May You Never Meet Her

by ketren

Summary

When she's too late to step in for her sister at the District 12 reaping, Katniss will stop at nothing to enter the Hunger Games and fight beside Prim, even if it means asking Haymitch for help and sneaking into the reaping of District 3. She'll have to let out a few secrets, make a few allies, and defend her sister to the death – if Prim will even allow the sacrifice.
As the Peacekeepers pack her away into a dim, white room in their garrison, Katniss can still feel the chill nipping at her skin in spite of the coming spring. The Seam has experienced the harshest winter on record, with several feet of snows piling up in the grimy streets around the Hob and threatening to buckle the roof of the Everdeens' house. A few weeks ago, Katniss nearly froze some of her fingers off raking it away, swearing low in her throat so Prim wouldn't hear. And that just made her angrier. Prim, shivering in her threadbare coat, her teeth chattering so hard she wouldn't speak because her stammers were too embarrassing.

No one should have to endure a winter like that. Not in the thin clothes the Everdeens had.

"So you've never seen the bow before?" The Peacekeeper seated in the chair across from Katniss is as jittery as a newborn colt, tapping the heels of his booted feet against the floor and shifting restlessly in his chair. He runs his fingers down the string of the weapon, plucking it once as if playing a guitar. Katniss's shoulders stiffen in irritation.

"No, I haven't," she replies coolly, looking away as he holds it out to her for her to take. "I told you. I haven't been selling them."

The man's armored partner stands in the corner, his shoulder blades resting against the wall. Katniss thinks he may be looking her up and down, but it's difficult to tell through the dark, mirrored visor. Katniss hates the reaping, hates dressing up for it, but she imagines her current attire is probably for the best today: a clean and fresh-faced girl with plaited hair and a simple blue dress looks far more unassuming than one in a wrinkled tunic who walks around in boots caked
It also doesn't hurt that she vaguely recognizes the pair of them as members of Purnia's unit, or at least she hopes they are: Purnia's unit buys more meat than any other group of Peacekeepers, and Katniss thinks they might look the other way. Hunting is a crime they often let slide.

"You sure sell a lot of meat for someone without a bow," the second man says, his voice muffled by the helmet.

"Everyone knows I hunt in the forest," she admits slowly, mostly because she thinks it may buy her some credibility. Hunting is against the law, but most of the Peacekeepers of District 12 are well aware of her and Gale's extracurricular activities, and trying to pretend otherwise would make her look both foolish and suspicious. Of course, she's not going to bring up any particular weapon if she can avoid it, even as her mind turns to her father's last three handcrafted bows, all of them wrapped carefully in waterproof tarp and concealed in hollow logs in the forest. "Of course anyone who gets caught would mention me first thing. Who said I sold them something, anyway?" Katniss asks, molding her face to look disinterested.

The Peacekeepers exchange a long glance. "Lenna Whittler," the one at the table replies shortly. Katniss refrains from showing any sign of recognition at the name. Lenna is a woman in her mid-thirties who lives at the farthest, seediest corner of the Seam, the area Katniss never allows Prim to enter, even to take a shortcut. The women there—the district's most impoverished, which is saying something—are accustomed to selling their bodies in exchange for food or goods or money. In return, men visiting the area tend to become boisterous and rough and solicitous of any woman passing through.

Lenna had approached Katniss to get a bow—not for hunting, like most people Katniss sold them to, but "for protection." Katniss honestly didn't care enough to ask more, and though the woman looked too stupid to know which end of the bow was the business end, Katniss sold it to her anyway. The Everdeens need the money.

"I've never met her, but my mother went to her a few weeks ago. Helped one of her babies with a fever. My mother mentioned that a lot of men are always hanging around the place, waiting their turns with Lenna for...you know." Katniss flushes, instantly hating herself for it. "Any of them probably did it, gave her a bow as payment. Payment in goods isn't uncommon for women there, I hear. And anyway, my mother brought her a squirrel on her last visit, so Lenna probably threw out the only name she could think of." It's fortunate that most of the story is true, just in case the Peacekeepers bother themselves to check. Except for the last part. As far as Katniss knows, her mother has never brought Lenna a squirrel, and Lenna named Katniss because she really is the person who sold the weapon.

"You sure about all that?" the Peacekeeper at the wall asks mildly, though Katniss can see them both visibly beginning to relax. The one in front of her is fidgeting less, anyway. "A man's been hurt because of it. Lenna Whittler meant to kill him."

Katniss meets his eyes—or his visor, anyway—with an even stare. "I'm sorry for him, then, but it wasn't my fault." Stupid Lenna Whittler can't even be trusted to actually kill a man and hide it, Katniss thinks. She'll have to be careful where she sells the last two bows.

The Peacekeepers have a few more questions for her, most of them as leading and as foolish as the first. No one really believes that Katniss Everdeen is supplying the Seam with weapons. Maybe they don't mean to arrest her even if she is. The punishment for a first offense like this is a lashing,
which she can easily take if she has to. The punishment for attempted murder, on the other hand, is death. But Katniss can't bring herself to care about blundering Lenna Whittler.

After a few minutes, the Peacekeepers both stand—taking the bow with them, as Katniss expected, though it annoys her—and tell her to wait until she can be processed and released. They won't say how long that might be, but Katniss thinks it probably won't happen until the reaping is done and more Peacekeepers can be spared.

It is considered mandatory to attend the reaping unless you're on death's door—or imprisoned. Katniss nibbles at her thumbnail as she waits, wondering if it will be Gale this time. Wondering if it will be her. Wondering if it would be better for her to be on death's door than here as she is now.

There is a bitterness in Katniss, a meanness so thick she thinks it might be a part of her blood. Sometimes she wonders exactly when it happened, when she started looking out only for herself and Gale and Prim—sometimes her mother, too, if she's feeling particularly generous.

It spills out mostly in little things. Stuffing fresh bread under her coat to bring home to her hungry sister. Wheedling money from easy marks, because Katniss isn't ashamed to beg if it gets her what she needs. A strange detachedness from other people's tragedies and horrors, as though anything that doesn't touch her personally just slides off her shoulders and away into that wide open space where the rest of the world lays. Us versus them. No empathy. No feeling.

As she waits in the tiny room, Katniss has a lot of time to ponder the fact that she should probably feel guilty about Lenna Whittler, but she can't manage to muster up the emotion.

The Peacekeepers finally let her out into the grimy side street, the sun glaring down on slick, rainbow-strewn pools of oil and grease. As her feet automatically guide her toward the square, Katniss gnaws on a finger and grumbles irritably to herself about the setback. She'll have to be careful about the last bows. More than likely, she'll have to trust only Greasy Sae, who at least knows how to keep her mouth shut, even if she doesn't pay all that well. Katniss will have to see if she can craft a few more bows, quality or not, because even though winter is finished and the air around her is only mildly cool in comparison to recent extremes, the Everdeens will need money for something else soon enough. They always do.

The streets are empty. Katniss passes through the Hob on the way to the square, thinking to herself that she's never crossed beneath its roof without having to push her way through half a dozen sweaty people. It's too quiet, wares left neatly in place as though waiting for their vendors to return and pick them up again. No smell of squirrel and lettuce stew wafts from Greasy Sae's stall.

If the streets seem frozen and haunted, it's nothing compared to the people who slowly began to spill out as Katniss makes her way toward the square. The reaping must be finished, and their faces are oddly hollow, as though they can't decide which emotion to paste on. They drift like ghosts down the alleyways.

Except the ones that don't: some of them, some of the people Katniss knows, stare at her with wide eyes as she passes. Madge Undersee even stops mid-step, her mouth opening and closing as though Katniss has broken her.

At first, Katniss thinks they're staring because she obviously hasn't been present at the reaping—which is almost inconceivable for how rarely it's allowed. And Katniss hates when people stare, feels herself withering and shrinking away like a plant under too much sun.
But there's more to it than that. Something in the way that they stare but won't quite meet her eyes.

She runs the rest of the way, shouldering past people who scatter from her path as soon as they recognize her. She wants to ask, but she also doesn't, and fright creeps into her lungs. Because it has to be—

Gale. He darts out from around a corner, and they almost crash into each other. "Oh my God," she blurts, laughing suddenly as she pulls hair from her mouth. "I thought it was you. I thought…” It was stupid of her to work herself up into superstition. The fear begins to drain away.

He grabs her roughly by the arm, something in his face tight and intense. "Katniss, where were you?"

"The Peacekeepers—they grabbed me for selling the bows. Lenna Whittler ratted me out, so they—Gale, what is it?"

He runs a hand through his hair. "You need to go to the Justice Building."

"Who is it?"

"It's Prim," he replies grimly, his dark eyes pleading. "They picked Prim."

A wild disbelief bursts to life in Katniss's mind, a brief moment in which she knows that's impossible, but it dies quickly as she studies the anxious, pinched expression on her friend's face.

And then there's a sudden ringing in Katniss's ears as though her body is not equipped to receive this statement. As though it can retroactively block the words out. As though there has been an explosion, and this is part of the aftereffects, and the deafening thrum is all she'll ever have.

Gale is saying something more, his mouth moving, but Katniss's legs begin to back away of their own accord, and then she's whipping away through the crowd, shoving and pushing without even registering faces. Gradually, the spires of the Justice Building sprout up over the rooftops, and they're the only things Katniss can see.

She reaches the building and bursts through the open doors, startling the Peacekeepers into attention. "Where's Prim?" she says. They examine her for a long moment. "Primrose Everdeen, where is she?" Katniss repeats urgently. "Her family's supposed to get time with her."

"Time's almost over," one of them replies, gesturing for her to follow. He leads her down a carpeted hallway. Katniss realizes that the paintings on the walls are blurry because her eyes are thick with tears. They come to a heavy wooden door, and the Peacekeeper raps on it smartly.

"Two minutes left," he warns as he pushes the door open for her. Katniss barely hears, because she's already thrown herself forward onto Prim, wrapping her arms around her sister as though she can press Prim into her chest so they can't be separated. With one hand, Katniss wipes away her tears so Prim won't see them.

When she pulls away, Prim still clings to Katniss's arms, to her dress, as though she's afraid to let go. The light shining through the window behind her makes her look radiant, all fair skin and fair hair and glowing blue eyes. She's so small, so skinny.

"Katniss," she says quickly, voice quivering, "I'm scared."

Katniss squeezes her eyes shut and feels tears leak out onto her cheeks in spite of herself. "I know," Katniss replies, "I know. Prim, I'm so sorry. I should have been there, I meant to be there. I would have done it in your place in a second."
"I know." Even her voice is small. "What do I do?"

It's as though she thinks Katniss can solve this like Katniss solves everything else, the way Katniss manages to get them food and clothes and money just when they need it most. But Katniss has nothing to offer now, and she only stares blankly at her sister, her mind empty. Prim touches Katniss's cheek and nods. "It's okay, Katniss. Never mind. I'm okay."

Their mother is at their side, sobbing as much as Prim is. Prim reaches up to wrap her arms around both of them, pulling them all into a huddle so that they're wetting each other with their teary faces.

There's not much more to say.

Prim will die in the 74th Hunger Games because she can't kill a fly, because she's so unlike Katniss in every way that she can barely bring herself to eat the animals Katniss brings home, because she cries every time Katniss brings her hunting.

Prim will die because no one else will see her for all that she is, because none of the other tributes will team up with a teary, homesick little girl.

Prim will die because she loves everyone, loves everything in a way Katniss has never been able to, no matter how hard she tries.

As she holds her sister roughly at her side, Katniss has the foolish, crazy thought that Prim can't die alone there in the arena. It goes against everything Katniss knows to let her sister die surrounded by strangers and cameras and killers. How can anyone expect Katniss to sit and watch the television screen at home as it broadcasts Prim, a million miles away, fighting for her life?

The fabric of Prim's dress is thin enough for Katniss to feel the ridges of her sister's old scars, which sketch their way across Prim's upper back and along her sides, and Katniss has another idea that's so foolish she can't help but cling to it as it blooms in her mind, as she nurses it slowly to life. Some ideas melt away when considered too closely, drooping under the heat of intense focus until they are discarded once their difficulties and impossibilities come to light. Katniss won't let this one fade. It's all she has.

A quick rap on the door, and then it swings open. "Time," the Peacekeeper says bluntly, stepping inside.

"I love you," Prim blurts at once.

"I love you, too," Katniss echoes, her mother chorusing. "Prim," Katniss adds urgently as the Peacekeeper begins to pull them away, "Prim, I will find a way to get to you—I'll help you—I promise."

Her sister weakly fights the Peacekeeper's pull, but he shoves her out the door. As it closes, Prim smiles at her from behind him. It's an awful sort of smile. For the first time in ages, Katniss is bitterly irritated with her sister, because the smile is the kind Prim uses to humor strangers who tell her they'll pay full price for her goat milk next week.

Prim doesn't believe her.

For some time, Katniss considers not telling her mother that she really does mean to follow Prim.
It would be easier not to say anything. Katniss sometimes feels that they are like strangers now, both of them dancing around each other in the same house, distantly polite, tethered to each other only due to their mutual love of Prim. Maybe it's something in their temperaments, both she and her mother inclined to the same quiet watchfulness rather than assertion, but they rarely speak to each other. It often feels as though Prim uses up all of the family's pool of words.

In her sister's absence, the house is quiet, awkward, empty. As though they have finished with a wake and the guests have all gone. Katniss's mother squeezes her forearm once and heads to bed. Some small part of Katniss wants to join her, to curl up beside her mother like she did in the days when she thought her parents could make the bad parts of the world go away.

Instead, she slips out of her mother's blue dress and packs all of her clothes into a bag, topping it off with the strawberries, stale bread, and goat cheese they'd meant to eat in celebration this evening. She finds a scrap of paper and details her intentions in a note to her mother, a good halfway point between waking her up to explain in person and not saying anything at all. She warns her mother to burn the note and to tell no one that she had any idea Katniss was leaving, as it may mean trouble for her if Katniss gets caught.

_I'm sorry you're losing two of us at once, but I can't see any other way, _she finishes. _I love you._

-Katniss

Katniss can't decide if the last part is completely true or not right now, but it feels right to say the words, and she knows her mother will need to hear them. To be sure her mother will see it, she leaves the note out on the table, tucking the corner under the vase of wildflowers Prim collected yesterday.

With that, she throws on her coat, slings the bag across her shoulder, and steps out of her home for what will be the last time in her life.

There have been very few occasions in which Katniss has set foot into the Victors' Village. Something about the complete silence, the empty houses waiting for victors no one believes will ever come, strikes her to the core. Its connection to the Capitol makes things worse. Even now, as her boots crunch across the gravel leading up to the houses, she half expects to hear the whirl of cameras or to be flooded by the sudden glare of spotlights.

Katniss knows Haymitch Abernathy only distantly. Ever since she was younger, he has been a point of interest to her, the way he appears at the reaping ceremony once a year, and the rest of the time holes himself away at the Village. Always alone, always unkempt and filthy. Katniss hates to admit it, but she sees something of herself in him, in the miserable loner who draws himself apart from the rest of the world. A part of her envies him because while _she_ tries to keep her bitterness to herself, Haymitch unflinchingly spits his out at the world. There's something almost admirable about his sharp, venomous statements to the cameras or quiet mutterings as he downs another gulp from his flask, ignoring the Capitol's embarrassment.

Together, she and Gale have done business with most people in the Seam and the Hob and even into the merchant's village over the years, but she's only ever come to the Victors' Village on her own.

Katniss isn't sure what made her do it the first time. She'd failed to sell a small turkey she'd killed in the woods that day, but that wasn't the real reason; she'd had to go home without selling game before. It was maybe curiosity more than anything else, an avid, hungry sort of interest. The turkey was just her excuse.
She remembers his bellowing laugh as she'd stubbornly named a price far above the bird's actual worth, knowing he had the money to pay for it. He'd let her in, to her surprise, and she'd cleaned and roasted the bird for him, eaten it with him. Neither of them had said a word the entire time.

Now, she sinks down for a moment on the marble steps that climb up to his mansion, rummaging through her bag for the bottle of whisky she'd brought as an offering, having stopped by the Hob to nick it from Frisola Hawson, who needs to buy a stronger lock for her wares. Katniss places it at the top of the bag’s contents and zips it closed.

The wooden windows of the mansion are shuttered, the insides dark, but that doesn't mean Haymitch is asleep. Katniss ignores the quaint brass knocker and raps sharply on the door, leaning in a bit to listen for sounds of movement.

Nothing. She raps again, louder this time.

A loud oath resonates from the other side of the door, and heavy footsteps echo toward her. Haymitch flings the door open, leaning against the doorframe, his hair greasy and his eyes slightly bleary with sleep. He wears a nice button-down shirt that Katniss assumes he wore to the reaping earlier, and she can smell his reeking breath even from a few feet away.

Haymitch stares at her for a few seconds, and then he snorts, an odd smile on his face. He turns and walks inside, leaving the door open for her to follow. Katniss closes it and bolts it shut behind her, wondering if he'd expected her. Wondering if she has been, in fact, one of the only people to visit Haymitch Abernathy at home for the past few years.

The inside of Haymitch's mansion is as stark and gloomy as it has always been, as if Haymitch can't be bothered to throw up decorations or to add personal touches of any kind, as if the lights burn his eyes. Where the walls of Katniss's home are decked with drying herbs and sketches she and Prim made when they were younger, Haymitch's walls are bare.

He leads her into the living room, which is freezing and choked with dust. Haymitch collapses onto the sofa, and she rolls her eyes and steps over to the fireplace. While Haymitch has probably never gathered the wood to light it, the panel on the side suggests that there's a bit more to the feature than first appears. Within a few moments of fiddling with the buttons, the electric fireplace bursts to life, radiating warmth and creating a holographic image of a wood-burning fire.

Haymitch is watching her in mild curiosity from his place on the couch when she turns around, his eyes gleaming in the artificial light. Wordlessly, she unzips the bag to pull out the whisky bottle, holding it out to him.

"Ho!" he laughs, sitting up to take it. "Figured you weren't here to sell me food this time, but I didn't count on you bringing something better."

Before she can work out a reply, he pops open the bottle and takes a swig, looking appreciatively at the label. Katniss pounds dust from the back of a nearby loveseat and drops onto it, suddenly exhausted. "I need your help," she admits, feeling foolish even as she forces the words out. It's stupid to think that Haymitch will help her because they've shared a few immensely overpriced dinners, because some snot-nosed kid cooks him food twice a year at most. It's stupid to even ask him to stick his neck out for her, and it makes her tired and angry just to think about it.

"Ah. So this is payment," he returns, his voice gravelly. From what Katniss knows of him, he's at least halfway to stoned at any given moment, but his eyes are remarkably shrewd as he watches her settle on the sofa.

"No," she retorts, "I just thought the alcohol would put you in a good mood before you hear this."
He stares, then grins toothily. "Honesty. Alright. What kind of help do you need?"

"The crazy kind," she admits. "I need you to...I need to know if you can get me into the Hunger Games. I need to know if there's any way it's possible."

Slowly, Haymitch rubs his forehead with the butt of the glass bottle. "Ah. Your sister. We leave tomorrow morning, Katniss. There's nothing you can do now."

She says nothing.

"If you wanted to get into the Hunger Games, why didn't you volunteer when they called her up?"

Katniss bites her tongue to keep from spitting out a surly retort. She needs Haymitch on her side. "I would have if I'd been there," she manages finally, and she doesn't elaborate. Haymitch sighs.

"The reaping is over," he says finally. For Haymitch, it's almost gentle, though he's careful not to look at her. This is more talking than they've done in the past year, and Haymitch has rarely given her anything more than gruff nods and thank-yous.

"The reaping is over in District 12," Katniss retorts.

Haymitch cocks an eyebrow at her. "That doesn't help. Unless you want to..." he trails off, seeing something in her face. "You do, don't you?" he asks flatly. "You want to volunteer in another district."

"There's no law against it. They'll work backwards from District 12 to District 1, so I'll have—eleven days. Eleven days to register in another district and to volunteer for someone else."

He doesn't answer right away, just leans back in his chair and rubs the stubble on his chin, still staring. Katniss feels herself withdrawing in irritation.

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard," he says flatly.

"I don't have anything else," she spits. "That's all I've got. It's legal, isn't it? It's possible?"

He nods slowly. "It's possible. But the Capitol won't like it."

"I don't give a shit about the Capitol," Katniss says quietly.

Haymitch snorts. "Course you don't. If everything goes according to plan, you'll be dead before they can touch you."

Something about the blunt words—"you'll be dead"—finally make the plan real. You'll be dead in the arena. The weight of it all might have terrified her if it weren't for Prim, but there's no room for fear anymore, not when her little sister is alone in a room in the Justice Building, guarded by Peacekeepers, waiting to catch a train to a death as certain as an execution. If Katniss had been alone in the Hunger Games, if she'd been chosen instead, she might have been frozen in fear. But her goal is Prim now, and that centers her. All she wants to do now is to help Prim come out of the Games in one piece, or, barring that, to die at her side.

"If anything goes wrong, I'm the one they'll come after," Haymitch says finally. "Not that you care."

Katniss shrugs. "They'll only come after you if they know you helped. I don't need anything huge. Just information. If you're smart about keeping to yourself, there's no reason they'll find out."
Haymitch barks out a laugh, offering a strange, wry smile. "God, you're a real piece of work." She glares at him, watching his movements carefully as he rises and leans on the arm of the sofa to toe off his boots.

"It's possible," she says. "Isn't it? People don't leave often, but it happens—that Turrell woman, the wife of one of the miners killed in the explosion a few years ago, she decided she couldn't live here anymore. Petitioned to go to—somewhere else, I don't know where. She had to wait for approval, but then she left. It's just that I don't have time to wait for approval. I need to get to another district now."

Haymitch heaves a rough sigh, flopping back onto the couch and rubbing at his chest as though Katniss is giving him indigestion. He takes another quick swig of the whisky, which seems to calm him down.

"It goes faster if you have someone in the district ready to vouch for you, but you'll be...cutting it close getting it all approved. Really cutting it close." He frowns and is silent for a long time. Katniss is good at being quiet, good at letting things lie, but she fidgets impatiently as she waits for him to say more. To keep her hands from shaking, she takes the basket of strawberries from her pack and sets them at her side. She must have forgotten how hungry she was, because by the time she looks down again, half of them are gone. She hasn't eaten since breakfast, and by the sky outside, it must be nearly midnight.

"No," Haymitch says suddenly a few moments later, righting himself in his chair. "If you mean to do this, you'll have to go there in advance, before you're legal, or you'll never get there in time."

He helps himself to a handful of strawberries, and she can't find it in herself to be irritated, even if it's some of the only food she's packed for the trip. *If he keeps talking, she thinks, and if he actually helps, he can eat the whole basket.*

She realizes that Haymitch is staring at her, and it's the strange, judging stare of a buyer studying a horse to decide whether making the purchase will pay off in the end. Katniss sits up straighter in her seat. "I'll do it. Tell me what to do."

He snorts incredulously and shakes his head, considering her still. It must be a full minute before he smiles wryly and replies. "Alright. I'll contact some of the victors from District 3 first thing in the morning, but the rest will be on you. Now, this is the only way this will work: you'll go to District 3 in advance of the paperwork. Make your way to the Victors' Village and find a man named Beetee. I'll ask him if—if—he'll vouch for you and take things from there. But you have to find your own way to District 3, stow away on a train on your own, understand?"

A knot winds and unwinds in Katniss's stomach. The train station in District 12 is used mostly for the transportation of goods and Peacekeepers only. No one Katniss knows has ever ridden on a train, except for a handful of miners chosen to explore a cave in District 6 that had been thought to hold mineral deposits. "Stow away?" she echoes.

"Losing your nerve?"

"No," she says quickly, though her stomach still churns. "How do I do it?"

"The trains that come and go here are rarely ever full. Take the outside of one of the last compartments. *Don't* try go get in by unlocking the door—unless you've got a Peacekeeper's code, it'll set off an alarm. There are ladders going up the backs of most of the cars. You'll have to hang on. It's a long ride."

Katniss nods, swallowing. "Alright. How do I find one going to District 3?"
"That part's on you, sweetie," Haymitch replies, taking another swig of the alcohol. "That's all I've got for you."

Katniss swallows again, throat suddenly dry. When Haymitch sets the whisky on the coffee table to reach for the strawberries, she picks the bottle up and takes a swig. It burns her throat, and she winces and coughs. "You leave tomorrow with Prim?" she asks.

"Tomorrow," he agrees, taking the bottle as she offers it back to him. "Train leaves first thing to go straight to the Capitol. But they won't let you see her again," he warns.

"I know. I wasn't..." she trails off before she can finish the lie.

He nods. "Sure you weren't." He gulps down the rest of the whisky and lies back on the couch again. "You know, Katniss, that's a real death wish you've got and all, but it'll be priceless to see the faces in the Capitol once they've realized what you've done. If you get there. Hell, you even make it as far as District 3 and I'll be impressed."

Something of her anger must flush across her face, because Haymitch bellows a laugh. "Nothing personal. We'll see and all."

Katniss stands, pulling the bag back over her shoulder. She feels restless, anxious, and she needs to leave soon. "You'll call...Beetee. In the morning, you'll call him?"

"I'll call him," Haymitch replies, still grinning. If he's displeased by her abrupt departure, he doesn't show it. "It's all you from here on out."

She heads for the door, leaving the remaining strawberries as the last of her pay to him, what little she can afford. Before she reaches the threshold, he calls out to her.

Katniss turns to find him peering over the back of the couch. "Even if you don't make it to District 3—even if you're cracked in the head—you're doing a good thing," he says seriously. "A damn good thing."

Before she can respond, he turns away and settles back into the dust.

Katniss lets herself out into the cold night air. She shivers as she pulls the heavy door closed behind her, turning to face the deserted village and the lonely travels ahead.

Chapter End Notes

Two more quick notes:

The reaping ceremonies: In case you didn't catch it, the reapings will NOT take place all in one day. Essentially, District 12 (being, in my mind, one of the farthest from the Capitol) will have a reaping ceremony on the first day, followed by 11, and 10, and so on. This gives the Capitol extra time for detailed media coverage. It's true that this could theoretically allow for unfair advantages, as the tributes from the higher-numbered districts have a bit longer to work with their mentors. However, I'm kind of running with the idea that the Capitol wouldn't mind it so much, as the tributes from the higher-numbered districts have historically been much less likely to win than
those from the lower-numbered Career districts. Besides, while the tributes chosen
earlier do have longer to work with their mentors, it's not as if they're getting any
physical training or anything—just a longer hotel stay and a bit more food, which
tributes from the poorer districts probably need to put on a good show anyway. At
any rate, we're all going to have to agree to communally ignore these small injustices,
because the change to the reaping schedule is a tweak that lets the story work the way
I want it to :-)  

Romance (or the lack thereof): This story will NOT feature any romance, either of the
Gale/Katniss or Peeta/Katniss varieties. The focus will be on the relationship between
the Everdeen sisters.
Pythias - Part II

It takes her some time to find a train to District 3, and it's mostly luck that one's leaving when she needs it to. Katniss knows from her earliest days at school that a fair amount of the minerals they unearth in District 12 go to District 3 for use in computers and other technology: zinc, silver, copper, aluminum, lead. Finding a train with these materials and a route to the right district is mostly a matter of reading the inventory lists, which she finds that she can pull up on the pad next to the door without entering a code. All her life, she'd seen the trains come and go through the district's train station, but it isn't until now that she truly understands how enormous the station is, and how complex a task it must be to coordinate the vast amounts of transient cargo.

As she scrambles onto the rungs of one of the back cars of the freight train, she considers Gale for the hundredth time that night. Gale would try to talk her out of this stupid, suicidal mission—or worse, he'd find a way to follow her to District 3. But he's still got family here in District 12, family that relies on him for everything, and Katniss can't take him away from that, no matter how much she wishes for his company. Katniss's mother will be alright on her own, Katniss thinks, especially now that she doesn't have two extra mouths to feed.

And so as the deep red light of the following dawn bleeds across the sky and onto the distant rooftops of District 12, Katniss finds herself alone. She clings to the metal ladder rungs at the back of one of the cars as the inter-district freight train shudders out of the station and into the wide, open air of the outside world.

Sometime after the train finally crosses through the district gate, the tall, spindly pines of her forest begin to recede. She had expected more of a feeling of loss, more of something, at leaving the only home she has ever known, but her thoughts are directed forward to District 3 and the impossible feats that will have to follow her impending arrival there.

She eats the last of her bread and the remaining goat cheese at midday. The sun wheels high overhead, warming the air enough that she can peel off her thick coat and tie it by the sleeves onto one of the rungs above her head. Sandwiched as she is between two cars, she rarely takes the full brunt of the sunlight, and the shade of the trees and the cars keeps her cool.

After a great deal of squirming, Katniss manages to make herself comfortable by wedging herself in the space between the rungs and the car, sitting on one rung as though on a swing, her back set against the wall of the train and her legs dangling toward the metal coupling. To either side of her dart the branches of strange trees of an unknown forest. The train slows to wheeze and strain as they climb mountains and hillsides, and then it hurries down the steep slopes on the way down.

No matter how high they climb, the undergrowth brims to either side of them, almost spilling onto one of the rungs above her head. Sandwiched as she is between two cars, she rarely takes the full brunt of the sunlight, and the shade of the trees and the cars keeps her cool.

Much later, she wakes with a jolt to a long, thin scream—the squeal of the brakes. To one side is a rocky wall scraped out of the mountainside; to the other is a set of train tracks that lines the gravel path. Further off is a stone wall with lettering in stenciled black paint: District 7.

Katniss grabs her coat and bag, hopping down toward the mountain wall as the train comes to a stop, and then she hides in the small, dark space beneath the train car.

It seems to take ages for them to move whatever goods they're unloading. Boots crunch in the
gravel around her, voices discuss steel for blades and axes, and vehicles rumble past, slow and steady under the weight of goods from District 12.

When the train rumbles to a slow start again, Katniss panics, grabbing the coupling and hauling herself through the space between cars before one of them can pass her by. She sits on the rungs and makes herself as small as possible, like a raccoon in hiding, and she doesn't move until they are out in the open again.

Two more stops, one in District 9 and one in District 10. Katniss reflects on what she knows of the geography of Panem, what she's learned in school. It's only District 5 to go now, she thinks, and then District 3 in a few hours.

The sky has faded to an inky black, broken only by the sprinkling of stars that have blinked to life overhead and the occasional glow of a distant outpost flickering past the moving train. What was a slight chill during the day has become biting cold, frost creeping across the window on the train door opposite and the wind whipping across the open space. She holds her bag across her lap and huddles against it for warmth.

To either side of her speed open, treeless plains, all of the land rolling gently like long ripples in water, illuminated by the strange blue of the moonlight. No trees at all. Nowhere to hide. Katniss has never seen a space so open before, except in the arena of the Hunger Games a few years back, one where the only way to hide was to duck into the tall, weedy grass. Away from the Games, Katniss thinks that the plain is not at all what she's used to, but it's beautiful to look at all the same. Prim would like to see this, she thinks, and then she stops herself, the thought souring like overripe fruit. Prim will have seen sights like this throughout the day today as she sped across the landscape on a high-speed Capitol train on the way to this year's Games.

Katniss wonders where her sister is now, wonders if Haymitch has told her about Katniss's plan. Wonders if it would be better not to tell her at all. The longer Katniss sits on this train, the more she has come to realize the complete stupidity and futility of her plan. Haymitch offered only the barest form of aid, ensuring that the Capitol, if it does become enraged by her stunt, never connects it to his name. How can Katniss possibly expect a complete stranger to vouch for her when she wouldn't vouch for herself?

Because it's true, she knows: if someone had wanted to sneak into District 12, Katniss never would have stuck her neck out. That's how people get themselves killed, she thinks. She has Prim and her mother to think about, and besides, she has a twisted, selfish hunger to stay alive, and it won't let her consider such a thing.

Katniss thinks it must be nearly dawn when the train sweeps past an electric fence similar to the dead one in District 12, but this one buzzes loudly with power. She straightens, her back and legs protesting, and pulls herself from where she sits hunched atop the rungs, readying herself to move. Her legs are stiff and unwieldy, but she loops one arm around the ladder and straightens the strap of her bag on her shoulder.

The train begins to slow, the brakes screeching once more as it rattles to a halt over the course of a half mile or so. As the buildings of the city limits begin to sweep by, Katniss creeps under the train, clinging to the coupling and threading her legs through the metal bar that stretches between wheels. This is arguably the most dangerous part of the stops, as she's forced to let herself dangle in such a way that the metal tracks dart past only a foot from her head. It's not so bad now that she's had some practice in Districts 9 and 10, whose train stations had been vastly more populated than the one in District 7, and she's learned to hook the backs of her knees over the metal crossbar and cling to the straight bar leading to the coupling with both arms, as though giving herself a hug.
Still, it's minute after minute of tense, clinging muscles, and then the ground finally rolls to a stop beneath her. She allows herself to sink onto the gravel, exhausted. The train's immense bogie and wheels hide her completely from sight as long as she makes herself as small as possible—though it's unlikely that anyone will check beneath the car anyway.

Katniss pants softly to herself as she listens to the coming and going of the technicians and workers, her legs cramping and stiff. She stretches as much as possible and rubs the soreness away, closing her eyes for just a second.

When she opens them again, it's because the train is squealing to a start around her, the metal rods and wheels slowly beginning to slip past. Panicking, she tilts her head back to see the upcoming train, timing her grab to reach for the bars of the next car. The train is just starting to pick up speed, and she hoists herself up with little trouble, though her legs and arms shake weakly.

Terrified of falling off, she scrambles up to grab the coupling and pull herself up toward the ladder. She's just managed to get all the way up, tucking her legs over the rungs, when a movement a few feet away startles her.

She finds herself staring into the eyes of an openmouthed woman in a grey jumpsuit, the symbol for District 5 stenciled onto the pocket. The woman moves slowly with the train, weaving her way through the rows upon rows of wooden boxes laid out in neat lines across the unloading dock. She cranes her head over her shoulder and then back to Katniss as though unsure whether to call for help.

Katniss had considered bringing the bow and arrow with her, but the only thing worse than being caught stowing away across districts is being caught stowing away with a weapon at her back. Besides, for all of her bluster, Katniss isn't sure she could kill someone like this in cold blood. Instead, hooking an elbow around a rung, she brings her free hand up to her mouth, laying a finger across her lips. If she were Prim, she might have been able to affect a pleading glance, but as it is, all she's got to offer is a startled, tense expression.

To her surprise, the woman nods jerkily, still watching in openmouthed wonder, and Katniss hopes desperately that no one's noticed the worker's strange behavior. After a second, the woman clutches a clipboard to her chest and slows to a halt, allowing the train to pick up speed and take Katniss out of sight.

And then that's all.

Katniss's legs and arms tremble, and she knows she doesn't have the strength to cling to the bottom of the train to keep out of sight again, even though they have not yet left the city. At any rate, it turns out alright: the sun has just risen, and the district is only now beginning to wake. Katniss leans onto the rungs, staring with wide eyes as the town wheels away to either side, neat rows of narrow, metallic houses with electric towers looming in the distance.

It's not until they pass the next electric fence marking the edge of the district that Katniss finally allows herself to breathe, the harsh, frightened pants tearing out of her before she can swallow them back.

The rain makes Katniss's clothes thick and heavy, like there's a whole extra person clinging to her side somehow, weighing her down. Her hair has fallen out of its braid and into her face, but the rungs are too slippery for her to feel safe loosening her grip in order to tie it back.

It's afternoon now, maybe evening, but with the clouds packed in tight and low in the sky, it's hard
to say for sure. The rain falls so thick around her that she can barely see a few feet to either side of the tracks. Katniss never would have thought that it would be the rain to finally drive her up the wall, not after hours spent clinging weakly to the side of a moving train, not after a day of exposure to blinding sunlight, not after sitting in the same cramped position for weeks and months and years. Except that she can't see, and the incessant patter across her skin and head make it hard to think, to concentrate on anything at all. When she has to stretch the crick in her neck, she can hardly breathe for the rainwater spilling over her face and into her nose and mouth.

When the time comes, she barely registers the signs of life flicking past at all, the fence on the outskirts of the district and the scattered buildings that follow. A flashing light streaks past, blinding her, and she presses her eyes against the metal of the ladder. Another light passes, blinking in the darkness, and then another, and she shakes the fuzzy threads of exhaustion from her mind.

She can't hide under the train for long this time; she doesn't have the strength anymore, and slipping from the rain-slick metal bars could kill her at this speed if she hits the ground wrong. As the train flickers past streets lined with sleek, shimmering, warehouse-sized buildings, she huddles against the metal frame of the ladder, hunched into a tiny ball and hoping that no one will notice her. Only as they enter the covered train station does she scramble to get herself beneath the car, the sudden relief from the pouring rain enough to remind her that everything will go to waste if she is caught now.

The train stutters and slows, and Katniss drops bonelessly to the ground before it can even come to a full stop, barely even bothers herself with hiding behind the wheel and bogie again.

She can't fall asleep this time, so she pinches her forearm, digging her fingernails into the skin until she thinks she may have left a mark, and then she drags herself over to peer through the wheels. She can't make out much, but from the sound of it, most of the unloading is taking place to the right side of the train.

After a minute of hesitation, she slinks quietly toward the gap in the wheels and peers through. Stacks of boxes identical to the ones she saw in District 5 line the area, but unlike the wooden floors and small piles in that district, everything at the unloading dock in District 3 is organized and efficient. Rows of steel shelving stretch all the way to the ceiling twenty yards above her, and the polished cement floor is marked with yellow labels, with arrows marking directions and lines blocking off certain areas. Occasionally peeking out from behind the wooden crates that line the shelves are what Katniss thinks must be mechanical lifts of some kind, two-pronged vehicles with obvious places for workers to sit at a control console.

Stiff-limbed, Katniss rolls out from under the train, fighting her legs to obey as she rights herself and hobbles more than sprints to an open aisle between the shelves. It takes her longer than she wants to reach the relative cover of the shelves, but there are no shouts—a good sign. When she finally reaches them, she realizes one flaw: the boxes are packed too tightly, and there's no room for her to squeeze between them and hide. Knowing that she could be found out any second by a worker who happens down the aisle, she runs to the far end of it. More shelves.

Suddenly voices startle her, and she drops into a crouch. In the small gap between the steel bars and wooden crates, Katniss can make out a pair of workers walking down the next aisle over. Their conversation fades away, and she forces herself to relax even as she whips her head around to see whether anyone is coming down the aisle in which she currently cowers.

It's risky to try and find her way out now, she realizes. This place is more of a warehouse than a simple train station, and it looks immense. There has to be somewhere to hide until the workers are done for the day. After a brief hesitation, her weak limbs protesting at the thought, Katniss throws her head back to peer at the top of the shelves and begins to climb.
Hours pass, and then more. Katniss moves the boxes packed on the top of a shelf into a small cocoon around her, ensuring that no one will see her unless they come from above, but she can't let herself fall asleep yet. She wishes she could pace to wake herself up, but she has to settle for a restless jitter of her legs.

Twice she has to move, slowly and noiselessly, away from the mechanical tones of nearby forklifts. She imagines that the chances are unlikely that anyone will need to get a box from the exact place where she is in a warehouse so enormous, but it doesn't hurt to be vigilant.

She thinks she can make out the light of a doorway a long way off, a glow that looks a little more natural than the glare of the artificial bulbs dangling overhead, but it's hard to say for sure, especially as the evening stretches into night.

The station finally quiets for long enough that Katniss thinks it really might be safe to leave it. Two days of little sleep, of catching snippets of rest while draped over the rungs of a train ladder, and she's exhausted. She feels everything deep in her bones, the way easy movements of her arms and legs have become arduous tasks like she's lifting heavy weights. Climbing down the steel shelving, snapping at herself to focus as she coordinates arm over arm, leg over leg, feels like one of the hardest things she's ever done.

She collapses onto the floor and can't bring herself to get up right away, waits until she's in danger of falling asleep right there to growl and pull herself to her feet.

Katniss makes for what she thinks might be the end of the warehouse, the direction in which a stream of workers left some time ago. Ghostlike, silent, she creeps around corners and down aisles as though she is hunting some animal, as though all of this is a game and she and Gale are simply stealing through the forests of her home.

There's a large, open area between the last of the shelves and the tall, wide doors at the edge of the warehouse, and Katniss straightens to walk rather than creep her way toward them, thinking that it looks much less suspicious. The back of her neck prickles anyway, her ears ringing as she strains to hear any murmur, any noise or shout of alarm. Nothing.

And then she's out in the cool night air of District 3, facing another wide wall. Another warehouse. She weaves her way through the series of warehouses that hum as they slumber, radiating warmth like enormous steel livestock. There are enough of them that Katniss begins to wonder whether everyone in District 3 somehow lives inside of them, whether the whole district is packed with warehouses.

The buildings become smaller as she walks, but not by much. These are different, though, and not warehouses: some of them have sleek, curved windows, and others have keypad entry and cameras at the door. Identical labels on all of them state the buildings' purposes: System Analytics, Database Administration, Information Security Systems, Software Development.

And then she finds herself among smaller buildings. Residential buildings. She can tell because of the haphazard use of steel and brick and clay for the homes, as though all of the quality materials were used on the warehouses behind her, and the citizens scrambled to cobble the leftovers into a place to live. Even so, with the odd mix of wavy tin roofs and clay walls, most of the homes have solar panels strung up somewhere and motion-sensing lights that flicker to life as she walks past.

Katniss hadn't been sure how well she'd blend into the crowd of District 3. From what she's seen televised, the district is an amalgamation of skin colors, not a steady, homogenous stream of olive-
skinned, dark-eyed residents like those in her home district. Even so, she'd worried about standing out in a place known for advanced technology, worried that her lack of advanced outerwear or high-tech gear might single her out. Still, she notices no real differences between herself and the few people she passes on the street, not that she can make out much of their features in the darkness. Something in the worn, bedraggled slump to their shoulders reminds her of the people she knows from home.

Like the people back home, the residents of District 3 step past her, incurious, with a purposeful, if tired, stride to their walk. *Maybe people everywhere are like that,* Katniss thinks to herself, cautiously eyeing a woman who taps in a code at the door of a building and sweeps out of sight. *All of us too tired from trying to stay alive to do anything else. All of us exhausted from trying to find ways to feed ourselves and working long hours and never sleeping past dawn.* Everyone she knows back in District 12 will probably be rushing home at this time as well, eager to light fires in their homes and wrap up in blankets beside the hearths.

When she finally makes her way to the top of a hillside, her calves burning, the world drops off beneath her into a shallow, sloping valley, with neat rows of houses falling away in straight lines webbed together by the golden ribbons of lighted streets. The scene is one Katniss can barely register, her woolen thoughts shuffling to make way for the awed realization that District 3 is absolutely enormous. The entirety of District 12 could have fit into the land that holds the warehouse area and the houses she just left behind, and the city that spills out before her must hold tens of thousands of people—maybe more—in comparison to the mere thousands her home district can hold.

As she stares down at this foreign city filled with strangers, the weight of what she's done settles over her. Katniss thinks she's never felt lonelier in her entire life. She has not one connection to anyone or anything in this district, and she doesn't even know where the Victors’ Village is in this region. And she's exhausted, worn down to her very bones.

Before any sort of crushing fear can take hold of her, Katniss forces a few deep gulps of air into her lungs and steadily catalogues all she can see from this viewpoint in an effort to calm herself down. Surrounding the entirety of the city is a jagged, deeper sort of darkness in the night sky, something that ripples across the horizon. Katniss takes them for rainclouds at first, but after she stares long enough, she can make out what they are: a series of mountains, all of them leaning slightly to one side as though swept by the wind for the entirety of their lives.

At the rim of the strand of mountains, in the distance off to her right, is a cluster of especially bright lights. Katniss thinks these might be larger buildings, maybe large houses. It's not much to go on, but they seem somehow different, higher up and set at a distance from the strings of ramshackle houses meant for the rest of the district. And Katniss doesn't have the mental capacity to think of anything else. She begins to stagger, her body moving of its own volition, in the direction of the distant buildings.

A half hour later, she weaves under a broad metal sign that reads *Victors' Village.* The stone buildings are almost identical to the ones back home in District 12, and for one crazy second, her thoughts buzzing and hysterical with her fatigue, she imagines that all of this has been a dream and she has yet to knock on Haymitch's door at all.

She leans against the ridged brick wall that holds up the sign, peering up at the ring of mansions. Four of them are lit, though most of the windows are darkened in this late hour. One of them belongs to Beetee, the other four to strangers. Well, people who are *more* like strangers. She doesn't even know what Beetee looks like.
Four doors. And the wrong choice could be fatal. Not everyone will keep their mouths shut about strange foreigners from distant districts, she thinks—or maybe they will. She can't reason it out; her mind is flickering out like a dying candle.

Katniss starts with the nearest lighted house, the second from the left. The lights on the lowest floor are on, sending perfect, rectangular patches of gold across the ground. She takes the steps slowly and nearly falls into the front door, catching herself with both hands against the wood. Then she knocks.

It's quiet for some time. Katniss is half asleep against the doorframe when the door finally pulls open.

Through the crack in the door, a woman. Dark, guarded eyes. Skinny, twig-like limbs. Short black hair that hangs in unruly tufts.

"I'm sorry," Katniss says hoarsely, the words rough in her throat. "I must have the wrong house."

She turns away to stumble down the stairs, but the stranger's voice, quieter than she would have expected, calls her back. "Katniss?"

Katniss isn't even awake enough to be surprised that the woman knows her name, just takes it in stride, faltering as she looks back toward the door.

"Are you Katniss?" the woman asks. The door is opened wider now, as though the woman has decided that this disheveled or drunken girl is not a threat. Warm air wafts from inside, sweeping over the skin of Katniss's face and hands, and she pitches toward it a little before she can help herself.

"That's me," she replies. It might have sounded flippant were she not so exhausted.

"Beetee's been expecting you," the woman says, her gaze more incredulous than wary now. "We didn't know if—we weren't sure..." she trails off.

Katniss chokes on her laugh. "I didn't think I was gonna make it either," she admits.

At this, the woman gives an embarrassed smile, and then she starts suddenly as though from an electric shock. "I'm sure you're tired. Please, come in..."

The door swings open, and it's almost too bright for Katniss to stand. After a second, the woman is guiding her inside by the elbow, and then there is the smell of cinnamon and orange and spices and a fire in the huge stone hearth at the far wall. Katniss's bag is gone, and she stupidly wonders if this is it, if the woman means to rob her and send her to the Peacekeepers, and then her clothes are different, cleaner—a nightdress and a knitted sweater. Later, she's in a strange room with a wide, cozy bed that stretches on for miles. She slips under the sheets and sinks down into the mattress, deeply and more deeply, and then she's gone.
Katniss wakes all at once, gasping for breath. The loamy earth above her gives way, and her
dream of being buried in a warm, dark place under the earth dissipates all at once. Feeling
suffocated, she allows herself a brief, shuddering moment of weakness and hugs her legs to her
chest, leaning her chin on her knees to squeeze her eyes shut. The blankets are too thick here, and
she's too warm. There’s a vague sheen of perspiration across her face and chest and thighs, a
sensation she has only ever felt in the hot summers of District 12—never at the tail end of winter.

It's still dark, the room nearly pitch black, but Katniss's limbs feel as senseless and heavy as if she
has slept for years. Upon a closer look, Katniss realizes that thin slits of light stream from the
walls, narrow slivers of brightness where windows might be. She pulls herself from bed, the floor
cool against her bare feet, and the movement makes the windows begin to slide open of their own
accord, flooding the room with bright midday sunlight. Katniss squeezes her eyes shut until she
has time to adjust to the sudden glare, and then she approaches the glass.

Outside is the cobblestone center of the Victors' Village, some silvery commemorative statue set in
the middle. Rimming this are the other wide mansions of District 3, all of them imposing and
plump, spilling into the land behind the main circle.

Katniss half wishes she had dreamed coming here. She turns back inside.

The room is obviously a guest room; it's done in neutral beiges and warm, earthy tones with no
particular decorations or personality to suggest that Katniss is taking over the space of someone
who lives there regularly.

Katniss opens the door and steps outside. The smell of roasting meat and spices wafts down the
hallway, and Katniss's stomach rumbles greedily. She can't remember the last time she ate, but
even this isn't enough to wash the wariness from her mind at the strange experience of waking in a
strange place. With her back to one wall, she pads quietly down the hallway, past rooms of closed
doors and down a carpeted flight of stairs.

She can't remember the layout of the mansion. She was too exhausted to stay awake last night,
and she thinks with embarrassment that the woman who came to the door last night must have had
to do a lot of coaching to get Katniss to move and ready herself for bed.

At the foot of the stairs is a wide, open living room, one with the same tall windows as the ones
upstairs in Katniss's room. Plush sofas and thick pillows are scattered about, all of them centered
around a crackling fireplace, and Katniss has never seen anything that looks so comfortable in her
life. A part of her, the still-tired part of her, itches to wander over to one and throw herself onto
one of the soft cushions.

Voices, two of them, and the thin clinks of ceramic and silverware. Katniss thinks that one of the
voices is the woman's, as quiet and wavering as it is. The other one she doesn't recognize. It's
gravelly and slightly deeper, the voice of a man. Katniss creeps around the sofas as though they
are brush and boulders from her forest, as though she is still hunting something back home. When
she gets to the door of the kitchen—she can make out a spacious area done in greens and browns,
a wooden cabinet before her, and an arrangement of copper pots and pans hanging overhead—she
peeks around it cautiously.

The man sits directly across from the thin woman who let Katniss inside last night. He is ashen-
skinned, with dark hair and eyes and thick, black glasses. She thinks from the deepened, semi-
permanent furrows in his brows and the lines around his mouth that he may be as old as her father
was when he died. He has a wry, cheerful sort of smile on his face in response to something the woman has said, and something in it reminds Katniss of Haymitch. She realizes suddenly that their smiles are all the same, all of the Victors, as though they're just a shade short of happy. As though there's something cynical that they can't quite scrape from their expressions.

"Ah, Katniss," the woman says, looking up. Katniss jolts back, and then, ashamed of being caught peering around corners like some silly little schoolgirl, she steps into the kitchen almost defiantly.

"We were wondering when you'd wake up," the man explains.

Katniss nods. "Thanks for letting me stay," she mutters uncertainly to the woman.

"It's nothing," the woman replies. "This house gets very quiet with just me in it." Katniss's eyes flicker over to the man and back.

The man smiles. "I'm just company. I have my own home here. I'm sorry; Wiress mentioned that the two of you didn't have much time to talk yesterday. Maybe we can straighten out a few things?"

"You're Beetee?" Katniss clarifies.

He nods. "Haymitch sends his regards."

Slowly, Katniss nods and sinks into the empty seat at the head of the narrow table. The woman, Wiress, wordlessly stands to rummage through a cabinet and hands Katniss an empty plate. Katniss isn't sure how she missed it before, but set on the table are thick slices of roast ham drooling with sweet honey and cinnamon, a whipped bowl of buttery mashed potatoes, and a steaming tray of colorful seasoned vegetables. After a brief hesitation, Katniss helps herself, thanking Wiress politely and trying to refrain, as much as possible, from filling her empty stomach like a pig at a trough.

For a while, they let her eat in peace. Wiress watches the wind bristle through the spindly trees outside, and Beetee fidgets with a laptop and a messy stack of papers spread out across his side of the table. Somehow, Katniss can still feel their eyes on her.

Though her movements are stiff in wariness, she doesn't stop to address either of them, nor does she care that her mother—were she present and in the right frame of mind—would chastise her for her rude behavior toward her hosts. But the mashed potatoes melt like butter in her mouth, and the food makes her feel pleasantly sated for the first time in days.

Eventually, once Katniss has more or less cleaned her plate, it's Wiress who breaks the silence, shifting her attention from the world outside. "Is it true? What Haymitch told us about you?"

Katniss swallows her last bite of ham and sets her fork down regretfully. "I don't know. Probably. What did he tell you?"

"That you're one of the craziest people he's ever known," Beetee replies at once, leaning back in his chair and folding his hands on the table in front of him.

"That part's mostly true," Katniss replies evenly.

This makes Beetee smile the same quirked, cynical smile. "I think I see what he means. Do you really intend to enter the Hunger Games for District 3?"

"I do. I'd need help. Obviously."
"Obviously," Beetee echoes without bite. "I sent in the required paperwork on your behalf two, three days ago when Haymitch sent us his message. It will be close, but it should be processed the day before the reaping."

Katniss nods. It's hard for her to concentrate on this statement, to allow herself to realize that her entire plan might have failed before it had even gotten onto its feet. That the paperwork wouldn't go through in time isn't something she's been able to bring herself to consider. At either side of her, Beetee and Wiress consult wordlessly, some understanding pulsing in the air between them like electricity.

It strikes Katniss that the way they look at her reminds her of the rare visitors to District 12 from the Capitol, the way they hold everything at arm's length as though fearful of the unknown, of germs, of contamination. Their vague, perplexed air as they study everything from afar. Uncertain. Distant.

They don't know what to make of her, Katniss realizes suddenly, and this, more than anything else she has seen so far, finally relaxes her. They are on even ground. All of them are treading lightly around each other, unsure how the coming days will take shape.

"I know we don't know each other," Wiress says awkwardly, toying with the edges of the linen tablecloth. "But I have to say this. I'd hate myself if I didn't. The Hunger Games are…brutal. Not like what you see televised; they're…I just want to be sure that you know what you're getting yourself into."

Katniss snorts. "Thanks, but I think I know."

The woman's face is grim. "No, I really don't think you do."

After a moment, Katniss shakes her head slowly. "No, maybe I don't. But I'm not stopping now—it's too late, isn't it? I'm already here."

"A train ride home and no one would know you had left," the woman replies quietly.

"The paperwork will go through," Katniss argues. "And I'd have to go to District 3 anyway when it does. And it's not like there's any way to opt out now—sneaking between districts is twenty kinds of illegal, and the only reason I'm not going to be lashed to the bone or jailed for life for it is because I plan to be in the arena, where they can't touch me anymore."

Again, the two of them are silent, exchanging meaningful glances with their eyes alone, and Katniss huffs in exasperation. She hadn't expected this sort of resistance from friends of Haymitch's, especially not after his initial reaction had basically been one of grudging acceptance.

Wiress purses her lips and makes to speak again, and Katniss interrupts. "I wouldn't have spent two days clinging to the back of a train if I didn't really mean to be here. Do you have any idea how hard it is to pee on a moving train? There's no way I'm doing that again."

Beetee snorts in laughter. Wiress raises her dark eyebrows at him, but her corners of her mouth curl upward as well.

"I have to get in," she adds seriously, setting her elbows at the edge of the table. "Prim, my little sister, was chosen for my district. I can't let her do that alone."

"And you intend to help her by dying?" Beetee asks.

Katniss has the feeling that he is trying to provoke her, and that knowledge is the only thing that helps her keep the anger back. She almost starts her retort with Don't you have any sisters or
brothers, but she's not sure that it will help them to understand her any better. Hundreds of siblings have been taken up by the Hunger Games, and to her knowledge, no one has ever attempted as stupid a rescue as this one—or any rescue at all, for that matter.

"Prim, she's the one thing…" Katniss shakes her head. "A part of it's that…I can't let her do that alone. And I can't let her—die alone in there, scared and hurt, and I can't watch it happen from home with my mother like it's just another night. And I think another part of it's that…I really don't think I can live without her. I've been thinking about it a lot for the last through days and I just really can't do it. It was just an instinctive reaction, going to Haymitch to find a way into the Games. I had to follow her, because I can't live without her. I think if the roles were reversed, she could learn to live without me. She's always been stronger than me like that. But I really can't live without her. I just can't."

She has to stop talking to keep from babbling and blubbering like an idiot, but she thinks they get the message by the way Wiress slowly lowers her eyes to the table in thought. Beetee leans forward in his seat.

"You don't think your sister would rather know you're alive? Not have to worry about you?"

"I think a part of her will want to never talk to me again for what I've done," Katniss replies honestly. "But we won't have time for that. Besides, I know she'll understand anyway. She knows me better than anyone."

"No question, then. No hesitation. You really mean to go through with this."

"I really mean to go through with it."

Beetee nods once, shortly, and sits back in his chair.

"But you'll help?" Katniss confirms suddenly. He nods again. "How much trouble will this get you into?" she asks, a little more hesitantly this time.

"Very little," Beetee replies, his instant response letting her know that he has likely already calculated and recalculated the possible risks. "If we play our cards right. The Capitol will only really be alarmed if they catch a whiff of any…deliberate, premeditated cooperation between districts. And that shouldn't be a problem now—I've already wiped all traces that Haymitch ever sent a message to us, let alone its contents. There will be no record that there was ever any communication between Districts 3 and 12.

"As long as our official story is that you made all of the choices on your own, that you found your own way here and relied your ability to beg for our help, the reaction will be…mild. Especially once this becomes the spotlight of the Games, and it certainly will," he adds snorting. "But if we all act our parts for the cameras, President Snow's hands will be tied. If we have the support of the public, we'll be fine."

Katniss stares at him blankly. "The support of the public?"

"Of course. After all, how could we possibly turn you away once you arrived on Wiress's doorstep, explaining the situation and begging for our help to fight for your sister's life? That's the official story, by the way," he adds. "That's what you're going to tell everyone outside of this room. You filed transfer paperwork the morning after your sister was chosen and decided to try coming here, with no help or advice from anyone. You threw yourself at Wiress's doorstep because you thought—oh, I don't know—that a victor would be more likely to help. Understand? That's the only story you'll tell."
Katniss nods slowly. "Why are you helping me?" she asks finally. "You don't even know me. Haymitch barely even knows me, and like he said, I'm sort of crazy. I think that about myself sometimes."

It's Wiress who answers. "I think it's because you're crazy," she replies. "You seem determined to do it with or without help. I have the feeling you'd find some riskier, less legal alternative if we turned you away. And I think..." here she frowns and shoots an odd glance at Beetee. "I think it'll help for everyone to see what you're doing for your sister."

"Even if we both die?" Katniss asks, nearly inserting a when instead of an if.

"Even if you both die," Wiress agrees.

Katniss nods again. "Okay," she says. "Okay, let's do this. What happens now?"

"Well, you'll stay as a guest here with me for the next five nights. Until the reaping," Wiress responds.

"And until then, we'll show you around the district and give you all the advice we have." Beetee adds.

It will give her a nice advantage, Katniss realizes, to have these two as mentors for a while. To know in advance that she will be in the Games instead of planning a spur-of-the-moment strategy. She'll be facing Careers who've had advisors and tactics training since the time they were swaddled in diapers, so she'll need all the help she can get.

Finally allowing herself to relax, she heaves a sigh. "Thank you. Really, thank you."

Wiress nods, a thin smile on her face. Beetee adds, "Don't thank us yet. You've got a long way to go."

As it turns out, Wiress doesn't often leave her home in Victors' Village. "I prefer it here," the woman says simply, clasping her arms in front of her like Katniss's old schoolteacher. It definitely shows, Katniss thinks, because Wiress's home is more warm and welcoming than Haymitch's by far, with little personal touches splashed across the side walls and strewn over shelves and mantelpieces, photos and flowers and candles and letters. And in the end, Katniss can't blame Wiress for sealing herself away from the world like this, not after it so betrayed her by tossing her into the Hunger Games.

Sometime while Katniss was asleep, Wiress must have had the clothes from her bag laundered, because they smell fresh and flowery instead of mildewed from the rain. Shrugging, Katniss pulls on her heaviest pair of pants and her father's old hunting jacket and steps outside into the Victors' Village, alone. She feels tense and jittery like she often does after a big decision, and she needs to walk to soothe her nerves.

When she reaches the gate, she can see the sun receding beyond the distant rim of mountains, spilling shadow across the valley below. She'd been unable to see it in the night when she'd first come this way, but the mountains of this district are a fiery orange, some mineral she's unfamiliar with. In the setting sun, their rocky faces seem to glow like embers. She has barely stepped across the threshold of the iron gate when a voice calls her name.

Beetee. He jogs toward her awkwardly, with the unsteady trot of someone unused to the movement, and smiles. "Wiress thought you might want a guide. Not much to see besides what you've already seen, but I'll show you around."
He had gone back to his house earlier, leaving her to rest a while in Wiress's company. Obviously, some sort of electronic communicative device was involved in the relay of information between them, but for a brief moment, Katniss toys with the idea of telepathy. Everything about them speaks to longtime companionship, and she can't help but wonder at the deepness of their connection.

She nods once and wordlessly starts off down toward the village, Beetee falling into step beside her. Even the ground at her feet is a strange, rusty orange, and her boots are already becoming stained with the color.

"So. You and Wiress?" she begins, thinking that he'll understand what she's asking without her having to fumble with the words.

He smiles again. "No. Just good friends. It's hard not to be, when you've experienced what we have. We all know each other well, the other victors and I, but Wiress and I are very close. We won the games back to back. I'm older by a few years, but she won it first, and then I won right after."

Katniss files this knowledge away, debates softening or sugarcoating her words, and then asks, "So, how'd you do it?"

Beetee's laugh wheezes out of him, and when Katniss tears her eyes from the stones at her feet, she sees that his expression is surprised, as though he hadn't meant for the sound to escape. "Haymitch didn't have much time to tell me anything besides the basics when he left the message, and to tell me he thought your plan was insane. But he did manage to describe you as blunt and confusing. 'Blunt and confusing as hell' were his words."

Katniss says nothing. They have reached the foot of the trail leading from the Victors' Village, which she has now realized sits up on a sort of cliff overlooking most of the village, and before them are the first rows of houses. Today, in the relative warmth of the fading sunlight, the structures look somehow cozy and appealing, jumbled construction and all. Women wander between houses in small flocks, baskets and bags in hand. Wires droop from the crinkled tin rooftops, and children splash through the dusty orange roads with strange, chirping electronic toys. The whole place looks warm and alive, and Katniss hadn't realized until now that this is why the Victors' Villages in Districts 12 and 3 unsettle her. They're too serene. Too placid, too cold.

When her footsteps become uncertain, Beetee wordlessly takes the lead, stepping down a narrow side street laced with clotheslines that whip in the wind. Not clotheslines, she realizes. Wires.

"We're allowed to bring the leftovers from the warehouses," he explains, following her gaze. "Certain materials, useless cords, but not much, not anything that can be used to really build something."

"What do you make in the warehouses?"

"Anything. Everything. New high-strength materials, computer systems, data storage and research, robotics, virtual games for the Capitol. Well, everything for the Capitol, really. We can use all of it as long as we're inside the warehouse labs, but as soon as we step out, the Peacekeepers search everyone."

"'We?' do you still work there?"

"I don't need to, of course, but...a part of me enjoys it. They let me do more now, since I proved myself in the Hunger Games." He says the last part with a bitter, razorblade twist to his mouth.
"Anyway, it's something I excel at, and to be honest, there's nothing else to fill my days. The life of a victor can be quiet. Lonely. And I suppose I'm a creature of habit. I've been working in the labs since I was a kid myself. I don't know any other life."

"Since you were a kid?"

Beetee nods. "They start us off young, around nine or ten. Simple wiring projects, basic computer tasks. That sort of thing."

Katniss nods slowly. A few people wave to Beetee as they pass. A pale woman moves at the window of a nearby house, carefully placing loaves of bread on the sill to cool. The smell of herbs and yeast makes Katniss's stomach rumble, and it reminds her of the baker in the Hob, a place she never thought she'd miss. "So, you know a lot about…electronics and stuff, then. I guess you all do. Is that what you do for your talent? For the Capitol?"

"It's almost expected of us," Beetee replies in agreement. "President Snow…well, let's just say victors from District 3 are in high demand around the Capitol; we're picked for the bigger projects, to work with the latest advances in technology. Makes you pretty popular among the citizens there. Gets you a lot of connections."

The way he says it, a strangely thoughtful expression on his face, makes Katniss curious, but he's speaking again before she can word a question.

"I imagine you're hungry again? It's getting late. I know a place."

The tall, timed streetlights are beginning to buzz to life in the evening air as Beetee leads Katniss toward what must be the center of the district, a wide, open space like the market square in District 12. It's lined with shops selling sticky, honeyed sweets and advertising electronics repairs and selling catchpenny trinkets. One store, its faded metal sign simply reading Clothes & Wares, seems to sell an array of products meant to keep the dust away, including head wraps perfect for dust storms, according to the window display.

Beetee passes them all, leading her to a narrow building that seems to be a more appropriate size for a closet than a store. A line winds toward a large window, which is bordered with signs displaying foods like honey nut bread and gaffflower fritters and seasoned catfish and hot pepper corn. They order, Beetee sliding a few coins across the counter for the meal, and then they weave through the herd of children bouncing along the cobblestone square and sink onto two rough-hewn orange stones, which have been sanded smooth for sitting. Strings of lights wind across the square, interspersed by flames from the oil drums scattered throughout the area.

The hot spices of the jackrabbit skewer make Katniss's mouth buzz. It tastes fresh. A few men smile at or wave to Beetee, but they seem to sense his distraction, and he and Katniss eat in silence. Beetee stares grimly at the knobby-kneed children as he peels away the wrapper of his fish, but Katniss sees him glance her way a few times, considering.

"I think my strategy for the Games was the same as most at first," he begins around his mouthful of catfish, swallowing. "Find an ally or a group you can trust, and then separate once the numbers thin out. It's a good strategy if you don't think you can kill someone outright. Keeps you alive for a little longer."

Katniss turns to him, nibbling at a burnt edge of the meat. He's frowning now, staring up at the bulbous, bug-like lights above his head. "It worked pretty well, I suppose. Or at least it did until she tried to stab me to death in the middle of the day. No words or warning or anything. I just turned and walked right into her knife." He rolls his left shoulder, frowning. "She didn't aim very well, though. Didn't hit any of the vital parts, and the knife was lost when we fought over it. She
was the only person I killed with my bare hands."

He says it so clinically: She was the only person I killed with my bare hands. Katniss has never seen his Games televised—he'd won before she was even born—but she still has no trouble imagining his actions. It's something in his shrewd, bespectacled face, maybe, or else it's something in his quick worker's hands. Or something in his vigilant rigidity, like a wary stag backed toward a wall.

"I was on my own after that. Too afraid to try working with anyone else." He pauses, picking a bone from his meal and tossing it onto the dirt. "That was the year they had us in an arena with a maze, all these high steel walls you couldn't climb over. Nowhere to hide, unless you were lucky enough to find an alcove, but they were very rare. They'd learned from—…Well, after previous Games, they'd finally started supplying food in the bags you fight for in the beginning, enough to last us in an environment as artificial as that one. And they'd even made sure we had water, as long as you were willing to fight for it. They were clever with the water.

"At the center of the maze—you had to remember your way to it—was an empty basin, and periodically, the whole thing would fill with water. Once every few hours, when it filled, an alarm would sound throughout the whole arena to let you know the water was back, and then the water would drain away after a few minutes. You can imagine the bloodbaths trying to rush back to it. It was a very popular year."

"Wouldn't people just stay nearby?" Katniss asked. "The Careers, at least. Block off the resource?"

"Ordinarily, yes, you'd expect that. But I suppose the Gamemakers expected it as well. The rest of the time, about every few minutes or so at random, arrows would come from the walls and floor to kill any tribute that got within about fifty feet. We learned quickly to stay out of the area." He crushes the remains of his meal absentmindedly.

"What did you do?" Katniss asks hesitantly once it appears that he's become lost in thought.

It still takes him a moment to answer; he twists his lips as though trying to force the words out. "When I was getting water once, counting on the other tributes to be distracted with attacking each other, someone pushed me into the basin just as the water was draining away. By the time I had pulled myself up to the edge, the water was gone and the blades were out. But not in the basin, I found out. As long as I was inside of it, I was fine. And as I sat there for hours, just waiting for it to fill up again so the arrows would stop and I could get away, I began to realize—it wasn't random. The time between the blades and arrows, I mean. If you sat and counted, they'd shoot up on a strict schedule: two minutes, one minute, five minutes, three, three, two, one, four, three. Regular. And I thought, I can use that. Surely, I can use that.

"So once I knew the rhythm by heart, I slipped between them. I couldn't change anything about when they came up, couldn't find anything to work with except the seal over the slot they came out of. But the alarm itself was strung up right near the basin. There was a tall sort of—well, not quite a tower, because you couldn't climb it, but it was a thick sort of structure with a beacon at the top to help the tributes find their way back. And once I saw the wires, I knew I could do it. The whole thing took forever, of course, running back and forth to the basin every few minutes to avoid the blades. But I could control it, control when the alarm sounded so that the other tributes would rush in thinking the area was safe, even when I knew the blades and arrows were only a minute away. So I rang the alarm and got away as quickly as I could, ran to a dead end nearby that no one used anymore because we all knew the center of the maze so well by then. I'd set it for five minutes, and I remember hearing them run past, one or two at a time, and then the screams when the blades came out. Had to do it three times to get everyone," he adds gruffly.
He removes his glasses and runs a hand down his face. Katniss wonders how many times he's had to relive this story for the Capitol and how many times he's retold it. It obviously pains him even now, even after the passage of all that time and so many retellings.

"Thank you, Beetee," she says quietly, pulling a scowl from her face. "For telling me."

"I'm not telling you because you asked," he replies quietly. "I'm telling you because you think you know the Hunger Games are up to chance, but I don't think you really believe it. I don't know if you'll really believe it until you're there. If the wires for the alarm had been hidden, I would have died. If I'd paired up with someone who knew the human anatomy better, knew where to hit, some surgeon's daughter, I would have died. Sometimes, I just lie in bed at night and think about all the ways I should have died but didn't. I think we all do.

"It all depends on so many things—the arena, the other tributes, the Gamemakers. Your intentions are…honorable, but I want to be sure you realize there's so much more to it than just swinging away in that arena. And some of depends on you. Some of it boils down to what kind of person you think you are, Katniss, and what kind of person you really are."

He'd lost her. "I know the risks. I'm not counting on winning this, just doing what I can for Prim until I go," she says, frowning. "And I know the kind of person I am." Bitter. Rude. Sulky. Fierce.

"So did I," Beetee says wryly, "before I was there. Before I killed a girl not much younger than I was with my bare hands. Wrapped them around her throat and just squeezed. Sometimes, you learn things about yourself there that you didn't want to know."

She doesn't have a response for that, and she doesn't think he wants one. His eyes are clouded over, blind.

"I don't know what I'm trying to tell you," he admits. "I just want to make sure you're sure. To actually choose to go through what I did, it's…it seems insane to me."

"It seems insane to me too, sometimes, but I know it's the only thing I can do. And it'll just be for a little while, and then I'll be…" she hesitates. "I'd better go before Prim does," she adds suddenly. "If I can't help her win, I'd better die fighting for her, because if she goes first, there'll be hell to pay." She can't imagine this outcome, or maybe she can, but the idea pains her so badly deep in her chest that she can't follow the train of thought for long.

Beetee stares at her for a moment, his gaze unfathomable. Katniss fights to keep from squirming. "Everyone will be watching you, you know. It's not something you can wrap your head around now, I suppose, but the Capitol will be riveted."

Katniss snorts. "I don't care about the Capitol—they're the ones pulling the strings on this. If I could, I'd…" she shakes her head. "I'm only here for Prim. That's all. I'll do anything for her."

Beetee smiles, nods. "Alright. But we'll have to work on your approach to the Capitol. On your strategy in general.

She nods. "Okay. Yeah. I could use the help."

The square bubbles and fizzles with noise and energy. A percussion-heavy rumble of music belts out from a dusty corner between two fruit sellers. Beetee rises and dusts off his pants. They throw away the wrappers and skewers as they leave.

Their walk back is quieter. All life in the district seems to have been drawn to the square, whether attracted by the lights, the food, the music, or the warmth, and the streets leading back to the Victors' Village are barren and dim. The night air is cool here but not cold, the thin breeze almost
pleasant. Katniss watches the stars wheel slowly overhead as she fights away Beetee's words. Chance, he'd said. She hates chance and luck, but it's true—the wrong arena, and she and Prim will be dead in a heartbeat. If the Careers target them for some perceived weakness, they'll have no chance at all.

"Beetee?" Katniss asks suddenly as they begin the climb up the slope leading to the cliff face. "What about Wiress? What happened to her?"

The man shakes his head slowly. "That's not my story to tell."

Wiress is asleep when Katniss climbs up the steps and into her house, or at least the woman's lights are off. And besides, Katniss isn't sure what she would say. Instead, she showers, taking advantage of the warm water of the Victors' Village, the luxury of not having to preheat a bath. Then she changes into the set of sleeping clothes Wiress lent her and sinks into bed.

Sleep is a long time in coming.

...

End of Part I, Pythias

A young man whose name was Pythias had done something which the tyrant Dionysius did not like. For this offense he was dragged to prison, and a day was set when he should be put to death. His home was far away, and he wanted very much to see his father and mother and friends before he died.

"Only give me leave to go home and say good-by to those whom I love," he said, "and then I will come back and give up my life."

The tyrant laughed at him.

"How can I know that you will keep your promise?" he said. "You only want to cheat me, and save yourself."

Then a young man whose name was Damon spoke and said—

"O king! put me in prison in place of my friend Pythias, and let him go to his own country to put his affairs in order, and to bid his friends fare-well. I know that he will come back as he promised, for he is a man who has never broken his word. But if he is not here on the day which you have set, then I will die in his stead."

-Fifty Famous Stories Retold, by James Baldwin, (1896)
Katniss spends the next few days swaddled in the stifling heat of Wiress's kitchen. Mostly, she watches her own sickly reflection in the copper pots hanging from the ceiling to be sure she's wiped the scowl from her face. She might have thought schoolbooks had been written on the subject of strategy in the Hunger Games for the way Beetee and Wiress prattle on about it, knowledge of terrain and survival flowing so easily from their mouths that they may as well have memorized it all from some grotesque instruction manual. Katniss is impressed in the beginning, clinging to the tactics with a hungry desperation, but she's never had the long-term focus needed for this sort of thing, not even as a schoolgirl. Not even if her life depends on it.

It doesn't help that Wiress and Beetee are almost robotic in their stamina, allowing pauses only for meals and short stretches before hammering on again without giving her so much as a chance to breathe, seemingly spurred by some mutual desire to irritate her to death. It's enough to make her want to scream, at least until she reminds herself how incredibly short on time they are, and that her mentors-to-be are just trying to help.

"...so as a rule, surviving in a bog is different from surviving in a swamp. The terrain there is unforgiving, and it will still be difficult to dry materials for a fire, of course, and the trick to both of them will be finding a dry, safe area to hide in." As she speaks, Wiress flips through a spread of glossy, enlarged photographs of past arenas, pausing to peer at close-ups of windblown trees and tussocks or moss-covered, decaying pools of water with sickly yellow sheens.

"What...what were the differences between a swamp and a bog again?" Katniss asks, fighting not to fall asleep to the hum of the woman's monotonous tone. Her side of the table is strewn with lined yellow paper filled with an untidy scrawl. She has been taking notes more to ensure that she remains awake than out of any real desire to preserve the information for future review. Regardless, the last few minutes are a blank gap, her pencil poised over the page uncertainly.

Beetee and Wiress exchange exasperated glances again, but Katniss's annoyance at this action is mitigated by the sheer number of times they have done it in the past few days. They often share these glances when they've become impatient with her short attention span, or else they'll occasionally exchange another kind of meaningful look when she's said something really biting or irritable about the Capitol. These particular looks never fail to arouse Katniss's curiosity, but she never digs. It's no business of hers whether Beetee and Wiress have something more up their sleeves. She's about to die, and she's certainly not in the mood to borrow more problems. All she wants to do now is take down anything that gets in Prim's way.

"Swamps are low wetlands whose waters have some sort of outlet for drainage, and they usually come with a range of diverse vegetation and trees and wildlife," Wiress explains patiently, "while bogs are generally higher, treeless areas with more semi-firm land to stand on, if you're lucky. Although, as I've mentioned, you'll have to be careful about a different set of things for each, especially because swamps tend to have the more dangerous sorts of wildlife—venomous snakes, crocodiles, that sort of thing. Although the midges in both are nothing to laugh at. And with bogs, you've always got the bog gas to contend with."

Katniss snorts. "Bog gas?"

"Yes, bog gas," Wiress replies tiredly. "As I've explained. Weren't you listening?"

Katniss just stares down at her crossed arms, frowning.

"It's mostly methane," Beetee says suddenly, picking up Wiress's train of thought. He sits on the
countertop in the corner of the kitchen, spending half the time lost in thought and half of it adding to Wiress's information. "And it comes naturally from all of the rotting vegetation trapped beneath the surface."

"So the whole place will smell like rot. But it's not—I don't know. Poisonous, or anything?"

"Not unless the Gamemakers have tampered with it again," Beetee replies grimly, shaking his head. "They did that a few years ago, made the mixture of gases a little extra flammable. Methane is naturally flammable, of course, but they made it virtually suicidal to even so much as start a fire. The smallest spark, and bang—it was over. We lost a tribute to bog gas that year, without any warning at all."

Wiress and Beetee have scattered those words into a lot of their teachings—we lost a tribute—but it's the first time that the phrasing of it has made Katniss pause. "There are other victors living in the houses here," she begins slowly, thinking about the lights that have glowed from some of the windows in the Victors' Village these past few nights. "But not all of the houses are filled."

"No. It's Wiress and myself at this end, and then a few others. Seven of us in all."

*District 3 is poor like District 12, Katniss thinks, but at least their citizens are smart and poor. More victors that way.* "Were they all your mentors?" she asks aloud.

Wiress nods. "But they don't all act as mentors anymore. Sesla is bedridden, and Tamas is so old he can barely walk. The Capitol has finished with them, at least, and they're usually left alone. To be fair, that's what most of us want—to be left alone. A peaceful life. You'll meet the others all soon enough, of course, but until then, it's probably best to leave them out of things. They like to keep to themselves, and it seems best to respect their wishes."

Katniss runs her fingers thoughtfully down the tufts of her braid. "But you two are the last victors in this district?" she asks quietly. "How long ago was that?"

Beetee lets out a bitter little huff of air. "Years ago," he says. "Thirty or so years ago."

Thirty years. Thirty years' worth of tributes coming to them for help and then leaving to die. *We lost a tribute,* they've said, and Katniss realizes what strikes her about the phrasing: *We lost.*

Looking at them now, both of them hunched over in thought, Katniss can't imagine the burden of guilt they must feel, being the sorts of people to claim responsibility for deaths that were no fault of their own. It explains the detached, mechanical recitation of facts and figures, the memorized details of terrain and strategy, and the well-worn edges of the arena photographs. They've been doing this for years, driven by the hopeless and almost pathetic desire to create survivors, warriors who will thrive in the chaotic arenas of the Hunger Games. To save lives instead of sending tributes to their deaths.

It's enough to make Katniss sorry for them, and she has to hold herself back from offering up stupid, pointless promises like *This time it'll be different* or *I won't go down so easily.* As though she's the one meant to be consoling them. As though she isn't the one about to die.

Any response she makes to address the topic would fall short, and from their open, almost gentle gazes, she has the feeling that they know what she is thinking anyway.

Instead, she pulls the stack of images toward her, staring down at images of golden broomsedge and flowering milkweed. "Alright," she says. "So if I get stuck with a bog, what are the plants I can eat?"
Three days later, Katniss's notes are sprinkled haphazardly around the room she's claimed as her own, tucked into drawers and laying on the windowsills. She sometimes finds the yellow corner of one of the papers peeking out from where it's been crunched in the door jamb of her closet, or she reaches into her pocket to find one crumpled inside of it. Sometimes she climbs into bed only to feel one rustle beneath her pillow.

She flings them all aside. With Beetee and Wiress in the cozy kitchen of Wiress's house, all of the talk of terrain and survival don't seem quite so frightening. But when she's alone, the words scare her.

*The Gamemakers will need to provide hiding places so find one as soon as you're with Prim.*

*Almost certain that Careers will guard water source. If area is wooded, gather water from plant life if possible.*

*Infection is the 2nd most frequent cause of natural death behind starvation. Signs: pain, swelling, redness, fever.*

That morning, they convene an hour after breakfast. For some time, Wiress putters around the kitchen to clear away the breakfast dishes and Beetee continues his detailed explanation of a manipulative strategy that promises to help her sneak out of an alliance with little trouble, if necessary. Katniss fidgets so much, staring right through Beetee and his animated gestures, that he eventually sighs regretfully and stands.

"Take a break. Take the afternoon off," he says in response to her confused expression. "Looks like you need it."

Katniss doesn't need to be told twice. Within minutes, she's bundled into her coat and gulping in deep breaths of fresh air outside as though she's just come back from drowning.

"You don't need to act like it's all that bad," Beetee says from behind her, a thin smile sweeping across his face.

She returns it apologetically, and he waves her off as he returns home. Katniss takes the path back down to the main residential sector of the district, no particular destination in mind.

Unlike District 12, which grew haphazardly like a mold or a creeping fungus across the area's forested hills, District 3 has a neat, orderly map. From the cliff on which the Victors' Village sits, Katniss can see the square right in the center of the city, with residential houses flowing outward in neat, compact rows, all of them branching off like the spokes of a wheel.

*Prim would like this place,* Katniss finds herself thinking again as she comes to the foot of the pathway and turns toward the square. Her sister had always preferred things to be sort of tidy; she'd probably blanch if she could see the state of Katniss's room here in District 3 with its crumpled and torn papers. The houses here have a sort of odd charm, something in their piecemeal construction, like some sort of industrial collage, each one unique as a thumbprint. And the *gadgets*—automatic lights and windows that open with a touch of a button, solar panels gleaming on rooftops. Prim would love it all.

But she'd especially love the strands of white lights that crisscross between houses and across the market square like strands of glowing spider silk. She'd drag Katniss from shop to shop in the square, wanting to taste and see *everything*, and Katniss would grumble in fond exasperation but be sort of pleased at the same time.
Katniss realizes that she's been staring for some time at a small cluster of children huddled between a pair of houses. There are four of them in total, and by their size, they can be nine or ten at most, their heads bent together in childish fervor, all of them conspirators in some secret plot. One of them holds some sort of panel or controls in his hands, and as Katniss watches, they back away from a glittering silver device on the ground, one with long flaps that sprout to all sides like flower petals. The boy does something to the controller, and the device flurries into the air, its petals twisting in quick circles as the children shout and cheer, following its wobbling, clumsy flight over to the next street.

She has half a mind to follow, but there's a melancholic twinge in her chest that holds her back. After a moment, she draws away and continues to the square, trying to leave her thoughts of Prim behind with the children.

Not that it helps much. The square seems to be filled with ragtag bunches of children as well, all of them in grimy clothes and sporting wide grins and unkempt hair. They don't look much like Prim—the fashions here seem to lean toward short, cropped hair, even in girls, and the clothes are loose and baggy—but it's always just enough to remind Katniss of her sister.

Don't they have school or something? Katniss thinks bitterly to herself. She sinks onto a stone bench and closes her eyes to shut them out, letting the sun stretch through the thin, cool spring air to warm her face and hands. It's been one week since I left, she muses. Today is the reaping in District 5. Just two days to go now. One day, really—the reaping here is the day after next.

She's not even sure she wants the time to pass quickly. She'd give anything to see Prim, of course, but these next few days will be her last. My last few days, she thinks coolly. Weird thing to think. I'd never have imagined any of this.

It seems hard to believe that she'd slept beside her sister only a little over a week ago. Somehow, the memory seems fresh enough to be tangible, as if there's a way she can climb back into that moment if only she can figure out how to reach out and grab it, as though these last few days can be erased if only she can find the place where she and Prim are bundled up in bed together on a icy, quiet night in District 12.

Katniss huffs out a laugh. Stupid to come here all alone. She should've known all she'd do was think of Prim. She swipes her forearm across her eyes, stands, and follows the threads of clotheslines and light strands back toward the Victors' Village.

Wiress has company when Katniss steps through the door. More kids? Unbelievable, Katniss thinks in exasperation, taking in the pair of children perched on the living room sofas. One is an older girl of thirteen or so, the other a boy of only eight or nine. Both wear light woolen sweaters, tough hide boots that look as though they've seen better days, and identical expressions of wary surprise and curiosity. They have Wiress's tufts of dark hair and the curve of her jaw, and so Katniss isn't surprised when Wiress smiles at her and says, "Oh, Katniss—here are my niece and nephew, Emet and Alree."

Emet, the girl, gives Katniss a perfunctory nod. Her younger brother, at nine or ten, stares unabashedly. "Is that her?" he asks his aunt.

"This is Katniss Everdeen," Wiress says by way of reply.

Katniss steps forward, unsmiling. She's never really been good with kids aside from Prim. "Nice to meet you."
"Are you really going to volunteer? I mean, really."

"Alree—"

"That's the idea," Katniss replies. The boy's knees are folded beneath him, and he bounces excitedly on the cushion.

"But—it's the Hunger Games," he says, almost whispering. "No one volunteers in our district, I mean, almost no one ever, because—are you're going to die?"

He gets the words out too quickly for his sister to elbow him in the side. She offers Katniss a flustered and apologetic look.

Wiress is standing, maybe to usher them out of the room, but Katniss replies anyway. "Probably. I expect to. But if I can manage it, I'll make it so my sister won't die there."

"It's because of your sister?"

"It's because of my sister."

Alree looks at his sister in consideration. "It's still scary to go after your sister, though."

"It is," Katniss agree. "But I think it'll be worth it for me."

Alree nods. "I'll be rooting for you."

At this, Katniss smiles. "Good. Glad I'll have at least one fan."

Emet finally speaks up. "And you're really, really sure you're going to do it?"

"I think it's a little too late to turn around and go home."

Emet nods. "Good. I mean, because—well, I know this isn't why you're doing it, but it's good to know for sure it won't be me this year."

Wiress seems to decide that the conversation has encroached into insensitive waters for long enough. "Alright, you two. Last I heard, your father expected you home soon. Thank you for the company, but I think it's best you go."

They do, their dark eyes still staring as Wiress packs them into their scarves and coats and sends them outside. She presses the door closed and turns back to Katniss, her laugh quick and small.

"I'm sorry about them. They mean well, but I suppose they've never really developed a good sense of when to stop talking."

"I don't think most kids have," Katniss allows. "And I don't mind. It's good to get it out sometimes."

Wiress pulls the box of notes and records and photographs from beneath the coffee table and begins to sort through the top stack. Katniss thinks she must have hidden them away in haste at the arrival of the children. The photographs, which she and Beetee had requested from the Capitol ages ago for training purposes, mostly show landscapes and arenas and terrain. Some, though, depict brutal, messy deaths. They've kept those pictures even from Katniss, but every now and then, she catches the glimpse of a trail of blood or a severed foot peeking out from beneath pictures of muttations and wildlife.

Katniss stares at the door. "Wiress, I don't know if this is a weird question, but I thought that
Katniss stares at the door. "Wiress, I don't know if this is a weird question, but I thought that victors were allowed to have their family come and live with them in the Victors' Village. And... well, this house is huge. Why don't your relatives live with you?"

"I invited them to," Wiress replies as Katniss sinks into an armchair beside the coffee table. "It's just my brother and his wife and children left, but I back when I first won, I invited them all. They couldn't bear to be here for long, though. 'It's not our place,' my brother always says. 'It's not even your place.' He never liked the idea of a Victors' Village. He thought it...I don't know. I think it just makes him sad. I've always loved it here, how calm it is, how quiet and far away it is from everything, but it really just makes him sad, this whole place."

"Because of what you went through to get here?"

"I expect so. But to be honest, I used to think...even though I know he doesn't mean it that way..." she pauses, her smile crystallizing. "I've never told you how I won, have I?"

Katniss shakes her head.

Wiress hums. "Well, it wasn't anything dramatic; I'll say that right now. I lucked out with the arena that year. Desert, just like home. It was..." she shakes her head, thinking. "So incredibly stupid, the whole thing. Just this huge, rocky place with almost no water at all. No food, either, except for what you could catch—there were coyotes and snakes and lizards, and I found out later that two of the tributes had killed some game to eat it, but most of us just avoided them.

"I was lucky enough to find a small, craggy sort of depression where I could hide and gather rainwater. I was near enough to the other tributes to at least hear their fights some of the time, so I guess the Gamemakers thought they'd just let me be instead of pushing me toward them. They probably thought someone would stumble across me eventually.

"And they might have, except that there was no food or water. Everyone was starving and dehydrated—or killing each other off, because some of them were still doing that, weak as we were.

"I was alright for a while, though. My family was...relatively poor, back then. I was used to not eating well, and I'd always liked to spend time in the deserted places on the outskirts of the city, out in the desert.

"Most of the other tributes weren't so adaptable. Eventually, the numbers just shrank and shrank until it was just me and two others. The Gamemakers were just pushing us toward each other—they'd arranged a dust storm—but the other two tributes were so dehydrated and lost that they stumbled right over an outcropping, and they fell...and that was that.

"The Gamemakers weren't very popular for it; I don't know what became of the Head Gamemaker, but he disappeared from the Capitol afterward. And after that, there was always some source of food and fresh water—otherwise, the Games would be too boring, and we can't have that.

"I wasn't very popular in the Capitol, not like the other victors with a strong fan base, but I've never minded. I'd never say it to the other victors' faces, or to Beetee, but I've always been glad it went like that. I didn't have to hurt anyone, or...well, I won through no particular strength except my ability to hide and endure long periods without food and survive in the desert. Like the Games that year had been picked specially for me."

Wiress stares down at a few images in her lap—a stubbly, misshapen cactus stretching from between boulders, a spiked lizard perched on a dusty orange rock, a spear and knife spilled across the sand—and Katniss wonders if they were taken in the arena where Wiress's Hunger Games
took place. She imagines it: a younger Wiress, skinny and birdlike and huddled into a rocky alcove, frightened and shivering in the freezing night air.

The woman looks up at her. "Beetee will tell you a lot about strategy. But even though it's not the most glamorous tactic, I think hiding is your best bet. Especially you and Prim, all alone." She smiles down and the photos. "But what do I know?"

After that, Wiress stares at the documents and images for so long, flipping gingerly through them as though they might fall to pieces at her touch, that Katniss stands wordlessly, presses a hand to the woman's shoulder, and heads to her room.

Their last full day is a chaotic mess as they all try to review Katniss's general plan and run through their last challenge: her presentation in the Capitol.

"It's not that we won't have time to keep talking things over once we're there," Beetee explains as he paces back and forth across the carpet of Wiress's living room. "It's just that there will be a million distractions, and I'd rather make sure we've hammered everything out. Especially if we still can't convince you to form an alliance with anyone other than your sister," he adds, staring pointedly.

"You still can't convince me," Katniss bites back. "I won't know the other tributes, and I can't trust anyone else not to turn against us at the wrong minute. It's too big a gamble—even if it has its advantages," she adds as Beetee opens his mouth to argue. "We've all seen things go wrong in alliances dozens of times. I'm not doing it. I won't."

Beetee raises his arms, palms out."Alright, then. So your next strategy—"

"—is to be mediocre," Katniss finishes with him, leaning back in her armchair. "I know, Beetee."

Out of the corner of her eye, she catches Wiress fighting back a smile at Beetee's exasperated expression. Katniss recites: "The entire Capitol will have its eyes on us, the sisters who'll be fighting together as an alliance, so we're going to have to take the target off our backs, or the other tributes will go straight for us. Boring training. Average performance for the Gamemakers."

"But you'll have to nail the interview," Beetee responds, sinking into a seat by the fire. "It's one thing not to be seen as a threat by the tributes, and it's another not to have the support of the Capitol when you need it. You and your sister will be the strongest with help from sponsors—don't forget that a big part of this is a popularity contest. On our end, we'll be chasing every potential sponsor we can get for you, but it means nothing if you don't stand out."

Katniss groans at this statement, as she always does, flopping forward to bury her face in her knees. "Don't worry, Katniss; we'll figure out how to help you through that part," Wiress adds, amused.

"It's unfortunate, but it really is just a contest," Beetee adds. "Finnick Odair is the poster child for this strategy—he was handsome and charming and good with a weapon, and he used it to his advantage to earn a trident from his sponsors. The most expensive gift ever given to a tribute."

"I know myself. I'm not expecting any tridents," Katniss retorts, though her voice is muffled.

"Afterward," Beetee continues as if she had not spoken, "you'll need to hoard weapons. A bow for you, especially if you're as good as you say, and some sort of blade for your sister, if possible. And then—"

"We hide somewhere near water and food, if possible, and stay close to the other tributes, if
possible, so the Gamemakers don't attack us. Then, if possible, we survive until the Careers start picking each other off, and then hopefully I can kill anyone who's left, if possible."

Beetee sighs. "Basic. But right. Use your knowledge of terrain, wildlife, and strategy to stay alive. The rest is up to you."

Katniss picks herself back up. "Yeah. Okay."

"But not just yet," Wiress says as Katniss slumps distractedly, considering the string of if possibles that lie between her and the end of the Games. "Like Beetee said, you'll get nowhere fast if you can't charm the Capitol. You're going to need to play a role here, Katniss. You'll have to act like someone else."

"Act like who?" Katniss mutters.

"Well, like...a version of yourself, I guess. The Capitol has a historical penchant for favoring the strongest candidates because—well, because everyone wants to be on the side of the winner. The candidates who have physical strength and who show a certain..."

"Barbarism," Beetee offers.

"Assertion," Wiress modifies. "But that might not be the best route for you. You'll be a target because you and your sister are a team—the other candidates won't have anyone they can trust as surely as you can trust Prim, and so they'll want to...separate you." Kill you, Katniss hears.

"So I can't show off any strengths, and I can't look like I know what I'm doing, but the Capitol won't like me unless I do."

"Not necessarily," Wiress argues. "Statistically speaking, the Capitol has a tendency toward the obviously strong, but sentimental attachments are a close second. Tragedies, especially. There was that boy a few years ago, what was his name again?"

Beetee looks at the ceiling in thought. "Oh, right—Allentio, Allentium..."

"Something like that. He was quite young and had recently been orphaned, and the Capitol ate it up. He was sent all sorts of trinkets to help him through the games: food, medicine, water, small weapons. It didn't help in the end, of course, but for a while, he was doing very well with all of the support."

"Oh," Katniss says blankly. "Great."

"There have been others as well. Some were suffering from some sort of disease or handicap, some had endured past violence...and it's not only tragedies, of course. Some were struggling to care for ailing family members at home, that sort of thing. Your story is built in...for obvious reasons," Wiress adds awkwardly.

"Right, because at least one of us is going to die there," Katniss snaps. "Instant tragedy. It'll be perfect for the Capitol."

Wiress sits stiffly in her chair, sighs, and a wave of equal parts guilt and frustration washes over Katniss. "I don't mean to..." the woman begins.

"No, that's—I'm sorry. It's not your fault. It's just..." Katniss trails off. It's just that I'm scared out of my mind. That my mouth moves before I can think.

They sit still for a few minutes, considering. "It's fine," Wiress replies. "But we'll still need to..."
"I know. Tell me what to do. It's fine."

Wiress peers warily at her, then at Beetee. "Alright. Your prep team and escort will be able to help more, but for now, let's practice your story, then. You and Prim may have to coordinate, depending on her strategy, but—here, sit up straight…"

For the next hour, Katniss repeats statements of dramatic zeal ("My sister is all I have") and fairytale love ("All we really need is to be together"), and Wiress pokes and prods her out of her slouch and into the guise of someone Katniss can't recognize, someone who actually smiles. She reacts to corrections that Wiress offers, like Nod and lean in, and Again, but without crossing your arms. Beetee offers suggestions as well: Be conscious about speaking slowly—it will help you look calm and confident, and Laugh at anything interesting your interviewer says.

It reminds Katniss, oddly enough, of her mother on her good days. Fingers running through Katniss's hair and squeezing her shoulders. No fidgeting, Katniss, and Relax your shoulders! You look so tense. But Katniss has never had to correct her speech and posture before a mirror—or before an audience—and she can only take so much of it.

"Enough," she says at last, climbing wearily to her feet. The smile slips from her face, that strange other girl draining away from her, and Beetee and Wiress let her flee down to her usual resting place in the market square.

It's odd that she should want to be here, especially since the next time she comes here—tomorrow morning—she'll be volunteering as tribute for District 3. And two days from now, she'll be put up in some pristine hotel in the Capitol, where Prim will be.

Prim will be amazing at the interview, Katniss thinks. A natural. She can imagine her sister now, radiant and golden-haired like some sort of angel, and she quashes a flare of jealousy. Prim has always been the favored Everdeen sister, the recipient of little smiles and fond glances.

Katniss can help them when they get into the arena, but when it comes to the interviews and the publicity in the Capitol, Katniss is certain it will be Prim who will save them both.

Shivering and miserable in the cold air, she half-dozes until long after the musicians have packed away their instruments for the night. The tide of people in the square slowly recedes, leaving the area empty except for a few vagrants who huddle beside the oil drums whose fires have by now faded to warm, glowing embers.

It's late when she finally drags herself to her feet to return to the Victors' Village, maybe two or three in the morning. To her fatigued, muddled mind, the journey back occurs in brief flashes and sensations: drawings scrawled in the frost at a darkened windowpane, a ripple of wind stirring the hair on the back of her neck, the feel and taste of the dusty air in her dry mouth, clouds slinking over a razor-thin moon. Katniss wonders aimlessly what it will be like not to know these things anymore.

When she finally stumbles into Wiress's home, she is surprised to find its owner awake and waiting for her wrapped in a thick blanket by the hearth. The woody smell of the fire, usually familiar enough to lull Katniss toward sleep, does little to soothe herragged nerves. There are sweet scents mixed in as well, flowery and rich.

Wiress smiles. A darkened kettle hangs over the fireplace, and she removes it to pour tea into an empty, waiting cup. "A blend of lavender and chamomile," she explains. "I don't know if you want to…well, I've always found that it helps me sleep."

The statement takes a moment to reach Katniss's fogged mind, but when she realizes that Wiress
has been waiting for her safe return, has made tea to help her sleep, she feels an embarrassing bloom of warmth in her chest. Prim is really the only one to do those sorts of things for her, Prim and sometimes Gale, with his offerings of fresh food and game. Katniss's emotions are so raw right now, her anxiety so fresh, that if she had been the sort of girl to take to crying, she might have already inundated Wiress with tears. As it is, Katniss finally trusts her voice enough to manage a rough, "Thank you. Wiress, thank you for everything."

It sounds like a goodbye, which Katniss instantly thinks is foolish: she'll see Wiress in the morning and over the next few days, after all. But Wiress doesn't seem to mind. She only stands, the tea held out to Katniss. "Don't mention it, Katniss. I'm glad to help. I'm glad you came, in the end. You're not at all what I expected."

Katniss keeps herself from snorting into the tea. It's pleasant, though not to her usual tastes, with a sweet tang and a flowery aftertaste. "How so?"

"Beetee and I couldn't make out what you were after from Haymitch's short message," she explains, pulling the blanket more tightly across her shoulders. "There wasn't much to go on, and to be honest, the entire thing sounded…"

"Insane? Stupid? Reckless?"

Wiress finally settles on "Ill-advised."

"You're such a diplomat," Katniss replies, smiling in spite of herself.

"You'll learn to be one soon enough," Wiress retorts. "At any rate, you're none of those things. Well, perhaps reckless wouldn't be too much of a stretch, but you're strong in ways I never would have expected. To do what you're doing takes more courage than I've seen in anyone I've ever known, and it's really an honor, Katniss. I'm so glad you're here."

"Thank you," Katniss replies, more uncertainly this time. She opens her mouth and closes it, not sure how to respond.

Wiress must catch sight of the uneasy shifts in weight Katniss is trying to hide, because she smiles politely and excuses herself to slip off to bed. "I'll see you in the morning," she adds. "I'll wake you when it's time. Oh, and Beetee forgot to mention—your paperwork went through this morning. He'd forgotten to tell you in all the…well, all the discussions. Congratulations on being a full citizen of District 3, Katniss."

With that, she leaves Katniss standing alone in the empty room. Sinking into one of the sofas, Katniss sips a bit more tea and then sets it down on the coffee table. She'd give anything for some of Haymitch's stash of alcohol now, anything to really help make the trip to dreamland easier, but she instead resigns herself to a night of restless, uneasy sleep.

When she wakes in the morning, Katniss feels as if she has fallen into a recurring dream. She's had those before in the past, usually after extended periods in which she and Gale have debated taking their families and running away from District 12, detailing when they would leave and what they would pack and where they would go. It's not a choice they have ever considered seriously, but it sometimes appears in Katniss's dreams as though her mind wants to make it a reality. She'll dream, and there they'll be, she and Gale scrounging up food and trying to find their family amidst the waters of an incoming storm.

The morning of the reaping in District 3 has the same hazy feeling of those dreams, as though
Katniss has already done all of this but can't quite remember all of the times it's happened before. She showers and freshens up, and then she pulls her mother's blue dress from the bottom of her bag and slips it on. She tries to braid her hair up to the back of her head like her mother always does for the reaping ceremony, but she can't quite reach, and so she leaves it hanging in its usual side braid.

Katniss never recognizes the girl in the mirror on the day of the reaping, a washed and clean girl in her mother's dress. Her face settles naturally into a resting position that looks vaguely like a determined glower, and she fights to stuff some warmth into her expression. \textit{Smile, Katniss}, her mother says. \textit{It'll be alright.}

Her mother will lose both of her daughters today. Katniss smoothes the bottom of her dress, thinking of her mother alone in their home in District 12, watching the event televised live and realizing, really realizing for the first time, what Katniss has done.

There is no taking it back now. And in a choice between Prim and her mother, Katniss has already made her decision.

She's forgotten the matching blue shoes, and it seems silly to ask Wiress for such a trivial thing, so she laces up her hunting boots. Though worn, they lend her outfit a more practical, polished air, and Katniss feels a bit more like herself.

The reaping isn't until two o'clock, but Beetee and Wiress seem to recognize that Katniss is in no mood to continue her discussions on strategy, so they leave her to her own devices. She sits on the cliff face that looks out the district for a while, watching the city slowly buzz to life, its vigor dulled to an almost mournful slowness by the approaching reaping ceremony. The sun crawls higher into the sky, warming the air enough to make coats unnecessary, and then it's time.

Wiress and Beetee approach her dourly, unsmiling. They are followed by others, all of them old enough to be Katniss's grandparents: a tall, gangly man with tanned skin and bright eyes, an older woman with her wispy grey hair hovering in tufts like a lion's mane, and a bald man with dark, bubbly scars across his right cheek and down his neck.

"Katniss, these are the other victors," Beetee says, gesturing to each of them in turn. "Videl, Rekka, and Leylan. This is Katniss Everdeen," he tells them.

The woman, Rekka, speaks for them all. "It's an honor to meet you, Katniss. We've heard a great deal about you."

By some unspoken consensus, little else is said. The walk down to the square is as silent as it has always been in District 12, the upcoming trial hanging oppressively over them.

As they near the square, Wiress gives her shoulder a little squeeze and murmurs, "See you soon." The victors peel off in the direction of the stage, which has been erected at one end of the square in front of the area reserved for fishmongers and fruit sellers. Katniss watches the crowds part respectfully to let them through, and then she joins the tide to find the sign-in tables, the faces that surround her as grim as her own.

When it is her turn at the table, the worker pricks her finger for the blood match, and Katniss holds her breath, but the name that scrolls across the screen of the electronic device is hers, in green and without error. "Next," the woman barks, and Katniss slips away, half in disbelief that the plan has actually \textit{worked}.

She finds a clump of other people who seem to be roughly her age and turns her eyes toward the stage, where the victors, including Beetee and Wiress, sit in elegant chairs. The remaining two
chairs are taken as well, one by a pink-faced woman Katniss assumes must be the mayor, and the other by a tall, spindly man with a sprig of pale green hair, who Katniss guesses can only be the escort for District 3.

When all is finally quiet and the film crews perched on the surrounding buildings give the signal to start, the mayor finally stands to begin the traditional story of the history of Panem, through which Katniss shifts from foot to foot impatiently. Next, he reads the list of the district's past victors. In seventy-four years, there have been eight in total—not bad, considering the current record in District 12.

The mayor introduces the escort for District 3, Gallum Fleetley, whose bored expression melts into a sly, cocky smile as he bounces forward under the eyes of the cameras. "Welcome to the 74th annual Hunger Games!" he bellows animatedly, as though the audience might burst into applause at any moment. "We wish the best of luck to all of you, and without further ado, let's select our tributes for this year's event!"

Ladies first. Gallum slips one gloved hand into a clear, glass sphere in which the name Katniss Everdeen is written no times at all, and he shouts a name that Katniss doesn't recognize into the microphone. A small, pale-faced girl is pulled gently through the crowd, maneuvered like a placid calf. Her eyes are wide, and Katniss watches her grasp the folds of her skirt, fists trembling, as she climbs the stairs to the stage.

Beetee has refreshed her memory on the traditional rules for volunteering, and so Katniss waits impatiently while Gallum asks the girl a few questions about herself, listens to the girl's curt introduction. And then comes the demand for volunteers.

Katniss blurts the words, which have long sat on the tip of her tongue, almost without conscious thought. "I volunteer as tribute!" It seems to her as though the words echo throughout the square, bouncing from the cobblestone streets and tin rooftops until all eyes are upon her.

Gallum's eyes bulge in excited disbelief. "Oh—a volunteer! Please, come up to the stage, young lady!"

The crowd parts for Katniss instantly, as though she is afflicted with some disease. She climbs the stairs, feeling the intent eyes of the victors upon her, and Gallum flits over to turn her to face the audience. "This is a stunning twist of events, but District 3 has the first volunteer it's seen in over two decades, everyone—oh, my dear, you can return to your place in the audience, thank you—"

The poor, frightened girl doesn't need to be told twice; she flies back down the stairs and into the open arms of her waiting friends. Gallum turns to Katniss. "How exciting! You must just be thrilled—may I ask your name?"

He holds the microphone to her mouth. This is the hard part, she thinks, but you're almost there. Millions of trillions of eyes gleam at her from the audience, and Katniss feels her palms begin to sweat. "Katniss Everdeen," she says quietly.

"Katniss Everdeen! Lovely. How old are you, Katniss?"

"Sixteen."

"Sixteen! And—let's see, your family must be so proud of you. I imagine you're here to show off your talents like all of the other incredible victors from this district?" He gives her an emphatic little nudge of the elbow, like a friend whispering a secret.

"No. I'm volunteering to compete with my sister," Katniss manages in a small voice, paralyzed by
the glare of the camera. Off to one side of the stage, workers adjust a white screen to flare a bit more light onto her.

"To compete with…?" Gallum asks, perplexed. He glances to the mayor, who shakes her head in similar bewilderment. "The girl who was just here, I suppose? To compete for her, you mean?"

"No. I'm here to compete with my sister, Primrose Everdeen of District 12." The crowd bursts into a soft buzz of amazement.

"Oh, my gosh—" Gallum steps back to look her up and down. "Oh, my gosh, of course! And—if I may say so, you look so much like her; it must be in the face…" His eyes have widened, and he looks as though he has stumbled across some rare jewel. "But please, tell us how this wonderful occasion has come to be—how it happened that the two of you live in different districts?"

The crowd is trying to figure this out as well, if the confused murmurs are any indication. "I filed paperwork the day of the reaping in District 12. As of yesterday, I'm a citizen of District 3. I'm here to compete with my younger sister."

"Incredible!" Gallum crows gleefully. "What a story—such dedication is unbelievable!" The cameramen to one side is signaling to him, holding a hand out, palm up. "Ah, but we're running short on time! We'll have to follow up with the lovely Everdeen sisters at a later date…"

With much less fervor, the male tribute's name is drawn from the sphere, Saneer Grellis, some dark-haired boy of fourteen or fifteen whom Katniss doesn't recognize. Gallum and the mayor each give some droning closing remarks, but it comes from a long way away, and Katniss has trouble focusing on the words.

Suddenly, the Peacekeepers are at either side of her and the ceremony is over. She is being herded down the street and into a tall, official-looking building that she assumes is this district's equivalent of the Justice Building.

In a quiet room all to herself, Katniss waits at the window, forehead pressed to the cool, glass panes as she watches the crowd spill through the street below, all of them returning to their everyday lives. In their world, the threat is over, and the time for celebration has begun. A few girls her age cluster together, hugging each other in relief. Across the street, a man brandishes a platter of meat and vegetables he's bought and invites his children to follow. *It's over for this year*, he must be saying, his voice deep and dimples pressed into his cheeks. *Let's eat.* Katniss wishes she could follow his beckoning gesture down the road as well, just walk away and never come back.

She's surprised to hear a knock at the door. Katniss hadn't thought to expect any visitors, since she doesn't know anyone from District 12 and the victors will be called away for official business, and besides, the time for visiting has nearly ended. She turns just as the Peacekeepers open the door and finds Emet and Alree standing at the threshold.

"Auntie Wiress said you might be lonely," Emet explains timidly. "And, um, Alree—"

"We just came to say goodbye," Alree interrupts.

Katniss is grateful for the distraction. "Well, come in, I guess."

They close the door behind her. The room is quiet as they sink into the provided wooden chairs. Katniss braces herself for the sorts of stilted, awkward conversations she always has with complete strangers, the kinds of conversations that make her dread the coming days, but Alree takes command with the confidence of a young child.
"You're going to do your best, won't you?" he asks, fidgeting. His eyes are very wide.

"Of course. If I can, I'm going to protect my sister," she says, settling back into her chair and crossing her arms. Then, she uncrosses them and sits straight, imagining, as Wiress has told her, being drawn up by the head. *Practice, practice,* she complains inwardly.

"And is it true you're very strong and you can fight with a bow and arrow?" Emet adds shyly out of the corner of her mouth, as though her question needs to be snuck into the discussion.

Katniss blinks. "I guess that's...yes, I can."

"Do you think you're going to win?" Alree asks. His sister, who curbed his blunt questions the last time, makes no move to stop him now.

"My sister is going to win. If everything goes well."

"But—but..." Alree fumbles. "What if it's only the two of you left? I mean, you can't kill each other."

"No," Katniss agrees. "We can't."

A rap at the door, and then it swings open. "Two minute warning," one of the Peacekeepers says to the children. Alree turns to watch the man pull the door closed, then he looks back to Katniss, considering. He stuffs a hand into the pocket of his coat and pulls out something round and black, holding it out for Katniss to take.

Automatically, she reaches out to accept it, feeling its surprising weight as Alree relinquishes it to her. It is an unevenly shaped stone a little smaller than her fist, polished black with blotches of deep red throughout. The blotches look like tiny poppies against the darkness of the stone.

"I found it in the stream one day last winter. Dad says the red bits are jasper," Alree explains. "He says it's supposed to be lucky. Will you take it? They let you bring something from your district, don't they? Unless you have something already."

Packing a token was the furthest thing from Katniss's mind the night she'd left District 12, and she isn't sure what she would have chosen, anyway. The stone has a pleasant weight in her hands, and though a quick, irritated thought zaps through her mind—

—couldn't it have been a lighter stone?

—she smiles and says, "Thanks, Alree. This is perfect."

Alree returns the smile and, to her surprise, hugs her around the waist. "Good luck, Katniss."

Before she can think to hug him back, he and his sister leave quietly the way they came. Katniss looks at the stone and then slips it into her pocket.

Then comes the part for which Katniss has been steeling herself. The Peacekeepers take her from the room and press her into a waiting car, which takes her out of the district center and through the looming warehouses—past the one where her cargo train was unloaded when she first arrived—and to the official Capitol train station.

By this time, reporters have clustered in preparation for her arrival, cameras flashing and newscasters speaking in quick, excited bursts. Katniss exits the car and schools her face into blank determination, editing out the angry, reckless furrow to her brow and twist to her mouth. Wiress had suggested that she cry, which would add to the story of devotion to her sister, but Katniss had flat-out refused. She won't use her normal, gruff expressions, but she won't let anyone target her for being a hopeless wreck, either.
The male tribute, Saneer is at her side then, and once they reach the train, they are forced to stand for a moment for additional pictures before the doors close and District 3 races away for the last time.

Katniss thinks, as she watches the treeless orange countryside slip past the window of her room, that she's lucky she didn't accidentally stow away on a high-speed Capitol train instead of one of the normal interdistrict transport options. Not that she could have possibly confused the rusted, creaking tub she'd ridden between Districts 12 and 3 with the sleek, lightning-fast train she currently rides. At 250 miles per hour, they'll be at the Capitol in no time.

Katniss is left in her assigned room on the train for a while, and she surprises herself by falling into an uneasy slumber sprawled across the bed. She wakes some time later when Gallum raps on her door to usher both tributes into the dining car for a multi-course meal. The victors are already there, chattering away politely, and they fall into a hush once Katniss and Saneer enter.

"Alright, Katniss?" Wiress asks as Katniss sinks into a seat at the table and begins to fill her plate with foods she's only ever seen on television.

"I'm okay," Katniss replies, not much in the mood for talking. As Gallum fills the quiet with prattle about how boring District 3 can be and how much better things are now with a volunteer, Katniss stuffs her face. There's no telling how much she'll have to eat in the Games, and she's never seen so much food in one place before. Beside her, Saneer is eating with similar gusto, and Katniss reflects that although the population of District 3 doesn't appear as prone to starvation as those in District 12, there's probably not much food to go around in any of the districts, really.

Right around the time that Katniss feels she might burst, the windows go dark. They are speeding through the tunnel that cuts through the mountains to the Capitol. Beetee and the other victors are discussing something in low voices as Wiress, who has only picked at her plate, tries to get the quiet Saneer to talk about his experience with weapons.

Katniss rises to peer out of the window just as sunlight explodes across it and the Capitol bursts into view. Glistening towers rise to dizzying heights, wide stone streets are littered with monuments and flowerbeds, and all of it is in glaring color, as though a rainbow has bled across the entire scene. Before she has time to really look the city over, they are pulling into the station, a crowd of excited visitors shouting and waving at their arrival. Katniss ducks out of sight, closing her eyes. This is the hard part, but you're almost there, she reminds herself.

And somewhere in this city of crazed voyeurs and lunatics, Prim waits.
The Remake Center is a torture Katniss hadn't expected. She steps out feeling as though the entire outermost layer of her skin has been scrubbed away to be replaced by a smooth and tender sheen. Her stylist, Jacara, is a seasonal favorite in the Games, and she stuffs Katniss into a pair of metallic grey lace-up boots and a flowing, shimmery dress that stops just above her knees. Katniss draws the line at the headpiece, a large and twisted contraption meant to represent District 3’s contributions to the Capitol through silver cogs and gears. Eventually, Jacara concedes defeat, admitting that Katniss's traditional braid may be attractive enough on its own. Her prep team brushes her hair out and re braids it with strands of silver twine laced throughout, and they add some sort of glittery spray over it until her hair gives a metallic glint when she turns her head just so.

Finally, in an admittedly impressive rush job, Jacara picks apart and remodels the headpiece, creating a strange but spectacular set of wings that branch off about a foot and a half to either side of Katniss's shoulders.

"That's darling; isn't that just darling?" the woman asks the prep team, fluttering her pale blue eyelashes, and then Katniss is whisked downstairs to join Saneer in the stables. Her partner's stylist seems to have collaborated with Jacara on the topic of headpieces, as Saneer is somewhat gloomily adjusting his to sit correctly across his forehead.

"Why couldn't we have both had wings?" he grumbles, stepping into the chariot. Katniss is busy craning her neck, trying to see Prim all the way at the very end of the building, but there are too many people between them.

"I don't think it matters much. All of our costumes are ridiculous," Katniss replies bluntly, just as the opening march begins. She clutches the edge of the chariot as it lurches forward, the horses trotting right at the heels of the golden, feathery tributes of District 2.

Katniss spends part of the time on the chariot holding on for dear life and part of it trying to remember to smile. Beside her, Saneer looks to be grimacing more than smiling, and Katniss wonders if her face has a similar pained expression. *Smile, Katniss, Wiress would say. Shoulders up, chin up, and relax, Beetee would say.*

Despite their efforts, as their chariots pass, Katniss gets the sense that the crowd's eyes are being drawn elsewhere. She doesn't feel secure enough on the clattering chariot to pivot while they ride in a straight line, but as they glide slowly around the curve of the City Circle before the president's mansion, she manages to twist enough to get a look. Behind her, the chariots loop around to fill half of the curved road.

The last chariot, Prim's, is on fire.

Before her chariot can even come to a complete stop, Katniss leaps onto the pavement to race to her sister's side, heart thumping madly in her chest. Saneer shouts something behind her, but Katniss can't hear it. *This can't be real, she thinks frantically. Nothing is supposed to happen to Prim, not now.*

In the past, the stylists have pulled crazy stunts to draw attention to their tributes—if Katniss remembers correctly, Jacara was the one responsible for nearly electrocuting the tributes from
District 3 a few years ago in an attempt to create a symbol of technology and electricity—and if Prim is hurt, Katniss will find the person who hurt her.

The music ends with a flourish, which is meant to be followed by the president's speech, but there's only the quiet murmur of the crowd as Katniss shouts her sister's name.

"Katniss!" Prim yells, and she's perfectly fine, her golden hair swirled elegantly on the top of her head. Her black cape—which matches the other tribute's—is aglow with some strange, unnatural fire. "You're really here!"

She throws herself into Katniss's arms, and it's not until Katniss sees that the flames are completely synthetic, are not even warm, that her mind stops screeching. "Oh my God, Prim," she murmurs, squeezing her sister tightly. "Oh my God." She draws away, holding Prim at arm's length to get a better look at her. "Whose idea was it to set you on fire?"

Prim laughs almost hysterically. "I agreed to it." She says it in a whisper, looking around meekly. The world is staring at them; Katniss glances at the screens above them, their identical pale faces, a ridiculous metallic bird and a girl on fire.

"Get back into the chariot," she mutters out of the corner of her mouth, pushing her sister into the vehicle.

Prim's hand shoots out to grab hers. "Don't—"

"I'm not leaving."

Prim settles at her place in the chariot, Katniss standing just outside of it, squeezing her sister's hand tightly.

When it becomes obvious Katniss isn't moving from her place—and the Capitol staff nearby, though wide-eyed and gaping, seems too stunned to make any move toward her—the president drops his unfathomable expression to make some airy little joke about the excitable tributes, and the show moves on to the official welcome. Katniss can see the screens, though, and she can clearly see that she and her sister are getting a fair amount of interest from the cameras.

After it is done, they are all ushered into base of the Training Center, where the District 12 and District 3 prep teams converge into a single tidal wave of flurried congratulations. Gallum is nearly overcome with emotion, happily shouting "That one's from my district!"

Haymitch, only slightly buzzed if his steady stance and continued ability to make eye contact are any indication, appears in Katniss's view. He smiles. "I was betting on you, but I still wasn't sure you'd make it. Glad to see you in one piece."

Throughout all of this, Prim is pressed firmly to Katniss's side, and Katniss tucks an arm around her sister's shoulders. After some time, the Everdeens manage to extricate themselves from the exuberant crowds, following the line of glaring tributes to the elevators. "Do you think we're allowed to stay together?" Prim frets anxiously, tugging at the tight neckline of her dress.

"I really don't care," Katniss retorts as they step into a vacant elevator.

"Okay. My room, then," Prim replies, pressing the button for the appropriate floor. "Effie says we have the penthouse, and you're really from District 12 anyway."

The elevator has thick glass walls that curve around them, and as it shoots up the side of the Training Center, the whole of the Capitol spills out beneath them. In the deepening twilight, with the white streetlights twinkling like stars, the city looks like some magical wonderland Katniss
could only have ever imagined. She's never seen anything like it in all her life, the little intertwined streets and shops in miniature.

She might have looked for longer, except that the side of her dress is wet. Prim's face is pressed into it, and her sister is crying without making a sound.

"Prim?"

"I didn't think you'd really do it," Prim says. Her voice, muffled by the fabric of the dress, is oddly calm. "I've been so scared, and I wanted you to be here, but I'm also really...I'm so mad you're here, Katniss," Prim whispers. "Because now both of us will...both of us could...there's only one of us—"

No, this is the hardest part, Katniss thinks suddenly. Getting her not to worry without telling her anything specific. There's no way to tell Prim the entirety of her plan, to tell her that if it comes down to just the two of them, Katniss will choose her own death in a heartbeat. Not that it matters: even if she can't put that into words, Prim probably already has her suspicions.

"I know. But Prim, I don't see much point in staying in District 12 alone without you. I'd rather be here with you, even if neither of us makes it out."

"That's not fair," Prim bawls. "Because I don't want you to die for me. It's not fair that you did that. And what about Mom?"

Katniss still can't see her face. She pecks a kiss onto the coiled hair piled on her sister's head. "Mom will be alright."

Prim's arms tighten around Katniss's middle, constricting.

"Don't be mad, Prim—please don't be mad. We've only got a few days, and I don't want to spend them mad at each other. Okay?"

Prim says nothing, but she pulls away and scrubs the tears off her cheeks. Her mascara smudges at the corners of her eyes. The elevator has reached the penthouse, and the door stands open, revealing a brightly lit room with a long dining table and a series of plush armchairs facing a long window. Katniss gently pulls her sister out of the elevator and into the empty space.

"I'm still mad," Prim sniffs. "I can't help it. But...we're okay. And, I mean—we're going to try, right? So maybe we'll win?"

So one of us wins, Katniss thinks. "Yeah," she says aloud. "I'm going to make sure no one touches you, Prim." She knows better than to make it into a promise, but she thinks her sister breathes a little easier regardless.

"Okay." Prim looks a little shell-shocked now, her face open with exhaustion. Katniss wonders if she has managed to sleep at all since the reaping. She wordlessly takes her sister by the hand and leads her across the room to find a place for them to sleep. Lights flicker on and off automatically as she peeks into rooms: a wide kitchen brimming with gleaming platinum appliances, a bathroom with a tub large enough to drown in, a library lined with books and stuffed with comfy chairs. Down a darkened hallway is a room cluttered with weapons and covered in padding—a private training room. Flanking the hallway is a series of spacious bedrooms, and Katniss chooses the one at the end for its wide, floor-to-ceiling window that stretches across one wall.

Prim, in her fatigue, doesn't seem to notice the window at all. She heads straight for the bed, and Katniss rummages through the drawers for pajamas for them both as Prim strips off her shimmery black dress, the familiar scars on her back stretching as she pulls the fabric over her head. Once
she's swallowed in the pale white nightgown Katniss has found for her, Prim looks more like herself. Katniss pulls on a shirt and a pair of pants that are a bit too large, and then she goes into the bathroom to scrub the makeup off her face.

When the water in the sink swirls with glitter, she tosses the washcloth aside and joins Prim in bed. Her sister is usually asleep a little after sundown, and it's a stretch for her to be awake so late. She huddles shivering under the blankets and clings to Katniss as soon as she slips under the sheets.

The joke among the Everdeens is that all Prim needs in order to fall asleep is a warm body nearby. Whether it's Katniss, their mother, or even Buttercup, Prim latches on like she's clutching a lifeline and is out cold within minutes.

Tonight is no different, even under such foreboding circumstances and in unfamiliar surroundings. Katniss can almost feel the thoughts buzzing beneath Prim's skin, holding her awake for some time as she restlessly fidgets under the sheets. It seems like ages before Prim eventually settles into the mattress, limp and snoring.

For Katniss, things are different. It's as if all of Prim's worries have transferred to her. This first act of their arrival feels somehow unfinished, as though the rushed ending has left the edges of the day frayed and undone. Katniss can almost feel the thoughts buzzing beneath Prim's skin, holding her awake for some time as she restlessly fidgets under the sheets. It seems like ages before Prim eventually settles into the mattress, limp and snoring.

The third floor of the Training Building is identical to the twelfth in every way, from what Katniss can see. Chattering away on a cluster of leather sofas are the District 3 victors Katniss met this morning. Leylan, his dark scar twisting under his smile, calls out to her as she enters. "The famous Katniss Everdeen! You caused quite a stir, my dear. Wiress told us what you intended to do for your sister, but no one expected you to bolt right out of the chariot. What a show!"

The cheery grin seems oddly out of place for a victor, given what Katniss knows of the other victors: Haymitch, who runs through alcohol like water, Beetee, with his wary and calculating glances, and Wiress, with her pencil-thin frame and reluctance to stray far from the safety of her home in the Victors' Village. Still, she supposes all of the victors eventually have to learn to be sociable during their time in the Capitol. The female victor, Rekka, also wears a wrinkled smile, but Videl slumps in his armchair, tired and bored.

"I...didn't actually mean to cause that much fuss," Katniss admits, approaching them slowly. From up close, Katniss sees that Leylan has one eye greyed over with cataracts. "I guess I didn't think things through."

"It's a bit more spirit than we've seen from our victors in years," Rekka offers. "I don't know that we've ever seen anything like it. I know your situation isn't the best, but you've certainly done a good job of stealing the show. It's a smart move when it comes to sponsors—everyone will be
"You should have seen the look on the president's face when you strayed from the program!" Leylan laughs, still working on his original line of thought. "I thought he'd never recover—too bad he did!"

"Are you allowed to say that?" Katniss asks, smiling in spite of herself.

"I won't tell him if you don't," he chuckles.

Katniss snorts, covering it with her hand as Leylan looks on in amusement. She shifts awkwardly. "Um, I was actually just looking for Wiress and Beetee…I thought I'd check in, but it looks like they've gone to bed?"

"Ah, the private club of mentors," Leylan replies, waggling his eyebrows. "That's alright, just leave us old ones out of it!"

"We're not much use," Videl rasps suddenly.

"They're in the kitchen still, I think," Rekka adds kindly. "I believe Haymitch is visiting."

"Thanks," Katniss responds, wandering toward the kitchen. Away from Leylan's laughter, she can hear voices echoing off the kitchen tiles, Beetee's gravelly tone and Haymitch's rasping voice still thick with the effects of his perpetual hangover. The door is ajar, and Katniss is about to round the corner when she hears her own name.

"...will be in any sort of trouble for what Katniss has done," Haymitch says. Katniss freezes just out of sight.

"She'll be fine, that's for sure. The Capitol already adores her, and the Gamemakers are after a good viewership. They'll show her off as much as they can, I expect."

"And we've already stuck to the plan," Wiress remarks. "Telling the reporters that we only found out she was coming when she was at our doorstep. Beetee, you wiped the message, didn't you?"

"I did. No record of communication between Districts 3 and 12." A clink of plates, and then a short lull in the conversation. "She's more...impatient and reckless than I had expected."

"I told you in the message, didn't I? Confusing as hell. I don't know much more about her than I do about the other two tributes, but I think you can only point her in the right direction, not predict what she's gonna do."

"Well, we can't use her if she's no help to us, can we?" Wiress asks. Her voice is closest, and a shadow that must be hers moves slowly back and forth across the floor as the woman collects the dishes. "And we've got so much riding on this. To let it ride on her...we need someone who understands the strategy, who can pull off political maneuvers. Even now, just with the Games, we've taught her what we know, but she may not use it. I'm not sure any of it sank in."

Beetee hums. "But it's not just Katniss now. It's her sister as well. Maybe between the two of them, they'll show some political sense and we'll know for sure."

"If they survive."

"They will," Haymitch drawls grimly. "That girl, Katniss—she has a thing about fighting for the people she loves. There's a good chance she'll make it, if her sister's there with her."
This statement makes the skin on Katniss's neck prickle. She leans gingerly against the wall, wondering just how much Haymitch knows or guesses what she has done for Prim in the past back in District 12, how far she has already gone for her sister.

"At any rate, the point is that it's far too early to say for sure. Personally, I think she's all we've got—and rebelliousness is what we're looking for, isn't it?"

A grunt. The conversation settles into silence again, except the regular clinking of plates. Katniss imagines Wiress removing the remains of their meal. She backs away slowly, uncertain: to join them in the kitchen so soon after this conversation will be suspicious, but it would be equally suspicious of her to return to the other victors without having spoken to the people she'd said she would. But the light from the living room is dimmed, and as Katniss approaches, she finds that the others have gone to bed.

Grateful, she sinks into an open armchair near the window. District 3's floor is much lower than District 12's, so the view through the window is not nearly so spectacular. She doesn't understand all of the conversation she'd overheard, but she can tell that the victors don't quite know what to make of her. There's not much she can do about that, of course, and it's not as though she'd change her behavior for them, but she wonders if she'll need to be more explicit about her decisions in the future, especially if it helps in any way as they attempt to line up sponsors for her.

Minutes pass, and Katniss hears the victors say their goodnights and head off to bed. The room is dark now, lit mostly by the streetlights and stars outside. Katniss thinks Haymitch won't see her as he makes his way to the elevator, but she hears his footsteps approach on the carpeted floor.

"That you outside the kitchen door?" he asks mildly, collapsing into the seat beside her. Katniss wonders how many of his drunken blunders are real and how many are intended to lull his discussion partners into a false sense of security, allowing them to imagine him as a stupid or forgetful lout.

"I didn't mean to overhear at first," Katniss explains, seeing no point in denying it if he already knows.

Haymitch hums.

"Are you betting on me?" Katniss asks after it becomes clear that he doesn't intend to say more.

At this, Haymitch laughs uproariously. "Yes," he wheezes, thumping his chest, "or at least I am. Good odds. But no, that's not what we meant."

"What do you mean?"

"We're looking for someone willing to piss on the president's face, pardon the expression."

Katniss sits up straight, suddenly tense. "Are you—…this doesn't seem like a good place to discuss things like that." Though there are no cameras or obvious wires anywhere in the Training Center, Katniss has been unable to get over the feeling that she is constantly being watched.

"Relax," Haymitch replies, lifting the flap of his coat to reveal a small black device clipped to the inside pocket. "Courtesy of Beetee. It'll scramble any electronics nearby that are recording."

Katniss raises her eyebrows, but she settles back into the chair. "That sounds bad for my health. The pissing thing, I mean."

"It is, if you win," Haymitch replies cheekily. "Which it doesn't sound like you mean to. Am I wrong?"
Katniss frowns. "They'd better hope I die in there, not Prim," she says matter-of-factly. "Because if I win, I'll find a way to make them pay for what they've done."

Haymitch blinks in surprise and then smiles at her, considering. "Even the more... outspoken tributes are left alone for the most part, no matter what they say—unless it's something obvious and stupid like that kid from District 6 a while back who went nuts during the interview, started spitting out stuff about the Capitol being corrupt and cursing the President out badly enough to make a Peacekeeper blush. Never thought his end in the Games was a natural one."

Katniss shakes her head and stands. "I think you've got the wrong girl."

"Sit down, sit down," Haymitch replies. Katniss ignores him, but she doesn't move to leave. "Like I said, the tributes are left alone. Bunch of them have spoken out against the Capitol every now and again and won the games anyway. Lucian. Vell. Chrome. The Capitol only silences them after they win, when what they say really matters. And like I said, you don't mean to win."

"But I also don't mean to say anything that will get me or Prim killed."

"Understandable. So don't. Just do us all a favor: whatever presentation and interview strategy Beetee and Wiress gave you? Drop it. Be yourself, Katniss. I don't know much about you, but I know you aren't going to let anyone push your sister around. Show them they can't mess with her. Or with you. That's all I'm asking."

He looks at her meaningfully, and Katniss thinks, So. He does know. I wonder how he found out. Aloud, she snaps, "I'll think about it."

"That's all I'm asking," he repeats. "If we can show that they're not infallible..."

He leans back in his chair, trailing off. Sensing that the conversation is at an end, Katniss makes to leave. Before she makes it a few steps, she turns around. "Haymitch?"

"Yeah?"

"If I manage this...if Prim wins...you'll keep an eye on her, won't you?" Haymitch looks taken aback, so Katniss hastens to explain. "My mother's back in District 12, but I'm not sure she'll be much help. You're not much better, but at least you're sober and in the right mind part of the time."

Haymitch nods. "She's a sweet kid. She'll be fine, but I'll keep an eye on her. You have my word on that."

"Thanks, Haymitch," she says, and she steps into the elevator.

Prim is just as Katniss left her up on the twelfth floor, sprawling and openmouthed on the mattress. Katniss closes the notebook she'd left on the nightstand, takes up the remote, and crawls into bed. She doesn't think she'll be getting much sleep that night, so she turns on the television and mutes it, half-curious about the infamous soap operas of the Capitol. Instead, she finds herself faced with a repeat of the reapings throughout the districts.

The faces of the other tributes stare back at her, some of them crying and afraid, others masterfully blank. The Career tributes cheer wildly, the muscles in their arms rippling with every pump of their fists.

Katniss finds her sister's hand and loops their fingers together in reassurance.
Prim is going to win. And these are the people I am going to kill, she tells herself. She repeats the words over and over again, like a mantra. Like a prayer.

Chapter End Notes

And that's Prim and Katniss together again, though Prim hasn't had quite enough time to process her feelings on the whole thing. Plus a healthy dash of foreshadowing :-)

Stay tuned - the next chapter is coming at you this weekend!
Like some sort of relentlessly cheerful flower, Prim has always had the habit of rising with the morning sun. In a series of slow, lethargic glances, Katniss pries her eyes open to see Prim sitting on the floor by the window with her forehead pressed against the glass, Prim curled in bed against Katniss's side as she doodles in the notebook, Prim curiously opening and closing the drawers. In the hour it takes Katniss to drag herself from bed, Prim finally strips off her own nightgown to dress for the day, donning black pants and a long-sleeved blue tunic that Katniss doesn't recognize.

"They've left clothes for both of us," Prim remarks as her sister stretches her arms gingerly overhead. An outfit similar to Prim's is folded neatly across a chest of drawers. "I guess they knew you would be here."

Katniss changes quickly, sensing her sister's impatience. After a brief hesitation, she transfers Alree's stone from the pocket of the hunting jacket she'd worn yesterday to the nightstand by the bedside, just in case anyone comes in to take up the laundry. By the time Katniss has brushed out and braided her hair, Prim is bouncing restlessly on the bed.

They head to the kitchen together for breakfast and find Haymitch and the blonde tribute from District 12 seated at the table. Both their plates are piled high with bacon and pancakes and eggs pulled from the heaping mountains of food that sit steaming at the center of the table. "Morning," Prim says, and sinks into a chair.

Haymitch is too tired—or maybe too hungover—to do anything more than grunt, but the boy offers a smile. "Good morning."

His face shoots through Katniss like lightning, and if she'd been bleary and tired before, she's wide awake now. Peeta Mellark. For a second, Katniss is surrounded by the icy, dark chill of the downpour in District 12, watching loaves of burnt bread tumble across the saturated earth. That time and place filter through the air somehow, and even knowing that she's standing here in the warm kitchen of the Capitol, she can almost smell the rain. After a beat, Prim tugs her sister into a chair. "What is it?"

"Nothing," Katniss replies, avoiding Peeta's eyes.

He's older now. Obviously. But she can still remember the bruises on his boyish young face the day after he'd thrown the bread out to her. She knows what he did for her, the kindness he showed, and she's never thanked him for it. It isn't really her way. Katniss Everdeen doesn't admit her weaknesses, not like that, and it's been easier to avoid him than to show any kind of gratefulness.

But she's always hated this constricting feeling at her throat, the one she feels now. The feeling of owingsomeone. Kind people are the worst people to have around now, she reminds herself. No matter what happened back then, you can't let this one in.

"What time is training?" she asks aloud.

Haymitch has to pause in between bites of greasy ham. "You'll meet in the gymnasium in forty-five minutes," he says, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. "But we'll need to talk about your
training with Effie and me first. I assume you'll be…ah, transferring back to your home district? That I'll be working with you two as a unit?” he asks, gesturing at Katniss and Prim.

Katniss nods. Beetee and Wiress have taught her what they know, but if Haymitch has anything to add, she'll need to learn what she can.

"Alright, then. First thing to do is to decide whether you want to be coached together or apart,” he says, with a broad gesture meant to include Peeta as well as the Everdeens.

"Why would we—?” Prim begins, at the same time as Katniss responds with a firm "Separately.” Prim blinks up at her in surprise.

"No offense,” Katniss adds to Peeta. "I just don't think it's the best idea for us."

"None taken,” Peeta replies, his face carefully blank. His plate is empty, so he pushes himself to his feet. His shoulders are broad, his arms thick, and Katniss thinks that he could be a very formidable enemy if given half a chance. She suddenly remembers him winning an award at school for a wrestling competition, pictures him carrying huge sacks of flour across his shoulders as though they weigh nothing at all. "Are you starting now?” he asks Haymitch.

"Just a brief overview," Haymitch replies, staring shrewdly at Katniss. "Fifteen minutes with them, fifteen with you."

Peeta nods once and sweeps from the room. Katniss is careful not to watch him go.

"Very cold, sweetheart," Haymitch says once Peeta is out of earshot.

"What was I supposed to do?” she snaps.

Haymitch shrugs airily. "Not saying that's a bad thing. Not here. Now," he begins without giving her a chance to work out a response, "tell me what I'm working with here. What can you ladies do in the arena? Strengths?"

"Katniss can shoot things," Prim replies instantly. She leans forward at the table, chin lifted in confidence. A model student. "She's the one who brings in enough meat for me and mom and sometimes Gale. She can shoot anything right in the eye, even if it's moving."

Haymitch lifts an eyebrow at Katniss. Is that true?

Katniss shrugs. "I'm pretty good with a bow and arrow."

"And she can make traps, too. For animals, I mean, little ones like squirrels and rabbits and stuff.”


"Nothing like Katniss. I can't even really hunt, I just…” she trails off.

"Prim helps our mother in the kitchen. She's good with a knife."

"Yeah, at chopping up vegetables."

"And skinning animals."

"I do that too. But they're not moving or anything. I've never used a knife on a real person.”

"I've never used an arrow on a real person, but I know the gist of it," Katniss retorts. "And you
know where to put a blade in a person, don't you?"

"In the eyes."

Haymitch raises both brows this time, his face open and incredulous. Katniss relishes the stunned expression for a moment before she explains, "It's the best choice, especially for someone her size. If you stab and it's not fatal, you'll just make someone mad. If you poke an eye out, you'll blind them and you can get away. It's not lethal, but it'll work best for her."

"And the two of you have spent the morning discussing fighting tactics, huh?" Haymitch asks, rising to rummage through the cabinets in search of something. Probably alcohol, Katniss guesses. The topic of the conversation is the sort of thing that might inspire such a quest.

"No. Katniss taught me that ages ago."

"Right," Haymitch replies dubiously, abandoning his search after a moment. He pulls a small silver flask from his coat pocket and takes a swig, rubbing his forehead. "And why on earth did she think it was a good idea to teach you that at an age any younger than you are now?"

"Because sometimes I might need to protect myself when she isn't around to help me. And I like knowing," Prim says, and Katniss glows a little at her defensive tone. "I don't want to use it, but I like knowing. Just in case." She is running her fingertips along the edge of her knife even as she speaks. Katniss thinks she might not even realize she's doing it.

Self-defense is a skill Prim needs to have, but Katniss isn't glad she had to teach her. Time for a change of subject.

"But she can also hide," Katniss says. "It might sound like nothing, but if Prim doesn't want to be found, she won't be. She's quiet as a mouse."

No argument from Prim at that. She knows this skill far better than Katniss, the way she can disappear into the folds of the house for long stretches when she's angry or upset, and neither the faint sound of breathing nor the slightest movement from weary limbs ever gives her away.

"Alright," Haymitch says. "One shooter-trapper, and one stabber-hider. Got it. Well, no matter what your skills are, here's your strategy for today, alright? Learn all you can, pick up new skills, but don't show off. I'm sure Beetee and Wiress have already discussed this with you, but the pair of you could easily become the first targets in the eyes of the other tributes. You're a natural alliance, one where there's no chance of betrayal, really. The others don't have anything like it, so they'll want to tear you apart.

"The only chance you have of showing you're not a threat is to spend the next few days being as boring and useless as possible. Even with the Gamemakers. It'll be important to show them you can use a bow and arrow, Katniss, so they'll put one into the arena for you, but if you're as good as you say, don't show it. A high number may get you more sponsors, but it'll also tell the other tributes that you were just messing around during training, that you really are someone to be reckoned with. Someone to take down at the first opportunity."

"But we need sponsors," Katniss argues. "If we have low scores from the Gamemakers, won't we —?"

Haymitch waves a dismissive hand at her. "Not necessarily. Most sponsors know there's a lot of leeway in the Gamemakers' scores. Victors have won with scores as low as a two in the past. That's not to say they wouldn't be quicker to scoop you up if you have a higher score, but I think that with your story being as unique as it is, you'll have more than your fair share of sponsors."
"You're going to find them for us, aren't you?" Prim asks. "Effie said it's all up to you."

"I'll scrounge up everyone I can find," Haymitch promises. "In the meantime, you," he points to Prim, "be adorable, and you," he points to Katniss, "be…you. Just stick together the whole time you're in front of the Gamemakers or anywhere in the Capitol. Play up the sister angle, be happy you're together…braid each other's hair, I don't know."

"Okay," Prim replies easily, threading her arm around Katniss's.

Haymitch looks back and forth at them, taking in their identical solemn faces, before he tilts his chair back on the rear legs, sighing. "Now get lost. It's Peeta's turn. Go get ready or something."

In person, the other tributes are hulking things, even some of the girls. Both Prim and Katniss have inherited the quick, slender limbs and inherent wiriness of the Everdeen line, but it doesn't seem like much compared to the beefy, blocky Career pack that chatters and laughs together as though they're all old friends. Only one girl, a small, dark-skinned thing with short brown hair, looks even close to Prim's size at all.

Prim hovers close to Katniss's side as the head trainer, Atala, runs them through the basic procedures for the training that will take place over the next few days. Following her speech, they are left mostly to their own devices, and the rest of the tributes disperse throughout the stations, leaving Prim and Katniss standing alone.

"Where do you want to go?" Katniss asks.

Prim doesn't respond right away, and when Katniss looks down at her, she sees that her sister's gaze is transfixed upon a nearby tribute, a brawny girl with dark hair pulled back in a tight ponytail who flings a knife at a nearby target with frightening accuracy. When she catches them looking in her direction, the tribute smirks and offers an airy little wave.

"Come on," Katniss says, dragging Prim to the nearest station, which happens to be for edible insects. It's not really Katniss's cup of tea, but it seems to distract Prim well enough. Her sister squirms as the trainer shows them how to catch and boil ants without too many bites and where to find waxworms, and Katniss takes advantage of the diversion to study the other tributes.

The Careers, loud and obnoxious, have formed a small horde near the hand-to-hand combat area. Though none of the tributes are permitted to fight one another during training, they watch each other fight the trainer, laughing uproariously and cheering as though committed to stealing all attention they can.

Sprinkled throughout the room are the other tributes, most of them getting their first shaky instruction in weaponry and survival. Saneer, whom Katniss hasn't seen since she leapt off the chariot, looks green as he picks up an axe whose blade is the size of his head. Though they are enemies here, she can't help but feel the slightest bit sorry for her temporary companion, and she hopes Wiress and Beetee are looking after him.

Stop it, Katniss, she warns herself once she realizes the direction of her thoughts. Don't borrow other people's troubles.

The girl who looks to be Prim's size is nowhere to be seen, but Peeta is across the room, painting his arm. Katniss has to look twice. Yes, he's really painting his arm. She cranes to see the name of the station: Camouflage. It explains the activity, maybe, and if Haymitch gave him the same advice he'd given the Everdeens, Peeta will be finding every opportunity to play down his
strengths. Still, the pattern looks good, even from as far away as she is now, and she can't help but wonder if hiding will be a part of his strategy as well.

Suddenly, Prim's voice, small and wavering, meets her ears. Katniss turns to her sister to find her shrinking away under the smirking gaze of two of the male Careers.

"You're so tiny," one of them, the male tribute from District 1, says offhandedly. He's skinny, with short, light brown hair and bright green eyes. He looks almost friendly, except for the way he bares his teeth. "Are you even old enough to be here?"

"We could probably snap her like a toothpick," laughs the other one, who has muscles rippling beneath every article of clothing. He leers at Prim.

Katniss sees red, and in an instant, she has grabbed Prim by the neck of her shirt and pulled her sister behind her back. "You'll have a tough time of that," she replies, keeping her voice pleasant. No fights are allowed between tributes here, not even verbal ones, if it can be helped.

"Oh ho! Big sister's taking care of you, huh?" the first boy snickers. Katniss begins to drag Prim away.

"You sure you can keep her safe in there? Might be hard to watch your back and hers, too," the other adds kindly.

The station for edible plants is a bit farther from the ones that encourage combat, and Katniss pushes her sister there. "You okay?" she asks.

"I'm fine," Prim says, gritting her teeth. Her eyes are vaguely watery, but she blinks rapidly and the moisture disappears. Good girl, Katniss thinks, peering over her shoulder at the ring around the gymnasium, where the Gamemakers are taking notes on everything, even now.

"Next station. Come on." One extra perk of choosing the edible plants station is that the subject is one they both know well, meaning that Prim gets the chance to really shine at something. The trainer seems impressed, especially when Prim sparks up a discussion on the healing herbs their mother has taught her about. Great, Katniss thinks, almost hysterically. It's all fine now. Prim'll just heal everyone to death.

Though they'll take their breakfast and dinner up in their respective suites, the tributes eat lunch together in the giant mess hall in the Training Center. All of them serve themselves and then hurry back to their seats, most of the tributes sitting silent and alone, with the exception of the Careers, who are as cockily exuberant at mealtime as they always are.

Katniss and Prim find a table near the corner. Prim picks at a spinach puff, pulling the flaky pastry apart as she looks at Peeta, who sits alone at his table, and then at Katniss.

"No," Katniss answers preemptively.

"Why not? He was fine before." Before you came, Prim doesn't say. "He's nice. I think he's alright."

"I know. That's the problem. You know why we can't…I mean, we can't just be friends with him, Prim."

"Why not for a little while?"

"Because we might have to kill him," Katniss replies harshly, stabbing a piece of chicken with her fork. "Where do you think this story's going to end, Prim?"
Prim's face screws up like it used to when she was just a little girl, right before she'd start to wail.

Katniss looks around in alarm. "Prim, don't—don't cry, okay?"

"I'm not going to cry," Prim retorts, sounding offended. She swallows, and the look recedes a little. "I'm just... I mean..." She shakes her head, lost for words.

"It's a lot all at once." Katniss sighs. "But listen, Prim. Please, just don't... make this any harder than it has to be, okay? We're going to have to do a lot of... a lot of scary stuff, and I'm going to make a lot of decisions you probably won't like. A lot of decisions I won't like. And— I'm going to do things that might..."

"I know," Prim says in a tiny voice. "It's okay."

The thing is, Katniss knows it's the truth. Even if Katniss manages to take out one of the other tributes, even if she does it right in front of Prim's face, her sister will stand by her side as she always has. There is little Katniss can do in the arena that will come as a huge surprise for Prim, who knows her better than anyone in the world, maybe even better than Katniss knows herself.

"I'm going to do most of it," Katniss reassures her. "All of it that I can, so you won't... It'll be me. It'll be my fault."

Prim, who had begun to look better, is suddenly biting her lip and ducking her face to hide from view. She nods, swiping quickly at her eyes before anyone can see.

Katniss takes her hand. "Are we okay?"

Prim nods again, squeezing.

They sit like that for some time, Prim staring down at her untouched food and Katniss staring at Prim. When all of the tributes have filed back into the gymnasium for another round of training, they finally stand. Before they reach the door, Prim tugs the side of Katniss's shirt to stop her in her tracks.

"I want to help." At Katniss's raised eyebrow, she hastens to add, "Not with—I mean, I don't know if I can help with the fighting part. I just mean I don't want you to have to think of everything alone. I don't think I'm smart enough like Haymitch to figure out how to win, but if you want, you can talk to me about things so you don't have to think of everything alone."

Katniss smiles at her sister. Hands clenched at her sides, Prim stares back, and the expression on her face reminds Katniss of the earnestness and determination of a terrier. She probably doesn't even know the effect she has on people, Katniss thinks, though she wonders sometimes. "Deal," she says at last.

"Okay." Slowly, Prim turns back to the double doors, chin raised high and proud. "Let's not be afraid," she adds.

"I love you," Katniss says suddenly.

"I love you, too," Prim replies, reaching for Katniss's hand.

Together, they push their way through the double doors, feeling the stares of the Gamemakers fall upon them as they enter.
Clove has a face perfectly made for punching. Maybe it's something in the rigid curve of the jawline, or maybe it's the delicate little dip between her eyes and eyebrows. Katniss imagines her own knuckles fitting there perfectly, crunching the bone until it breaks. Maybe it's the upturn of her nose, which reminds Katniss of a story her mother had once told her, one in which a man had been punched so hard in the nose that shards of bone had split right apart and rammed their way into his brain, killing him almost instantly.

Maybe it's the way that everything that springs from her mouth is acidic bile.

The Careers are all a little like that, all of them making caustic remarks and laughing too loudly and preening and showing off for Katniss and Prim and anyone else within spitting distance. Katniss is glad that Haymitch and Beeetee and Wiress warned them to be as nondescript as possible, because if this is how they're treated when they're thought to have no skills at all, she hates to imagine what it might be like if the Careers ever see them as a threat.

Over the next two days, as the Everdeens wander around the room at the Training Center to continue learning, a Career or two occasionally breaks off from the pack to follow and leer at them, or to stare at them from a nearby combat training center while making loud, rude remarks about the Everdeens' abilities to do whatever they're doing. The two boys from earlier, whom Katniss now knows as Marvel from District 1 and Cato from District 2, are particularly crude. "No reaction," Katniss whispers to Prim each time, and Prim always nods and focuses on the task at hand.

Eventually, the Careers bore of the continued abuse of two girls, who obviously have no skills whatsoever, and they leave Katniss and Prim alone. But not Clove, whose name Katniss only remembers for the sheer amount of times the trainers have called it out to remind the girl not to engage with other tributes. She's always a bit too close, a bit too wickedly eager, getting as near to Prim as possible before Katniss can turn around and pull her sister away.

"I'd love to kill that girl first," Katniss mutters to herself, searching the gymnasium to make sure the Career in question is still showing off at the other end of it.

"What was that?" Prim asks. They're at the station for knots today. Prim is busy learning to make a basic hunting snare, and Katniss following the trainer's instruction to make a trap that will hoist a person straight into the air.

"Nothing," Katniss replies, turning back around. "That looks better," she comments. The tight knots in the trap are nearly as neat as Katniss's own now. Prim beams.

"Are we done?"

Katniss throws her own work aside, having memorized the knotting pattern some time ago. "Let's go."

They rise to their feet, stretch, and look around the gymnasium. Over the last few days, they have learned a remarkable variety of skills: how to make fire, how to make shelter, how to fish, how to climb. They've hovered around survival skills mostly, and Katniss tries very hard not to think that she's been guiding them to these skills to ensure Prim's continued survival if and when Katniss is no longer around. Prim doesn't bring it up either, but something in her morose, accepting expression makes Katniss think she knows why these have been the first selected.

Today, the last day of training, they have exhausted the pool of available survival skills, and the only things that remain are combative skills. Prim will need those too, but not as badly—Katniss has the feeling her sister will try to refrain from using them as much as possible. And it doesn't help that she, Katniss, has the bleak, fatalistic sense that there will be little hope left for either of
them if they ever have to rely on Prim's fighting skills.

Sensing Prim's hesitance, Katniss makes a decision. "Over here," she says, guiding Prim by the shoulders to the knife station. Although one day is not enough time for her to learn anything substantial about knife-throwing, Katniss thinks that both of them should learn the basics of gripping and handling a blade, which is—according to Wiress's and Beetee's statistics—the most widely available weapon in the Games. She explains as much to the trainer, who appears, like all of the other trainers they have met so far, torn between amusement and confusion at seeing two tributes working in conjunction.

The trainer adjusts their stances—feet set apart, chin tucked, checking hand out—and shows them how to dart in and out quickly and purposefully. As they jab together, Katniss thinks this weapon may be perfect for her small but speedy little sister.

After an hour with the trainer, Katniss declares them to be passable, letting Prim finish one more exercise on targeting critical parts of the body as she scans the gymnasium for their next session: slingshots or swords? In the distance, one of the Careers falls ten feet at the climbing station. Katniss snorts.

"I think we should—" she begins, turning around, but Prim is gone, and the trainer is placing the knives back in their cases.

Katniss looks around to find her sister striding purposefully down the main aisle between stations. She darts after Prim, wondering what she is up to, when she realizes what Prim has seen: Clove has caught the little girl, the small one from District 11, right at the corner of the camouflage station. It's been masterfully done, this entrapment—behind the trees and bushes laid out for practice at the camouflage station, it will be hard to spot them unless someone knows they're there. The girl from District 11 backs toward a dark tree trunk, looking up at Clove with wide, frightened eyes, her arms half up as though she's afraid Clove might actually attack her right here in the training session.

Prim bolts in between them as Katniss hurries to catch up. Her sister's face is unyielding and angry in a way Katniss has rarely ever seen. It's an expression Prim reserves for arguing in defense of small animals and occasionally older sisters.

Clove is laughing, and as Katniss approaches, she can just make out the girl's words: "...and oh, no, there are two poor little babies—what will I do? Wake up, string beans: we're going to kill you, and everyone sees it coming. I can't believe you're here at—"

Katniss grabs the fabric of Clove's shoulder and rips her away. "For the last time, leave my sister alone, you bitch."

It irritates her that Clove is still laughing, her freckles stretching across her cheeks. That ridge above her eye is so inviting, so welcoming that Katniss's knuckles twinge with the need to strike her right on target. "This is hilarious. I really can't believe it. I hope you know you're not exactly a threat either, big sister." Clove is close now, her eyes glinting in amusement. She looks pointedly down at her shoulder and adjusts the fabric of her sleeve. "I'm going to kill her in front of you," she whispers quietly. "I'll get the others to hold you down and make sure you watch."

Flames rise out of Katniss's stomach, up her throat, into her eyes, but before she can so much as move, a voice asks, "Is everything alright?"

She and Clove whip around as one to see the trainer from the camouflage station jogging up to them, Prim and Rue hot on the man's heels—and when did they leave, anyway?
Katniss swallows, the heat dissipating. "Everything's fine," she says quietly.

"Just trading strategies," Clove chirps. She steps lightly away, heading back toward the other Careers, but before she's out of sight, she turns back to Katniss and points one finger back at them, her thumb up. Bang, she mouths, and she cackles and turns around.

"Are you alright?" The trainer asks. He looks interested in the same way the Gamemakers always do when they lean over the rails to peer down at the gymnasium—calculating and distant.

"I'm fine," Katniss replies irritably. After a beat, the trainer nods and returns to his station, leaving Katniss alone with Prim and Rue. Katniss doesn't even realize her hands are shaking until Prim takes one of them.

"It's okay, Katniss," she murmurs.

"I know," Katniss says, but it's really not. Not if Clove means what she says. The other Careers have left them alone, but Katniss fears that Clove will really hunt them down in the arena. It's one thing to have an aggression like Katniss's, a detached acceptance of fighting—and maybe killing, if it comes to it—to stay alive. It's another thing entirely to take pleasure in it, to laugh at the thought of slow torture.

She grits her teeth, and her eyes fall on the girl from District 11. "This is Rue," Prim says calmly. "Clove was being a bitch to her."

The profanity sounds bizarre coming from Prim's mouth, and Katniss snorts in amusement, as Prim means her to. Rue grins at Prim. "Thanks for helping," the girl offers. "I can't stand her. I don't like any of them, but I can't stand her at all."

"Me, neither," Prim agrees. "It was a good idea to go get help."

"I was afraid you'd get in trouble for fighting," Rue explains to Katniss. Her gaze is part wary, part shy. She looks so hopeful and so much like Prim that Katniss smiles at her almost reflexively.

"I might have," Katniss admits. "I don't know...I wonder if she meant for me to. Get in trouble for fighting, I mean."

"I thought she seemed like the type of person to do something like that," Rue offers, looking back the way Clove left. The girl has already forgotten them, moving on to a spear-throwing competition with the boy from District 2. "If you get in trouble for attacking someone, you have to sit out for the rest of the day."

It was a valid point, not that Katniss had thought of it. Smart girl, she thinks regretfully, sizing Rue up.

But there can be no alliance between them. Two mouths to feed and two bodies to look after will be almost more than Katniss can manage when the Games begin, and she's already promised herself: no more kind people. Not even smart girls who remind me of Prim.

Still, there's no point in being rude. "Thank you," she says. "I didn't think about that. You probably saved me from being kicked out."

"You're welcome," the girl replies shyly.

"Prim and I have a few more training centers we need to visit before the session with the Gamemakers this afternoon," Katniss says. "We'll see you around?"
"See you around," Rue agrees, and she walks away into the trees of the camouflage station.

Prim stares after the girl, and then she looks at Katniss reproachfully. "No one but us," Katniss reminds her softly. "I'm sorry."

Her sister nods. "No one but us," she repeats, but she turns back to stare into the trees after Rue anyway.

By the time lunch rolls around, Katniss and Prim have practiced with slingshots, swords, and hand-to-hand combat, which Katniss hopes they will never need, as Prim is too tiny and physically weak to cause any real damage to an opponent. There's no time for anything else, and at any rate, Katniss imagines axes and tridents are mostly self-explanatory after learning to use swords and knives.

They talk companionably as they eat, chattering about catching slippery trout in the fishing station and joking that Prim should dye her hair to the luxurious lavender that Effie claims is the color of the season in the Capitol. Pretending that the next few days don't exist. When Katniss is with Prim, and only then, it becomes possible to allow herself to forget, to somehow disengage the portion of her brain that whirs with worries and calculations. For a while, she can lose herself in the moment.

Presently, Prim slaps her hand away from her frosted sugar cookie. "Get your own," she says, looking at her sister incredulously and cupping her hands over it as though sheltering it from attack.

"The station is so far away," Katniss laughs, and eventually, Prim relents and snaps the cookie in half.

"You're lucky I love you," Prim says under her breath.

"If you didn't—"

"Marvel Decera," booms a voice over the loudspeaker. "Marvel Decera to the gymnasium."

The mess hall, which was quiet before, is now completely silent. All eyes stray to the Career pack, where the male tribute from District 1 slowly takes to his feet. The other Careers watch wordlessly as he leaves. There are no signs of the encouragement or support they'd feigned back in the training session, just a cluster of shrewd, watchful gazes. He weaves through the tables to push open the heavy doors to the gymnasium.

"I didn't realize they'd be calling us so soon. I didn't know it was happening at lunch," Prim remarks, setting her portion of the cookie back onto the plate.

"Me neither," Katniss replies, watching the double doors swing shut. "But it doesn't change anything. Just do what Haymitch said: don't show off, but go from station to station and show the very basics of what you can do. Alright?"

Prim swallows, nodding. "Not that there's much," she says.

"Climb and hide, Prim. Use the slingshot station, too. No matter what happens, we'll be fine—it doesn't matter what the Gamemakers think of us."

"Right," Prim says under her breath.
After that, they watch silently as the next tributes leave and don't return: Glimmer, Cato, Clove. Saneer slinks away when his name is called, his shoulders hunched as though he wants to cave in upon himself.

In no time at all, it's her turn. "Katniss Everdeen. Katniss Everdeen to the gymnasium."

Katniss kisses her sister on the forehead. "See you back upstairs, Prim."

"Good luck," Prim whispers, and then Katniss turns and strides purposefully into the Training Center.

The Gamemakers are lined at the edge of the railing, some of them with clipboards and notebooks, others with glasses of wine in hand. They chatter amiably, but they quiet as soon as she enters. Under their attentive gazes, Katniss feels afraid and then angry with herself for feeling afraid.

Focus, Katniss, she scolds herself. Shoot straight, but not too straight. She heads to the archery station, finally letting herself pick up the bows she's been eyeing hungrily for the past few days. They're unfamiliar and rigid, not willowy and supple like her father's wooden bow, and her first shots need no help being unimpressive: she misses the dummy by almost a foot, and it takes her several tries to hit it at all.

Once she's satisfied that she knows the provided bows well enough, she walks over to the climbing station to swipe some chalk dust onto her sweating hands as she ponders exactly how close she should shoot her next target. The Gamemakers are murmuring to each other now, and she doesn't need to look at them to know they're scribbling away in their papers, plump and purple-robed like a cluster of grapes.

She takes her position back at the shooting range, her stance firm and sure, and lets an arrow fly. It hits the target a few inches off-center. Good, she tells herself, breathing deeply and eyeing the second ring from the outer edge. Next one a little farther.

It goes on like this for some time. Katniss is careful sure to aim for long, unnecessary stretches and to stay in one position as though rooted. No need for the Gamemakers to know she needs under a second to aim and can shoot while running.

"Thank you, Katniss Everdeen. You are dismissed," one of the Gamemakers finally calls. Uncertainly, Katniss nods, setting the bow back in its place and leaving using the other end of the gymnasium, a hallway that leads to an elevator.

As soon as the doors close in front of her, she heaves a slow sigh of relief. The elevator doesn't move, waiting for her input. After a moment's hesitation, Katniss punches the button for the third floor: she hasn't seen Beetee and Wiress in some time, and after becoming so used to their presence over the week before her reaping, she misses their company.

She steps into the wide living area, which is bright with midday sunlight, and hears voices seeping from the kitchen. As she approaches the door, Saneer steps out of it. He takes a look at her, then scowls slightly, looking away as he walks off. Eyebrows raised, Katniss stands in surprise for a moment before crossing the threshold.

"What's with him?" she asks without preamble.

Beetee is leaning against the far wall, Wiress drinking tea at the table. Both smile when they see her.

"Look what the cat dragged in," Beetee remarks. "We thought you'd forgotten about us."
"Not so much," Katniss replies, sinking into an empty seat. "I've just been upstairs with Prim."

"Of course," Wiress says, sipping her tea. "Haymitch tells us the two of you are inseparable."

The thought of all of them together reminds Katniss of the conversation she'd overheard a few nights ago. Considering what she'd heard, she wonders how much of their penetrating gazes has to do with the upcoming Games and how much has to do with their covert vendetta against the Capitol. "I just want to keep her close," she says. "She's waiting for her session with the Gamemakers right now. I know she'll be last to go."

"Ah, right. District 12," Beetee murmurs.

"So. How did you do?" Wiress inquires. Without asking, she has stood to pull out a teacup for Katniss to fill it with a steaming cup of tea.

"Average. I don't have anything to base it on, since I've never seen any other private sessions, but I'm guessing between a six and an eight."

"Good," Beetee says as Katniss accepts Wiress's cup of tea with a grateful nod. "Passable, but not threatening. Sponsors won't discount you, but the other tributes won't target you."

"Speaking of other tributes," Katniss remembers, "what's up with Saneer? He completely just glared at me on his way out. Did he do badly or something?"

Beetee and Wiress exchange a glance.

"Right, privacy," Katniss adds, sipping her tea. "Never mind."

"I think it's hard for you to see this from where you stand, Katniss," Beetee murmurs, "but no matter how average you try to make yourself, there will be many eyes upon you simply for the fact that you have done something no other tribute has ever done. While the volunteers from Districts 1, 2, and 4 are enjoying a fair amount of attention as well, it's rare that tributes from other districts receive any notice from the Capitol this early on. It's understandable that some of the other tributes might be…ah…"

"Jealous?" Katniss suggests suddenly, understanding what he doesn't want to say.

Beetee nods.

"But it's not like I've got any special advantage, except that there's a lot of focus on me and Prim. Except that I guess—" she pauses, thinking. "I guess maybe people don't think it's fair that you're technically my mentors, but I'm also talking to Haymitch."

Wiress chuckles and then catches herself, hiding a smile behind her cup. "I don't think anyone's worried about your asking Haymitch for help," Wiress explains when Katniss shoots her a questioning look. "The general opinion is that he's an incompetent, unkempt drunkard—and that's far kinder than most things I've heard said about him. We know differently, of course, but I think that most people will consider it a disadvantage that you're collaborating with the mentor from District 12."

Katniss nods slowly. "Then there's really no reason for anyone to be jealous. Except that I've got Prim with me now, we're all on even ground."

Beetee and Wiress shoot each other a long, disbelieving look. Katniss recognizes it as the one they often exchanged to express mutual irritation that she had not yet grasped a simple tactic or that she wasn't focused enough to hash out a list of memorized facts, except that Katniss can't see where
she's lacking this time.

"You don't understand the effect you two have together," Beetee says. "And perhaps you won't until you have the chance to see how intently the Capitol is studying both of you. Tomorrow's interview should show you just how interesting they find you. I doubt you'll find yourself asked the sorts of mundane questions they'll ask the other tributes."

The interview. Katniss groans. "I don't want to do it. I won't know what to say."

"We've rehearsed, Katniss," Wiress says worriedly.

"Yeah, but I'm...I'm not cheerful or happy or anything like that now. I can't pretend to be someone like that."

"Well, we...we can come up with something else," Wiress begins, looking at the exhausted expression on Katniss's face.

"No. No planning or rehearsal or practice or...anything. I don't want to think about it; I don't want to...let's talk about something else."

"Katniss—"

"Maybe—I'll just go wait for Prim upstairs—"

"No, it's fine, Katniss," Beetee says. "Sit down. You're right: if you don't feel comfortable saying the things we've rehearsed, they'll come across as phony, and that's the last thing you want. At any rate, it's very likely you won't need any sort of planned answers. As I said, you're likely to have a lot of questions about you and Prim, and all you need to do is answer as yourself. You've shown us how much you love your sister; all you have to do is show the same to the audience."

Katniss nods slowly.

"Now. Let's review your Game strategy one more time..." Beetee begins to rattle off the general plan, the outline she already has memorized, and Katniss wonders if he's doing it mostly to soothe her nerves.

In any case, it gives Katniss a chance to think. Beetee's right: the Capitol will most assuredly have questions for her tomorrow. Some of them will relate to the part her friends in District 3 played in her escape plan, Katniss realizes. Her mentors have assured her that they'll be in no trouble from the Capitol as long as they all play their parts, and so far, this seems to be the case. But Katniss knows that District 3 is already considered a threat to the Capitol; it's evident in the way they're allowed to bring nothing home from the warehouses, to build nothing particularly innovative for their homes. District 3 is an intelligent district, and Katniss needs to draw attention away from Beetee and Wiress's involvement in her plan as much as possible.

She'll have to be the real threat, and playing the role of a foolish, doting sister isn't going to get her there, not if she wants to prove to sponsors that she has what it takes to defend herself and her sister.

Wiress once told her that the key would be to stop looking so angry all of the time, but what if the opposite is true? If I'm going to die, she realizes suddenly, if this is really it...then I want do go out as myself.

And that means letting the mean, bitter parts of her bleed out so people can see them—because it's true that Katniss loves her sister, but she loves her wholeheartedly, with a profound and dangerous kind of love, and that's what she'll have to show the Capitol tomorrow. The fierce, mean kind of
love, the kind of love that comes at the expense of anyone who isn't Prim.

Her mind drifts as she considers her available strategies. A few years ago, the Capitol was swept away by a passionate infatuation with a tribute from District 2 named Nero. His widespread fame stemmed from the shock of his interview, in which he confessed to the murder of his cousin and brother over an inheritance dispute. He had already been selected for the Games and was likely to die, so the Gamemakers let him into the arena, driven by the intense interest the people of the Capitol showed in him.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Nero won by ripping out four tributes' throats with a sickle. The minute he was pulled from the arena, he was sentenced to execution for his crimes, and the topic, as far as Katniss knows, is still the subject of controversy to this day.

But Katniss doesn't intend to make it out alive, so the execution part doesn't exactly apply. I can it, then, Katniss realizes. I'm that kind of person.

"Haymitch told me you'd be here," Prim says from the doorway. She rests her shoulder outside of the frame as if too uncertain of her welcome to venture all the way inside.

"Prim!" Katniss exclaims, motioning for her sister to come sit beside her. "How did it go? Oh, Wiress, Beetee—this is my sister, Prim. Prim, these are two of the mentors for District 3, Wiress and Beetee."

"It's nice to meet you in person," Wiress offers. "Katniss has told us a lot about you."

"It's nice to meet you, too," Prim says shyly. "Thank you for helping Katniss. I know it was probably dangerous, but I'm glad you brought her here."

Just like that, Katniss thinks. She can see it in her mentors' faces, the pleasant upward tilts of their mouths. This is Prim's talent, one the Gamemakers will never pin down. Prim is genuinely and instantly charming, with an uncanny ability to inspire little blooms of fondness in everyone she meets.

"We were glad to help," Wiress replies, a certain motherly lilt to her tone. "Tea?"

"How did it go?" Katniss interrupts before Prim can respond.

"Okay. I mostly just climbed up and down the climbing wall and then shot from the slingshot a little. No one was even really looking, since I was last. I probably could have just sat on the floor the whole time."

Her voice wavers a little, and Katniss realizes she's trying to keep calm. "That's a good thing, Prim," Katniss says. "The Gamemakers shouldn't know anything about us. We're going to go in as total surprises, both of us. You'll see."

Prim smiles weakly. "Alright."

Wiress pushes a cup of tea her way, and Prim takes a few sips, humoring her.

"Do you need any help with your presentation, dear?"

Prim shakes her head. "Haymitch said to be myself. He gave me an A plus."

Beetee laughs. "I'm sure he did. He's running out of alcohol by this point, so he must have been sober enough to see that you were fine."
"He's really looking awful," Prim laughs conspiratorially. "You should have seen him with Effie this morning…"

Prim launches into an animated story about poor Haymitch, complete with a particularly adept imitation of Effie's tittering voice. As she speaks, earning bursts of laughter from both of the mentors, Katniss marvels at her sister's warm, unaffected charisma. Soaks in these minutes with Prim, this time in which her sister is here and vibrant and alive.

And then she tucks a sprig of blonde hair behind Prim's ear and wonders what kinds of natural laws had to be bent so that someone like Katniss can share the same blood as someone like Prim.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was hell to write, not least of which because it turned out to be eighteen pages! Trying to highlight the emotional/physical differences (and hugely different skill sets and talents) of Katniss and Prim has been really fun, though. I had a great time just imagining how each of them might approach such an extreme situation. Hopefully that part came out well :-)

If you made it through this very long chapter, let me know what you thought! The feedback always helps.
In the morning, a sharp rap at the door startles Katniss into consciousness. "Big day, Katniss," Gallum says, his voice disinterested and muffled by the wood. "Better get out of bed."

"Go away," Katniss groans irritably.

Prim, who is wide awake at this hour, leans back against the headboard with her notebook in hand. She smacks Katniss with the side of her foot. "Thank you, Gallum," she calls, though Katniss thinks he's already gone.

Prim frowns down at her. "What?" Katniss asks blearily, rolling out of bed. "He's useless. It's the first time I've seen him in days."

"You've been up here for days. On the twelfth floor."

" Doesn't change the fact that he's been too busy comparing tributes with his friends to hang around the Training Center much. Even Effie thinks he's worthless."

Prim, who has much more respect for Effie than Katniss does, seems slightly mollified. At any rate, she hums in agreement as she slips out of bed. "Even so."

They dress haphazardly in fresh clothes from the drawers, Katniss tucking her blouse into a pair of brown pants and Prim pulling on a tunic dress. Today, their stylists and prep teams will have their way with them, so there's no point in dwelling on their attire. Prim fidgets anxiously as Katniss brushes out and braids her hair into two long plaits. When she is finished, Katniss drops a kiss on the crown of her sister's head.

"We'll be alright. Especially you. This is where you'll shine."

Prim nods but says nothing, just studies her own pale reflection in the mirror before turning away.

They leave the bedroom and follow the clamor that has arisen from the living area in the last few minutes. A few members of the prep team dance animatedly around Peeta, dragging him toward the elevators for his makeover.

The man who must be Prim's stylist waits for her in a chair. He wears a simple, dark shirt that complements his acorn-brown skin. His eyes light up as they enter the room. "Prim! And you must be Katniss." He holds out a hand for her to shake. "I'm Prim's stylist. Cinna."

Katniss takes it. His grip is firm, and as she leans in, she notices the only makeup he wears is a bit of golden eyeliner to bring out the flecks of green in his eyes. "Well, you're the most normal-looking person from the Capitol I've seen the whole time I've been here," she says bluntly.

Cinna laughs. "We are a colorful bunch, aren't we?" Turning, he tugs at one of Prim's braids lightly. "This is a good, playful style. It'll work well with your dress."

A jolt runs through Katniss. "You set my sister on fire!" she remembers, flabbergasted.

Cinna laughs again, and it has an odd, musical quality to it. "I apologize," he says finally. "If I'd have known it would send you into such a panic, I might have...well, no, I still would have done it. Prim looked lovely, and you caught a lot of attention with that stunt."

"Still," Katniss grinds out grudgingly.
"Well, then, I suppose it's only fair to warn you that some of your sister's dress for today will be on fire again. Don't put her out." He winks.

Prim is grinning up at her, and Katniss fights back a smile in spite of herself. "I'll try."

"Also, you might be interested to know that Jacara and I have collaborated a little on the designs of your gowns this evening. It's not something stylists often have the chance to do in this stage of the competition, since tributes are rarely so closely allied at this stage, but we thought it might be appropriate to show the connection between the two of you."

"Oh! What are they like?" Prim asks.

"You'll have to wait and see like everyone else," Cinna replies mischievously. He turns to Katniss. "If you don't mind me stealing your sister away? I'm sure Jacara is looking for you by now."

Katniss nods hesitantly, squeezing Prim's shoulder, and then she heads for the elevator.

On the third floor, Jacara is pacing anxiously, her long blue curls fluttering behind her as she walks. "There you are!" she exclaims as she lays eyes on Katniss, who has the sudden sensation of being sized up for consumption by a mountain lion before she is dragged off to the prep team.

Over the next few hours, Katniss is again ruthlessly bathed, scrubbed, plucked, painted, moisturized, and more—*How can there possibly be more to do after the first time?* she wonders—with nary a mirror in sight.

After the prep team is finished attacking Katniss, Jacara babbles about the evening's dress. "I *would* have done you up in this beautiful, flowing gown that matches your chariot outfit perfectly, with a few geometric patterns to evoke the headpi—ah, the wingpiece. After all, a strong link between designs is so refreshing. But I suppose Cinna had a point," she sniffs. "Connections are important."

The dress is deep grey, sleeveless, with no frills or soft curves, at least from what Katniss can see before she is stuffed into it. "Besides," Jacara continues, "I suppose you belong more to District 12 than to District 3, anyway. And I heard from your mentors that something soft and flowing won't suit you—you needed something commanding. Hard."

She holds out a jacket for Katniss to slip on, and then she finally drags her over to the mirror.

Standing before Katniss is a bold-looking girl whose deep grey dress falls to her knees. Fiery red sparks across the bottom of it, swirling around the hem and creeping up her right side. The dress is covered by a black leather jacket, one with rigid shoulder pads and gleaming gold buttons. With her hair pulled out of her eyes and a smudge of mascara for a polished, no-nonsense look, the girl staring back at Katniss appears dangerous. Threatening. Fearless.

"It's gorgeous," Jacara titters, clapping her hands exuberantly. "Bit of a rush job, to be honest, but I suppose I'm used to it with you now. Besides, it's what I do."

"This is perfect," Katniss says honestly, turning a little to watch the red details shimmer like embers in the light. "Thank you."

Jacara beams, taking Katniss's hands in hers. "Sweetheart, I know we haven't gotten the chance to know each other over the past few days, but I'm certain you'll make sparks tonight."
Her bubbly, teary expression takes Katniss aback—*Is that actual emotion? Are tears even allowed?* And then she's gone, belting out orders for the prep team to pack everything up for the day. Katniss watches them dart around the room for a moment and then heads toward the elevator to find Prim.

Beetee cuts her off before she can leave the prep team station. "Straight to the arena, Katniss," he says apologetically, watching Saneer's stylist fret over the collar of his suit. "I think you two are close to last. We're running late."

The path to the interview is dark, lit only by pinpricks of light on the ground directing Katniss toward the stage. She can faintly make out the some of the other tributes, minus Prim, already seated in their semicircle. Down and to her left, the audience roars and gushes like some black, twilit sea. She finds the fifth seat empty and settles down in it, closing her eyes and breathing deeply to calm her nerves. A few minutes pass in relative silence, broken only by the periodic shuffling of feet as the other tributes arrive, stumbling in the darkness in search of their seats, and the hum of murmured conversation from over her shoulder, where the stagehands prepare for the spectacle.

As the appointed hour nears, anticipation thickens in the air, a collective sort of fidgeting and anxiety. A faint rustle comes from Katniss's right. "Don't screw it up, big sister." Clove's voice is amused.

Katniss might normally have bitten out a response, but tonight, focused as she is on the task ahead, she can only think with surprising certainty, *She's the first person I'm going to kill.*

And then the lights are up, blinding Katniss momentarily. Even under their harsh beams, she can't make out much past the first few rows of the audience. The faces become dimmer and dimmer, fading into the blackness at the back of the theater, but by the sheer volume of the excited cheering, she feels as though the space might stretch on forever, full of people craning to see the distant faces of the tributes splashed across enormous screens.

Suddenly, Caesar Flickerman appears from the relative darkness of stage right, his bright blue hair electrifying under the spotlights as he flashes a gleaming, personable smile. His presence makes everything seem surreal to Katniss, who can remember watching his commentary during live feeds of the Games for as long as she can remember. "Welcome to the 74th annual Hunger Games!" Caesar cries exuberantly. The roaring applause has barely died down before the announcer dives into the show, orienting the audience by reminding them of the events of recent Games (a seven-year winning streak for the Career districts, naturally) and warming them up with a few jokes that Katniss doesn't understand, things she assumes one would only understand after living in the Capitol for years, or at least long enough to be familiar with the intricacies of wealth and fashion.

Katniss takes advantage of the opportunity to crane her head for a look at Prim. Her sister wears a light grey dress, and as the camera pans across the tributes, Katniss sees feathery details done in a subtle flower pattern. The color and texture make her look like a pale turtledove, but the hem of the dress flows with an array of fiery reds and golds to match the theme of Katniss's outfit.

Prim catches her eye, smiling shyly. Katniss returns the smile.

On cue, the girl from District 1, Glimmer, slinks forward in a revealing dress, and tonight's program settles into its main focus. Katniss tries hard not to listen to the interviews, because allowing the witty, confident remarks to dislodge her own confidence will be a hard thing to spring back from. Even the other Careers have polished their strategies for the interview: Marvel is cocky and a little blunt, Clove's sly humor earns a few surprised laughs from Caesar, and Cato is
strangely good-humored and exuberant.

Before Katniss has much of a chance to worry at all, it is her turn to climb down to the center of the stage and take the seat across from Caesar under the bright lights.

"Katniss Everdeen!" he announces to the crowd, which cheers and applauds wildly. "Katniss Everdeen, everybody! Katniss, how are you?"

"I'm better now, Caesar," she hears herself saying meekly. No, she scolds, be bold. Be powerful. Then, in a firmer tone: "I'm finally back with my sister."

"Ah, your sister!" Caesar exclaims. "Boy, you caused quite the ruckus back at the Chariot Parade, didn't you? Were you excited to see her?"

"Actually, I thought she was on fire," Katniss admits bashfully. "My first thought was—oh my God, I'm going to kill whoever set my sister on fire!"

Caesar belts out a laugh, the audience joining in. "Oooh, I hope the stylists know they'll need to look out for you," he chuckles, winking at Katniss. She realizes that the cameras have shifted to show Cinna's face onscreen. The stylist smiles good-naturedly back.

"Oh, he's been forgiven," Katniss blurts, just to say something. "He did a great job with my sister's dress. Even her dress tonight looks incredible."

Abruptly, the cameras pan to Prim, who looks surprised and flustered under the spotlights. She recovers well, folding her arms gracefully across her waist and shooting Katniss a smile. "Well, doesn't she, folks?" Thunderous applause rains onto them, a few whistles sounding from the darkness. Caesar nods at the audience, his smile gleaming, and then he waves an arm to settle them down. Obediently, they quiet, their expectant hunger focused on the stage. On Katniss. "We'll have to get her thoughts on the dress later, but for now, I think we've all got questions for you, Katniss. I have to say, transferring districts to fight alongside your sister? Not something we've ever seen before. And with only one of you as the winner, what was your thought process behind the decision?"

Katniss has been expecting this question, though she has never needed to rehearse the answer. "If either of us wins, it'll be Prim," she replies instantly. "That was my only thought. I love her more than anything in the world, and I'm going to do everything I can to make sure she stays alive to the end, or else I'm going to die with her."

A tremor of whispered murmurs rustles from one end of the audience to the other. "Such bravery," Caesar murmurs. "Such courage. Does Prim know this is your plan?"

Katniss looks behind them toward her sister. Prim meets her gaze, anxiously leaning forward as though she might surge to her feet. "I've never told her aloud," she admits. "But I know she knows why I'm really here. She knows me well enough to guess. I've done things like this before." This is the part Katniss has rehearsed, the place where she hopes she will be able to lead the interview down the path she has chosen, and she leaves the statement hanging for Caesar to grab.

To her great relief, he does—perhaps sensing the intriguing appeal of allowing such a heavily scrutinized tribute to say what she will. "What sorts of things, Katniss?"

"Well," Katniss begins slowly, pausing as though she is considering whether or not to answer. It's only a beat of silence, but in that moment, the air grows still and breathless. Katniss can almost feel the eyes of hundreds of thousands of people, not just here in the Capitol but back home
as well. In that moment, she can feel the anticipation of the people from her district—the weight of Gale's gaze. The weight of her mother's.

Prim's jaw is clenched, and Katniss turns away from the worry and reproach in her sister's face. "Well, this is another story I've never told her out loud." She clears her throat. "So. Things are really hard in District 12. Not like here, like in the Capitol. In the area where I live, there's not always enough food or money to go around. Especially in families like ours, where Prim and I have school and can't work, and our mother hasn't done much work since our father died in a mining accident. Making ends meet is hard enough most of the year. But when the winters come, we don't always have the supplies and the clothes we need to make it through."

Caesar nods his head sympathetically, but Katniss knows this is old news here in the Capitol. Being poor and cold and starved isn't enough to grab the attention of the Hunger Games' average viewer, who sees poverty as a necessary evil endured by the descendants of rebels. Katniss takes a deep breath to start putting nails into her own coffin. "Three years ago, three winters ago, we were so desperate that my friend and I caught as much game as we possibly could to sell it to the Peacekeepers—not legal, strictly speaking," she adds, holding up a finger to Caesar.

The announcer pantomimes zipping his mouth shut, earning a few chuckles from the audience. Briefly, Katniss wonders how much trouble the Purnia and her unit will be in for this story—the offense seems minor to Katniss, at any rate—but she doesn't have time to linger on the thought for long.

"We needed the money soon. Snows were coming in, and we were short on supplies—food and firewood. The house was so cold at that point that we could barely sleep even when all three of us huddled in one bed together. And so we split up to sell all of the game fast, Prim and my friend and I. Things are bad even for the authorities in our district, so our Peacekeepers are mostly on hard times, too. They usually look the other way or buy straight from us, so we're used to dealing with them. That day, though, we didn't know that there were visiting Peacekeepers from the Capitol to help with that year's Census—they all look the same in uniform, so there's no way…" Katniss swallows, shaking her head. "And when Prim tried to sell to them, they strapped her to the post in the center of town and gave her thirty lashes. No warning, no…we didn't even know what happened right away. All we knew was that she never came home; we looked for her all night. They'd thrown her in jail without even giving her medical attention. She stayed there for one week. For selling game."

Katniss takes a deep, steadying breath to gather her thoughts, thinking of the scars that still run across her sister's back from the lashes.

When her pause becomes too long, Caesar fidgets. "What happened next? What did you do?" he asks urgently, his face focused and earnest as though he is simply a good friend enraptured by her story.

Looking down at her lap, Katniss closes her eyes. At some point, her hands balled themselves into fists, and she tries to relax them now. No going back after this, she tells herself. Squaring her shoulders, she looks Caesar in the eye. "I killed them," she says bluntly. "For what they did to her."

All at once, the audience is wholly silent. Nothing stirs in the dark, gaping void offstage, but Katniss can feel them gaze upon her as one. The words come more easily now, maybe because she's never spoken them aloud before—not even to Gale, though she knows he's guessed—and they bubble up to her throat so she can spit them out. "I shadowed them for a day or two and started to ask around about them. Nothing much ever happens in twelve, and visitors to the district from anywhere, especially the Capitol, always draw attention and gossip. So it wasn't hard to pick up information while I was trying to figure out how to…well. They were pretty hooked on
Morphling, or so the rumors said. That's hard to come by outside of the Capitol. We don't have any of it in District 12. Not even for our sick." That injustice has always put a foul taste in Katniss's mouth, but tonight, she casts her rant aside for the sake of the story.

"My mother's an apothecary. She mixes what herbal remedies she can manage with the plants that grow in our district. Prim's usually the one who helps with the herbs and medicines, but since she was...in poor health, some of the tasks fell to me." And that's when she'd gotten the idea. Katniss can remember it now, that dark moment of sorting through the cupboard of vials and tablets and dried leaves as the thought struck her and she stilled in their empty kitchen. Oleander clasped in one hand, fingers of the other skimming over the tops of all the things her mother has warned her to administer only in small doses: pennyroyal, hemlock, foxglove, nightshade. Belladonna.

"My mother had used belladonna that year to treat a stomach sickness that passed through the district, and we still had a lot of it. Belladonna's used a lot as a sedative and painkiller. For a few other things as well. But it's also the most poisonous plant that grows around my home, along with nightlock. Eating only one or two berries can have you fighting for your life. A leaf can kill you. I brought what we had to them, a mixture of mashed berries and roots and leaves. And I told them it was the only drug we had in District 12, but you had to take enough of it." She laughs hollowly. "I'm sure if they'd known I was related to Prim, they might have thought twice about taking it. They were suspicious at first, I think, but I made it sound like a bribe, like I just wanted them to look the other way for something I'd done. They laughed and took the belladonna. Told me to get lost, but I hung around to wait. It took a long time." For a moment, Katniss sees their faces slackened in dizziness and delirium, eyes wide and dilated. She'd stood near the door for over an hour to make sure they were dead, too afraid to go near them. Watching their breathing ease and then stop altogether.

"I don't think my mother was ever aware enough of what was happening to suspect me at all," she adds bitterly, "but I know the rest of the district guessed. No one ever said as much, but by the time they finally sent Prim home, no one was coming to us for treatments anymore. No one would turn me in for it, and I made sure there was no way to connect me to any of it, but all of a sudden there was no money coming in for our mother's remedies anymore. No one wanted anything to do with us. I meant to finish the Peacekeepers off for what they did, to get rid of them and be done with it, but we almost starved because of it."

The stares of the audience feel a lot like the stares from the people of twelve, closed off and wary, like someone fearing that an animal might strike. Ever since she killed those men, Katniss has always hated having people stare at her like that.

Caesar has forgotten himself. He gapes at Katniss as well, his blue-tinted lips flung open in a shocked O, the microphone dangling loosely in his hand. His expression is strange enough—and she is anxious enough—that she can't help the laugh that escapes. He jolts back to life instantly, returning to his role.

"My dear girl," he says, flustered. He smooths down his lapels, glances at the audience with wide eyes in a Did you hear what just I heard? sort of way. "My dear girl, what can you mean by telling us this story, and telling your sister, if you've never told her?"

"She knows, I think," Katniss replies. After her sister was released from the holding cell in District 12, no doubt having heard a wealth of gossip in the Peacekeeper Station about what had happened, Katniss periodically caught Prim staring at her with an odd, measuring expression when she thought Katniss wasn't looking, as though she couldn't quite comprehend the stranger standing where her sister used to be. "But like I said, I mean for Prim to win the Hunger Games. That means I won't make it out alive. And by telling this story, there's no getting out alive for me. If I win, I'll be executed for what I've done."
"But the reason I told you," she adds, and for just a heartbeat, she catches sight of herself on the television screen, her dark eyes flashing and set in a defiant gaze as though some otherworldly, powerful being has taken her place, "the real reason I said it is because I want people to know that I'll do anything for my sister. I'll kill for her. And I'll die for her."

For the first time since the cameras first panned to her sister, Katniss looks at Prim. Katniss hadn't known what to expect, but her sister's gaze is both shaky and fierce. She clutches the armrests of her seat as though she might fling herself out of it if she lets go for even a second, her eyes narrowed with restrained tears.

Katniss jumps minutely as Caesar takes her hand in his, but he holds her gaze steadily. "It takes a lot of courage to do what you're doing, Katniss," he says, the audience still clinging to his every word. Just offstage near the wings, a cameraman is waving frantically at him. Out of time. In everyone's distraction, Katniss's story must have earned her an extra few minutes on screen. "And I think it's safe to say we've never had a tribute quite like you. If this is indeed the last time we'll all be seeing you outside of the arena, we'll all wish you the best of luck with your sister."

The applause rips into Katniss's very bones, thrumming through her body. As the audience roars unintelligibly, she murmurs a "Thank you" to Caesar, who drops a kiss on top of her hand as she stands.

And then it's over. Once she reaches the safety and relative darkness of her seat, it takes her a few minutes to calm her racing heart. Away from the cameras, she can feel the agitated flush fading from her cheeks and chest, her breathing beginning to level off as if she is recovering from a long-distance run. If she allows it, she'll begin to pick apart her own words and sink into a mire of worried self-criticism. Even now, she has a hard time avoiding the cynical thoughts: Did I earn us more sponsors or more attacks from the other tributes? Did telling that story just spell our deaths?

To distract herself, Katniss forces her mind to focus on the other tributes' interviews, concentrating on gleaning whatever useful knowledge she can from their words. Some of the other tributes venture into stories of their past, and others cockily brag of their proven abilities. But nothing earns the dizzying response Katniss's story has. She can almost see the faint signs of doubt in them, deflated shoulders and tense expressions. If Katniss weren't so anxious herself, she might have relished the thought of having shaken the others with her story, which will obviously be the focal point of pre-Game debates in the Capitol. Instead, her heel taps relentlessly against the floor as the spotlight slowly moves down the line of tributes toward Prim.

The last few interviews seem to rush past quickly. There's a girl with a sly, fox-like face and sleek red hair who talks about analyzing the situation and a boy from District 10 who plays up a recent leg injury. And then there's Prim tiptoeing down to center stage, her little grey dress boots clinking like glass against the floor.

She settles into the seat, smiling beatifically at Caesar, her dress fluffing around her waist and legs like the down of a bird.

"Primrose," Caesar says. "It's lovely to have you here, and—my goodness, but you look just like your sister. Don't they look just alike, folks? Aren't they both lovely?"

A round of applause rains upon them. Katniss sees her face splash upon one of the screens beside Prim's. While comments like this are familiar to them both, they have never been able to perceive the physical similarities others see in them.

"Now, Prim. It must be—well, I don't know, exhilarating, frightening, wondrous, horrible—to have your sister here with you. Take your pick. Can you tell us what you're feeling?"
"Well, to be honest, I was angry at first," Prim admits in a small voice, "because I didn't want her to get hurt. But really—and it's awful of me, but—I'm really glad she's here. I don't think I could do this alone." She's already close to crying; Katniss can tell by the waver in her voice. Still, she thinks the signs of misery are somehow appropriate here, with the audience clinging to Prim's every word. Prim turns teary eyes to Caesar. "Isn't that so selfish?"

"I think it's understandable," Caesar replies, gently taking her hand. "Wouldn't you agree?" he asks the audience. The audience coos and offers scattered applause, melting under Prim's candor.

"Do you agree with your sister's strategy?" Caesar asks quietly. "Do you think you'll be the one to win?"

"I don't know. I'm afraid, and—I don't want to win if I'm all alone." She chokes back a sob, cupping a hand over her mouth. "I don't know what will happen."

"Your birthday recently passed, didn't it? I'm told you're one of the youngest tributes we've ever had. I imagine it's very terrifying to be in your position."

Prim nods, swallowing. "But it's also..." she pauses, considering. "If I do die, I'm glad it's with Katniss. It's hard to explain—if I'd been all alone, I'd have been terrified. But having her here makes it easier, because my last days will be good ones if I'm with her. I'm glad we can spend our last days together instead of dying apart and alone."

These words ring true with Katniss, and she knows the words are genuine—the sentiment, anyway. She also knows with certainty that her brilliant Prim is still calculating, still thinking through her tears and picking the words that will help them most.

"You and your sister are quite dedicated to each other," Caesar offers. "But tell me, Prim, were you aware of how far your sister has gone for you? It's rare for us to hear such sinister secrets being spilled onscreen—it's happened only once before that I recall, and the consequences were quite dire."

Prim nods again, and this time her expression is steady as she confirms what Katniss has always guessed. "I knew from the beginning. I know Katniss—she didn't have to tell me. I just knew."

"Have you ever thought of her any differently?"


"Even with the terrifying things she's done for you?"

Prim shakes her head. "After it happened, I used to think about what it would be like if she was hurt and not me, and I'd wonder if I could go through with it. I was never sure if I could, and I still don't know. Maybe I'll never know unless I'm in a situation like that. But that's Katniss, and she can do something like that. That's who she is. And that's fine. Sometimes, when you're family, you'll do anything for each other, because you love each other that much."

Caesar takes the opportunity to get in a joke. "I don't know about you," he mutters confidentially to the audience, "but my family wasn't as devoted as all that!"

The audience bursts into surprised laughter, but when it settles, Prim is still staring at Caesar with her unfathomable blue eyes. "Maybe you have the wrong kind of family," she responds.

Caesar chokes, half in laughter and half in shock. "Maybe I do," he murmurs in agreement. "You and Katniss truly share something special. Beauty and love, that's what I say—" The man at the
wing is motioning again, a single finger held in the air for Caesar to see. "And speaking of beauty, we'll have to end with your lovely dresses. I'm loving the matched theme—grey from electronics and fire from coal, I imagine. And I suppose your stylist has hidden another surprise?"

He bounces in excitement, and Prim smiles at him. "He did. Do you want to see it? I think Katniss won't worry so much this time."

In response to that, Caesar laughs. "Please!"

Prim is on her feet. "Ready?" she inquires, suddenly playful.

"Are we?" Caesar asks the audience. An answering roar rushes over them, and once it has reached a sufficient volume level, Prim begins to twirl gracefully, her braids swinging in the air as she spirals. The bottom of her dress sparkles and flurries in red-orange flame, just enough to ripple up to her waist and flicker as she comes to a stop.

"I like the fire," Prim adds to Caesar before he can make some remark on her appearance, "because it makes sense for us. We not seem like much at first, but fire's catching. Turn your back on us, and you might regret it."

She smiles at Katniss while the audience applauds with renewed fervor, a strange tension in the air following the bold statement. Katniss returns the smile. You and me, Prim, she thinks. Whatever happens, we'll stick together to the end.

Her back straight and proud, Prim accepts Caesar's customary peck on the back of her hand and sweeps back to her seat to make way for the final interview. She is too polite to slump in her chair, but Katniss can almost see the exhaustion rolling from her sister in waves, as if the conversation has taken something vital from her. After some sort of unremarkable interview from Peeta, Caesar climbs to his feet for the last time that evening to bid the audience good night and happy Hunger Games.

And then it's really over.

The chandeliers above the crowd brighten just a bit to allow the excitable audience to leave their seats, but the stage lights dim, the cameras stilling and the screens fading to black. Katniss closes her eyes. She takes a moment to reflect on the fact that all of the political games and subtle struggles are finally over. Tomorrow, it will be her and Prim alone in the arena fighting for their lives.

After a few minutes, a heavy, warm weight falls upon her. Prim hugs her shoulders, squeezing into the extra space on Katniss's seat. "Was I okay? Do you think we did okay?" she asks.

Katniss runs a hand down the ridges of her sister's braids. "You were brilliant. And we're going to get a boatload of sponsors who love you."

Prim is silent for a moment. Then she takes a slow breath. "I meant what I said. I don't know what's going to happen, if one of us is going to live or not, but I think I'm okay with dying there with you. I mean," she laughs a little hysterically, her voice sounding weary, "I'd rather not die, but if we have to, I think I'm okay with it being like this."

"Me too," Katniss replies, tucking Prim down so she can rest her chin on the crown of her sister's head.

The clamor of the audience trickles away as people stream through the doors and into the quiet night of the outside world. A whir of machinery above suggests the movement of cameras and lights as they retreat into their hiding places. Footsteps of cameramen and stagehands patter from...
one wing to the other.

In a moment, someone will tell the Everdeens to follow the trail of tributes heading back to the elevator, but for now, Prim is motionless in her sister's arms.

"Tomorrow, we're going to fight," Prim says quietly, as though this is a new idea for her.

Katniss squeezes her shoulders tightly. "You bet we are."

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End of Part II, Locusta

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The most notorious and expert character of this kind [of poisoner] is handed down to us by the historians and poets under the name of Locusta, who was condemned to die on account of her infamous actions, but was saved in order that she might become a state engine…She was accordingly employed to poison Claudius by Agrippina, who was desirous of destroying the Emperor…

-Annals of Philosophy, Volume 7 (1824)

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A/N: And so finally we get to see the source of Katniss's change to a more overprotective and bitter sort of character than the one in the books. I really wanted to play with Katniss's past in this fic, and to have the desperate setting of District 12 shape her into a more calculating and cold sort of person. Luckily, she's using her powers for good to help her sister, of course :-) Do let me know what you thought of her big reveal in the interview—she certainly isn't planning on pulling her punches, either in the interviews or in the arena.

On the poisoning: I don't think belladonna poisoning happens so quickly, as I couldn't find much in the way of timelines online. However, it does appear to be true that a single leaf (or a few berries) can sicken or even kill an adult, so having the Peacekeepers consume all of the Everdeens' stored plants should have done the trick very well, no calculations needed.

On Peeta's interview: I feel I should mention that I did debate having him come forward to express his interest in Katniss back when I was first outlining this story, but I really don't think it would happen with this turn of events. In canon, Peeta points out his interest in her partially (I believe) because of Haymitch's strategy. While he might have said something about Katniss of his own accord without Haymitch, I think that Katniss has made her lack of interest obvious in this fic—not that she doesn't do so in canon, but she also doesn't have an obvious ally in her sister in the book. Also, as stated early on, whatever feelings Peeta obviously has for Katniss, she isn't really
going to be in any position to reciprocate romantically. With her obvious strategy in this fic being to fight for Prim's life so they can appeal to the sympathy of the Capitol together, there's no real reason for her to need Peeta's help in playing a role to gain sponsors. That being said, Peeta will be turning up again (obviously, since the cast of characters gets pretty small once they're all trapped in the arena). So be prepared for that!

Next chapter starts part three, the last (and longest) arc of this story. If you've reviewed or favorited, thank you! Let me know what you thought of this chapter too?
A hand shakes Katniss from her half-formed, sickening dreams, and her arm involuntarily darts out to clutch the fabric of Prim's nightgown near her throat. "Katniss," Prim says, her cold fingers creeping up to clasp Katniss's fist. Her voice is rough with tears, "Katniss, they're saying it's time.

Dawn has not yet broken, but the sky is rusted with the light of the coming sun. It spills out into the room, casting deep shadows in the folds of their twisted blanket and illuminating the two bodies standing in the doorway, though it's too faint to make their features distinguishable. Katniss shoots up straight, nearly causing her head to collide with Prim's, and she releases the folds of Prim's clothes to grab her sister's arms.

"It's alright, Prim," she says quickly, the last dredges of slumber falling away. "We're going to be alright. If you can't see me in the circle, if we're on opposite ends with the Cornucopia between us, which way do you run?"

"Left," Prim sniffles, clutching Katniss's arms so hard they ache.

"And I'll run right. We'll meet each other, and as long as we're together, everything will be okay."

"Are you still going to try to go for the Cornucopia?"

"Only if I can see where you are and I think it's safe. If we can't see each other, the most important thing is to get together."

"Okay." Prim takes a long, slow gulp of air.

"I'm sorry, but it's time." The apologetic voice is low and familiar, and Katniss realizes that it belongs to Cinna. She is struck by the thought that she's glad Prim will have him at her side this morning. He seems more genuine than Effie or the rest of the prep team, and Prim will need a kind face to keep her from dissolving into tears. Crying is fine for this morning, but by the time they are cast into the arena, Prim will need to show any potential sponsors a face of stone.

Katniss hugs her sister ferociously, the crushing sort of hug Prim usually wriggles out of, complaining that it's hard to breathe, but her sister squeezes her back with equal fervor. As they pull apart, she kisses Katniss's cheek. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

There's nothing else to say. Katniss allows Cinna to peel her sister away, and then the two of them disappear wordlessly into the shadows of the darkened hall. Katniss listens to their footsteps recede, and then she looks at Jacara, whose face looks like a deep purple bruise in the burgeoning daylight.

"Are you ready?" Jacara asks, covering a yawn with her fingertips.

Katniss pauses and turns to her nightstand, where her father's hunting jacket has sat gathering dust, and she pulls out Alree's stone. Two days ago, Katniss sent it for inspection with all of the tokens from the other tributes. It passed, and although the Gamemakers had sent no commentary with it, Katniss could almost feel the weight of their incredulity echoed in the slow, skeptical stare Jacara had given her upon returning it. Now, Katniss turns it over in her hand, feeling its water-worn
smoothness. Good luck, he'd called it. She'll need it now.

"No," Katniss replies finally, dropping it into her pocket. "But let's go."

The next hour passes almost too slowly to bear. Jacara, silent and tired, guides an equally quiet Katniss to her own private hovercraft to receive her tracker and her breakfast, which Katniss forces herself to eat. For all she knows, it may well be her last meal. Once the hovercraft windows black out half an hour into the flight, a signal that they are approaching the arena, Katniss begins to pace the floor.

Fifteen minutes later, the hovercraft settles into place at their destination with only the barest of jolts to signal that they've arrived. Jacara leads Katniss down the ramp. They're in some underground hangar obviously designed so the tributes don't get the slightest hint about the features of this year's arena. As the first strings of panic begin to ripple across Katniss's skin, she follows Jacara to her own personal Launch Room, which, like the rest of the hangar, has a series of bare walls and glaring lights.

Jacara helps Katniss dress in the official clothing of this year's Hunger Games: tawny pants, a light green blouse, a hooded black jacket, and leather boots perfect for running in. Katniss transfers her token to the pocket of her new clothes.

Somewhere very nearby, Prim is receiving similar treatment from Cinna. Katniss can feel her sister as though she is in plain sight, as though Katniss could simply look over her shoulder and Prim would be there. Somewhere, Cinna is speaking gently to her, maybe holding her hand and offering food and water, or maybe wiping away tears with a cloth napkin he'd thought to bring just for that purpose.

Jacara does none of this. Katniss isn't sure if this is because Jacara is simply too tired or too professional to offer advice and condolences or because Katniss has schooled her features into something hard and determined in practice for her first view of the arena. Likely, it's a bit of both. At any rate, Katniss appreciates the silence. She doesn't think she could take any delicate, simpering remarks from a tittering Capitol resident bundled in a violently teal dress.

"Eat more, if you can," Jacara remarks, the first thing she's said in nearly an hour. She sinks down into a seat and pulls a mirror from somewhere between her breasts, aiming it so she can powder her nose. "Or at the very least, drink."

She's right. Katniss may need the hydration later. She doesn't think she can stomach any more of the Capitol's rich foods today, but she sips from a glass of water as they wait.

And waiting takes at least an hour, maybe more. Katniss has no way of knowing, trapped in this sterile and claustrophobic box. An eternity may very well have passed between her waking in bed next to Prim and this moment. Finally, an announcer comes over the loudspeaker. "Prepare for launch," the voice says pleasantly.

At one end of the room is a metal plate. Katniss has been fixated upon it for some time. It's stupid to be thinking of this now, but the moment she had first seen it, she had thought to herself that it would mean the death of her. She would go into the arena, and then she would die. It all seems more real here and now than it ever did back in Haymitch's house back in District 12.

But she doesn't have time to let fear seize her—and she can't let all of her effort go to waste. She and Prim are going to fight together, away from the Capitol's manipulations and politics. She and Prim are going to fight and maybe die together, unless Katniss really can save her sister.

As soon as the voice gives the order, she's on her feet to step onto the plate. With a dull hiss, a
glass cylinder descends from the ceiling to slowly surround her. Katniss has the sudden image of
the giant soap bubbles she and Prim had made with Gale and his brothers one summer afternoon a
lifetime ago, the way Gale had made them with a barrel hoop and the bubbles been big enough
that they could just fit through if they were careful, and then they'd blink and the shimmering wall
around them would suddenly disappear.

"Good luck," Jacara says, her voice muffled through the thick glass.

Katniss squeezes Alree's lucky stone through the fabric of her pocket, and the metal plate presses
her outward, upward, into the white light of the midday sun.

The exuberant voice of Claudius Templesmith rolls through the air, welcoming the audience to the
74th annual Hunger Games, but the noise seems distant and unimportant. Katniss's first
impressions of the arena are welcoming, and she soaks them in with the greedy hunger of a
newborn child, twisting this way and that to recognize the scent of pine and damp earth, a flurry of
a breeze that sweeps dry leaves across the ground, a wall of dense forest surrounding the plain
where the golden Cornucopia lies. To her right, a small lake gleams white in the reflected, burning
sunlight, its waters still and placid.

And Prim, just half a dozen places away, looking unfamiliar in the sturdy boots and canvas pants.
Prim's eyes dart around the circle as Claudius continues his introduction, and then they fall on
Katniss. A look of relief washes over her.

But they aren't in the clear. Between them, perched on the station next to Prim, is the last person
Katniss wants on their side of the circle, let alone near her sister. Clove glances at them both in
consideration before turning to size Prim up. They have no weapons yet, but Clove's fingers
twitch and then ball into tight fists as though she's imagining now how best to go about the
business of killing Prim. It's not a smart move to attack another tribute right after stepping off the
metal plates, though it occasionally happens. Clove is too smart for that, though. She'll run for a
weapon, Katniss knows, but once she and the other Careers are settled, Clove will be coming for
Prim.

So when Clove looks back at Katniss and smiles, Katniss returns it. All's fair.

The booming introduction has come to an end, and the other tributes are either wavering or
arranging themselves according to their own decisions, backs turned either to the forest or to the
Cornucopia, their eyes determined. As the timer finally begins its countdown from sixty, Katniss
pulls out Alree's stone, peering down at the blood-red drops against the black and weighing it in
the palm of her hand as she calculates. Thanks for the good luck, she tells Alree, and then, while
all eyes are fixed elsewhere, she throws.

The stone arcs through the air perfectly, and it appears to her as if it falls in slow motion. Katniss is
not as practiced at throwing stones as she is at archery, but the rock still approaches its target as
surely as if Katniss had shot an arrow from a bow, and then it lands with a soft thunk at the place
where the metal of Clove's station meets the earth. Clove has just enough time to morph her
leering grin into a surprised O, and then her face is gone.

The blast is smooth and focused, as Katniss knew it would be from watching past Games: the
explosions, in the rare event that they do happen, are always concentrated enough to take out the
single tribute without harming the others, just a quick blaze of red flame and dark smoke spilling
across the field. It's happened much too suddenly for most of the distracted tributes to catch the
cause of the blast, Katniss thinks, blinking rapidly as ashes drift into her face. Even the Capitol is
probably fumbling to put up an instant replay right now. For a second, Katniss imagines their
wonderment at the sudden action, a display that suggests that the Everdeen sisters are not to be toyed with.

Amid screams of alarm and confusion, the echoing boom of a cannon signals the first death of the Hunger Games. Katniss squares her shoulders, the threat of Clove slicking off of her skin and easing from her mind, and she roughly banishes the thought of what she has done, though she has a hard time escaping the thought that the hovercrafts will need to pick Clove up in pieces once the bloodbath is done. No time for that, she chastises herself roughly. Focus.

Katniss watches Prim as the smoke clears, and once she has caught her sister's eye, she points at the forest behind them. New plan. That way.

Prim nods, knowing Katniss will catch up with her. Her face is still open in shock, but it smoothes away as she braces herself for a dash to their target.

In the thirty seconds they have left, most of the tributes still alarmed and shaken, Katniss tries to concentrate. She and Prim will need food, water, and supplies to survive, and she wants a weapon more than she could ever say.

Her legs are tense and stiff, so she bounces lightly in place to loosen her limbs, darting a quick glance to be sure Prim is prepared to run the other way.

She sees it when she glances back—a silver bow glinting in the afternoon sunlight, resting not too far into the confused piles of weapons and supplies. It's lean and familiar, and Katniss thinks it may even be the same one she shot a few days ago for the Gamemakers in the gymnasium. What's more, it's propped at such an angle that she thinks it must have been meant for her, an offering from the Gamemakers now that they've seen what she can do, a way to make the Games more interesting by supplying at least one tribute with what she needs.

That's mine, she thinks, and at the sound of the gong, she's sprinting toward it, ignoring the scattered food and bags and rubble strewn across the dry earth. There's no time to think about the contents of the boxes or to consider the usefulness of one supply over another. All Katniss sees is the silver bow.

At her side, a boy from District 9 grabs a pack a few feet away and is skewered by a Career—a few of them have already claimed weapons and begun to kill the weaker prey. Keep running, Prim, Katniss thinks, and then a flash of green darts across her view, another tribute going for the bow as well, but the boy from District 2, Cato, is already blocking her way, weapon glinting in the sun and aimed perfectly to catch the other girl in the throat. Katniss's steps falter, her eyes widening as Cato's sword skewers the girl, a thousand curses flying across her mind as he raises his cold gaze to meet hers, the girl still blubbering and choking on his blade. With only the smallest second of hesitation, Katniss abandons her prize to shoot away toward the woods.

Screams reach her ears as she runs back, a horrid, gurgling noise peaking somewhere just out of view, and Katniss glances quickly over her shoulder to be sure she's not being pursued—there's the girl from District 1, Glimmer, slicing the throat of some kid from the upper districts, and Cato is sliding his sword out of the dead girl's body and moving in Katniss's direction—and she blindly scoops up a bag on her way to the forest.

Except for a surge of footsteps at her heels, the sounds recede as Katniss sprints across the open plain, hoping desperately that Prim is alright. A pale movement under the shade of the trees catches her eye, and there's Prim, her eyes wide and urgent. She stretches an arm out as Katniss approaches.

This idiot is standing out in the open, Katniss thinks frantically, and then she crosses the tree line
without stopping, shouldering the backpack with one arm and grabbing Prim's hand with the other. "Move!" she shouts, yanking her sister with her as she hears Cato's thundering footfalls behind them. They crash through the foliage, branches whipping into their faces and scratching at their sides.

At her side, Prim stumbles and cries out, but Katniss drags her onward, the bag heavy across her shoulder. Through patches of dappled sunlight and damp earth they race, Katniss not daring to look behind her to see whether they're still being pursued. The only things she can make out are tug of the mud against her boots as she runs and the sounds of their ragged gasps. By the time she recognizes another quiet, steady patter, it's too late—something dark spurts in front of Prim and catches her in the side, and she stumbles into Katniss, their legs tangling together hopelessly.

Katniss falls hard against the ground of an embankment, leaves crunching beneath her and Prim's sharp knees jabbing her stomach as they tumble one over the other down the slope. Katniss flails the arm that isn't desperately clutching the bag, trying to find something on which to catch herself, but the ground is too steep. After a few terrifying seconds, she rams into the trunk of a tree so hard that it pushes the air from her lungs in one quick blow, leaving her dizzy and gasping for breath.

A distant shout from somewhere behind her. A voice swears.

"Katniss!" Prim chokes from somewhere behind her, and Katniss jerks her head toward her sister at the tone.

The thing that had hurtled into Prim is a person: Foxface, the red-haired girl from the interview. She and Prim are intertwined on the ground, both of them staring wide-eyed at each other. Prim grabs the fabric of the girl's clothes to pull her off, and Foxface whimpers and clutches her left arm.

Katniss rolls to her feet, still heaving deep breaths. "Come on—Prim," she manages, her traitorous legs shaking as she puts weight on them.

A crash of leaves comes from behind them, and Katniss whips her head around to see Cato break out of the foliage at the top of the embankment. A triumphant smirk stretches across his face as his eyes fall upon them.

"Shit, shit," Katniss hisses, and then she stumbles forward to drag Prim to her feet as the boy starts down the embankment.

They run wildly and without forethought, Katniss leading them blindly through scattered copses of trees, the sun burning their eyes. Farther and farther they run, sprinting in panic across slippery patches of leaves still slick with dew and sliding and stumbling into each other as they go.

*He won't chase us much farther,* Katniss hopes frantically, though she doesn't dare look back. Her ears ring with every faint crunch and crack that might be a footfall somewhere in the distant forest. *He can't, or he'll be separated from the other Careers—and he won't get his pick of the Cornucopia stash.* But it's some time before they cease to hear his rustling movements behind them, and still they run on, stumbling against bushes in their terror and fatigue, hounded by the possibility of his pursuit.

It must be five or six minutes later that Katniss finally stutters to a halt, gulping great breaths of air. Behind her, Prim ambles exhaustedly forward, and it's only then that Katniss realizes that her sister's hand is still fisted in the strange girl's tunic.

"Get away from her," Katniss spits, and Prim and Foxface jump apart as though scalded. With the
sudden movement, the girl bumps her elbow into a tree trunk and doubles over, swearing impressively.

"Are you…?" Prim swallows, frowning. "Your arm's hurt."

"That's her problem, Prim," Katniss says, keeping one eye on Foxface as she pulls the backpack off to rifle through it for weapons as she should have done ages ago. Prim watches as she digs through the contents. There's nothing of immediate use to them: a sleeping bag, a roll of bandages, a pack of crackers, a bag of dried beef strips, a box of matches, loops of wire, sunglasses, a few coils of paracord, an empty water bottle. She frowns, closes the bag, and readjusts it across her shoulders. The girl doesn't look particularly intimidating or skilled at first glance, but then again, neither does Katniss.

At any rate, Foxface is backing away at a snail's pace, wary, as though a sudden movement might prove fatal.

"You twisted it?" Prim asks, partway between Katniss and Foxface.

"Prim," Katniss says warningly, and Prim looks back at her and then at Foxface.

"We can't just leave her," she hisses, as though Foxface isn't standing close enough to hear her. "Her arm looks broken—and like that…"

This girl stands no chance. Weaponless and already injured, she'll be an easy target for the Careers. "That's her problem," Katniss repeats, teeth gritted.

"Give me your arm," Prim says instead, holding a hand out to Foxface.

Katniss grabs her sister's shoulder and jerks her around roughly. "No one but us."

Prim holds her gaze for a minute, her blue eyes cool and considering. "There are two of us," she returns finally, "and none of us have weapons. If she tries anything, we'll run. But she won't try anything," she adds, turning back to Foxface.

Incredulous and angry, Katniss casts her gaze around them, listening for movement in the forest. Nothing. "Alright. You look at her arm. Then we leave. That's All."

Prim's mouth tightens, and she turns back to the girl. "Give me your arm," she orders again. The girl still reminds Katniss of a cornered animal, something in the way she shifts from foot to foot as she stares at them both in open disbelief. Her arm is clutched firmly to her chest as though she fears they might make a grab for it. After a long moment, she gives a tense nod.

Katniss ushers them into a nearby thicket of low trees. Leaves and pine needles rustle softly underfoot as they crouch in the dim grove. The girl holds her arm out to Prim, and Katniss doesn't need the healing experience her sister has to know the thing's broken. It's subtle, but the forearm tilts at a slight, sickening angle.

"It hurts to open and close your fingers?" Prim asks.

The girl gingerly flexes and winces, nodding. Prim stretches her hands out and flicks her eyes up at the girl quickly, asking for permission. After a tight nod, she runs her fingers along the girl's arm.

"Unbelievable," Katniss mutters under her breath, shuffling to the side so she can both keep an eye on Prim and look out for any potential threats, wondering if the bloodbath has finally ended at the Cornucopia.
Prim ignores her. "You're going to want to keep it straight," she explains, "or it'll hurt. It'll probably hurt anyway, but it'll hurt less this way." She stands slowly, making long, leisurely movements as though Foxface is some wounded animal. Turning her head to look at the ground and foliage around them, Prim digs through leaves and branches for a few moments until she returns with a sturdy, straight branch. "Katniss, weren't there some bandages in the bag? And wire?"

Grumbling, Katniss rifles through the bag to produce them, and Prim sets about creating a haphazard, makeshift splint. The girl, who was at first rigid and dubious, looks intrigued as she watches Prim's careful movements. The materials aren't ideal, but Prim's had enough practice to make quick, neat work of it.

When the splint is done, the girl lifts the arm up and down experimentally, flexing the bandages and twined wire. Katniss thinks that the bright white color is the last thing she'll want if she's going for camouflage, but she bites her tongue in front of Prim.

"Thank you," the girl says finally. Her face is still unreadable and somehow sealed off, but Katniss thinks she catches some contemplative glimmer in her amber eyes as they flit back and forth to study the Everdeen sisters. "I didn't..." she trails off. "It's Prim, right?"

Prim nods.

"I'm Finch. Thanks, Prim."

"You're welcome," Katniss says, and then to Prim: "Let's go."

"I can help you," the girl says quickly, and though the words tumble out in a quick blurt, her expression is determined. She has a strange accent, nowhere near as strong or as annoying as the one from the Capitol, and it makes her words sound strangely melodic. "We can help each other, I mean. I know alliances seem risky—"

"—but if the Careers come prowling, it'll be better to have more of us. And with my arm like this, I can't do anything to you anyway. And—I can find us some water. We'll need to find it fast, before nightfall, else we won't be able to see well enough to search for it."

Katniss frowns at her, feeling the parched cotton of her own mouth. They've run for ages, it feels like, and a thick sheen of sweat has dried across her skin. Prim is in a similar state: dried sweat has plastered some of her hair to her neck and forehead. They'll need water soon, and Katniss has seen no sign of it. In the lush woods of her home, she'd instinctively know the best places to find a stream or a pool of water, but this forest is wholly unfamiliar. *Worse,* she realizes suddenly, *the only water I've seen was the lake back at the Cornucopia. Unless we find something, we might have to head to the Careers' territory to drink.*

The thought is upsetting. She takes a moment to size Foxface—*Finch*—up. Piercing amber eyes, sleek red hair pulled into two loose buns behind either ear, slender limbs, a bit taller than Katniss, but not by much. The girl still clutches her arm to her chest. Prim, suddenly traitorous, whispers, "There are two of us. We'll be alright."

*No one but us,* Katniss thinks, but it's true that they can ditch Finch whenever they need to, even right after she leads them to water if they have to. Katniss has been dead set against alliances the entire time, mostly because betrayal is almost an inevitable fact, but now that they're *here* and she can use the extra help, she's not so sure it would be wise to pass up this chance. One weaponless girl is unlikely to be a threat to Prim's safety, and if the girl really *can* find water, Katniss would
rather not face the Careers weak and dehydrated. And, she thinks regretfully, Finch'll be an easier target for the Careers if they do catch us. Maybe even enough for Prim and me to get away. Closing her eyes in exasperation, she nods. "Alright. Find us some water."

And that's that. They have found themselves in a low, sloping valley, which makes Katniss feel oddly trapped, but it's likely a good sign if they're to find a source of water. Katniss keeps Prim behind her as they follow Finch, who occasionally stops to peer down at hard-packed ground or at a mossy rock. Once, the girl pauses to run the fingers of her good hand lightly across the impression of a rabbit's paw in the dirt.

For some time, the Everdeens follow wordlessly a few paces behind her. Katniss is almost unconsciously aware of the direction to the Cornucopia, feels it in her mind as though there's some invisible tether stretched between them, but she's less sure of how far they are from the other tributes.

As they walk, she's careful to keep an eye out for any movement. Though the other tributes will likely be occupied with scrounging for food and shelter, and the Careers will likely be picking apart and securing the Cornucopia till dark, the Gamemakers may drive them toward the others if they get too near the edge of the arena, so it's best not to stray far.

Finch stops suddenly, head tilting back to follow something flitting in the air—a small grey bird, maybe a dove or a pigeon. "There we go. Good sign," she says. "Means water's close by. Look around…"

They hear the water before they see it, a faint but steady burble off in the distance. As they hurry through the foliage, it expands before them: a small trickle of a stream about a foot in width seeping across scattered brown stones. They all start forward immediately, cupping their hands and drinking from the fresh water. It suddenly occurs to Katniss that the water could be contaminated, but she highly doubts it. After a series of unsatisfying, bloodless deaths in the Hunger Games a few years ago, the Gamemakers had begun using cleaner water. The worst that might happen to them is a bad stomach bug, but it's too late to worry now.

Once they've all had their fill, Katniss feels stronger already, as though their success rates have flourished with their hydration. She stands. "We'll want to find somewhere nearby to hide if we can," she says aloud, thinking. That's two of the three things they'll need: water, shelter, food. For today, they can eat what's in her backpack—though it would be a lot more if it was spread across two mouths instead of three—and hole up somewhere before the Careers lose interest in the Cornucopia at some point this evening. With the sun drooping to the west, a faint chill is already thickening in the air and expanding in Katniss's lungs; she thinks that the night will be very cool. "Find some firewood, if you can," she tells the girl. "It'll help if we need to heat some of the stones for the river to keep us warm tonight. Prim and I'll look for some too while we find a place for shelter."

Finch nods and turns on her heel. The Everdeens start off in the opposite direction, Prim silent and watchful as she stoops to pick up the occasional dry branch for the fire. Katniss peers up into the trees around them. There's not much to work with except for a small grove of low-slung willow trees with sturdy-looking branches a few yards away. Katniss thinks that if they can climb up into them, they'll be virtually hidden from sight should the Careers come hunting this way.

Prim catches her train of thought before Katniss can voice it. "I don't know if Finch can climb one," she says quietly, adjusting the wood in her arms.

Katniss frowns, considering the redhead's helpfulness and that horrible feeling of owing her. "We'll have to help her up. I think the fork of that tree's wide enough for the two of us, and she can use the one next to it. That's all we can do for now. We'll have to…tie ourselves to the trunks
tonight, I guess."

"We're going to sleep in the trees?"

"I think it'll be safer. Let me see—" She hoists herself into the larger of the two trees, scrabbling for footing and pulling herself up branch by branch. When she reaches the fork, it's a sturdy, wide space well covered by the dense foliage of the willow. The other, Finch's, looks even more secluded. *Hopefully, the leaves give us some insulation*, Katniss thinks, already feeling the chill of the air over her skin in this darkened space, *or it's going to be a tough night.*

"I got the firewood," Finch announces from below. Katniss looks down quickly to see her standing just beside Prim, and she curses herself inwardly for leaving her sister alone for even a second. "But I don't think I can start one on my own, and besides, I definitely can't do it one-handed." She looks doubtfully up at Katniss. "Are you planning—we're not sleeping in the trees, are we? We'll fall out."

Katniss is scrambling out of the tree, and she leaps with a hard *thud* at its roots. Finch looks at her coolly, but if she senses Katniss's thoughts, she gives no indication. "We'll be fine if we tie ourselves into the branches."

Finch nods slowly. "Do you think you can get a fire started?"

"Yeah, I can. It'll take a minute."

They wander back to the stream. Katniss scrounges up some dry leaves and grass for the tinder nest and lights it using one of their two dozen matches—a generous number, considering the Gamemakers' habitual stinginess. Finch settles nearby, keeping a wary lookout for intruders as Katniss and Prim pull up their sleeves and crouch low to dig out some of the smaller brown stones, the water cold on their hands.

When they have stacked a small pile of smooth, fist-sized stones beside the trickle of water, Katniss instructs Prim to help her arrange them in a circle around the fire, close enough for the flames to just lick them every now and then. When Katniss sets down her last stone, she looks up to find Prim weighing one thoughtfully in the palm of her hand. Just as Katniss had weighed Alree's stone earlier. Prim's blue eyes glance up at Katniss, the question unspoken.

"I didn't want to find out if she'd meant what she said," Katniss explains shortly. There is no judgment in her sister's expression, only a sober frown.

"Heavy totems are going to be banned next year," she replies, smiling weakly.

Katniss returns it, and that's all that's said on the matter. Finch stares at them both from across the fire. It's very likely she has no idea what they're talking about, although someone as smart as Finch seems to be can probably guess from the words that Katniss had something to do with the Clove's death. Around now, the girl is probably regretting this temporary alliance. *Good*, Katniss thinks. *Leave on your own so I don't have to tell you to. Or worse, in the end.*

But for now, they are still partners, and Katniss begrudgingly shares the dried beef strips and crackers with her. They eat in silence as the sun sinks below the trees and casts them all in shadow, Prim curled into Katniss's side for warmth.

Sudden booms thunder through the still forest air, sending them all to their feet in fright until they register the sounds. Cannons, echoing one at a time. Katniss counts the sounds as they settle back onto the ground. Nine in all. The bloodbath at the Cornucopia must have finally dispersed enough for the Gamemakers to make out the death toll for the day. Ten total, counting Clove.
"We'll need to find food tomorrow," Katniss says eventually, handing the last of the crackers to her sister. Some of the paracord and wire has gone to binding up Finch's arm, and what they have left will be needed to tie them all in place in the trees tonight, or else Katniss might have set a hunting snare.

"I can fish," Finch replies after a beat, "Least, I can show you how to, since it'd be harder with my arm. This stream may lead us back to the lake. If it widens any, we might find fish there."

"Alright," Katniss replies evenly, thinking with another burst of annoyance that they'll never be rid of Finch if she keeps proving herself so useful, though she knows that's exactly what the girl is probably after. Having an alliance to deter potential threats is a good strategy for an injured tribute. "In the meantime, we should get some rest. It's early still, but it'll make more sense for us to sleep around sunset and wake at dawn so we can use all of the daylight. And I'd rather be hidden when the Careers come to check out the area."

The fire has mostly burnt the wood to ash, but a few flickers of orange still glow in the black. It only takes Katniss a minute to put it out by kicking dirt over the fire's remains. She orders Prim to gather leaves and branches to cover the area, and when the smoke has ceased, Katniss stamps the ashes with her foot to be sure. They scatter the ashes and put leaves and branches over the darkened area, and within a few moments, Katniss would have been hard-pressed to find anything that looked like signs of a fire.

With the forest still darkening around them, the light a deep, filtered violet now, they gather the still-warm stones from their circle and creep quietly into the grove of willows, Katniss bending down to give Prim a boost up into the branches. With the branches of her tree so low, Finch manages to climb up slowly on her own, even with her arm the way it is. It's just as well, because Katniss isn't sure how much she wanted to help the redhead get up there. Still, she clambers up into the branches of Finch's tree to hand the girl a bit of paracord and a few warm stones, which Finch shoves between the fabric of her tunic and her jacket, and then Katniss hands the rest of the stones up to Prim.

She and Prim have the additional advantage of the sleeping bag from Katniss's pack. It's a bit odd with both of them balancing in the tree, Katniss wrapping the cord around them and then laying the opened sleeping bag across them both like a blanket. They settle the stones between them, and Prim lays her head on Katniss's shoulder to get some rest.

By the time night finally falls in earnest, Prim has finally fallen into a fitful sleep. It seems late when the loud boom of the anthem shocks her awake. The recap of the day's deaths is plastered across the sky somewhere above them, but the thick foliage blocks all light from view. Having jolted upright, Prim fidgets, probably with half a mind to climb down so she can see, but it doesn't really matter in Katniss's eyes. Ten tributes gone, one of them Clove, and that's the important thing.

When the tune finally ends, Katniss thinks that sleep will be hard in coming, but she hasn't really slept in two days. As Prim sinks back into a restless sleep at her side, Katniss is lulled by the sounds of the forest as it springs into its night life. A chilly breeze rifles through the leaves of the trees, although the thick, twining tresses of the willow do an excellent job of insulating them from the worst of the wind. Insects murmur in small swarms somewhere nearby, astir in the occasional puffs of cool air.

Hours later, Katniss wakes in surprise, not remembering falling asleep. At first, she's not sure what woke her: it's hard to tell the time, but her internal clock says it must still be a while before dawn. With the deep foliage of the willow blocking out the sky, there's no moonlight to help her see.
After a moment of rigid study, Katniss becomes aware of a very faint light off in the distance through the leaves of the willow, a yellowy flicker paired with the scent of wood smoke.

*Some bonehead has a fire going,* she thinks to herself incredulously. *And of course they picked the exact patch of woods where we're hiding.*

From where she sits, Katniss can just make out the shape of Finch strung up in the tree. The girl's face is in shadow, but when Katniss begins to slowly stir, the redhead turns to her.

"Do we move?" Finch asks, her whisper so low that Katniss has to strain to catch it.

"We can't," Katniss whispers back, the faint rustle of the willow strands around them disguising the noise, "not with a *signal fire* to tell everyone where we are. We have to wait it out."

Katniss's spine is uncomfortably rigid against the lumpy trunk of the tree, but she sits tense and fuming for the next hour or so, listening for the slightest bit of human movement in the natural rhythm of the forest.

It doesn't take much longer. There is a sudden shout of surprise, and then a girl's voice pleading. "Wait! Wait, please don't—"

The laughter of the Careers is loud and raucous; they congratulate each other in excitement and fight over who will "do the honor." By this time, Prim is tense and breathing sharply. Katniss slowly wraps an arm around her shoulders.

A loud screech, which cuts off abruptly. The most awful, wet noise. More laughter.

Katniss tries to pick out the voices as they dole out orders and begin checking the girl for supplies. They're definitely the Careers, though their numbers sound larger than Katniss had originally thought. She can make out the voice of the boy from District 2, Cato, and at least three other male voices, as well as two or three female ones. One of the females is definitely Glimmer, if the high-pitched trill is anything to go by. It's a bit of a jumbled mess, though, especially as all of the voices pipe up at once to argue about whether or not the girl is well and truly dead, and it finally occurs to Katniss that the Career pack has expanded to include a few tributes outside its normal districts.

It's Peeta's voice that causes her and Prim to jump, though. "We're wasting time! I'll go finish her and let's move on!"

And he does. In the next minute, there is the sound of cannon fire, and as the Careers watch and wait, the hovercraft drifts above them, the wind growing fiercer, and Katniss thinks they must be picking up the body of the dead girl.

Peeta's *good with a knife,* apparently, according to the other tributes. They disperse slowly, still rowdy and unafraid in the quiet night, and Katniss thinks to herself that this new development may be for the best. It would have been harder to kill Peeta eventually if he'd stuck to his morals, if he'd tried to be friendly or brave. But if he's going to be a hellion like the rest of them, slitting his throat will come easier.

Prim is shaking in earnest now. Katniss thinks she's cold at first, except that her sister moves to wipe her eyes every now and again. There are no words as hollow as the ones Katniss wants to say—*it's okay, Prim*—so she just rubs her sister's shoulder as she cries.

Dawn will come soon. For now, though, the three girls huddle in the trees, alternately fidgeting or dozing restlessly as they wait for morning light.
Chapter End Notes

I meant to get this out in time to celebrate the last movie, but it didn't quite work out that way, obviously! Regardless, please leave a note to let me know what you thought :-)
In the end, it's probably a good thing Katniss decided not to ditch Finch in the woods. The redhead turns out to be surprisingly adept with survival tactics, and her breadth of knowledge makes up for the gaps in Katniss's.

They climb down from their trees in the morning, debating whether or not to make back for the lake. Eventually, they decide to head deeper into the valley instead, as Finch thinks the downhill flow of water should widen the stream, which will ideally allow them to fish while keeping them away from the Careers.

She's correct, to Katniss's relief and chagrin. The stream widens further on, and by midday, they have begun to spot small shapes darting back and forth, scales shimmering against the dark rocks at the bottom of the clear water.

Being this far from the Cornucopia feels safer, so they settle on one of the banks to try their hand at fishing.

"It's gotta be something really sharp," Finch tells Prim when she proffers a few dull thorns from a nearby bush. "We don't have anything to sharpen it with."

"I don't see much else," Prim replies doubtfully, tucking a stray blonde curl behind her ear. She slept so restlessly that her braids have come undone in the night, leaving her hair looking like a wispy bird's nest.

Katniss crunches back across the pine needles to where Finch sits on the dirt near the stream. Their findings are spread out across a flat rock before her, spindly little sticks and twigs in neat rows.

"How's this?" Katniss asks, procuring the blackthorn branch she'd yanked from a nearby tree. Its thorns are ridged and twisted, but they look sharper than anything they've come across so far.

Finch takes it with her good hand, holding it up in the sunlight to turn it this way and that. "It's not what I'd usually pick, but it'll do," she says finally. "Can I have the rest of the wire?"

Katniss digs it from the bottom of the backpack, whose bright orange polyester they camouflaged with packed mud and dirt a little after dawn this morning. She hands their remaining reel of wire to Finch, who picks off one of the thorns and settles down to begin work.

"So we're gonna sort of connect these two twigs together, or really the twig and one of the thorns, and make a hook to catch the fish with," she begins explaining aloud, mostly because Prim is hovering nearby with thinly veiled interest. "It's gonna be kinda rough, I think, but we should be able to make it so they don't fall apart, leastaways."

Awkwardly, she begins using her splinted hand to hold the wood down as she works the coil with her other hand. "You start it off by tying it to the sharp piece, the thorn, so you can wrap the rest of it around…"

As Finch narrates, Katniss gently pushes Prim to the ground beside the redhead and pulls out her sister's braids, running her fingers through the blonde tresses to remove the tangles, and she plaits it all firmly against the back of Prim's skull. The scene, with Finch explaining and Prim asking
questions and Katniss braiding her sister's hair, is so stupidly domestic that Katniss doesn't know whether to laugh or cry.

By the time she has finished with Prim's braids, Finch has completed a braid of her own. The fishing hook is cleverly wired into place in a crossing and twisting sort of pattern, and the finished product is very neatly made.

"Where did you learn to make them?" Katniss asks, marveling at the intricacy of the final product.

"My Pa's good at fishing," she replies simply, holding the hook in the palm of her injured hand before looking up at Katniss and Prim. "Where we live, in District 5, there are tons of irrigation canals and the like, and we use the push of the water to supply the power for the city, and all of the canals lead down into a huge lake, with the forest all around on all sides. Dad spends more time there than anyone else and knows a ton about the land and trees there. He taught me to fish when I was just a little kid running at his heels. I used to make these for fun, because we had much better fishing poles to use, but I'm glad he taught me now."

"Me, too," Prim agrees, smiling. Finch smiles back.

Katniss's mouth goes sour. "Well, how do we use them? What do we need?"

"Maggots, grub. Earthworms are best," Finch shrugs. "If you don't mind digging."

It takes a few minutes, but with advice from Finch ("Just move as slow as possible—they don't have eyes, but they kinda feel vibrations and such. They'll feel your footsteps if they're too heavy."), Prim finally digs an earthworm from the dirt along the banks, wrinkling her nose as she holds it out to Finch in her cupped hands. Finch skewers the thing remorselessly and plops the handmade hook into the stream, holding the end of the wire with her good hand.

"Now, we wait," she says, making herself comfortable at the edge of the water, her boots sinking into the mud. She casts an eye back at Katniss and Prim. "Though it would be good to have a bit more bait if this works. The more fish, the better."

And so the afternoon finds them sifting through the mud and dirt along the banks of the river, their sleeves rolled up to their elbows. There's a trick to catching the slippery creatures, to holding fast during the initial tug of war until the earthworm finally tires and can be pulled from its hole. The jackets the tributes have all been given are equipped with multiple pockets, one of them zippered, and Katniss and Prim tuck the writhing creatures inside until they have almost two dozen in total.

They pause twice to help Finch reel in a struggling fish; though the redhead can grasp the wire well with her good arm, it's difficult to pull the length in one-handed. The first fish is speckled black and green and nothing Katniss recognizes, although it's not as though she's an expert in them. Finch doesn't seem to be familiar with it either. "We've got mostly perches and herrings at home," she explains at Katniss's questioning glance. "This is maybe some kind of bass, I think."

The second isn't a fish, exactly. It flings itself to and fro in the water as they reel it in, making it hard to see what it looks like, and it takes Katniss and Finch both to pull the thing to shore. Prim squeals and laughs, darting away at the sight of it.

"It's an eel," Finch crows excitedly. "We get them sometimes in District 5—they're really good."

Katniss looks doubtfully at the creature, which looks enough like a muddy, olive green snake to set her on guard. It's nearly three feet in length and still thrashing about on the ground, even with Finch pressing its head into the dirt and Katniss holding the other end.

"And you're sure we can eat it?" Katniss asks.
Finch nods. "It'd be easier to clean with a knife, but we'll have to make do."

They put another fire together, taking advantage of the midday sun for cover, and Finch uses a part of the sharp blackthorn branch to dig out the innards of both fish, though it takes some time to clean them out completely. While she does this, Prim tries her hand with the hook, and over the next hour, Katniss helps her reel in two more of the speckled, maybe-bass fish.

"This should be enough to last us for a while," Katniss says as they set the fish down for Finch to clean. "At least, we'll maybe have enough for today and tomorrow if we roast it all now."

"And we have the snares, too," Prim reminds her sister. Earlier, they had used the lengths of paracord with which they'd bound themselves to the trees last night to set up snares, deciding that if they were going to be nearby for long enough to fish, they might as well try trapping, too.

Katniss nods. "Come on. We'll check them together."

It doesn't take two people to check snares, but Katniss doesn't feel comfortable leaving Prim alone with Finch for any length of time. Her sister seems to be more trusting of the redhead, but Prim doesn't object, only strides at Katniss's heels as they wander into the woods. As far as Katniss knows, though Finch's survival skills are exceptional, the girl has no particular strength when it comes to weaponry. Katniss expects that she'll stick with the Everdeens for as long as she can, making herself useful to them for as long as the playing field is even between them.

Finch has no guarantee that Katniss won't strangle her in her sleep except for the presence of Prim, which has, as always, a reassuring and calming effect on Katniss. Finch is likely cunning enough to see that, but Katniss imagines that the moment any of them gets their hands on a weapon, they will separate for good—though she also imagines they'll do so without violence.

She knows what she's doing, then, Katniss thinks, wondering how wise it is to pair with someone of Finch's intelligence.

"Watch yourself around her," Katniss warns Prim in a low voice. The woods are silent, and both of them are on edge as they listen for any noises coming from a direction other than Finch's.

"I will," Prim replies as they come up on the first snare, which sits empty beside a spiral of tree roots. "But I think she's alright."

"So do I," Katniss replies before she can catch herself. She frowns, leaning down to pick apart the knots of rope. "But that doesn't mean she is. You've watched the Games before."

Katniss doesn't have to look back to know that Prim is nodding. "I know."

"And if it comes to it…if we have to…"

"I know," Prim says. "But it won't come to it."

Katniss pulls the rest of the snare up so she can unravel it as they walk. "Just watch yourself around her," she says again.

The second snare, which is a little to the west of the stream, is loud with flurries of movement. A grey rabbit kicks its bound legs, panicked, and Katniss hands Prim the remains of the other snare and bends down to grab the animal by its ears. She looks pointedly at Prim, who, instead of looking away as she normally might, only gazes back in wordless determination. Katniss snaps the creature's neck in one quick movement.
They carry the animal back to Finch, and something in the air is different between all of them at their return. It's as though in the brief separation, the tension has thickened and grown, as though Finch is aware of the contents of the Everdeen's discussion. She probably is, Katniss realizes. It's sort of obvious what we'd talk about as soon as we were alone.

Though the redhead's movements are a bit more blunt and jerky than usual, she gestures to the line of roasting fish, which is positioned above the fire with the help of two forked branches. "Dinner," she says.

Katniss sits at the fireside to begin cleaning the rabbit with the blackthorn branch as Prim tentatively picks up one of the fish to muse at its crackled red skin. Katniss braces herself for a quiet, awkward evening, but to her surprise, Finch breaks the silence.

"Here," she says, holding something out to Prim. The blonde reaches out instinctively to grasp it, and Katniss sees that it's a bit of eel meat that Finch has managed to hack into smaller pieces a few inches wide. "Like I said, it's actually really good, better than the fish, even." When she looks down at the remaining length of eel to begin cutting again, Katniss discreetly pinches her sister's leg.

As if sensing Katniss's thoughts, Finch reaches for a smaller piece of eel that lies closer to the fire. In the light, Katniss suddenly notices that it's half-eaten, and Finch sinks her teeth into it now.

"Probably not poisoned, then. Prim looks at Katniss, shrugging, and bites into it. Her face swirls through a few expressions as though she can't quite decide to make of it, and she stares down at the ruddy red strip curiously. "It tastes weird," she says once she's swallowed. "Kind of like—maybe tuna?"

She offers it to Katniss, who tries it as well. The texture is strangely like chicken, but it has an oily slickness to it that she isn't expecting. "Tuna," she agrees. "But that's the only kind of fish we've ever tried, so there's not really that much room to compare," she reminds her sister.

"That's kinda strange. In District 5, we eat mostly fish—or at least my pa and I do, because you can find them easier than buying a lot of food. You only had tuna before?" Finch asks, sliding her chin onto her palm.

"Our father brought home a few cans of it once when we were little. As a treat."

"What do you mean, cans?"

Prim shrugs. "That's how they came. I think the people in the Capitol eat them out of cans like that. They can go to stores and get some."

Finch absorbs this, humming thoughtfully. "How'd he manage to get his hands on Capitol goods?"

"Every now and then, things turn up in the Hob, the market area of District 12," Katniss explains, struggling to strip the rabbit's hide. It peels away slowly, the rabbit having begun to stiffen and cool. "Our father brought back cinnamon once, and oranges—do you remember that, Prim?"

Prim is bent over to examine the eel thoughtfully as she chews, but she nods vigorously in response. "Oh, yeah. That was delicious."

"Cinnamon?"

"It's this spice—kind of like, I dunno, pepper or something. But you put it in bread or sweets."
Finch bites into her sliver of eel thoughtfully. "My pa's never traded for anything from the Capitol before," she begins slowly. "But I reckon it's because we don't have much to trade. He's just a station worker like most of the other men in the district, and there's not much special about the job he can use to trade with anyone. Except that he cooks well enough," she adds, working out a sliver of bone and pulling it out of her mouth to toss it onto the ground. "Just before I left, I helped him make a fruit cake with some nuts and the pawpaws that grow in the field near our house. It was his birthday, and it's his favorite kind of dessert. Truth is, I can't really cook much besides fish, but every year for his birthday, I help him make a fruit cake. It's just me and him left, and there's no one else to really celebrate but us, and now he's..." she trails off, frowning.

"So's our mother," Prim responds before Katniss can stop her. "It's just us and our mother, and she's alone at home now."

They're all uncomfortably frozen for a moment as though Prim's words have broken some kind of spell, Finch's face pinking slightly. Comparing remaining family members is a poor strategy—all of them reminded who they have to live for and why they need to return home.

Though Katniss would be content letting the awkward moment fall away into silence on its own, she can almost feel Prim's mind buzzing as she casts about for another, less piercing topic. But it is again Finch who responds. "Tell me about her," she says determinedly, her amber eyes firmly set on Prim's and her cheeks still slightly ruddy with discomfiture.

Prim's mouth works open and closed. "Well," she replies slowly. "Well, I guess she's very good with her hands and with making things, and she's very good with medicines and tonics and healing people."

"Oh, right—I remember you saying she's an apothecary," Finch adds suddenly, facing Katniss. "Back at the interview, when you talked about—um," and then she bites her tongue, her face heating again.

She looks so ill at ease that even Katniss reluctantly wades into the conversation to help. "She's alright. She was never really the same after our father went, though."

"She's better now," Prim argues. "She's just very quiet a lot of the time." Katniss snorts at Prim's lenience, but she lets the statement slide.

"My ma died when I was just a girl," Finch offers. "I never knew her real well, but I hear she was quiet too. Liked to write a lot—I have some of her journals. Everyone thought she was a bit odd, 'cause no one really has much need for reading and writing outside of school."

"Our mother used to write in journals too—she keeps them under her bed now," Prim adds suddenly. "It's funny that they were in different districts. Maybe they would have been friends otherwise."

"Maybe so," Finch offers, smiling.

The afternoon light has faded enough and the conversation has steered into strange enough waters that Katniss takes to her feet. "Time to put the fire out," she remarks, looking at the lengthening shadows of the trees around them.

As they wrap the remaining fish and eel into the cotton bandages for easy storage, Finch and Prim continue to chatter aimlessly about their mothers' respective handwritings as though they are not in the Hunger Games but at some camping party, as though they themselves can find a way to be friends.
Katniss keeps an eye on the two of them as she puts out the fire and finishes unraveling the second snare. She has half a mind to yank Prim away from Finch, but something holds her back. *She's been helpful so far*, Katniss tells herself uncertainly, frowning down at the mess of knots. But that's not really why. It's true that Finch's help has served them well, especially with her ability to locate water far from the lake guarded by the Career pack.

But it's more than that. There's something more to Finch, something she didn't have this morning. It's as though Finch has somehow fleshed herself out in front of their very eyes, as though the redhead has somehow added depth and shadow to what had previously been a mere sketch. As though she is a more complete human being now in a way she wasn't before.

*That's exactly it, isn't it?* Katniss realizes, standing abruptly as she winds the length of paracord into a coil around her fingers. With all the stories she's been telling...they made us remember that she's not just a tribute—she's a person just like us.

An acid taste blooms in Katniss's mouth. Kind people, helpful people have a way of burrowing under her skin in spite of her best efforts to push them away. Katniss's greatest strength up to this point has been the knowledge that she might, whenever necessary, put an end to Finch's life without a second thought. Now, though, with the girl becoming more and more real with every kind gesture and bubbly laugh, that kind of unrestrained violence would be nearly impossible.

*It's all a game.* Katniss knows this as surely as she's aware at every second of the cameras upon her, the audio feeds picking up Finch's stories as well as her own ears do. And for all Katniss knows, the stories might be entirely invented—Finch might not even have a father, and for all Katniss knows, the girl's a thief or a murderer in her district. But when the time comes to act, Katniss also knows that she, Katniss, might hesitate for just a second. Not that she won't have the stomach to do it. But the slightest hesitation may be all Finch needs when the time comes.

She looks over to the two girls, just a few feet away. They carefully pack the fish into the top of the backpack.

Finch looks up at her. Stares.

She's been oddly eager to share, Katniss realizes suddenly. Especially given that she might have to kill or be killed by the Everdeens at some point in the future. It's not a bad strategy for her to show off her good side, to introduce a little sympathy. But while most people might have been cowed by the thought of this intelligent strategy, Katniss can respect the logic behind it, appreciate the plan—which is even worse. Allies are allies because you just *join* with them; you aren't supposed to *like* them. Finch knows this, and while the redhead might not seem like much of a danger, weaponless and injured as she is, she's still playing the game.

*Smart girl*, Katniss thinks, meeting her eyes. She holds out the coil of rope for Finch to pack.


Chapter End Notes

Not much movement this chapter, but the first days of the Games are passing a little slowly. And I can assure you that Katniss is just as frustrated with the slowness and the sudden and unexpected burden of Finch as you probably are with the dawdling plot!
Potentially more updates to come soon, since I'm off for the week. And thanks for your reviews last chapter! Please leave me a note to let me know what you thought of this one too.

'Till next time, happy reading :-)


For all of Katniss's worries about being ambushed by other tributes in the middle of the night, it's not the Careers that get them.

They sleep above the ground again, this time with Finch huddled on a lower branch of the sturdy pine where Katniss and Prim rest. The night is warmer than the one before, a bit of the day's springtime heat lingering in the air, and Katniss doesn't even feel the need to pull out the sleeping bag to keep warm.

With the paracord fastened securely around her waist and Prim at her side, Katniss sleeps soundly. The last few nights have been plagued either by worry or the brutality of the Career pack, and her body sinks deep into slumber as soon as the sun sets—despite her intention to sleep lightly.

She crests from the depths of a troubled dream and wakes choking, fistfuls of ash and smog lining her throat and lips. The rind of crescent moon that had hung just above the branches of her pine tree is blocked out entirely by a curtain of billowing black smoke. Katniss shakes Prim awake, unable to form the words to order her sister out of the tree, but Prim gets the message quickly enough. They grope at the knots to untie themselves and clamber from the branches, coughing uncontrollably.

When they reach Finch's branch just below, the redhead's eyes are wide open and panicked as she fumbles to untie herself with one hand. Still coughing, Katniss presses Prim toward the ground below and works at the knots as quickly as she can. She yanks the cord from around Finch's waist and shoves it down the front of her own jacket, hoping Finch can climb down well enough on her own.

The girl manages alright, and they reach the ground weak and shaky, Prim nearby and crouched low to avoid the worst of the smoke.

"Let's go," Katniss manages, "and put your shirts over your mouths." She presses her own sweaty tunic over her nose and grabs her sister's sleeve so they won't be separated in the thick, dark ash. They run in a confused panic, stumbling across rocks and boulders and nearly flinging themselves headfirst into trees. Katniss finds herself bitterly hoping no one in the Capitol can see them in all the smoke, as their dazed antics are sure to be amusing for the bloodsucking rabble watching the Games live.

And then there's fire. It happens quite suddenly, huge orange tongues of it sprouting from the ground before them, so bright and rapid that Katniss flinches away. "This way, this way!" she cries, turning on her heel and thinking wildly. The Gamemakers have done this, she realizes. They must have strayed too close to the edge of the arena, or else nothing of interest must have happened recently and they want a good show.

The fire moves, licking its way up tree trunks and into the leaves to rain down little cinders upon their heads, and a minute later, it's all around them. The heat is suffocating, pressing into Katniss's very skin.

The first ball of fire that jets out barely misses Finch, who ducks quickly with a cry of alarm. Blades of fire sweep in front of them and block the path; Katniss drags Prim aside and leads them down a rocky embankment crawling with small patches of flame, half worried the rubber soles of their boots won't hold up.

They leap over the trunk of a fallen tree and spring through the dry forest floor before the next
fireball comes, striking a patch of earth just behind them. The attacks come more quickly then, one after another, and Katniss lets go of Prim's hand so they can both dodge more fluidly.

"Where are they sending us?" Prim shrieks, leaping to the side to avoid one of the blasts.

The Gamemakers, she means, and Katniss intends to respond except that she coughs instead, her mouth again filled with ash.

"I don't know," Finch shouts back, nearly tripping over a protruding root, "but I don't think we've seen this area of the woods before. We might be—"

But another hiss signals an incoming fireball, and they fall to the earth as it sails overhead. A horrid smell of burning plastic wafts over them as Katniss scrabbles to her feet, spitting mud from her mouth.

Prim gives a little shriek and thumps the backpack roughly with her arm, pushing Katniss forward. "It's on fire," she cries, batting out the flames, and Katniss feels a searing jolt on her bare neck as well. She slaps at it roughly, yelling in pain, and pulls her braid over her shoulder. It crumbles to ash in her hand, a good few inches at least dropping away from the rest of her hair.

Finch shouts unintelligibly and pushes them forward again, Katniss feeling as though she's being boiled alive and Prim still slapping frantically at the flames on Katniss's backpack.

From behind them comes another hiss, and a massive fireball rolls from some distant source toward Prim's side. Katniss throws her arms around her sister, who gives a surprised "Whoa!" and falls to the ground, but not before a biting, scorching pain spills across Katniss's side and thigh.

She screams in pain, the heat shooting through her so fiercely that her world narrows to a tiny pinprick, funneling smaller until the only thing that exists is the pain in her side. Katniss feels as though it lingers for several hours, boiling across her skin until Prim drags her to her feet.

"Katniss, we have to go! I'm sorry, I'm sorry—come on!"

Katniss limps along as best she can, Prim and Finch each taking one of her arms so that they all hobble raggedly through the woods together. Katniss is completely on fire, drenched and submerged with it, but the flames seem to be dying away in the woods around her, or else the world as a whole has grown dark. And then the smoke thins, though it still clings to their clothes and makes their eyes water, but the fire is behind them now, or maybe it's been manually extinguished by the Gamemakers—Katniss doesn't know.

A rough sort of whimpering sound reaches Katniss's ears, and it takes her a few minutes to realize it's coming from her own mouth. At her side, from miles away, Prim and Finch shout something, maybe talking to Katniss or maybe conferring with each other, and then they hurry forward again. All at once, Katniss is lowered carefully to the ground, sinking deeply into it and letting its cool softness filter over her.

The heat of the fire recedes; she breathes slowly and deeply, filling her lungs with cool, clean air. The night still hangs deep and dark around her, but the blackness above is thick with overhanging foliage rather than dense clouds of black smoke.

It takes Katniss some time to come to herself. She's not in the ground but in a pool of cool water. Hands cradle the back of her head, holding it up so she can breathe. Prim, looking pale and frightened, hovers at the edge of her vision. Quick, soundless tears stream down her face—*she always does that*, Katniss thinks dazedly, *cries all to herself*—and she bends closer once she realizes Katniss's eyes are tracking again.
"Katniss?" she whispers, blinking away tears. "Are you okay?"

Crouched in the water at Prim's side is Finch, who leans over in concern to peer at Katniss, her face open and afraid. As Katniss watches, she turns to stare into a thicket of brambles and vines at the edge of the pond. Watching for other tributes, Katniss realizes, grateful for the help.

"I'm okay," Katniss croaks, and it isn't entirely true, but she's at least well enough to start moving again. In a minute. "We need to get out of here. If they've stopped with the fire, it's because we're close enough to other tributes for them to find us."

Prim pulls one hand from under Katniss's head and wipes the tears from her cheeks. "Okay. Can you get up?"

Slowly, Prim pulls Katniss up by her shoulders until she's sitting on the bottom of the pond, the water up to her waist. Away from the fire now and in the cool night air, Katniss shivers. With Prim's help, she manages to climb to her feet.

"I didn't know what to do about your burn," Prim is saying, "so we got you into the water, but now I'm thinking that might not have been so good. If there's anything in it, you could get an infection."

"If you hadn't, the burn would have been worse," Katniss soothes, wincing as Prim gingerly touches her side, a jolt racing across her skin. "Thanks, Prim. You did the right thing."

Instinctively, Katniss's hand darts up to her hair, which stops just above her shoulders. She vaguely remembers the feeling of burning across the skin on her back and lower neck. Her hair is jaggedly burnt, stopping just at her neck and longer on one side than the other.

Well, at least sponsors don't pick us for our looks, she thinks, dropping her hand.

"If you hadn't, the burn would have been worse," Katniss soothes, wincing as Prim gingerly touches her side, a jolt racing across her skin. "Thanks, Prim. You did the right thing."

"I wasn't. I'm all right."

Finch is carefully looking away, her back turned to them. As the conversation drifts off, she turns back. "We should go," she says.

Prim continues. "I thought maybe—when you pushed me down and the fire was all over your side and on the bag, I thought maybe you were—"

"I wasn't. I'm all right."

Again, they hear the Careers before they see them—Katniss wonders if any of them have ever bothered to train in stealth, or whether brute strength and muscle has been such a focal point of their practices that they've never bothered with any subtler arts. An excited whoop tells Katniss they've been spotted, and she grabs Prim to rush forward through the trees as quickly as she can, taking advantage of the lingering darkness and their own aptitude for silence.

A feverish haze creeps over Katniss's thoughts for several minutes, the pain still shooting up her side, and she is apparently slow enough for Prim to begin yanking her forward of her own accord. All around her is the laughter of the Careers, as though she's wandering in a dream in which their
voices magically swirl about. In her daze, it takes Katniss several moments to recognize that Finch is nowhere to be seen.

"Finch?" she asks, her tongue thick in her mouth.

"I don't know—we got separated," Prim replies curtly, but the sounds of Careers crashing through the forest behind them are still loud in their ears, so they press on. For several minutes, they continue just out of sight of the Careers until Prim takes a sharp turn to ascend a sloping stretch of land clustered with thick swaths of heather and foxtail, and she and Katniss duck down into the brush behind the wide trunk of a tree.

They have been moving so quietly that the Careers don't seem to notice their detour, and Katniss hears them stumble past in the darkness, only three pairs of feet this time. Where are the rest?

Several moments pass, Katniss trying to keep herself from breathing heavily and gritting her teeth against the fire in her side. Finally, Prim seems to feel that they are safe enough to emerge, and Katniss blindly follows her sister as they slink through the tall grass.

"She got separated from us when they cut us off at that fork," Prim whispers. "Come on."

Katniss forces herself to focus, her hands still twitching in desire to press against the wound at her side. "Wait, Finch?"

"Yes, Finch."

"I'm sure she's fine, Prim. She's quick on her feet, and you know...maybe this is for the best, that's all. Us being separated." It's ideal, even, Katniss thinks. A resolution in which neither party has to kill the other, and it's happened without Katniss even pushing Finch away or upsetting Prim.

"But what if they've gotten her?"

"They haven't. I haven't heard a cannon." Not that this means much: Katniss's mind hasn't exactly been functioning at its best the past few minutes.

"Let's just check, alright? We'll go back really quietly just to see."

"Prim—"

"We have to, Katniss. We won't do anything. Come on."

Before Katniss can protest any more, Prim stubbornly sets forward at a crouch, and Katniss has to choose between either hissing at her sister or following silently. With the woods thick with the watchful eyes of the boisterous Careers, it seems wiser to just move on. Besides, they don't know where they are and in which direction the other Careers have run, so backtracking is as good an option as any.

The sounds of swearing and shouting are very faint at first, but they grow louder as the Everdeens approach. Prim leads Katniss just near enough to hear the chorus of voices, but she stops at a distance that's far enough away to have a good head start if running becomes necessary.

"—can't get her down."

"Find another way, then!"

"What are we supposed to—?"
"—useless with that."

Through the dense, shadowy brush, Katniss can make out movement somewhere high in the trees. It's too dark to see much. After a moment of arguing, the faint scent of smoke reaches her nostrils. Katniss entertains a brief jolt of fear, thinking that the forest has been once again set aflame, but there's a sharp sizzle and crunch drifts from the general direction of the Career pack, and she realizes they've started a fire.

"—be there in the morning. We'll deal with her then." The voice that reaches her ears may be Peeta's, but she can't say for sure. Next to her, Prim shifts uneasily.

The Careers who ran past them earlier return to the pack now, bringing the news that Katniss and Prim have escaped capture. Swears and insults reach Katniss's ears, and she listens as they alternately argue against each other and defend themselves. Peeta, if he's still among them, remains silent.

The growing fire, dim as it is, seems like a bright spotlight in the utter darkness of the woods. Its red glow faintly illuminates the branches above it, and though the meager light doesn't stretch far, Katniss thinks she can just make out the shape of a body in the branches of the tree and a mess of red hair. Finch has taken a leaf out of their book to clamber into another tall pine. Getting to such a high position on her own would have necessitated the use of both hands, and Katniss bets that her damaged arm is paining her badly now.

The Careers' squabbles eventually come to an end, the silence thick and mistrustful. Still, Katniss doesn't dare move, doesn't dare breathe, until some time later, when their conversations have faded and the almost imperceptible sound of snores begins to reach her ears. Her side and her thigh sting with repetitive, agonizing throbs, and Katniss feels uncomfortably warm. She tugs Prim's sleeve gently, meaning to find somewhere else to sleep for the rest of the night and to deal with Finch later—if ever—but Prim doesn't move.

Katniss tugs again, more urgently this time, and Prim waves her hand away as though she were some buzzing insect. Then she peers back at Katniss and points to something in the trees.

At first, Katniss thinks she's pointing at Finch. The redhead appears to have dozed off, perhaps: it's hard to be certain in the darkness, but she straddles a thick bough and hugs the trunk of the tree, unmoving, her forehead pressed to the bark.

Impatient now, Katniss is about to tug Prim away more persistently when a slight movement in a neighboring tree catches her eye. It's just a small rustle, the quiet shift of a watchful owl or nocturnal mammal, but when Katniss looks closer, it's not an animal at all. It's Rue, staring right at the bushes where Prim and Katniss hide.

The girl is carefully positioned in the shadows of a pine, and Katniss wonders how long she's been watching, trapped in the trees with Finch until someone either notices her or else they finish with Finch and go away. She must have clambered up when she heard the Careers coming.

As Katniss watches, she slowly points to Finch, and then makes a quick gesture with her fist.

"I can't tell what she means," Prim whispers.

It looks at first as though Rue means for them to push Finch out of the tree, but Katniss gets it after a moment once her eyes fall across the uneven, rounded shape that dangles from the one of the boughs of Finch's tree.

"Bees," Katniss whispers suddenly. "Or—probably tracker jackers, since the Gamemakers like to
Prim catches her train of thought, nodding slowly. "So how do we get them onto the Careers?"

"I don't think we can," Katniss replies. "We don't have any way to get it down from here. I think Finch will have to do it. Maybe she can kick it down." This is doubtful, though: the nest is too far away, suspended on a branch too slender to hold the girl's weight.

"She's…" Prim trails off. She's probably not sleeping, Katniss thinks, considering the rough twinge of her own wound. But her arm will be killing her from climbing so fast. And she won't be any shape to do much.

Still, it's probably Finch's best chance. After cursing herself for being an idiot, Katniss murmurs, "Don't move from where you are, and stay low. I'm going to try to wake her up."

"Without waking anyone else?" Prim hisses frantically, and Katniss shushes her.

"Yes, if I can. Help me find some small rocks. Pebbles."

They search the area, creeping carefully to sift through twigs and stones for a handful of rocks heavy enough for Katniss to throw. Prim puts a few into her sister's hands. "Be careful," she says.

When Katniss is certain Prim is well hidden enough not to be seen, she cautiously approaches the Careers' camp. Rue has stopped gesturing, obviously realizing that the Everdeens have caught her meaning, and she watches Katniss with solemn eyes now.

The Careers lay sprawled across the forest floor, all of them fast asleep. Now that they are motionless, Katniss can finally take count: the boys from Districts 1, 2, 4, 6, and 12, and the girls from Districts 1, 4, and 9. It strikes Katniss how ridiculously cocky it is to not even assign a night watch with as many of them as there are, and then she realizes that there is a guard. Glimmer is seated but asleep against the trunk of the tree, her head in her hands. Katniss has half a mind to steal a bag or a weapon if she can, but the Careers seem to be much better about that: prompted by some mistrust of enemy tributes or of their partner Careers, they all sleep strategically. Arms lay across bags and backpacks; weapons are carefully closed in clenched fists. Nothing to grab easily, except for a pot and some cups near the fire.

And anyway, that's not why she's here. With her handful of pebbles, Katniss focuses her eyes on Finch and throws.

The first pebble hits the side of the branch and skitters down, rattling lightly against the boughs and trunk of the tree. Finch doesn't move.

The next one Katniss pelts, and it hits spot on, striking Finch right beneath her shoulder blades before falling to the earth. Finch makes no sound, but she twists her torso around so quickly that she nearly falls out of the tree. Her eyes fall on Katniss.

The pebble continues its descent to clatter against the dry leaves at Glimmer's feet, and the girl sits up with a jolt. Katniss crouches instantly, hidden behind a thick trunk as the Career peers about suspiciously. Silently, Katniss sets the pebbles onto the grass.

Finch has turned back to press her forehead against the trunk of the tree, not wanting to give Katniss away, and when Glimmer peers up at the branches, there's no noticeable movement to suggest Finch is even awake.

Still, Glimmer looks wary, or at least intrigued. Katniss is prepared to let the whole thing rest, to see if maybe Glimmer will lower her guard so Katniss has a moment to signal the plan to Finch,
but Glimmer gets into a slow crouch and slings something across her back.

_The bow and arrows._ Anger courses through Katniss, because the weapon was most assuredly meant for her.

Glimmer's eyes flit across the darkened forest, and Katniss can guess her thoughts. Whatever woke her was probably something either Gamemaker-made or else some sort of animal game, because no tributes are ever foolish enough to try and take on an entire Career pack this early in the Games, especially such a large pack. And the Gamemakers never wait so long to reveal an attack. After a moment, she seems to settle on exploring for game, and to Katniss's eternal gratefulness, she does it without waking anyone else.

_Probably it'll make her look better to the other Careers and her sponsors if she finds food alone, Katniss thinks. Hunting's a good skill to have here._

The girl's eyes are alert as she creeps forward, and Katniss—incredulous at her own daring—starts slowly away from her, careful to keep just out of sight. Her heart thumps wildly, as though she herself is, in fact, some sort of frightened game. Which she supposes she might be, depending on how you look at it.

In the darkened woods, it's difficult to both keep track of Glimmer and formulate a plan, but Glimmer makes enough noise for Katniss to easily track her—slight rustles of pine needles beneath her feet, the twang of a twig snapping back into place, and even, occasionally, a slight cough. Katniss leads the Career on, moving as silently and purposefully as she can with only the little moonlight filtering through the canopy to guide her. Glimmer is always just out of sight, but the girl closes in fast, and Katniss wonders whether she has already strung an arrow and whether she is skilled at using the weapon at all.

After a few minutes have passed, Katniss comes across a patch of low-slung bushes growing around a fallen tree, and she crouches behind the cover to allow Glimmer to wander on. Katniss holds her breath as the footsteps crunch closer, hardly daring to peek between the leaves to see the girl through the darkness, but she can faintly make out the Career's light hair just a few feet away. Glimmer is close now, no matter how silent Katniss thinks she's been, and the time to either fight or flee is at hand.

Moonlight drifts through a gap in the foliage above, making the metal bow gleam white for a second, and Katniss-leaps forward out of her hiding place, dropping her fistful of pebbles onto the dirt.

Glimmer swears vehemently as Katniss grabs the weapon and pushes it away, but the other Careers are too far off to be woken by the noise. Katniss takes advantage of the girl's momentary surprise to twist the bow, still strung, and slam Glimmer into the side of a tree. The girl grunts, but she's stronger than Katniss imagined—having trained her whole life for moments like this, probably—and her grip on the bow doesn't weaken; the tip of the arrow inches toward Katniss side, and a strike at this range would easily prove fatal.

The Career catches Katniss in the ribs with her knee, and all of the air floods from Katniss's lungs. She manages to hang onto the weapon, but her heaving chest makes it difficult, and after a few seconds, her only recourse is to rip away from Glimmer and back into the woods.

Now that Glimmer is more actively chasing her, Katniss runs too quickly to be silent; her footsteps are loud in her own ears. But a lifetime spent hunting makes it easy for Katniss to weave and dodge in a way that she knows will make it difficult for Glimmer to aim at her, especially in darkness. Not that it's needed; after a moment of running, an arrow strikes a tree six feet away with a harsh _thunk_, and Katniss thinks that it's not fair that the tribute who got the weapon can't
even aim it properly.

In an insane, impulsive rush, she cuts toward the arrow to yank it out of the trunk, darting off before Glimmer has the chance to nock another. Katniss's side is on fire again with the vigorous movement, and it burns into her ribs and lungs, making her feel faintly feverish and dizzy. She needs this to be over quickly, because the longer she runs, the slower and more dazed she'll become.

Already, Glimmer is just out of sight on her heels, running swiftly behind her. Katniss could hide, but the girl would know it immediately by the lack of sound—but Katniss's mind darts to the earthworms in her zippered pocket, the poor things completely forgotten and probably dead, and she unzips it with her free hand and shoves her way inside.

One or two of them writhe weakly in her grasp. Katniss whirls to a stop, crouching behind a tree to quickly fling the some of creatures into the brush at her side, once nearby and again farther off. Leaves patter in the distance under their weight, and Glimmer falls for it, hurrying off toward the noises and pausing just yards away when they stop altogether.

The girl's wary confusion is almost palpable; from here, Katniss can see her out in the open. The girl crouches low to the ground, moving forward slowly like a predatory beast. An arrow is still nocked to the bow, and as Katniss watches, the girl pulls it back slowly for maximum power. But Glimmer's back is turned to Katniss, and that's all Katniss needs. She hurries forward again, giving Glimmer just enough time to start at the sound, turning and half-raising her weapon, but by the time she brings it up, Katniss has already jabbed the tip of the metal arrow deep into the Career's throat. It clacks against something hard, perhaps the bone of the girl's neck, and Glimmer falters, her expression indecipherable under the dark covering of the trees—except that her wide eyes glint in the thin light.

Blood spurts from the puncture once and then once more, splattering across the shoulder of Katniss's jacket as Glimmer sinks to the ground. It's funny, because a dying deer might have done the same thing—the slow, steady droop to the earth like a fading flower, the wild eyes, the dribbles of blood—only Katniss would have slit its throat as a mercy. She has nothing to ease Glimmer's passing and can only fall into a crouch, panting harshly herself, as she watches the tribute's final moments.

It's probably better this way. Her actions will be pasted across televisions throughout Panem—Katniss Everdeen, the girl who waited and watched her victim's death—and interviews with sponsors and potential sponsors will showcase statements like "She's a hard girl, that Katniss," or "There's something very cold in that one," or "She's definitely still a contender."

Which is all well and good, except that Katniss is weak and panting as she tries very hard to keep the contents of her stomach down, because it will probably spoil the show. She doesn't know for sure whether her sudden queasiness is due to the presence of Glimmer's now-dead or almost-dead body or the feverish spread of her burn.

Glimmer is openmouthed and staring, and Katniss closes the girl's eyes, more to get out from under their weight than out of respect. Imagine that, she tells herself. Not much difference between killing an animal and killing a person, in the end. Not if you don't think about it.

And Katniss can't think about it, can't feel queasy, because she'll have to do a lot more of this before it's over. She shakes her thoughts off, determinedly picks herself up, and swallows back bile. Then, she strips Glimmer of the bow and arrows, slinging them across her shoulder and feeling their comforting weight settle across her back.

It's just in time, too. Cannon fire rings out once in the distance. A hovercraft will soon be by to lift
away the body.

Katniss slowly trails back to the Careers' camp, limping slightly with the putrid warmth and pain in her side. These woods are unfamiliar to her, but she made sure to note her surroundings as well as she could while she ran, because being lost and separated from Prim in this arena might be almost as bad as death.

Still, it takes her some time to return, walking as slowly as she does. By the time she can make out the faint, lingering smell of smoke and sees the last glowing embers, she thinks at least a half an hour has passed since she first left the site.

When she finally reaches the clearing, the faint, pink light of the morning has just begun to creep into the sky. The Careers are still dead asleep, some snoring gently. Finch is still in the tree, Katniss realizes, though lower down than she'd been before. The redhead is pressed against the tree trunk, straddling one bough and holding onto a branch above her head with her good arm. Getting to the ground would require a leap of a fair distance, and with the Careers nestled so close to its base, the noise would be unwise. Two Careers sleep with their heads resting in the tangle of roots at its base. No, Katniss corrects herself. One Career and Peeta. She's still not gotten used to thinking of him as a part of their pack, if only because of how generally useless he appears to be.

Finch shifts restlessly, stretching her back after the long sedentary period. Being so near to the Careers is likely unwise as well, but the move gets her farther from the tracker jacker, which is probably for the best for the time being.

Prim isn't where Katniss left her. As best she can without making noise, Katniss searches the surrounding shrubs, but there's no sign of her sister's light blonde hair in the darkness. For a moment, Katniss is close to panic, the feverish pressure in her mind driving her to frantic worry, and then she remembers that Rue was nearby.

A slight movement in the foliage of Rue's tree is enough to catch Katniss's attention. She makes no noise as she slinks closer, low to the ground to be less of a visual target, and when she looks up, two pairs of eyes peer down at her from the dark boughs.

Secure in the knowledge of their safety, Katniss holds one hand up, palm out, to stop her sister from creeping down to her watches her with wary eyes as she moves slowly toward the circle of sleeping tributes.

Finch looks up when Katniss nears, her face pale against the dark trunk and her eyes wide and surprised.

Me too, Katniss grumbles bitterly to herself. If you'd told me two days ago I'd be saving your ass, I'd have laughed myself into a happy little meltdown. For a moment, she even considers it.

Leaving Finch behind is still the wisest choice, and she'd never set herself on making any long-term alliances. But Katniss can feel the weight of her sister's eyes on her now, and there's really no turning back, not when Prim expects this of her. Besides, she reflects lazily, pressing one knee to the ground as she slowly draws a silver arrow into place, it's always a good idea to get rid of a few more Careers.

The bow is definitely the one she shot for the Gamemakers, and Katniss cynically wonders if she should thank them for it. The aim is easy, and the arrow flies true, striking right at the strand that connects the dry bulb to the branch. At such close range, the blow is particularly powerful, and the structure quivers violently—Katniss can hear the increased buzzing from where she crouches—and for a second, she thinks another arrow will be necessary.

Then it falls, crashing into the tree roots. For one brief second, nothing happens except that its
papery insides split open and the slumbering Careers shoot up with alarmed cries. Katniss hadn't known what to expect, but it wasn't the next part: the nest suddenly bleeds dark, teeming masses of tracker jackers that buzz viciously in her ears, swarming in numbers so thick that her view of some of the Careers is entirely clouded out.

Katniss is struck by the sudden, wild thought that she wishes she could take it back, because they're all going to die now, submerged by thick floods of furious tracker jackers. She stumbles backward, the burn on her side shooting such sharp pains down her leg that it gives out and she crashes to the ground. She's too far away to reap much of the aggression, but she swats away a handful of the insects and is stung on her exposed neck by several of them until she finally drags herself away from the swarm with her arms and good leg.

Head reeling, Katniss gasps for air as though the insects are invading her lungs as well. All at once, hands grip her arm, and Katniss almost lashes out before Prim says, "Come on, we have to follow Finch!" Katniss is torn between asking why they need to follow Finch (and where is she going, anyway?) and, absurdly, chastising her sister for sneaking up on her, but the words of both thoughts squabble so long that her heated mind tires and she finally says nothing at all, only hobbles after her sister as best she can.

She loses a bit of time somewhere in the woods—at one moment, they're trampling clusters of yellowed birch leaves, and the next the wind pelts her face as they cross an open, moonlit meadow. How long they run, Katniss cannot say, but she has the distant sense of being part of a string: she follows Prim, who follows Rue far off in the distance, and Rue must be following Finch.

It's some time before they begin to slow, Prim crying out. Katniss blinks again, her short hair getting into her eyes now, and they've come to a halt. Her mouth is painfully dry, and her skin is thrumming, and her side is throbbing, and for a moment, she jerks her head around to make sure Glimmer isn't still following them before the memory surfaces of Glimmer splattered across the ground.

Finch, her neck and arms and face green with oozing stings, looks a bit like Glimmer now, maybe close to dying in the same way. She has collapsed onto the grass, and it looks so soft, almost as good as the down mattress toppers at the Capitol, that Katniss's legs buckle and she lies down beside the girl.

Prim is murmuring something far above, her tone taking on the worried quiver it usually does when they talk about the money they don't have.

Katniss thinks she'd best put her sister's mind to rest, except that her own mind fizzles and sparks into darkness around her.
Katniss sleeps so deeply and for so long that when she wakes, she wonders why she isn't dead.

Golden light flutters through gaps in the foliage above her, dappling the deep green brush that grows to her left. The vegetation is so thick and tall that Katniss can't see much from her prone position, and she feels too weak to do more than lift her head a few inches like some half-drowned puppy. She's been carefully tucked into a shallow cavity beneath the roots of a towering elm, the soft dirt having been dug out and scattered a few feet away, and someone has removed her jacket to keep her comfortable in the warmth of the afternoon.

A line of broad maple leaves are plastered to the skin of her arms, neck, and shoulders, and Katniss peels them off one by one. It takes her a moment to realize that her vision is clearer than before; ever since the fire burnt most of her braid away, she'd been fighting to get short strands of hair out of her face. Now, she feels along her scalp to find that some sort of tie has pulled her remaining hair into a ponytail.

Impossibly, she still feels tired enough to sink back into a doze in spite of the obvious fact that she's slept through most of the day, but she can't fall back to sleep without seeing Prim first. It takes her two tries to sit up, but she finally manages it by grabbing an exposed root and dragging herself into a sitting position. From here, she peers over the verdant foxtail and brambles and can just make out two odd colors poking above the green, one belonging to a head of blonde hair and the other to deep brown curls.

Katniss rises into a crouch, glaring suspiciously at her own weak legs, but her side feels much better than it had before. With some hesitation, she peels back the burnt fabric to find that the skin beneath looks much better than she might have expected given the severity of the wound yesterday; it's a shiny, baby-skin pink instead of the previous angry red. That's not natural, Katniss thinks worriedly.

From this position, she can see a pale hand in the grass a few feet away, and the oddity is enough to distract her from her wound. She creeps forward to find Finch, who is also decked with maple leaves and folded into a small nook. The redhead also looks better: the swelling from the stings seems to have gone down, and though her skin is slick with sweat, she's not quite as dead as Katniss expected her to be at this point, so things are certainly looking up.

Too many inexplicable miracles. Katniss needs to talk to the instigators.

Slowly, she drags herself up, mostly using the roots for leverage, but when she finally gets to her feet, she feels much sturdier. It must be Prim who has cared for her, because the bow and arrow lay on the dirt just beside her; Prim knows that they may need Katniss's skill quickly if they get into a pinch, and her sister likely also realizes that Katniss feels safer with a weapon nearby.

Katniss slings the quiver across her shoulder and takes the bow in hand as she starts toward Prim and Rue, who sit together on an overturned log, their heads bent together in furtive discussion. They look up simultaneously as Katniss approaches, Rue's smile shy, Prim's earnest and grateful.

With a pang, Katniss thinks that in another life, the two of them might have been excellent friends. Here, Katniss may have to kill Rue to save her sister. If she can kill the girl at all. What happened to just you and me, Prim? she wonders miserably.
And as if Rue and Finch weren't far too many, Peeta sprawls unconscious across the ground at the girls' feet.

Katniss has an arrow nocked and ready almost before she has time to think.

"What are you doing?" Prim cries, shooting to her feet and stepping over Peeta. "Put it down!"

Katniss lowers the weapon immediately, but she doesn't slip the arrow out of position. "What's he doing here?"

"He got stung like the rest of them, but when Finch dropped out of the tree and wouldn't get back up, he pulled her out of the swarm before he passed out. He knew Finch was with us, so he didn't want her to get hurt. I don't think he's with the Careers. I don't think wants to hurt us at all."

"You don't think? We're fighting for our lives in the Hunger Games and you don't think Peeta's an issue? I'm sure a lot of tributes didn't think their allies were an issue until they suddenly were."

Prim's eyes are bright, but she glares at Katniss ferociously. "If we'd have just left him there, he'd have died!"

"That's the whole point, Prim! Tributes aren't puppies; we can't just adopt them all! My God," Katniss laughs incredulously, slipping her head back to address the leaves above her, "you must be the only person in the history of the Games to come here and try to save everyone." She settles her voice back into something more solemn. "We are not allying with Peeta Mellark. It's too dangerous."

"You think he's useless."

"He is. But even useless people can sometimes point a knife the right way and slip it between your ribs when you're distracted."

"He would never do that!"

"You have no way of knowing!"

"Guys!" The voice is Rue's. The girl stands just between them, one hand pressed to Katniss's chest and the other to Prim's, and it's only now that Katniss realizes how close she is to her sister and how loud they've both become. "We can't fight here in the open. Someone could hear."

"You're right," Katniss says at once to Rue, and then quickly to Prim, "This isn't a fight. It isn't a discussion. You fix Peeta, do whatever you can while he's passed out, and as soon as he wakes, we're gone. Do you understand? We cannot ally with Peeta. I don't trust him, I don't like him, and we don't need him."

Prim nods sharply, her face set into an expression of cool approval, and Katniss thinks that her sister is probably remembering that Katniss once said something very similar about Finch. That's different, Katniss tells herself. Finch isn't a problem. Peeta has allied with the Careers and killed one tribute already. There's no way I'm letting Prim near him for longer than she needs to be. I'd feel safer if—

She stops suddenly, eyes resting on the dagger at Prim's side. "Where did you get that?" she asks.

Prim has ground some sort of herb mixture onto a small, flat rock, and she kneels to apply some of it to the stings on Peeta's collarbone. "We searched him for weapons first thing and took away everything but his clothes," Prim replies, not looking up. "I'm not an idiot."
"We also went back to where the tracker jackers were to search for weapons and supplies," Rue adds placatingly before Katniss can interject. "The Careers grabbed most of them when they ran, and we didn't get to take anything from the two that died, the girl from District 1 and the girl from District 4. Most of the weapons and supplies were taken up when they grabbed their bodies, we think, but we still found two daggers and a canteen of water."

Katniss nods as she tries to quash her series of small heart attacks at the thought of Prim wandering the woods on her own—or even with Rue. She looks doubtfully down at Peeta. Prim has done good work; though half of Peeta's face is mostly unrecognizable, it's a far cry better than he might have been without her help. In the thick of the swarm, he should have died. "What is that?"

"Lagoris," Rue replies, sitting near Prim to pull a fistful of leaves from her bag. "We use it in our district all the time to counteract tracker jacker stings while we harvest."

"Right," Katniss replies. She slowly loosens the arrow and sets it back in place in her quiver. Now that she's been standing for a few minutes, she can feel the weakness of her own legs, a subtle tremble that warns her to take the weight off of them.

Two little healers, she thinks, lowering herself onto the grass just behind Prim and Rue so she can lean against the fallen log. Both of them set on nursing people who don't deserve it.

"Look, I mean it," she adds suddenly, mostly to Prim. "Let me know as soon as he wakes. And don't let your guard down around him."

Prim nods but doesn't turn around. Katniss knows her sister is irritated, but Katniss will do whatever it takes to keep the girl alive, even if it means dragging Prim kicking and screaming away from this place.

That would have to happen some other time, though. Katniss has already begun to feel her limbs grow heavy and weak, as though the small exertion of standing and threatening an unconscious boy with a bow and arrow is more than she can stand. Rue watches her warily as she removes the quiver, setting it and the bow within easy reach, and rests her head against the wood.

"Don't worry," Katniss tells the girl. "I don't like Peeta much, but you're a different story." For now.

"She won't hurt you," Prim adds.

Rue smiles at Katniss, the trusting sort of smile that makes Katniss's heart clench, and then she turns back to tend to Peeta.

The evening cicadas have begun their shrill screams. As Katniss considers what it may take to keep her idiot sister alive—and whether she can do it—the sound lulls her to sleep.

She drags herself from her doze when she senses a quiet movement at her side. When she finally manages to pull her eyes open, it's evening, and the last of the daylight is beginning to fade away. Finch sits beside her, amber eyes open just a crack as she rubs gently at a sting on her good arm. The splint on her broken arm looks to have been rewrapped, as it's much neater than it had been before.

Peeta's prone body still sprawls a few feet away. Someone crouches over him, but Katniss can't make out whom. The remains of a dying fire smoke gently, lazy drifts of it wheeling into the trees overhead. At least the girls were bright enough to put it out before nightfall.
She shifts to sit up, and the girl at Peeta's side turns to face her. It's Rue. "Are you feeling any better?"

Katniss takes inventory. Her body doesn't feel quite so weak anymore, she thinks, but the light fog has not completely left her mind. "Better," she replies, squinting around to see in the darkness. "Where's Prim?"

"She went to the stream to put some water into the canteen and water bottle. We boiled some of it earlier to make sure it was clean when we were using it on you guys' wounds, but we've just been drinking the regular water otherwise."

"She went to the stream alone?"

"It's only a five minute walk," Rue soothes, holding her hands out so that Katniss settles back into place. "We've been going back and forth all day."

"It's too dark for her to be alone."

"She has the night vision glasses—it's fine. She'll see anyone else coming a mile away."

"Night vision glasses?"

Rue smiles. "She didn't recognize them either. They're given in District 11 when we have to harvest through the night."

Katniss nods as she peers through the trees, but her worry for Prim still niggles in the back of her mind. It's stupid, because if what Rue said is true, Prim is more than capable of making it to the stream and back without being seen, but she'll feel safer when her sister returns.

"Oh—you shouldn't rub it," Rue says, and Katniss turns back to find the girl bending down to look at Finch's hand. "That only makes it worse."

Finch looks up solemnly, sweat still cementing strings of red hair to her cheeks and forehead. As though it's far too heavy for her to keep it upright, she lets her head fall back onto the rough wood with a hollow thunk.

Frowning, Rue drags the backpack from the fireside and rifles through it. "I'm not sure which plants to use, though. The lagoris is mostly what we use at home, but Prim collected all of these other things…"

"Let me see," Katniss replies, and Rue obediently pushes the bag to Katniss's outstretched hand. Katniss drags it nearer—it's heavier than it had been last time she'd worn it—and inspects its contents. Six or seven types of vegetation are rolled into neat little bundles and tied with excess paracord; Katniss recognizes only some of them. Sugar maple leaves, a few strips of bark, mare's tail, a sprig of wiry roots, sagebrush, and little white flowers whose leaves their mother uses for pain relief. Katniss pulls out the last, stripping the leaves from two of the plants and holding them out to Finch in the palm of her hand.

Finch's eyes flit from the herbs to Katniss's face. Katniss should probably feel irked or offended, but she responds in amusement. "If I wanted to kill you, I'd take the bow and arrow and just do it," she says. "Much more fun that way."

Wordlessly, Finch reaches her hand out, and Katniss dumps the leaves onto the girl's palm. Finch throws them into her mouth all at once, scowling at the acidic taste.
Katniss sets the flowers carefully back into the bag, and a strange glint makes her realize why the backpack has grown so heavy. She reaches inside to pull out a small but surprisingly hefty plastic canister that still has its silver parachute attached.

"A sponsor?" Katniss says in surprise.

"That's your burn salve," Rue replies. "Prim couldn't find any plants to help heal you, so someone sent you ointment to help."

Her first gift from a sponsor. Beetee had kept his promise to talk her up, then. Somehow, Katniss is surprised that she even has a sponsor. With the exception of killing Clove in the first few seconds of the Games, she feels like she's done everything wrong since the very start: she'd failed to get the bow at the Cornucopia, she and Prim have stupidly taken on stragglers like stray pets, and she'd gotten herself so terribly burned in the fire that her leg had almost been useless.

Still, she can't complain. "Probably saved my life," she remarks aloud, still awed. Although most tributes don't bother with thanks in the heat of the game, she impulsively lifts the little pot into the air in the same way someone in the Capitol might when giving a toast. She thinks the message will be pretty clear.

Rue hums in agreement. "It probably did. Prim was going crazy. She couldn't get your fever down, and she thought you were going to get infected and maybe die."

A twinge of guilt flits into Katniss's chest. She hadn't meant for Prim to have to worry about her so badly.

The slightest movement at the edge of their vision is the only warning they receive as to Prim's arrival. She's good at that, Katniss thinks with pride, watching in the fading light as Prim bends down to lower the filled water bottles at their feet.

"You're awake," Prim remarks, her face unreadable through the dark glasses that cover her eyes.

"Yeah, I'm better, I think. Hey, Prim, let's not fight, okay?"

"We're not fighting," Prim returns in exasperation, sinking down beside her sister. "We just don't agree. But it's fine."

Katniss nods uncertainly. There is more she could say, more she wants to say, but the sudden thought of all of the millions of eyes watching them, some rooting for her and Prim to fight and some crying out for them to make up, makes her hold her tongue. She wishes it were possible to really have a private conversation.

A few feet away, Rue stomps on the last dying embers of the fire and then scatters dirt over the remains to ensure that the last of its glow has been extinguished. The forest is shadowed now. The moon has not yet risen, and Katniss can see very little.

"We should sleep now," Rue says quietly. "We can't do much without light, and I think we all need rest."

Prim murmurs in agreement. She rises to help Rue drag over a few large, leafy branches that sit near the hollows and hiding places where Katniss and Finch had slept earlier. "It's not much," Prim explains as she covers Peeta with the branches and scattered leaves, "but it might be enough if anyone's wandering the woods with glasses like these."

Rue helps Finch to lie down and then plasters leaves to her arms. Prim moves to press leaves to Katniss's skin, and then the two girls lay branches across all three of them.
"I'll take watch," Rue says. "You went first yesterday." Prim takes off the glasses and hands them to Rue, who perches at the end of the fallen log, crossing her legs and straightening her back. With the huge glasses glinting on the brim of her nose, she looks like some watchful beetle.

To Katniss's surprise, Prim slips between Katniss and the log to lie down on the dirt beside her. "You and Rue should be in the trees," she says, trying to make out her sister's features. "It's safer. Finch and I can't get up there, but it's better for you two to be off the ground."

"I'm not sleeping in a tree by myself," Prim replies, sounding offended.

"Why not?"

"I'd rather be down here."

"Prim."

"Go to sleep, Katniss," Prim orders, putting her head on Katniss's shoulders and curling up at her side.

Katniss does.

The ground next to Katniss is still vaguely warm when she wakes the next morning, but when she feels for her sister, eyes shut tight against the morning sunlight, she comes up with only grass and dry leaves. Hushed chatter reaches her ears, and she slowly opens her eyes to find that Prim and Rue are both out of sight, murmuring somewhere in the tall grass a few feet away. Finch, her skin much clearer and her expression less pained, is still curled against the side of the log, fast asleep.

Katniss is hungry, starving even, and she wonders how long it's been since she ate anything substantial. Without her ability to hunt and Finch's to fish, she suspects Prim and Rue have eaten little as well. But as she stretches her arms overhead, she reflects that she feels much better today, certainly well enough to catch some small game. An inspection of her side shows that the wound, though still raw and slightly pink, has healed at an incredibly fast rate. Even stretching the skin doesn't cause the same painful twinge it did yesterday.

"I owe you guys one, Beetee and Wiress," Katniss mutters softly to herself. And to the cameras, but that's an afterthought.

She rises, feeling stronger and more fluid than she has in days, but the view from this higher vantage point puts a sour taste into her mouth. It's not Rue laughing with Prim. Katniss sweeps through the grass and drops into a crouch at Prim's side to glare at the intruder.

"Morning," she tells her sister, who smiles in weak amusement at Katniss's behavior.

Peeta Mellark stares back unabashedly. "Morning," he says. Like Finch, he looks much better under Prim's care. The swelling in his face has gone down, and though his neck will likely bear the scars of the tracker jacker's aggression for some time—or at least for the next several days of the rest of his life—the wound looks less violent now. He lies propped against a tree stump, obviously still too weak to do much. Although he watches Katniss warily with his dark brown eyes, he makes no move to arm or defend himself.

"We're not keeping him," Katniss says bluntly.

"He's not a pet, Katniss," Prim replies. She does not look up from where she sits grinding herbs,
one small stone scraping the vegetation across the flat rock she'd used earlier. At home, they'd have used a mortar and pestle for the work, but here, she has to make do.

"He might as well be for the way you're helping him."

"She's already told me that you plan on leaving soon," Peeta interrupts. He struggles to force his weak arms to push him into a straighter position. "But I think you're making a mistake if you go without me."

Katniss raises her eyebrows at Prim, who shrugs. "I told him to take it up with you."

Satisfied, Katniss nods. "Good. Answer's still no."

"The Careers are pissed at you," he continues as though she's said nothing at all, and this, more than anything, annoys Katniss. "They've guessed that it was you who took out that girl from District 2 at the start of the Games, for one thing. And making them look like idiots with the whole tracker jacker thing—they're not gonna let that slide."

"Oh, and you can help? Apparently, you're as good as one of them. You didn't seem to have such a huge problem with them a while ago when you killed that District 8 girl in the woods."

Peeta's face freezes. "That was—...I was helping. She was bleeding out from what they did to her. It would have been more painful otherwise."

"Sure. And I guess it'll be really useful for us to ally with some baker's son. What are you going to do, paint your way out of here?"

Peeta frowns at this, tilting his head. His ridiculously golden hair gleams in the sunlight despite the dirt that clings to it. "You were watching. During training, you were watching me paint at the camouflage station."

Katniss shrugs. "Don't take it personal. I kept an eye on all of the competition. Main thing it told me about you is that you have no useful skills." This isn't entirely true, of course, because Katniss hid her talent during the joint training as well, so it's reasonable to assume other tributes did the same. Besides that, she's seen Peeta throwing around fifty pound sacks of flour like they're nothing. But she's not going to give him a reason to think he can stay. Prim shoots her a reproachful look out of the corner of her eye, but Katniss ignores it.

"I can tell you about the Careers. I spent days with them."

"And that really makes you look great, cozying up with the people who want us dead."

"An alliance keeps you alive at this stage of the game," he tells her, eyes piercing. "I knew I wouldn't get one with you, so I took the next best offer."

It's an idea she can respect. But before she has time to think over the words I knew I wouldn't get one with you, a low chirp comes from somewhere overhead. The three of them look up quickly to see a sponsor gift sinking toward them, its silvery parachute shimmering in the air.

The slight breeze is carrying the package a little ways off, and Prim hops to her feet to catch it before it goes too far. On the way back, she struggles to pull the cloth closed in the wind, and Katniss is surprised to see that the plastic container is fairly large, about two feet in diameter.

"It's not too heavy, whatever it is," she remarks, setting it down near Katniss and beginning to pry off the lid.
Once she opens it, a delicious smell wafts out, making Katniss's mouth water instantly. "Bread," she says in surprise.

And it is: thick, yellow slabs of it are piled in a small mound in the plastic container. The loaves are very square in shape and just about the width of Katniss's hand; Prim picks one loaf up, and Katniss can see that it seems to be more of a cake than anything else, its crusts golden and its insides fluffy and slightly porous. Katniss has the niggling suspicion that the gift must be from Haymitch and meant for Peeta—bread for the baker's son, bestowed with precise timing to show Katniss that Peeta shouldn't be counted out of the game just yet—when a small noise comes from behind them.

Whirling around and regretting that she'd left the bow and arrow where she'd slept, Katniss comes face to face with Finch, whose eyes are wide. "Cornbread!" the girl exclaims. "I'm starving!"

"Cornbread?" Prim echoes.

Finch nods, dropping onto the grass beside Prim and reaching for one loaf—square?—unabashedly, biting into it before she even begins. "It's a specialty in District 5," she explains, speaking around her mouthful. "It—well, I guess it sounds weird if you've never had it, but you make it out of cornmeal."

"So the gift's for you," Katniss remarks, taking a piece as well. It's oddly sweet and moist when she bites into it, which is not what she'd been expecting from a bread of its name.

"I don't know. The bread's what we eat sometimes in my district, anyway. Did you check the number?"

"The number?" Peeta echoes. He, too, has a mouthful of the bread, to Katniss's chagrin, and she has to remind herself that it's not her gift to share or not share.

"Yeah. They don't make it obvious which district the gifts are from, because if they can make the tributes fight over it, they will. But the parachute's always marked." She balances the rest of her bread on her knee and searches through the folds of the parachute. After a moment, she finds it: "Here, look—oh, it's not mine."

Stitched onto the corner of the parachute where it meets the string linking the cloth to the container is a small white patch with the number 3.

"District 3?" Katniss shakes her head. "I've never even had cornbread before. Why would a sponsor send me this?"

"Well, we're all hungry," Prim says reasonably. "Maybe they just wanted to let you try something new."

But Katniss's suspicions are wiggling into paranoia. The sponsors get to decide what is sent, but it's the mentors who coordinate the actual delivery. If a sponsor—or, more likely, a set of sponsors—had simply decided to pay to feed Katniss, Beetee and Wiress and the other mentors from District 3 would be responsible for selecting the food, if it hadn't been specified.

Bread for the baker's son. Cornbread from District 5. During training, Katniss had adamantly stated that she didn't want to form an alliance, but Beetee had never stopped encouraging her to find someone she could trust. And in past games, many mentors have been prone to working hints and warnings into gifts, whether written as a note or as some other implicit sign. Is the bread his way of giving advice? Of showing Katniss he thinks the pair of them can be trusted as allies?

Or is Katniss still dazed with slight tracker jacker venom and pain medication? That seems to be
"Save some for Rue," she says suddenly, abandoning the thoughts for later. "She'll be hungry, too. Where is she, anyway?"

"At the stream," Prim replies between bites. "But actually, I think she's been gone a while."

"How long?"

As though she can sense Katniss's worry, Prim glances behind them in the direction of the stream. "Not too long. But she could've been back by now."

She also could've been ambushed, Katniss thinks, and then she pushes down the lid of the container on the last two loaves of bread. "Those are for Rue," she says quietly, and she stalks back through the grass to sling the bow and arrow over her shoulder.

She turns back. "Prim," she begins, and then she stops. She'd been about to tell her sister not to leave Finch's side, all of her wariness directed toward Peeta at the moment. But relying on a tribute, even one as helpful as Finch, can be fatal in the Hunger Games. Katniss squashes the thought violently, willing herself not to let her universal suspicion, one of the most useful tools she has, slip away now when she needs it most.

Fortunately, Prim seems to think Katniss is instructing her to follow, because she wipes the last of the crumbs on her jacket and stands.

They walk through the forest in tandem for some time, both of them noiseless and alert. "I doubt anything's happened," Katniss soothes once she realizes Prim is clutching the dagger at her side. "It's just in case."

Prim nods without loosening her grip. Katniss nocks an arrow, her weapon lowered but ready.

From somewhere above, birds caw irritably at each other. The breeze stirs up the leaves and grass, silencing the sound of the Everdeens' footfalls. They reach the stream after a few minutes' walk.

No sign of Rue.

"Maybe she walked back already," Prim says doubtfully. "And if she didn't come back this way, we might not have seen her."

"It's possible," Katniss says, scrutinizing the woods for signs of life.

Prim suddenly cocks her head to the side, eyes searching out some point in the distance. Katniss turns and listens, and she can vaguely hear the sound that has caught her sister's attention.

Voices. Two of them. Muted by the babbling water.

"Get down," Katniss orders, and Prim disappears behind a bush, her dagger unsheathed and fiercely gripped. Katniss pulls the arrow back and drops into a crouch, slowly creeping downstream across the pebbled ground until she can make out who is speaking.

Blooming slips of yellow-eyed grass grow at her side and in bundles down the length of the river; the two speakers stand in it, their figures dark against the vegetation and their faces turned away. One of them, small and compact and curly-haired, is Rue. The other is the male tribute from District 11, tall and dark-skinned and built like an ox. As Katniss quietly moves in, she sees that
he grasps Rue's forearm tightly even as she scrabbles against his hold, raking her fingers against his hand.

"Hey!" Katniss shouts, standing abruptly, her bow pulled taut and aimed before she has fully risen. "Leave her alone."

It's then that she notices the long, curved sword in the boy's other hand, near enough to Rue to slice her open in a heartbeat. Just as she's about to release the arrow, Rue cries, "Wait! It's alright! He's not hurting me—he's trying to help."

"Doesn't look like it," Katniss replies, not taking her eyes off him. He returns her gaze, his strange golden-brown eyes narrowed and mistrustful.

"He is," Rue says, ripping her arm from his clutches. "It's just—"

"This the girl you allied with?" the boy asks. "The one who said she was gonna kill everyone who wasn't her sister?"

"She won't hurt me," Rue retorts. "Prim said."

The boy snorts. "Like hell. Come on, Rue," he replies, grabbing her shoulder to drag her away, eyes still fixed on Katniss and her bow. "She doesn't exactly look trustworthy."

"I'm not leaving, Thresh. We have a good alliance. You should come with us."

"Let her go," Katniss spits again, stepping forward with her raised bow as the boy drags Rue back by the fabric of her sleeve.

"You put that thing down, Fire Girl," Thresh retorts, pulling Rue behind him, his sword pointed at Katniss.

"Stop it!" Rue screams, struggling in vain to free herself from his grasp. "Stop!"

There's only the slightest noise at Katniss's back to suggest Prim's arrival, and then her sister pushes the bow and arrow down. "Stop, Katniss."

"What, and just let him take her?"

"This is stupid," Prim retorts, blue eyes flashing. "You both want Rue safe, but don't kill each other over who does it."

"And—" Rue begins, struggling to pull the neck of her jacket down. Thresh lets go of it at once. "And we can stick together a while, all of us. The Careers—nobody wants them to win, and there are too many of them for us to do anything separately. Let's stay together, just for a while. So we're as strong as they are."

Thresh takes his eyes from Katniss for the first time to stare at Rue, and Katniss recognizes the familiar expression, remembers seeing it a few times during training. It's a protective sort of fondness, as though the meanness in him is tempered by her presence, because Rue is an innocent twelve-year-old girl who he can't in good conscience leave on her own. As guarded as Thresh is toward Katniss, she thinks that the same protective sentiment will likely extend to Prim as well, meaning that her sister is in the clear. And Katniss can take care of herself.

And it's true that the Careers need to be wiped out if Prim's going to make it out alive. And it's not something Katniss can do on her own.
"Alright," she says quietly, surprising even herself. Had she been watching this exchange live on television, she almost certainly would have groaned in exasperation, and she wonders what the Capitol will make of this decision. "But just until we find a way to get rid of the Careers."

She makes a point of sliding the arrow from its position and slipping it back into her quiver. After a long moment, Thresh sheathes his sword, the metal slipping soundlessly into its fur-lined container.

**Wow,** Katniss thinks. **This is going to be really uncomfortable.**

And then they are six.

Katniss grumbles as she sits beside Finch, unwilling to be the one to explain why this stupid decision has come to pass. Prim relays the information as Katniss pushes the remaining cornbread toward Rue, who takes a bite and closes her eyes in bliss. She shares the last loaf with Thresh, who takes it without hesitation. Katniss notes that he looks remarkably well-fed for having spent days here in the arena, so he must have resources to get food as well. Which is good, because between Katniss, Finch, and Thresh, they'll have to find a lot of food to keep all of these mouths fed.

Prim has only just finished her story when another irregular chirping noise catches Katniss's attention. Another sponsor gift is floating in on the breeze, sinking directly overhead, and this time it's Finch who rises to catch it. She stumbles a little under its weight, balancing it awkwardly between her good and bad arms, but she quickly rights herself. Peeta clears the other container from the center of their circle so she can set it down, and Finch pulls the parachute aside so they can all take a look.

It's bigger than the last gift by a few inches but still circular in shape. After a second of hesitation, Prim says, "Well, let's open it, then."

Rue pries the corner open and lifts the lid, her expression eager when she sees the contents. "They're apple rolls!" she exclaims.

There are four or five long loaves of bread inside, and they look to Katniss like the normal variety she might find in District 12, except for the nuts and bits of apple sprinkled across the light brown crusts. But when Rue picks up a slice, Katniss sees that the insides are beautiful, swirled with perfect spirals of apple chunks and spices.

They all scramble to try a piece of the sweet bread, hurried by the thought that it may be some time before they find their next meal. For some time, the only sounds are noises of contented gluttony.

Once they have each had four or five slices, they sit back, too full to even eat the last loaves. "I've never had one of these before," Finch says slowly as Rue uses the bit of fabric that lined the tin to wrap up the remaining loaves. "Are they from your district?"

"Oh, yes," Rue remarks, struggling to tie the fabric off. Katniss frowns and pulls the parachute toward her, looking for the stitched number. "But we don't get them often. Maybe once a year. They never let us eat the apples we pick in the orchards unless we have too many of them, because otherwise they'll spoil and go to waste before they even reach another district. When we get to eat them, people put them into all sorts of foods."

The number 3 again sits in the corner of the parachute. Katniss can feel the eyes of Prim and Finch
and Peeta as she folds the cloth away.

"What is it?" Thresh asks suspiciously.

"Are you sure they're all marked?" Katniss asks Finch. "Maybe they all have the same number."

Prim frowns, pulling their backpack toward her to carefully rummage through the medicinal herbs and other contents. "I think Districts 5 and 12 sent medicine for Finch and Peeta earlier. We used up all of the medicine, but I thought we might be able to use the pots or parachutes for something later."

After a moment, she pulls out two tiny pots, both emptied. Katniss takes them and finds two numbers in the corners of their parachutes: 5 and 12.

Katniss shrugs as though it doesn't matter. "I guess they just forgot to send dessert," she says casually, and after a moment, she directs the topic to the location of other food sources, as the remaining loaves of bread won't even last them the rest of the day.

But it's obvious now what Beetee means. Trust a little, Katniss, the gifts say.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaand the alliance is really happening. Poor Katniss…everyone is conspiring against her, even with the best laid plans and all that. I’ve always thought that it makes sense to have a temporary alliance in the Hunger Games, especially if you can count on the Career pack banding together to take everyone out. Instead of letting them pick you off one by one, why not try to show a little more resistance from the start?

On another note, please recall that there will be no romance in this story. Yes, Peeta is here, but no romantic subplots will be taking place.

Thanks for reading! If you enjoyed (or didn’t), please let me know what you thought!
It takes them just a day to run out of food. Katniss knows it's the fault of the Gamemakers, not that there's any way of proving it.

After they pack the last loaves of apple bread into the backpack, she spends all afternoon with Prim in the dense woods, setting snares and lying in wait for animals that never appear. Neither the faintest impression of a paw print nor the smallest bit of scat suggests the presence of any game, small or large, in this part of the woods. It should be impossible for a forest to be so empty, especially since a fair amount of the wildlife must have fled this way after the Gamemakers' fire, but it doesn't change the fact that Prim and Katniss return solemn and empty-handed.

They are met with similar expressions of faint worry. Finch spent the day walking up and down the stream with the makeshift fishing pole, searching the water for signs of life. Peeta, who had gone to help, claims that they hadn't seen even a glint of scales the whole day, even though they'd searched until it grew too dark to see.

Only Rue and Thresh have some success, both of them managing to gather an array of edible plants—weeds and sorrel and leafy greens and dandelions and even some wild asparagus. They lead the group down near the waters of the stream, where cattail plants grow wild and lush along the banks. The white areas at the bottom and the roots taste alright raw—though slightly bitter—and the tributes eat their fill of the vegetation and the remaining apple rolls before they go to bed.

But plants won't sustain them for long, and they'll need all the strength they can get if the Careers are eating the rich foods left in the Cornucopia.

By the time Katniss wakes the following morning, she's already decided what has to be done. "Finch, Prim, and I are going to go scout out the Cornucopia today," she begins, biting into the leftover cattail they'd pulled from the stream. "We've got to get into their food somehow."

Her statement breaks the silence and is met with expressions of mild surprise. "Why you three? And what about us?" Rue asks.

"Us three because Prim comes with me wherever I go, and Finch because she's quiet. And because when you're done with your part, you and Thresh should gather as many edible plants as you can to keep us all going. We're not going to make a move right now. We're just going to look so we can figure out what we're dealing with, how many there are now, that sort of thing."

"What d'you want us to do?" Thresh asks.

"Be a distraction," she says apologetically. "As safe a distraction as you can be. Gather some green wood—the kind that makes a lot of smoke as it goes up. You'll set it somewhere in the woods near the Cornucopia, maybe in a few places, to draw the Careers away while we take a look. Just light the wood and run. Then gather food. We'll need it to get through one more day, and then we'll come up with a plan and hit them tonight or tomorrow, depending on what we find out."

Though she tells herself she isn't really asking permission, Katniss looks at Thresh as she finishes. After a moment, he nods curtly. "I'll fight them off if we come to any trouble."

"And me?" Peeta asks, looking between Thresh and Katniss.
"And me?" Peeta asks, looking between Thresh and Katniss.

"You go with Rue and Thresh," Katniss says after a moment. "No offense, but you're not quiet at all. Your footsteps might as well be rocks hitting the ground."

"No offense," Peeta echoes dryly, and Rue hides a smile.

They finish eating in relative silence, and then they stuff all of the remaining herbs and medicine into the communal backpack. Katniss hides the sleeping bag in the hollow of a tree in case they need to double back for it later, as it hasn't been of much use since the weather warmed following the first cold night. Thresh shoulders the backpack as they head toward the Cornucopia.

It takes some time to work their way back through the lush, green maze of the forest's vegetation. The woods sit in anticipatory silence, and Katniss imagines the eyes of a thousand spectators fixed to their screens in breathless wonder. The eyes of the cameras are on them, at least: Katniss spots one or two little black bulbs as they walk, watching the lenses open like flowers to zoom in on their faces. Beside her, Rue peers up at the trees as well, her expression one of muted intrigue.

"They're still there," she murmurs suddenly. "The mockingjays."

Katniss follows her gaze. Above them in the soundless foliage rests a mockingjay, its grey feathers streaked with bits of white on the wings and tail. A handful more sit on a neighboring branch. They are unnaturally still and quiet for birds, and Katniss wonders whether it's possible for the Gamemakers to silence them or whether the birds themselves feel bound to silence by some palpable thrill in the air.

"We can use the signal song," Thresh remarks, looking up as well as he tries not to stumble across a series of protruding roots. "No one else'll know it."

"Signal song?" asks Prim.

"We use it in our district when the working day is finished," Rue explains. "You whistle it, and then the birds pick up the song and carry it around so everyone knows it's time to go home. Here." She looks up at a branch where two of the birds set, and she whistles a short, four-note tune. The birds ruffle their wings in something like excitement and return the song in trilling notes, and then, like a ripple moving through the surface of still water, the song passes to other birds that flutter in excitement and pass the song further. The leaves above are suddenly alive with the song, which is repeated over and over again and accompanied by the quick, darting movements of the birds.

Once the song fades away, the birds cease their short flights and jittery hops. "That can be the signal," Thresh says. "When we're done, we can use it to say we've done our part and we're alright."

"Good idea," Finch remarks, staring at the birds. The mockingjays watch them all alertly now, as though they are spectators in this game as well.

After a moment, the group slowly presses forward again, a grim focus settling over them. Once they have spent several more minutes creeping through the undergrowth, Thresh remarks, "I know this area. Cornucopia's close, maybe a quarter mile away."

This is where they part ways, then. Rue looks worriedly from Finch to Katniss to Prim. "Be really careful," Prim tells them quietly as Thresh shifts from foot to foot. "Run away as soon as the fire starts."

"You be careful, too," Rue replies, and then she follows Thresh and Peeta to take a direction that will eventually lead them around the back of the Cornucopia.

Katniss leads Prim and Finch straight toward it, the three of them trickling through the foliage like
a line of fearful ghosts, Katniss at the head and Finch at the rear. The few times Katniss chances a
look at her sister, Prim's jaw is grit firmly, her hand still on the dagger she swiped from the Careers
a few days ago. Katniss swears to herself she'll make sure Prim doesn't have to use it.

After several minutes of walking, they slip quietly down a shallow slope, and Katniss can just see
the golden metal of the Cornucopia glinting brightly through the trees. She holds out a hand
behind her, and Prim and Finch slow instantly. The three of them creep forward with extra
prudence, alert for any hint of sound or movement in the distance as they cast quick glances at
their feet to avoid making noises of their own.

As they approach the tree line, they crouch low to the ground. Sprouting new growth and tufts of
narrow-leafed bushes hide them from sight. Keeping behind a tree, Katniss pulls down a branch to
scan the open field where the Cornucopia lays like some beached, golden whale.

"They've straightened it up a bit," Prim whispers, peering through the leaves on the other side of
the tree.

"Must be nice to have so much food and weapons that you have to organize it," Finch agrees
mulishly. "But why so far from their camp in the Cornucopia?"

Katniss shakes her head wordlessly: scattered across the open, grassy field are boxes and supplies
and bins, all of it piled neatly fifty feet or farther from the Cornucopia itself. "It doesn't make
sense. They won't have quick access to it when they need it. And it's out in the open where they
can't protect it. It's like they left it out. For…"

"Too neat." Finch rubs her nose in thought, settling into a more comfortable position with both
knees on the ground. "I'd say they don't have the smarts to rig a proper booby trap, but they are
smart enough not to leave so much food and supplies where it's unprotected. But—oh. Look at the
area around it."

Finch gestures to the edge of the Cornucopia nearest to them, and it takes Katniss a minute of
squinting to recognize the slightly raised piles of disturbed dirt. "Did they dig something up?"

The redhead frowns. "Or else did they bury something? The area's not safe. That's all I'm saying."

Katniss turns back to the structure to scrutinize its inhabitants. "The Careers've got the help,
though—the boy from District 6 and the girl from District 9. Not that they struck me as especially
smart or anything. And the alliance might just be a strategy to keep anyone useful alive until they
know they've gotten rid of the other alliances. Well, our alliance, anyway. I don't know if any of
the other tributes have alliances, and there aren't many of them left, anyway."

"They don't look so great," Prim says suddenly, frowning at the Career pack. "The other Careers,
I mean. They must not have known to take out the tracker jacker stingers, or else they didn't know
which plants to use to fight the venom."

"That'll be good for us." Katniss cranes her neck to see better. Prim is right: the tributes who bore
the brunt of the stings still have swollen lumps across their bodies. The boy from District 6 looks
particularly pale as he leans against the metal wall of the Cornucopia, the others sprawling
raggedly across its base.

"How many do you see? I count five of them, if—where's the boy from District 1?"

"There are five—he just went into the back. I think he's behind those grey boxes against the wall."

Finch, who up to this point had been squinting in focused agitation, arms crossed over her knees,
gasps suddenly, slapping the back of her hand against Katniss's leg as she does so. "It is a booby
"Yes, but—"
"We might not get such a good chance again!" Finch says in exasperation. "If the Careers go to the fire and don't find anything, they'll get suspicious. They may not fall for the same thing again if we come back later."

Katniss rubs her forehead. "Alright. Five minutes. Prim, stay here. You see anything or anyone move in those woods, you shout or give us a signal. Okay?"

"Okay." Prim squeezes Katniss's arm as the elder Everdeen slowly nocks an arrow to the bow. "Be careful. Just be careful."

Finch is already moving into the open. "Finch is the one about to get herself killed," Katniss mutters, following the girl cautiously.

Being out from under the cover of the trees is horrible. Katniss feels naked and exposed, her skin tingling all over as though at any moment she might feel the slip of a blade into her flesh. She keeps one eye on Finch, whose red hair gleams like a fiery spotlight in the warm sun, and one eye on the dark patch of woods into which the Careers disappeared not three minutes ago.

"Stop," Finch commands, and Katniss freezes instantly, balancing on one foot as she frowns down at the hard-packed dirt and sprinkles of grass at her feet. "I'm going to—we're not that close," she adds in amusement upon seeing Katniss's position. "I didn't mean to stop for the mines."

"You could have said," Katniss replies, relaxing and dropping to one knee. She pulls the arrow back, weapon still pointed at the ground as she fixedly scans the land and forest behind Finch.

Finch stares, eyes flitting to Katniss's bow and then her face. "You know, you're handy to have around," she remarks abruptly. Before Katniss can reply, she says, "I'm going to go for some of the stuff at the edge on my own. But I'll have to mostly be looking at the ground, so you and Prim just...watch my back from here."

"Got it," Katniss replies. "You sure about this?"

"I can do it," Finch says. "At least, I'll be alright if I don't get surprised partway through. Besides, if I fall over, you'll be far enough to..." she trails off, gauging the distance between Katniss and the heart of the mines, which Katniss assumes are under the ridges of dirt surrounding the biggest bundles of goods. "Well, you might make it, anyway."

"Good to know," Katniss says sardonically, and Finch offers a wry smile before she turns to devote her full concentration to the task ahead.

The redhead steps with infinite slowness across the ground. Over the course of a minute or two, Katniss watches her hop over a few loose mounds of earth, her balance faltering slightly every now and then to the point that Katniss's heart skips a beat, but she doesn't dare call out and risk startling Finch. As she nears a bundle of apples, the girl places both feet carefully on the ground and gives one quick hop, landing just a foot away from the food.

Katniss releases a breath she hadn't known she'd been holding. The girl hoists the bag of apples over one shoulder and rummages around in a metal bin before crowing gleefully at its contents. She pulls out a silver sword, incredulously raising her eyebrows at Katniss as she holds it up with a grin. It comes with a sheathe and leather strap, and she slings it over her shoulder and draws out an axe as well, tucking it firmly under her broken left arm as she readies herself for the return journey. The redhead jumps across a small bulge in the earth, stepping lightly for a few paces.

Her strange dance of leaps and quick steps is interrupted by a sudden shout. Katniss's bow is up in
a flash, aimed at the noise, which has come from the Cornucopia. From inside sweeps a boy, and it takes her a minute to realize who he is. "Saneer," she breathes, recognizing the wiry limbs and shock of dark hair. She lowers her weapon slightly, uncertain in the face of her pair from District 3. Why are you here? she thinks. Why would you be with the Careers?

In the corner of her eye, Finch has frozen where she stands, her legs spread apart and her mouth open in surprise. Saneer's expression is just as shocked, and Katniss wills him to let them go—because for one ridiculous second, the part of her that is most like Prim reminds her that he's been decent to her during their time together, that he can't really want to be with the Careers—and she remembers that Prim is watching all of this even now, probably wide-eyed in the forest behind them.

For that one second, she thinks he might let it slide. Then Finch, spurred by his hesitation, begins to work her way through the rest of the maze of mines, and this seems to wake Saneer from his trance.

In a flash, his hand goes down to his waist, and Katniss aims again but thinks he can't know how to use any long-range weapons and please, don't do this in front of Prim, and to her surprise, it's not a weapon he pulls out.

It's a horn. He takes a quick breath and blows hard into it, and its blast is like the loud bellow of a train, long and low and then suddenly cut off by Katniss's arrow in his throat.

Finch is still working her way through the final yards of the minefield, eyes wide in panic. "Slow, Finch," Katniss calls quickly. "It's not worth anything if you blow yourself up."

As she strings another arrow, she hears the sudden boom of a cannon. Katniss risks a quick glance back toward the forest where Prim hides. Her sister's head is just visible through the leaves, one pale hand over her mouth. She lowers it instantly when she sees Katniss looking. Swallows.

A minute later, Finch hops over the last bulge in the ground and flies to Katniss's side. "That boy explains where they suddenly grew the brains to pull a stunt like this," she pants. "We'd better——"

A cry from the opposite side of the field cuts her off. In the distance, the Career pack springs from the woods. Cato's surprised expression melts into one of rage, and he leads the others in a sprint around the back of the Cornucopia toward Katniss and Finch.

"Drop the apples and run with Prim," Katniss orders Finch. "I'll lead them away from you. If we get separated, we'll meet at the stream where we picked cattails." The girl wordlessly obeys, pulling the axe from under her arm and into her grip as she disappears into the copse of trees where Katniss last saw Prim.

Katniss turns back, determined to give the Careers every reason to believe that she's the more deadly of the tributes and that they'll need to stop to take care of her. They're still far off, as they have to circle around the entire minefield to reach her, and Katniss realizes suddenly that they aren't afraid of her because they don't know how well she can use her arrows.

Let's fix that, she thinks, and the arrow springs from her grasp and into the chest of the boy from District 6, who is at the head of the rushing tributes. He looks down in faint surprise and drops to the earth.

By then, Katniss has gripped another, which she releases toward Cato; the boy twists just enough that it lodges itself deeply into his shoulder, sprouting out of the back of him with such power that only a few inches of the feathered end remain in his front. He cries out in pain and sinks to his knees, and Katniss turns to run.
Thundering footsteps shock her into raising her weapon again, but the tributes who spill from the woods aren't enemies—they're Thresh and Peeta, silver weapons glinting in the light. Peeta holds the axe Finch just nicked from the minefield, which settles Katniss's nerves a bit, because it means that Rue must be safe with Finch and Prim.

With the strength of two allies at her back, Katniss turns back around, aiming her weapon just as the Careers fall upon them.

The ensuing few minutes pass too quickly for Katniss to properly track the events; her instinct takes over as she ducks and dodges, knowing that her weapon is ill-equipped for close-range action but too stubborn to flee and leave Thresh and Peeta behind.

She finds herself at the mercy of the girl from District 9, who attacks her with an unwieldy sickle. Katniss can tell from her awkward movements that she's not yet learned to balance its weight. Thresh roars from somewhere far off as Katniss leaps back to dodge the girl's quick swipes, stumbling backwards when the girl won't give her enough space to aim her bow.

From the bushes behind her bolts a splash of dark clothing and fiery red hair; Finch darts forward, holding the sword in her right hand and pressing her broken arm to her chest, and she slashes at the girl's legs before the tribute can react. The girl cries out in pain, swinging the sickle wildly to graze Katniss's arm, and then falls backward.

Katniss quickly knocks the sickle aside, pressing it into the ground with the heel of her boot, but the girl rolls over and is on her feet before Katniss can aim or shoot. The girl pulls something from the bag at her side and flings it at Katniss and Finch, who just manage to duck in time. Katniss glances behind her, where a blade has settled into the bark of a tree. A throwing knife. The girl probably isn't as good as Clove was, but it'll only take a bit of luck to impale someone on the end of one, and the girl already has another blade in hand.

If it comes to a long-range battle between the two of them, though, Katniss is confident she can win. The girl must sense this, though: gone is the controlled violence from before, and in its place is a fearful, panicked looseness to her face and movements as she backs quickly away, retreating from the nearby sounds of Peeta defending against the blows of the furious Cato boy.

Suddenly, the boy from District 1, Marvel, is upon Finch and Katniss, springing from the trees at their back, and Finch has just enough time to block his blow. "Get the girl!!" she cries to Katniss, who turns on her heel to take on the tribute who is meticulously aiming another knife. Katniss rushes forward, determined not to give her enough time to do it properly, and the girl's blade misses by two feet or more.

Still, what the girl lacks in precision, she makes up for in speed. In seconds, she's thrown two more of the small blades, one that makes Katniss duck quickly and one that just grazes the side of Finch's jacket a few feet away. The redhead looks down in surprise and is nearly caught by a crushing blow of Marvel's mace. Katniss has the wild thought that the ratings will be off the charts for this season of the Games, because while sneak attacks by the Careers on batches of one or two tributes at a time are common, it's incredibly rare for a battle to encompass a large and fairly even number of tributes.

After another close call with a knife darting just at her feet, Katniss swears and shoots an arrow in the girl's direction. It finds a place right above her knee, knocking her back just in time for Katniss to take stock of the girl's position.

They are all fighting in the open space between the forest and the first subtle mounds of the minefield, but the girl has run too close to the stacked bundles of supplies. As if the moment takes a year to pass, Katniss watches her face open in shock as she falls backward. Her hands are spread
behind her to cushion her fall. One arm falls clear; the other sinks down by the elbow just across the upturned dirt, and then there is a quick blast of fire that obscures her entirely, rising into the sky as instantly as the flicker of a light bulb.

Yards away, the blast knocks Katniss backward, crushing all of the air from her windpipe as a wall of black smoke billows over her. Ashy debris, some of it on fire, rains around her, and she chokes and coughs in the thick, foul air as she feels for her bow with one hand and covers her head and face as best she can with the other.

It takes a full minute or more for the smoke to finally begin to clear, and all that remains of the containers on the minefield are warped plastic and burnt wood and unrecognizable plastics. Still coughing, Katniss peers through the gloom drifting to the earth to find that the others are alive and slowly picking themselves up from the ground.

And all of them are alive—as Finch and the others weakly try to right themselves, so do Cato and the other two remaining Careers, Marvel and the District 4 boy. As if drifting out of a daze, they begin to reacquaint themselves with their situation, their eyes widening and their hands fumbling for dropped weapons.

Before any of them can react, Cato has rolled to his feet to disappear shakily into the woods. Katniss weakly pushes herself up to rush after him, but the ground swirls under her feet, and she flops back onto the grass. Cato had been farther from the blast, and while he's apparently well enough to leave on foot, her ears still ring violently, and her lungs can't suck the air in fast enough for her brain to start working again.

Marvel is off after Cato before Peeta can grab him, his run slanting awkwardly to the side as though his left foot can't quite take the weight of his body. Nearer to the trees, Thresh is already exchanging blows with the boy from District 4.

"Where are Rue and Prim?" Katniss roars urgently, unable to pull herself up. In the empty void created by her ringing ears, she can only faintly make out the sound of her own voice and is only sure she's spoken at all because of the movement of her vocal cords.

"I told them to hide. They're up a tree—they're safe," Finch gasps, her voice tinny and coming from a million miles away. The girl's hair is streaked with grime and ash. She works her way from crouching to standing. "The Careers won't find them."

In the distance, Thresh has made quick work of his tribute, who lies on the ground, his throat and chest slashed. Thresh stumbles as he turns to face them, eyes dark and blood dripping from his curved blade, and Katniss thinks for one wild instant that she has to kill him and Peeta. It's the smart thing to do. With the number of Careers dwindling, their alliance will eventually have to turn on each other—it's only a matter of time. Either she and Prim make a run for it, or else she takes the others out when their backs are turned. Or she takes them out now. Her fingers buzz with the potential of this plan, ready to pull up the arrow already nocked to her bow, ready to fire.

Even as she feels the metal against her skin, she knows she won't do it. You're an idiot, Katniss chastises herself, knowing that if she were watching these events play out on television, she'd be urging herself to take care of the others.

But their lives are all wrapped up together now, and if only for Prim's sake, she'll keep her word. They've agreed to stay together until the Careers die, and two of the Careers are still out there. Katniss can't take them out alone.

Speaking of which. "Let's find Rue and Prim," she says weakly, watching Thresh wipe the blood off of his sword and onto the grass. "Hiding or not, we need to make sure the Careers don't get to
"Looks like they're alright," Peeta grunts, gesturing at the woods behind them with the hand not holding his ribs in place, and Katniss looks up just in time to see Prim rush toward her and throw her arms around her waist, knocking her back.

"You're okay," Prim says, voice muffled by the polyester of Katniss's jacket and distant in Katniss's ears. Her left ear, still humming, doesn't register the noise at all.

"I'm okay," Katniss agrees, slipping the arrow and bow into place at her back so she can hold her sister, running her hands up and down her back and arms and sides to check for injuries. "I thought you were hiding," she rebukes, trying to make her voice not sound so accusatory.

"We were, but we weren't very far away. Rue climbed higher up in the tree to see what was happening, and we heard when it was over."

"There weren't enough cannons," Rue adds urgently, sidling up beside them. Like Prim, she had managed to retrieve a small blade when they had upended the tracker jacker nest over the Careers, and she clutches it in her fist now as she eyes the fallen tributes. "Prim said there were five of them, plus the one who surprised you in the Cornucopia, right? And two of them ran underneath us when we were in the tree. But there were only three cannons."

In the violent quickness of the battle, Katniss hadn't paid attention to the sounds of the cannons at all. "You're sure?"

She nods, and all of their eyes dart around. The body of the girl from District 9 was torn apart in the violence of the blast and is, of course, nowhere to be seen, but there are still three dark shapes lying across the earth in wait for their hovercrafts—Saneer, in the shade of the Cornucopia, the boy from District 6 at the edge of the minefield, and the boy Thresh had killed beside the forest.

"Katniss." Prim says, and she hurries toward the last tribute, the one who had taken the brunt of Thresh's blade.

"Prim, stay back!" Katniss warns, but when she follows at the heels of her sister, she realizes that the boy is in no shape to fight. His side is split wide open, thick with spilled blood and his insides faintly visible, and his leg is in similar shape, cut nearly to the bone and hanging awkwardly to one side. "Prim," Katniss murmurs, pulling her sister behind her. Prim's jaw is clenched firmly, her eyes brimming with tears, and she swallows in the way she sometimes does when she's trying to choke down a sob.

The boy's eyes struggle in and out of focus as Katniss strings an arrow, aiming it for the boy's chest. Prim pushes it aside quickly, and before Katniss can explain—or maybe somehow will her sister to understand that she's helping ease his pain—Prim says, "Not there. It's fast, but do it like you do with your squirrels. It's supposed to be...not so painful. Mom said once."

Prim's face is unreadable now, her gaze lowered resolutely toward the boy and away from Katniss, who can feel the presence of the others at her back. She pulls the arrow back, aiming for the boy's eyes, which are slowly glazing over, and she looses the arrow.

Within seconds, a cannon rings out in the distance. Katniss strings her bow onto her back, remembering the version of her sister that had bawled like a baby in the forest of District 12 over a fallen deer. "Don't—" Katniss begins suddenly, then bites her tongue. "You don't have to pretend to be okay with this. Don't..." Don't be like me, Katniss thinks. Keep caring about everyone, Prim. That's the part of you I'm fighting for.
Prim seems to understand. "It's just easier for him," she says quietly. "Because if you don't hit his heart, it could take a while for him to bleed out. And if you hit around his stomach, it's the most painful and slow way to...it's just better to be sure you didn't miss."

"Okay." Katniss pulls her sister's head closer to kiss the top of it. She tells herself she does it because it's best to keep giving the Capitol a show, to display their joined forces and maybe even their joint, wild violence, but it's mostly because her hands are trembling and she needs the gesture.

The others move wearily around them, Finch awkwardly fumbling with the leather sheathe and holster at her back to slip her new sword into place, Peeta rubbing ash from his eyes with the heel of his hand, Thresh and Rue scrutinizing the silent thickets of the tree line. They say nothing, and their absent gestures make it seem as though they are biding time.

_They're waiting for our next move, Katniss realizes. Are they waiting for Prim and me to decide?_

Katniss turns back to Prim, whose eyes are squeezed shut. Her breathing is slow and even. In the time it takes her to compose herself, two hovercrafts sprout from somewhere beyond the forest canopy, stirring up small, dusty swirls of debris. Katniss pulls her sister back as they all watch in mild interest while the long arms descend to scoop up the tributes' bodies, the claws rocking them almost gently as they finally disappear into the deep underbellies of the vehicles.

When they have finally gone and the skies grow silent again, Katniss squeezes Prim's shoulder. "We should get a move on, Prim," Katniss murmurs. "Ready?"

After a moment, of slow, even breathing, her sister says, "Alright. Let's go."

"Where to?" Peeta asks, cinching his axe into the back of his pants.

"Actually," Finch begins, almost apologetically, "maybe we should stick around for a bit. The Careers won't be back, I don't think, and we might find something we can use in here."

Thresh shakes his head as he stares out at the smoking mound of debris and rubble, at the pebbly remains of their much-needed supplies that blacken the grassy field like a huge, gaping wound. "Not if the blast didn't set off all the mines. We might just blow ourselves up, and for what? Probably there's nothing."

It's a point Katniss might not have immediately considered. Still, Finch looks at Katniss staunchly, her good arm on her hip.

"Why don't we throw things at it?" Rue asks tentatively. "Rocks and things, I mean. If we throw them from far enough away, maybe..."

They all turn to the scorched ground, considering. "If the Gamemakers have really started to clear out the food, we'll need whatever we can find," Katniss says after a moment. "Let's step back toward the forest and throw—but don't go too far. We can take on Marvel and Cato if they come back, but only if we're together."

And just like that, the decision is made. "Find rocks and heavy branches, then," Peeta suggests, and they spread out to search the ground.

A few minutes of effort produce a small pile of stones and branches and misshapen debris, and then Finch picks up one piece of it, a heavy bit of warped plastic. Katniss watches her weigh it in the center of her palm.

"Ready for some fireworks?" she asks finally, turning toward them and waggling her eyebrows at
Rue, who giggles. It's not funny, not really—but maybe it's the hysterical exhilaration of still being alive after all of this fighting that makes Katniss smile as well.

Slowly, the redhead walks toward the edge of the circle, drawing her arm back, pausing to consider the throw, and finally flinging the plastic toward the edge of the circle, where it rattles across the ground, coming to a slow and silent stop.

Nothing. A few more seconds pass. They all let out a breath. "I'm almost disappointed," Finch admits mulishly.

As if this is a signal, they all lean in to pick up stones from the pile, stepping forward in turns to toss them from the relative safety of the tree line. The more they throw, the less they wait between turns, until finally they're all jogging back and forth to toss debris haphazardly onto the ruined ground.

A few minutes of quiet tosses pass in this way, all of them flinging objects as hard as they can in a range that covers most of the open earth. And then suddenly: "What was that?" Katniss asks Prim abruptly when her sister's stone falls just short of the blackened pile, coming to rest on the unblemished grass almost a yard away. "It's all in the shoulder, Prim."

In response, her sister bares her teeth, half glaring and half grinning. Katniss is surprised to hear the teasing tone in her own voice.

"You could throw a little farther yourself," Peeta jumps in, and when Katniss turns to him, he looks her up and down in a dismissive manner that is broken only by his smile. "Yours never go more than a few feet inside."

Katniss can't quite bite back her shocked laugh.

And then it's a competition.

With her small and wiry figure, Rue's strategy is to throw with both arms to gain additional strength, but Thresh and Peeta are—to no one's surprise—the best at throwing their objects at great length, the long arcs of their tosses sailing almost to the other side of the blackened ground.

Katniss might have thought the competition would stir up reminders of seriousness of the Games themselves, of the desperate fight they have just ended, but even the two boys seem to be enjoying the contest, shooting amiable digs from the corners of their mouths and laughing when their own tosses fly too far off course. But they all smile a little too much, laugh a little often, and Katniss wonders if they can all feel how frantically they've latched onto this outlet, the strangely surreal playfulness of this venture, as if they believe they can wipe away the past few moments if they concentrate hard enough.

After a few minutes of this, they run out of throwing objects and relocate to the other side of the minefield to begin again, searching for rubble and rocks and then pooling their findings together in a communal pile. They throw again, spacing their tosses relatively evenly. When Katniss is certain they've covered the entire area—at least far enough in for them to search the outskirts of the pile—Finch suddenly points to an elongated pole standing a few yards away. "Points to whoever hits that stick thing."

Prim, laughing with the knowledge that she will almost certainly lose this competition, instantly flings her stone as hard as she can, and it skitters off of the ground at least a yard from the pole's base.

Peeta elbows her. "Nice try, anyway."
"That was awful, Prim," Katniss laughs, and Prim waits until Katniss is about to throw before she shoves her, causing Katniss's burnt metal disc to go too wide to even be close.

Thresh's expression is smug as his throw arcs gracefully to fall just inches to the left of the pole.

They all scrabble to use the last of the pile, tossing frantically in the direction of the pole, and though there are several close calls, no one quite reaches it. As they come to the last few stones and bits of debris, it looks as though no one will manage it, at least until Rue, of all people, throws a tiny scrap of stone that strikes the pole with a crisp, clear noise like a bell.

"Oh," she says in surprise, just as Thresh lets out a cheery whoop. Finch pulls her into a side hug as Peeta laughs incredulously.

"Nice one," Katniss says, dropping her last rock onto the ground. "Now, what do you say we go search for treasure?"

They tread slowly across the rubble-strewn earth, stepping over unrecognizable lumps of plastic and clambering up burnt boxes. And it is very much like a treasure hunt: Prim hoists an untarnished metal pot into the air with glee, Thresh finds a mostly intact backpack—with a thin blanket inside—that had been hidden beneath a warped shield, Finch burrows into an open box to find another metal canteen, this one filled with water. No ropes to set snares, but then, Katniss has pretty much subscribed to the theory that the Gamemakers have pulled the wild game from the arena.

Still, they are in high spirits. It occurs to Katniss as she ruminates through a box containing the remains of what may once have been a full suit of leather armor that she's not currently aware of Prim's location. Languidly, she pulls her head up to glance around. Thresh teeters precariously atop a stack of warped plastic to one side of the circle; Rue is scraping through a pile of ashes with a stick.

Her eyes fall on Prim, whose bright blonde hair has grown ashen with all of the debris they have upturned. She sits laughing with Finch, who has formed a necklace from a bit of wire and some twisted utensils. The redhead walks back and forth, airily mimicking the fashion shows televised by the Capitol.

Katniss hasn't even worried about her sister, hasn't registered her presence in some time. The realization makes her pause. The entire day so far, but especially the last two hours or so, has been spent in the mindset of team effort. Their joined efforts to defeat the Careers in the earlier skirmish, the playful throwing competition, the hunt for useful goods and food—all of it has been done with a strange air of camaraderie, and Katniss has sunk into it without a second thought. She trusts Prim with Finch.

And that's dangerous here. No matter what Beetee seems to think.

She closes the box slowly, pressing the full weight of her body down upon it, but the rim is so warped that it won't click shut, and she sits on it instead, thinking. She can't kill them. Especially not Rue or Finch. Rue, because she reminds Katniss so strongly of her sister with her stupid hopefulness and bright candor. And Finch, because—as suspicious as Katniss still is about her motives and as worried as she is about finding Finch's sword in her back one day—the redhead had been their first ally. She'd helped Katniss and Prim survive the first uncertain days of the Games and even rushed back to aid Katniss in the fight against the Careers.

Katniss likes Finch. The girl has played the game well by making herself essential to Katniss and Prim, by buying their loyalty. Katniss wonders if the others have been playing games too, or if her fondness for them has crept up organically. If they've fallen into the same trap of fondness for her
and Prim.

She swears softly to herself. The solution is obvious. She and Prim will have to leave. As savvy as Prim is becoming, Katniss is unsure that she will be readily willing to abandon their alliance. Which means that Katniss will have sever their ties suddenly and in such a way that Prim won't realize it until it's too late. And she'll have to do it as soon as possible.

A call from Peeta, his voice betraying his excitement, drags her from her thoughts. "Guys, you have to see this!" Katniss thinks they've scoured pretty much the entire area, but she rushes toward him anyway. He stands near the center of the circle, having apparently dug out a metal box from beneath a pile of useless rubble. The box is about two feet wide and a few inches deep, and he holds the lid down, grinning, as they approach. "Ready for this?"

He pulls the lid up to reveal the box’s contents. It's food, and lots of it. Lines of whole-wheat crackers, little plastic pots of nuts and trail mixes, rows of snack bars, two bottles of water, crisp dried jerky, a container of cheese, a small stack of canned food, and maybe more buried beneath it all.

Famished as they are, they fall upon the provisions with wild cries of joy, settling into a circle around the open box. From their central location, they have a good view of the surrounding plain even as the afternoon light begins to fade, and their relative safety and new food source make them a very cheerful bunch.

"There's so much of it," Finch says after a few minutes of contentedly stuffing their faces.

"Why would they have shoved all this into a huge box?" Thresh wonders around a mouthful of crackers. "No one would carry it out."

"I guess that's why they put everything into packs and containers," Peeta answers. "So if you thought you had enough time, you could just grab a couple of them."

Prim and Rue, heads bent together and giggling, delicately balance a small round of hard, yellow cheese on Rue's knee as Prim cuts little chunks of it with her unused dagger. They pass around bits for everyone to try, and Katniss is surprised by its strong, almost spicy taste. As she and Finch rummage through the rest of the food, Katniss recognizes one of the cans.

"Prim!" she exclaims, picking up the familiar tin container and wordlessly displaying it to her sister, who gives an incredulous laugh.

Finch leans across to read the label, which includes a little blue banner that reads: "Tuna fish?"

Katniss yanks open a tab at the edge of the can, and the lid peels away easily.

The variety of can that their father had brought home had required the use of a knife to wedge open the metal lid. Katniss remembers him laughing as he struggled with the thing, his whole family bouncing eagerly in wait to try the new food. It had taken him several minutes, and the first can had splattered across the table. They'd stared in surprise for only a second before scrambling to move the contents into a bowl, and they'd eaten it all anyway.

She realizes she's been staring at the can, and she looks up, knowing that Prim is remembering the same thing. Her sister smiles. "Do you remember Dad had gotten a recipe for tuna salad from somewhere, so we made homemade mayonnaise for it? And there were pickles, and eggs, and… some other herbs or something."

"It was really good," Katniss agrees.
"I'm sure it'll still be good," Peeta remarks. "Try it with the crackers."

They pass around crackers, and everyone stacks bits of the tuna onto them. Peeta's right: it doesn't taste the same as Katniss remembers, but she's hungry enough that it's just as delicious. When they've gone through four cans of it, they all lean back, full and exhausted. The shadow of the Cornucopia, yards in the distance, now stretches to cover them entirely, and they sit for a few minutes to listen to the insects in the forest spring to life in the deepening twilight.

"We have to pack the rest of the food away," Finch says eventually. Her tone is regretful. "It's fine being out here during the day, but when we're sleeping, it's probably best to be hidden."

Lethargic after the amount of food they've eaten, the others drag themselves up and begin putting what little remains of the food into the new backpack Thresh had found. Katniss knows most of them are wondering where they'll find their next meal now, but no one mentions it. Thresh slings the heavy bag with their supplies onto his back, and Katniss takes the food bag, and then, with Finch taking the lead as she peers through the night vision glasses, they begin their trek back into the forest.

Prim sidles up to her sister, walking just at her heel as though narrowing the distance to begin some private conversation. Instead of speaking, though, she twines her arm around Katniss's elbow without looking away from the path, a little half-smile on her face.

"It'll be tonight," Katniss thinks regretfully, moving her free arm over to squeeze Prim's forearm gently. "I'll take first watch, and then I'll wake Prim and we'll go. I'll tell her... But Katniss doesn't know what to tell her. And she doesn't know, either, if she should really leave the other tributes sleeping and defenseless with two Careers still in play.

Without conferring, they all head back toward the stream that has been their home base for so long, silent and wolf-like in their wary pack. The forest is darkening around them, the pools of shadow thickening to swallow the faint purple twilight.

It happens like this: they are descending a shallow bank beside an oak tree. Before them is a thicket laid out with soft, loamy earth. The tree's raised roots form a lattice across the dirt, so much so that they have to look down to step neatly across the damp ground, and then Katniss's eyes flit casually to her side to meet a pair of eyes peeking from a hollow in the tree's root system.

The horror seeps into her slowly over the course of a second, and then its fierce panic crashes into her, stopping her limbs in place with an icy, freezing current. Like a thing out of her nightmares—and before she has a moment to process the sight and react—the boy spurts forward on his hands and knees like some spider scuttling across the dark ground, but in place of a bite, he clutches a silver knife in one hand.

Katniss registers Cato, registers his trajectory, grabs the side of Prim's jacket to pull her away, and this perhaps saves her sister from the worst of it, because the blade had been aimed for the center of her chest. As Prim stumbles backward, though, flinching and too surprised to cry out, the dagger finds a home in her upper right thigh, sliding with a painful *snick* into her flesh and scraping against bone.

Distantly, Katniss is aware of Cato's continued movement as he rips the knife away, of his rustling through the bushes and a flash of hair to suggest to her that Marvel, too, has been hiding nearby, and of the others' gradual realizations as they turn to find both of the Careers there, and then Prim's scream washes everything else away, frighteningly loud even in Katniss's bad ear. Katniss, still cold with fear and anger and her ears roaring with her sister's shriek, lowers Prim onto the ground as best she can. Words spill out of her mouth, but she hardly knows what she's saying, whether she's muttering reassurances or begging forgiveness.
The blood flowing from Prim's leg is thick and steady, and Katniss hovers near the wound, uncertain, until Prim, panting now that all of her cries have thrown themselves from her throat, manages, "Don't touch it—you can't!"

"I'll have to; I just—" Her eyes blurring, she strips Prim's clean dagger from the girl's side and makes to cut away strips of her clothes to use as bandages when she remembers the blanket Thresh had found. She tears her bag open, frantically dumping it over to spill the food and grabbing the brown blanket before it can fall. "We're going to—we're going to—"

Cato and Marvel are gone. The others, their faces brimming with panic, return to their side. Someone swears.

"Get me some water," Katniss orders shakily. "And someone—help me cut this blanket into strips."

Her mind buzzes too fiercely for her to keep track of much besides the sounds of the blanket ripping under her knife and her sister's shallow pants. Rue falls to her knees at Prim's side, her eyes wide as she lets Prim clutch her hand so tightly the skin around her grip goes pink. Peeta takes over the cutting of the blanket as Finch fumbles through the bags to find their water bottles.

Katniss cuts away the fabric of her sister's pants to see the wound properly, a bloody mess of deep red fluid that makes Katniss wince. Prim catches the expression. "This is really bad."

"No. No, it's—where's the water?"

Finch hands her the bottle. "It's the one we just got," she explains, her face pale. "The one from the Capitol, so I think the water should be cleaner than the water from the stream."

Katniss pours it over the wound, wishing she had some of Haymitch's alcohol instead, and pats it dry with a strip of blanket. "Okay, help me lift her leg."

Prim screeches again as Finch pulls her leg up gently, murmuring apologies, and Katniss begins to wrap the strips of blanket around the injury as best she can, winding it tightly. It soaks up the blood as she goes, so much so that the first few wraps have specks in blood before she can set down the next layer.

When she has used a few of the strips, the makeshift bandages are thick and tight enough to hold, and Prim is panting on the ground, her face sweaty and her eyes glossing over. The sight reminds Katniss of the boy from earlier, the one Prim had helped her kill with mercy, and she runs a hand across her sister's brow to wipe the sweat away.

"You're okay," she murmurs, stroking Prim's hair. "You're okay."

But she isn't. Katniss has seen a few serious wounds in her life, a few injuries that even her mother could not help. With the minimal medicine provided in District 12, there was little that could be done, and most victims bearing heavy wounds lingered for a few days at best before eventually wasting away.

With the severe blood loss and the exposure to the elements without real medicine, this may be one of those injuries. And in the arena of the Hunger Games, where survival depends on mobility, this is likely a fatal blow. Katniss thinks Prim knows it. Weakly, her sister takes her hand.

"Katniss. I don't know if this is going to heal, and I can't move it or walk. If you stay with me, you'll—"

"I'm not leaving you, idiot. No matter what, we're here together."
Prim falls silent, mollified at Katniss's tone. Suddenly, Katniss becomes aware of the others once more, all of them hovering in watchfulness, though Thresh and Finch, at least, look away to pretend they aren't staring. *All of our lives are wrapped up together now, huh?* Katniss thinks bitterly.

But, of course, this makes things easier. The fact that their paths *must* split has never been more obvious, not with one of their number lying before them, fatally wounded on the ground.

"Listen," Katniss says and clears her throat to remove the thickness from her voice. "Listen, you need to go. All of you."

There is only silence for a moment, all of them looking at her in surprise. "What do you mean?" Finch asks cautiously.

"It's obvious, isn't it? It's just going to be me and Prim now. We were all going to need to split up eventually; we've said it from the beginning. When the Careers were gone, we said we'd go our separate ways."

"But they aren't gone," Rue points out. "Cato and the other boy—"

"There are only two of them now, and—what, were they hiding or something?" Katniss asks. "Did they even fight?"

Their expressions are blank and stupefied, and a beat of silence passes, something like the moment when a class is wordlessly deciding who will give the obvious answer to a teacher's question. "Cato went after Thresh for a second," Peeta says finally, and Katniss's eyes flit to Thresh, whose face is unreadable. "But he turned and ran. Both of them did."

"They're running scared," Katniss says, though she knows it probably isn't true. Whatever she needs to say, she'll say it. "There are only two of them. And with Prim like this—it doesn't make sense for you to stay with a tribute who's been hurt."

"How are you going to move her around on your own?" Peeta asks.

"That's for me to worry about now."

Rue, still holding Prim's hands, shakes her head. "We can't leave. We've been together—and we made a promise. We were going to stick it out until the Careers were gone. And they're not. So we're still here, Katniss. And you're going to need help with Prim."

"What are you going to do for her alone?" Finch asks. "Are you going to carry her and somehow *magically* find extra arms to protect her, too?"

It's this last question that makes Katniss falter, as it was meant to. In a brief flash, Katniss sees herself carrying Prim on her back through the darkened forest, Cato and Marvel springing from the trees, both of the Everdeens dying before Katniss can put her sister down to string an arrow.

Her plan depends on both of their mobility, and with Prim unable to walk, there is no way to pull it off. Worse than *allowing* the others to help her, she will have to *rely* on them.

"I'm sorry, Katniss," Prim says weakly. "I know you wanted to go. But I think we should stay."

And *of course* Prim had known somehow, though Katniss had never said a word, though she had been planning to drag her sister away kicking and screaming. That odd half-smile from earlier, when Prim had linked their arms—was that what it had been? Had that been not just a show of comfort, as Katniss had originally thought, but a show of solidarity? A statement that *I know what*
you're thinking, and we'll do it together?

Does it even matter now?

Katniss scans the faces of her allies—because they are, despite her best efforts, still her allies—and scrutinizes their defiant expressions. Perhaps their alliance will still earn Katniss a knife in the back soon. But from what she can tell, there is now no alternative.

Only Thresh makes her wary. For a moment, Katniss thinks he will say something to object, hanging back and away from the rest of them as he is, but after a second, he steps closer and nods.

Seeming to sense her decision, Peeta speaks. "We could camp here if we don't want to move her, but I think we should still go back to the stream. We know the area best, and it'll be good to have fresh water if there's no more food."

"Let's get you up, then," Finch says, crouching beside Prim. "And we'll have to stay alert. One to carry her, and the others all on guard—weapons out."

Katniss and Thresh are the best with their respective weapons, so Katniss reluctantly allows Peeta to carry Rue on his back, her whimpers excruciating as they settle her against him and as his strong arms gently support her weight. Finch again leads the way, night vision glasses perched upon her nose as she scans the woods more warily this time, and they cluster around Peeta and Prim in a tight circle as they cover the remaining ground to their former campsite.

It comes to nothing. The forest is completely still and silent, without even the rustle of birds in the leaves above them. Katniss is relieved when they finally spill out onto familiar ground. None of them are particularly keen about sleeping out in the open tonight, even under the cover of tall grass, so they carefully lower the now-unconscious Prim to the ground in the hollow of the tree where Katniss had woken after the tracker jacker incident, and the others settle into the brush around her.

"I'll take first watch," Katniss says, reflecting on the irony that she had planned to say this earlier, to run away with Prim into the night. "I don't think I'll be able to get much sleep anyway."

Finch hands her the glasses, and all of the others, fatigued from the long day and probably aching, as Katniss is, with the scratches and bruises earned in their fight with the Careers, settle down to rest.

It's only when she is certain that they have all fallen asleep that Katniss allows herself to cry, burying her head in her arms and choking back the quiet sobs that long been threatening to wrack her entire body. The crying is a thoughtless sort of pain, not the kind even consciously aimed at any particular source or worry, but the kind that stems from an encompassing despair, a wordless pain and heartache. It's been such a long time since Katniss had last afforded herself this sort of opportunity that it takes her a while to stop, so long that her eyes are puffy and raw when she wipes away the last of her tears.

When she finally comes to herself—still frightened and wary and bitter but still Katniss—she takes several slow, calming breaths under the cloak of darkness.

She fought so hard to arrive here at Prim's side, only to let Cato at her with a dagger in the end. Her sister is hurting, and with a total lack of any medicine, the most Katniss will be able to do is watch her suffer and hope that the wound will miraculously not become infected. Still, the bleeding has stopped, from what Katniss can tell—though she dares not peel away the makeshift bandages to look more closely—and though Prim may not be able to use the leg, she might survive the injury.
And even if her condition worsens, Katniss does not intend to allow her sister to die. While the medicine of District 12 cannot save her sister from a serious wound or infection, the medicine in the Capitol surely can. In the end, nothing has really changed—if Prim is the victor of these Games, her life will be saved. The doctors of the Capitol, with their advanced medicines and technologies, will be able to save her sister's life.

Which makes Katniss wish more than ever that she and Prim could leave their alliance behind, because she's not sure how else she'll manage to be rid of them.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was kind of a monster, and a really long one at that, so it messed with my every-other-week schedule a bit. But I've always thought it would be interesting to have something of a battle between groups of tributes rather than each picking off the others one by one, so it was really fun to write.

In other news, I have been trying to keep track of the number of tributes, but I apparently can't do math that well and messed up the remaining number of tributes—thanks to GMantis for noticing the mistake last chapter! If anyone sees any other discrepancies, let me know!
Chapter Notes

The atmosphere of their group is somehow different when Katniss wakes the next morning. Their fleeting, jubilant mood from the previous day has been dampened by the presence of Prim, who lies alternately shivering and sweating on the ground. But it's more than that as well: a nameless tension thrums between them, some communal sense of the passage of time, the continued threat of the remaining Careers, and the uncertainty of the approaching end of the Games all rolled into one.

The others make themselves busy to release their energy, rationing out the rest of yesterday's spoils to be eaten for breakfast and lunch—dinner is when they run out of food—and helping Katniss tend to Prim's injury. Finch runs to and from the stream with the pot she'd found at the minefield, and they chance a small fire to boil water, letting it cool so that Katniss can clean her sister's wound.

The injury is still fairly clean, a small and compact rip in Prim's flesh, but it's Prim's fever that worries Katniss. Infection, from the blade or from the blanket or from something else, has already begun to set in.

Throughout the morning, Thresh sits wordlessly on a rock a little ways away, frowning in thought and kicking the dirt with his boot. Unlike the others, he offers no help, and when he picks up his sword and announces around midday that he's going to stretch his legs, Katniss bids him a silent farewell. Though he's taken no food, Katniss knows he can probably find enough of it on his own for the next few days. She doesn't really expect him to return.

She doesn't say as much, of course. But some time later, when Finch has gone back to the stream to refill the pot and Peeta is in the woods nearby searching for more dry wood for the fire, Rue pulls out the rations for lunch. "Do you think Thresh is coming back for his?" she asks.

Katniss snorts, watching a sparrow flit through the leaves above them as she munches some of her allotted trail mix. "You don't think he's coming back?"

Rue shakes her head. "He feels guilty for leaving us, I bet, which is why he didn't take his part of the food. But I think it's hard for him to really trust anyone, and he probably thinks it'll be for the best in the end if we separate. I think he's just worried because there aren't many of us left."

"Good catches," Katniss thinks admiringly. What is it about you and Prim that makes the two of you so good at watching people and really knowing what they think?"

"I think we all are," she says aloud.

"A little," Rue admits, shimmying into a cross-legged position. "But I think that...if we do get rid of the Careers, we'll just split up like we said. But until that happens, there's no point in worrying about it."

"Mmm."

"And I like it being like...all of us together. It's nice. So even though it's—you know, even though I was afraid to come to the Games...even though I'm still afraid, it's not so bad being here. Not like this."
Katniss nods slowly, having struggled with the same thought herself at odd moments. It feels strange to allow herself to settle into such a complacent opinion, but she can't help but think that if she and Prim must die in the Hunger Games, there are worse ways it could happen. She voices the idea: "As far as last days go, this wouldn't be so bad. To end things like this. Would it?"

Rue shakes her head, smiling. They fall into a companionable silence, looking out from under the dappled shade of the tree and into the small clearing, where tufts of wind billow against the grass. In the light of day, the open meadow looks like a shimmering, emerald river.

*When I let myself forget where we are, the arena's almost peaceful, in a way.*

"Do I get some of those?" a voice asks weakly. Prim is pointing at the dried cranberries in Katniss's hand. Her blue eyes are slit open just a little, as though she can't quite manage to open them all the way, but Katniss has never been so happy to see her sister awake.

"You can have as much as you want!" Katniss says, nearly laughing in relief. "Here, Rue, help me get her up."

Together, they slowly lift Prim into a sitting position, turning her so she can rest her back against the trunk of the tree. "I think I was dreaming," Prim murmurs slowly, wiping away the strands of hair that stick to her sweaty forehead, "because it sounded like you were saying something really mushy, Katniss."

"You were definitely dreaming," Katniss grins, pouring some cranberries into Prim's outstretched hand. Her sister throws the handful of them into her mouth, and Katniss lays the rest of Prim's ration onto her sister's lap.

"I don't know, Katniss, I think it sounds like you. Sharing your feelings and being sappy?" Rue joins in, sharing a sly glance with Prim.

"Well, double-teaming me isn't very fair," Katniss remarks, but she is stupidly happy to see Prim's grin. Her sister, under the weight of her stare, slowly manages to eat all of the trail mix and a few crackers. "How are you feeling?" Katniss asks after a while.

"Gross," Prim replies, wrinkling her nose. "I need a bath."

"We all do," Katniss agrees, rolling her eyes at the statement, which is so typical of Prim that they might as well have been back home. All of them are still streaked with ash and soot from yesterday, with the exception of Finch, who has taken advantage of her frequent trips to the stream to wash most of the grime away. "But it's probably better to keep you out of the water, just in case. It's alright to drink when we boil it, but I'm not sure it's a good idea to soak your wound in it."

Prim nods, sighing, and the sound of footsteps through the woods at their side announces the return of Finch or Peeta—except that it turns out to be neither. It's Thresh. For a moment, all of them stare at each other in surprise, Katniss marveling at his presence and at his expression, which looks almost astonished, as though he hadn't expected his feet to return him to this clearing.

*He came back after all,* she muses to herself, watching him shift uncomfortably in place. *Must've thought better of wandering around on his own with two Careers still in play.*

After a second, Thresh appears to gather his thoughts. "Rue. We need to go."

Rue stares at him in puzzlement. "Go? Where?"
"I mean we need to leave them, you and me. We can't stay with them anymore."

"Thresh, I—I'm not leaving. I don't want to, and you don't have to either. We can both stay—"

"We're not staying." Thresh has begun to step closer, and alarm bells go off in Katniss's head. Her bow and arrow are just behind her, leaning against the raised roots of the tree, their presence burning against her back. Thresh glances at her as though aware of her thoughts. "It's dangerous to stay here. I don't care what you think or what she's told you, but she's going to kill you, Rue. She'll kill all of us if we stay."

"Katniss?"

"You don't see it, do you? But she's been saying it to everyone all along. She'll do anything for her sister. You honestly think she's gonna pick you over Prim? When it comes down to it, she'll kill you where you stand. Maybe feel sorry about it for a second. And then she'll kill herself too, all so her sister wins. Or hell, maybe she'll kill Prim first in the end so she wins."

He towers just a few feet away from them now, his hulking figure seeming somehow more menacing now that he's no longer pretending to be an ally. Katniss rises to a crouch very slowly, reaching for her bow and arrows. Thresh's eyes are on her still, but he makes no move to stop her. Katniss holds the weapon in her hands but does not ready it: Thresh hasn't drawn his weapon, and she doesn't want to start a fight if she can help it. Especially when there's no telling who would win.

Thresh looks pointedly her position and then at Rue. "Come on, Rue. Think about it. We have to go."

"We said we'd stay together! All of us, we said we'd stay together until the Careers were gone! And if you're worried about us killing each other, why take me with you?"

"I just mean you should leave them, that's all. Rue—"

He reaches forward to grab Rue's arm, but Katniss moves her bow, the arrow loosely strung now, and he springs toward that instead. Before she can fire, he pushes the weapon down to the ground, Katniss cursing herself all the while for forgetting that there are no allies in the Hunger Games, and then he crashes onto her, pinning her firmly against the trunk of the tree. Beside her, Prim and Rue screech at Thresh, Rue standing to pull on his shoulders, but he takes no more notice of her than he might a small bird.

"What the hell are you thinking?" Katniss screams, pushing against his weight with one arm and straining for an arrow with the other.

"You—you're the one that has to go—"

And then his fingers wrap around her windpipe, the crushing force of them blocking Katniss's airway. She stops searching for a weapon and begins to scrabble at his hands, kicking with the leg that isn't pinned to the tree to get him off, but he won't budge. His eyes are fierce and determined, not with the seething rage and hate of Cato but with a sturdy commitment, a dedication to carrying out a disagreeable task. Katniss has seen the same coolness in the gazes of Peacekeepers in her district as they set themselves to carry out a lashing or to bring someone to execution, their focus both distant and unshakeable.

As the seconds pass, the sounds of shouting grow fainter but somehow more frantic. The world spirals away from her, crashing into dark grays and then blacks. For a second, as her mind dips into a delirious half-consciousness, Katniss thinks she must be imagining the sudden spurt of
liquid from Thresh's throat. But then a warmth begins to soak onto her, down her front and her legs, and the heavy pressure on her windpipe relaxes.

"Katniss! Katniss!" It's Prim. Her sister is screaming, her eyes wide and panicked as Katniss falls limply onto her. One of Prim's cold hands pats at her throat and breastbone to be sure no damage has occurred. "Katniss, answer me!"

"I'm okay," Katniss rasps, her throat on fire and her words sounding rusty and raw. "I'm—he—?"

She is sitting on the ground now. Thresh lies facedown across her legs, his blood still pooling onto the roots of the tree. Katniss wears the rest of it across the front of her jacket. For the first time, enough air has wormed back into her brain that she realizes that Thresh is dead.

In Prim's other hand is her dagger, soaked with Thresh's blood. Prim is crying. Rue, both hands clapped to her mouth, stares down at Thresh's body as the sound of a cannon rolls through the air.

Katniss is slow to process all of this. "Prim. Prim, you...?" She can't finish, so she swears instead.

With the adrenaline ebbing away, her sister wobbles feebly, and Katniss grabs her elbow to stabilize her. "I didn't know what to—I'm s-sorry, but he was killing you, and I didn't know how to, I didn't know—"

Katniss pushes Thresh off of her. He rolls face up onto the grass, his throat ragged and bloody. She pulls the dagger from her sister's hand and flings it aside, and then she pulls Prim into her arms. "Shh, it's okay, Prim. It's okay. It's over. We're okay."

Prim wails into Katniss's shoulder, clutching her sister tightly. From somewhere above, their four-note tune flows through the branches from mockingjay to mockingjay, the notes quick and jarring as though the initial whistle was rushed. *Peeta or Finch*, Katniss realizes. *Wondering if we're alright*. As if in a daze, Rue pulls her hands away from her mouth to answer back, her whistle catching in the warbles of the birds to spread back to the asker. *We're alright*, the song says, but Katniss isn't sure it's the truth.

Peeta finds them a minute later, having dropped all of his firewood to rush back to the campsite at the distant sound of their shouts.

"Thresh," he says almost inaudibly, his steps faltering as he nears. He looks at Katniss. "What happened?"

Teary and frightful, Prim pulls away to face him. "He w-was choking Katniss, and he almost killed her, so I—the dagger was right there, and I—"

Katniss shushes her. "He came back. And he..." She doesn't know how to explain, and she can't decide if the scene looks suspicious enough that she should need to.

"Alright." Peeta says after a moment. He's frowning. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Katniss responds, mystified by his expression until she remembers that she's covered in blood.

"Alright," Peeta says again slowly, still staring. After a moment, he walks over to Thresh and closes the boy's eyes. Rue settles back as he grabs Thresh under the arms to gently begin pulling the body a little ways away, out from under the branches of the tree and onto the thick bed of grass in the meadow. He straightens Thresh's limbs to make him look more relaxed, as though he is only asleep, and covers what he can of the blood by pulling up Thresh's shirt. After a moment, he returns to sink onto the ground beside Rue, who still hasn't moved.
"I'm so sorry, Rue," Prim whispers, her voice dim and miserable. Her fist clenches in Katniss's jacket as she leans toward her friend. "I didn't want to."

"No, it's—I just wish he didn't—" And then it's Rue crying, and Prim is crying again, and Peeta and Katniss stare out into the meadow as a lone hovercraft appears in the sky to drift above the body before lowering its metal arm.

Finch arrives just as Thresh disappears into the depths of the aircraft, her face wild in panic until Peeta explains it all in a low voice over Prim's quiet sobs. Her response to the tale is mostly like Katniss's, but with a bit more swearing. "Thought he was fixing to leave," she says finally, worrying her lip as she stares out into the meadow.

She's not taking it as hard as Rue or Prim, and Katniss thinks that Finch must have expected a bit more bite out of Thresh than she'd let on. She can see it in the girl's ready acceptance of the story, the way it takes her only a few seconds to move past Thresh in the present tense to Thresh in the past. Finch must have been prepared, better prepared than even Katniss herself, for this eventuality. It makes Katniss feel almost ashamed to have been caught unaware. If Prim hadn't stepped in, she'd be dead. Prim would be dead. Everything would be over.

Katniss looks out into the meadow where Thresh lay just a few minutes earlier. It looks just the same as it had before, impossibly verdant against the cornflower blue of the sky, the songbirds just beginning to take up their tunes after the disappearance of the hovercraft. She imagines she can see the machine still, the deep black of it dwindling to a speck somewhere just behind the tree canopy, sinking toward the distant horizon as it nears the Capitol.

"I didn't think he'd come back to do something like this," Katniss admits suddenly. Beside her, Prim is calmer now, and she only shakes her head at her sister's statement.

Finch turns to Katniss, looking her up and down slowly as Peeta had done, measuring her up against the film of Thresh's blood drying on her tunic. Katniss wonders what the redhead is thinking, but some sort of tension releases from Finch's posture. "Me neither," she says at last. "You okay?"

"He didn't mean to," Rue retorts. "Or—I don't think he did. He just thought I should leave, and when he got close and Katniss moved for a weapon, he just…went crazy."

"Some kind of crazy," Finch replies bitterly, putting down the pot with a hard thud. Water splashes over the lip. She seems to regret the movement at Rue's flinch. "I mean, it's just that before this, he was so…he was just…"

"I like him," Rue says in a small voice. She huddles against Peeta's side, hunched under the weight of his arm across her shoulders. "Liked him. He was really nice to me."

"He looked after you," Finch agrees softly, dropping down to sit beside her. "He was a good person, but he just didn't go about it the right way this time."

"Maybe…this is why it makes more sense for us to split up," Katniss sighs after a moment. "With the Games ending, and…I mean, when the Careers are gone, what are we going to do?"

It's the question she knows they've all been asking themselves for ages now, pondering at every waking minute. Katniss sees it in the others' expressions sometimes, a bitterness that doesn't quite let go.

Of course, it's not like tributes always win by killing each other; Wiress is a testament to that. Occasionally, there have been years where the last stragglers died of exposure to the elements
before the Gamemakers could push them together for a fight. But there's no avoiding the fact that alliances never end well in the Hunger Games. The smart ones split up once things get too serious; the stupid ones let the Games play out and wait to see who takes the knife in the back.

"What if we don't?" Peeta remarks suddenly, his dark eyes thoughtful as he stares at the pot of water. Rue is still crying soundlessly, her tears drying on her cheeks and her eyes red and puffy.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, alliances in the Games always break when someone betrays someone else. But what if we just don't? What if, when it comes right down to it, and if we're the last ones left, what if we stay together and just don't attack each other in the end? What can they even do to us to make us fight each other?"

"I—" Katniss begins, and then she pauses. "I don't know. I don't think that's ever happened. But they could probably figure out something. And they're listening."

"So let them listen. Maybe they've already got a plan for it. But until then, what if we just stay together?"

"Let's find out, Katniss," Prim says desperately, taking Katniss's hand. "I want to find out what happens. I want to get to the end and do it together. I want to get to the end with you."

Katniss wants to point out that as of the last half-hour, their track record for staying strong as an alliance is looking a little worse for wear. Not that Katniss wouldn't have instantly pointed to Thresh as the person most likely to break the alliance, of course, and none of the others appear so obviously belligerent. But right on the heels of all that has just happened, it seems like a bad omen to discuss something so ridiculously hopeful.

Still, she looks around at the faces her allies. Rue, whose eyes are still puffy with tears, looks tired but thoughtful, her mouth curving downward. Peeta, after voicing his idea, stares back at Katniss with a determined set to his jaw, his expression bolder and more confident than Katniss has come to expect from him. And Finch is smiling.

"I like that idea," the redhead says in explanation when Katniss looks at her curiously. "It beats the alternative, and I say we put them to the test. Fuck the Gamemakers, fuck the Capitol."

Katniss finds herself smiling tentatively back, though she still feels uncertain about her own ability to keep this promise—uncertain whether she can really let Prim die in order to retain the honor of their alliance. Maybe if she had been alone, as the rest of them are, her commitment to the decision might be firmer. She might risk her own life for such a thing, but she treasures her sister's life too much to let it go so easily.

But Prim is staring earnestly at her, all wide eyes and worried brow, the way she does when she wants something and knows Katniss will give it to her. Once upon a time, it was a look that earned sweets and piggyback rides and stray cats and small goats. Now, it's a look that asks Katniss to value her wishes over her life.

That's a hard thing to do, maybe the hardest thing Prim has ever asked of her. And while Katniss has always put her sister's wishes over her own, she's not sure she can do it this time.

Even now, Katniss isn't sure which way she'll go in the end. Not when it comes right down to it.

Still, they're waiting for her response, and she knows enough to say: "You're right. Let the Capitol stew at their television screens while we just sit and do nothing—and you know what the Capitol hates most, what it's always afraid of?" she adds, suddenly thinking back to her conversations with
Beetee and Wiress and Haymitch.

"What?" Rue pipes up.

"When districts cooperate," she answers, smiling thinly. "It terrifies them, because they don't like it when pawns unite against them. Or when things don't go according to plan. So let's shake things up a little, huh?"

The others return her smile, but their prospects still seem so bleak that nothing more is said.

They silently eat the remainder of the food, Thresh's allotment, for dinner, and Katniss thinks that Rue's knack for finding edible plants will come in handy if the Gamemakers decide to starve them out after hearing of their plan. While foraging will be more work, they'll still have enough to eat, if the abundant vegetation they'd found earlier is anything to go by.

For the rest of the evening, they stay close to their camp, none of them venturing any farther than the distance it takes to find a private space to relieve themselves. Once she shakes herself out of her tears, Rue, who is seemingly determined to distract herself, teaches them a sort of game played in the dirt in her district during downtime when harvesting, one in which players take turns drawing something with a stick and allowing the others to guess. They pass the time in relative peace, still wary of the approach of other tributes, until the sky grows too dark for them to make out the details of the pictures.

Prim is nowhere near well enough to clamber into a tree, and Katniss stubbornly refuses to even entertain the thought of sleeping out of harm's way without her sister, so they settle into a soft patch of grass instead. The others wordlessly follow suit, Peeta carefully pouring water onto the remains of the fire and stamping out its last glittering embers. Waves of heat roll off of Prim as she curls up beside Katniss. Her fever, though not debilitating, still lingers. Katniss doesn't dare bring this up—mostly because worrying about it makes her feel both nauseous and helpless.

At any rate, she makes Prim drink the rest of the clean water from their canteen. Though alternating between sweat and shivers, Prim appears to be on the verge of sleep when they are all violently startled from their dozes as the sound of trumpets rips through the silent night. Finch and Rue both jump and freeze as though expecting a blow, and Peeta throws his head back, wide-eyed, as though he can pinpoint the source of the noise somewhere in the sky.

When the blaring music ebbs away, the air fills with the booming voice of Claudius Templesmith. "My dear tributes!" he exclaims dramatically. "We would like to invite you…to a feast." At this, Katniss sits up, exchanging a hopeful look with Finch at the prospect of food. A good meal would make the next few days pass more smoothly, and Katniss is loath to miss out on additional strength and sustenance if the remaining tributes have the chance to grab a bite.

"But wait!" Claudius continues, "This is no ordinary feast. Each of your groups needs something desperately. 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."

Katniss waits, but there is no additional sound or closing fanfare. There are no other noises except the sounds of a forest at night: the faint whisper of wind, the dull hum of insects in the distance somewhere, the cooing of a bird, all of it resuming instantly as though someone has pressed play on a paused video.

The only other sound is from Prim, who clings violently to Katniss's arm, guessing her sister's
thoughts before Katniss can piece them together herself. "No, Katniss. You can't go."

"I have to," Katniss says, the words tumbling out almost of their own accord and before she
knows what to say. She feels dazed. "You know it'll be medicine for you, Prim. That's what we
need desperately. We can't just let that go."

"You can't risk your life for it!"

"Prim—"

"No, Katniss. No." She takes in a long, rattling breath, though she tries to swallow the shaky
sound of it at the last minute. "Please just don't. I...I don't want you to."

Her sister's grip is unrelenting and strong, despite the warmth bleeding from her hands. It's too
dark to make out much, but Katniss knows the others are weighing their options carefully, coming
to their own conclusions as Katniss has. There are no voiced objections to Katniss's obvious plan,
and Katniss takes that as support. At her side, Finch's gaze is solemn and neutral, but some
understanding seems to pass between the two of them as Katniss stares at her.

"Alright," Katniss says finally. "Alright, Prim, calm down. I'll stay, alright?"

She sinks into place beside her sister, unable to make out the expressions on the others' faces in the
fading light. At any rate, they're laying their heads back down to rest, with the exception of Finch,
who has first watch.

Prim, glaring at Katniss in the darkness, begins to cry weakly into Katniss's shoulder. Katniss isn't
sure how her sister always manages to hear the lies in her words. "I hate you sometimes, Katniss. I
wish you wouldn't go..."

There's nothing to say in return that wouldn't be more of a lie, so Katniss says nothing at all. She
rubbs her sister's arm in silence for what seems like ages until Prim finally sobs herself to sleep.

As the rosy glow of dawn lifts across the horizon, Katniss begins to stir. Rue had woken her for
the last watch of the night nearly two hours prior, drowsy and apologetic, barely pausing to hand
her the night vision glasses before drooping onto the leaf-strewn ground and falling asleep.

Even in sleep, Prim clings to Katniss's side. Katniss's slow movements, designed to extricate
herself from her sister's clutches, would normally have woken Prim, who sleeps lightly. The fact
that she remains asleep now is a testament to the severity of her wound and the related fever.

When Katniss is free, she slings the bow and arrow over her shoulder and adjusts the night vision
glasses before standing to creep slowly out of the clearing. The faint sound of movement behind
her startles her into reaching for her weapon, but it's only Finch. The redhead rolls easily to her
feet, grabbing her sword with her good hand and awkwardly pulling the sling over her head.
Katniss realizes Finch must have been waiting for her to make a move.

"You're coming?"

Finch nods. "There are two of them. There should be two of us."

A few days ago, Katniss might have objected. She shouldn't trust Finch—can't trust her,
even after what happened with Thresh—but she does. She has spent the last few hours
considering her objectives and designing her plan of attack, and while she doesn't think she'll need
the help, she could use the company. She nods, and Finch falls into place at her back.
They retrace the path back to the Cornucopia in the darkness, Finch keeping up remarkably well in spite of the fact that Katniss is the one wearing the night vision glasses. Eventually, as fiery oranges and reds bloom overhead, the forest brightens enough that Katniss no longer needs the glasses at all. She drops them into her quiver for safekeeping.

Sunrise is imminent when they finally reach the main area of the arena. The Cornucopia is a dark shadow splashed across the ashen field, still and silent. Choosing a small grove of trees with a clear view of the Cornucopia's mouth, Katniss and Finch crouch down into the brush and wait for daybreak, rigid with anticipation and tensing with the slightest sound. Katniss is struck by how helpless she suddenly feels now that she can only hear through one ear; it's as though she has to turn her head often to be sure she can catch everything that she misses in the silence to her left side. She has already strung an arrow into her bow, and Finch thumbs the hilt of the sword with her good hand.

"Where is it?" Katniss hisses after a few minutes have passed. The first rays of the sun have crept into the sky, its yellow fire pooling brightly just over the tops of the trees to the east.

"I don't know," Finch responds tensely, and she peers into the woods at their backs for any signs of ambush. "He said the Cornucopia. Could he have meant inside of it?"

"I think he would have said inside of it."

"Maybe, but—"

A sudden hiss comes from the direction of the golden structure. The ground just beneath the mouth springs open, a small square of it splitting in two as a table is pressed up into view. Atop it rest two bags. One is half the size of their backpacks and marked with the number 2, and the other —Prim's—is a tiny black bag. Though Katniss can't make out its number, she knows it must be 12.

Once the ground clicks into place, Finch moves purposefully beside her. The girl's eyes are still on the table as she widens her stance like a runner before a race. "Cover me," she whispers, and that's all the warning Katniss has before Finch springs from their hiding place, strings of messy red hair whipping behind her as she sprints toward the table. Swearing violently at the surprise, Katniss jerks her bow into position, aiming it in the general direction of the golden structure and scrutinizing the surrounding area for any sign of movement. Finch closes the distance to the table, rips the small bag from its resting place, and turns on her heel to run back toward Katniss. Half-astonished by and half-admiring of the clever idea, Katniss rises in place, keeping her weapon out as Finch rushes to her side. The redhead is grinning in exhilaration. "Go, go, go!"

Katniss lowers the bow, still too surprised to argue and still shocked by the simplicity of the thing, and they scurry through the woods together for a few steps, making their departure as noiseless as possible.

But Katniss spent the better part of the night rolling the idea of this feast over and over in her head, poking and prodding it like a sore in the side of her mouth, and all of her plans had been prepared quite differently. She slows to a halt.

Finch, aware of her change of pace, turns to Katniss breathlessly from a few feet away, her expression puzzled.

"I—there's something I need to do. Hold on."
Katniss doesn't respond. Hunching low to the ground, she creeps back toward the tree line, settling into another good hiding place among the tall grasses and sedges. Finch, still panting slightly, is a warm presence at her side. Katniss can almost feel the girl's confusion and worry as a tangible thing, but Katniss's obvious focus on the last remaining bag must put the girl off of asking further questions.

They wait for several minutes, both of them more tense than ever, aware that Cato and Marvel might be searching the woods for them. Katniss is betting that this won't be the case, though: Finch's strategy is brilliant, and the Careers should assume that they've left immediately after getting the bag. Katniss has the feeling Cato thinks they're gone and is biding his time to be sure.

After some time, her guess is confirmed. A movement in the woods to the right catches their eyes. Cato emerges slowly from the trees, stiff-backed and wary as he clutches his sword, and then he jogs toward the table. Now that he has revealed his hiding place, Katniss can just make out the top of Marvel's dirty brown hair peeking out from the grass, the paleness of his skin as he peers around the side of a tree.

It's Cato she's after now, though. Pulling her knee up for a better position, she aims her readied arrow carefully and then fires. It hits Cato in the leg, sending him crashing to the ground. He howls in pain, trying to pull himself up.

Before Marvel can so much as move to a better vantage point, Katniss has strung another arrow. The boy is moving to defend his ally, peeling himself away from the tree and hurrying into the open, when Katniss looses the next arrow. It finds its target right in his eye, as perfectly as if she had simply been shooting a squirrel clinging to the side of a tree. Mercy for you, Katniss thinks as the cannon fires, her mind going to Prim, though you probably don't deserve it.

She pulls herself up from her hiding place and steps toward Cato, aware of a small gasp from Finch and then only a roaring in her ears, a narrow point of focus to her vision. Cato sits on the ground, his sword in hand as he peers toward Marvel, still uncertain and disbelieving in the seconds that have passed since his ally's death, still shocked by the quick ferocity of it. At her approach, his head twists around quickly.

"You," he shouts when he sees her, acid dripping in his voice. His eyes are dark with a cold fury, and he struggles into a crouch, one hand still on his sword, careful not to put weight on his wounded leg. He rips the arrow out of his calf in one swift motion, grunting painfully, and Katniss wonders if it's supposed to be a sign of strength. Blood oozes from the wound more swiftly than before.

For her part, Katniss keeps her distance, leaving at least twenty feet of space between them and fastening her eyes carefully upon him the entire time. Facing him, she steps slowly toward his item on the table, and he roars at her unintelligibly. "You bitch," he screams. "Get the hell—"

He flings a knife at her from somewhere, more quickly than she ever would have expected, and she has only a split second to move so that it doesn't hit her face straight on. Instead, it cuts a gash into the side of her cheek and continues past, dropping somewhere in the grass behind. Katniss quickly nocks another arrow to her bow before he can reach for another weapon, if he even has one, and she lets this one fly straight into his stomach. He heaves a breath as though all the air has been knocked out of him, his free hand trembling toward it as he drops backward to lie on the ground.

"That one's from my sister," she says, hardly believing her own daring as she grabs his bag and slings it over her shoulder.
Cato's eyes are wide and glassy as he clutches the arrow and alternately heaves shaky breaths and chokes wetly deep in his throat. Katniss, still watching as he writhes upon the ground, steps slowly back toward the grove where Finch waits.

Katniss isn't sure which of them starts it, but they are suddenly both bolting through the forest, their movements jerky and desperate as though an army is at their backs. The noise of their footfalls and harsh breathing booms in Katniss's ears, and all of her limbs are charged by some painful electric current, her heart drumming wildly in her chest.

After a few minutes, Finch finally snaps out of it, slowing. "Katniss," she pants, scrabbling to clutch the fabric of Katniss's sleeve and pull her to a halt. "Katniss, what...you just..."

"I know." Katniss replies, heaving great gulps of air. Her legs are on fire, and her lungs. That had to happen, she assures herself, as she had all this morning under the cover of the starry sky during her watch. Cato and Marvel had to die, and only at the feast would their locations be known. Otherwise, they would all have to stumble across each other in the woods, and the last time that had happened, it had gone disastrously for Prim.

Katniss is the obvious choice for a killer among their group. This morning, her part in all this had seemed coldly logical, but the idea had possessed at the same time the airy, fragile quality of a dream or a fantasy, one Katniss had only vaguely expected to take shape. And she hadn't imagined what she'd done to Cato at all, the slowness of his punishment. She'd meant to kill them both quickly and run, but everything had changed when she saw his face, remembered him as a dark nightmare rushing from the tree toward Prim. In the end, all of her bitterness and wrath had come out of her as though she'd somehow meant to do it all along. Not that she's sure she regrets her actions, exactly, but the thought of Cato's quivering sides, his slight whimpers, the fact that he is even now still alive as blood and bile spill out of him—

Feeling the weight of all she has done, Katniss chokes and then turns aside as her stomach rolls. Something warm and acidic springs into her throat, and she heaves it out onto the ground. She coughs when she is done, spitting to remove the taste from her mouth.

As she straightens, Katniss tries to ignore Finch's measuring stare. The girl is wiping sweat from her own forehead and neck with the sleeve of her jacket, her breathing still slightly shallow.

"Let's go," Katniss says finally. "We need to get the medicine to Prim."

The rest of their trek passes in relative silence. Finch keeps shooting glances at Katniss, and Katniss imagines that the blunt aggression of her actions has awakened a healthy dose of worry in the redhead, part for Katniss's mental state and part for Finch's own well-being.

It takes several more minutes before the boom of a cannon echoes across the sky.

Chapter End Notes

Katniss is not messing around, people. Two chapters left!
"We're the last survivors," Finch says in reply to the unasked question. "We're the last ones here."

No one asks anything more about it, at least not right away. Katniss doesn't know whether it's because of the stony, grim expression on Finch's face or the way that she, Katniss, has instantly run to hug her sister, burying her face in wispy blonde hair. Even now, Peeta and Rue watch the uncharacteristic display of emotion with perplexed concern.

Prim, being Prim, must guess at least some of it. "It's okay, Katniss," she says, weakly wiping blood from Katniss's cheek. Katniss isn't sure why, but both of them are crying. Prim's tears are warm on her shoulder. "We're safe now."

When Katniss finally allows herself to be pried away from Prim, Rue delves into the bag from the feast to pull out two small silver pots. The first, when opened, contains a dozen blue pills; under the lid are the simple words *One each hour.* The second contains a pasty yellow salve and no instructions.

Prim is ashen and sweat-soaked, but she manages to swallow one of the pills with a bit of help, though Peeta murmurs that she has been able to keep almost nothing down, not even water. With Rue's help, Katniss unwinds the bandages from Prim's leg to add some salve to her wound, and Prim bites her thumb to keep from crying out as tears squeeze from her closed eyes. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, Prim," Katniss murmurs, and then they dress the wound with the last of the bandages ripped from the blanket.

Having been born and raised in the districts, none of them have any idea what to expect of the Capitol's advanced medicine. For a few minutes as the day glimmers to life around them, all of the tributes splayed tiredly across the ground near the firewood, they watch Prim for signs of improvement. Even Katniss, having experienced firsthand the wonders of the burn salve, almost expects a miracle. "Feeling any better?" She asks once Prim struggles to sit back up.

"I'm not feeling like I'm melting," Prim says dryly. "I guess that's a good start." She wipes sweat from her neck, and it's then that it really begins to dawn on Katniss that the five of them are the only ones left. The semi-victors of the Games. Finch stares at her, and Katniss knows the redhead is thinking the same thing.

"What happens now?" Rue asks in a small voice.

There's no easy answer except the one they've already agreed upon. "What if we *don't kill each other?" Prim asks again, reminding them all of their words from the night before. As though a spell has been broken, they relax almost in unison.

"I guess we wait and see," Peeta replies, his smile genuine in spite of the uncertain lilt to his voice. "I guess we…live for a while longer."

Rue gets to her feet. "We were going to start a fire right before you two got back. Should we do it still?"

They use the matches to light the gathered firewood, Peeta carefully fostering the small flame until it's large enough to grow on its own. There's nothing else to be done, so they settle into a circle around the fire as it blossoms,absently watching it creep across the wood, until Finch remembers
Cato's bag. Katniss had dropped it when they had searched the District 12 bag for Prim's medicine, and she retrieves it now, bringing it back to their circle to open it under the others' curious stares.

It's food, enough to last two tributes for about a day or so: a box of toasted sandwiches with thick slabs of turkey, a half-dozen little red apples, a bag of strawberries and blueberries, salted brown twists that Finch calls pretzels, and a container of steaming, buttery broccoli.

"I guess they were hungry," Rue begins once they have gotten past their awe.

"Well, since we destroyed their food, and there's no game to hunt, they must have been worried about starving before the Games were over," Peeta says reasonably.

"And they don't have you to find them plants, Rue," Katniss adds.

Finch plucks a turkey sandwich from the pile. "Well, they don't need it now. No point in letting it go to waste."

They each scoop up some of the food, Katniss forcing Prim to try a handful of strawberries, and begin to eat. At any other moment of the Games, the prospect of finishing the day with a full stomach would have put them in high spirits. Now, with the unfathomable future finally at hand, a future that had once seemed so distant they might never reach it, Katniss's stomach churns a little. The others pick at their food slowly, passing the time lost in their own inward reflection.

Eventually, Peeta sets down his half-finished apple. "I can't really believe we're here," he says suddenly. "And it's even—it's even a nice day, isn't it?"

It's beautiful, Katniss thinks. After all that has happened, it seems strange to be sitting in this calm place where clouds drift on the wind in the wide, clear sky. Mockingjays and sparrows loop overhead as well, darting in and out of the glinting foliage of the beech trees lining the meadow.

It's only a matter of time before the Gamemakers change something up for the end of the Games, as they always do once a finale seems to be near. Katniss imagines them hunched breathlessly on the edge of their seats, all of them wondering which tribute will be the first to betray this alliance, the first to begin bringing this year's Hunger Games to the inevitable end.

Katniss is wondering the same thing herself.

"We're really the last ones?" Rue asks tentatively. Katniss knows she, like everyone else, must have heard the cannons this morning as all of them wondered which tributes had caused the noises, but even now, the fact that the Careers are all gone is almost too much for Katniss to comprehend.

"We're really the last ones," Finch confirms, glancing at Katniss. "Thanks to you."

Feeling a sudden rush of defensiveness bubble up, Katniss replies, "If we'd have let them go, we would have had to figure out—"

Finch waves a hand. "I'm not being...Someone had to," she says finally. "And like I said, you're pretty handy to have around."

Katniss returns her uncertain smile, recognizing the words of gratitude for what they are.

The sudden blare of trumpets again frightens all of them out of their wits; Katniss is not the only one to reach instinctively for a weapon before recognizing the booming voice of Claudius Templesmith. "My dear tributes!" he begins jubilantly. "Our congratulations go out to your
alliance for reaching this point in this year's Hunger Games. We would like to announce a final
twist to our spectacle: this year, the two remaining tributes will both be considered victors. Good
luck!"

That's all there is, and the statement is so brief that it takes Katniss a second to register what he has
said. When she does, an icy fear and a hopeful excitement war within her. We could go home.
That impossible dream, that idea Katniss has so far refused to allow herself to consider, is in the
distinct realm of possibility now. Waiting with the others to see what would happen if they didn't
kill each other had been a last resort, but this new guarantee is tangible. Real. A goal Katniss can
reach.

The others see the change in her instantly. Their hands, which still rest upon their weapons, grip
them intently now, all of their eyes wide and fearful. Can I do this? Katniss thinks suddenly. Is it
really over? She'd known it would be her, after all—that the end of the alliance, if it ended, would
come from her before anyone else. Prim is the most important person in the world to her, but as
she stares at the others, all of them coiled tautly as springs and ready to bolt in an instant, Katniss
falters.

"Katniss," Prim barks, and Katniss hadn't even realized that she had nocked an arrow to her bow
except that her sister is pulling it aside.

Katniss turns to stare at her sister, who, though still pale and covered in sweat, returns her gaze
fiercely. Katniss feels all of her momentum, all of her determination draining away. Her goal has
always been to make it to the end with Prim, a part of her knowing all the while that this would
require her to kill all of the other tributes—including herself—to secure Prim's victory. But in this
instant, under the dark and almost unreadable gaze of her sister, Katniss is aware that Prim would
never forgive her for these actions.

"Do you think I want to win like that?" Prim hisses. "And do you really think they're going to let
both of us walk away? Have you ever watched the Games?"

"What the hell, Prim?" Katniss snarls. "So it's all for nothing? Coming here, doing any of this—it
was all for you, and I can't just—"

"I didn't ask you to do this! You came because you thought you were going to make me win, but
that's not what I wanted! How could you think I'd be okay watching you die so I could get out of
here? Are you insane?"

"You need to get out of here, Prim; you're hurt—"

"And go where?" Prim spits, pushing Katniss's chest as her voice rises. "Go where, Katniss? Can
you imagine me being happy after this? After they turn around and say there's only one victor?
Me, in the Capitol, all on my own?"

Katniss gets a sudden flash of it then, a future she had been unable or unwilling to imagine for her
sister: Prim left to a lonely life with only their useless mother for support, left vulnerable in the face
of the whims and manipulations of President Snow and the Gamemakers; Prim alone in a series of
spacious, empty rooms in the Capitol, the remnants of her life under the constant magnifying glass
of camera flashes and studio audiences; Prim remembering and loving Katniss with a twisted
bitterness, simultaneously detesting her for the betrayal—because it would be a betrayal—when
she killed friends who had trusted them in the Games and left Prim to weather the aftermath alone.

"You'd be condemning me," Prim tells her fiercely, eyes flashing with tears or fury.

"I just—want you to be okay, Prim! God, that's all I've ever wanted."
Prim laughs bitterly. "This isn't okay. None of this—where I am, everything that happened to me, what I did to Thresh, none of it's okay. But it wasn't as bad this whole time because you were here, and that's—maybe you didn't mean to come here just to be with me, but that's made it…" Her face is suddenly open and sad, but no tears fall. She takes several shuddering breaths, and Katniss can feel them all vibrating through her sister's hands, which still press down the bow in her arms. "I don't know, Katniss. Just, please don't do this. If we go, we go. But we all said—you agreed—that we'd find out what happens if we just don't kill each other. So let's find out what happens. Together."

Gently, Prim pulls the bow and arrow from Katniss's grip and sets them on the ground by the fire with pointed slowness, staring up at the others as if they are cornered animals, as if to say I'm not going to hurt you. Then she sits back up and looks at Katniss, and the expression on her face is so full of emotion that Katniss has to close her eyes.

"Fuck you, Prim," she whispers, and her sister pounces at her, hugging her so tightly that Katniss feels as if Prim might be filling some hole deep inside her, some cavity from which all of Katniss's bitter anger is slowly bleeding away.

Some part of her is waiting for the bite of a knife or axe or sword, but it never comes. For a small taste of infinity, she sits holding Prim right before the two of them die, either by a tribute's blade or by the Gamemakers' design, but now that Katniss has laid all of her plans to rest, it doesn't feel quite so bad.

When they finally loosen their hold, the others are still in place. Peeta's soft expression is gentle, wistful; Rue is grinning up at the sky; Finch, whom Katniss might have expected out of all of them to be the source of the knife in their back, sits lazily on her haunches as she looks out into the forest. At the feeling of Katniss's eyes upon her, the redhead smiles.

"Let's see what happens next."

Letting all of her plans go is exhausting.

Ignoring the continual throb from the gash in her cheek, Katniss drowses in the warm heat of the sun, feeling more restful and at peace than she has since Prim's name was first drawn all those ages ago. There's a certain confidence in letting things happen as they will, and she thinks that if she falls asleep now, she might sleep deeply and for hours. She might sleep and never wake up at all.

Prim still clings to her side. A few minutes ago, Katniss made her take another pill. Her sister breathes easier now, and she used some of the water from the pot to clean her face until it no longer shines with sweat. Rue is asleep on Prim's other side, curled toward the glow of the fire, and Peeta and Finch talk in low voices beside her, debating whether residents of the Capitol will find their antics charming or horribly dull.

The day is bright and warm, though there is an odd stillness in the air. Not even the slightest breeze moves in the clearing, as if the whole world has drawn a breath to see what will happen next. Katniss can almost feel the millions of eyes upon them, the crowds rooting for them in their districts, in 12 and 11 and 5 and maybe even 3, none of whom often have tributes that even make it as far as the final half. And the eyes of the Gamemakers—Katniss can feel those, too. Weighing, judging. Still curiously waiting to see which of them will be first to sneak out a blade.

For Katniss, though, there is a strange feeling of weightlessness, as though their impending death doesn't exist, in the same way that District 12 is some strange, intangible, half-dreamt life that no
longer exists. It's hard to believe that somewhere in the world is the very real mortar and stone of her district, that the streets she knows and the forest she loves haven't vanished into some ethereal fog. Has it really been less than a month since Prim's name was first drawn?

Rue is coming out of sleep, yawning as she rolls nearer to the fire. One arm flops dangerously close to the flames, but Finch catches it with her foot, and Rue straightens and murmurs something either grateful or apologetic.

"Looks like the Gamemakers won't be getting their big finale this year," she says to no one in particular, rubbing her eyes as she straightens.

Peeta snorts. "They could do without the feasting."

Katniss raises her brows, not quite expecting the jibe from him.

Rue hides a giggle with her hand. "They do look like fat grapes," she murmurs under her breath, just loud enough for them to hear but low enough that the cameras and audio may not be able to make out her words. Katniss knows that Rue, at least, is thinking that it might not be wise to provoke the people who hold your life in their hands.

"It's better to have no finale, anyway," Finch says. She slides closer to the fire, like Rue, so that the other tributes can hear her lowered voice. "And I reckon if they want a finale, then I'd rather not give them one. I don't know about you, but I'm too lazy to get up right now, and I mostly feel like I don't owe them anything," she adds sardonically.

Their good humor doesn't last long, as Katniss knew it wouldn't.

Very slowly, over the course of an hour or so while they continue to laze by the fire's glow, clouds spill across the sky so gradually that Katniss doesn't notice at first until Peeta mentions it. Whether or not the Gamemakers have heard their words, they have obviously begun to really fear that their remaining tributes will tediously sit still for an indefinite period of time if let alone, meaning that viewers in the Capitol will switch channels on their televisions—which is almost unheard of, though not unprecedented, during the Games. The slow change of the sky may be meant to allow the remaining tributes a bit more time to strike organically and without external pressure, if they are still debating turning on one another, but all of them only watch in silence, huddled together at the fireside with their heads thrown back as they watch the clouds thicken and churn above.

"What do you think?" Rue asks fearfully.

"Not muttations like usual," Finch murmurs.

Katniss frowns but doesn't voice what they're all thinking: muttations wouldn't give the tributes a chance to kill each other. The victor would be left completely up to chance, which means a potentially unsatisfying finale with low ratings. But by creating some other threat, something slower and a little more vague, the Gamemakers must hope to offer the remaining tributes some encouragement, something to show why it's a good idea to get out of the arena alive.

And she will probably be the first to shoot.

With the first rolls of thunder, Katniss reaches behind her head for her bow and arrow. The other tributes stare at her in less concern than they might have two hours ago, though Finch still looks particularly wary. Ignoring her, Katniss gives the weapon a considering look, fondly running her fingers along the ridges of the bow, and then she tosses it into the fire along with the quiver.

"What are you doing?" Rue asks in alarm as sparks wheeze up from the pile.
"I won't need it anymore, will I?" Katniss says, watching the metal and thinking they'll need more fuel for the fire if it's going to burn anytime soon. "If they're gonna kill us, they're gonna kill us."

Rue considers this. Katniss can almost see her work at it, her dark eyes glinting with the orange of the fire now that the clouds have blocked out the sunlight. After a moment, she peels her dagger from her side.

"Not that I ever used it," she says sheepishly, tossing it into the fire. "But I'm glad I never did."

Katniss, thinking suddenly of Cato's dying twitches, half-wishes she'd never used her weapon either. They'd stripped Prim's dagger off of her when they'd dressed her wound, but Prim rummages through the bag for it now. When she finds it, her mouth twists into an angry line for a moment as she runs her finger down the spine of the blade, and Katniss knows she is thinking of Thresh. Her sister flings the weapon into the fire as well.

Rue has stepped a few feet into the forest, and she comes back with a small pile of dry leaves and twigs in her jacket, which she holds out like the bottom of an apron. She lets it all slide off and onto the fire, which eats it hungrily.

Peeta gives a wry smile as he drops his axe atop the pile, where it settles with a clink onto one of the daggers.

Finch is the last, and this is the only place Katniss has anticipated any trouble. Katniss had pegged the redhead from the first day as a sly survivor, as the sort of person who slips a blade into your back when your head's turned, and as Finch pulls her sword from her back now, Katniss knows that her initial impression may have been right.

How easy it would be to kill them all now, weaponless as they are—though Katniss supposes that if they felt dedicated enough, they could always reach into the fire to grab their burning weapons in defense. Finch could be done with it in only seconds, before they even had the time to move.

And Katniss knows the girl must be thinking it. Katniss would have been, had Prim not been at her side. Katniss might have even done it.

But Finch exhales slowly, carefully not looking at any of them, and with an expression that clearly states This is the stupidest thing I've ever done, she drops the sword into the flames as well. She stands over it for a minute, poised like her hand might dart back in to save it from the fire, and then she sinks back down onto the ground. Her eyes find Katniss.

"Great feeling, isn't it?" Katniss asks sarcastically, and Finch grins wryly.

As if in response to this, the first raindrops begin to fall.

"This is because of the girls on fire thing again, isn't it?" Katniss howls over the thundering downpour. "They can't let that go?"

The fire has long gone out, the remains of their weapons warped and smoldering in the ashes as the five of them cluster together for warmth beneath a nearby willow. All of them are drenched to the bone, the foliage doing very little to shield them from the sheets of rain, and the temperatures have sharply dropped in only minutes, leaving them freezing and shivering—courtesy of the Gamemakers.

Prim is glued to Katniss's left side, Rue plastered to her right, and Finch and Peeta make the circle
complete, all of their arms looped together as they fight for body heat. It had been an odd moment, coming together for warmth like this, Peeta sliding an arm over Prim's shoulders and onto Katniss to look at her warily, as though she were some animal that might resent the touch, but she'd only given him a slow shrug.

"What are we going to do?" Peeta shouts now.

"Let them make it rain!" Finch replies. "What else can we do? There's nowhere around here for shelter."

As Finch and Peeta argue, Katniss turns to Prim. "Where's the medicine?" she asks. "Take another pill. It's probably been almost an hour."

Prim stares. "Katniss, it's not like—"

"I got you the medicine, Prim. Just take it. If we can make it a while longer, we will."

Prim fumbles through her pockets for another pill and pops one into her mouth, shoving the case back into one zippered pocket when she's done. "Ick," she says suddenly, pulling out a limp earthworm. "Wow. That's gross."

"That seems like it happened years ago," Katniss says, laughing in spite of herself as she pushes wet strands of her bangs out of her eyes.

"It does, doesn't it?" Prim murmurs, flicking the dead thing onto the ground. There are dozens of worms and bugs there now, Katniss notes, all of them trying to get out of the wet, flooded ground. What was once saturated earth has turned to puddles and now a solid half-inch of water.

That's probably not good, Katniss realizes.

The Gamemakers, who are too impatient to let the rain slowly fill up the arena on its own, must be pouring water in from somewhere. Katniss begins to see and hear the trickles of water, glimmering rivulets of it swirling across the earth toward them as though part of some lazy stream, and then the water is tugging earnestly at her boots.

"Guys," she snaps, interrupting Peeta and Finch's argument over whether or not it would be wise to trek back to the Cornucopia, "I don't think we have time for that."

They follow her stare, and Finch swears. "They wouldn't just…would they?"

"I can't swim," Rue says in a small voice.

"You won't have to," Katniss says. "We're climbing. Come on."

Now guided by a single, focused purpose, Katniss grabs Prim's hand to lead them through the water, which gushes over their feet and soaks into the bottoms of their pants. Her teeth chatter as she peers around at the trees for some time, looking for the tallest and oldest growths in the area.

"Just pick any tree," Peeta shouts after a few minutes, but Katniss keeps walking, wishing she'd thought to take the night vision goggles out of her quiver before burning it, because the darkened forest makes it hard to see much.

"There," Rue says, pointing. Katniss follows the gesture to see a thick, towering pine. As they approach the base, they can see quite clearly that its trunk is much wider and sturdier than those of the surrounding trees.
"Go ahead first, Rue. You're quickest." The water has crept up to her lower thighs by this time, and Rue and Prim will need to get up soon. Rue scrambles up the side of the tree a bit more gingerly than usual, cognizant of the slick, rain-soaked bark. When she has made it up a few limbs, Katniss turns to Prim. "You next."

Katniss boosts her sister up, watching her wobble a little as she climbs, and she turns to Peeta and Finch, thinking of the girl's damaged arm.

"I'll get her up," Peeta says. "Go with Prim."

Katniss doesn't need to be told twice. She pulls herself from the water and hurries up the side of the tree.

*What are they thinking?* Katniss wonders in alarm as she tries to grasp the slick branches above. *They can't kill us off like this. Unless they mean for us to knock each other out of the tree to keep from drowning?*

It's a valid thought. The Gamemakers know they have no weapons, so perhaps they expect sheer panic to fog their reason. A little encouragement to push each other from great heights might help, and strangulation is never out of the question, awkward as it would be to pull off without falling.

After a few minutes of slow progress, she catches up with her sister, whom she can barely see in the branches above her for the pounding rain. She doesn't find Prim so much as bumps into her.

"Katniss," Prim says, her voice thick with fear, "this is too high, and it's—cold, and slippery, and—"

Katniss thinks her sister might be crying, but in the dark and the rain, she can't be sure. Katniss's limbs shake with cold and fatigue, and she squeezes herself up onto Prim's branch and presses her against the sturdy trunk, lowering her carefully down until they're sitting on the thick bough. "It's alright, Prim," she says. "Let's stop here." *It's as good a place as any,* Katniss thinks.

The others might as well not exist. Somewhere in the grey, windy mist above them is Rue, and struggling through the dark branches behind are Peeta and Finch. From this vantage point, though, Katniss can just make out a patch of open earth where their peaceful clearing must once have been, except that glints of silvery light dance in vague patterns where the ground should be, and Katniss knows that the entire area has flooded.

*Will they just let the water rise, then?* Katniss wonders. *And whoever's at the top and out of the water wins?*

For a heartbeat, she has the vague intention of pushing Prim up through the branches to get her sister out of here, to be sure that her sister is the victor, but Prim is shaking fearfully, trying hard not to look at the ground, and Katniss lets the thought slip away.

"Prim," Katniss says, and her sister's blue eyes snap up. "I love you so much, you know?"

"I love you, too," Prim blurts, as though the words have been on the tip of her tongue. She leans into Katniss, and Katniss can feel shivers running along her skin. "This isn't how I thought it was going to go," Prim adds in a small voice. "I was thinking it would be fast. But I'm still glad it's with you. I mean, not glad, but—"

"I know," Katniss says, pressing her forehead into the tree trunk as she buries her face in Prim's shoulder.

The water is swallowing them whole. Katniss thinks she can hear Peeta or Finch rustling the
leaves below them, and the sound of water pounding on her skull.

Thoughts of strangulation, of pushing the others to their deaths circle in her head. But she's too weary to move, and Prim's arms around her waist feel as tight as a chain.

There is nothing else here, only the two of them. Katniss is impossibly tired, her limbs weak with exhaustion and her mind drifting in a light, airy haze.

The rain pours and pours until it washes her thoughts away.

End of Part III, Charybdis

Then, Odysseus,

you'll see the other cliff. It's not so high.
The two are close together. You could shoot
an arrow from one cliff and hit the other.
There's a huge fig tree there with leaves in bloom.
Just below that tree divine Charybdis
sucks black water down. She spews it out
three times a day, and then three times a day
she gulps it down—a terrifying sight.
May you never meet her when she swallows!
Nothing can save you from destruction then,
not even Poseidon, Shaker of the Earth.
Make sure your ship stays close to Scylla's rock.
Row past there quickly. It's much better
to mourn for six companions in your ship
than to have all of them wiped out together.

-The Odyssey, by Homer
Friendship is magic. That's the moral of the story, guys. The end.

Okay, not really. There's an epilogue eventually, and all will be explained. Except whatever I've forgotten...

Anyway, thanks for sticking around! Please let me know what you thought?
In her dreams, she climbs a silver ladder up and into an inky black sky pebbled with stars. She's been climbing for years and years, so long that the ground is a distant patchwork of dark greys and browns and greens below. Her limbs are infused with lead, and she crawls slowly until the stars drift all around her, moving and blinking slowly, sweeping across the shadows on vague breaths of wind. She climbs over and above them, letting them dance beneath her feet and then slip away into the darkness.

And then, inexplicably, there is Prim at her side, smiling and shining with life.

Katniss wakes in hell. The air is stale and foul, making it hard for her to fill her lungs with enough of it to drag herself from slumber. She rubs her eyes with the heel of her right hand to loosen them. When she finally manages to scrape them open, she's in a dim, windowless room, almost a closet, really. The curved steel door makes her think prison, which is logical whether she really is in hell or whether the Gamemakers have pulled them from the arena for some alternate purpose.

Her thoughts are still sluggishly processing the shock of her life, namely, that she is still (possibly) alive, when her eyes fall on the empty wooden chair at her side. A smattering of empty glass bottles litter the floor around it, a few set on the bedside table as well, and her first thought is of Haymitch and the careful arrangements of bottles and glasses that have always peppered every surface of his home back in District 12. Definitely hell, if he's here, she thinks stupidly. Not that I'm that surprised.

She runs a finger across her forehead and into her short hair, which has been loosed from its ponytail and feels surprisingly clean. She's in a bed. It's softer than anything she's slept on in days, so thick it seems to threaten to swallow her up, but upon reflecting, Katniss realizes that it's the heavy and tired weight of her limbs that keep her in place, not the cushioning. Her left arm in particular is numb with pain and feels stuck to the bed.

Weakly, Katniss turns to find her sister's head pinning her arm to the pillow. Prim's asleep, but her face is clear for the first time in days, her hair clean and smelling faintly of soap, and Katniss has never been happier to see anyone in her life. She swears violently and pulls Prim toward her, startling her sister from sleep. Prim yelps and struggles before she recognizes Katniss, who thinks that she probably looks as confused as Katniss feels.

"Katniss?" Prim says, blinking, and then she plasters herself against her sister, laughing. "Katniss, did we…? How did we—did you—?"

"I didn't do anything," Katniss says. "I don't know what happened; I just remember you and me in the tree, and then... was there a silver ladder?"

Prim looks at her doubtfully. "I don't think so. Where are we?"

"I just woke up too." Her eyes fall onto an empty whiskey bottle. "I don't know if we're safe or not."

"We must be."
A sinking feeling settles into Katniss's stomach. "No. It's not over. Why would they just let us go? Why would they let Haymitch—or someone else—take us out? And where's everyone else?"

Prim watches her sister slip out of bed to pick up one of Haymitch's empty bottles, examining its strength and weighing its sturdiness in her hands. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking we find out what we can based on how they act when they see us out of the room," Katniss replies, trying to figure out who 'they' might be.

"Wait." Prim wiggles from the sheets and stumbles over to press one hand against the door. The knob turns when she tries it—which is a good sign, because they aren't locked in—but Prim doesn't open it right away. "Are you ready?" she whispers.

Katniss grips the bottle but holds it behind her back. "How good are you at fake crying?"

Though she rarely uses it, Prim has a strange ability to cry on demand, which she has done periodically throughout her life to get Katniss out of trouble. Now, she smiles wryly. "Still pretty good."

"We might need some dramatics. Just be ready, in case."

Prim's mouth smooths into a grim line, and she nods. Quickly, she swings the door open, and it pivots silently on its hinges to reveal a long corridor lined with other doors placed at uniform distances from each other. The whole place seems gloomy and sterile, and it reminds Katniss of the Justice Building in District 12, all functionality and neatness.

It's silent. Or mostly silent. Above them is the buzz and flicker of fluorescent lights. Katniss thinks the distant, steady whirr must come from an air conditioning unit somewhere.

But there's a faint murmur like the flow of conversation spilling from their right; Katniss's good ear picks up on it straight away. Prim hears it too, and she looks up at Katniss as if to ask Toward the noise or away from it?

Katniss jerks her head to the side, and they follow the sounds wordlessly, Prim limping a little. Katniss thinks all the while that if someone means them harm, they've gone through a lot of trouble to get them out, and that if they go for Prim, she's going to need a better weapon than an empty bottle.

They approach the corner, and Katniss realizes that the voices are ones she knows. Still dubious and uncertain, she peeks just into the open room so that only one eye can see into it.

It's a large room arranged a bit like the waiting room at the Peacekeepers' garrison in District 12, except bigger and ill-lit. The people nearest her are no one Katniss recognizes. A tall, pale-faced woman. A man in what looks like a uniform. A woman with a sheet of grey hair. She's the one speaking, standing over everyone else in the room.

But seated on the metal chairs facing her are Beetee and Wiress, neither of whom Katniss had ever expected to see again, and she's surprised at the surge of warmth that courses through her. They both look the worse for wear, exhausted and somehow unwholesome, as though they are on the verge of illness.

Beside them sit Finch and Rue and Peeta, all of them looking fatigued and ragged but clean and alive. The slipshod bindings on Finch's arm have been removed to make way for a hard plaster cast. As if she can feel Katniss's eyes, Finch looks up.

At some point, Katniss has stepped out into the open without fully intending to, and the room
gradually falls into silence as its inhabitants turn to stare.

"Katniss," Beetee says, his voice a deep rumble and his smile creeping into a crooked slant across his face. His eyes flicker down to the bottle that hangs limply in her hand. "I hope you weren't intending to fight your way out of here."

Her shock is so complete that she can't work out a reply. Prim curls around her side to answer. "We didn't know what else to do," she says in a quiet voice.

"Honestly. We set Haymitch to explain so that something like this wouldn't happen," Wiress remarks, striding across the stone floor to their side. Gently, she takes the glass bottle from Katniss's grip. "You won't be needing this," she explains. "You two will be safe here."

Safe. Hearing the word from Wiress makes it so. Something thick creeps into Katniss's throat, and she feels her eyes grow watery. She grits her teeth and fights the tears back, because there are still people staring at her, some of whom she's never even met.

"Katniss and Primrose Everdeen," says the grey-haired woman. She approaches them, and Wiress automatically steps back to make way for her. The woman's eyes are a murky grey, her cheekbones high, and she holds her chin at an angle. Something about her unyielding expression and stiff movements remind Katniss of coldness and steel. "I know all of this must come as a surprise to you. You couldn't have known what we were planning."

"Where are we?" Katniss asks instantly. "What happened to the end of the Games?"

"Oh, they've ended," the woman says, a twisted smile crossing her face. "We've made sure of that. We pulled you from the arena before they could take things any further. You were all half-dead," she remarks offhandedly, turning her body slightly to glance at Rue and Peeta and Finch, including them in the statement. "We just managed to get to you in time."

"Where are we?" Prim asks, echoing Katniss's earlier question. She has planted herself firmly at Katniss's side, no longer bothering to half-hide behind her sister as she habitually does with strangers.

The woman turns to face her, slate-grey eyes flashing. "You're in District 13," she says simply. "In one of our underground bunkers."

The statement is so preposterous that Katniss instinctively pivots to take in the others' expressions. Rue and Finch stare at the woman blankly, offering no guidance, but Peeta nods and shrugs.

"It's true, Katniss," Beetee adds, rising. "We have been working extensively with District 13 for several years now."

"District 13 is gone. It was destroyed during the First Rebellion," Prim says, reciting the words as though from a schoolbook, despite the uncertainty in her tone.

"That's what you've been told. That's what everyone's been told," the woman says. "It makes things easier."

"Easier? Why did—how did—?"

"We'll save the history lesson for later," the woman says. "Suffice it to say that District 13 is alive and well, and we're actively engaged in finding a way to stir up a little fighting in the other districts and to loosen the hold of the Capitol."

"How are we supposed to believe this?" Katniss asks.
The woman smiles grimly. "Well, you're speaking to its president." She sticks out a hand for Katniss to take. "President Coin. It's nice to formally meet."

Katniss shakes the hand, still casting doubtful looks at Beetee. President Coin takes Prim's hand as well.

"Why did you get us out?" Prim asks suddenly. "And why only at the end?"

President Coin drops the hand. "Now, that is an interesting question. And we were just getting to the answer. Maybe you'd like to sit and join us?"

The woman gestures to the chairs, and now that she has stepped fully into the room, Katniss realizes that the seats have been arranged to face a floor-to-ceiling television monitor. Katniss drops into the empty seat beside Finch, and Prim takes the next one, both of them bemused and faintly disbelieving, feeling as though they've stumbled into the world of a dream.

The screen flickers to life with a push of the button on a remote. Katniss recoils at the sudden sound of screaming before Coin turns the volume down. Masses of bodies swarm at each other like insects across the square of one of the districts, overturning the Peacekeepers that try to mow them down. Then the video switches to a shot of District 10—Katniss can tell by the banners—conspicuous for the absence of people and the presence of several smoldering buildings. Then another district whose Justice Building has been nearly overrun by residents.

"The Capitol isn't broadcasting any of this, of course, but they're monitoring it." Coin leans against the wall, looking at them and not at the images. "And we've got Beetee on our side, so we're monitoring it as well."

"What is it?" Prim asks, and Katniss turns to find reflections of the violence in her sister's glossy eyes.

It's Beetee who answers. "Uprisings," he says simply. "Some of them small, some of them—just displays of discontent, really. But consistent. More consistent than we've ever seen."

"This has happened before?"

"Oh, always," Coin says, her voice for the very first time growing excited. "Usually smaller, and maybe in one district every few years. Never on such a large scale. Districts 3, 5, 8, 10, 11, 12, all within the last few days. All because of you."

"Because of us?" Katniss shakes her head. "How can that be our fault?"

"Your little displays of solidarity got pretty popular," Coin remarks casually. "Not killing each other. Doesn't happen often in the Games, not past a certain point. Alliances always fall apart. Except for yours."

She inspects them all carefully, and Katniss stares back at her with rigid disbelief. Whatever Coin sees in them appears to please her. She slits her mouth back open to speak but is interrupted by the arrival of a bespectacled man. "President Coin—"

"I know," she interjects. "I'm coming." She glares at him pointedly until he leaves, and then she turns back to them. "I apologize, but I have other matters to attend to. Beetee and Wiress will answer some of your questions in a few minutes. At any rate, I suppose we'll be seeing a lot of each other from now on. I look forward to it."

Without waiting for a response, she sweeps from the room, taking her silent entourage with her,
and Beetee and Wiress trail after them. Katniss glances at Prim and the others and sees reflected in their expressions, for only a moment, the same exhausted wariness she feels. Something subtle in the way they look at Coin, something formal and distant in their bearing that fades as soon as she leaves the room. And with this confirmation of her sentiments toward this President Coin comes the realization that the games have not yet ended. Not that Katniss thought they had, not really. All of them, all of the remaining tributes, have been inexplicably removed from the certain death of the Hunger Games arena only to be cast into another game of some sort, but this one seems different in ways they don't yet understand. And they have no time to prepare for round two.

She has little time to process the thought, because the sudden absence of President Coin seems to have removed some damper that had thickened across the room, and it suddenly becomes apparent to both Katniss and Prim that—Games or not—they are alive and may have the opportunity to remain so for the foreseeable future.

"Oh, my God," Prim squeals suddenly, her eyes huge and round before she throws herself onto Katniss. "This is real. This is real." Bubbly and excited as Katniss has ever seen her, she pounces on Finch next, knocking the redhead back into the arm of her chair. Finch laughs, and Prim then turns to Rue and Peeta, catching them both simultaneously.

Katniss turns to Finch, who pulls her hair from her face and straightens her shirt. "Is this real?"

Katniss asks the girl in a low voice beneath Prim's chatter.

"It still seems too good to be true to me," Finch replies in a similar tone.

Katniss nods. "When did you get here?"

"A little while before you did. Beetee and Wiress brought me here, but President Coin had just started to introduce herself when you came in."

"Your arm's okay?"

Finch looks down in consideration, wrinkling the freckles of her nose. "I guess. It stings a little. They offered me medicine for it, but…" She trails off.

"Yeah," Katniss agrees, wondering at the dedicated medical center of this district. She's not sure she would have accepted any unknown medical procedures just yet, either. "What do you make of all this?"

"What, getting pulled out of certain death?" Finch rubs the back of her head. "Well, not that I'm not grateful to be here and all, but—"

"But they didn't just rescue us out of the goodness of their hearts," Peeta continues. He frowns at Finch.

"But they did rescue us. They're not bad people," Rue says quietly. Prim nods slowly at her side, both of them looking as stubborn as they ever have.

Katniss shoots Peeta and Finch an exasperated glance, which they respond to in amusement, and she is struck by the sudden thought that they—the five of them—are no longer allies. Or, rather, that they are, but they can allow themselves to be more than that. Katniss's trust of them in the arena had been born of necessity and tempered by constant suspicion as she doubted their every move and motive. Here, in the outside world, the survival of one of them no longer means the death of another.

Spurred on by a common goal to discover the motives of these rescuers from District 13, they can be teammates. They can be friends. Katniss, blinking in surprise, realizes that she can actually
"They did rescue us," Katniss says finally, shaking her head. "But what do we do now?"

"We don't know anything yet," Finch says. "They haven't told us anything, and I get the feeling they're trying to feed it to us real slow. But I think that for now, they aren't going to hurt us, far as we can tell. So we should keep a close eye on them. And on each other."

"And find out everything we can," Peeta says. "Whatever they're not telling us yet."

"Do you think they'll try to split us up?" Rue asks.

Katniss frowns. "I don't think so," she says slowly. "They seem to be after us to cooperate. If it looks like they're going to try to get us apart, just make a fuss over it. We'll see what they do then."

"Why do you think they want us?"

Before Katniss can make any guesses, Beetee and Wiress return to them. If the victors are surprised by their closeness, they don't show it. Here, with the other tributes at her side, Katniss comes to another sudden realization.

"You knew," she says accusingly to Beetee, who sinks wearily into a seat as though under the weight of her incoming diatribe. "You knew all along that we had to cooperate. That's why you sent me signs when we were in the Games!"

"Signs?" Prim echoes.

"The food!" Katniss growls. "Bread meant Peeta, and bread from District 5 and District 11 meant Finch and Rue. I went along with it because I thought you thought it would help me save Prim, but you just didn't want us to fight! Did you know all along that this was going to happen? Were you working with District 13 the whole time, from the very beginning?"

"I was," Beetee replies wearily. "But only because I have always been in contact with them. We've been waiting for years for something we could use to incite the people of the districts. Most of what we need is in place; District 13 has the facilities to create all the supplies we may need. But we've never had the backing of the people, and without that, we knew we would fail."

"Wait, you're—" Rue interrupts, and then she snaps her mouth shut apologetically before Beetee gestures for her to continue. "You're talking about a real battle. Like a war. You're talking about taking down President Snow?"

"If we can," Beetee says, and he lets that settle in for a moment, lets all of them process just how far this idea reaches, and then he continues his story. "So. We needed backing. That's where you come in, Katniss. I told Coin about you from the moment you showed up on my doorstep. Like I told you once, part of me never thought you'd actually do it, but there you were all of a sudden, and I realized you might be exactly what we needed: a sign of rebellion against the Capitol, but not an overt one. Nothing that could really be struck down or extinguished. You were only protecting your sister, and that would gain you too much compassion for the audience for the Capitol to do anything to harm you. But the sympathetic story would also make you a focal point so that no one could avoid noticing the fact that you twisted the rules. Nothing was broken, of course, but it's obvious that this isn't how the regulations were meant to be taken.

"And before you even got into the arena, you were causing a stir. Someone who had killed for her sister in the past and would do it again, a favorite to win. And of course, they played up the discussion of your innocence, Prim, but that normally would have just made for a good story in
"Until the two of you started fighting for each other and forming a strong alliance. Every time you thought about ending it and didn't, the unrest grew throughout the districts. 'If they're not going to kill each other, the Capitol shouldn't kill them,' people said. All of you deciding to stay with Prim after her injury. Your fight against the Careers, all joined together. Finch returning to the fight after Katniss told her to run. Rue, saving you from the tracker jackers. Prim killing Thresh for Katniss; Katniss killing the Careers for Prim. Peeta comforting Rue and Prim to distract them from Katniss leaving. Finch packing a bag one night and then unpacking it once she decided to stay after all—though I suppose none of you knew about that."

They hadn't. Finch's face is as bright as her hair. "It was in the beginning. You looked like you were going to kill me," Finch grumbles to Katniss, who grins in spite of herself.

"All of that built it up," Beetee continues. "But it was the last day when people started going crazy. When you threw your weapons into the fire. The districts exploded with people calling an end to the Games. Some of the Capitol citizens were even upset about it. And that was all Coin really needed. She's got agents sprinkled throughout all of the districts, and she's been spreading whispers throughout the district about a possible rebellion. Her agents stirred some of it up further, but not much needed to be done. People are incensed still, and the Peacemakers trying to crush them just makes them fight harder this time. Especially once the broadcast ended while you were all still alive as a team, climbing out of the flood together."

He finishes his story, watching their faces. Peeta, frowning, voices a thought Katniss hadn't considered. "Why save us, then?" he asks. "Wouldn't it be better for her if we were dead? She could point at what the Capitol did and say, 'Look how they treat us.'"

Beetee smiles. "That's one way of doing it. And Coin might have…" he hesitates, shaking his head. "I don't know. But Wiress and I thought of another. Taking you out of the Games—which have played out, uninterrupted, for seventy-four years—is one of the biggest acts of rebellion we could create. People are still stunned, by all accounts. The Capitol managed to stop the footage from broadcasting before it got too far, but they still showed a foreign hovercraft taking all of you up. People know you're free. It won't be long now before they wonder where you are and who took you."

A sinking feeling has begun to pool in the pit of Katniss's stomach. "But that's not all, is it? That's why she wants us to cooperate. That's why she kept us alive. She wants us to help her with this rebellion." After a moment, Katniss corrects herself. "You want us to help us with this rebellion."

Beetee nods. "That's why you were rescued."

"What do you want us for?" Katniss asks, feeling strangely betrayed.

He grimaces apologetically, dark eyes earnest as though willing her to understand. "We have work for you to do."

Later, Prim finds Katniss leaning against the railing outside of their private compartment.

The entirety of District 13 is underground, Katniss has discovered. Thinking that they have lied to her on this account, Katniss sneaks away at dinner, telling Prim to stay put at the table with Finch and Peeta and Rue. She climbs every flight of stairs she can find, the whole world dark and sterile and quiet, but there's no escape hatch she can find. She has the feeling of being watched wherever she goes, and as little as she knows Coin, Katniss wouldn't put it past the president to have the
entire district under surveillance. Still, if anyone notices Katniss's wanderings, no one ever shows up to usher her back into place, and for that she's grateful.

Eventually, she sinks down onto a metal stair and puts her head in her hands, only partly lost. She feels confident that she knows the direction of the mess hall, but it will take her some time to retrace her steps.

Even with all they've been told about their new roles—being filmed by camera crews to increase strength and morale, playing perfect little models like the other uniformed inhabitants of District 13—it's Cato who remains on Katniss's mind now.

She hadn't seen Marvel when he died. That had been a quick thing, there and gone, just as she'd planned. But Cato had suffered, and she'd made sure of it. She couldn't remember whether or not she'd meant it that way or if she'd only shot him in the gut once she saw his slimy face. But he'd suffered, and he'd suffered for ages. By her reckoning, over half an hour had passed between her shot and the cannon, though it's hard to say so with any degree of certainty.

And when she's done with Cato, she sees Finch and Rue and Peeta lying bloody on the ground beside him.

Katniss sits there for some time. Every few minutes, she hears someone walk around her on the stair, but no one stops. At least, not until a woman touches her shoulder gently to ask whether she is alright. The woman looks nothing like her mother except in the eyes. Katniss nods wordlessly and begins the long trek back to the mess hall.

Coin has promised that she will make every effort to bring her mother and Gale and his family to them. When it happens, Katniss will believe it.

They are guided to their private quarters by a uniformed young man who explains that she and Prim will share a compartment, if they don't mind, as space can be limited. Prim hops into the shower the moment they are alone, hoping to get the soapy smell from her skin, and Katniss feels trapped enough by the confined space that she steps out into the hall.

The railing blocks her from falling out into a huge, open sort of courtyard—or what would be a courtyard if there were any sunlight. Workers cross the area below on their way to stations and jobs and whatever it is their tattoos tell them to do. Coin has promised that it will all become clear to them as they spend more time in the district, but the thought of all this new information makes Katniss want to vomit.

Eventually, Prim rescues her from her thoughts. "You look like you swallowed a frog," she says suddenly, limping forward to lean against the railing as well. Her hair is still wet from her shower, and she wears an identical cotton shirt and pants to the one she'd worn earlier. Katniss looks at it in distaste. "I know," Prim remarks, flicking the hem of the shirt. "I changed, I promise. That's all the clothes they have for us, for now. I guess we'll get some kind of uniforms later."

Katniss hums.

Her sister follows her gaze down to the ground below, and they both spend a few moments watching the regimented ebb and flow of workers. Prim is close to her, so close that her arm is pressed against Katniss's and her warmth bleeds into Katniss's skin. "What happens now?" Prim murmurs suddenly, her voice lowered in spite of the general buzz of voices.

Katniss shoots her a sidelong glance. "We keep our eyes open. Learn what we can. Get out if we can."
"I want to help," Prim retorts. Katniss has been expecting this, so she feels resigned instead of disappointed.

"Of course you do."

"You don't."

"No. But it's probably the best thing to do right now. Maybe the safest."

"I don't think they'd hurt us if we refused."

Katniss thinks of the steely set to President Coin's eyes and half-doubts it, but she bites her tongue anyway. "I just don't like following... all these strategies. All of them are thinking of how to use us like we're soldiers or models or something, and I just wouldn't put it past them to get us hurt if it helped them."

Prim frowns. "That won't happen. Like you said, eyes open. And Peeta and the others are with us, too. We'll figure something out. We'll help them, but we'll do it safely. Our way."

"Why do you want to do this, Prim?"

Prim shifts her weight, putting her chin in her hands. "I don't think the Hunger Games and how the Capitol treats the districts—I don't think that's right. You don't think it is either," she adds knowingly, and then pauses. "And if Beetee and President Coin are right, this might be the best chance we have to make it so that this stuff never happens again, so no one has to do what we did. It's... we started all of this, Katniss. We didn't mean to, but we did. Maybe it's our job to finish it."

Whether it is or isn't their job doesn't matter anymore. Katniss can tell by the sure set to Prim's voice that she is decided on the matter. And Katniss will follow her sister to hell and back. She already has. "I wish you were a little less right all the time," she says instead.

Prim smiles and wraps her arms around Katniss, and Katniss has never been sure what it is about her sister, but when she holds Prim close, some of the meanest and most bitter parts of her seem to bleed away for a while. A whirl of emotions swim through her—regret at all she's done, happiness that they're free of the Games, worry because they aren't really free—and it takes several moments for Katniss to pull away.

"Why do you look like you swallowed a frog?" Prim asks Katniss once they are leaning on the rails again. She absentmindedly reaches out to touch the gash on Katniss's cheek, which the doctors here have said will leave a scar for some time.

Katniss debates offering Prim responses about her suspicions of President Coin, her wish to be out in the open forest somewhere, but Prim will see through these distractions at once.

She could tell her sister about Cato. Katniss has the feeling that Prim already knows that Katniss went back for him, that his death was purely murder and not self-defense, but Katniss doubts she knows the full extent of it. Probably Prim will see it televised at some point—but then again, she might not unless she seeks it out. District 13 doesn't seem keen on displaying Capitol recaps on their televisions, and everyone they have come into contact with has been careful about what they say about the Games.

But Prim doesn't need to know what Katniss has done for her. Katniss doesn't think her sister really wants to know.

The rest of it is worse, but it's easier to say because Prim already knows the details. "I was just thinking about how the Games could have gone," she explains. Then she snorts and shakes her
head. "Actually, I can't stop thinking about it."

"You mean that we almost died there?"

Katniss nods. "Yeah, but...also the rest of it at the end. After the Careers were gone, when it was just us. I came really close, Prim. I really wanted to kill them, Rue and Peeta and Finch. I was afraid for me and I was more afraid for you."

"I know," Prim says, taking her hand. "It's okay."

"But the thing is," Katniss continues determinedly, "I really would have done it. Maybe I should have, because if Coin hadn't needed to save us, we all would have just died. Maybe we'd be together, but we all would have died. Instead of you getting out alive. And it's just, thinking like that—I just...I really would have done it."

"No, you wouldn't have."

"I only didn't because you were there. And you didn't want me to. And it's—I can't decide if it's better or worse, if I should have or shouldn't have, if I would have or wouldn't have. I thought about it so many times, how easy it would have been to just shoot them in their sleep. And maybe I should have, but now that we're here, I'm really glad I didn't."

The tears that have been threatening her all day begin welling up in her eyes, and she scrubs at them in anger and then presses the heels of her hands to her eyes.

"You wouldn't have," Prim repeats. "Even if I wasn't there. You wouldn't have done it."

Katniss laughs, but the sound comes out oddly cracked. "How would you know? Prim, I—I mean, you know what I've done. I've done other things. The poison, and inside of the Games, all the tributes I shot."

"That's different."

"That's not different. You don't even know—with Cato, Prim, I—" she bites her tongue.

"I don't care what you did to him," Prim hisses, gripping Katniss's forearms with surprising strength, almost digging her fingers into Katniss's skin. "It doesn't matter. Katniss, I know it wasn't...I know you're still upset about it. I think it hurts you more than if...but anyway, I need you to really listen. Because you wouldn't have hurt them."

Prim's blue eyes are so fierce and glint with such anger that Katniss is shocked out of crying.

"How do you know?" Katniss asks her eventually, her voice faltering.

"Because you're not that type of person. You already loved them by then," Prim says simply.

"Loved them?"

Prim smiles. "You do, you know."

Katniss shakes her head slowly, caught in the shock of it all. She thinks back to that moment, that final moment after Caesar Flickerman's announcement, when she had stared down the others half in determination and half in horror and dismay. It's hard to bring it all back. It's as though that Katniss was a wholly different person, someone familiar but removed, and that version of Katniss is too hard to read.
She can't work the answer out for herself, can't work out all of the variables. But Katniss trusts Prim.

Because in the end, Prim has always known her better than she knows herself.

Wordlessly, she pulls her sister closer. Prim nods. "Good. I think it'll be...hard to just come away from this, and everything's so different now, and everyone expects things from us. We can't just forget what happened in the Games, but we're still alive, and we're still together. And that's all we need." She says the last part as though she's begging.

Katniss wipes her eyes, glancing around quickly to be sure no one's watching. "You're right," she says. She doesn't smile, but it's a near thing.

Long moments pass. A uniformed worker walks across the catwalk behind them with only a glance in their direction. From somewhere below, there's a flurry of movement in response to an order. Above them, the fluorescent lights flicker. Eventually, Katniss takes a breath and adds, "Okay. Fine. You and me are going to make some changes around here."

Prim's expression is nothing less than triumphant. "Exactly. We have work to do."

The two of them stand at the railing for some time, Prim a solid and steady warmth against Katniss's side, until the hour of curfew approaches and the floors begin to empty. Gently, Katniss pulls her sister into their compartment, shutting the door behind her to block out the last sounds of footsteps as the citizens outside retreat to their burrows. The Everdeens clamber into one of the twin beds by unspoken agreement, pulling the blanket up to their chins.

Long after her sister has fallen silent, Katniss listens to the sounds of Prim's breathing, her hand resting lightly on Prim's neck so that the steady drum of her sister's heartbeat reverberates faintly through Katniss's skin. It lulls Katniss to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Soaaaao I couldn't actually kill them all. I tried really hard, but they were too clever. Sue me.

As a whole, this story is really about Katniss and Prim and the choices they made, and I think that leaving it off here is the only possible ending to the story I wanted to tell. And so although the end is left sort of open, I'm not currently planning to write a sequel.

Anyway, all of this came about when I watched the movies again and got the impression that Beetee, Haymitch, Wiress, etc. could easily have been prepared to move to District 13 in secret from day one. And I think if Katniss had been more rebellious outright, if they'd known they could use her from the start, District 13 might have been much quicker to make a move and save her. In the books, it's only after she wins that they realize her usefulness. So a part of this story came when I wondered, what if they'd known in advance, "This is a girl we can use?" Because then, ironically, the Katniss who comes to the Games thinking she's prepared to kill anyone and everyone becomes part of the unexpected alliance that changes everything—not without significant help from Prim, of course.
Thanks so much for reading along, and I hope you've enjoyed this as much as I've enjoyed writing it :-) If you've made it this far, let me know what you thought!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!