no more than our average Friday-night haul. I was disappointed

do better tomorrow. We were resting a moment by a stream when we saw him. A young buck, probably a yearling by his size. His antlers were just growing in, still small and coated in velvet. Poised to run but unsure of us, unfamiliar with humans. Beautiful.

Less beautiful perhaps when the two arrows caught him, one in the neck, the other in the chest. Gale and I had shot at the same time. The buck tried to run but stumbled, and Gale's knife slit his throat before he knew what had happened. Momentarily, I'd felt a pang at killing something so fresh and innocent. And then my stomach rumbled at the thought of all that fresh and innocent meat.

A deer! Gale and I have only brought down three in all. The first one, a doe that had injured her leg somehow, almost didn't count. But we knew from that experience not to go dragging the carcass into the Hob. It had caused chaos with people bidding on parts and actually trying to hack off pieces themselves. Greasy Sae had intervened and sent us with our deer to the butcher, but not before it'd been badly damaged, hunks of meat taken, the hide riddled with holes. Although everybody paid up fairly, it had lowered the value of the kill.

This time, we waited until dark fell and slipped under a hole in the fence close to the butcher. Even though we were known hunters, it wouldn't have been good to go carrying a 150-pound deer through the streets of District 12 in daylight like we were rubbing it in the officials' faces.

The butcher, a short, chunky woman named Rooba,

haggle with Rooba. She gives you one price, which you can take or leave, but it's a fair price. We took her offer on the deer and she threw in a couple of venison steaks we could pick up after the butchering. Even with the money divided in two, neither Gale nor I had held so much at one time in our lives. We decided to keep it a secret and surprise our families with the meat and money at the end of the next day.

This is where I really got the money for the goat, but I tell Peeta I sold an old silver locket of my mother's. That can't hurt anyone. Then I pick up the story in the late afternoon of Prim's birthday.

Gale and I went to the market on the square so that I could buy dress materials. As I was running my fingers over a length of thick blue cotton cloth, something caught my eye. There's an old man who keeps a small herd of goats on the other side of the Seam. I don't know his real name, everyone just calls him the Goat Man. His joints are swollen and twisted in painful angles, and he's got a hacking cough that proves he spent years in the mines. But he's lucky. Somewhere along the way he saved up enough for these goats and now has something to do in his old age besides slowly starve to death. He's filthy and impatient, but the goats are clean and their milk is rich if you can afford it.

One of the goats, a white one with black patches, was lying down in a cart. It was easy to see why. Something, probably a dog, had mauled her shoulder and infection had

set in. It was bad, the Goat Man had to hold her up to milk her. But I thought I knew someone who could fix it.

"Gale," I whispered. "I want that goat for Prim."

Owning a nanny goat can change your life in District 12. The animals can live off almost anything, the Meadow's a perfect feeding place, and they can give four quarts of milk a day. To drink, to make into cheese, to sell. It's not even against the law.

"She's hurt pretty bad," said Gale. "We better take a closer look."

We went over and bought a cup of milk to share, then stood over the goat as if idly curious.

"Let her be," said the man.

"Just looking," said Gale.

"Well, look fast. She goes to the butcher soon. Hardly anyone will buy her milk, and then they only pay half price," said the man.

"What's the butcher giving for her?" I asked.

The man shrugged. "Hang around and see." I turned and saw Rooba coming across the square toward us. "Lucky thing you showed up," said the Goat Man when she arrived.

"Girl's got her eye on your goat."

"Not if she's spoken for," I said carelessly.

Rooba looked me up and down then frowned at the goat. "She's not. Look at that shoulder. Bet you half the carcass will be too rotten for even sausage."

"What?" said the Goat Man. "We had a deal."

"We had a deal on an animal with a few teeth marks.

Not that thing. Sell her to the girl if she's stupid enough to take her," said Rooba. As she marched off, I caught her wink.

The Goat Man was mad, but he still wanted that goat off his hands. It took us half an hour to agree on the price. Quite a crowd had gathered by then to hand out opinions. It was an excellent deal if the goat lived; I'd been robbed if she died. People took sides in the argument, but I took the goat.

Gale offered to carry her. I think he wanted to see the look on Prim's face as much as I did. In a moment of complete giddiness, I bought a pink ribbon and tied it around her neck. Then we hurried back to my house.

You should have seen Prim's reaction when we walked in with that goat. Remember this is a girl who wept to save that awful old cat, Buttercup. She was so excited she started crying and laughing all at once. My mother was less sure, seeing the injury, but the pair of them went to work on it, grinding up herbs and coaxing brews down the animal's throat.

"They sound like you," says Peeta. I had almost forgotten he was there.

"Oh, no, Peeta. They work magic. That thing couldn't have died if it tried," I say. But then I bite my tongue, realizing what that must sound like to Peeta, who is dying, in my incompetent hands.

"Don't worry. I'm not trying," he jokes. "Finish the story."

"Well, that's it. Only I remember that night, Prim insisted on sleeping with Lady on a blanket next to the fire. And just before they drifted off, the goat licked her cheek, like it was giving her a good night kiss or something," I say. "It was already mad about her."

"Was it still wearing the pink ribbon?" he asks.

"I think so," I say. "Why?"

"I'm just trying to get a picture," he says thoughtfully. "I can see why that day made you happy."

"Well, I knew that goat would be a little gold mine," I say.

"Yes, of course I was referring to that, not the lasting joy you gave the sister you love so much you took her place in the reaping," says Peeta drily.

"The goat *has* paid for itself. Several times over," I say in a superior tone.

"Well, it wouldn't dare do anything else after you saved its life," says Peeta. "I intend to do the same thing."

"Really? What did you cost me again?" I ask.

"A lot of trouble. Don't worry. You'll get it all back," he says.

"You're not making sense," I say. I test his forehead. The fever's going nowhere but up. "You're a little cooler though."

The sound of the trumpets startles me. I'm on my feet and at the mouth of the cave in a flash, not wanting to miss a syllable. It's my new best friend, Claudius Templesmith, and as I expected, he's inviting us to a feast. Well, we're not that hungry and I actually wave his offer away in indifference

when he says, "Now hold on. Some of you may already be declining my invitation. But this is no ordinary feast. Each of you needs something desperately."

I do need something desperately. Something to heal Peeta's leg.

"Each of you will find that something in a backpack, marked with your district number, at the Cornucopia at dawn. Think hard about refusing to show up. For some of you, this will be your last chance," says Claudius.

There's nothing else, just his words hanging in the air. I jump as Peeta grips my shoulder from behind. "No," he says. "You're not risking your life for me."

"Who said I was?" I say.

"So, you're not going?" he asks.

"Of course, I'm not going. Give me some credit. Do you think I'm running straight into some free-for-all against Caro and Clove and Thresh? Don't be stupid," I say, helping him back to bed. "I'll let them fight it out, we'll see who's in the sky tomorrow night and work out a plan from there."

"You're such a bad liar, Katniss. I don't know how you're survived this long." He begins to mimic me. "*I knew that goat would be a little gold mine. You're a little cooler though. Of course, I'm not going.*" He shakes his head. "Never gamble at cards. You'll lose your last coin," he says.

Anger flushes my face. "All right, I am going, and you can't stop me!"

"I can follow you. At least partway. I may not make it

"You won't get a hundred yards from here on that leg,"

I say.

"Then I'll drag myself," says Peeta. "You go and I'm going, too."

He's just stubborn enough and maybe just strong enough to do it. Come howling after me in the woods. Even if a tribune doesn't find him, something else might. He can't defend himself. I'd probably have to wall him up in the cave just to go myself. And who knows what the exertion will do to him?

"What am I supposed to do? Sit here and watch you die?" I say. He must know that's not an option. That the audience would hate me. And frankly, I would hate myself, too, if I didn't even try.

"I won't die. I promise. If you promise not to go," he says.

We're at something of a stalemate. I know I can't argue him out of this one, so I don't try. I pretend, reluctantly, to go along. "Then you have to do what I say. Drink your water, wake me when I tell you, and eat every bite of the soup no matter how disgusting it is!" I snap at him.

"Agreed. Is it ready?" he asks.

"Wait here," I say. The air's gone cold even though the sun's still up. I'm right about the Gamemakers messing with the temperature. I wonder if the thing someone needs desperately is a good blanket. The soup is still nice and warm in its iron pot. And actually doesn't taste too bad.

Peeta eats without complaint, even scrabbling out the pot

it is, which should be encouraging if you don't know what fever does to people. He's like listening to Haymitch before the alcohol has soaked him into incoherence. I give him another dose of fever medicine before he goes off his head completely.

As I go down to the stream to wash up, all I can think is that he's going to die if I don't get to that feast. I'll keep him going for a day or two, and then the infection will reach his heart or his brain or his lungs and he'll be gone. And I'll be here all alone. Again. Waiting for the others.

I'm so lost in thought that I almost miss the parachute, even though it floats right by me. Then I spring after it, yanking it from the water, tearing off the silver fabric to retrieve the vial. Haymitch has done it! He's gotten the medicine — I don't know how, persuaded some gaggle of romantic fools to sell their jewels — and I can save Peeta! It's such a tiny vial though. It must be very strong to cure someone as ill as Peeta. A ripple of doubt runs through me. I uncork the vial and take a deep sniff. My spirits fall at the sickly sweet scent. Just to be sure, I place a drop on the tip of my tongue. There's no question, it's sleep syrup. It's a common medicine in District 12. Cheap, as medicine goes, but very addictive. Almost everyone's had a dose at one time or another. We have some in a bottle at home. My mother gives it to hysterical patients to knock them out to stitch up a bad wound or quiet their minds or just to help someone in pain get through the night. It only takes a little. A vial this *size* could knock Peeta out for a full day, but what good

offering into the stream when it hits me. A full day? That's more than I need.

I mash up a handful of berries so the taste won't be as noticeable and add some mint leaves for good measure. Then I head back up to the cave. "I've brought you a treat. I found a new patch of berries a little farther downstream."

Peeta opens his mouth for the first bite without hesitation. He swallows then frowns slightly. "They're very sweet."

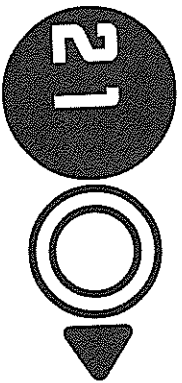
"Yes, they're sugar berries. My mother makes jam from them. Haven't you ever had them before?" I say, poking the next spoonful in his mouth.

"No," he says, almost puzzled. "But they taste familiar. Sugar berries?"

"Well, you can't get them in the market much, they only grow wild," I say. Another mouthful goes down. Just one more to go.

"They're sweet as syrup," he says, taking the last spoonful. "Syrup." His eyes widen as he realizes the truth. I clamp my hand over his mouth and nose hard, forcing him to swallow instead of spit. He tries to make himself vomit the stuff up, but it's too late, he's already losing consciousness. Even as he fades away, I can see in his eyes what I've done is unforgivable.

I sit back on my heels and look at him with a mixture of sadness and satisfaction. A stray berry stains his chin and I wipe it away. "Who can't lie, Peeta?" I say, even though he can't hear me.



In the remaining hours before nightfall, I gather rocks and do my best to camouflage the opening of the cave. It's a slow and arduous process, but after a lot of sweating and shifting things around, I'm pretty pleased with my work. The cave now appears to be part of a larger pile of rocks, like so many in the vicinity. I can still crawl in to Peeta through a small opening, but it's undetectable from the outside. That's good, because I'll need to share that sleeping bag again tonight. Also, if I don't make it back from the feast, Peeta will be hidden but not entirely imprisoned. Although I doubt he can hang on much longer without medicine. If I die at the feast, District 12 isn't likely to have a victor.

I make a meal out of the smaller, bonier fish that inhabit the stream down here, fill every water container and purify it, and clean my weapons. I've nine arrows left in all. I debate leaving the knife with Peeta so he'll have some protection while I'm gone, but there's really no point. He was right about camouflage being his final defense. But I still might have use for the knife. Who knows what I'll encounter?

Caro, Clove, and Thresh will be on hand when the feast starts. I'm not sure about Foxface since direct confrontation isn't her style or her forte. She's even smaller than I am and unarmed, unless she's picked up some weapons recently. She'll probably be hanging somewhere nearby, seeing what she can scavenge. But the other three . . . I'm going to have my hands full. My ability to kill at a distance is my greatest asset, but I know I'll have to go right into the thick of things to get that backpack, the one with the number 12 on it that Claudius Templesmith mentioned.

I watch the sky, hoping for one less opponent at dawn, but nobody appears tonight. Tomorrow there will be faces up there. Feasts always result in fatalities.

I crawl into the cave, secure my glasses, and curl up next to Peeta. Luckily I had that good long sleep today. I have to stay awake. I don't really think anyone will attack our cave tonight, but I can't risk missing the dawn.

So cold, so bitterly cold tonight. As if the Gamemakers have sent an infusion of frozen air across the arena, which may be exactly what they've done. I lie next to Peeta in the bag, trying to absorb every bit of his fever heat. It's strange to be so physically close to someone who's so distant. Peeta might as well be back in the Capitol, or in District 12, or on the moon right now, he'd be no harder to reach. I've never felt lonelier since the Games began.

*Just accept it will be a bad night,* I tell myself. I try not to, but I can't help thinking of my mother and Prim, wondering if they'll sleep a wink tonight. At this late stage in

the Games, with an important event like the feast, school will probably be canceled. My family can either watch on that static-filled old clunker of a television at home or join the crowds in the square to watch on the big, clear screens. They'll have privacy at home but support in the square. People will give them a kind word, a bit of food if they can spare it. I wonder if the baker has sought them out, especially now that Peera and I are a team, and made good on his promise to keep my sister's belly full.

Spirits must be running high in District 12. We so rarely have anyone to root for at this point in the Games. Surely, people are excited about Peera and me, especially now that we're together. If I close my eyes, I can imagine their shouts at the screens, urging us on. I see their faces — Greasy Sae and Madge and even the Peacekeepers who buy my meat — cheering for us.

And Gale. I know him. He won't be shouting and cheering. But he'll be watching, every moment, every twist and turn, and willing me to come home. I wonder if he's hoping that Peera makes it as well. Gale's not my boyfriend, but would he be, if I opened that door? He talked about us running away together. Was that just a practical calculation of our chances of survival away from the district? Or something more?

I wonder what he makes of all this kissing.

Through a crack in the rocks, I watch the moon cross the sky. At what I judge to be about three hours before dawn, I begin final preparations. I'm careful to leave Peera

else will be of much use if I don't return, and even these would only prolong his life a short time. After some debate, I strip him of his jacket and zip it on over my own. He doesn't need it. Not now in the sleeping bag with his fever, and during the day, if I'm not there to remove it, he'll be roasting in it. My hands are already stiff from cold, so I take Rue's spare pair of socks, cut holes for my fingers and thumbs, and pull them on. It helps anyway. I fill her small pack with some food, a water bottle, and bandages, tuck the knife in my belt, get my bow and arrows. I'm about to leave when I remember the importance of sustaining the star-crossed lover routine and I lean over and give Peera a long, lingering kiss. I imagine the teary sighs emanating from the Capitol and pretend to brush away a tear of my own. Then I squeeze through the opening in the rocks out into the night.

My breath makes small white clouds as it hits the air. It's as cold as a November night at home. One where I've slipped into the woods, lantern in hand, to join Gale at some prearranged place where we'll sit bundled together, sipping herb tea from metal flasks wrapped in quilting, hopping game will pass our way as the morning comes on. *Oh, Gale, I think. If only you had my back now . . .*

I move as fast as I dare. The glasses are quite remarkable, but I still sorely miss having the use of my left ear. I don't know what the explosion did, but it damaged something deep and irreparable. Never mind. If I get home, I'll be so stinking rich, I'll be able to pay someone to do my



The woods always look different at night. Even with the glasses, everything has an unfamiliar slant to it. As if the daytime trees and flowers and stones had gone to bed and sent slightly more ominous versions of themselves to take their places. I don't try anything tricky, like taking a new route. I make my way back up the stream and follow the same path back to Rue's hiding place near the lake. Along the way, I see no sign of another tribute, not a puff of breath, not a quiver of a branch. Either I'm the first to arrive or the others positioned themselves last night. There's still more than an hour, maybe two, when I wriggle into the underbrush and wait for the blood to begin to flow.

I chew a few mint leaves, my stomach isn't up for much more. Thank goodness, I have Peeta's jacket as well as my own. If not, I'd be forced to move around to stay warm. The sky turns a misty morning gray and still there's no sign of the other tributes. It's not surprising really. Everyone has distinguished themselves either by strength or deadliness or cunning. Do they suppose, I wonder, that I have Peeta with me? I doubt Foxface and Thresh even know he was wounded. All the better if they think he's covering me when I go in for the backpack.

But where is it? The arena has lightened enough for me to remove my glasses. I can hear the morning birds singing. Isn't it time? For a second, I'm panicked that I'm at the wrong location. But no, I'm certain I remember Claudius Templesmith specifying the Cornucopia. And there it is.

A T I ... T am So where's my feast?

there's a disturbance on the plain. The ground before the mouth of the horn splits in two and a round table with a snowy white cloth rises into the arena. On the table sit four backpacks, two large black ones with the numbers 2 and 11, a medium-size green one with the number 5, and a tiny orange one — really I could carry it around my wrist — that must be marked with a 12.

The table has just clicked into place when a figure darts out of the Cornucopia, snags the green backpack, and speeds off. Foxface! Leave it to her to come up with such a clever and risky idea! The rest of us are still poised around the plain, sizing up the situation, and she's got hers. She's got us trapped, too, because no one wants to chase her down, not while their own pack sits so vulnerable on the table. Foxface must have purposefully left the other packs alone, knowing that to steal one without her number would definitely bring on a pursuer. That should have been my strategy! By the time I've worked through the emotions of surprise, admiration, anger, jealousy, and frustration, I'm watching that red-dish mane of hair disappear into the trees well out of shooting range. Huh. I'm always dreading the others, but maybe Foxface is the real opponent here.

She's cost me time, too, because by now it's clear that I must get to the table next. Anyone who beats me to it will easily scoop up my pack and be gone. Without hesitation, I sprint for the table. I can sense the emergence of danger before I see it. Fortunately, the first knife comes whizzing in on my right side so I can hear it and I'm able to deflect it

an arrow straight at Clove's heart. She turns just enough to avoid a fatal hit, but the point punctures her upper left arm. Unfortunately, she throws with her right, but it's enough to slow her down a few moments, having to pull the arrow from her arm, take in the severity of the wound. I keep moving, positioning the next arrow automatically, as only someone who has hunted for years can do.

I'm at the table now, my fingers closing over the tiny orange backpack. My hand slips between the straps and I yank it up on my arm, it's really too small to fit on any other part of my anatomy, and I'm turning to fire again when the second knife catches me in the forehead. It slices above my right eyebrow, opening a gash that sends a gush running down my face, blinding my eye, filling my mouth with the sharp, metallic taste of my own blood. I stagger backward but still manage to send my readied arrow in the general direction of my assailant. I know as it leaves my hands it will miss. And then Clove slams into me, knocking me flat on my back, pinning my shoulders to the ground with her knees.

*This is it*, I think, and hope for Prim's sake it will be fast. But Clove means to savor the moment. Even feels she has time. No doubt Cato is somewhere nearby, guarding her, waiting for Thresh and possibly Peeta.

"Where's your boyfriend, District Twelve? Still hanging on?" she asks.

Well, as long as we're talking I'm alive. "He's out there now. Hunting Cato," I snarl at her. Then I scream at the

Clove jams her fist into my windpipe, very effectively cutting off my voice. But her head's whipping from side to side, and I know for a moment she's at least considering I'm telling the truth. Since no Peeta appears to save me, she turns back to me.

"Liar" she says with a grin. "He's nearly dead. Cato knows where he cut him. You've probably got him strapped up in some tree while you try to keep his heart going. What's in the pretty little backpack? That medicine for Lover Boy? Too bad he'll never get it."

Clove opens her jacket. It's lined with an impressive array of knives. She carefully selects an almost dainty-looking number with a cruel, curved blade. "I promised Cato if he let me have you, I'd give the audience a good show."

I'm struggling now in an effort to unseat her, but it's no use. She's too heavy and her lock on me too tight.

"Forget it, District Twelve. We're going to kill you. Just like we did your pathetic little ally . . . what was her name? The one who hopped around in the trees? Rue? Well, first Rue, then you, and then I think we'll just let nature take care of Lover Boy. How does that sound?" Clove asks. "Now, where to start?"

She carelessly wipes away the blood from my wound with her jacket sleeve. For a moment, she surveys my face, tilting it from side to side as if it's a block of wood and she's deciding exactly what pattern to carve on it. I attempt to bite her hand, but she grabs the hair on the top of my head, forcing me back to the ground. "I think . . ." she almost

teeth together as she rearingly traces the outline of my lips with the tip of the blade.

I won't close my eyes. The comment about Rue has filled me with fury, enough fury I think to die with some dignity. As my last act of defiance, I will stare her down as long as I can see, which will probably not be an extended period of time, but I will stare her down, I will not cry out, I will die, in my own small way, undefeated.

"Yes, I don't think you'll have much use for your lips anymore. Want to blow Lover Boy one last kiss?" she asks. I work up a mouthful of blood and saliva and spit it in her face. She flushes with rage. "All right then. Let's get started."

I brace myself for the agony that's sure to follow. But as I feel the tip open the first cut at my lip, some great force yanks Clove from my body and then she's screaming. I'm too stunned at first, too unable to process what has happened. Has Peeta somehow come to my rescue? Have the Gamemakers sent in some wild animal to add to the fun? Has a hovercraft inexplicably plucked her into the air?

But when I push myself up on my numb arms, I see it's none of the above. Clove is dangling a foot off the ground, imprisoned in Thresh's arms. I let out a gasp, seeing him like that, towering over me, holding Clove like a rag doll. I remember him as big, but he seems more massive, more powerful than I even recall. If anything, he seems to have gained weight in the arena. He flips Clove around and flings her onto the ground.

above a murmur. "What'd you do to that little girl? You kill her?"

Clove is scrambling backward on all fours, like a frantic insect, too shocked to even call for Carot. "No! No, it wasn't me!"

"You said her name. I heard you. You kill her?" Another thought brings a fresh wave of rage to his features. "You cut her up like you were going to cut up this girl here?"

"No! No, I —" Clove sees the stone, about the size of a small loaf of bread in Thresh's hand and loses it. "Carot!" she screeches. "Carot!"

"Clove!" I hear Carot's answer, but he's too far away, I can tell that much, to do her any good. What was he doing? Trying to get Foxface or Peeta? Or had he been lying in wait for Thresh and just badly misjudged his location?

Thresh brings the rock down hard against Clove's temple. It's not bleeding, but I can see the dent in her skull and I know that she's a goner. There's still life in her now though, in the rapid rise and fall of her chest, the low moan escaping her lips.

When Thresh whirls around on me, the rock raised, I know it's no good to run. And my bow is empty, the last loaded arrow having gone in Clove's direction. I'm trapped in the glare of his strange golden brown eyes. "What'd she mean? About Rue being your ally?"

"I — I — we teamed up. Blew up the supplies. I tried to save her, I did. But he got there first. District One," I say. Maybe if he knows I helped Rue, he won't choose some

"And you killed him?" he demands.

"Yes. I killed him. And buried her in flowers," I say.

"And I sang her to sleep."

Tears spring in my eyes. The tension, the fight goes out of me at the memory. And I'm overwhelmed by Rue, and the pain in my head, and my fear of Thresh, and the moaning of the dying girl a few feet away.

"To sleep?" Thresh says gruffly.

"To death. I sang until she died," I say. "Your district . . . they sent me bread." My hand reaches up but not for an arrow that I know I'll never reach. Just to wipe my nose.

"Do it fast, okay, Thresh?"

Conflicting emotions cross Thresh's face. He lowers the rock and points at me, almost accusingly. "Just this one time, I let you go. For the little girl. You and me, we're even then. No more owed. You understand?"

I nod because I do understand. About owing. About hating it. I understand that if Thresh wins, he'll have to go back and face a district that has already broken all the rules to thank me, and he is breaking the rules to thank me, too. And I understand that, for the moment, Thresh is not going to smash in my skull.

"Clove!" Caro's voice is much nearer now. I can tell by the pain in it that he sees her on the ground.

"You better run now, Fire Girl," says Thresh.

I don't need to be told twice. I flip over and my feet dig into the hard-packed earth as I run away from Thresh and Clove and the sound of Caro's voice. Only when I reach the

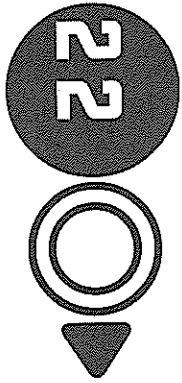
backpacks are vanishing over the edge of the plain into the area I've never seen. Caro kneels beside Clove, spear in hand, begging her to stay with him. In a moment, he will realize it's futile, she can't be saved. I crash into the trees, repeatedly swiping away the blood that's pouring into my eye, fleeing like the wild, wounded creature I am. After a few minutes, I hear the cannon and I know that Clove has died, that Caro will be on one of our trails. Either Thresh's or mine. I'm seized with terror, weak from my head wound, shaking. I load an arrow, but Caro can throw that spear almost as far as I can shoot.

Only one thing calms me down. Thresh has Caro's backpack containing the thing he needs desperately. If I had to bet, Caro headed out after Thresh, not me. Still I don't slow down when I reach the water. I plunge right in, boots still on, and flounder downstream. I pull off Rue's socks that I've been using for gloves and press them into my forehead, trying to staunch the flow of blood, but they're soaked in minutes.

Somehow I make it back to the cave. I squeeze through the rocks. In the dappled light, I pull the little orange backpack from my arm, cut open the clasp, and dump the contents on the ground. One slim box containing one hypodermic needle. Without hesitating, I jam the needle into Peeta's arm and slowly press down on the plunger.

My hands go to my head and then drop to my lap, slick with blood.

The last thing I remember is an exquisitely beautiful



The sound of rain drumming on the roof of our house gently pulls me toward consciousness. I fight to return to sleep though, wrapped in a warm cocoon of blankets, safe at home. I'm vaguely aware that my head aches. Possibly I have the flu and this is why I'm allowed to stay in bed, even though I can tell I've been asleep a long time. My mother's hand strokes my cheek and I don't push it away as I would in wakefulness, never wanting her to know how much I crave that gentle touch. How much I miss her even though I still don't trust her. Then there's a voice, the wrong voice, not my mother's, and I'm scared.

"Karniss," it says. "Karniss, can you hear me?"

My eyes open and the sense of security vanishes. I'm not home, not with my mother. I'm in a dim, chilly cave, my bare feet freezing despite the cover, the air tainted with the unmistakable smell of blood. The haggard, pale face of a boy slides into view, and after an initial jolt of alarm, I feel better. "Peeta."

"Hey," he says. "Good to see your eyes again."

"How long have I been out?" I ask.

"Not sure. I woke up yesterday evening and you were lying next to me in a very scary pool of blood," he

says. "I think it's stopped finally, but I wouldn't sit up or anything."

I gingerly lift my hand to my head and find it bandaged. This simple gesture leaves me weak and dizzy. Peeta holds a bottle to my lips and I drink thirstily.

"You're better," I say.

"Much better. Whatever you shot into my arm did the trick," he says. "By this morning, almost all the swelling in my leg was gone."

He doesn't seem angry about my tricking him, drugging him, and running off to the feast. Maybe I'm just too beat-up and I'll hear about it later when I'm stronger. But for the moment, he's all gentleness.

"Did you eat?" I ask.

"I'm sorry to say I gobbled down three pieces of that groosling before I realized it might have to last a while. Don't worry, I'm back on a strict diet," he says.

"No, it's good. You need to eat. I'll go hunting soon," I say.

"Not too soon, all right?" he says. "You just let me take care of you for a while."

I don't really seem to have much choice. Peeta feeds me bites of groosling and raisins and makes me drink plenty of water. He rubs some warmth back into my feet and wraps them in his jacket before tucking the sleeping bag back up around my chin.

"Your boots and socks are still damp and the weather's not helping much," he says. There's a clap of thunder, and I

see lightning electrify the sky through an opening in the rocks. Rain drips through several holes in the ceiling, but Peera has built a sort of canopy over my head and upper body by wedging the square of plastic into the rocks above me.

"I wonder what brought on this storm? I mean, who's the target?" says Peera.

"Caro and Thresh," I say without thinking. "Foxface will be in her den somewhere, and Clove . . . she cut me and then . . ." My voice trails off.

"I know Clove's dead. I saw it in the sky last night," he says. "Did you kill her?"

"No. Thresh broke her skull with a rock," I say.

"Lucky he didn't catch you, too," says Peera.

The memory of the feast returns full-force and I feel sick. "He did. But he let me go." Then, of course, I have to tell him. About things I've kept to myself because he was too sick to ask and I wasn't ready to relive anyway. Like the explosion and my ear and Rue's dying and the boy from District 1 and the bread. All of which leads to what happened with Thresh and how he was paying off a debt of sorts.

"He let you go because he didn't want to owe you anything?" asks Peera in disbelief.

"Yes. I don't expect you to understand it. You've always had enough. But if you'd lived in the Seam, I wouldn't have to explain," I say.

"It's like the bread. How I never seem to get over owing you for that," I say.

"The bread? What? From when we were kids?" he says. "I think we can let that go. I mean, you just brought me back from the dead."

"But you didn't know me. We had never even spoken. Besides, it's the first gift that's always the hardest to pay back. I wouldn't even have been here to do it if you hadn't helped me then," I say. "Why did you, anyway?"

"Why? You know why," Peera says. I give my head a slight, painful shake. "Haymitch said you would take a lot of convincing."

"Haymitch?" I ask. "What's he got to do with it?"

"Nothing," Peera says. "So, Caro and Thresh, huh? I guess it's too much to hope that they'll simultaneously destroy each other?"

But the thought only upsets me. "I think we would like Thresh. I think he'd be our friend back in District Twelve," I say.

"Then let's hope Caro kills him, so we don't have to," says Peera grimly.

I don't want Caro to kill Thresh at all. I don't want anyone else to die. But this is absolutely not the kind of thing that victors go around saying in the arena. Despite my best efforts, I can feel tears starting to pool in my eyes.

Peera looks at me in concern. "What is it? Are you in a lot of pain?"

I give him another answer, because it is equally true but

terminal one. "I want to go home, Peeta," I say plaintively, like a small child.

"You will. I promise," he says, and bends over to give me a kiss.

"I want to go home now," I say.

"Tell you what. You go back to sleep and dream of home. And you'll be there for real before you know it," he says. "Okay?"

"Okay," I whisper. "Wake me if you need me to keep watch."

"I'm good and rested, thanks to you and Haymitch.

Besides, who knows how long this will last?" he says.

What does he mean? The storm? The brief respite it brings us? The Games themselves? I don't know, but I'm too sad and tired to ask.

It's evening when Peeta wakes me again. The rain has turned to a downpour, sending streams of water through our ceiling where earlier there had been only drips. Peeta has placed the broth pot under the worst one and repositioned the plastic to deflect most of it from me. I feel a bit better, able to sit up without getting too dizzy, and I'm absolumely famished. So is Peeta. It's clear he's been waiting for me to wake up to eat and is eager to get started.

There's not much left. Two pieces of groosling, a small mishmash of roots, and a handful of dried fruit.

"Should we try and ration it?" Peeta asks.

"No, let's just finish it. The groosling's getting old any-

and eat slowly, but we're both so hungry we're done in a couple of minutes. My stomach is in no way satisfied.

"Tomorrow's a hunting day," I say.

"I won't be much help with that," Peeta says. "I've never hunted before."

"I'll kill and you cook," I say. "And you can always gather."

"I wish there was some sort of bread bush out there," says Peeta.

"The bread they sent me from District Eleven was still warm," I say with a sigh. "Here, chew these." I hand him a couple of mint leaves and pop a few in my own mouth.

It's hard to even see the projection in the sky, but it's clear enough to know there were no more deaths today. So Caro and Thresh haven't had it out yet.

"Where did Thresh go? I mean, what's on the far side of the circle?" I ask Peeta.

"A field. As far as you can see it's full of grasses as high as my shoulders. I don't know, maybe some of them are grain. There are patches of different colors. But there are no paths," says Peeta.

"I bet some of them are grain. I bet Thresh knows which ones, too," I say. "Did you go in there?"

"No. Nobody really wanted to track Thresh down in that grass. It has a sinister feeling to it. Every time I look at that field, all I can think of are hidden things. Snakes, and rabid animals, and quicksand," Peeta says. "There could be anything in there."

warnings they give us about not going beyond the fence in District 12. I can't help, for a moment, comparing him with Gale, who would see that field as a potential source of food as well as a threat. Thresh certainly did. It's not that Peeta's soft exactly; and he's proved he's not a coward. But there are things you don't question too much, I guess, when your home always smells like baking bread, whereas Gale questions everything. What would Peeta think of the irreverent banter that passes between us as we break the law each day? Would it shock him? The things we say about Panem? Gale's tirades against the Capitol?

"Maybe there is a bread bush in that field," I say. "Maybe that's why Thresh looks better fed now than when we started the Games."

"Either that or he's got very generous sponsors," says Peeta. "I wonder what we'd have to do to get Haymitch to send us some bread."

I raise my eyebrows before I remember he doesn't know about the message Haymitch sent us a couple of nights ago. One kiss equals one pot of broth. It's not the sort of thing I can blurt out, either. To say my thoughts aloud would be tipping off the audience that the romance has been fabricated to play on their sympathies and that would result in no food at all. Somehow, believably, I've got to get things back on track. Something simple to start with. I reach out and take his hand.

"Well, he probably used up a lot of resources helping me  
*...and what not out" I sav mischievously.*

"Yeah, about that," says Peeta, entwining his fingers in mine. "Don't try something like that again."

"Or what?" I ask.

"Or . . . or . . ." He can't think of anything good. "Just give me a minute."

"What's the problem?" I say with a grin.

"The problem is we're both still alive. Which only reinforces the idea in your mind that you did the right thing," says Peeta.

"I did do the right thing," I say.

"No! Just don't, Karniss!" His grip tightens, hurting my hand, and there's real anger in his voice. "Don't die for me. You won't be doing me any favors. All right?"

I'm startled by his intensity but recognize an excellent opportunity for getting food, so I try to keep up. "Maybe I did it for myself, Peeta, did you ever think of that? Maybe you aren't the only one who . . . who worries about . . . what it would be like if . . ."

I fumble. I'm not as smooth with words as Peeta. And while I was talking, the idea of actually losing Peeta hit me again and I realized how much I don't want him to die. And it's not about the sponsors. And it's not about what will happen back home. And it's not just that I don't want to be alone. It's him. I do not want to lose the boy with the bread.

"If what, Karniss?" he says softly.

I wish I could pull the shutters closed, blocking out this moment from the prying eyes of Panem. Even if it means



losing food. Whatever I'm feeling, it's no one's business but mine.

"That's exactly the kind of topic Haymitch told me to steer clear of," I say evasively, although Haymitch never said anything of the kind. In fact, he's probably cursing me out right now for dropping the ball during such an emotionally charged moment. But Peeta somehow catches it.

"Then I'll just have to fill in the blanks myself," he says, and moves in to me.

This is the first kiss that we're both fully aware of. Neither of us hobbled by sickness or pain or simply unconscious. Our lips neither burning with fever or icy cold. This is the first kiss where I actually feel stirring inside my chest. Warm and curious. This is the first kiss that makes me want another.

But I don't get it. Well, I do get a second kiss, but it's just a light one on the tip of my nose because Peeta's been distracted. "I think your wound is bleeding again. Come on, lie down, it's bedtime anyway," he says.

My socks are dry enough to wear now. I make Peeta put his jacket back on. The damp cold seems to cut right down to my bones, so he must be half frozen. I insist on taking the first watch, too, although neither of us think it's likely anyone will come in this weather. But he won't agree unless I'm in the bag, too, and I'm shivering so hard that it's pointless to object. In stark contrast to two nights ago, when I felt Peeta was a million miles away, I'm struck by his immediate

when he goes to sleep. No one has held me like this in such a long time. Since my father died and I stopped trusting my mother, no one else's arms have made me feel this safe.

With the aid of the glasses, I lie watching the drips of water splatter on the cave floor. Rhythmic and lulling. Several times, I drift off briefly and then snap awake, guilty and angry with myself. After three or four hours, I can't help it, I have to rouse Peeta because I can't keep my eyes open. He doesn't seem to mind.

"Tomorrow, when it's dry, I'll find us a place so high in the trees we can both sleep in peace," I promise as I drift off.

But tomorrow is no better in terms of weather. The deluge continues as if the Gamemakers are intent on washing us all away. The thunder's so powerful it seems to shake the ground. Peeta's considering heading out anyway to scavenge for food, but I tell him in this storm it would be pointless. He won't be able to see three feet in front of his face and he'll only end up getting soaked to the skin for his troubles. He knows I'm right, but the gnawing in our stomachs is becoming painful.

The day drags on turning into evening and there's no break in the weather. Haymitch is our only hope, but nothing is forthcoming, either from lack of money — everything will cost an exorbitant amount — or because he's dissatisfied with our performance. Probably the latter. I'd be the first to admit we're not exactly riveting today. Starving, weak from injuries, trying not to reopen wounds. We're sit-

mostly to keep warm. The most exciting thing either of us does is nap.

I'm not really sure how to ramp up the romance. The kiss last night was nice, but working up to another will take some forethought. There are girls in the Seam, some of the merchant girls, too, who navigate these waters so easily. But I've never had much time or use for it. Anyway, just a kiss isn't enough anymore clearly because if it was we'd have gotten food last night. My instincts tell me Haymitch isn't just looking for physical affection, he wants something more personal. The sort of stuff he was trying to get me to tell about myself when we were practicing for the interview. I'm rotten at it, but Peeta's not. Maybe the best approach is to get him talking.

"Peeta," I say lightly. "You said at the interview you'd had a crush on me forever. When did forever start?"

"Oh, let's see. I guess the first day of school. We were five. You had on a red plaid dress and your hair . . . it was in two braids instead of one. My father pointed you out when we were waiting to line up," Peeta says.

"Your father? Why?" I ask.

"He said, 'See that little girl? I wanted to marry her mother, but she ran off with a coal miner,'" Peeta says.

"What? You're making that up!" I exclaim.

"No, true story," Peeta says. "And I said, 'A coal miner? Why did she want a coal miner if she could've had you?' And he said, 'Because when he sings . . . even the birds stop

stunned and surprisingly moved, thinking of the baker telling this to Peeta. It strikes me that my own reluctance to sing, my own dismissal of music might not really be that I think it's a waste of time. It might be because it reminds me too much of my father.

"So that day, in music assembly, the teacher asked who knew the valley song. Your hand shot right up in the air. She stood you up on a stool and had you sing it for us. And I swear, every bird outside the windows fell silent," Peeta says.

"Oh, please," I say, laughing.

"No, it happened. And right when your song ended, I knew — just like your mother — I was a goner," Peeta says. "Then for the next eleven years, I tried to work up the nerve to talk to you."

"Without success," I add.

"Without success. So, in a way, my name being drawn in the reaping was a real piece of luck," says Peeta.

For a moment, I'm almost foolishly happy and then confusion sweeps over me. Because we're supposed to be making up this stuff, playing at being in love, not actually being in love. But Peeta's story has a ring of truth to it. That part about my father and the birds. And I did sing the first day of school, although I don't remember the song. And that red plaid dress . . . there was one, a hand-me-down to Prim that got washed to rags after my father's death.

It would explain another thing, too. Why Peeta took a bearing to give me the bread on that awful hollow day. So,

“You have a . . . remarkable memory,” I say haltingly.

“I remember everything about you,” says Peeta, tucking a loose strand of hair behind my ear. “You’re the one who wasn’t paying attention.”

“I am now,” I say.

“Well, I don’t have much competition here,” he says.

I want to draw away, to close those shutters again, but I know I can’t. It’s as if I can hear Haymitch whispering in my ear, “Say it! Say it!”

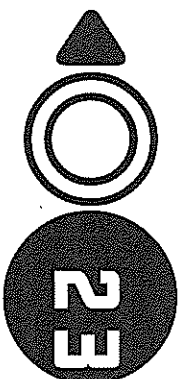
I swallow hard and get the words out. “You don’t have much competition anywhere.” And this time, it’s me who leans in.

Our lips have just barely touched when the clunk outside makes us jump. My bow comes up, the arrow ready to fly, but there’s no other sound. Peeta peers through the rocks and then gives a whoop. Before I can stop him, he’s out in the rain, then handing something in to me. A silver parachute attached to a basket. I rip it open at once and inside there’s a feast—fresh rolls, goat cheese, apples, and best of all, a tureen of that incredible lamb stew on wild rice. The very dish I told Caesar Flickerman was the most impressive thing the Capitol had to offer.

Peeta wiggles back inside, his face lit up like the sun. “I guess Haymitch finally got tired of watching us starve.”

“I guess so,” I answer.

But in my head I can hear Haymitch’s smug, if slightly exasperated, words, “Yes, *that’s* what I’m looking for,



Every cell in my body wants me to dig into the stew and cram it, handful by handful into my mouth. But Peeta’s voice stops me. “We better take it slow on that stew. Remember the first night on the train? The rich food made me sick and I wasn’t even starving then.”

“You’re right. And I could just inhale the whole thing!” I say regretfully. But I don’t. We are quite sensible. We each have a roll, half an apple, and an egg-size serving of stew and rice. I make myself eat the stew in tiny spoonfuls—they even sent us silverware and plates—savoring each bite. When we finish, I stare longingly at the dish. “I want more.”

“Me, too. Tell you what. We wait an hour, if it stays down, then we get another serving,” Peeta says.

“Agreed,” I say. “It’s going to be a long hour.”

“Maybe not that long,” says Peeta. “What was that you were saying just before the food arrived? Something about me . . . no competition . . . best thing that ever happened to you . . .”

“I don’t remember that last part,” I say, hoping it’s too dim in here for the cameras to pick up my blush.

“Oh, that’s right. That’s what *I* was thinking,” he says. “Scoot over. I’m freezing.”

I make room for him in the sleeping bag. We lean back against the cave wall, my head on his shoulder, his arms wrapped around me. I can feel Haymitch nudging me to keep up the act. "So, since we were five, you never even noticed any other girls?" I ask him.

"No, I noticed just about every girl, but none of them made a lasting impression but you," he says.

"I'm sure that would thrill your parents, you liking a girl from the Seam," I say.

"Hardly. But I couldn't care less. Anyway, if we make it back, you won't be a girl from the Seam, you'll be a girl from the Victor's Village," he says.

That's right. If we win, we'll each get a house in the part of town reserved for Hunger Games' victors. Long ago, when the Games began, the Capitol had built a dozen fine houses in each district. Of course, in ours only one is occupied. Most of the others have never been lived in at all.

A disturbing thought hits me. "But then, our only neighbor will be Haymitch!"

"Ah, that'll be nice," says Peeta, tightening his arms around me. "You and me and Haymitch. Very cozy. Picnics, birthdays, long winter nights around the fire retelling old Hunger Games tales."

"I told you, he hates me!" I say, but I can't help laughing at the image of Haymitch becoming my new pal.

"Only sometimes. When he's sober, I've never heard him say one negative thing about you," says Peeta.

"That's right. Who am I thinking of? Oh, I know. It's Cinna who likes you. But that's mainly because you didn't try to run when he set you on fire," says Peeta. "On the other hand, Haymitch . . . well, if I were you, I'd avoid Haymitch completely. He hates you."

"I thought you said I was his favorite," I say.

"He hates me more," says Peeta. "I don't think people in general are his sort of thing."

I know the audience will enjoy our having fun at Haymitch's expense. He has been around so long, he's practically an old friend to some of them. And after his head-dive off the stage at the reaping, everybody knows him. By this time, they'll have dragged him out of the control room for interviews about us. No telling what sort of lies he's made up. He's at something of a disadvantage because most mentors have a partner, another victor to help them whereas Haymitch has to be ready to go into action at any moment. Kind of like me when I was alone in the arena. I wonder how he's holding up, with the drinking, the attention, and the stress of trying to keep us alive.

It's funny. Haymitch and I don't get along well in person, but maybe Peeta is right about us being alike because he seems able to communicate with me by the timing of his gifts. Like how I knew I must be close to water when he withheld it and how I knew the sleep syrup just wasn't something to ease Peeta's pain and how I know now that I have to play up the romance. He hasn't made much effort to connect with Peeta really. Perhaps he thinks a bowl of

broth would just be a bowl of broth to Peeta, whereas I'll see the strings attached to it.

A thought hits me, and I'm amazed the question's taken so long to surface. Maybe it's because I've only recently begun to view Haymitch with a degree of curiosity. "How do you think he did it?"

"Who? Did what?" Peeta asks.

"Haymitch. How do you think he won the Games?"

I say.

Peeta considers this quite a while before he answers. Haymitch is sturdily built, but no physical wonder like Caro or Thresh. He's not particularly handsome. Not in the way that causes sponsors to rain gifts on you. And he's so surly, it's hard to imagine anyone teaming up with him. There's only one way Haymitch could have won, and Peeta says it just as I'm reaching this conclusion myself.

"He outsmarted the others," says Peeta.

I nod, then let the conversation drop. But secretly I'm wondering if Haymitch sobered up long enough to help Peeta and me because he thought we just might have the wits to survive. Maybe he wasn't always a drunk. Maybe, in the beginning, he tried to help the tributes. But then it got unbearable. It must be hell to mentor two kids and then watch them die. Year after year after year. I realize that if I get out of here, that will become my job. To mentor the girl from District 12. The idea is so repellent, I thrust it from my mind.

argument. While I'm dishing up two more small servings of lamb stew and rice, we hear the anthem begin to play. Peeta presses his eyes against a crack in the rocks to watch the sky.

"There won't be anything to see tonight," I say, far more interested in the stew than the sky. "Nothing's happened or we would've heard a cannon."

"Karniss," Peeta says quietly.

"What? Should we split another roll, too?" I ask.

"Karniss," he repeats, but I find myself wanting to ignore him.

"I'm going to split one. But I'll save the cheese for tomorrow," I say. I see Peeta staring at me. "What?"

"Thresh is dead," says Peeta.

"He can't be," I say.

"They must have fired the cannon during the thunder and we missed it," says Peeta.

"Are you sure? I mean, it's pouring buckets out there. I don't know how you can see anything." I say. I push him away from the rocks and squint out into the dark, rainy sky. For about ten seconds, I catch a distorted glimpse of Thresh's picture and then he's gone. Just like that.

I slump down against the rocks, momentarily forgetting about the task at hand. Thresh dead. I should be happy, right? One less tribute to face. And a powerful one, too. But I'm not happy. All I can think about is Thresh letting me go, letting me run because of Rue, who died with that spear in her stomach. . . .

I give a noncommittal shrug and cup my elbows in my hands, hugging them close to my body. I have to bury the real pain because who's going to bet on a tribute who keeps sniveling over the deaths of her opponents. Rue was one thing. We were allies. She was so young. But no one will understand my sorrow at Thresh's murder. The word pulls me up short. Murder! Thankfully, I didn't say it aloud. That's not going to win me any points in the arena. What I do say is, "It's just . . . if we didn't win . . . I wanted Thresh to. Because he let me go. And because of Rue."

"Yeah, I know," says Peeta. "But this means we're one step closer to District Twelve." He nudges a plate of food into my hands. "Eat. It's still warm."

I take a bite of the stew to show I don't really care, but it's like glue in my mouth and takes a lot of effort to swallow. "It also means Carro will be back hunting us."

"And he's got supplies again," says Peeta.

"He'll be wounded, I bet," I say.

"What makes you say that?" Peeta asks.

"Because Thresh would have never gone down without a fight. He's so strong, I mean, he was. And they were in his territory," I say.

"Good," says Peeta. "The more wounded Carro is the better. I wonder how Foxface is making out."

"Oh, she's fine," I say peevishly. I'm still angry she thought of hiding in the Cornucopia and I didn't. "Probably

home," says Peeta. "But we better be extra careful about the watches. I dozed off a few times."

"Me, too," I admit. "But not tonight."

We finish our food in silence and then Peeta offers to take the first watch. I burrow down in the sleeping bag next to him, pulling my hood up over my face to hide it from the cameras. I just need a few moments of privacy where I can let any emotion cross my face without being seen. Under the hood, I silently say good-bye to Thresh and thank him for my life. I promise to remember him and, if I can, do something to help his family and Rue's, if I win. Then I escape into sleep, comforted by a full belly and the steady warmth of Peeta beside me.

When Peeta wakes me later, the first thing I register is the smell of goat cheese. He's holding out half a roll spread with the creamy white stuff and topped with apple slices. "Don't be mad," he says. "I had to eat again. Here's your half."

"Oh, good," I say, immediately taking a huge bite. The strong fatty cheese tastes just like the kind Prim makes, the apples are sweet and crunchy. "Mm."

"We make a goat cheese and apple tart at the bakery," he says.

"Bet that's expensive," I say.

"Too expensive for my family to eat. Unless it's gone very stale. Of course, practically everything we eat is stale," says Peeta, pulling the sleeping bag up around him. In less than a minute, he's snoring.

And it's true, Peeta has always had enough to eat. But there's something kind of depressing about living your life on stale bread, the hard, dry loaves that no one else wanted. One thing about us, since I bring our food home on a daily basis, most of it is so fresh you have to make sure it isn't going to make a run for it.

Somewhere during my shift, the rain stops not gradually but all at once. The downpour ends and there's only the residual drippings of water from branches, the rush of the now overflowing stream below us. A full, beautiful moon emerges, and even without the glasses I can see outside. I can't decide if the moon is real or merely a projection of the Gamemakers. I know it was full shortly before I left home. Gale and I watched it rise as we hunted into the late hours.

How long have I been gone? I'm guessing it's been about two weeks in the arena, and there was that week of preparation in the Capitol. Maybe the moon has completed its cycle. For some reason, I badly want it to be my moon, the same one I see from the woods around District 12. That would give me something to cling to in the surreal world of the arena where the authenticity of everything is to be doubted.

Four of us left.

For the first time, I allow myself to truly think about the possibility that I might make it home. To fame. To wealth. To my own house in the Victor's Village. My mother  
I don't want to live there with me. No more fear of hun-

would my life be like on a daily basis? Most of it has been consumed with the acquisition of food. Take that away and I'm not really sure who I am, what my identity is. The idea scares me some. I think of Haymitch, with all his money. What did his life become? He lives alone, no wife or children, most of his waking hours drunk. I don't want to end up like that.

"But you won't be alone," I whisper to myself. I have my mother and Prim. Well, for the time being. And then . . . I don't want to think about then, when Prim has grown up, my mother passed away. I know I'll never marry, never risk bringing a child into the world. Because if there's one thing being a victor doesn't guarantee, it's your children's safety. My kids' names would go right into the reaping balls with everyone else's. And I swear I'll never let that happen.

The sun eventually rises, its light slipping through the cracks and illuminating Peeta's face. Who will he transform into if we make it home? This perplexing, good-natured boy who can spin out lies so convincingly the whole of Panem believes him to be hopelessly in love with me, and I'll admit it, there are moments when he makes me believe it myself? *At least, we'll be friends*, I think. Nothing will change the fact that we've saved each other's lives in here. And beyond that, he will always be the boy with the bread. *Good friends*. Anything beyond that though . . . and I feel Gale's gray eyes watching me watching Peeta, all the way from District 12.

Discomfort causes me to move. I scoot over and shake Peeta's shoulder. His eyes open sleepily and when they focus

"We're wasting hunting time," I say when I finally break away.

"I wouldn't call it wasting," he says, giving a big stretch as he sits up. "So do we hunt on empty stomachs to give us an edge?"

"Not us," I say. "We stuff ourselves to give us staying power."

"Count me in," Peetra says. But I can see he's surprised when I divide the rest of the stew and rice and hand a heaping plate to him. "All this?"

"We'll earn it back today," I say, and we both plow into our plates. Even cold, it's one of the best things I've ever tasted. I abandon my fork and scrape up the last dabs of gravy with my finger. "I can feel Effie Trinker shuddering at my manners."

"Hey, Effie, watch this!" says Peetra. He tosses his fork over his shoulder and literally licks his plate clean with his tongue making loud, satisfied sounds. Then he blows a kiss out to her in general and calls, "We miss you, Effie!"

I cover his mouth with my hand, but I'm laughing. "Stop! Caro could be right outside our cave."

He grabs my hand away. "What do I care? I've got you to protect me now," says Peetra, pulling me to him.

"Come on," I say in exasperation, extricating myself from his grasp but not before he gets in another kiss.

Once we're packed up and standing outside our cave, our mood shifts to serious. It's as though for the last few

sorts. Now, although the day is sunny and warm, we both sense we're really back in the Games. I hand Peetra my knife, since whatever weapons he once had are long gone, and he slips it into his belt. My last seven arrows — of the twelve I sacrificed three in the explosion, two at the feast — rattle a bit too loosely in the quiver. I can't afford to lose any more.

"He'll be hunting us by now," says Peetra. "Caro isn't one to wait for his prey to wander by."

"If he's wounded —" I begin.

"It won't matter," Peetra breaks in. "If he can move, he's coming."

With all the rain, the stream has overrun its banks by several feet on either side. We stop there to replenish our water. I check the snares I set days ago and come up empty. Not surprising with the weather. Besides, I haven't seen many animals or signs of them in this area.

"If we want food, we better head back up to my old hunting grounds," I say.

"Your call. Just tell me what you need me to do," Peetra says.

"Keep an eye out," I say. "Stay on the rocks as much as possible, no sense in leaving him tracks to follow. And listen for both of us." It's clear, at this point, that the explosion destroyed the hearing in my left ear for good.

I'd walk in the water to cover our tracks completely, but I'm not sure Peetra's leg could take the current. Although the drugs have erased the infection, he's still pretty weak. My forehead hurts along the knife cut, but after three



head though, just in case physical exertion should bring it back.

As we head up alongside the stream, we pass the place where I found Peera camouflaged in the weeds and mud. One good thing, between the downpour and the flooded banks, all signs of his hiding place have been wiped out. That means that, if need be, we can come back to our cave. Otherwise, I wouldn't risk it with Caro after us.

The boulders diminish to rocks that eventually turn to pebbles, and then, to my relief, we're back on pine needles and the gentle incline of the forest floor. For the first time, I realize we have a problem. Navigating the rocky terrain with a bad leg — well, you're naturally going to make some noise. But even on the smooth bed of needles, Peera is loud. And I mean *loud* loud, as if he's stomping his feet or something. I turn and look at him.

"What?" he asks.

"You've got to move more quietly," I say. "Forget about Caro, you're chasing off every rabbit in a ten-mile radius."

"Really?" he says. "Sorry, I didn't know."

So, we start up again and he's a tiny bit better, but even with only one working ear, he's making me jump.

"Can you take your boots off?" I suggest.

"Here?" he asks in disbelief, as if I'd asked him to walk barefoot on hot coals or something. I have to remind myself that he's still not used to the woods, that it's the scary, forbidden place beyond the fences of District 12. I think of

to move at all without chasing off the game. I feel certain he's laughing back home.

"Yes," I say patiently. "I will, too. That way we'll both be quieter." Like I was making any noise. So we both strip off our boots and socks and, while there's some improvement, I could swear he's making an effort to snap every branch we encounter.

Needless to say, although it takes several hours to reach my old camp with Rue, I've shot nothing. If the stream would settle down, fish might be an option, but the current is still too strong. As we stop to rest and drink water, I try to work out a solution. Ideally, I'd dump Peera now with some simple root-gathering chore and go hunt, but then he'd be left with only a knife to defend himself against Caro's spears and superior strength. So what I'd really like is to try and conceal him somewhere safe, then go hunt, and come back and collect him. But I have a feeling his ego isn't going to go for that suggestion.

"Kanniss," he says. "We need to split up. I know I'm chasing away the game."

"Only because your leg's hurt," I say generously, because really, you can tell that's only a small part of the problem.

"I know," he says. "So, why don't you go on? Show me some plants to gather and that way we'll both be useful."

"Not if Caro comes and kills you." I tried to say it in a nice way, but it still sounds like I think he's a weakling.

Surprisingly, he just laughs. "Look, I can handle Caro. I

Yeah, and that turned out great. You ended up dying in a mud bank. That's what I want to say, but I can't. He did save my life by taking on Caro after all. I try another tactic. "What if you climbed up in a tree and acted as a lookout while I hunted?" I say, trying to make it sound like very important work.

"What if you show me what's edible around here and go get us some meat?" he says, mimicking my tone. "Just don't go far, in case you need help."

I sigh and show him some roots to dig. We do need food, no question. One apple, two rolls, and a blob of cheese the size of a plum won't last long. I'll just go a short distance and hope Caro is a long way off.

I teach him a bird whistle — not a melody like Rue's but a simple two-note whistle — which we can use to communicate that we're all right. Fortunately, he's good at this. Leaving him with the pack, I head off.

I feel like I'm eleven again, tethered not to the safety of the fence but to Peeta, allowing myself twenty, maybe thirty yards of hunting space. Away from him though, the woods come alive with animal sounds. Reassured by his periodic whistles, I allow myself to drift farther away, and soon have two rabbits and a fat squirrel to show for it. I decide it's enough. I can set snares and maybe get some fish. With Peeta's roots, this will be enough for now.

As I travel the short distance back, I realize we haven't exchanged signals in a while. When my whistle receives no

ground where the sun can reach the single layer of berries that covers it. But where is he?

"Peeta!" I call out in a panic. "Peeta!" I turn to the rustle of brush and almost send an arrow through him. Fortunately, I pull my bow at the last second and it sticks in an oak trunk to his left. He jumps back, flinging a handful of berries into the foliage.

My fear comes out as anger. "What are you doing? You're supposed to be here, not running around in the woods!"

"I found some berries down by the stream," he says, clearly confused by my outburst.

"I whistled. Why didn't you whistle back?" I snap at him.

"I didn't hear. The water's too loud, I guess," he says. He crosses and puts his hands on my shoulders. That's when I feel that I'm trembling.

"I thought Caro killed you!" I almost shout.

"No, I'm fine." Peeta wraps his arms around me, but I don't respond. "Karniss?"

I push away, trying to sort out my feelings. "If two people agree on a signal, they stay in range. Because if one of them doesn't answer, they're in trouble, all right?"

"All right!" he says.

"All right. Because that's what happened with Rue, and I watched her die!" I say. I turn away from him, go to the pack and open a fresh bottle of water, although I still have some in mine. But I'm not ready to forgive him. I notice the

definitely picked away part of the cheese. "And you ate without me!" I really don't care, I just want something else to be mad about.

"What? No, I didn't," Peeta says.

"Oh, and I suppose the apples are the cheese," I say.

"I don't know what are the cheese," Peeta says slowly and distinctly, as if trying not to lose his temper, "but it wasn't me. I've been down by the stream collecting berries. Would you care for some?"

I would actually, but I don't want to relent too soon. I do walk over and look at them. I've never seen this type before. No, I have. But not in the arena. These aren't Rue's berries, although they resemble them. Nor do they match any I learned about in training. I lean down and scoop up a few, rolling them between my fingers.

My father's voice comes back to me. "Not these, Kauniss. Never these. They're nightlock. You'll be dead before they reach your stomach."

Just then, the cannon fires. I whip around, expecting Peeta to collapse to the ground, but he only raises his eyebrows. The hovercraft appears a hundred yards or so away. What's left of Foxface's emaciated body is lifted into the air. I can see the red glint of her hair in the sunlight.

I should have known the moment I saw the missing cheese....

Peeta has me by the arm, pushing me toward a tree.

"Climb. He'll be here in a second. We'll stand a better

I stop him, suddenly calm. "No, Peeta, she's your kill, not Caro's."

"What? I haven't even seen her since the first day," he says. "How could I have killed her?"

In answer, I hold out the berries.



It takes a while to explain the situation to Peeta. How Foxface stole the food from the supply pile before I blew it up, how she tried to take enough to stay alive but not enough that anyone would notice it, how she wouldn't question the safety of berries we were preparing to eat ourselves.

"I wonder how she found us," says Peeta. "My fault, I guess, if I'm as loud as you say."

We were about as hard to follow as a herd of cattle, but I try to be kind. "And she's very clever, Peeta. Well, she was. Until you outfoxed her."

"Not on purpose. Doesn't seem fair somehow. I mean, we would have both been dead, too, if she hadn't eaten the berries first." He checks himself. "No, of course, we wouldn't. You recognized them, didn't you?"

I give a nod. "We call them nightlock."

"Even the name sounds deadly," he says. "I'm sorry, Katniss. I really thought they were the same ones you'd gathered."

"Don't apologize. It just means we're one step closer to home, right?" I ask.

"I'll get rid of the rest," Peeta says. He gathers up the sheet of blue plastic, careful to trap the berries inside, and goes to toss them into the woods.

"Wait!" I cry. I find the leather pouch that belonged to the boy from District 1 and fill it with a few handfuls of berries from the plastic. "If they fooled Foxface, maybe they can fool Caro as well. If he's chasing us or something, we can act like we accidentally drop the pouch and if he eats them—"

"Then hello District Twelve," says Peeta.

"That's it," I say, securing the pouch to my belt.

"He'll know where we are now," says Peeta. "If he was anywhere nearby and saw that hovercraft, he'll know we killed her and come after us."

Peeta's right. This could be just the opportunity Caro's been waiting for. But even if we run now, there's the meat to cook and our fire will be another sign of our whereabouts. "Let's make a fire. Right now." I begin to gather branches and brush.

"Are you ready to face him?" Peeta asks.

"I'm ready to eat. Better to cook our food while we have the chance. If he knows we're here, he knows. But he also knows there's two of us and probably assumes we were hunting Foxface. That means you're recovered. And the fire means we're not hiding, we're inviting him here. Would you show up?" I ask.

"Maybe not," he says.

Peeta's a whiz with fires, coaxing a blaze out of the damp wood. In no time, I have the rabbits and squirrel roasting, the roots, wrapped in leaves, baking in the coals. We take turns gathering greens and keeping a careful watch for Caro, but as I anticipated, he doesn't make an appearance.

When the food's cooked, I pack most of it up, leaving us each a rabbit's leg to eat as we walk.

I want to move higher into the woods, climb a good tree, and make camp for the night, but Peeta resists. "I can't climb like you, Karniss, especially with my leg, and I don't think I could ever fall asleep fifty feet above the ground!"

"It's not safe to stay in the open, Peeta," I say.

"Can't we go back to the cave?" he asks. "It's near water and easy to defend."

I sigh. Several more hours of walking—or should I say crashing—through the woods to reach an area we'll just have to leave in the morning to hunt. But Peeta doesn't ask for much. He's followed my instructions all day and I'm sure if things were reversed, he wouldn't make me spend the night in a tree. It dawns on me that I haven't been very nice to Peeta today. Nagging him about how loud he was, screaming at him over disappearing. The playful romance we had sustained in the cave has disappeared out in the open, under the hot sun, with the threat of Caro looming over us. Haymitch has probably just about had it with me. And as for the audience . . .

I reach up and give him a kiss. "Sure. Let's go back to the cave."

He looks pleased and relieved. "Well, that was easy."

I work my arrow out of the oak, careful not to damage the shaft. These arrows are food, safety, and life itself now.

We toss a bunch more wood on the fire. It should be

stream, I see the water has dropped considerably and moves at its old leisurely pace, so I suggest we walk back in it. Peeta's happy to oblige and since he's a lot quieter in water than on land, it's a doubly good idea. It's a long walk back to the cave though, even going downward, even with the rabbit to give us a boost. We're both exhausted by our hike today and still way too underfed. I keep my bow loaded, both for Caro and any fish I might see, but the stream seems strangely empty of creatures.

By the time we reach our destination, our feet are dragging and the sun sits low on the horizon. We fill up our water bottles and climb the little slope to our den. It's not much, but out here in the wilderness, it's the closest thing we have to a home. It will be warmer than a tree, too, because it provides some shelter from the wind that has begun to blow steadily in from the west. I set a good dinner out, but halfway through Peeta begins to nod off. After days of inactivity, the hunt has taken its toll. I order him into the sleeping bag and set aside the rest of his food for when he wakes. He drops off immediately. I pull the sleeping bag up to his chin and kiss his forehead, not for the audience, but for me. Because I'm so grateful that he's still here, not dead by the stream as I'd thought. So glad that I don't have to face Caro alone.

Brutal, bloody Caro who can snap a neck with a twist of his arm, who had the power to overcome Thresh, who has had it out for me since the beginning. He probably has had a special hatred for me ever since I overpowered him in

I have a feeling it drove Carot to distraction. Which is not that hard. I think of his ridiculous reaction to finding the supplies blown up. The others were upset, of course, but he was completely unhinged. I wonder now if Carot might not be entirely sane.

The sky lights up with the seal, and I watch Foxface shine in the sky and then disappear from the world forever. He hasn't said it, but I don't think Peetra felt good about killing her, even if it was essential. I can't pretend I'll miss her, but I have to admire her. My guess is if they had given us some sort of test, she would have been the smartest of all the tributes. If, in fact, we had been setting a trap for her, I bet she'd have sensed it and avoided the berries. It was Peetra's own ignorance that brought her down. I've spent so much time making sure I don't underestimate my opponents that I've forgotten it's just as dangerous to overestimate them as well.

That brings me back to Carot. But while I think I had a sense of Foxface, who she was and how she operated, he's a little more slippery. Powerful, well trained, but smart? I don't know. Not like she was. And utterly lacking in the control Foxface demonstrated. I believe Carot could easily lose his judgment in a fit of temper. Not that I can feel superior on that point. I think of the moment I sent the arrow flying into the apple in the pig's mouth when I was so enraged. Maybe I do understand Carot better than I think.

*Daavio tha farima in mv body mv mind's alert so I let*

day has begun when I shake his shoulder. He looks out, almost in alarm. "I slept the whole night. That's not fair, Karniss, you should have woken me."

I stretch and burrow down into the bag. "I'll sleep now. Wake me if anything interesting happens."

Apparently nothing does, because when I open my eyes, bright hot afternoon light gleams through the rocks. "Any sign of our friend?" I ask.

Peetra shakes his head. "No, he's keeping a disturbingly low profile."

"How long do you think we'll have before the Gamemakers drive us together?" I ask.

"Well, Foxface died almost a day ago, so there's been plenty of time for the audience to place bets and get bored. I guess it could happen at any moment," says Peetra.

"Yeah, I have a feeling today's the day," I say. I sit up and look out at the peaceful terrain. "I wonder how they'll do it."

Peetra remains silent. There's not really any good answer.

"Well, until they do, no sense in wasting a hunting day. But we should probably eat as much as we can hold just in case we run into trouble," I say.

Peetra packs up our gear while I lay out a big meal. The rest of the rabbits, roots, greens, the rolls spread with the last bit of cheese. The only thing I leave in reserve is the squirrel and the apple.

*Rv tha rima wata down all at once I let*

feeling of grubbiness. Maybe we don't bathe daily in the Seam, but we keep cleaner than I have of late. Except for my feet, which have walked in the stream, I'm covered in a layer of grime.

Leaving the cave has a sense of finality about it. I don't think there will be another night in the arena somehow. One way or the other, dead or alive, I have the feeling I'll escape it today. I give the rocks a pat good-bye and we head down to the stream to wash up. I can feel my skin, itching for the cool water. I may do my hair and braid it back wet. I'm wondering if we might even be able to give our clothes a quick scrub when we reach the stream. Or what used to be the stream. Now there's only a bone-dry bed. I put my hand down to feel it.

"Not even a little damp. They must have drained it while we slept," I say. A fear of the cracked tongue, aching body and fuzzy mind brought on by my previous dehydration creeps into my consciousness. Our bortes and skin are fairly full, but with two drinking and this hot sun it won't take long to deplete them.

"The lake," says Peera. "That's where they want us to go."

"Maybe the ponds still have some," I say hopefully.

"We can check," he says, but he's just humoring me. I'm humoring myself because I know what I'll find when we return to the pond where I soaked my leg. A dusty, gaping mouth of a hole. But we make the trip anyway just to confirm what we already know.

"You're right. They're driving us to the lake," I say. Where there's no cover. Where they're guaranteed a bloody fight to the death with nothing to block their view. "Do you want to go straightaway or wait until the water's tapped out?"

"Let's go now, while we've had food and rest. Let's just go end this thing," he says.

I nod. It's funny. I feel almost as if it's the first day of the Games again. That I'm in the same position. Twenty-one tributes are dead, but I still have yet to kill Caro. And really, wasn't he always the one to kill? Now it seems the other tributes were just minor obstacles, distractions, keeping us from the real battle of the Games. Caro and me.

But no, there's the boy waiting beside me. I feel his arms wrap around me.

"Two against one. Should be a piece of cake," he says.

"Next time we eat, it will be in the Capitol," I answer.

"You bet it will," he says.

We stand there a while, locked in an embrace, feeling each other, the sunlight, the rustle of the leaves at our feet. Then without a word, we break apart and head for the lake.

I don't care now that Peera's footfalls send rodents scurrying, make birds take wing. We have to fight Caro and I'd just as soon do it here as on the plain. But I doubt I'll have that choice. If the Gamemakers want us in the open, then in the open we will be.

We stop to rest for a few moments under the tree where the Careers trapped me. The husk of the tracker jacker nest, beaten to a pulp by the heavy rains and dried in the burning sun, confirms the location. I touch it with the tip of my boot, and it dissolves into dust that is quickly carried off by the breeze. I can't help looking up in the tree where Rue secretly perched, waiting to save my life. Tracker jackers. Glimmer's bloated body. The terrifying hallucinations...

"Let's move on," I say, wanting to escape the darkness that surrounds this place. Peeta doesn't object.

Given our late start to the day, when we reach the plain it's already early evening. There's no sign of Caro. No sign of anything except the gold Cornucopia glowing in the slanting sun rays. Just in case Caro decided to pull a Foxface on us, we circle the Cornucopia to make sure it's empty. Then obediently, as if following instructions, we cross to the lake and fill our water containers.

I frown at the shrinking sun. "We don't want to fight him after dark. There's only the one pair of glasses."

Peeta carefully squeezes drops of iodine into the water. "Maybe that's what he's waiting for. What do you want to do? Go back to the cave?"

"Either that or find a tree. But let's give him another half an hour or so. Then we'll take cover," I answer.

We sit by the lake, in full sight. There's no point in hiding now. In the trees at the edge of the plain, I can see the *Mockingjays* flirting about. Bouncing melodies back and

forth between them like brightly colored balls. I open my mouth and sing out Rue's four-note run. I can feel them pause curiously at the sound of my voice, listening for more. I repeat the notes in the silence. First one mockingjay trills the tune back, then another. Then the whole world comes alive with the sound.

"Just like your father," says Peeta.

My fingers find the pin on my shirt. "That's Rue's song," I say. "I think they remember it."

The music swells and I recognize the brilliance of it. As the notes overlap, they complement one another, forming a lovely, unearthly harmony. It was this sound then, thanks to Rue, that sent the orchard workers of District 11 home each night. Does someone start it at quitting time, I wonder, now that she is dead?

For a while, I just close my eyes and listen, mesmerized by the beauty of the song. Then something begins to disrupt the music. Runs cut off in jagged, imperfect lines. Dissonant notes intersperse with the melody. The mockingjays' voices rise up in a shrieking cry of alarm.

We're on our feet, Peeta wielding his knife, me poised to shoot, when Caro smashes through the trees and bears down on us. He has no spear. In fact, his hands are empty, yet he runs straight for us. My first arrow hits his chest and inexplicably falls aside.

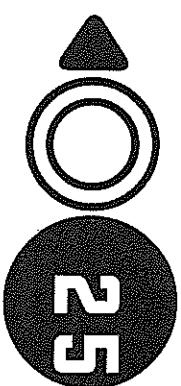
"He's got some kind of body armor!" I shout to Peeta.

Just in time, too, because Caro is upon us. I brace myself, but he rockets right between us with no attempt



to check his speed. I can tell from his panting, the sweat pouring off his purplish face, that he's been running hard a long time. Not toward us. From something. But what?

My eyes scan the woods just in time to see the first creature leap onto the plain. As I'm turning away, I see another half dozen join it. Then I am stumbling blindly after Caro with no thought of anything but to save myself.



Mutations. No question about it. I've never seen these mutts, but they're no natural-born animals. They resemble huge wolves, but what wolf lands and then balances easily on its hind legs? What wolf waves the rest of the pack forward with its front paw as though it had a wrist? These things I can see at a distance. Up close, I'm sure their more menacing attributes will be revealed.

Caro has made a beeline for the Cornucopia, and without question I follow him. If he thinks it's the safest place, who am I to argue? Besides, even if I could make it to the trees, it would be impossible for Peeta to outrun them on that leg — Peeta! My hands have just landed on the metal at the pointed tail of the Cornucopia when I remember I'm part of a team. He's about fifteen yards behind me, hobbling as fast as he can, but the mutts are closing in on him fast. I send an arrow into the pack and one goes down, but there are plenty to take its place.

Peeta's waving me up the horn, "Go, Karniss! Go!"

He's right. I can't protect either of us on the ground. I start climbing, scaling the Cornucopia on my hands and feet. The pure gold surface has been designed to resemble the woven horn that we fill at harvest, so there are little

in the arena sun, the metal feels hot enough to blister my hands.

Caro lies on his side at the very top of the horn, twenty feet above the ground, gasping to catch his breath as he gags over the edge. Now's my chance to finish him off. I stop midway up the horn and load another arrow, but just as I'm about to let it fly, I hear Peeta cry out. I twist around and see he's just reached the tail, and the mutts are right on his heels.

"Climb!" I yell. Peeta starts up hampered by not only the leg but the knife in his hand. I shoot my arrow down the throat of the first mutt that places its paws on the metal. As it dies the creature lashes out, inadvertently opening gashes on a few of its companions. That's when I get a look at the claws. Four inches and clearly razor-sharp.

Peeta reaches my feet and I grab his arm and pull him along. Then I remember Caro waiting at the top and whip around, but he's doubled over with cramps and apparently more preoccupied with the mutts than us. He coughs out something unintelligible. The snuffling, growling sound coming from the mutts isn't helping.

"What?" I shout at him.

"He said, 'Can they climb it?'" answers Peeta, drawing my focus back to the base of the horn.

The mutts are beginning to assemble. As they join together, they raise up again to stand easily on their back legs giving them an eerily human quality. Each has a thick

describe as blond. There's something else about them, something that makes the hair rise up on the back of my neck, but I can't put my finger on it.

They put their snouts on the horn, sniffing and tasting the metal, scraping paws over the surface and then making high-pitched yipping sounds to one another. This must be how they communicate because the pack backs up as if to make room. Then one of them, a good-size mutt with silky waves of blond fur takes a running start and leaps onto the horn. Its back legs must be incredibly powerful because it lands a mere ten feet below us, its pink lips pulled back in a snarl. For a moment it hangs there, and in that moment I realize what else unsettled me about the mutts. The green eyes glowering at me are unlike any dog or wolf, any canine I've ever seen. They are unmistakably human. And that revelation has barely registered when I notice the collar with the number 1 inlaid with jewels and the whole horrible thing hits me. The blonde hair, the green eyes, the number . . . it's Glimmer.

A shriek escapes my lips and I'm having trouble holding the arrow in place. I have been waiting to fire, only too aware of my dwindling supply of arrows. Waiting to see if the creatures can, in fact, climb. But now, even though the mutt has begun to slide backward, unable to find any purchase on the metal, even though I can hear the slow screeching of the claws like nails on a blackboard, I fire into its throat. Its body twitches and flops onto the ground with a thud.

"It's her!" I get out.

"Who?" asks Peeta.

My head snaps from side to side as I examine the pack, taking in the various sizes and colors. The small one with the red coat and amber eyes . . . Foxface! And there, the ashen hair and hazel eyes of the boy from District 9 who died as we struggled for the backpack! And worst of all, the smallest mutt, with dark glossy fur, huge brown eyes and a collar that reads *11* in woven straw. Teeth bared in hatred. Rue . . .

"What is it, Karniss?" Peeta shakes my shoulder.

"It's them. It's all of them. The others. Rue and Foxface and . . . all of the other tributes," I choke out.

I hear Peeta's gasp of recognition. "What did they do to them? You don't think . . . those could be their real eyes?"

Their eyes are the least of my worries. What about their brains? Have they been given any of the real tributes memories? Have they been programmed to hate our faces particularly because we have survived and they were so callously murdered? And the ones we actually killed . . . do they believe they're avenging their own deaths?

Before I can get this out, the mutts begin a new assault on the horn. They've split into two groups at the sides of the horn and are using those powerful hindquarters to launch themselves at us. A pair of teeth ring together just inches from my hand and then I hear Peeta cry out, feel the yank on his body, the heavy weight of boy and mutt pulling

the ground, but as it is, it takes all my strength to keep us both on the curved back of the horn. And more tributes are coming.

"Kill it, Peeta! Kill it!" I'm shouting, and although I can't quite see what's happening, I know he must have stabbed the thing because the pull lessens. I'm able to haul him back onto the horn where we drag ourselves toward the top where the lesser of two evils awaits.

Caro has still not regained his feet, but his breathing is slowing and I know soon he'll be recovered enough to come for us, to hurl us over the side to our deaths. I arm my bow, but the arrow ends up taking out a mutt that can only be Thresh. Who else could jump so high? I feel a moment's relief because we must finally be up above the mutt line and I'm just turning back to face Caro when Peeta's jerked from my side. I'm sure the pack has got him until his blood splatters my face.

Caro stands before me, almost at the lip of the horn, holding Peeta in some kind of headlock, cutting off his air. Peeta's clawing at Caro's arm, but weakly, as if confused over whether it's more important to breathe or try and stem the gush of blood from the gaping hole a mutt left in his calf.

I aim one of my last two arrows at Caro's head, knowing it'll have no effect on his trunk or limbs, which I can now see are clothed in a skintight, flesh-colored mesh. Some high-grade body armor from the Capitol. Was that what was in his pack at the feast? Body armor to defend against my arrows? Well, they neglected to send a face guard.

Caro just laughs. "Shoot me and he goes down with me."

He's right. If I take him out and he falls to the murts, Peeta is sure to die with him. We've reached a stalemate. I can't shoot Caro without killing Peeta, too. He can't kill Peeta without guaranteeing an arrow in his brain. We stand like statues, both of us seeking an out.

My muscles are strained so tightly, they feel they might snap at any moment. My teeth clenched to the breaking point. The murts go silent and the only thing I can hear is the blood pounding in my good ear.

Peeta's lips are turning blue. If I don't do something quickly, he'll die of asphyxiation and then I'll have lost him and Caro will probably use his body as a weapon against me. In fact, I'm sure this is Caro's plan because while he's stopped laughing, his lips are set in a triumphant smile.

As if in a last-ditch effort, Peeta raises his fingers, dripping with blood from his leg, up to Caro's arm. Instead of trying to wrestle his way free, his forefinger veers off and makes a deliberate X on the back of Caro's hand. Caro realizes what it means exactly one second after I do. I can tell by the way the smile drops from his lips. But it's one second too late because, by that time, my arrow is piercing his hand. He cries out and reflexively releases Peeta who slams back against him. For a horrible moment, I think they're both going over. I dive forward just catching hold of Peeta as Caro loses his footing on the blood-slick horn and plumm-

We hear him hit, the air leaving his body on impact, and then the murts attack him. Peeta and I hold on to each other, waiting for the cannon, waiting for the competition to finish, waiting to be released. But it doesn't happen. Not yet. Because this is the climax of the Hunger Games, and the audience expects a show.

I don't watch, but I can hear the snarls, the growls, the howls of pain from both human and beast as Caro takes on the mutt pack. I can't understand how he can be surviving until I remember the body armor protecting him from ankle to neck and I realize what a long night this could be. Caro must have a knife or sword or something, too, something he had hidden in his clothes, because on occasion there's the death scream of a mutt or the sound of metal on metal as the blade collides with the golden horn. The combat moves around the side of the Cornucopia, and I know Caro must be attempting the one maneuver that could save his life — to make his way back around to the tail of the horn and rejoin us. But in the end, despite his remarkable strength and skill, he is simply overpowered.

I don't know how long it has been, maybe an hour or so, when Caro hits the ground and we hear the murts dragging him, dragging him back into the Cornucopia. *Now they'll finish him off*, I think. But there's still no cannon.

Night falls and the anthem plays and there's no picture of Caro in the sky, only the faint moans coming through the metal beneath us. The icy air blowing across the plain reminds me that the Games are not over and may not be for

who knows how long, and there is still no guarantee of victory.

I turn my attention to Peeta and discover his leg is bleeding as badly as ever. All our supplies, our packs, remain down by the lake where we abandoned them when we fled from the mutts. I have no bandage, nothing to staunch the flow of blood from his calf. Although I'm shaking in the biting wind, I rip off my jacket, remove my shirt, and zip back into the jacket as swiftly as possible. That brief exposure sets my teeth chattering beyond control.

Peeta's face is gray in the pale moonlight. I make him lie down before I probe his wound. Warm, slippery blood runs over my fingers. A bandage will not be enough. I've seen my mother tie a tourniquet a handful of times and try to replicate it. I cut free a sleeve from my shirt, wrap it twice around his leg just under his knee, and tie a half knot. I don't have a stick, so I take my remaining arrow and insert it in the knot, twisting it as tightly as I dare. It's risky business — Peeta may end up losing his leg — but when I weigh this against him losing his life, what alternative do I have? I bandage the wound in the rest of my shirt and lie down with him.

"Don't go to sleep," I tell him. I'm not sure if this is exactly medical protocol, but I'm terrified that if he drifts off he'll never wake again.

"Are you cold?" he asks. He unzips his jacket and I press against him as he fastens it around me. It's a bit warmer, but

Even now I can feel the Cornucopia, which burned so when I first climbed it, slowly turning to ice.

"Cato may win this thing yet," I whisper to Peeta.

"Don't you believe it," he says, pulling up my hood, but he's shaking harder than I am.

The next hours are the worst in my life, which if you think about it, is saying something. The cold would be torture enough, but the real nightmare is listening to Cato, moaning, begging, and finally just whimpering as the mutts work away at him. After a very short time, I don't care who he is or what he's done, all I want is for his suffering to end.

"Why don't they just kill him?" I ask Peeta.

"You know why," he says, and pulls me closer to him.

And I do. No viewer could turn away from the show now. From the Gamemakers' point of view, this is the final word in entertainment.

It goes on and on and on and eventually completely consumes my mind, blocking out memories and hopes of tomorrow, erasing everything but the present, which I begin to believe will never change. There will never be anything but cold and fear and the agonized sounds of the boy dying in the horn.

Peeta begins to doze off now, and each time he does, I find myself yelling his name louder and louder because if he goes and dies on me now, I know I'll go completely insane. He's fighting it, probably more for me than for him, and it's hard because unconsciousness would be its own form

would never allow me to follow him, so I can't let him go. I just can't.

The only indication of the passage of time lies in the heavens, the subtle shift of the moon. So Peeta begins pointing it out to me, insisting I acknowledge its progress and sometimes, for just a moment I feel a flicker of hope before the agony of the night engulfs me again.

Finally, I hear him whisper that the sun is rising. I open my eyes and find the stars fading in the pale light of dawn. I can see, too, how bloodless Peeta's face has become. How little time he has left. And I know I have to get him back to the Capitol.

Still, no cannon has fired. I press my good ear against the horn and can just make out Carø's voice.

"I think he's closer now. Karniss, can you shoot him?"

Peeta asks.

If he's near the mouth, I may be able to take him out. It would be an act of mercy at this point.

"My last arrow's in your tourniquet," I say.

"Make it count," says Peeta, unzipping his jacket, letting me loose.

So I free the arrow, tying the tourniquet back as tightly as my frozen fingers can manage. I rub my hands together, trying to regain circulation. When I crawl to the lip of the horn and hang over the edge, I feel Peeta's hands grip me for support.

It takes a few moments to find Carø in the dim light, in the blood. Then the raw hunk of meat that used to be my

enemy makes a sound, and I know where his mouth is. And I think the word he's trying to say is *please*.

Pity, not vengeance, sends my arrow flying into his skull. Peeta pulls me back up, bow in hand, quiver empty.

"Did you get him?" he whispers.

The cannon fires in answer.

"Then we won, Karniss," he says hollowly.

"Furray for us," I get out, but there's no joy of victory in my voice.

A hole opens in the plain and as if on cue, the remaining mutts bound into it, disappearing as the earth closes above them.

We wait, for the hovercraft to take Carø's remains, for the trumpets of victory that should follow, but nothing happens.

"Hey!" I shout into air. "What's going on?" The only response is the chatter of waking birds.

"Maybe it's the body. Maybe we have to move away from it," says Peeta.

I try to remember. Do you have to distance yourself from the dead tribute on the final kill? My brain is too muddled to be sure, but what else could be the reason for the delay?

"Okay. Think you could make it to the lake?" I ask.

"Think I better try," says Peeta. We inch down to the tail of the horn and fall to the ground. If the stiffness in my limbs is this bad, how can Peeta even move? I rise first, swinging and bending my arms and legs until I think I can

help him up. Somehow, we make it back to the lake. I scoop up a handful of the cold water for Peeta and bring a second to my lips.

A mockingjay gives the long, low whistle, and tears of relief fill my eyes as the hovercraft appears and takes Caro's body away. Now they will take us. Now we can go home.

But again there's no response.

"What are they waiting for?" says Peeta weakly. Between the loss of the tourniquet and the effort it took to get to the lake, his wound has opened up again.

"I don't know," I say. Whatever the holdup is, I can't watch him lose any more blood. I get up to find a stick but almost immediately come across the arrow that bounced off Caro's body armor. It will do as well as the other arrow. As I stoop to pick it up, Claudius Templesmith's voice booms into the arena.

"Greetings to the final contestants of the Seventy-fourth Hunger Games. The earlier revision has been revoked. Closer examination of the rule book has disclosed that only one winner may be allowed," he says. "Good luck and may the odds be ever in your favor."

There's a small burst of static and then nothing more. I stare at Peeta in disbelief as the truth sinks in. They never intended to let us both live. This has all been devised by the Gamemakers to guarantee the most dramatic showdown in history. And like a fool, I bought into it.

"If you think about it, it's not that surprising," he says softly. I watch as he painfully makes it to his feet. Then he's

moving toward me, as if in slow motion, his hand is pulling the knife from his belt —

Before I am even aware of my actions, my bow is loaded with the arrow pointed straight at his heart. Peeta raises his eyebrows and I see the knife has already left his hand on its way to the lake where it splashes in the water. I drop my weapons and take a step back, my face burning in what can only be shame.

"No," he says. "Do it." Peeta limps toward me and thrusts the weapons back in my hands.

"I can't," I say. "I won't."

"Do it. Before they send those mutts back or something. I don't want to die like Caro," he says.

"Then you shoot me," I say furiously, shoving the weapons back at him. "You shoot me and go home and live with it!" And as I say it, I know death right here, right now would be the easier of the two.

"You know I can't," Peeta says, discarding the weapons. "Fine, I'll go first anyway." He leans down and rips the bandage off his leg, eliminating the final barrier between his blood and the earth.

"No, you can't kill yourself," I say. I'm on my knees, desperately plastering the bandage back onto his wound.

"Karniss," he says. "It's what I want."

"You're not leaving me here alone," I say. Because if he dies, I'll never go home, not really. I'll spend the rest of my life in this arena trying to think my way out.

"Listen," he says, pulling me to my feet. "We both know

they have to have a victor. It can only be one of us. Please, take it. For me." And he goes on about how he loves me, what life would be without me but I've stopped listening because his previous words are trapped in my head, thrashing desperately around.

*We both know they have to have a victor.*

Yes, they have to have a victor. Without a victor, the whole thing would blow up in the Gamemakers' faces. They'd have failed the Capitol. Might possibly even be executed, slowly and painfully while the cameras broadcast it to every screen in the country.

If Peeta and I were both to die, or they thought we were . . .

My fingers fumble with the pouch on my belt, freeing it. Peeta sees it and his hand clamps on my wrist. "No, I won't let you."

"Trust me," I whisper. He holds my gaze for a long moment then lets me go. I loosen the top of the pouch and pour a few spoonfuls of berries into his palm. Then I fill my own. "On the count of three?"

Peeta leans down and kisses me once, very gently. "The count of three," he says.

We stand, our backs pressed together, our empty hands locked tight.

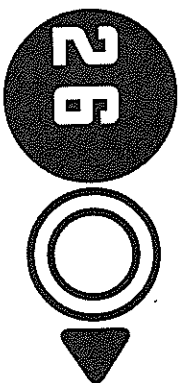
"Hold them out. I want everyone to see," he says.

I spread out my fingers, and the dark berries glisten in the sun. I give Peeta's hand one last squeeze as a signal, as a good-bye, and we begin counting. "One." Maybe I'm wrong.

too late to change my mind. I lift my hand to my mouth, taking one last look at the world. The berries have just passed my lips when the trumpets begin to blare.

The frantic voice of Claudius Templesmith shouts above them. "Stop! Stop! Ladies and gentlemen, I am pleased to present the victors of the Seventy-fourth Hunger Games, Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark! I give you — the tributes of District Twelve!"





I spew the berries from my mouth, wiping my tongue with the end of my shirt to make sure no juice remains. Peetra pulls me to the lake where we both flush our mouths with water and then collapse into each other's arms.

"You didn't swallow any?" I ask him.

He shakes his head. "You?"

"Guess I'd be dead by now if I did," I say. I can see his lips moving in reply, but I can't hear him over the roar of the crowd in the Capitol that they're playing live over the speakers.

The hovercraft materializes overhead and two ladders drop, only there's no way I'm letting go of Peetra. I keep one arm around him as I help him up, and we each place a foot on the first rung of the ladder. The electric current freezes us in place, and this time I'm glad because I'm not really sure Peetra can hang on for the whole ride. And since my eyes were looking down, I can see that while our muscles are immobile, nothing is preventing the blood from draining out of Peetra's leg. Sure enough, the minute the door closes behind us and the current stops, he slumps to the floor unconscious.

My fingers are still gripping the back of his jacket so

with a fistful of black fabric. Doctors in sterile white, masked and gloved, already prepped to operate, go into action. Peetra's so pale and still on a silver table, tubes and wires springing out of him every which way, and for a moment I forget we're out of the Games and I see the doctors as just one more threat, one more pack of mutts designed to kill him. Petrified, I lunge for him, but I'm caught and thrust back into another room, and a glass door seals between us. I pound on the glass, screaming my head off. Everyone ignores me except for some Capitol attendant who appears behind me and offers me a beverage.

I slump down on the floor, my face against the door, staring incomprehendingly at the crystal glass in my hand. Icy cold, filled with orange juice, a straw with a frilly white collar. How wrong it looks in my bloody, filthy hand with its dirt-caked nails and scars. My mouth waters at the smell, but I place it carefully on the floor, not trusting anything so clean and pretty.

Through the glass, I see the doctors working feverishly on Peetra, their brows creased in concentration. I see the flow of liquids, pumping through the tubes, watch a wall of dials and lights that mean nothing to me. I'm not sure, but I think his heart stops twice.

It's like being home again, when they bring in the hopelessly mangled person from the mine explosion, or the woman in her third day of labor, or the famished child struggling against pneumonia and my mother and Prim, they wear that same look on their faces. Now is the time to

is long gone and in another part of the Seam the hammers make the coffin. But I'm held here both by the hovercraft walls and the same force that holds the loved ones of the dying. How often I've seen them, ringed around our kitchen table and I thought, *Why don't they leave? Why do they stay to watch?*

And now I know. It's because you have no choice.

I startle when I catch someone staring at me from only a few inches away and then realize it's my own face reflecting back in the glass. Wild eyes, hollow cheeks, my hair in a tangled mat. Rabid. Feral. Mad. No wonder everyone is keeping a safe distance from me.

The next thing I know we've landed back on the roof of the Training Center and they're taking Peeta but leaving me behind the door. I start hurling myself against the glass, shrieking and I think I just catch a glimpse of pink hair — it must be Effie, it has to be Effie coming to my rescue — when the needle jabs me from behind.

When I wake, I'm afraid to move at first. The entire ceiling glows with a soft yellow light allowing me to see that I'm in a room containing just my bed. No doors, no windows are visible. The air smells of something sharp and antiseptic. My right arm has several tubes that extend into the wall behind me. I'm naked, but the bedclothes are soothing against my skin. I tentatively lift my left hand above the cover. Not only has it been scrubbed clean, the nails are filed in perfect ovals, the scars from the burns are less prominent. I touch my cheek, my lips, the puckered scar

above my eyebrow, and am just running my fingers through my silken hair when I freeze. Apprehensively I ruffle the hair by my left ear. No, it wasn't an illusion. I can hear again.

I try and sit up, but some sort of wide restraining band around my waist keeps me from rising more than a few inches. The physical confinement makes me panic and I'm trying to pull myself up and wriggle my hips through the band when a portion of the wall slides open and in steps the redheaded Avox girl carrying a tray. The sight of her calms me and I stop trying to escape. I want to ask her a million questions, but I'm afraid any familiarity would cause her harm. Obviously I am being closely monitored. She sets the tray across my thighs and presses something that raises me to a sitting position. While she adjusts my pillows, I risk one question. I say it out loud, as clearly as my rusty voice will allow, so nothing will seem secretive. "Did Peeta make it?" She gives me a nod, and as she slips a spoon into my hand, I feel the pressure of friendship.

I guess she did not wish me dead after all. And Peeta has made it. Of course, he did. With all their expensive equipment here. Still, I hadn't been sure until now.

As the Avox leaves, the door closes noiselessly after her and I turn hungrily to the tray. A bowl of clear broth, a small serving of applesauce, and a glass of water. *This is it?* I think grouchy. Shouldn't my homecoming dinner be a little more spectacular? But I find it's an effort to finish the spare meal before me. My stomach seems to have shrunk to

the size of a chestnut, and I have to wonder how long I've been out because I had no trouble eating a fairly sizable breakfast that last morning in the arena. There's usually a lag of a few days between the end of the competition and the presentation of the victor so that they can put the starving, wounded, mess of a person back together again. Somewhere, Cinna and Portia will be creating our wardrobe for the public appearances. Haymitch and Effie will be arranging the banquet for our sponsors, reviewing the questions for our final interviews. Back home, District 12 is probably in chaos as they try and organize the homecoming celebrations for Peeta and me, given that the last one was close to thirty years ago.

Home! Prim and my mother! Gale! Even the thought of Prim's scruffy old cat makes me smile. Soon I will be home!

I want to get out of this bed. To see Peeta and Cinna, to find out more about what's been going on. And why shouldn't I? I feel fine. But as I start to work my way out of the band, I feel a cold liquid seeping into my vein from one of the tubes and almost immediately lose consciousness.

This happens on and off for an indeterminate amount of time. My waking, eating, and, even though I resist the impulse to try and escape the bed, being knocked out again. I seem to be in a strange, continual twilight. Only a few things register. The redheaded Avox girl has not returned since the feeding, my scars are disappearing, and do I imagine it? Or do I hear a man's voice yelling? Not in the Capitol

help having a vague, comforting feeling that someone is looking out for me.

Then finally, the time arrives when I come to and there's nothing plugged into my right arm. The restraint around my middle has been removed and I am free to move about. I start to sit up but am arrested by the sight of my hands. The skin's perfection, smooth and glowing. Not only are the scars from the arena gone, but those accumulated over years of hunting have vanished without a trace. My forehead feels like satin, and when I try to find the burn on my calf, there's nothing.

I slip my legs out of bed, nervous about how they will bear my weight, and find them strong and steady. Lying at the foot of the bed is an outfit that makes me flinch. It's what all of us tributes wore in the arena. I stare at it as if it had teeth until I remember that, of course, this is what I will wear to greet my team.

I'm dressed in less than a minute and fidgeting in front of the wall where I know there's a door even if I can't see it when suddenly it slides open. I step into a wide, deserted hall that appears to have no other doors on it. But it must. And behind one of them must be Peeta. Now that I'm conscious and moving, I'm growing more and more anxious about him. He must be all right or the Avox girl wouldn't have said so. But I need to see him for myself.

"Peeta!" I call out, since there's no one to ask. I hear my name in response, but it's not his voice. It's a voice that provokes first irritation and then eagerness. Effie.

end of the hall — Effie, Haymitch, and Cinna. My feet take off without hesitation. Maybe a victor should show more restraint, more superiority, especially when she knows this will be on tape, but I don't care. I run for them and surprise even myself when I launch into Haymitch's arms first. When he whispers in my ear, "Nice job, sweetheart," it doesn't sound sarcastic. Effie's somewhat teary and keeps parting my hair and talking about how she told everyone we were pearls. Cinna just hugs me tight and doesn't say anything. Then I notice Portia is absent and get a bad feeling.

"Where's Portia? Is she with Peeta? He is all right, isn't he? I mean, he's alive?" I blurt out.

"He's fine. Only they want to do your reunion live on air at the ceremony," says Haymitch.

"Oh. That's all," I say. The awful moment of thinking Peeta's dead again passes. "I guess I'd want to see that myself."

"Go on with Cinna. He has to get you ready," says Haymitch.

It's a relief to be alone with Cinna, to feel his protective arm around my shoulders as he guides me away from the cameras, down a few passages and to an elevator that leads to the lobby of the Training Center. The hospital then is far underground, even beneath the gym where the tributes practiced tying knots and throwing spears. The windows of the lobby are darkened, and a handful of guards stand on duty. No one else is there to see us cross to the tribute elevator.

to the twelfth floor, the faces of all the tributes who will never return flash across my mind and there's a heavy, tight place in my chest.

When the elevator doors open, Venia, Flavius, and Octavia engulf me, talking so quickly and ecstatically I can't make out their words. The sentiment is clear though. They are truly thrilled to see me and I'm happy to see them, too, although not like I was to see Cinna. It's more in the way one might be glad to see an affectionate trio of pets at the end of a particularly difficult day.

They sweep me into the dining room and I get a real meal — roast beef and peas and soft rolls — although my portions are still being strictly controlled. Because when I ask for seconds, I'm refused.

"No, no, no. They don't want it all coming back up on the stage," says Octavia, but she secretly slips me an extra roll under the table to let me know she's on my side.

We go back to my room and Cinna disappears for a while as the prep team gets me ready.

"Oh, they did a full body polish on you," says Flavius enviously. "Not a flaw left on your skin."

But when I look at my naked body in the mirror, all I can see is how skinny I am. I mean, I'm sure I was worse when I came out of the arena, but I can easily count my ribs.

They take care of the shower settings for me, and they go to work on my hair, nails, and makeup when I'm done. They charter so continuously that I barely have to reply,

because even though they're rattling on about the Games, it's all about where they were or what they were doing or how they felt when a specific event occurred. "I was still in bed!" "I had just had my eyebrows dyed!" "I swear I nearly fainted!" Everything is about them, not the dying boys and girls in the arena.

We don't wallow around in the Games this way in District 12. We grit our teeth and watch because we must and try to get back to business as soon as possible when they're over. To keep from hating the prep team, I effectively tune out most of what they're saying.

Cinna comes in with what appears to be an unassuming yellow dress across his arms.

"Have you given up the whole 'girl on fire' thing?" I ask.

"You tell me," he says, and slips it over my head. I immediately notice the padding over my breasts, adding curves that hunger has stolen from my body. My hands go to my chest and I frown.

"I know," says Cinna before I can object. "But the Gamemakers wanted to alter you surgically. Haymitch had a huge fight with them over it. This was the compromise." He stops me before I can look at my reflection. "Wait, don't forget the shoes." Venia helps me into a pair of flat leather sandals and I turn to the mirror.

I am still the "girl on fire." The sheer fabric softly glows. Even the slight movement in the air sends a ripple up my body. By comparison, the chariot costume seems garish, the

interview dress too contrived. In this dress, I give the illusion of wearing candlelight.

"What do you think?" asks Cinna.

"I think it's the best yet," I say. When I manage to pull my eyes away from the flickering fabric, I'm in for something of a shock. My hair's loose, held back by a simple hairband. The makeup rounds and fills out the sharp angles of my face. A clear polish coats my nails. The sleeveless dress is gathered at my ribs, not my waist, largely eliminating any help the padding would have given my figure. The hem falls just to my knees. Without heels, you can see my true stature. I look, very simply, like a girl. A young one. Fourteen at the most. Innocent. Harmless. Yes, it is shocking that Cinna has pulled this off when you remember I've just won the Games.

This is a very calculated look. Nothing Cinna designs is arbitrary. I bite my lip trying to figure out his motivation.

"I thought it'd be something more . . . sophisticated-looking," I say.

"I thought Peeta would like this better," he answers carefully.

Peeta? No, it's not about Peeta. It's about the Capitol and the Gamemakers and the audience. Although I do not yet understand Cinna's design, it's a reminder the Games are not quite finished. And beneath his benign reply, I sense a warning. Of something he can't even mention in front of his own team.

We take the elevator to the level where we trained. It's

customary for the victor and his or her support team to rise from beneath the stage. First the prep team, followed by the escort, the stylist, the mentor, and finally the victor. Only this year, with two victors who share both an escort and a mentor, the whole thing has had to be rethought. I find myself in a poorly lit area under the stage. A brand-new metal plate has been installed to transport me upward. You can still see small piles of sawdust, smell fresh paint. Cinna and the prep team peel off to change into their own costumes and take their positions, leaving me alone. In the gloom, I see a makeshift wall about ten yards away and assume Peeta's behind it.

The rumbling of the crowd is loud, so I don't notice Haymitch until he touches my shoulder. I spring away, startled, still half in the arena, I guess.

"Easy, just me. Let's have a look at you," Haymitch says. I hold out my arms and turn once. "Good enough."

It's not much of a compliment. "But what?" I say. Haymitch's eyes shift around my musky holding space, and he seems to make a decision. "But nothing. How about a hug for luck?"

Okay, that's an odd request from Haymitch but, after all, we are victors. Maybe a hug for luck is in order. Only when I put my arms around his neck, I find myself trapped in his embrace. He begins talking, very fast, very quietly in my ear, my hair concealing his lips.

"Listen up. You're in trouble. Word is the Capitol's furious about you showing them up in the arena. The one thing

they can't stand is being laughed at and they're the joke of Panem," says Haymitch.

I feel dread coursing through me now, but I laugh as though Haymitch is saying something completely delightful because nothing is covering my mouth. "So, what?"

"Your only defense can be you were so madly in love you weren't responsible for your actions." Haymitch pulls back and adjusts my hairband. "Got it, sweetheart?" He could be talking about anything now.

"Got it," I say. "Did you tell Peeta this?"

"Don't have to," says Haymitch. "He's already there."

"But you think I'm not?" I say, taking the opportunity to straighten a bright red bow tie Cinna must have wrestled him into.

"Since when does it matter what I think?" says Haymitch. "Better take our places." He leads me to the metal circle. "This is your night, sweetheart. Enjoy it." He kisses me on the forehead and disappears into the gloom.

I tug on my skirt, willing it to be longer, wanting it to cover the knocking in my knees. Then I realize it's pointless. My whole body's shaking like a leaf. Hopefully, it will be put down to excitement. After all, it's my night.

The damp, moldy smell beneath the stage threatens to choke me. A cold, clammy sweat breaks out on my skin and I can't rid myself of the feeling that the boards above my head are about to collapse, to bury me alive under the rubble. When I left the arena, when the rumpets played, I was supposed to be safe. From then on. For the rest of

my life. But if what Haymitch says is true, and he's got no reason to lie, I've never been in such a dangerous place in my life.

It's so much worse than being hunted in the arena. There, I could only die. End of story. But out here Prim, my mother, Gale, the people of District 12, everyone I care about back home could be punished if I can't pull off the girl-driven-crazy-by-love scenario Haymitch has suggested.

So I still have a chance, though. Funny, in the arena, when I poured out those berries, I was only thinking of outsmarting the Gamemakers, not how my actions would reflect on the Capitol. But the Hunger Games are their weapon and you are not supposed to be able to defeat it. So now the Capitol will act as if they've been in control the whole time. As if they orchestrated the whole event, right down to the double suicide. But that will only work if I play along with them.

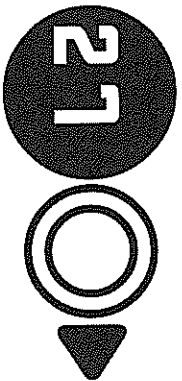
And Peeta . . . Peeta will suffer, too, if this goes wrong. But what was it Haymitch said when I asked if he had told Peeta the situation? That he had to pretend to be desperately in love?

*"Don't have to. He's already there."*

Already thinking ahead of me in the Games again and well aware of the danger we're in? Or . . . already desperately in love? I don't know. I haven't even begun to separate out my feelings about Peeta. It's too complicated. What I did as part of the Games. As opposed to what I did out of anger at the Capitol. Or because of how it would be viewed back

in District 12. Or simply because it was the only decent thing to do. Or what I did because I cared about him.

These are questions to be unraveled back home, in the peace and quiet of the woods, when no one is watching. Not here with every eye upon me. But I won't have that luxury for who knows how long. And right now, the most dangerous part of the Hunger Games is about to begin.



The anthem booms in my ears, and then I hear Caesar Flickerman greeting the audience. Does he know how crucial it is to get every word right from now on? He must. He will want to help us. The crowd breaks into applause as the prep teams are presented. I imagine Flavius, Venia, and Octavia bouncing around and taking ridiculous, bobbing bows. It's a safe bet they're clueless. Then Effie's introduced. How long she's waited for this moment. I hope she's able to enjoy it because as misguided as Effie can be, she has a very keen instinct about certain things and must at least suspect we're in trouble. Portia and Cinna receive huge cheers, of course, they've been brilliant, had a dazzling debut. I now understand Cinna's choice of dress for me for tonight. I'll need to look as girlish and innocent as possible. Haymitch's appearance brings a round of stomping that goes on at least five minutes. Well, he's accomplished a first. Keeping not only one but two tributes alive. What if he hadn't warned me in time? Would I have acted differently? Flaunted the moment with the berries in the Capitol's face? No, I don't think so. But I could easily have been a lot less convincing than I need to be now. Right now. Because I can feel the plate lifting me up to the stage.

under my feet. Then there's Peeta just a few yards away. He looks so clean and healthy and beautiful, I can hardly recognize him. But his smile is the same whether in mud or in the Capitol and when I see it, I take about three steps and fling myself into his arms. He staggers back, almost losing his balance, and that's when I realize the slim, metal contraption in his hand is some kind of cane. He rights himself and we just cling to each other while the audience goes insane. He's kissing me and all the time I'm thinking, *Do you know? Do you know how much danger we're in?* After about ten minutes of this, Caesar Flickerman taps on his shoulder to continue the show, and Peeta just pushes him aside without even glancing at him. The audience goes berserk. Whether he knows or not, Peeta is, as usual, playing the crowd exactly right.

Finally, Haymitch interrupts us and gives us a good-natured shove toward the victor's chair. Usually, this is a single, ornate chair from which the winning tribute watches a film of the highlights of the Games, but since there are two of us, the Gamemakers have provided a plush red velvet couch. A small one, my mother would call it a love seat, I think. I sit so close to Peeta that I'm practically on his lap, but one look from Haymitch tells me it isn't enough. Kicking off my sandals, I tuck my feet to the side and lean my head against Peeta's shoulder. His arm goes around me automatically, and I feel like I'm back in the cave, curled up against him, trying to keep warm. His shirt is made of the same yellow material as my dress, but Portia's put him in



black boots he keeps solidly planted on the stage. I wish Cinna had given me a similar outfit, I feel so vulnerable in this flimsy dress. But I guess that was the point.

Caesar Flickerman makes a few more jokes, and then it's time for the show. This will last exactly three hours and is required viewing for all of Panem. As the lights dim and the seal appears on the screen, I realize I'm unprepared for this. I do not want to watch my twenty-two fellow tributes die. I saw enough of them die the first time. My heart starts pounding and I have a strong impulse to run. How have the other victors faced this alone? During the highlights, they periodically show the winner's reaction up on a box in the corner of the screen. I think back to earlier years . . . some are triumphant, pumping their fists in the air, beating their chests. Most just seem stunned. All I know is that the only thing keeping me on this love seat is Peeta — his arm around my shoulder, his other hand claimed by both of mine. Of course, the previous victors didn't have the Capitol looking for a way to destroy them.

Condensing several weeks into three hours is quite a feat, especially when you consider how many cameras were going at once. Whoever puts together the highlights has to choose what sort of story to tell. This year, for the first time, they tell a love story. I know Peeta and I won, but a disproportionate amount of time is spent on us, right from the beginning. I'm glad though, because it supports the whole crazy-in-love thing that's my defense for defying the Capitol, plus it means we won't have as much time to linger over the

The first half hour or so focuses on the pre-arena events, the reaping, the chariot ride through the Capitol, our training scores, and our interviews. There's this sort of upbeat soundtrack playing under it that makes it twice as awful because, of course, almost everyone on-screen is dead.

Once we're in the arena, there's detailed coverage of the bloodbath and then the filmmakers basically alternate between shots of tributes dying and shots of us. Mostly Peeta really, there's no question he's carrying this romance thing on his shoulders. Now I see what the audience saw, how he misled the Careers about me, stayed awake the entire night under the tracker jacker tree, fought Cato to let me escape and even while he lay in that mud bank, whispered my name in his sleep. I seem heartless in comparison — dodging fireballs, dropping nests, and blowing up supplies — until I go hunting for Rue. They play her death in full, the spearing, my failed rescue attempt, my arrow through the boy from District 1's throat, Rue drawing her last breath in my arms. And the song. I get to sing every note of the song. Something inside me shuts down and I'm too numb to feel anything. It's like watching complete strangers in another Hunger Games. But I do notice they omit the part where I covered her in flowers.

Right. Because even that smacks of rebellion.

Things pick up for me once they've announced two tributes from the same district can live and I shout out Peeta's name and then clap my hands over my mouth. If I've seemed indifferent to him earlier, I make up for it now, by

for the medicine, and being very free with my kisses. Objectively, I can see the mutts and Caro's death are as gruesome as ever, but again, I feel it happens to people I have never met.

And then comes the moment with the berries. I can hear the audience hushing one another, not wanting to miss anything. A wave of gratitude to the filmmakers sweeps over me when they end not with the announcement of our victory, but with me pounding on the glass door of the hovercraft, screaming Peeta's name as they try to revive him.

In terms of survival, it's my best moment all night.

The anthem's playing yet again and we rise as President Snow himself takes the stage followed by a little girl carrying a cushion that holds the crown. There's just one crown, though, and you can hear the crowd's confusion — whose head will he place it on? — until President Snow gives it a twist and it separates into two halves. He places the first around Peeta's brow with a smile. He's still smiling when he settles the second on my head, but his eyes, just inches from mine, are as unforgiving as a snake's.

That's when I know that even though both of us would have eaten the berries, I am to blame for having the idea. I'm the instigator. I'm the one to be punished.

Much bowing and cheering follows. My arm is about to fall off from waving when Caesar Flickerman finally bids the audience good night, reminding them to tune in tomorrow for the final interviews. As if they have a choice.

Peeta and I are whisked to the president's mansion for

eat as Capitol officials and particularly generous sponsors elbow one another out of the way as they try to get their picture with us. Face after beaming face flashes by, becoming increasingly intoxicated as the evening wears on. Occasionally, I catch a glimpse of Haymitch, which is reassuring, or President Snow, which is terrifying, but I keep laughing and thanking people and smiling as my picture is taken. The one thing I never do is let go of Peeta's hand.

The sun is just peeking over the horizon when we straggle back to the twelfth floor of the Training Center. I think now I'll finally get a word alone with Peeta, but Haymitch sends him off with Portia to get something fired for the interview and personally escorts me to my door.

"Why can't I talk to him?" I ask.

"Plenty of time for talk when we get home," says Haymitch. "Go to bed, you're on air at two."

Despite Haymitch's running interference, I'm determined to see Peeta privately. After I toss and turn for a few hours, I slip into the hall. My first thought is to check the roof, but it's empty. Even the city streets far below are deserted after the celebration last night. I go back to bed for a while and then decide to go directly to his room, but when I try to turn the knob, I find my own bedroom door has been locked from the outside. I suspect Haymitch initially, but then there's a more insidious fear that the Capitol may be monitoring and confining me. I've been unable to escape since the Hunger Games began, but this feels different, much more personal. This feels like I've been imprisoned

in bed and pretend to sleep until Effie Trinket comes to alert me to the start of another "big, big, big day!"

I have about five minutes to eat a bowl of hot grain and stew before the prep team descends. All I have to say is, "The crowd loved you!" and it's unnecessary to speak for the next couple of hours. When Cinna comes in, he shoos them out and dresses me in a white, gauzy dress and pink shoes. Then he personally adjusts my makeup until I seem to radiate a soft, rosy glow. We make idle chitchat, but I'm afraid to ask him anything of real importance because after the incident with the door, I can't shake the feeling that I'm being watched constantly.

The interview takes place right down the hall in the sitting room. A space has been cleared and the love seat has been moved in and surrounded by vases of red and pink roses. There are only a handful of cameras to record the event. No live audience at least.

Caesar Flickerman gives me a warm hug when I come in. "Congratulations, Katniss. How are you faring?"

"Fine. Nervous about the interview," I say.  
"Don't be. We're going to have a fabulous time," he says, giving my cheek a reassuring pat.

"I'm not good at talking about myself," I say.  
"Nothing you say will be wrong," he says.

And I think, *Oh, Caesar, if only that were true. But actually, President Snow may be arranging some sort of "accident" for me as we speak.*

Then Peeta's there looking handsome in red and white,

pulling me off to the side. "I hardly get to see you. Haymitch seems bent on keeping us apart."

Haymitch is actually bent on keeping us alive, but there are too many ears listening, so I just say, "Yes, he's gotten very responsible lately."

"Well, there's just this and we go home. Then he can't watch us all the time," says Peeta.

I feel a sort of shiver run through me and there's no time to analyze why, because they're ready for us. We sit somewhat formally on the love seat, but Caesar says, "Oh, go ahead and curl up next to him if you want. It looked very sweet." So I tuck my feet up and Peeta pulls me in close to him.

Someone counts backward and just like that, we're being broadcast live to the entire country. Caesar Flickerman is wonderful, teasing, joking, getting choked up when the occasion presents itself. He and Peeta already have the rapport they established that night of the first interview, that easy banter, so I just smile a lot and try to speak as little as possible. I mean, I have to talk some, but as soon as I can I redirect the conversation back to Peeta.

Eventually though, Caesar begins to pose questions that insist on fuller answers. "Well, Peeta, we know, from our days in the cave, that it was love at first sight for you from what, age five?" Caesar says.

"From the moment I laid eyes on her," says Peeta.

"But, Katniss, what a ride for you. I think the real excitement for the audience was watching you fall for him.

When did you realize you were in love with him?" asks Caesar.

"Oh, that's a hard one . . ." I give a faint, breathy laugh and look down at my hands. Help.

"Well, I know when it hit me. The night when you shouted out his name from that tree," says Caesar.

*Thank you, Caesar!* I think, and then go with his idea.

"Yes, I guess that was it. I mean, until that point, I just tried not to think about what my feelings might be, honestly, because it was so confusing and it only made things worse if I actually cared about him. But then, in the tree, everything changed," I say.

"Why do you think that was?" urges Caesar.

"Maybe . . . because for the first time . . . there was a chance I could keep him," I say.

Behind a cameraman, I see Haymitch give a sort of huff with relief and I know I've said the right thing. Caesar pulls out a handkerchief and has to take a moment because he's so moved. I can feel Peeta press his forehead into my temple and he asks, "So now that you've got me, what are you going to do with me?"

I turn in to him. "Put you somewhere you can't get hurt." And when he kisses me, people in the room actually sigh.

For Caesar, this is a natural place to segue into all the ways we did get hurt in the arena, from burns, to stings, to wounds. But it's not until we get around to the mutts that I forget I'm on camera. When Caesar asks Peeta how his "new

"New leg?" I say, and I can't help reaching out and pulling up the bottom of Peeta's pants. "Oh, no," I whisper, taking in the metal-and-plastic device that has replaced his flesh.

"No one told you?" asks Caesar gently. I shake my head.

"I haven't had the chance," says Peeta with a slight shrug.

"It's my fault," I say. "Because I used that tourniquet."

"Yes, it's your fault I'm alive," says Peeta.

"He's right," says Caesar. "He'd have bled to death for sure without it."

I guess this is true, but I can't help feeling upset about it to the extent that I'm afraid I might cry and then I remember everyone in the country is watching me so I just bury my face in Peeta's shirt. It takes them a couple of minutes to coax me back out because it's better in the shirt, where no one can see me, and when I do come out, Caesar backs off questioning me so I can recover. In fact, he pretty much leaves me alone until the berries come up.

"Karniss, I know you've had a shock, but I've got to ask. The moment when you pulled out those berries. What was going on in your mind . . . hm?" he says.

I take a long pause before I answer, trying to collect my thoughts. This is the crucial moment where I either challenged the Capitol or went so crazy at the idea of losing Peeta that I can't be held responsible for my actions. It seems to call for a big, dramatic speech, but all I get out is one almost inaudible sentence. "I don't know, I just . . . couldn't

"Peeta? Anything to add?" asks Caesar.

"No. I think that goes for both of us," he says.

Caesar signs off and it's over. Everyone's laughing and crying and hugging, but I'm still not sure until I reach Haymitch. "Okay?" I whisper.

"Perfect," he answers.

I go back to my room to collect a few things and find there's nothing to take but the mockingjay pin Madge gave me. Someone returned it to my room after the Games. They drive us through the streets in a car with blackened windows, and the train's waiting for us. We barely have time to say good-bye to Cinna and Portia, although we'll see them in a few months, when we tour the districts for a round of victory ceremonies. It's the Capitol's way of reminding people that the Hunger Games never really go away. We'll be given a lot of useless plaques, and everyone will have to pretend they love us.

The train begins moving and we're plunged into night until we clear the tunnel and I take my first free breath since the reaping. Effie is accompanying us back and Haymitch, too, of course. We eat an enormous dinner and settle into silence in front of the television to watch a replay of the interview. With the Capitol growing farther away every second, I begin to think of home. Of Prim and my mother. Of Gale. I excuse myself to change out of my dress and into a plain shirt and pants. As I slowly, thoroughly wash the makeup from my face and put my hair in its braid, I begin transforming back into myself. Kaniss Everdeen. A

girl who lives in the Seam. Hunts in the woods. Trades in the Hob. I stare in the mirror as I try to remember who I am and who I am not. By the time I join the others, the pressure of Peeta's arm around my shoulders feels alien.

When the train makes a brief stop for fuel, we're allowed to go outside for some fresh air. There's no longer any need to guard us. Peeta and I walk down along the track, hand in hand, and I can't find anything to say now that we're alone. He stops to gather a bunch of wildflowers for me. When he presents them, I work hard to look pleased. Because he can't know that the pink-and-white flowers are the tops of wild onions and only remind me of the hours I've spent gathering them with Gale.

Gale. The idea of seeing Gale in a matter of hours makes my stomach churn. But why? I can't quite frame it in my mind. I only know that I feel like I've been lying to someone who trusts me. Or more accurately, to two people. I've been getting away with it up to this point because of the Games. But there will be no Games to hide behind back home.

"What's wrong?" Peeta asks.

"Nothing," I answer. We continue walking, past the end of the train, out where even I'm fairly sure there are no cameras hidden in the scrubby bushes along the track. Still no words come.

Haymitch startles me when he lays a hand on my back. Even now, in the middle of nowhere, he keeps his voice down. "Great job, you two. Just keep it up in the district

until the cameras are gone. We should be okay." I watch him head back to the train, avoiding Peeta's eyes.

"What's he mean?" Peeta asks me.

"It's the Capitol. They didn't like our stunt with the berries," I blurt out.

"What? What are you talking about?" he says.

"It seemed too rebellious. So, Haymitch has been coaching me through the last few days. So I didn't make it worse," I say.

"Coaching you? But not me," says Peeta.

"He knew you were smart enough to get it right," I say.

"I didn't know there was anything to get right," says Peeta. "So, what you're saying is, these last few days and then I guess . . . back in the arena . . . that was just some strategy you two worked out."

"No. I mean, I couldn't even talk to him in the arena, could I?" I stammer.

"But you knew what he wanted you to do, didn't you?" says Peeta. I bite my lip. "Katniss?" He drops my hand and

I take a step, as if to catch my balance.

"It was all for the Games," Peeta says. "How you acted."

"Not all of it," I say, tightly holding on to my flowers.

"Then how much? No, forget that. I guess the real question is what's going to be left when we get home?" he says.

"I don't know. The closer we get to District Twelve, the more confused I get," I say. He waits, for further explanation, but none's forthcoming.

"Well, let me know when you work it out," he says, and the pain in his voice is palpable.

I know my ears are healed because, even with the rumble of the engine, I can hear every step he takes back to the train. By the time I've climbed aboard, Peeta has disappeared into his room for the night. I don't see him the next morning, either. In fact, the next time he turns up, we're pulling into District 12. He gives me a nod, his face expressionless.

I want to tell him that he's not being fair. That we were strangers. That I did what it took to stay alive, to keep us both alive in the arena. That I can't explain how things are with Gale because I don't know myself. That it's no good loving me because I'm never going to get married anyway and he'd just end up hating me later instead of sooner. That if I do have feelings for him, it doesn't matter because I'll never be able to afford the kind of love that leads to a family, to children. And how can he? How can he after what we've just been through?

I also want to tell him how much I already miss him. But that wouldn't be fair on my part.

So we just stand there silently, watching our grimy little station rise up around us. Through the window, I can see the platform's thick with cameras. Everyone will be eagerly watching our homecoming.

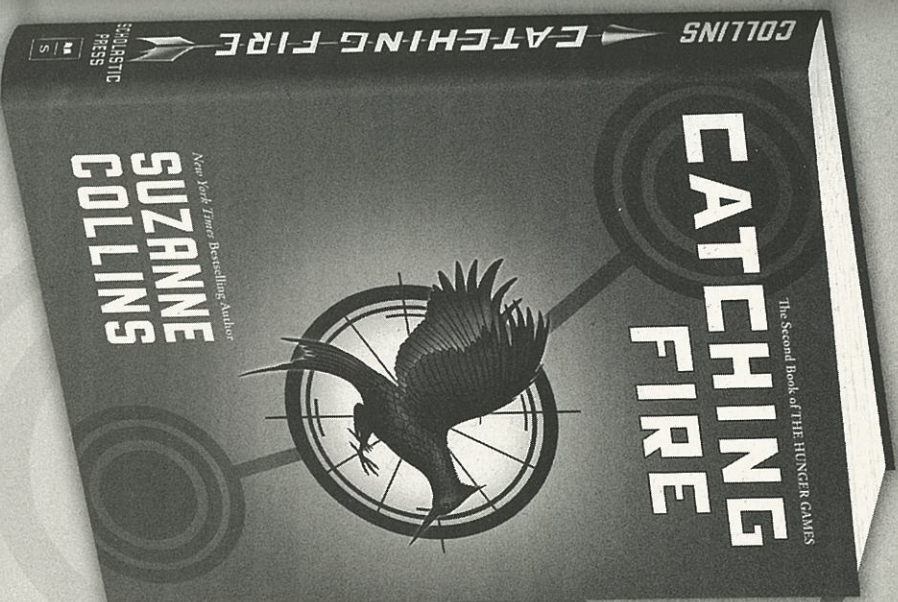
Out of the corner of my eye, I see Peeta extend his hand. I look at him, unsure. "One more time? For the audience?" he says. His voice isn't angry. It's hollow, which is

worse. Already the boy with the bread is slipping away from me.

I take his hand, holding on tightly, preparing for the cameras, and dreading the moment when I will finally have to let go.

**END OF BOOK ONE**

**THE GAMES ARE OVER, BUT  
THE BATTLE HAS JUST BEGUN**



**SPARKS  
WILL  
FLY**

**READ THE SECOND BOOK IN THE  
HUNGER GAMES TRILOGY!  
WHAT WILL HAPPEN NEXT?  
SEE WHAT OTHERS ARE SAYING....**