The 100th Games

by nerdhourariel

Summary

AU: The Victory Tour was successful and now, 25 years later, Katniss and Peeta must see their children through the 100th Games, a fourth Quarter Quell where Victor's children are pitted against each other.
The Quarter Quell: Announcement – Katniss

I crouch behind a fallen tree and watch as a deer walks through the snow. It’s small, too small to feed a decent amount of people, but I’ll still bring it to the Hob. They need it more than I do and anything will help. Especially during the winter. The deer nibbles on a bush as I ready an arrow, hesitating to pull back the string.

Twenty five years and I still can’t kill something as easily as I used to. It isn’t just my Games, my memories of the arena; it’s all the tributes I’ve lost since then. Seeing them die, being unable to save them or even to help after they were reaped.

I understand Haymitch a lot more than I used to. Why he drinks, why he doesn’t bother to get to know them and I would have given up long ago too if it weren’t for Peeta. Every year he tries. Every year he coaches them as best as he can. He shows them how to camouflage, how to win the crowd, but they never make it out.

I give them survival tips and sometimes it’s useful, sometimes I think they might win. But I haven’t seen it happen yet. These kids grow up around me. I watch them get older every day, take tesserae, put their names in more times. And then I hear them called and I lead them to their deaths.

I can’t beat the Capitol and I can’t change the Games. I can’t help them when they go to the arena. Even as Peeta and I try to get them sponsors, nothing works. Nothing changes.

Our victory tour saw to that. And a year later, amongst the 75th games and the third Quarter Quell so did our marriage. We had to mentor adults our first year. I remember the announcement clearly.

“For this, our third Quarter Quell, to remind any remaining rebels that everyone suffers during war, this year’s tributes will be reaped from the adult citizens of Panem.”

I didn’t really know either one personally. Gale did. The male tribute, Sodor, worked in the mines with him. I see Sodor’s son around the Hob some days, but I can’t look him in the eyes. Just like I can’t look at any of the other families I’ve failed because I couldn’t save their children. Peeta talks to them, sends them food and I leave them rabbits or squirrels I catch, but it doesn’t make up for their losses. Nothing will ever fix it.

Rumors of rebellion died with the birth of our daughter and Snow stopped watching us when our son came along. I had never wanted children, not in this world, not when I saw them die all the time. Not when I knew they would be taken from me for the Games. But after about six years of marriage, the Capitol began to question it. Other districts questioned the lie again, started fighting back once more in the name of the Mockingjay. And a fresh white rose addressed to me with congratulations told me more than any threatening words would.

Peeta and I healed each other after our Games. Both plagued with nightmares, both stuck under the Capitol’s rule. While I wanted to forget, to move on, to pretend when I had to, he was honest, sincere, forcing himself to relive it so he could change things when the time came. He kept me whole when Snow threatened our family, even more so when my nightmares could no longer be contained.

The marriage may have started out as a lie, but my love for him is not. He understands a part of me that only people who have been in the arena can. But it goes deeper than that. He knows what
to say when the nightmares come, the right food to bring me, all the secrets and fears that I don’t want to share with others or can’t. He knows me better than anyone else.

So when the letter came. When our future was written for us, he knew what to say, how to lie to the Capitol.

“We can pretend we can’t have them. That there’s something wrong with me,” he said, his hand gripping mine, the other holding the letter.

I was the one who decided it was better to let it happen. Maybe some small part of me wanted them. Maybe I knew there was no fighting Snow. He wouldn’t buy it and our families would be at risk. I’m not really sure if it was an act of giving up or bravery to go through with it. There are days where I question if it was both or neither. But I do not question how much Peeta loves them. Maybe even more than me.

I fear for them every day, but the worst day is always the reaping. Waiting to hear their names, waiting to know if I will have to make sure they survive the arena. And that fear forced me to make sure they knew how to hunt, how to find water, and the right plants to eat or heal. Even if I am sure they will never starve, I can’t guarantee that they will not go into the arena. And that fear has lessened as they have aged, but it will not truly go away until they are both out of that bowl of names.

I know I will protect them with my last breath. I don’t know how much of me loves them. I don’t really think I know how to love them when I never wanted them. But I try. I make sure they never go hungry, that they are strong enough for this world. Peeta does the rest. He teaches them how to be kind, how to face the cameras, and the entirety of Panem, who knew their names before they did.

I tried to teach Basil to hunt. But after years of him stomping through the woods, grumbling and huffing about not wanting to kill anything or even see it, I let him stay home. He’s fourteen now. He likes to paint with Peeta or run around with other children in town. We let him, because it’s normal, because he should be allowed to have a childhood. They both should. Ivy is another story however.

She wants to be around me, to learn what I have to teach her and she soaks it all up, understanding it easily. It didn’t take her long to learn how to shoot a bow and she’s quiet, resourceful.

“Just like you,” Peeta said once when I told him about our first walk in the woods. There’s a feeling I get when I think about those words. About our features mixed on her. My dark hair. His blue eyes. Its warmth and a sinking feeling. Pride and guilt.

I’ve passed on the legacy of those berries and the girl on fire, but she never talks about it. Or about the questions she gets every year when the cameras arrive and the Capitol wants a glimpse of her. They always make comparisons to me, even worse now that she’s seventeen. They constantly wonder if they should expect her to volunteer for the arena or wear one of Cinna’s dresses. He’s always sent some, but she refuses them. I don’t blame her. I never ask her about all of it. I should ask, but I doubt she’d tell me anyway. We’re similar in our stubbornness and our inability to talk about how or what we feel.

Bas doesn’t get the same amount of attention. He has my grey eyes. Peeta’s golden hair which he cuts short to avoid the curls, but the Capitol doesn’t react to him like they react to Ivy. Maybe because she’s the first. Maybe because his attitude is too close to mine. Ivy can play it off. She has a way about her that echoes Peeta in interviews, but Bas gives short one word responses with nothing more. They don’t seem to enjoy making comparisons to myself or Peeta with him.
The deer I’ve been watching, readying to kill, continues eating, unaware of the threat from three feet away. I take a breath, aim and pull back the bowstring. It’s down with an arrow through the eye before I can even think to take the shot.

Ivy steps into my line of sight from another tree. She throws the bow over her shoulder before tying her tangled hair up in a knot. She avoids wearing it in a braid and has ever since she was old enough to do her hair herself. It’s only once a year that she wears it that way. And only because Effie insists. Prim is always the one to do it for her. She refuses to braid it herself or allow me to do it.

She looks to my hiding place as I step out from cover.

“Shouldn’t you be in school?” I ask, not because I really care that she isn’t there, I always thought it was useless. I’m curious as to how she got all the way out here, in an area that I don’t normally go, without anyone else noticing.

“Early day. Quarter Quell announcement and all,” She shrugs and I remember why I went further than usual. The 100th Games. The next announcement. How many more tributes will I lose this year? What other atrocities will I have to try to guide them through? I didn’t want to think about it and I didn’t want anyone to find me while I avoided it.

“How did you find me out here?” I look around but see no sign that I left. No trail she could have followed.

“Tracked you.”

“That’s impossible. Even with the snow, I was very careful.”

“You broke some branches about a mile back.” She smirks. She is a much better tracker than I could ever be. It would scare me if it wasn’t so useful when we are looking for game.

Gale used to hunt with us and taught her a few things a while back. Before the shaft he was working in collapsed, burying him and a group of five beneath coal and rubble. I miss him. I see him in the faces of his brothers, who now work in the mines themselves. I see Rory more since he and Prim have been married for five years. They are expecting their first child in a few months and I see how happy they are during this time. I wonder if I ever looked happy during my pregnancy. I can’t imagine that I did. Prim, however, seems to think so.

“Let’s get this to the Hob before the announcement,” I tell her with a sigh. She nods before she pulls the arrow from the deer. I make sure to add, “Good shot,” which makes her smile. I’ve learned to spot the difference between the fake smile she puts on for the cameras and the genuine one usually reserved for Peeta, myself, or Bas. Prim will get them sometimes and so will my mother, but Ivy is very guarded. She’s only herself out here with me in our woods, where we are safe and the Capitol cannot watch us.

We are silent until we reach the fence and she asks, “What do you think it’ll be?”

I shrug, “Nothing good.”

“Do you think things could change?” She asks quietly. I have to take a second to realize what she’s truly asking and how to answer.

“I think it would mean a lot of death and destruction.” I remember a time when Snow came to visit me. When he threatened me and told me about war. I don’t want a war. I want it even less than I did that first time it was a possibility. I don’t want to see my children faced with it.
“But if it meant the Games could end, would you still try?”

“Where is this coming from?”

“I don’t know. It’s almost my last year. But Bas’ll still be in the bowl for four more. And I mean it’s not like I don’t know the kids who get reaped. I just, I don’t want to see it anymore.” She shrugs and there’s a waver when she says anymore like there’s something else she doesn’t want to see. Like she isn’t sure what she’s trying to say.

I know what it is. My nightmares. My screams when I wake in the middle of the night. There are times when I relive Rue’s death, the time I shot Marvel, but there are worse ones, ones that haven’t even happened. Times I’ve seen her die in the arena. Bas die in the arena. And I wake shaking with a need to find them, make sure they are real and safe.

Bas, like Peeta, comforts me without words. A hug and he’s back to sleep, letting me watch over him. Ivy is different. She’s frightened of this version of me. The damaged victor. She should be.

On the nights when this happens, she’s usually left her room; the one across from Peeta’s and mine. When I find her, she’s sitting outside on the steps, unable to sleep because of my screaming, and shaking worse than I am.

I am afraid to hold her in these times. Afraid that she will recoil and that fear will shatter whatever small relationship I have with her. I can’t love her, but I will not let her believe that she is unloved. Peeta is the one who has to coax her back in the house, who brings her to her room and gets her to sleep. He is a better father than I am a mother. They need him more than they need me. I have taught them how to stay alive and Peeta has made sure they are loved. That’s all we can do.

“I don’t want to see it either. But there’s nothing we can do.”

She looks at me with an anger I have never seen. There’s a spark in her eyes that’s been gone from my own for years now. The very fire that I’ve tried to put out has been reborn in my daughter. I try to think when I missed the moment that it started. Or maybe it’s always been there and I couldn’t see it. Embers waiting to ignite when given the chance.

“You can. You did. And you can do it again,” She speaks with pride and I’m taken aback by it. There’s nothing about me she should be proud of. I have killed people. I have been responsible for letting children die. I have let the Capitol control me. I’m ready to tell her the same thing I’ve always said, the same words I’ve been repeating to Panem for years. How the Capitol and President Snow are good for Panem, how I was so in love with her father that it wasn’t defiance. It was just the actions of two star crossed lovers who couldn’t live without each other. Nothing more.

Then, she whispers, “You’re the Mockingjay,” and I forget the script that I’ve been following for twenty five years.

“Where did you hear that?” I look around, afraid of being overheard even though no one is near the fence and we are miles from town.

“No one ever really says it, not loud enough to hear anyway. But I’ve seen it. In dad’s paintings. When we take the train to the Capitol, sometimes, it’s in the other districts, and it’s new. It’s never gone away. You could change things. Even now.” Her eyes are wide with hope and I feel the weight of Snow’s gaze all the way from the Capitol. I know it’s impossible out here, but I feel it. I fear it.

“We are done talking about this. Don’t ever say that word again.” I pick up the deer and head
through the fence, too afraid to look back and see the light in her eyes die from my cold words. There is no revolution. There is no Mockingjay. There is no hope. It all goes on and on. The Games. The victors. The Capitol ruling over the twelve districts. There is only making it through the year alive. She needs to live with that, like I do. Like we all do.

We sell the deer. Ivy is silent for the walk home. Only the sound of her boots through the slush remind me she’s there.

When we get home to our house in the Victor’s Village, Peeta has dinner ready and Haymitch is waiting, drink in hand, readying for the announcement. His mind is still as sharp as ever when he’s sober, but his body has gotten slower after years of drinking. Bas returns home from The Seam covered in dirt and coal dust. I make him get himself cleaned up before we all sit down to eat.

“How was hunting?” Peeta asks, glancing from me to Ivy. His blonde hair has streaks of grey in it now and the same lines surround his eyes as they do mine. When he laughs he looks the same as he did when he was sixteen, but as the games get closer, we both show our age and the weathered lines brought on by twenty four years of dead tributes.

“I shot a deer,” Ivy says as she bites into a piece of bread. Peeta looks at me for confirmation and I nod. He ruffles Ivy’s hair, impressed, and she brushes him away.

“I would have loved to see the look on your face when the kid brought it down.” Haymitch smiles as he swallows some of his stew.

It’s times like these that I can forget about the world I live in. That I can pretend that my family is safe, and that there are no Games. Sometimes I wonder if that world could exist, but then I remember that it can’t. Not without a cost and a war that I am unwilling to be a leader or a symbol for.

Bas looks at me, “I drew this today.” He hands me a folded piece of paper and I open it. It’s a charcoal drawing of Prim and Rory and I smile. “Dad says he’s going to put it on a cake for their anniversary. Or when the baby is born, whichever is first, we can’t remember.”

“The baby, I think. That’s very good, I’m sure they’ll love it. Can I keep this?”

He nods, but before I can fold it back up, Peeta stands, gravely serious and I understand without him saying.

It’s time for the announcement.

We wait as the Panem anthem plays, its symbol bright against the triumphant horns. Peeta and I stand beside each other, unable to sit due to our anxiety. Haymitch is already halfway through his flask and lounging on a chair. Ivy and Bas sit on our couch, silent and waiting, like all of us, for what horrors this year’s games will bring.

The 100th Games. It’ll be bigger than all the others. I can feel it.

President Snow is wheeled out by his granddaughter, in her thirties now and just as cold as him. He manages to stand, shaky, but making a point to show his strength. Even as he approaches ninety two, his health has never been a public concern. I’m sure the Capitol has some medicine keeping it that way, but I hope one day it’s no longer useful. Although I’m not sure how much relief I would have when another President would just take his place.

Snow is handed a yellow envelope marked 100. And he speaks about the previous Quell and the
Games with a smile. I recall the memories of my tributes dying as Capitol citizens cheer at the appropriate times. I remember Sodor’s face as he was drowned. The girl last year, Briony, only thirteen, who was killed during the bloodbath. On and on the memories continue until Peeta grabs my hand and silences them. I do my best to focus on the floor until Snow reaches the point in his speech that we’ve been waiting for.

“This year we honor our fourth Quarter Quell.” He opens the envelope and my heart begins to pound. He reads the card to himself before looking into the camera with a satisfied smile. And I realize it then, what that smile means. What Ivy’s words mean. She’s not the only one who whispers about the Mockingjay. Who have hope as to what it could mean. Even as I try to forget and make others do the same. Snow never did. Nor has he forgiven. He’s merely been very patient.

And this is his moment of revenge.

“On the one-hundredth anniversary, as a reminder to the rebels that even the strongest among them can’t always protect those they love from their past actions, this year’s male and female tributes will be reaped from the children of previous victors.”

The citizens of the Capitol begin cheering wildly in a roar that echoes through the walls of the house. I can barely hear them over the sound of the blood pumping in my ears. I feel like a weight is crashing down on me, a weight that I’ve been waiting for but forgot was there.

I stare, stunned, at the dark screen as I hear footsteps leave the room in a rush. A door slams and I hear a rage filled scream from up above me as something comes crashing to the floor.

I can feel an anger I’ve pushed down rising. A fire burning in my stomach, reaching my heart where my fear has encased it in ice, melting it and burning away any last remnant of complacency I had forced myself into. I want him to pay. I will make him pay.

Peeta grabs my arm, pulling me back into the room, the reality of everything around me and my anger recedes. Replaced with despair, and a heartbreak that I can’t fully comprehend. I turn around and face Ivy, sitting stunned on the couch, staring at the floor, putting it all together.

I reach out for her, my hands shaking, but she stands too quickly for me to reach her. She’s upstairs and in her room before I drop my arm and turn to Peeta.

“This can’t be happening,” He says, voice fragile, about to fall to pieces.

Haymitch stands, dropping his flask in the process, “But it is happening. And denying it isn’t gonna help them now.”

“Haymitch, what do we do?” Peeta asks, as I try to think if there’s anyway, by some unimaginable miracle, Haymitch could have fathered some kid somewhere, but I know he didn’t. And I know what I have to do come reaping day.

“Make sure they survive.”

“Both of them can’t win, how do we—“

“We do what we’re supposed to do. We mentor them and make sure they live the longest,” Something in Haymitch’s words eases Peeta’s tension but is lost on me. Haymitch hands me a bottle and I don’t care enough to question him further. I feel like I should be in mourning, but I know I’ve been expecting something like this for so long that I can’t feel anything. How do I mentor them? How do see them through the arena when I haven’t managed to do it a single time before?
I take a drink. I can’t think about the announcement right now, the Games or what’s going to happen come reaping day. I can’t think about the fact that both of my children are going into the arena. And if I’m lucky one of them will come out.

“There are thieves, who rob us blind,
and kings, who kill us fine,
but steady, the rights and the wrongs
invade us, as innocent song.
I'm not ready, I'm not ready
For the weight of us, for the weight of us, for the weight of all of us.”

– The Weight of Us by Sanders Bohlke
The Quarter Quell: Plans - Ivy

Chapter Summary

Ivy faces the fact that she will be going into the Games and begins to plan.

The Quarter Quell: Plans – Ivy

I storm into my room. Pacing, desperately trying to wake myself up from whatever nightmare I’m in. It can’t be happening. Why is it happening?

I slide against the door and sit on the ground trying to breathe. It feels like my lungs are collapsing under a siege of water and I can’t force any oxygen in. I’m drowning. I’m dying.

No. Not yet. Not until the arena.

The arena.

A chill falls over me as I think about the one thing that’s been my greatest fear. My father’s paintings of it. My mother’s screaming through the night. It’s the only constant throughout my seventeen years of life. Every year watching new tributes go through it, knowing full well what the winner comes out with. It’s not riches, it’s not victory. Its memories of bloodshed and violence you can’t escape. It’s damage, not glory. And being forever stuck underneath the Capitol’s watchful gaze and obsession.

Maybe I’ve always been heading to this moment. An arena waiting for me. A family legacy I can’t escape.

But I don’t want to escape it. I never have. Even with the Capitol dragging my brother and me out every year for interviews. My father has tried and failed to keep the attention away from us, away from me, but the Capitol doesn’t care about the star crossed lovers from Twelve as much as they care about the children of those tributes. And it’s clear now with the Quell announcement how much they value those children’s lives.

I am angry now. Angrier than I have ever been. They want to invade our lives, know all the details, claim to love us, and then they cheer when our lives are threatened. When they know only one of us is going to live through it. And they celebrate it without mercy. Like it’s some kind of honor. But I know there is no honor in this. Not in victory. Not in death. And still they cheer.

My breath evens out the more I think about it. The drowning feeling stops and I want to burn the Capitol to the ground. I want to, but I can’t. I am trapped in this Hell. Even the whispers of hope, of a time before I was born, when revolution was a possibility, won’t save me now. I may be the daughter of the Mockingjay, but the Mockingjay was caged and the fire inside her died.

And she took the people of Panem with her.

No. She didn’t do it. The Capitol did it. Snow did it. Snow destroyed her.

I’ve seen highlights from my parents’ Games. I’ve seen the spark and the fire in her. Not just in the footage of her time in the arena. From her early interviews, her reaping, the moment she
volunteered for my Aunt Prim, and the moment when she was willing to sacrifice it all to prevent herself from killing my father. The moment she defied the Capitol.

But it isn’t just in all of this, images of the past, that I see it. I’ve seen it when we are out in the woods. Like the further we get away from everything, the more she is allowed to live again. It’s the times in the woods that I feel like she can breathe and that she truly loves me. But it’s gone when we cross the fence.

Any defiance she had has been replaced by a scared woman willing to obey rather than fight, all to prevent war. To prevent death. Our deaths. But it’s coming anyway. So what was the point?

My father still paints her as she once was, as she should be. Her dress on fire. The little girl, Rue, who died in the arena. The one she doesn’t talk about. The one she buried. I’ve heard the story from my father, who she told long ago, back when the memories were fresh and the world was rallied behind her. I don’t know how she didn’t see it, how she didn’t want it as badly as they did. To be free.

Maybe it’s all a lie. Maybe there is no freedom. Maybe I should just accept my fate.

Not just my fate. My brother’s too. And that is something I can’t allow to happen.

I can’t ask my mother about the Mockingjay. I can’t ask why she didn’t fight. Or why she was so afraid of it. I can’t free her from her cage. I can’t change the Quarter Quell announcement. Or fight the Capitol.

I can save my brother. That I can do. And I will.

I don’t understand why I’m not scared. There’s a confidence that I have about saving Bas, like it’s not even a possibility that I will fail. And then I realize why.

I’ve been preparing for the Games my entire life. The trips in the woods. Hunting with my mother. Interviews with the Capitol. I know how to handle everything they will throw at me. I’ve spent my life with mentors. And I’m not just another tribute going into the arena. I’m a career.

Bas is not. And my parents will not choose between us, even though they should focus on him. So I have to decide for them. And I know who to share this decision with.

But I can’t do that now. Not with the announcement so fresh and the reaping a few weeks away. I will have to plan what to say as I so often do. But this isn’t like speaking to Caesar Flickerman and the Capitil audience. This is family or as good as. And the planning is only to soften the blow of announcing that I have no intention of making it out of this arena alive. But I will ensure that my parents do not lose both of their children. I have to.

I hear someone walk down the hall, but I know they will not knock on my door. Everyone in this house needs time away to cope with the announcement. And falling onto each other and crying isn’t going to do anyone any favors. Or so I think.

That is until I actually hear someone crying. It’s faint and muffled, like they are trying to hide it, but so full of grief that it is impossible to do so.

I’m quiet as I open the door and I can hear the sobs easier now. They originate across from me, from the closed door of my parents’ room. And that’s when I recognize who it is. My mother. But it’s not just her. Every now and then there’s another faint sniffle, of someone doing their very best to hold it together while the other lets out their grief. I get closer to the door and listen between the broken sobs as they speak.
“I did everything he asked. I stopped the rebellion. I had them because he told us to,” my mother breaks, and I look at the floor. This news doesn’t come as surprising to me. She’s always kept us at a distance and it’s something I’ve long suspected. But it still stings to know that I wasn’t born out of love, but out of survival, and a need to stifle rebellion. It doesn’t stop me from continuing to listen.

“Maybe that’s why he wanted us to,” my father says bitterly. And the sobs stop. I can feel the same anger within me rising in my mother. And with it a hope follows. Like I’m witnessing a resurrection of someone long dead.

“He couldn’t have known we would have both.”

“But we did. And two is a bonus.”

“They are not a bonus,” she whispers it so suddenly, so viciously, that I feel guilty for wondering if she loves me. But it’s always a back and forth and I know as quickly as that guilt comes, I will go back to wondering and feel justified in it.

“They are for him.”

“We can’t talk about this. He’ll…”

“What? Throw them in the arena?” I can hear my father’s smirk from here. And the thought of the arena seems to pull her back together.

“Peeta, how are we going to save them?”

There is silence after the question and I know there is no answer he or my mother could come up with that would seem good enough. Even if there was, I don’t want to hear it.

I return to my room, falling onto my bed without changing. I just want to shut it all out for a few hours. Be no one as I close my eyes. Reborn when they open. Ready to fight. Ready to save my brother.

There may be a ticking clock on my life, but until it finishes counting down, I’ve still got time. Time to plan, time to mourn, and time to enjoy breathing, for however long that is.

The next day I have school, but I see even less reason to be there now than I ever did before. So I stop going. I don’t think either of my parents or anyone at school has a problem with it. And if they do, they don’t say anything. Not when they know that in a few weeks I’m going into the arena.

Bas still goes through the motions. I think he likes pretending and everyone in my family lets him. There’s no talk about the Games yet, no discussion of the Quell announcement. And I know there won’t be. Not for another week or two, when my father tries to bring up strategies or things we should be thinking about. My mother will stay silent. As will I. As will Bas. We won’t talk about it until we are on the train. Until we have to and there’s no escaping it.

With Bas at school, my mother out hunting, and my father at the bakery, I am left to my own devices. Normally I would want to go with my mother, but today, I feel like being alone. I won’t have this time to myself much longer. So I’m learning to value it.

I walk around Twelve for a bit, through the Seam, the Hob. I don’t really have a set destination. Soon it will be time to head back to the Victor’s Village where I will see Haymitch and tell him which of the Mellark children he has to save.
I am still trying to prepare what I will say as I wander and only pay half attention to where I walk. But then I begin to feel eyes on me and force myself to look around.

Everyone I pass, they all look at me, their faces a mixture of sympathy and mourning. I can’t help but imagine this as my funeral. And when they pull my body out of the arena, when it’s brought back to Twelve to be buried, this is how they will look at my family.

I nod to them because I know, just as they know, that I’m not coming home once I leave. They don’t want me in the arena any more than I want to be there, but this is the way of the world, and until it changes I have to keep my head up. I have to be confident, even when I feel like I’m about to break. Make the other tributes see me as the threat. Put all eyes on me and keep them away from Bas. It’s only a matter of surviving long enough for him to win. And I will.

I am still trying to figure out what to say to Haymitch. He probably already knows. He’s always had things figured out before everyone else. And he seems to be the only one who has never questioned whether my mother loves my father. Or me and my brother. I have never asked him why. And some days I think I will, but then I think I don’t really want the answer.

I get tired of the looks and head back earlier than intended.

I pass the bakery on my way but don’t stop inside. I’m not fond of my grandmother and my father rarely makes me see her, but I do usually like to say hello to my father and get a cookie when he can spare one. But it’s after the announcement and everything is different.

I can’t do things as I once did. I can’t be little Ivy, the girl who used to sneak sweets and who would run around in the woods until the sun set. I have to be Ivy Mellark, tribute from Twelve, a calculating career. And I’m afraid that if I stop, if I try to pretend like my brother, it will only hurt that much worse when my name is called. It will only remind my parents that I’m going to die. I can’t hide it in my eyes. They have always been able to read me better than anyone and they will know. They will see that I have a plan and they will ask me about it. And I will not lie. But they are not ready for the truth yet, so I can’t stop. I can’t pretend.

I enter the Victor’s Village feeling the weight on my back. The weight of keeping my brother alive. The weight of killing others. The weight of changing myself for it all to work. They are all self-inflicted. Things that I have to carry, that I am making myself carry. Only one is heavier than the rest.

I walk into Haymitch’s house as I’ve done before in the past. Albeit, it was with one of my parents and I’m fairly certain they had me wait by the door, but still, times have changed and I need to do things now that I haven’t done before.

He’s sitting in an overstuffed chair, feet up, drink in hand as per usual. I don’t see the same glassy expression that normally accompanies his day of drinking. When he speaks, he’s clear, lucid, and I realize what’s in his glass is nothing more than water.

He indicates a chair across from him. I take a seat. It’s clear he’s been expecting me.

“Are you coming to ask me if I have some bastard running around somewhere?” Haymitch quips but I shake my head. He continues, “I take it you’ve been thinking about what to do with your brother.”

“He needs to be the one you focus on. He needs to stay alive,” I’m surprisingly steady. Haymitch smiles.

“I was really hoping you weren’t gonna say that. Why can’t you just be selfish and ask me to save
you? No, you gotta be like her. Big damn hero.”

“I’m not trying to be a hero. I just don’t want him to die.”

Haymitch claps his hands together, “There it is again. You know you keep up all these similarity
things and the Capitol’s gonna eat it up.”

Then I look at him and I’m cold, “Good.”

He seems to have thought of something I haven’t yet come to the conclusion of. His next question
is calculating, and I’m not entirely sure of his meaning.

“You looking to make a statement?”

“If it keeps them away from Bas, yes.”

“I’m not talking about Bas, I’m talking about you. What do you want them to see?”

I shrug. I’m not entirely sure what I want. I don’t want them to look at me like I’m scared. Like I
can’t win. I want them to see me like my mother before. Like the girl on fire. I want all of them to
see it. And I want them to be afraid of me. I feel the anger again. Anger at the Capitol, at President
Snow. I want to remind them what they tried to kill. I want my mother to see it, to become what
she should have always been. The Mockingjay. I want her to believe, to hope, again. And I want
these Games to change things.

I know I shouldn’t be thinking about sending a message. About restarting the very rebellion my
parents stopped. I should be thinking about saving Bas. About the weeks to come. The Games.
My arena. My grave waiting for me.

I finally answer my voice strong, angry, “A threat.”

He laughs as he dumps the water. Pours some alcohol in the glass and tips it to me. He swallows it
all down with one gulp and pours some more.

“Your parents aren’t gonna let me choose between you two. Your mother will shoot me, and your
father? Well, he’ll just talk me to death. Or maybe punch me. Hard to tell with him sometimes.
Maybe you should break the news to them.” Haymitch smiles but it doesn’t reach his eyes and I’m
reminded more than I should be of my limited time.

“They won’t understand.”

“You’d be surprised what they would understand.”

“In any case, its best they don’t know until it’s too late.”

“And when they find out?”

“I’ll be happy I’m in the arena.”

He fights laughter and swallows another glass before pouring more, “What’s your strategy?”

“I’ll figure it out when I’m in there. I can handle it.”

“You might think you’re prepared and maybe you are, but let me tell you, you aren’t the only one
whose been raised by a victor. And One, Two and Four are careers raised by careers.”

I swallow. I’ve been too caught up in my plans, forgetting the very words that brought me and
others like me here. I may be a career, I may have been raised by victors and mentors, but so has everyone else. And some might be more like Bas, who can’t kill or won’t, but others, the ones I had failed to consider, they will. And they will enjoy it just a bit too much. They will see this as a way to make their parents proud, a way to continue a family tradition. And they will work even harder to win for themselves than all the rest.

Haymitch smirks, “You didn’t think about them. Huh?”

My resolve tightens, I can’t give up, I just have to prepare for them, “Save Bas. Focus on getting him sponsors and anything he needs in the arena. And I’ll take care of as many tributes as I can.”

I stand, ready to leave, when Haymitch speaks again, “And what do I tell them when they ask why I’m not helping you?”

“You tell them this is my choice,” I start, hesitating on my last thought, finding the right way to say it. A way to make him fully realize what else needs to happen, the idea he’s given me, “And that they shouldn’t have forgotten the effect they can have.”

I’m out the door before he responds. I want to hurry home, hide away in my room once again but I’m greeted by my brother’s face as I leave. He seems just as annoyed to see me as I do to see him.

“What are you doing here?” I ask and he shrugs.

“Same thing as you apparently.”

I grab his arm, he might be stronger than me but I can still drag him around with ease. Sometimes I think he lets me, but then I remember that I punched him in the face once when we were kids and that he’s still afraid of me.

“You are not going to sacrifice yourself for me,” I grumble as we walk out the Victor’s Village. We can’t have this conversation in front of our parents and I can’t risk that my mother has returned early. So we head back towards town.

“And neither are you,” he argues. I let go of him. Frustrated.

“This isn’t about me.”

He continues, “I don’t need you to protect me. I’m not a weak little kid.”

“I know that. It’s just…you have to be the one who comes home, Bas.”

“And what about you? You want to die?” There’s a sharp anger in his question that accompanies a clenched fist and I’m stunned. These past two days have brought out something in him that makes him volatile and emotional. Just as they have made me cold and calculating. We are operating under new circumstances and it is bringing out the unexpected in us.

I hesitate and consider crafting a lie to convince him to let me go through with my plan. I decide to be honest. He can’t stop me anyway, “No. But they need you more than me.”

He laughs, “They need their kids not to die.”

“Well we can’t change that.”

He shrugs, “But we can prove a point.”

I stare at him. Has he come to the same conclusion as me? That we have a chance to do something
important. And I smile my first real smile since the announcement.

“What did you have in mind?” I ask my voice bright, full of possibility.

“What did you?” He returns with just as much enthusiasm.

“Make them remember us.”

He nods and then grabs my arm. I look around as he leads me towards the Seam. The houses here are smaller and the people much thinner than myself or Bas. But still, they don’t look at us with any jealousy. Why would they? They don’t want to be in the arena.

“How do you blame her?” I ask. Quietly, sullen, like I regret saying it the second it came into my head. It’s true. If she hadn’t given up. If she hadn’t let them get to her. Maybe we wouldn’t be here now facing death and all its agents intending to put us in the ground.

I don’t know what the Capitol is truly capable of. I only know my limited time in its spotlight and that it will do anything to keep the Districts in line. I just don’t know all the lengths they will go to. But it doesn’t stop me from wanting a different world. Haymitch has given me something invaluable. I can see a way out for everyone and everything, or at least, I want to see it.

Bas looks at me, and I can hear the gears turning.

“She let them kill her,” he says as if realizing it, “but I think she was trying to save everyone and did what she thought was best. And that meant sacrificing herself.”

I forgot how perceptive Bas can be. More than myself. I face the world for what it is, and see it just the same. When someone gives me a reason I can see what it could be. And I see people in the same light. Except my mother. I can’t face her when at her worst. I’m too afraid to see how broken she is.

Bas understands people a lot more than I do. He hides from what he doesn’t like and refuses to accept it for what it is. He will see people as they are but will see why, and he sees what they could be and should be.

It’s like he’s been given a sense into people’s minds that he knows exactly where they stand. If he trusts someone, they are worthy of it. And he knows how to deal with all of the people he encounters within a minute of meeting them.

When it comes to our mother he has never questioned her love for us, even when I’ve asked him about it. And while I hide from the damage, he seeks it, and knows just how to fix it.

Bas stops in front of a row of shacks. There’s a wall behind them poorly built, covered in dust, separating the road from the homes. And on the wall, red and bright, fresh and new, is the painting of the Mockingjay symbol.

I look at Bas who beams at the artwork. I don’t need to ask, I know this was him. I feel a sense of pride looking at it. Like a piece of me has been resurrected with this act. The piece I lost in the announcement. When I look at it, I understand the power of this symbol. And I add a new plan to my growing list.

My mother is very protective. That is one thing I will never deny about her, and given that it’s her first instinct I am sure this announcement has put it on overload. Especially given the fact she can’t protect us both. And it’s those instincts I’m counting on to show the world what they saw during her Games.
It’s time to remind Panem that the girl on fire is still here, still alive. That the Capitol hasn’t won. I have two missions, two decisions that I am final in. Keep my brother alive during the Games. Keep the hope of the Mockingjay alive until I die. And pray for the best when it’s over.

I will do it the only way I know how, with words and an unfailing resemblance to my mother.

In a few weeks we will be changed. We will forget home and forget what it meant to be as safe as we could be. But right now, before all the fear, before all the bloodshed, we stand in front of the very symbol we will do all we can to protect. And when we turn and see half of Twelve behind us, staring at it with smiles and tears, their three middle fingers raised in salute. We believe we can succeed. We believe we can change the world.

That is until the Peacekeepers arrive and I’m shown firsthand what the Capitol will do to people who even think of defying them.

“So go, come alive and let yourself show,
the way it was when we were growing older,
the way it was when we were singing,
hold on tight,
you’re not alone”

–Little Vessels – The Lighthouse and The Whaler
The Quarter Quell: Aftermath - Ivy and Katniss

Chapter Summary

Ivy and Katniss deal with the Peacekeepers’ arrival in The Seam and their actions against the reappearance of the Mockingjay symbol.

The Quarter Quell: Aftermath – Ivy and Katniss

Ivy -

I don’t really remember when the gunshots started. I don’t remember when the Peacekeepers set fire to the wall and started raiding the houses for contraband. I don’t remember how it all began, it just sort of collapsed into one giant frenzy of chaos. And I started running with Bas through it all.

I hear screaming. I smell fire. I’m choking on smoke. And before I know it I’m grabbed by a Peacekeeper. Bas tries to push his way through the crowd to get to me. But it's impossible. He’s fighting against a wave of frightened people and he can’t break through.

“Mellark!” The Commander, I think his name is Slate, shouts as I’m pulled with a group of others to stand in a clear area surrounded by shacks.

We stand in a line. A small unit of Peacekeepers in front of us, others continue to make their way through the Seam, rifling through homes for contraband and any sign of resistance is met with swift action. Its chaos and all I hear are the sounds of it.

I have never felt this terrified in my life. I have never seen what Peacekeepers will do when faced with opposition or the extremes the Capitol will take. My heart pounds as Slate walks up and down the line.

“I should have known you’d be involved, just like your stupid mother,” he snaps, inches from my face, his breath reeking of alcohol and mint. “If you weren’t scheduled for the arena, I’d shoot you on the spot.”

He looks like he’s about to continue up the line but then snaps his fingers as if a realization has hit him. I see the act. The show he’s putting on for all of us. This is fear. This is power. He is in charge and he’s enjoying it. “Still, examples must be made.”

He hits me. Hard. Right across my face. I fall to the ground, spots dancing across my vision. A pain throbs across my right cheek and up to my eye. It hasn’t begun swelling yet, but I know in a few minutes, it will. I taste blood and subtly check if all my teeth are still in. They are. It’s coming from a cut on my lip.

I didn’t know a single punch could do so much damage. I really am unprepared for the arena. I am unprepared for what I’ve caused or thought about causing. And I think I’m starting to regret everything. That fear returns, the panic that felt like it was going to kill me right after the Quell announcement.

I feel my lungs burn and my breath gets shorter, sharper. I can’t let this happen. Not here. Not in front of them. I try to fight it, but I’m failing and Slate looks at me with victory etched all over his
satisfied smile. But it’s not enough for him.

“Kill the rest,” Slate orders.

“No!” I’m suddenly on my feet, screaming, trying to grab the guns, to do something. But Slate hits me again and this time he twists my arm as I’m forced to the side.

The Peacekeepers raise their guns. I look at an older woman. Her eyes find mine and I see no anger towards me. These people should hate me. This is my fault. Bas painted the symbol, but I was going to do the same thing with words. What did I think was going to happen when it came time to fight? Did I really believe that my mother lived her life according to their rules for no reason? Did I think I could fight without consequence? Did I think I could win?

It must show on my face because the woman smiles like she’s trying to comfort me.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. She looks at me curiously and very slightly shakes her head. She turns back to the firing squad before her and spits. It hits one of their boots.

I hear a laugh from a child. And then the guns go off.

I hear someone screaming. I only realize it’s me when I feel the tears on my cheeks and the rawness of my throat. Slate throws me to the ground in disgust, I can’t tell. He and the Peacekeepers leave me there as they finish raiding the houses and put out the fire.

What have I done?

I look at the shoes and count them. Six pairs. Six dead. Four are men. One is the old woman. And one is too small to be lying there. This shouldn’t have happened.

What have I done?

I see blood, mixing with the black coal dust and the slush. I want to throw up. But I can’t move. I’m shaking, cold and wet, but I stay lying on the ground.

I thought I knew what Hell was. Living with traumatized parents, one who let her fear beat her down and break her. The threat of the arena. Constant attention and invasion of privacy from the Capitol, the whole of Panem knowing my name before I could talk. But I had no idea. I don’t starve like these people. I’m trained to hunt. And the Games pale in comparison to this moment right now. I deserve to be in that arena. For this right here.

And so does Bas.

We thought we were so smart. That we knew more, that we could do more, should do more. But what can we really do? And should we, when this is the result?

We were wrong. I was wrong. I was stupid. Why would anyone want to bring back the Mockingjay when this is the result?

Katniss –

I’m climbing through the fence when I hear screaming. I look towards the Seam where I can see smoke rising. Then I hear gunshots and my heart stops. This shouldn’t be happening. Why now?

I am running towards the screams. I have to be there. I shouldn’t be seen. It will only make it worse. I should stay away but there’s something telling me to go.
Run faster. Can’t slow down. Don’t question.

I barely notice when I pass the bakery and Peeta runs out to join me.

You have to hurry.

You have to run faster.

You have to.

I freeze when I see a crowd of people pushing their way into the town square, away from the Seam, and a blonde haired boy of fourteen is with them.

“Bas!” I scream. He looks at me, his grey eyes wide with fear.

I force my way through the people to him. Peeta behind me. We reach him. I check him over. He’s a little dirty, covered in soot, but otherwise fine. I don’t have time to ask him why he’s here or what’s happening. I only know there’s one other person I need to find.

“What’s your sister?”

Bas looks around, shakes his head like he’s been expecting her. But then I see his hands shake as he comes to a realization.

“They grabbed her.”

A different fear settles in my stomach. An acid burns in my throat. This isn’t the same anger and expectation that I had when the Quell was announced. This is new. This is direct interference. This is harming her before they play with her.

Peeta nods to me and pulls Bas to the side. I hear him say, “Tell me everything that happened,” before I’m running towards the Seam. Towards the very danger I’ve tried to prevent from returning.

I feel like I’ve been running in a giant circle. This has all happened before and it will all happen again. Never ending. Never changing. Panem today. Panem tomorrow. Panem forever.

I hear a final round of gunshots and I stop. They wouldn’t kill her. Not when she’s going into the arena. They need their Games. They need their tributes. But I can’t say for sure what they would or wouldn’t do. I’m cold and I feel like a hole has been torn through me. But I push myself forward. I need to know for sure.

With each step I remember the old me. The one who went hunting to feed her family. The one who would do anything for her sister. And I don’t think I’ve changed that much. But then I remember laughing with Gale. Peeta feeding me and giving me hope when I had none. When I went into the Games. Killed Marvel. Lost Rue. The Mutts. The berries and what all of it has done to me. I feel broken again.

Then, I remember falling for Peeta. The boy with the bread. The one who brought me back to life. I remember him holding me on our victory tour. Making the nightmares go away. And even though we were forced into it, even though we did it to prevent war, I remember our wedding. And I think I was happy.

I remember giving birth to our daughter. I remember hearing her cry and being too afraid to touch her. Afraid to love her. Afraid I would destroy her. Afraid that I would infect her with whatever weakness I had caught from being under the Capitol’s control.
I stopped them from dying.

That’s the lie I keep telling myself. In reality, I killed their hope. And I know firsthand how powerful that feeling is and what it can give to someone.

When my son was born, my fear had lessened. I became complacent. I accepted my life. I accepted the new me. And forgot all about the girl I once was.

The girl on fire. A Mockingjay. Something the Capitol tried to kill but couldn’t. Because she’s still in me, still there. Still willing to sacrifice herself for others.

And now she’s fighting to the surface with every step.

I hear Peacekeepers ahead of me and hide behind one of the shacks. They are laughing while their leader, Slate, runs down a list of new rules for Twelve.

“Anyone out after curfew will be killed on the spot. Anyone outside the fence will be beaten then executed. Anyone caught trading will be beaten. And I want guards at the entrance to the Victor’s Village day and night, as well as, patrols around the fence and mines. Twelve has been lax in their laws for far too long.”

They pass by and my hand shakes. I can’t go in the woods. I can’t have my freedom, if only temporarily. But then another thought crosses my mind. How will I make sure Ivy is ready for the arena? She can’t go in like me, unsure, afraid to die. She has to be stronger. She has to come out alive.

But if she does, Bas will die. And I need the silent, peaceful boy to live. I need them both to live.

And that’s when it truly hits me. What these Games will mean. No matter what happens, I will lose at least one of my children. I had been avoiding thinking about it. Been deluding myself, like Bas. But now, I can’t stop imagining what will happen. How one of them could go. How I will feel with one walking out, damaged, but alive, while the other lies in a plain box to be buried.

I shake my head as if willing it away. I need to find Ivy. I need to make sure it hasn’t already happened.

The Seam feels empty. There are no more screams. No more gun shots. And all I hear is a faint crackle as the last embers die out. The Peacekeepers have all gone and all the people who live here are surely scattered about Twelve cursing my name. After all, this wouldn’t have happened if not for me. If I had just eaten those stupid berries long ago.

The sun begins to set as I step over a body. Someone trampled to death in the chaos and I force myself to check them. To make sure it isn’t Ivy. It’s an older man. Rail thin. It’s possible he had already been dead before the attack, but I can’t be sure.

Then I look up and down the pathway between the shacks and I see a small clearing, where laundry lines intersect and the shacks surround in a circle. I see someone lying on their side, back facing me. I can’t make out who it is or if they are even alive. But then I recognize the messy ponytail. And the jacket Effie gave her long ago. It’s similar to my fathers, but it’s a darker shade and made of richer, almost red, leather.

I feel like my limbs have turned to liquid metal and as I get closer, its hardening, slowing me down, preventing me from continuing forward. I’m afraid of what I’m about to find, of what they’ve done to her. I force myself to keep moving.
I get closer and I can see that she’s breathing. I’m relieved but only for a moment. A gust of wind whistles through the Seam and I pull my jacket closer. I’m cold and getting colder as it gets darker. I don’t know how long she has been lying there in the snow and on the freezing ground. I need to get to her.

With a final push I jog the rest of the way to her. And see a row of bodies in a line down from her. I only look long enough to see that they have been shot. And I feel guilty for bringing this upon my District. Once again my decision to save Peeta and myself years ago brings damage to everyone else around me. And Snow will continue to remind me how powerless I am and how much control he has. It’s not enough to take my children, he needs to make sure after it’s over I’m still his spokesperson for submission, his distraction.

I turn to Ivy whose vision is frozen upon the bodies. And I see a dark swollen bruise along her jaw and up her cheek, stopping near her eye. I know what it means to watch someone die, I know what it means to kill, but she hasn’t seen anything like this. I never wanted her to.

I block the bodies as I crouch in front of her. I gently touch her forehead. She’s too cold. Possibly hypothermic, something my mother used to treat when winter came around. I remember her telling me to boil water, not too hot or it would shock the system. Just enough so that it was warm, but not too warm. Slowly get the body back to the right temperature without losing a limb or killing them.

“Ivy,” I say, my voice straining from my run here.

She doesn’t respond. She doesn’t move.

“We have to go,” I try. “You need to get warm or you’ll die out here.”

She’s shaking. “I deserve it.”

“What?”

“It’s our fault,” she chokes out, blinking back tears. Finally breaking from whatever state she forced herself into.

“What did you do?”

She shakes her head, barely moving. And I remember that I need to get her inside before I can continue this discussion. I rub her arms, and hold her hand, trying to pull her up but she doesn’t grab it back and just remains lying.

“Ivy, lying here is not going to help anyone.”

I feel like I’m lying. Like I shouldn’t tell her to get up when I’ve been faced with the same feeling for years. Before we were successful in stopping the revolution, I watched a man in Eleven get shot for whistling a familiar tune as the people saluted me. And I felt responsible. I was responsible. All the tributes I’ve lost, I’m responsible for them too. There are days where I don’t want to get out of bed. I should tell her I understand, but first I need her to move.

“I’m tired.” She begins to close her eyes and I shake her.

“No, you can’t sleep right now, okay? We need to get home, you can sleep there.” I know I can’t carry her. I can’t save her on my own.

Peeta could. I wish he was here.
I remove my father’s jacket and drape it over her. Then, I lie down beside her. The ground is freezing against me and I begin to shake. I hold her close, trying desperately to keep her warm.

“Please. Get up,” I whisper.

The sun disappears and I wonder why no one has returned yet. Maybe they aren’t ready to see the dead. Maybe they want us to die out here.

I can no longer feel my limbs. And when Ivy closes her eyes, I realize I am too cold to stop her. I start to feel tired. And when I hear footsteps, my eyes shut.

I only choke out, “Save her.”

“But the day will come,
when it falls like a cheap house of plastic
And the cards that we dealt,
will be tossed like a storm in the sky
’Cause you can only lie for so long before you get something drastic
And the kids are lined up on the wall,
and they’re ready to die
And the kids are lined up on the wall,
and they’re ready to die”

-The Kids Are Ready to Die – The Airborne Toxic Event
The Quarter Quell: Reaping – Katniss and Ivy

Katniss –

I wake up in a chair beside a fire with a blanket over me. My neck is stiff from the position I was sleeping in. I recognize the fireplace as typical of the homes in the Seam, meaning someone must have pulled me inside. Panic sets in and I remember my daughter lying out in the cold, freezing and dying as I tried to save her.

“Ivy?” I call out, frantic.

I force myself to stand even though my limbs protest and the blanket falls. My heart is pounding as I turn to see her asleep on the dirty and worn couch. She’s covered in blankets. The bruise on her cheek is an ugly dark purple. I see her take a breath and my pulse returns to normal.

I kneel beside her and run my fingers through her hair, making sure she’s really here. That I’m not dreaming it as I lie outside, freezing to death. My heart is in my throat as I imagine all the ways I could have found her, or, even worse, not found her.

How am I going to mentor her through the Games?

“Katniss.”

I turn to see Peeta standing by the couch. His eyes are bloodshot and his hair is a mess. He hasn’t slept. There’s a mixture of relief and pain on his face that I can’t describe.

There are many things he wants to say. Things he wants to ask or shout about, but he doesn’t. He won’t. Instead he picks up the blanket I dropped and wraps it around me.

“You should keep that on.”

He sits beside me, twiddling his thumbs and rubbing his palms together. The thought of losing us hasn’t left him yet.

“What happened?” I ask.

“After you didn’t come back, I went looking.”

“Bas?”

“He’s in the kitchen with the others.”

I look up and see him standing with Prim and two people I’ve never met. They smile kindly as I meet their gaze. I smile back, grateful that they’ve helped us when they didn’t have to. Prim brings
me a mug of something hot.

“Drink this,” she orders. I take it from her. The mug warms my hands almost instantly.

“Is she—” I look at Ivy, the color drained from her, her breaths shallow, the injuries on her face. My throat tightens.

“She’ll be fine. But you need to drink that.”

I sit beside the couch, watching Ivy, making sure she’s okay. I know Prim said she will be fine but I need to be sure. Peeta understands as he always does and joins me. He twiddles his thumbs, trying to distract himself from whatever it is he’s thinking. I have an idea of what it is, I’m thinking it too. How easily it can all be taken.

“And you’re both very lucky,” Prim adds as she checks Ivy. I watch her as she waddles. Her frame is too small for how big her stomach has gotten. Prim’s going to be a great mother. She wouldn’t let her child almost freeze. She would have gotten them out.

“When did you get here?” I ask her.

Prim and Rory don’t live in the Seam and even if I wanted they couldn’t live in the Victor’s Village. So instead of leaving them on their own, I helped them get a nice house with the merchants. Even calling it a wedding present didn’t silence their protests, but I’m stubborn and I wouldn’t take it back, so eventually they accepted it.

“Abel came and got me after they pulled you two inside.”

“Prim, there’s a curfew,” I try but she waves me off.

“Would you rather I let you two die? You needed help, so I helped. The end. Drink that.” She points to the mug in my hand. I do as she says. I don’t like the thought of her risking her life for me. I don’t want anyone to risk their life for me. And yet I would do it for her. So how can I argue?

She walks back to the kitchen and I see Bas shuffle around. He looks scared. Ashamed even. His resolve finally gets the better of him and he walks in. His eyes are red and he looks like he’s been crying.

Peeta helps me stand and doesn’t let go of my hand. I look at Abel and his wife. She is cleaning up a plate that must have been for Bas. I feel bad for not knowing her name. She smiles to me once more.

“Thank you,” I say. They nod and return to the kitchen. Bas bites his lip as he looks at me.

“I’m sorry,” Bas says, shakily.

“For what?”

Peeta squeezes my hand and I feel like I’m waiting for the Quarter Quell announcement again.

“I painted the Mockingjay.”

There’s a long silence after he admits it. Peeta has already heard this, it’s clear by the way he rubs circles on my hand. I put down the mug and take a deep breath. I let go of Peeta’s hand.

“I didn’t realize what was going to happen. You have to understand—“
“I do understand.” I’m not lying. I get it. I know why he did it. He’s angry. He wanted to send a message and he truly didn’t know what was going to happen. How could he? He’s never experienced it first-hand. But it doesn’t stop me from being angry about it. That the thing I have given everything to stop can be restarted instantly. I’m angry that it never really went away. And I’m angry that it was my child who brought it back.

But another part of me, a long dormant part that’s been silenced for far too long, is laughing at this development. The same part of me that’s been laughing since the announcement. Knowing this was always going to happen, knowing that everything I’ve done to stop it has been for nothing. It’s all a joke. A lie that Snow fed me to keep everyone else in line. And, just for a moment, I’m both unsurprised that it was Bas who painted the symbol and proud of him for it.

But I can’t tell Bas any of it. The voice of the Capitol, the fragile, beaten down woman I’ve become, is the one I speak with.

“But it got people killed. And your sister, almost…” I can’t bring myself to say it. Not when I know it’s going to come soon enough. “Do you want to be in a war?”

I want to throw up when I realize I’m throwing President Snow’s words against me right back to my son. The very words that started my downfall.

He doesn’t answer.

“Basil,” Peeta snaps and Bas looks at me. His eyes are wet with fresh tears and he sniffs.

“No I don’t.”

“I know you’re angry and upset, but other people are going to be the ones who pay for your actions. Not the people you want to pay. Innocent people.” I take a breath, trying to shake the memories of the people of Eleven fighting against Peacekeepers, of the bodies lying in the snow last night.

Bas’ fists clench. “Then we should fight, and whoever else wants to should, too.”

“What?” My stomach drops. I imagine Twelve burned to the ground, dead children lying on battlefields, screams of terror as the boots of Snow’s army marches. I smell blood and acid rises in my throat. I swallow it down as I remember Districts fighting back, Peacekeepers beating people in the streets.

I can’t let it happen again. I can’t be responsible for that wave of endless violence, for a war that we can’t win. Panem is broken. There is no beating the Capitol even with the beliefs of those that want to try. They will fail and we will suffer a lot more than Games. There is no one who can change that.

“I’m tired of living like this, knowing I’m going to die, when and where it’s going to happen. I’m not going out under their circumstances. They don’t own me. And I’m tired of them thinking they do. And I’m not the only one. So a war is coming, I guarantee it, it’s just a matter of time, because they’re willing, they’re just waiting.” His eyes are clear, the threat of tears no longer there and they are angry, desperately trying to convince me of something I already know to be true but am too afraid to admit.

“What are they waiting for, Bas?” I ask, my voice cracking.

“For you. The Mockingjay.”

I’m taken aback and Peeta is the one who steps in.
“You need to stop. It’ll get worse if you continue. From now until reaping day, you come home before nightfall; you work in the bakery or go to school. Those are your options.” Peeta shudders, like he’s hurting himself with every word.

Bas laughs. “So I’m grounded until the Capitol takes me to kill me? That’s fair. I’m sorry people died for what I did. I should have thought it through better, put it somewhere else, probably, but I will never be sorry for painting it. Because that symbol is the only hope this country has.”

He goes back into the kitchen. Peeta and I are stunned silent. I want him to be wrong, but he isn’t. *That symbol is the only hope this country has.* It’s the only hope anyone has for changing things. But I won’t be the one responsible. I can’t be.

When my children’s names are called, I’ll know it’s my fault they are standing on that stage. And if Bas is any indication, I know they will blame me for being a coward. I shouldn’t have stopped the revolution all those years ago, but then where would I be? How many lives would I be responsible for ending?

And how many lives am I responsible for ending now because I succeeded in ensuring life went on as usual?

Will my children be added to the list of dead who blame me for their fate?

“Is keeping him from enjoying the last couple weeks really fair?” I ask quietly.

Peeta sighs. “No, but I don’t want him out with the Peacekeepers. They’ll make him pay for it. I’m not letting anyone else in this family get hurt.”

“It’s going to happen soon enough,” I whisper. His hand grips tighter and he turns to look at me, the lines around his eyes more visible. A frown running deep on his face.

“Not if I can help it.”

“They won’t let them both live.”

He breathes and shakes his head. He can’t bring himself to say whatever it is he wants to, or maybe he just can’t admit the reality. Instead he kisses my hand and gives me back the mug.

I take a sip of the warm liquid. It’s a kind of broth that’s common in Twelve. There’s not much in it to give it substance, but it’s warm, and right now, with my body still recovering from almost freezing, it’s welcome.

There’s stirring behind us and I put the mug back down, forgetting I need it as I turn. Ivy tries to sit up but she’s tangled in blankets and can’t get off the couch. She’s clearly disoriented by the unfamiliar surroundings and groggy from sleep. I shush her as I kneel down and place my hands on her shoulders to keep her still.

Her eyes meet mine and she settles back down.

“It’s okay,” I tell her. Her eyes lose focus and I know she’s remembering the events of last night. I’ve done this to myself many times before. Remembering every moment of the arena and wondering what I could have done to save Rue.

She starts to shake and I see the tears coming. “It’s okay,” I repeat as I smooth back her hair. I pull her close, suddenly afraid I might lose her again. She falls into the embrace and sobs.
Bas hovers in the kitchen, pacing back and forth; alternating between glaring at me and staring sympathetically at her. I would laugh at every change in expression if not for the lead in my stomach, the weight of knowing I will have to go through this again and of knowing the damage that has been done to my daughter.

The same damage I have had done to me. In District Eleven. In the arena. Seeing someone die is not an easy thing, and it changes you.

She’s too weak to keep crying but she continues to lean on me. Peeta is beside us and rubs her back as I let go of her. She sits up on her own but won’t look me in the eyes.

“Ivy,” I try but she still won’t look at me. “It wasn’t your fault.”

I remember her lying on the ground. How she said it was because of her, and I know that blame. This wasn’t her. She can’t go into the arena with guilt when she has to fight for her life.

Sympathy is getting me nowhere and I remember how afraid I was when she gave up. How angry I was that she gave up. I still am angry. The other me, the victor, the killer, the girl on fire, she’s angrier. And I let her take control.

“Ivy.” I’m sharp and her wide eyes snap to mine. This is an old voice from interviews, with a dress on fire. A girl standing in an arena holding berries to my mouth so I wouldn’t have to come home alone. “Don’t you ever just lie there like that again.” I don’t need to tell her she can’t give up. She knows, and it would be hypocritical.

“Got it?” I add and she nods, wiping the last of her tears away. “No more crying.”

“They…”

“I know what they did. But you don’t let them do it to you.”

“What about the arena?”

It’s the first time she’s asked about it. The first time anyone has mentioned it out loud. The frightened me wants to scurry away and never think of it as memories of mutts with familiar eyes resurface. The girl on fire keeps talking. The Mockingjay keeps control.

“What did I say?”

“Don’t let them.”

“Fight,” I tell her. “Prim’s gonna check on you and then we’re going home.”

I kiss her forehead and she stares at me like it’s some new action and then I realize that it is. I’ve given her hugs, quick small ones but only when she’s initiated them. I’ve never given her a goodnight kiss. I’ve tucked her in when she’s asked but I’ve never kissed her. Maybe once when she was a baby, when she was first born, but I can’t even remember if I did then.

It’s always been Peeta who’s been the affectionate one. Never me.

I stand back while Prim checks her over. Peeta watches me, a curious smile toying at him, and I feel a strength returning. I hug Bas and give him a kiss on the forehead. He allows it to happen even though he’s still angry.

I feel as if I’m finally realizing how much I love them when they are about to be taken from me. It’s a cruel feeling. I’ve done all I can to keep them at a distance but still, I am not ready for
reaping day. None of us are.

In an hour we leave the house and make our way through the Seam. People are cleaning up the wreckage from the night before, rifling through stuff that was tossed hoping to salvage something.

Peeta keeps Ivy close, holding her up when she struggles to walk. She still has a blanket around her coat and she shakes slightly, but she’s moving. We need to leave before the Peacekeepers see us here. The last thing they need is a reason to tear through people’s homes again.

We reach the Victor’s Village without incident but arrive to two Peacekeepers guarding the entrance.

“Where have you all been?” one asks.

Bas is beside me and I see him stiffen, his hand curls but he stops himself from taking any action. Ivy keeps her eyes glued to the ground and Peeta has a tight hold on her. I look right at him. He’s young, maybe in his twenties, his helmet obscures most of his features but I can make out a scar on his chin.


“Go on.” The Peacekeeper ushers us inside. He spits behind us as we walk through then turns to the other guard, “I can’t wait till reaping day.”

I stop. My blood boils and I feel acid rising. I turn back and begin making my way towards them, readying to give them a fight, but Peeta grabs my arm. I look and see Ivy leaning against the door of the house, Bas holding her upright.

Even from a small distance I can see her bruise glaring at me and I remember everything that happened.

I look at Peeta and he shakes his head. I nod.

“What’s the problem?” the Peacekeeper with the scar asks.

“No problem. Just thought I was going to be sick,” I reply monotonously. Peeta and I make our way inside.

Ivy –

My mother barely lets me out of her sight for the rest of the night and when we eat we are silent. No one wants to address what happened and I’m not entirely sure I know how to broach the subject. I saw something in her earlier, an old light that hadn’t completely died and she was the mother I always wanted, not the one the Capitol gave me.

I go to bed without so much as a word. My face is sore and all I want to do is shut my eyes and forget the past day, but as soon as I close them I hear the child’s laugh and the guns.

I see the blood, feel the cold ground beneath me as I lie there, and I count the shoes.

I know it’s not real. This is a nightmare, but the bodies rise and they stare at me, their faces covered in blood. The child is laughing and kicking me with all the fury his short legs can muster.

I’m screaming as the Peacekeepers laugh over and over again before firing.

I’m shaken awake by my father. I’m flailing, fighting him, and I land a hit but soon realize that I’m
not being attacked, that the nightmare has ended.

He rubs his jaw from where I punched him. My cheeks are wet from tears and I’m shaking as the remnants of the nightmare disappear.

“T’m sorry,” I croak. He shakes his head.

“I know. It’s okay.” He pulls me close and I shut my eyes. I cling to his shirt like I did when I was five and the scent of flour and baking bread greets me. I feel safe.

“Were you baking?”

He nods. “I was going to send some bread to Abel and Nina.”

“Is mom asleep?”

“No. Do you want her?”

I don’t answer. Maybe because I’m not sure or because I don’t know which version of her I will get. I want the mother who kissed my forehead and was by my side in the snow. I’m afraid of getting the other one.

I lie back down and my father leaves. I hear two sets of footsteps, his heavier ones and lighter, delicate ones. I realize my mother was waiting outside the door and regret not asking for her.

My face heals as reaping day nears. The cold winter changes to spring and the Peacekeepers maintain their watch. As the days pass without being able to go into the woods, I plan for the Games. Strategies occupy my mind and I spend hours thinking of ways to defeat one and two. After a while, even strategies don’t help my anxiety and I find myself awake at all hours of the night wishing I could hide in a tree and enjoy the peace of the woods one last time.

For how bad I am, my mother is worse. Whatever spark was growing within her is losing its power as the woods become unattainable. For all the nights I’m awake, they don’t come close to the amount of times I hear her screaming and pacing. She can’t sleep or function without a place to call her own. A place where the Capitol can’t control her.

She tries a few times and makes it through unseen, but she never brings back game. That would be too risky. I’m sure she just sits out there in the calm, with the occasional song of a mockingjay, and I wish to go out there too, but I can’t. The Peacekeepers watch Bas and me too closely. They would know if I went missing. I would rather she get to enjoy the woods for a few more days before the reaping than risk us all being beaten.

Bas goes to the bakery with my father every day. He doesn’t speak of revolution or of the Mockingjay. He rarely speaks at all. The Games haven’t even begun and they’ve already changed us.

When I sit in the bakery, watching Bas lift heavy sacks of flour the day before the reaping, I realize why my father wanted him there. I know how to hunt and now Bas has the strength to survive the arena. I’m not going to let him die, but if we get separated, he can survive on his own just as my father did before my mother found him.

Haymitch visits the night before and we have dinner just as we did the day of the announcement. I can’t eat, not when I already know what happens tomorrow. Bas overeats from both his nerves and day of working.

We don’t talk much, not even my father who can change a room with a sentence.
The screens have already been running with pre-Games coverage. Showing highlights from the past victors, making guesses as to who will be reaped from Districts with more than one Victor. One and Two are the Districts they are most excited about, as per usual.

Haymitch and my parents decide to watch some of the coverage and get a feel for who will be reaped. They want to figure out weaknesses, give us the best chance, but I can’t stand to listen to any of it. I will when the Games come around, but right now, I want one last night of peace even if my dreams will be filled with blood and gun shots.

I hear some of it as I walk up the stairs.

Caesar Flickerman and Claudius Templesmith have been announcers for what seems like forever and they don’t seem to have aged at all. I think the Capitol has doctors that can manage it, but I’m always amazed by their lack of age every year. It’s unnerving.

Caesar has chosen a shocking yellow as this year’s hair and suit arrangement. It almost hurts my eyes to look at it. I stand on the stairs, frozen when I hear my name.

“Let’s talk about Ivy and Basil Mellark. We’ve heard so much about who may or may not be in the Games, let’s talk about who will.” Claudius is the one who brings it up and he looks right in the camera before looking at Caesar.

“Did you bring them up because you know they’re my favorites?” Caesar jokes and Claudius laughs along.

“I’ll let you talk about them because they’re your favorites.”

Our pictures flash up on the screen.

“Well, District Twelve hasn’t seen a winner in twenty five years. If anyone’s going to break that streak I think it’ll be one of the children of the very Victors who won the last time. Over the years we’ve watched them grow and I’m very excited to see what they can do. But I also think it’s a very fitting bookend to the star-crossed lovers that both their children go into the arena together.” Caesar’s so casual that I want to throw up. It’s fitting, a bookend, entertainment for the Capitol, a message to everyone else. My nails dig into my palm as Claudius speaks.

“Yes, the interesting thing about this Quell is it’s all legacy tributes. We don’t know whose skills they will favor, if at all, and with the Mellarks there’s no telling if one of them will use a bow or not. That’s honestly very exciting.”

“I agree. Even with interviewing Ivy over the years there’s no telling which way she will go. But I do believe the odds are in her favor.” Caesar smiles wide, taking up half his face. My stomach turns.

“But Twelve is not the only District we’re sure about. Let’s look at Four. Now, the female tribute is up in the air, as we’ve discussed, but the male tribute is definitely going to be Beck Cresta.”

Beck’s picture is shown. He has dark hair down to his chin and golden skin, with green eyes. He smiles in his picture like he’s without a care. I wish I could feel like that. I’ve never met any of the other Victors, but I have heard the story of his mother and how she went crazy after the arena. I wonder what that must be like growing up. I’ve dealt with my share of nightmares and screaming parents because of the arena, but not like him. He looks strong.

“That was a bit of a scandal, remember that, Claudius?”
“Never named the father, poor boy, let’s hope he’s better suited for the arena than she was.”

“Or that he’s as good a swimmer. Maybe he’ll get lucky like her.” They laugh and it’s clear they’ve discounted Beck Cresta from District Four as nothing more than another dead body.

I don’t know if I should be relieved that I’m considered worthy of analysis or not. I sit down on the stairs, wondering if I will have to kill Beck Cresta from Four, if I will be the one who ends the smile.

“Enough.” My father shuts off the screen.

“Peeta, we have to know who,” Haymitch starts, but he’s cut off.

“We will after the reaping. I can’t hear about it anymore, not when we know those kids’ parents.”

“And they’re probably doing the same thing right now. Who gets coverage. Who doesn’t. Who’s a threat.” Haymitch takes a drink. My mother sighs.

“We saw enough. They’ll do the same thing tomorrow night and we can watch it on the train. Goodnight, Haymitch, we’ll see you tomorrow,” my mother tells him. Haymitch nods and walks himself out. He stops at the door and notices me on the stairs.

“See you tomorrow,” he says with a smile and I return it. He takes the bottle with him and shuts the door as he leaves.

I look over into the living room and watch as my father slumps on the couch. My mother takes his hands in hers and they touch their foreheads together. They are silent like that for a while. I turn away and watch the door, counting the minutes until I will have to leave this house and join a long history of dead tributes from Twelve.

I lose track of time until Bas sits beside me. He nudges my shoulder and hands me a cookie. It looks like a leaf, painted perfectly in shades of green.

“I made it.” He smiles and I take a bite. It’s under cooked and over salted. I eat it anyway. I give him a thumbs up as I try not to grimace, but he knows I’m lying. I finish it anyway. He plays with the laces on his shoes. Neither of us says anything. We’re both enjoying these last hours of peace before we’re rushed off to the Capitol and made to kill for sport.

He stands. “Well, I’m off to bed. Good luck tomorrow. Don’t fall.”

“Don’t cry,” I retort. He indicates his face with his hand.

“This face and tears, not gonna happen.” We laugh as he walks up the stairs. I wonder if I’ll laugh again before the end comes. I shake my head to try and will the morbid thoughts away. There’s no point in dwelling on my inevitable demise, I’ll just have to try and enjoy the little things. That is if there’s anything to enjoy before the arena takes me.

My mother quickly takes my brother’s place next to me. She rests her chin on her hand, propped up by an elbow on her knee. She looks at me, asking if I’m ready without needing to voice it aloud.

I shrug.

It’s the silent conversations between us that I enjoy the most. She drops her arm and makes to reach for me but pulls back. She’s building a wall. One that won’t be so easily broken when I’m faced with absolute death. She needs to be strong from this point forward. A mentor readying to
keep her tributes alive for as long as possible and hoping one will be a victor.

A part of me, the logical part, understands what’s happening, but the scared child craving her mother’s love and affection isn’t so mature. She’s railing against the rules set forth by this world. She’s begging and crying not just to keep her life but to get a new one, a better one. A world where children aren’t killed for entertainment or to settle old scores. I feel tears, but I swallow them. I can’t allow myself to cry, not now, not ever from this point forward. I’m in the Games starting tomorrow and tears are weakness. I have to get over it without showing it.

My mother senses it. I can see it in the way she watches me. She nods, because she knows. She’s done it for years.

“You should get some sleep,” she says quietly.

“I don’t think I can.”

“You should try. Maybe you’ll get lucky.”

“I don’t think luck really runs in our family.”

She smirks but lets it fade. I hear my father shuffling around in the kitchen.

“What’s he doing?” I ask as I look towards the noise.

“He’s not going to sleep, so he’s baking. Stress reliever.” My mother smiles absently, like she’s remembering days gone by where she first learned all the things that my father did when he was scared, or stressed, or angry.

“Are you going to sleep?” I ask after a minute. I don’t often see my mother smile like that and I wish I could. I feel bad for breaking it when I speak.

She shakes her head. “I’ll just have nightmares.”

I don’t know how to respond. She doesn’t talk about the nightmares, not to me, not out loud. But if there was ever a time to start it’s now, in the breath before the fall.

“What are they about?” I ask quietly, scared to continue but wanting to know more.

“Different things. A lot from the arena. But lately, well since you were born, it’s been about losing you. All of you.” She looks away like she’s ashamed to be scared. I rest my head against her shoulder. There’s a comfort that I get and I’m sure she feels it too because she rubs my shoulder and pulls me closer. She kisses my forehead and rests her chin on my head.

I shut my eyes and let myself feel safe. I don’t think I’m going to feel this again.

“Guess the nightmares came to life,” she whispers and I almost don’t catch it. She lets go of me and I slide away.

“Do you think I should wear anything special?” I change the subject quickly and she laughs, short but genuine.

“I don’t think it’s going to make them change their mind,” she quips.

I shrug. “I was thinking more along the lines of like sponsors or whatever.” My voice fails after that and we’re both brought back to reality.

She nods, before getting up. “Come with me.”
I follow her to my parent’s bedroom. She rifles through drawers, trying to find something. I sit on the end of the bed, looking at a painting that hangs on the wall. My father often paints the Games but this is of a lake that I recognize out in the woods. There are birds in the trees and a bright orange sunset. The trees and outlying grass are a deep rich green.

It looks so real. I wish I was there now.

My mother finds what she’s looking for. It’s small, wrapped in a piece of old cloth that hasn’t seen the outside of the drawer in a while. My mother sits beside me and un-wraps the cloth delicately. I see a flash of gold as she opens it up before laying it on the bedspread before me.

“You can use this as your token. It’ll keep you safe.” She holds up the Mockingjay pin and I forget to breathe.

“Really?” I ask, scared. I remember what the Peacekeepers did. I don’t want that to happen again over a pin.

She nods, determined, the light in her eyes back. “I want you to wear it.”

It’s settled. I take the pin from her. It feels too light for the weight it carries. The symbol. The spark. The hope. I feel like I’m holding it all in my hand and I regret ever wanting to carry it in the first place.

But I will carry it, because my mother needs me to and because if I do, she will return. I won’t let the Capitol kill the fire so easily again. The embers are catching and they will regret ever trying to stomp them out.

The Mockingjay is returning.

I manage to catch a few hours of sleep to my surprise. I wake with the pin resting on a simple white dress beside my bed and the smell of baked goods throughout the house.

I bathe then dress, pinning the Mockingjay where it will be visible as well as close to me.

My hair is drying as I walk into the kitchen. Bas is in a collared shirt and slacks with his hair slicked back. I sit at the table as my father places a cheese pastry in front of me. I smile, gratefully and pick at it.

My mother is in an orange dress with yellows and reds along the bottom in a wave pattern. It almost looks like fire. I wonder if it’s a dress Cinna sent. My father is dressed similarly to Bas, only his shirt is the same color as my mother’s dress.

I swallow a few bites of the cheese pastry but can’t force myself to eat anything else.

“Mom?” I take a breath. My question is strangely heavy. “Can you braid my hair?”

She pauses, almost shocked that I asked before nodding. “Of course.”

We sit in the living room, only the sound of her brushing my hair filling the space. She goes through the process easily but delicately, like she’s savoring every second, memorizing every moment. Clinging to the last moments of her daughter before the Capitol breaks us apart.

It’s over too soon and my hair is braided just as there’s a knock on the door. My father answers it.

He returns a few seconds later, somber, with Haymitch behind him.

I see Peacekeepers waiting at the door, shifting from one foot to the other, staring at us expectantly.

“Is that really necessary? We’re not gonna run.” Bas glares at them.

“It’s a show.” Haymitch smirks.

We slowly make our way to the door before being forced into a line and marched out of the Victor’s Village and through Twelve to the square.

The stage and the cameras are all set to go. The District is gathered but they lack the enthusiasm of places like One and Two. Even Effie lacks her usual attitude and fervor. Over the years she’s maintained the lilt in all the right places, but I’ve learned to recognize an act and she puts one on. She’s still Capitol, still views this as slightly entertaining and an honor, but I think she’s learned to see the tributes as people since my parents became Victors.

She’s watched us grow, given us gifts. I think she loves us more than someone who’s only a fan would. I think she thinks of us as family, or whatever passes for it in the Capitol.

We are marched to the stage. Each bowl only contains one slip of paper. My parents and Haymitch stand to the side as the Mayor and family walk out. I stand beside the bowl with my name. Bas does the same with his.

Effie works her way through the usual speech, pausing to take a breath and compose herself every once in a while. The same video plays about the rebellion that’s played for a hundred years. I see my aunt Prim in the crowd with her husband, Rory. She’s crying and he’s holding her for dear life.

My grandmother is beside them, clinging to my aunt and fighting back tears. I want to cry too but I know I can’t. I nod to let them know its okay. Bas stares at the ground in front of the stage. His hands shake, which he tries to hide by curling them into fists. I pray the cameras don’t catch it. That One and Two aren’t watching and making note of his fear.

Effie takes a deep breath and says, “Ladies first.” She looks to my mother, and I notice her lip quiver. My mother nods before Effie turns to me, her eyes watering, hand shaking, and I smile. She pulls the slip of paper with my name on it.

“Ivy Mellark.”

I step forward and I stare right into the camera. I have to be strong. I have to make sure they see me as the threat. Focus on me, forget about Bas. Fight me, not him. That’s the plan. Keep him alive. It starts now.

Effie swallows her tears as she calls, “Basil Mellark.”

He steps forward and makes eye contact with the crowd. He turns to look at my mother and kisses his three middle fingers and raises them to honor her.

All of Twelve follows and I do the same.

I don’t care that the Peacekeepers drag us inside the Justice building and that we’re thrown onto the train in a hurry. I don’t care that I get no goodbyes. I want them to see. I want my mother to see. I want these Games to matter, to count and I hope my mother makes Snow pay.
We’re silent as the train makes its way closer and closer to the Capitol. Tomorrow we’ll be there. Tomorrow I meet the other tributes and I will make sure they come after me. Tomorrow I begin to plan how to kill them all and make sure my brother wins.

Tomorrow I forget the girl from Twelve who went hunting with her mother. Tomorrow I truly live up to my name. Ivy Mellark, daughter of Katniss and Peeta, tribute of the 100th Hunger Games.

And when it’s over it will read Ivy Mellark, top three, Basil Mellark, Victor.

I just hope I’m brave when the moment comes for me to die and I hope my family understands when they bury me. I don’t want Twelve to come. I don’t want them to honor me because I won’t be me when it happens. I’ll be the arena me. The one forged in fire and war, surrounded by death. I just hope they remember me as I was, not as the killer I’m going to become.

I shut my eyes and try to remember growing up in Twelve. How I used to run through the Seam with Bas and other children. I remember when I learned to hunt and track, the feeling of peace in the woods with my mother. I recall the smell of the bakery and the cookies we used to sneak. I remember my aunt Prim teaching me about healing methods and being too bored to listen. I wish I had now. I might need them. I remember my father’s hugs and my mother’s smile and how she ran her hand through my hair every so often. I even remember Effie dropping by with presents, going on and on about how much the Capitol loves us and how much we are growing up.

I already miss it all.

“At the end of the line
There’s no more time
And you go it alone
You can never come home
At the end of the line”

- Oh Death – Noah Gundersen
As the train makes its way to the Capitol, Katniss learns of Ivy’s plans to save Bas.

Part Two:

The Games: Train Ride – Katniss

The train glides smoothly towards the Capitol as carts of food are wheeled in.

“Lunch,” Effie trills but only Haymitch follows her to the table. Effie still has bright hair, with an outfit to match, but she doesn’t prattle on about the Capitol like she normally does during this portion of the trip.

Last year our tributes were both fifteen and the girl, Iris, spent the night throwing up. Effie tried and failed to make her feel better by talking about the things she would see. Iris wasn’t very receptive to the welcome speeches and hid in her room whenever she could. The boy, Oliver, was better at taking in everything and he ate until he could barely walk. Neither one of them made it past the bloodbath.

I look at Bas, loosening the tie he wore, hands shaking. He can be angry. He can be headstrong, but he’s gentle. I can’t imagine him killing anyone. My son is too young to be here and he’s not ready for the arena. It will destroy him.

Ivy stares at the ground, focused, like she’s coming to terms with something. She might be the same age I was when I entered the Games, but like Bas, she’s too young. I was too young. They shouldn’t be here.

I try to imagine one of them walking out but I can’t. I can’t bring myself to choose. To decide which one I think will live. I can’t lose them. Not to death. Not to the arena’s horrors. Not to nightmares that threaten to claim me.

The Mockingjay pin on Ivy’s dress catches the light. Is that the answer? After all these years of trying to escape it, is it time to accept the role? To do what I should have done on the victory tour. Make them see it once again. Hope. Something that has evaded me for so long.

“What are you going to eat?” Ivy asks Bas, breaking the silence.

He shrugs.

“You probably should. We both should.” She sighs and stands. Bas follows her to the table and they fill plates. At first, they pick, but the rich food gets the better of them and they dive in, going for seconds shortly after.

We keep them well fed, but they don’t get this type of food, the rich delicacies of the Capitol.

I stand and Peeta is at my side.

“What are you okay?” he asks quietly, placing a hand on my shoulder.
I nod, leaning into him. “We have to keep them alive.”

“We will.”

I try to ask him how, how we can make sure they both live when it’s against the rules. When even a handful of berries won’t change them again. He cuts me off with a kiss. I return it, feeling warmth and comfort spread from my chest all the way to the tips of my fingers. When I kiss him, I remember the dandelion, the first feeling of hope I ever had. He’s a light I can always find amongst the endless trips to the Capitol and the years of being forced to play these roles. He breaks it all too quickly. The warmth fades and I’m brought back to the reality of the train continuing on its trek towards the extravagant and bustling city anxiously awaiting the arrival of this year’s tributes.

“We’ll figure it out.”

He walks to the table and I can hear his mind turning, planning. I look around the train, expecting a Peacekeeper to barge in and question him. I can’t ask, not aloud. He’ll tell me when he’s ready, but I can’t imagine that even Peeta, with his words and plans, can change our children’s fate.

After we finish eating, Haymitch turns on the screen to watch the recap of the reapings.

Bas looks anywhere but at the screen. Ivy pays close attention, though. Peeta’s real leg bounces as we watch whose children are joining ours in these Games. Children we will help plan to kill, whose parents we have seen for years and helped when our tributes have died.

“For starters, this is a Quell, everything’s bigger, more extravagant. And its legacies, which means the Capitol citizens’ll be extra excited. I wouldn’t be surprised if they’re waiting by the training facility,” Haymitch says, scratching at his beard.

“Aren’t they usually waiting?” Ivy asks. I can hear a methodical nature to her voice. Like Peeta, when she’s planning, I know. And she’s taking mental notes of everything said.

“There’s usually more when a tribute with family history is in the Games,” Effie answers, sadly. She looks away from Ivy to the screen, trying to repress tears. I wonder if she ever waited by the training facility, if she dreamed of being an escort, if it’s everything she wanted. I can’t imagine it is.

“So we should expect to be overloaded by fans?” Bas asks, tersely. Haymitch shrugs. “Perfect, just what I’ve always wanted.”

“I’m sorry,” I tell him. He looks at me, shaking his head before taking my hand and giving it a light squeeze.

“It’s not your fault, mom.” My throat tightens and I forget to breathe. Why doesn’t he blame me? He’s so angry, why isn’t it directed at me? He lets go then turns to Haymitch. “So who’s going to be trying to kill us?”

He smiles, trying to lighten the mood. I see so much of Peeta in that smile. I can’t imagine never seeing it again.

We watch intently as the screen changes to District One. The recap is quick, showing the names, the reactions from Tribute, their Victor parent, and their District before moving on.

As usual, the careers of One and Two are strong, prepared, and all too happy to go into the arena. When it cuts to Four, the attitude is different than that of years past. I already knew Beck Cresta
would be the male tribute, but I hadn’t been prepared for Annie’s reaction.

She holds it together until they call her son’s name. She covers her ears and I remember seeing the footage of her in the arena. The seventeen-year-old girl swimming for her life, screaming when her district partner was beheaded. The girl tribute’s name is called next, but before the screen can cut out, Beck is next to his mother, holding her together, telling her it’ll be okay.

Finnick Odair, the Capitol idol, still adored and desired after all these years, watches them, trying to lead them inside the justice building. There are no roars of applause in Four.

Annie isn’t usually on the mentor team but I wonder if this year she will be. Now that her son is being forced into the same circumstances she once faced. Finnick is always on the mentor team and over the years I’ve gotten used to his prancing around the Capitol and trading floor, his remarks, and his constant attention by Capitol citizens. He usually manages to get the better sponsors, but he hasn’t seen a Victor in a few years. Sometimes I wonder if he ever considered living quietly in Four, maybe settling down, or if he prefers his life in the Capitol.

I’ve heard rumors of Victors being sold for the pleasure of Capitol citizens and Finnick’s name often comes up. Never experiencing it first-hand I can’t be sure if they are true, but knowing Snow, I don’t doubt that they are. Given those circumstances I don’t think Finnick had much of a chance to settle down, I don’t think he ever had the option to find someone, but we all do what we have to, to survive. And he plays the role of aging playboy just as I play the role of happy wife and mother, forever grateful to the Capitol for allowing Peeta and I to be together.

The other Districts pass by without incident, with most of them only having one option for either the boy or girl tribute. The oldest Tribute, Trina from Nine, still only twenty-three, keeps her head held high as her name is called. The youngest is a nine-year-old boy from Ten whose name I miss. He cries as he stands on the stage.

“He’s too young. His name shouldn’t even be in there,” Peeta says, his hand gripping the edge of his chair.

“He was the only boy, and they need their Tributes,” Haymitch says, sadly, taking a drink.

“The Quell said Victor’s children, they didn’t specify how old,” Ivy adds, monotonously. I look at her. She watches the screen, her expression empty, eyes focused but her mind somewhere else. She looks like she’s about to be sick.

When Ivy and Bas show up on the screen, it cuts right before the salute. I’m grateful that they look brave. They look capable of caring for themselves in the arena. They don’t look like easy targets. It’s a small relief considering how much of it’s an act.

The recap ends. The room falls silent. I look at Haymitch, needing his guidance, his experience, even after years of being a mentor myself. He nods and stands in front of the screen. All eyes are on him.

“So, what do we think?” he asks. “What allies are we looking at?”

Ivy shakes her head. “No, no allies.”

“Ivy, it’s--” I try, but she cuts me off.

“I don’t want an ally. And no one is going to want to ally with Twelve anyway.” She crosses her arms, sitting back in her seat like the argument is settled. I’m reminded of when she was five and wouldn’t eat the Katniss roots I dug up, something Haymitch still laughs about to this day.
“This year is different and if you have the skill set, which you do, they will want you as an ally,” Haymitch tries.

Ivy continues to shake her head. “I’m not going to run through the arena with someone I don’t trust. Not when I’ll just have to kill them anyway.” She’s collected and calm. I’m taken aback by her attitude.

“If this is a vote, I’d rather just stick with her,” Bas adds. Ivy nods.

Haymitch stares at Ivy, hard, trying to get her to understand. “If you want to survive, make some friends. Get an ally. It’s your best chance.”

She swallows and looks away. I watch the exchange. There’s something they aren’t saying. A hidden message he’s giving her.

“Not One or Two. I’ll consider the others.”

“At least someone in this family is reasonable.” Haymitch sits.

“So that’s it?” Bas asks.

“What else do you want? Can’t strategize until we’re in the Capitol, and we won’t be there until tomorrow.” Haymitch shrugs.

“I’m gonna go to my room then.” Bas leaves with Ivy following not far behind.

“I’ll be right back,” I say before heading towards their rooms. I can hear them down the hallway. I keep my distance, trying to listen but not intrude.

“Whatever they say just agree,” Ivy says quietly, trying to convince him.

“Why?” Bas asks. “Shouldn’t we actually do what they’re saying?”

“I have a plan.”

“Yeah your great plan. I’m not going to follow you around in the arena just to watch you die. You’re not dying for me, okay?”

“And neither are you. Just listen to me. I’ll keep you safe. We don’t need anyone else.”

“I think we should listen to Haymitch. They’ll want you as an ally especially when they know you can shoot.”

I can’t listen anymore and interrupt. “You don’t want to show them all your skills the first day.” They jump when I speak. Ivy looks away. “Makes you a target.”

“Good thing I don’t have anything to show,” Bas jokes. I ruffle his hair before pulling him in for a hug.

I stare at Ivy and wait until she makes eye contact. “Can I talk to you?” I’m colder than I mean to be but she agrees all the same.

We leave Bas in his room and walk back to the hallway. I cross my arms. “What’s your plan?”

She shrugs. “I don’t have one.”

“Don’t lie to me.”
“Do you really want me to answer honestly?” she asks, voice breaking.

I don’t need her to tell me the truth. Self-sacrifice runs in the family and I can see the plan as clear as day. She has no intention of surviving these Games. When I volunteered for Prim, I didn’t think I had a chance, but I wasn’t planning on dying. I just knew I didn’t want my sister to die when I could take her place. I understand Ivy’s way of thinking, but it doesn’t stop me from being angry about it.

“I told you not to give up.”

“I’m not. If I was giving up, I wouldn’t be trying to save him. I have to.”

“Why?” I ask, heart in my throat.

Her eyes are glassy. Her voice cracks when she says, “He’s more important.” She walks away and I’m left standing alone, heart shattered.

Does she really believe she isn’t as important as Bas? I think back on the two of them growing up. I was frightened when she was born, always expecting Snow to show up at my door and take her away. The Capitol was all over her name, a picture of her, and all I wanted was to shield her from it, but I knew I couldn’t.

I taught her to hunt. That was all we had, our time in the woods. Peeta was the one who took care of her. Who comforted every nightmare, took care of every illness, read to her. What did I do? I built a wall. I was too frightened of her being reaped, of a future I couldn’t guarantee, that I kept her out. I let cameras invade her life, I made her dress up and parade for interviews.

With Bas, my fear was there, but I never made him do the things she did. I let him stay inside instead of forcing him out into the woods. I let him stay silent during interviews. I would bring him things back from the woods. How must that look from her perspective?

Too afraid to love one child, too careless to treat the second the same.

I wish I could go back. I would never stop the war. Maybe I could love them then as they deserve to be loved. Maybe they could be children in a world where there is no fear of Games to take their lives.

I slide down the wall and hold my knees to my chest. I can’t breathe. I’ve failed my children. I made sure my daughter was capable of fighting in the arena but I couldn’t be her mother. I was her mentor. And with my son, I was just someone who lived with him. I was no better, just less demanding.

I rock back and forth until Peeta finds me. He gently lifts me up and brings me to our room. I lie on the bed and cry while he holds me tight.

When I’m calm, I stay in his arms, my head on his chest. I can hear his heartbeat, steady and warm. I finally talk about what I heard and what Ivy said. Peeta listens, his hold tightening on me when I mention Ivy’s plan.

“We can’t let her go in thinking she’s going to die,” Peeta says, scared.

“What can we do? Tell her not to? She won’t listen. She wants to save him.” I sit up. He shrugs, disappearing into his thoughts. I cup his face and draw his attention back to me. “What is it?”

He shakes his head and tries to comfort me with a smile. It doesn’t work. He takes my hand in his.
“I don’t know. I wish there was an easy answer. Some way…”

“Maybe they’ll allow two Victors. Who knows?” My voice is bitter but Peeta laughs, short and breathy.

“We can send them some berries to threaten the Game makers with,” he says, pulling me close once again. I smile.

“And then they’ll just call the whole thing off.”

“If only,” he says sadly. I sigh, I wish there was a way for them to call it off. That it was simple. That I could march up to Snow and make him stop this, but I can’t. Unless of course, I want to start a war, which is becoming more and more desirable as opposed to watching my children turn into killers or dying.

I wonder what they think of me. Of the Tributes I killed. Do they think it’s something I had to do or do they wish, like Peeta, I had become a Victor by chance? I wonder what Beck thinks of his mother who couldn’t kill anyone in the arena. She’s the only Victor not to have any blood on her hands, even accidentally. She went crazy after it, but no Victor leaves the arena unaffected. At least, none that I’ve met.

I wonder if he walks through the streets of Four with a smile because even though he’s a legacy, even though he doesn’t have a father, he’s got a mother who didn’t kill anyone and survived just the same. The Capitol doesn’t focus on many families, namely mine and a few in One and Two. They largely ignore the Victors without interesting stories. I wonder if Beck is glad that he’s not interesting enough to have their attention, if that makes him smile even more.

Will Ivy ever smile like him? Will Bas? Are they proud of the family they come from? Or do they wish they could go unnoticed, that they had been born to some other name?

Prim is expecting her baby any day now. I hope her child grows up happy, that it knows how loved it is because it will be loved by her and Rory. Their child will never regret the family it comes from and will never fear or pay for its parents past deeds.

“I should have done better,” I whisper as I shut my eyes, trying to fall asleep. “I let them down.”

“No, you didn’t.” Peeta brushes my hair back. “Katniss.”

I open my eyes to look at him.

“There is no better. They love you. And you love them, they know that. They will get through this. We will get through this. Trust me.”

“How can you be sure?” I ask, defeated.

“Because I have to be.” He kisses me and I return it, sinking into the comfort and the safety it provides. The first time I truly felt safe was with Peeta on our Victory Tour. He has the ability to bring me back when I’m about to crumble. No one else does. It started as an act but no act can go on for this long without being true. I don’t think I realized how much I loved him until we were married. I hated the cameras, the Capitol extravagance, and I forced a smile for them, my heart pounding as I walked to the altar. It wasn’t until I got to him, when he took my hand, that I could breathe. And I didn’t have to force a smile or pretend that I wanted to kiss him. I did.

I love him. I need him.

And I need our children to live. I need to burn Snow and the Capitol. I need to make up for the
damage I’ve done. I need to fight back.

But the train keeps moving and as much as I want to fight, I have no way of doing so. When we stop, when we reach the Capitol, we’re on display. There is no hiding, no safety, no pretending that we aren’t about to lose a child and no planning for anything other than the Games.

For now, I lie in Peeta’s arms, praying that the sun won’t rise, that the train won’t stop and that we won’t have to watch our children die.

“And if we could float away
Fly up to the surface and just start again
And lift off before trouble
Just erodes us in the rain”

- Us Against the World - Coldplay
Ivy learns the Capitol is not what she expected as she’s prepped for the Tribute Parade.

I sleep for a few hours, but wake before dawn. I dress and find myself sitting on the bed thinking of the Capitol. In a few hours, we will be bombarded by people and thrown into preparation for the parade later. There will be no time to get settled.

I cherish these last few hours of silence.

I think about killing twenty two other Tributes. Their families watching, one parent who will probably accompany them here as their mentor. My parents facing those people when I end their children’s lives. Will they be relieved when I die? Will the monster I turn into even be worth mourning?

The silence becomes overbearing and I force myself to leave the room. It’s not really mine, it will never be. It’s just a place to sleep, like the room in the training center. The room that was mine, the place that meant more than just a bed to sleep in, is back home, never to be seen by me again.

I glance out the window on my way to the dining area. I can see the sunrise, the bright oranges and deep reds. I’ve always loved the sunrise. I wonder how many I have left or if I will even be able to see one in the arena.

I walk into the dining car where Effie is examining a plate. She looks at me as I enter. She pulls herself into her usual Capitol smile and I wonder if she’s even slept. She still looks just as meticulously prepared as ever, but there’s something about her eyes, even hidden under the makeup, that seem so worn.

“Oh, Ivy dear, I didn’t think you’d be awake so soon. That’s good. I won’t have to worry about you being on time,” she trills, smiling.

“Just everyone else,” I say, taking a seat in one of the overstuffed chairs beside the screen.

She sits across from me in another chair. I haven’t spent a lot of one on one time with Effie, but she has given me gifts over the years and tried, desperately, to get me to call her auntie. Something I haven’t been able to do, because she’s not. She doesn’t have any children of her own, but I think she likes to view us as surrogates. Though we’re not as refined as she probably wishes.

“You mustn’t worry about the Capitol. They will love you. I’m sure of it.”

“I’m not worried about them.”

“What are you worried about?” she asks, sincerely, and it’s the first time I’ve heard her voice lack its bubbly brightness.
“What happens after.”

“You win. You come home—”

I look at her, cold and hard. “I’m not coming home. We both know who I’m going to save. And what I’m going to do in that arena.”

She’s silent as her hand grips the arm of the chair. If it was possible to tell beneath the makeup I would say she’s gone pale.

She takes a deep breath. “Well then, we must make sure that, for the time being, we show them your beauty. And we make sure they remember you.”

I can’t help but smile.

“There’s the real smile. It’s much prettier than the usual one.”

“What?” I ask.

“There’s the face the world sees and the real one. We all do it. The real one is usually better.”

She checks her watch and her Capitol trill returns. The fake face back on. I begin to understand not only Effie a little more but my parents as well. There are the brave faces for Twelve, the happy faces for the Capitol and the other Districts, and the real ones that I’ve seen, if only temporarily.

“It seems it’s about that time. Breakfast will be served shortly. I’ll go wake the others.” Effie squeezes my shoulder as she passes. She leaves the dining car to retrieve everyone else and once again I’m alone with nothing but the silence and my thoughts to keep me company.

I shut my eyes and I must fall asleep for a short while because the next moment I’m being gently shaken awake by my father. I open my eyes and see him smiling at me.

“How long have you been out here?” He asks kindly.

I rub my eyes and shrug. It can’t have been too long, but I’m not exactly sure.

“Are you hungry?”

I nod and he offers me his hand to help me off the chair. We walk to the table as my mother and brother arrive. We serve ourselves and once again I’m overtaken by the rich flavors of the food. Bas eats faster than me and is already on his second plate by the time Haymitch shuffles in with Effie ranting about lateness behind him.

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“How long have you been out here?” my mother asks curiously.

I look down at my dress, realizing I must have taken it off and forgotten to put it back on.

“I’ll go get it.” I stand and make my way back to the room. I find it on the nightstand and pick it up. The gold shine hasn’t weathered over the years. I wonder how many times my mother has taken this out of the drawer. It seems polished, like every so often someone has made sure to keep it intact.

I feel the train slow and grip the pin tight. I realize I’m shaking as I can hear cheers from outside. I return to the dining car. Effie claps her hands.

“Alright, let’s give them something to cheer about.” She smiles. Haymitch takes a swig from his bottle and follows her out the exit to mild applause.
My father squeezes my mother’s hand before holding my brother’s shoulder and walking out with him. The crowd gets louder. I look out the window and watch my brother making half waves, the crowd loves him. Their bright outfits and hair are almost blinding against the white of the cityscape. They flood the streets and surround the training center, trying desperately to catch a glimpse of the interior of the train or of the Tribute and Victor before them. Some try to touch Bas or my father; they seem to be able to avoid them deftly, my father guiding my brother through.

My mother pulls me close. “Don’t look at them. Don’t give them anything. They don’t deserve it.”

I’m taken aback momentarily by the anger and darkness in her voice. I want to smile but I can’t respond as she’s pulling me forward and the next thing I know I’m standing in bright daylight with a screaming crowd of Capitol citizens before me.

They care most about my mother out of the four of us, but still I hear shouts of my name mixed amongst hers.

She holds my wrist tightly as we walk forward. I can’t breathe, all around me are painted faces with eyes of glee and idolization. There’s another look too, only in a few, but it’s darker and it makes my heart race with fear. I see it in an older man, with gold around his eyes and wearing too much jewelry. When he grabs my other arm, pulling me away from my mother, he stares me up and down like a starving person for food.

“I’ll be rooting for you. Just like I rooted for your mother.”

My mother returns and shoves him away, placing herself between me and the man. He appears insulted. I can feel the pin digging into my palm as I hold it tighter.

“How dare you?” The man brushes his suit where my mother shoved him. His mouth is agape as if what she’s done is unthinkable.

“Don’t touch her,” she threatens. My father runs back to us.

“Hey now what’s the problem?” he asks, trying to smooth it over with a smile, but he knows what happened and I can see an anger threatening to reveal itself in him by the way he clenches his hand.

“Your wife--”

“My wife is not the problem here. We appreciate the support. If you want to sponsor, leave your name with Effie.”

The man attempts to interject but my father adds, “Be grateful I got here when I did and that there are people around. Enjoy the Games.”

My father steers me back on the path. “Katniss,” he calls and my mother stares down the man as he disappears into the crowd. She follows after me. They keep me between them, though the occasional brush of my shoulder or theirs still gets through.

I don’t know how I look, but I feel like I’m going to be sick. I watch the ground, trying to block out the cheers and the leering looks. I focus on the metal in my hand. The feel of it. The weight. It helps to silence the noise. I didn’t expect it to be this bad.

My mother whispers in my ear, “It’s okay. We’re almost there. Just watch the ground.”

I nod as we pass the last of the crowd. Bas, Effie and Haymitch are waiting just inside as we enter.
“What happened?” my brother asks coming to my side.

“Capitol citizens are an excitable bunch,” Haymitch says. “You okay, kid?”

I nod.

“Good. Welcome to the training center, where you will be living in luxury. Until of course you’re surviving in a hostile environment where you’re not sure when you’ll get a meal or if you’ll make it to the next day.”

“Haymitch,” Effie warns. “Your stylists are waiting.”

I hand my mother the pin, afraid that I will lose it. Effie guides us to a separate wing as my parents watch us go. I look back and my mother nods as I walk forward with Bas beside me. They get into an elevator and head up to our floor.

“What’d they do to you?” Bas asks quietly as we walk.

I shake my head. “I don’t really want to talk about it.”

“They were shouting things at me. It was weird. Some woman tried to kiss me.” He shudders. “Dad stopped her.”

I look at him. “I had some guy grab me.” I can feel the impression left behind by how tightly I held the pin. The Mockingjay is outlined in my skin, like a reminder to be strong. Even as it fades I feel like the symbol has been burned into me.

“I hate these people,” he whispers.

“Why are they like this?” I ask.

He shrugs. “Because they are.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“It’s not a fair question.” He groans. “Fine. Because we let them. Because no one stood up to them. Is that a better answer?”

“Maybe.”

“What do you think they’re gonna do to us?” he asks.

“Set us on fire most likely.”

He looks scared and I can’t help but laugh.

“Bas, not really, you know that. It’s not real fire.”

“I know, but still. It’s not something I really want,” he says, running a hand through his hair.

We pass through a smaller hallway, where I can hear water running and people laughing. Effie stops us in front of two doors on opposite sides of each other. She smiles, proudly, but it doesn’t reach her eyes.

“Here we are. Ivy you go into the room on your left, Basil the room on your right. I’m sure you’ll both look absolutely stunning. I’ll see you both later. Remember, chins up and smile.” She imitates
her advice and we both nod.

“Good luck,” I tell Bas before I open the left-hand door.

“Yeah, hope they don’t cut all your hair off,” he laughs opening the right door.

“I hope they cut yours,” I add and he looks offended as I walk into the room.

I’m bombarded by my prep team almost immediately. They kiss me on the cheek and give me a hug like we’re old friends. In truth I’ve seen them maybe once or twice. I was more familiar with my mother’s old prep team, as they would come by once a year to get us ready for interviews. They’ve all since retired or become head stylists for other Districts.

My new prep team, Ambrose, Reeta, and Dietrich, have all chosen to keep the flames motif in their outfits and hair. They fawn over me, trying to impress me with tales of the Capitol and how I’ll shine or burn brighter than all the others. There’s a big laugh for that joke.

I’m stripped before they hose me down and wax every unwanted hair off my body. This is new. They don’t usually do this for interviews because I’m barely on camera. It’s not a pleasant experience.

After the uncomfortable waxing, they give me a robe and sit me down. It’s at about this time that we break for lunch, which I’m grateful for. They don’t talk as much with food in their mouths.

Lunch ends too quickly and it seems they’ve only become louder with a full stomach. They set to working on my hair, pulling and brushing to get it as smooth as possible. They cut my split ends, and put product after product in my hair. This I’m used to and I sit silently as they work. There’s a shine and curl to my dark hair when they’re done.

“Oh that looks gorgeous, Ambrose,” Reeta says in a high pitched squeal.

“She’s so much better at this than some of the others, right?” Ambrose says and the others agree with him.

“Remember the girl last year?” Reeta asks. The others nod in agreement. “She wouldn’t sit still. I was afraid I would cut her ear off.” They all laugh.

Next they work on my makeup. I sit still as they run black around my eyes to make them stand out, putting light touches of gold on the top.

“Oh that’s stunning. Those pretty blue eyes are going to stand out so well,” Dietrich says, satisfied with his work.

“They really are gorgeous. I’m jealous,” Ambrose says as he adds some gold touches on my arms.

“Well, I mean, look at her parents, of course she’s gorgeous. The audience is going to fall all over you. I won’t be surprised if you have sponsors lining up out the door come morning,” Reeta says with a smile. I try to smile back. I know they are saying what they think will make me feel better, will give me some kind of confidence going into this. They are telling me what they know, what they think is good news.

All I keep picturing is the Capitol man that grabbed me and the leering looks as I walked to the training center. I keep imagining how pretty they’ll think I am when I’m killing some other Tribute or when I’m lying on the ground dead. Will they find my eyes so stunning when there’s no life in them?
After what seems like forever they finally deem their work done and hug me goodbye. Once the door shuts I feel like I can breathe. I slump in my seat, careful not to mess up my hair. The last thing I want is for them to have to come back.

The door opens and I sit up straight.

“You don’t need to do that,” Cinna says and I turn, immediately relaxing. He’s aged well over the years. His hair is graying and he has wrinkles but he does nothing to change the look of age. He still wears earrings, and has gold on the corners of his eyes. I’ve always appreciated the minimal embellishments he’s chosen. Just enough that it looks good, not overdone to the point of it being sickening.

He carries a plastic covered black dress with a long train.

“How are you feeling?” he asks, genuinely, before giving me a hug.

I shrug. “As well as can be expected.”

“How’s your mother doing?”

I sit back in my seat. “I don’t really know. She almost got into a fight with someone earlier, but other than that, she’s been the same. I guess after so long she’s used this place.”

Cinna shakes his head and smiles. “Your mother is a very private person, which can be difficult here.” He furrows his brows before looking at the dress. I can tell he’s remembering my mother. The teenager that once held the hopes of Panem on her shoulders. He swallows the memory down and turns back to me.

I make a noise of agreement. He places a hand on mine.

“Still, a fight is unusual, even for her, what happened?”

“Some man got a little too close and pulled me away from her to tell me he’d be rooting for me. To be honest I didn’t really feel like I wanted him to root for me,” I say, the truth spilling out. It’s easy to talk to Cinna, especially after knowing him for years.

He nods and his eyes go dark, like he has some insight into the interaction that I don’t. “Some people don’t understand personal space. Speaking of which, need to get you dressed and ready to remind them what the Mellark family is made of.”

He removes the dress from the plastic and hands it to me. The fabric is dark and though it looks heavy it isn’t. It shines against the light and is silky smooth as I put it on. He holds the train, which actually seems more like a cape. It’s too long for me to walk around with it. I hope it doesn’t get tangled in the chariot. He finishes last minute touches, and then we are out the door walking to the staging area.

This will be the first time I’m in the same room as the other Tributes. I can’t size them up fully, not until we enter training, but it’ll give me somewhat of an idea of who I’m dealing with. It’ll also give me a chance to get the necessary sponsors to ensure Bas’s victory. I think about the Capitol citizens and my heart races. My hands shake but I force them to steady. There is no room for weakness anymore.

We take an elevator down to the staging area. I focus on the floor, trying to collect myself.

“Don’t give them anything. They don’t deserve it,” Cinna tells me. His words, which echo my mother’s, give me the last bit of strength I need to hold my head high as the doors open.
He doesn’t follow me out. I look back. “Go to the last one. I have to check on your brother, but I’ll be back. You’ll be fine.”

I nod as the doors shut again. I turn back to the staging area and see the Tributes of One and Two with their mentors talking amongst themselves. I guess they’re already preparing their team. I pass Four, but see only Beck by the chariot talking to Finnick Odair.

The only other Tributes are the ones from Seven. The boy, about thirteen, I think his name is Grover, talks to Johanna Mason. Even though she’s well into her forties, she still looks the same as the Victor who marched out of her arena. Despite the few wrinkles signaling her age, she could still chop someone up with ease. I’ve always been frightened by her, even before seeing her in person, but now that I have that fear hasn’t lessened. She looks me up and down as I pass, giving me a nod of recognition. Her Tributes turn to stare at me before she immediately draws their attention back to her. I wonder what she’s telling them. Make friends with me or kill me. I swallow and force myself to continue to my chariot.

I can hear the audience outside, already growing restless. It makes my stomach turn. I give the horse a couple pats to calm myself.

Slowly, more Tributes and stylists funnel in. Not everyone’s mentors join them, or only one does, and I wonder if it makes the ones without them seem stronger, like they can stand on their own.

“You look very princess-like,” a voice says lightly.

I turn to face Beck Cresta, his smiling face greeting me. His hair is shorter than it was at the reaping and I realize his style team cut it. It’s been mussed up in a sort of half wave with product that gives it a shine. It makes his green eyes stand out more. They’re so green that it reminds me of home and of the trees in the woods. I have to look anywhere but at his eyes as he talks to me. He leans against the chariot, but slips and forces himself to stand straight. I’m not sure what he’s trying to accomplish by coming over here. If it’s intimidation, it’s not working. If it’s trying to ally himself with me, he’s having less of an effect.

“What is that supposed to mean?” I ask, noticing his outfit. They’ve given him some kind of half open shirt to show off his chest, which has been oiled to give him a shine and tan. There’s some kind of netting around his waist over leather pants. They’ve pierced his ear with a gold fishing hook. Tridents and shells have been embroidered on his loose vest.

“That someone’s making a point. And you look...nice.” He shrugs. “I’m Beck.”

“I know, I saw the reaping.” I narrow my eyes.

“Well I saw yours, Ivy, but I was being polite.”

“What are you supposed to be?” I ask, annoyed. Why is he here?

“Pirate. They thought it would be a nice theme since my mother was a mermaid during her Games and all. And this year is all about history, isn’t it?” He laughs, though there’s no humor in it. There’s a deep seeded anger that I understand.

The noise from the audience outside increases as more people pack into their seats in anticipation. Beck looks towards the entrance and I think I see a shudder, but he covers quickly, straightening and turning to address me, the bravado back.

“I thought they were always about history. The rebellion. Or do they not give you an education in Four outside of preparing you for the Games?” I smirk.
He cocks his head to the side, staring me down, weighing his next remark. “Oh come now, we both know I’m not the only one prepared.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I shrug.

“Yeah I’m sure.”

I hear an elevator open and watch Cinna walk out of it with my brother beside him. They head towards Beck and I. Beck takes one look at them and begins to walk away, but not before he adds, “You know you should give the horse a sugar cube, maybe eat one yourself. Good for the nerves.”

I watch him as he reaches Finnick, who grabs his shoulder and talks to him quietly. They look back at me every so often and my hand clenches. He’s just trying to find a weakness. It was probably Finnick’s plan to send him over too. I can’t trust anyone here, no one except Bas.

Still, there’s an odd way Finnick looks at Beck as he speaks, like he’s more worried than giving him advice. When they look at me one final time, there’s a similarity to their expression that’s almost eerie. It’s then that I realize why they look similar. I’m not the only one here with two Victor’s for parents.

“What did he want?” Bas asks and I’m broken from my thoughts.

I turn to Bas. “He told me I looked princess-like.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” He looks towards Beck, whose getting onto his chariot with the girl from Four. She’s much shorter than him but stands straight and watches everyone around her with careful precision. She’s going to be a problem. They both are.

“That’s what I said.” I try to laugh and it manages to bring a smile to Bas’ face. Cinna attaches the trains to our outfits. While I wear a dress, Bas wears what looks like a suit fit for royalty. The train looks like a cape on him. They haven’t done much with his hair, just trimmed it and styled it back and they haven’t put much makeup on him. Just enough to give him a shine under the lights.

When Cinna’s finished he looks at his work to make sure it all fits the way he needs it to. He nods approvingly. “It’s timed so as soon as you hit the lights, the train will burn away. So don’t panic when it starts.”

We nod.

Before he leaves he adds, “Don’t give them anything.”

“That’ll be easy,” Bas adds and I agree. Cinna smiles before he takes his leave.

“You think Beck’s ally material?” Bas asks as we board the chariot.

I shake my head. “I already told you. We don’t need anyone.”

“Yeah, because the two of us against twenty two others really puts the odds in our favor.” He rolls his eyes.

“Do you trust me?” I ask. He looks at me like I’ve asked him if the sky is blue.

“Of course. But—“

“I’ll keep you safe. I promise.”
That’s the end of the conversation as the anthem plays and the chariots pull forward. As soon as we exit the staging area, our trains light up and fire plumes around us. The crowd screams and chants our names.

We give them nothing. We don’t even acknowledge President Snow or his granddaughter. They don’t deserve it. No one here deserves our attention. I can feel the anger burning through us and I hope there’s a mishap that causes this fire to become real, to burn this entire building down and take everyone with it. But it doesn’t happen and we return to the staging area unharmed.

If I thought the stares were bad before, it’s worse after the reactions of the crowd. One and Two in particular keep a close watch on us as we meet our parents and Haymitch before boarding the elevator.

I feel a squeeze on my shoulder and turn to see my mother behind me. She gives me a look, asking me if I’m okay and I nod, turning back to the doors as they open.

We walk into the vast room and I’ve never seen a view like the one outside the window. I may hate the Capitol and all it stands for but I have to admit looking out over the city with its lights against the dark sky makes it seem beautiful and peaceful even.

I feel exhausted and go to my room, peeling off the dress once I’m inside. I go into the shower and let the water wash off all the product and makeup they’ve put on me. When I finally feel like myself I exit and find a pair of pajamas in the drawers.

That night I dream of cheering faces, twisted with their exaggerated wigs and painted faces. They grab at me and pull at me until I’m being torn apart, my screaming silenced as they drown me in a sea of applause.

It stops suddenly when I’m reminded of green eyes and the peace of home. The next thing I know, I’m sitting in a tree above a lake and there’s nothing that can hurt me for miles. I sleep soundly for the first time in a long time.

“This road is paved with pictures and tools
oh revealers
the journeys long so you better make your move
we're all heathens and we're healers

A miracle in one hand
and the other holds a ball and chain
we thirst for liberation
we thirst for the rising flame”

– Tricksters and Fools - Lynx
Chapter Summary

Ivy experiences her first day of training and meets the Tributes she will be facing in the arena, including the Careers. Meanwhile, Katniss faces her duties as a mentor in finding potential allies and sponsors.

The Games: Making Friends – Ivy and Katniss

Ivy –

Training gear has been set out for me the next morning. When I dress, I’m surprised how comfortable and soft the fabric is. The number twelve has been embroidered across the back and on the sleeve for all to see, like a target for the Careers to focus on.

*Good,* I think. Let them focus on me, let them hate me, at least it isn’t Bas. If they ignore him it’ll be easier for him to win. If they’re too busy trying to figure out how to kill me, Bas can slip by and become the Victor without them even realizing they’re playing right into my plan.

I leave my room, feeling a little better about my death sentence. I’m not sure what it is, maybe the good night’s sleep, maybe I’ve finally reached acceptance, or maybe I know I’m going to succeed. Today, I don’t feel as worn down, as terrified of the Capitol as I was. The prospect of finally meeting the Careers doesn’t even scare me. I think I’m finally giving up and trying to enjoy my final days.

Is this what my mother felt years ago? This feeling of elation that comes with giving up and not caring anymore?

I take a seat at the table as Effie chatters away to my parents about their schedule for the day.

“And then you have a meeting while we’re at the trading floor at two. Until then, manners. That means you Katniss. There will be several sponsors there today.”

“Yeah I’m sure they’ll be real interested in talking to Twelve over One and Two,” my mother says.

“If you remind them of this one, here, they should make time.” Effie points to me. “You know, everyone’s talking about that dress. First time in ten years that Cinna’s used flames again. This family does bring out the best in his inspiration.”

“I’m glad I’m only learning how to kill people today. What you three are doing sounds awful.” I take a bite and see my mother hide a smile. Effie looks at me like I’ve gone crazy. “What?”

“You made a joke,” Bas says as he walks in, pulling at his shirt. “It’s shocking. This feels tight.”

“You’ll get used to it,” I tell him. He sits beside me and throws bacon onto his plate.

“But will we get used to the jokes?” Bas asks, taking a bite of bacon.

“I make one a year, so probably not.”
“That’s two.”

“Shut up.”

“How’d we do last night?” Bas asks our parents. My mother’s absent smile fades as she’s reminded of reality and of the fact that we’re tributes and she’s our mentor.

Haymitch clears his throat. “Well, you two definitely made a statement. But today, you have training and what you want to do is avoid showing them your skills at all cost.”

“Why? I mean it’s not like they won’t be able to guess what we’re good at,” I say with a shrug.

“Yeah, wouldn’t it be better if they knew? Could get us allies?” Bas asks.

I shoot him a warning look. He covers, “Or just, you know give them a reason to avoid us.”

“It gives them a reason to target you,” Haymitch says, taking a drink of water.

“You don’t want the Careers watching your every move. Trust me,” my mother says.

“Don’t draw attention to yourselves, in any way.” My father gives Bas a look and I know he’s silently reminding Bas of what he did in Twelve, not that Bas needs reminding. I’m sure, like me, he thinks about the damage every day.

“We’ll stick to traps and plants,” Bas says. I nod in agreement. We don’t need to learn how to make traps or to learn what plants we can and can’t eat. We’ve had those skills instilled in us from an early age. Even Bas, who doesn’t go out in the woods and who hates hunting, knows how to trap squirrels and how to tell the difference between nightlock and other berries.

Effie claps her hands around nine when it’s time to leave. She leads us to the elevator and shows us which button to press before leaving us. Haymitch shouts a last piece of advice as the doors shut.

“Make some friends.”

We’re silent as the elevator descends to the training floor. When the doors open I see the Gamemakers observing from their platform. They eat and drink as they watch us enter. Plutarch Heavensbee, the Head Gamemaker for this year, raises a glass to us. He was the Gamemaker for the last Quell and for five years after, but then he retired. I guess, since he was so well received during the 75th, Snow decided to bring him back for the 100th. He’s in his early seventies with a large stomach and what little hair he has left is white. Even without the usual Capitol flourishes I feel sick at his presence. It reminds me that this is entertainment for them.

The tributes from One and Two are already practicing with swords, knives, and spears. While the tributes from Nine and Ten mill about, trying to settle on a skill. The rest of the tributes have yet to arrive.

The boy from Ten, only nine years old and doing his best to be brave, is too small to fit into his shirt. I can only make out the zero on the back of his shirt. Like my father said on the train, he’s much too young to be here. Little Zero shakily takes a spear and tries to throw it to the laughter of the Careers.

“Hey!” I shout as I storm over to them. They seem almost taken aback that someone not in their group is even talking to them. I want to hit them. Bas follows me, trying to stop me with a hand on my shoulder. I shrug him off and continue over.
“Is there a problem?” the boy from One says. He’s about twenty two, tall, with blond hair. His name is Stone, I remember because Bas and I spent an hour trying to figure out why his parents named him that, before thinking of different rocks we could call him. The rest of the names I’ve also committed to memory because I knew they’d be the ones to cause me the most trouble.

“Leave that kid alone.” I stand tall as the Career pack fans out to face me. They won’t hurt me here, they can’t. But I’m fairly certain the plan of going unnoticed has been shot to Hell.

“Why?” Victoria, the girl from Two asks. She’s got long dark hair and stands about a foot taller than me. Her father, Brutus, never fails to mention how proud he is of his daughter in every interview I’ve seen. I’m sure he’s beaming at what he assumes is her soon to be victory. He even named her for the title of Victor.

“Think of how it looks. Big strong adults picking on a little kid. It’s sad,” Bas answers, trying to play it off. They don’t buy it.

“Maybe he needs to understand that he’s outmatched,” Cain, from Two, with his short dark hair and lean muscles, replies as he twirls a sword. He’s the strongest out of the four of them. He turns to me. “And maybe you should care more about your stupid fire dress and next interview, than what I’m doing.”

“Are you worried that I’ll get more attention than you?” I ask, a smile threatening to form.

“We know you get more attention.” Emery, from One, picks at her cuticles. Her father, Gloss and her aunt, Cashmere, won their Games back to back, and they’re both on her mentor team. She doesn’t look like them though. She has short brown hair with natural curls. She’s slender but I can tell she’s stronger than she looks. “But, I know that it doesn’t mean shit. All they care about is your stupid mother and her love story. Frankly I’m surprised she even won.” Her snide remarks do what she intends them to, they get under my skin.

“Yeah well I’m sure you’ll be just as surprised when I kill you.” I regret saying it as soon as it leaves my mouth. They all laugh at me, like I’m beneath them, except Emery, who glares at me like she wants me to try. She’s the only one out of the lot of them that sees me for what I am, ready and willing to kill them.

“Making friends?” Beck asks as he approaches me. I don’t take my eyes off Emery. Cain and Victoria introduce themselves to Beck, it’s forced but they try to be nice. They don’t see him as any more of a threat than they do me.

“Beck. Minnow’s on her way over.” He steps in front of Emery. “Ivy, I think you and your brother should leave now,” he says, calmly. Whatever pleasantries he had the other night are gone now as I knew they would be. I’m glad I chose not to trust him, but it makes me angrier than it should.

“Good luck in the Games, both of you,” Cain says with a smile glancing from me to my brother. A chill runs up my spine. He rips the spear from Zero and throws it into the center of the target.

I want to grab the bow from the archery station and show them just how much luck my brother and I need. But I think better on it and walk away to the laughter of the Careers.

“Nice job going unnoticed,” Bas says as we walk away.

“They knew who I was anyway. It doesn’t make a difference.” I’m lying to myself. They may have known my name but I’ve given them a reason to seek me out in the arena. I don’t care if they see me as a target, I even want them to, but I know that if I’m their focus during the cornucopia
there’s a chance I won’t make it past the bloodbath and then where does that leave Bas.

I try to ignore the Careers as we walk over to the rope tying station. We spend the better part of an hour learning different knots. I’m not very good at tying them, but Bas picks it up quickly.

“Shouldn’t make them see you, not smart at all,” the boy from Nine says as he sits beside us. His cropped hair covers his forehead, and he avoids eye contact. He mutters to himself before he’s lucid enough to tell us, “I’m August.”

“Ivy, this is Bas,” I point to my brother.

“I know who you two are.” Then, he adds in a whisper, “The Mockingjay children.”

We don’t know how to respond. August holds a finger to his lips like he’s silencing us, or himself. He taps a rhythm on his cheek after he moves his finger aside.

“August, are you bothering them?” his district partner asks, bored. She’s tall and thin, with a tan from what I can only assume is spending days outside in Nine.

“No, he’s just talking,” Bas covers. August smiles.

“This is Trina. She’s very angry.” August plays with a piece of rope, trying to tie a knot but failing. Bas shows him how to do it correctly. I want to scold Bas for helping another district but I find myself liking these two from Nine. Immediately I feel guilty. I shouldn’t like anyone. They’re just going to die or I’m going to have to kill them.

“Yeah I’m angry. You age out, think you’re safe but oh no, thanks to your family history, you now get reaped for the Quell.” Trina blows a piece of hair out of her face. I glance over at the Careers and wonder if they’re just as angry. Do they see this as a second chance to win, or do they blame my family for being here? Emery hates us. She wouldn’t be here if not for us. I wonder if Trina blames us too.

“Though I’m sure you two are probably worse.” She takes a seat and ties a knot.

“Why would you say that?” I ask.

“Brother and sister. Only one of you can win. That’s harsh.”

I nod. “We’ll figure it out.”

“She has a plan,” August adds. “And I bet it’s to save you.” He points to Bas.

“Sorry about him. August is a little out there. His mother is on a lot of morphling. I think it affected his development.”

“Can you paint?” August asks Bas. “Like your father? Or do you do the arrows and she does the painting?”

“Bas, let’s go to plants now.” I stand. Bas nods.

“Nice meeting you,” Bas says courteously, following me.

August waves before saying, “She does the arrows I bet.”

“It’s called archery, August. And of course she does,” Trina tells him, exasperated.

We spend the rest of the morning checking off the plants we can eat and the ones we can’t. Every
once in a while I look over to the Careers and watch Beck throw a trident into a target. It always lands right where he wants it to. The others, especially Cain seem to be impressed by it.

I overhear Stone tell him, “I have to say, considering your mother, we weren’t sure how prepared you’d be for this, but I’m glad to be wrong.”

Beck grips the trident a little too tightly as he nods to Stone. He feigns appreciation well, but I can see through it. When he throws the trident the smack as it hits the target is louder than the others. I wonder if he’s imagining Stone as he throws it. Beck glances over to me as he picks up the trident and he smiles.

I roll my eyes and go back to my plants. I’m not playing this intimidation game where he feigns kindness to kill me. I would be more worried about him if Johanna was his mentor as she knows just how to pretend the right way before killing everyone. But, knowing that Finnick is his father doesn’t make me fear him any more than I did before and it should.

“What do you think about them? Trina and August?” Bas asks, bored as he checks off another plant.

“What do you mean, what do I think?”

“Haymitch said to make friends. Thinking they could be allies?”

“I already told you, we don’t need allies, Bas.”

“We’re gonna need someone else if we’re facing them,” Bas says as he looks towards the Career pack.

I shake my head. “We won’t be facing them. We’ll play it safe, find somewhere to hide, and wait it out.”

“Assuming there is a place to hide.” Bas checks off another plant.

We break for lunch, eating silently as the Careers spend it laughing and talking about their skill level. Zero eats with his district partner, which I’m grateful for. She seems to be protecting him after the incident with the Careers. At least he has someone to do it. Otherwise, I would have been the one watching for him and I can’t take care of him and Bas.

The loud Career conversation turns into different ways to kill. Beck feigns an interest until the topic changes to their Victor parents. He focuses on the stew he’s eating and adds nothing to the conversation. I can’t help but feel a little bad for him. All they know is his mother and he can’t talk about his father. I don’t fully understand the reasons behind him not telling people, or Finnick and Annie not telling people, but I know what it’s like to grow up with attention and cameras. Maybe they wanted to avoid that with him.

The girl from Four, Minnow is around sixteen and small for her age. Despite her size, she’s just as loud as the others and enjoys talking about her father a little too much.

“Beck, remember when my dad dropped that boulder on the boy from Ten. He had lost his weapons and was all alone and he just found this boulder and managed to push it so that it rolled and crushed the boy from Ten.” She says it in one breath. Beck nods along.

“My father beheaded three tributes during the bloodbath,” Cain says proudly. I shudder when he adds, “And completely disemboweled a fourth. He has the highest kill rate of anyone at the cornucopia.”
“Going to try to go for the new record, Cain?” Stone asks.

“Well if anyone’s going to beat him, it should be someone in the family.” Cain laughs.

“I’m going to be the third person in my family to compete. And to win,” Emery announces. The other Careers take it as a joke but continue to add veiled threats under the guise of laughter.

“Not if I can help it.” Victoria smiles as she takes a bite of some braised ribs. It’s the first time I’ve seen her smile or heard her speak since this morning. It’s not a kind smile, there’s a dead space in her eyes where it doesn’t reach.

I imagine her as a little girl training, her father teaching her the best ways to kill someone and how to inflict maximum damage. She’s probably known how to cut someone down since she was old enough to hold a sword or throw a spear. I’ll have to kill her from a distance. I don’t stand a chance against her in hand to hand. The same applies for Cain. Emery and Stone might be easier, but I won’t actively seek out a close fight with any of them.

Beck would be useless without his trident, which he may stand a chance of hitting me with. I have to be faster than him. Minnow doesn’t concern me as much as the others, she’s small but I make a note not to overlook her and to pay attention when she picks up a weapon. She hasn’t yet today and I hope maybe she doesn’t have one she’s particularly good at. I imagine what it would be like to kill one of them, for their laughter to stop, for their eyes to go cold. I can’t see it.

I go to refill my plate, somehow feeling hungry despite my thoughts. Beck joins me a minute later as I scoop some potatoes onto my plate. He’s the last person I want to talk to, especially after planning how I need to kill him.

“You should try the fish,” he says as he puts rice on his plate.

“Careful, you don’t want your new friends to see you talking to me.”

“They’re not my friends. They’re tools for survival.” Beck follows me down the line.

“Well those tools are going to try to kill you. And when they try, I’m not gonna help you.” I face him.

“Who said anything about you helping me?” Beck asks, an irritating smirk on his face.

I’m starved for words as I go back to putting whatever food I can on my plate as quickly as possible.

“Do you want to help me, Twelve?” he asks, suddenly too close to me. I feel my cheeks flushing red.

“No, in fact I can’t wait to kill you, Four.” I hurry back to my table, hoping he can’t see how red my face is.

“Making yourself more noticeable?” Bas asks as I slam my tray down. I sit across from him and take a bite out of the fish I haphazardly threw on my plate.

“Making friends.”

I glare across the room at Beck and the Careers. I really wish we were in the arena and I could shoot them all.

After lunch, Bas tries his hand at camouflage. He’s good at it, probably just as good as our father,
which he proudly tells me after he paints his hand to look like a rock.

I swirl colors in a bowl and try to paint tree bark on my hand but fail to make it resemble anything other than a grey, brown mess. I wipe off the paint as the girl from Eleven, Callie speaks to my brother.

“You’re good at that,” she says, impressed.

“Thanks,” he replies, “I have a lot of practice.”

“We know,” Callie says pointing to her district partner across the room. He’s tall and surprisingly quick as he practices hand to hand combat. “That’s Teddy. He thinks he needs that over survival skills.” Callie rolls her eyes.

“You shouldn’t overlook them. What happens if you need to eat and you don’t know which plants are good,” Bas says as he wipes off the paint on his hand.

“That’s what I keep saying, but he doesn’t want to listen.”

“My sister’s similar. She thinks she’s always right.” Bas looks at me.

“I’m right here,” I say, annoyed.

“I know.” He laughs. Callie joins him.

I look over at the fire station. There’s only one person there, the boy from Seven with his shaggy hair and glasses. He’s small for his age, fourteen, and as I watch him struggle to get a fire going, I can’t help but see my brother in him.

“You should try it like this.” I take the stick from his hand and show him how my mother taught me. The fire lights, smoke billowing from the tree stump.

“I don’t think my mentor would advise you to teach people how to survive,” he jokes. I smile as I take a seat.

“I don’t think my mother would care.”

“I can respect that. I’m Grover,” he introduces, holding out his hand.

I take it and we shake. “Ivy.”

“Both your parents are your mentors?” He asks. I nod. “That’s hard. I can’t imagine having one here, let alone two.”

“You don’t have a parent?”

“No. My mother, she died like a year after I was born. I live with my grandmother.”

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“It happened too long ago for me to know.”

I don’t remember his mother’s Games. I was about a year old when she won. I do remember being around five and hearing a report on her death. Apparently there was an accident in Seven, some kind of freak thing where she was walking in the woods and a tree fell on her. The Capitol took the loss pretty hard. I think her name was Natasha.
I remember my father shaking his head at the report and my mother consoling him.

“How’s Johanna doing?” he had asked my mother at the time. I don’t remember what the answer was or if they even traveled to Seven for the funeral. But judging by their reactions I doubt the story is true and I’m sure she died under different terms. Terms the Capitol doesn’t want getting out, because then the people might stop seeing the dead Tributes as sacrifices for the glory of the Capitol and start seeing their Victors as damaged individuals who aren’t as lucky as people think they are.

Grover doesn’t have a father either. That I remember, and the Capitol didn’t have much of an interest in him.

“Hey, don’t feel bad for me. It’s not like I’m fighting for my life…oh wait.” He smiles at his joke. I don’t understand how some of them can still find the time to smile, but then I remember how I felt this morning. How I had given up and known, believed, my plan would be successful. I look around and realize the ones with smiles are the ones who share that feeling. He continues, “Besides, I have Johanna. She’s kind of like an aunt.”

“I’ve always found her to be kind of scary,” I tell him.

“She’s pretty intense, but she cares, and when she cares, be glad you’re the one she cares about.” Grover manages to light a fire on his own. He looks up at me, proud.

“Good job.”

The Careers have settled into their chosen weapons by now. Stone favors swords and spears, though he’s not as good at them as Cain, who has much more versatility with weapons than all the others. At one point he picks up an ax and throws it dead center into a target. Emery, like her father and aunt, uses knives while Victoria settles more on watching the others. She throws spears just fine, and like the boys favors a sword, as I thought she would, but she doesn’t show off as much as the others. She leans against the wall watching as her allies practice combat training and I can see the gears turning. She’s working out everyone’s weaknesses and strengths just as I was doing during lunch. I wonder if she has a plan for me, if she knows exactly how she’s going to kill every single one of us.

Minnow tries her hand at combat training. She’s quick enough to avoid being hit, but doesn’t strike as hard as the others. Victoria barely watches her. She’s already counted Minnow amongst the dead.

Grover says something to me that I don’t catch. “What?”

“I asked if they scare you.” He indicates the Career group.

Minnow falls and Cain rolls his eyes. He whispers something to Victoria who nods in agreement. They may be loyal to each other now, joking around and smiling, but they’re all too eager to win, desperate to be the one who ends this. They’ll fall apart quickly. I shake my head, “No.”

“They scare me.” He pauses, debating whether he wants to continue before saying, “You’re a lot like Johanna said you’d be.”

“And that is?” I ask, taken aback.

“Really good at lying to yourself. But also, really brave and kind of frightening, in a good way. She likes you.” Grover smiles warmly. It doesn’t make me feel better to know that Johanna Mason likes me. It just makes me think she’s going to order Grover to kill me first.
I mill about going to useless stations, bored out of my mind. I want to go back to the room. I can’t shoot. I don’t want to make friends. I’m done with training. I can’t imagine doing this for another two days. I wonder how my parents are doing with their meetings.

Katniss –

I’ve always hated trying to convince people to help my Tributes. Even more, I hate how the sponsors walk around like they’re precious commodities. They are and they can be what stands between life and death, but Tributes aren’t items to be purchased. My children aren’t things to be coveted. I’m reminded once again of the desire to end this.

The large trading floor bustles with mentors trying to sell their tributes to the best sponsors. We each have our own small section with chairs and during the Games there will be screens on the wall devoted to each of our Tributes. Right now they display each face with a number above their head. Their odds of winning keep shifting as more sponsors sign up. They will change after the scores are released, providing a more definitive look at possible Victors. As usual, the sponsors flock to One and Two. They take time to talk to Finnick, but largely ignore Four as potential Victors.

Finnick does his best to put on a smile, even when the women and some men of the Capitol come up to him just to touch him. I hear him try to sell them on Beck, some make excuses, while some genuinely consider him as long as his training score holds up to Finnick’s praise.

I used to consider Finnick nothing more than a Victor, proud of his title. But Tributes aren’t the only people the Capitol covets. It’s a rumor to others who haven’t experienced it, but I know, especially after seeing the reactions when we arrived, if it weren’t for Peeta, there’s a chance I would have become like Finnick. If Ivy wins, she very well could. I feel cold thinking about it. If Bas wins, would that be better? Would he be safe? No, there is no safety. I can’t comprehend losing either one of them.

Peeta, Haymitch and I get a few interested parties as the day wears on, but nothing serious. Even being branded the girl on fire’s daughter doesn’t have the amount of attention Cain from Two gets. They don’t consider her victory a sure bet. I expect the same rule’s going to apply to my children as they do for Beck. If their training score is high enough, we’ll get requests. Until then, Haymitch drinks steadily while talking with Johanna.

Whatever he tells her seems serious, though he plays it off with a smile. She does the same but I’ve learned to recognize the signs in Haymitch. He doesn’t want attention, he’s planning and it can’t look like he is. I need to know the plan. I need to have hope that I can save my children.

I take a step towards them but am almost immediately stopped by Finnick.

“Katniss,” he says, smiling.


“You know as well as I that looks can be deceiving.”

“Any takers yet?” I ask, expecting Effie to run in at any moment and drag us to our meeting. The clock reads five to two and she’s nothing if not punctual.

“You know how it is. First day’s the hardest. Unless you’re One and Two. Cashmere and Gloss sure are generating a lot of interest.” He directs my attention to the two blondes surrounded by Capitol sponsors. Two men practically get in a fight trying to speak to one of them. “And here I thought it would be them fighting over you.”
I don’t want to be in this room. I don’t want to be in this city. I hate the smell, the blood and roses that follows me wherever I go. I hate the constant attention and the extravagance. People are starving all over the country and these people eat meal after meal made of the grain and meat taken from the people in the districts. And they throw it away when they’re done like it’s nothing or throw it up to stuff more in.

I remember my Victory party, Peeta was just as angry as I when we witnessed the Capitol’s way of life. It only got worse as the years went on, as we spent more time here. We play our parts, we pretend to be grateful, to love the Capitol and our way of life, but even though we’re well off in Twelve, we’ve never taken more than we need.

I remember that Finnick is standing beside me and I shake myself back to reality. I check the clock. It’s after two. Where’s Effie?

“Well, I’d love to stay and chat, Finnick, but I have--”

“A meeting? Yeah I know. It’s with me.” He smiles before adding, “And Annie.”

“What about River?” I look around for the third Victor from their district. There used to be four Victors, but Mags died years ago. She was nothing but kind and one of the few Victors I actually liked being near. The year after she was gone, the 80th Games, it was just Finnick and River, who won two years before.

“He’s not interested in allying his daughter with your kids. Thinks it’ll get her killed.”

“And you want to ally Beck because…you think someone should? And if he dies, whatever?” He’s not usually interested in allying with Twelve. He hasn’t been for some time. I don’t know why he would start now. Unless he thinks because these Tributes are my children they’ll have some kind of advantage.

All the tributes have the same advantage, they were raised by Victors and while some bear the scars better, we’ve all lived with the same fear. That one day our children would become like us. Even Gloss, who’s normally composed with a superior attitude, has a wild look to his eyes as he speaks to sponsors. He wants to give Emery everything he can to ensure her win. I don’t blame him for it. I would be doing the same thing if we had more interest, but no one cares when you don’t have a victory in twenty five years.

Finnick’s jaw tightens and he grinds his teeth. The mention of Beck hits him harder than I think it should. He pulls himself together and the playful smile returns. The illusion of the careless mentor he so often plays.

“Beck wants to ally himself with Ivy.” He shrugs. “I’ve told him to stick with One and Two, but he’s chosen not to listen to me.”

“They do that.” I think of Ivy and her unwillingness to listen. Finnick silently agrees, understanding my meaning much better than I expect him to. I wonder how much he knows Beck, if this is more personal than he wants me to believe it is.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea,” I try, but he doesn’t take no for an answer.

He pleads. “Will you come with me to see Annie? She might convince you.” There’s a look that reflects Gloss’s, the same one that I’ve seen in Peeta and in the mirror. Desperation to save someone you love.

“I’ll find Peeta,” I tell him. He looks relieved.
Peeta and I follow Finnick down the hall to the door marked Four. Each district gets its own suite on the trading floor. It’s smaller than the rooms we’re given during training, but each suite has a dining area, a small lounge, and two bedrooms. Most districts take shifts during the Games, with one remaining on the trading floor while the other mentors sleep. Sponsors are never brought into the suites. They are reserved for conversations between districts, usually involving allies. Even when both tributes are dead from their district, the other mentors help the ones left standing. We’re not allowed to leave until the Games are over so it’s easier than doing nothing.

We walk inside the suite. Annie sits on the couch, staring at the glass table. The door shuts but she doesn’t look up.

Annie doesn’t usually mentor in the Games, she’s always been considered too damaged to be helpful. Or so everyone but Finnick says. Since this year her son is in the Games, nothing, not even her fragile state, would keep her away. She’s kept to herself and stayed in the suite all morning. I don’t think the sponsors want to see her, to be reminded of what happens after what they call glory. And if they don’t want to see her, she wants to see them even less.

Finnick sits beside her and coaxes her back to reality. She snaps out of it quickly, her green eyes finding mine.

“How is it out there?” she asks Finnick.

He shrugs. “What we expected. Do you still want…?” He never finishes his question. She nods, standing and walking to the dining table. Finnick takes the seat beside her while Peeta and I take the two across. An Avox brings us glasses of water.

Finnick looks to Annie. She nods. He starts, “Like I said Beck has asked us to request Ivy as an ally. Now before you say no, you should know that his skill set would be desirable in the arena. And I’m sure it would make it easier on your children.”

“That’s all well and good, but, Ivy isn’t looking for allies,” Peeta says, quietly.

“Are you sure?” Annie asks.

I nod. “She’s said, repeatedly, that she doesn’t want them.”

“Why are you here, then?” she asks, her voice on edge.

“We’re hoping she might change her mind,” Peeta answers.

“She might change her mind. And if she doesn’t? You’ll just let her enter the arena naively believing she doesn’t need help. I expected more from you, girl on fire.” Finnick takes a sip of his water.

“Don’t call me that,” I threaten.

He ignores me, leaning forward in his chair, that desperate look back on his face. “Anyone who has ever won has won with an ally who’s either died for them, or killed for them. And yes, even been killed by them. We all know this is temporary and no one wants to admit that there’s a very real chance one of them might kill the other, but as of right now, it’s good for all of us.” Finnick takes a breath before continuing, “I’m assuming Ivy has an affinity for a bow and arrow and if she does, she can’t face the Career pack alone.”

“She’s not alone,” Peeta says.

“Worrying about Basil is going to be a distraction for her. She’s going to need someone else to
watch her back besides her brother.” There’s no smile on Finnick’s face anymore, this is the business like mentor prepared to do anything to keep his Tribute alive.

I’m barely listening to Finnick. I’m too focused on his earlier words. About every Victor winning with an ally. “I didn’t.”

“What?” he asks.

“You said anyone who has won, won with an ally. I didn’t.”

He stares at me, a sardonic laugh echoing through him. “Have you really forgotten? Of course you did. Rue.”

I clench my fists under the table at the mention of Rue. The truth is I have tried to forget. I see her all the time, but I’ve pushed the memories away, even as I’m haunted by them. Peeta takes my hand silently.

“And later Peeta, who you defiantly refused to kill.” Finnick glances between the two of us.

“You know it wasn’t defiance,” I say, glaring at him.

“No, you were so in love,” he says disbelieving, his voice tinged with anger.

“Finnick,” Annie warns. He looks to her, she shakes her head. I’m surprised how much he listens to Annie and how well she’s holding herself together during this conversation. From the brief stories I’ve heard about her I didn’t think she would be able to sit through half as long as she has. I should have known the stories were exaggerations. The Capitol loves their gossip almost as much as they love their Victors. His tone diminishes into a defeated, business-like one.

“As I mentioned before, Beck isn’t interested in making friends with One and Two. So we have to look at the best options. I know he doesn’t seem it, but he’s strong and he’s loyal. I can promise you that he will defend her and your son, who I’m assuming, is a package deal with your daughter, until he can’t anymore.” Finnick’s voice cracks at the last three words. He sits back in his chair, picking at a fraying thread of the seat cushion.

Peeta and I look at each other. I want to believe Finnick. To believe what he says about Beck, but it’s too early to trust a Tribute’s request for an ally. This could be a plan to get close to her just to kill her. And even if I did trust it, I can’t make Ivy do something she doesn’t want to. And if she doesn’t want an ally, I won’t force her to have one.

Peeta voices our shared suspicions. “Why her? Its day one of training, he can’t have seen her do anything yet. Why would he choose her over a sure bet like One and Two?”

“I trust his betting luck,” Finnick replies with a smirk.

“No. Why?” I ask, staring Finnick down.

Annie shifts in her seat. “He didn’t say.” She shakily takes a drink of water, trying to steady herself, preparing to sway our opinion. “But, I trust his judgment. He’s always been good with reading people and Ivy is the ally he wants.”

“He thinks she’s pretty,” Peeta concludes. “No. I don’t trust this. I’m sorry. If she says something, we’ll come back to it, but only if she asks. Let’s go.” He stands and we head to the door.

Out of the corner of my eye I see Annie place her head in her hands. Finnick slides his chair closer to her, his hand on her shoulder.
I hear Annie say, “What are we going to do?”

“Maybe he listened to me. Maybe he’s with the others.”

“Or pretending to be,” she laments.

As the door shuts behind me and Peeta I can’t help but think we’ve made a mistake. Beck wasn’t the only one betting on our family. Maybe Ivy’s changed her mind about an ally.

When we return to our floor for dinner, Ivy and Bas shuffle in, tired from the day.

“Make any friends?” Haymitch asks, taking a bite of his lamb stew.

Ivy and Bas look at each other.

“What’s that face?” Peeta asks.

“Nothing. The plan to go unnoticed has sort of fallen apart. I think I’m on the Careers short list now.” Ivy stares at her plate. My heart jumps into my throat. I want to be angry with her, but I know how volatile the Careers can be, I didn’t truly expect them to ignore my children.

“What did you do?” Haymitch asks.

“They were picking on that little kid from Ten. I told them to stop.”

“She may also have threatened them,” Bas adds. She gives him a look that causes him to shrink down in his seat.

“Ivy, I thought you would know better than to antagonize them.” Peeta runs a hand through his hair, the color draining from his face.

Haymitch laughs and looks from Peeta to me. “You think with that one as her mother she would have the sense not to say something? Peeta I thought you were smarter than that.”

I look at Haymitch, my annoyance evident, which only makes him laugh harder.

“Sorry sweetheart, but you and I both know it’s true. Apple doesn’t fall far from the tree and all that.” He takes a satisfied bite of his food before turning to Ivy. “What did you say?”

Ivy shrugs. “I don’t remember.”

“You remember,” Haymitch coaxes.

She sighs. “Emery said something along the lines of being surprised that you won.” Ivy looks at me. “And I said I’m sure you’ll be just as surprised when I kill you.”

Peeta shakes his head. “They were just trying to rile you up and you let them. You can’t do that. Now they’re gonna target you and I…excuse me.” He stands and hurries out of the room.

“He’s not mad at you. He’s just scared. I’ll be right back.” I follow after Peeta, knowing exactly where he’s disappeared to.

When I walk out onto the roof, the wind causes my hair to fly in multiple directions. He sits, knees to his chest, watching the city like we did long ago when we were Tributes and he was worried about being a piece in their Games.
I sit beside him, the both of us quiet as the sounds of the city surround us. Eventually I slide closer to lean on his shoulder as he wraps an arm around me.

“I think you scared them,” I finally say, breaking the silence.

“I’m scared,” he admits, his mind far away.

“Me too.” I remember our conversation on the train. “But someone told me we will get through this.”

“That someone was wrong.”

“No, he wasn’t.”

“How can you be sure?” he asks.

“Because I have to be.”

He looks at me and smiles gratefully before kissing my forehead.

“I love you,” he whispers.

“I love you too.”

We stay on the roof for a while, keeping each other warm, watching the lights of the city change as the night wears on.

“But if you close your eyes,
Does it almost feel like
Nothing changed at all?
And if you close your eyes,
Does it almost feel like
You’ve been here before?”

- Pompeii – Bastille
Katniss visits Cinna and remembers the feeling of rebellion. Ivy questions her ability to be a killer and lets the Careers get to her.

Katniss –

“Why are you letting yourself become like them?” Gale asks, shouting.

“I’m doing what I have to. To keep the people I love alive.” I shake despite the warm weather.

“What about your kids?”

“Don’t.” My voice reaches a dangerous low.

“What happens when they get reaped?” He asks. I shudder. “Will you fight then? Will you fight when it’s your family?”

“I can’t fight! Every time I try to help or I think I can help, it just gets worse. You remember when the Peacekeepers came here.”

He flinches. He still bears the scars of that day.

I continue. “I’m not going to let that happen again. And I will not let that happen to my children.”

“So what? You’ll just keep doing what you’re doing? Forget and hope everyone else does too? They’re starting to hate you. They’re waiting for you and you’re failing them.”

“They shouldn’t have looked to me in the first place.” I walk away, a bitter taste in my mouth. I hate what I’m becoming. I hate that I’m turning into a mouthpiece for President Snow. But what choice do I have? I have to keep everyone alive. I have to keep them safe.

I’ve seen what happens when Victors don’t play by the rules.

My daughter is five, my son is three. I can’t put them through a war. I can’t be the Mockingjay. I can only smile and wave to the cameras, despite the toll it takes. It would be so easy to look into one and tell the truth. A relief even to call out the Games and the Capitol for all its wrongdoing. An even greater relief for President Snow to just kill me.

But I know he wouldn’t just target me. He would take everyone I love with me. But it would be so worth my life to make everyone see the truth. To convince them to fight. If only there was a way to ensure Peeta and my children’s safety. To make sure Prim, my mother, Gale and his family got away too. Then I would do it. Then I would give in.

“There’s a difference between being alive and living,” Gale calls after me. “Fight back.”

And I want to.
The next morning a mine shaft collapsed, killing Gale and five others. And I resigned myself to being the symbol of the Capitol’s generosity and not the symbol of rebellion.

Gale’s death has never sat right with me. I grieved with everyone else, maybe more than the others. But it was so convenient that he was trying to convince me to fight and without that push I gave up. When I went back into the woods without him, I found myself thinking of his last words to me.

Those words have haunted me ever since that day. Even more than his question over what I would do when my children were reaped. Gale’s words mix with Finnick’s from yesterday and my head feels like it’s going to split open.

Anyone who has ever won did so with an ally. And I am no exception, despite my desire to believe so.

I’ve tried to bury my memories of the Games. I’ve tried to move on. To forget as much as I possibly could. I can’t forget the faces and names of the ones I’ve killed, like Marvel. Or the ones who died, like Rue, but the details blur over time.

Details that are now sharpening and screaming with every unwanted memory. You can only bury something for so long before it finds its way to the surface. It was my plan that got Rue killed. Peeta kept the Careers away from me for as long as he could. The fire is what brought us all together and even when I was stuck in the tree he tried to keep them away. He was my ally long before I went to find him.

I wouldn’t have survived without Peeta.

I watch the ceiling. I don’t sleep much when we’re in the Capitol. It took me years to finally be able to make it through the night back in Twelve. And all of that was thanks to Peeta.

He’s saved me more times than I can count. In the arena and now.

I turn to look at him beside me, still asleep, hair sticking up at odd angles. His hand rests near my pillow, his wedding ring shining in the early morning light. It’s hard to remember a time when we weren’t what we are now. When I didn’t need him as much as I do, but that time existed.

In the first year of our marriage it was a back and forth between us. There were days where it didn’t feel like pretending at all and I could feel myself capable of loving him. But then there were bad days where I couldn’t look at him because I felt the lie weighing on us. I felt like he deserved to be happy and that wasn’t with me.

By the second year I needed him. I needed to be as close to him as I could, I needed to believe we could be happy and a part of me was. That small piece of happiness grew and turned into the love I have for him now. There were days where I was afraid to get out of bed without him.

When I couldn’t bear the looks the people of Twelve would give me, the sympathetic and hopeful looks for the Mockingjay. Peeta was there. When President Snow sent us roses to remind me of my duties, Peeta was there. When I felt so close to breaking, Peeta was there, ready to pick up the pieces.

I wouldn’t have survived without Peeta.

All these years and that’s a fact that remains unchanged. Even as I built walls to keep my children out and to steel myself against whatever the Capitol threw at me.
Although those walls are cracking, have been since the announcement. And as the Games go on and the arena comes closer, they’re crumbling. I’m afraid once there’s nothing left for me to protect myself with, I’ll crumble too.

Peeta opens his eyes to look at me, his blonde hair almost golden with the sunrise.

“What’s wrong?” He asks. He can always tell.

“Do you ever regret winning?” I ask.

“I’m alive. So no.” He smiles making the wrinkles around his eyes stand out. He must know I’m on the verge of a breakdown just as he was last night. We’re both falling apart as the days go on. And it’s getting worse with each hour and each step closer to the arena.

“Maybe not winning, but everything after. With me?”

He tucks my hair behind my ear and keeps his hand on my cheek.

“At first I wasn’t happy that we had made up this lie. Even the wedding, it wasn’t what you really wanted. But you needed me to go through with it. It’s what kept you safe. So I was okay with it, I didn’t regret it.” He kisses me and the warmth of it travels through me.

“And now? Now that I forced you to have our kids so we could go through this?”

“Katniss, you didn’t force me, let’s keep that clear. I would have wanted them even if we didn’t have to. And I don’t think I could ever regret them or you. I love you,” he says, sincerely.

It soothes me temporarily but then I think of Ivy and Bas. The two of them alone in the arena with the Career pack on their trail. A Career pack with sponsors who will send them whatever they need.

“What are you thinking?” Peeta asks.

I know what I have to do. “We need to convince her to get an ally.”

Peeta mutters a noise of agreement.

Ivy and Bas are already sitting at the table with Effie when we walk in. Ivy picks at her food while Bas devours his. Effie rambled on suggestions for how to find allies and how to select the right ones. To my children’s credit they listen without interruption. They’re much more patient than I.

“Now you’ll want to make sure they see you as capable, but not too capable. You don’t want the wrong attention.” Effie takes a bite of some fruit.

“She’s already getting that,” Bas says through a mouthful of food.

Ivy glares at him before looking down at the table.

Effie continues, straightening in her seat, “Yes, well, you’ll want to avoid that kind of attention today. Maybe focus on the people who will be interested in helping you with that.”

“What does it matter if they can help me?” Ivy asks, finally snapping. “I’m just going to have to kill them anyway. Or watch them die.”

Effie breathes, frustrated. “Young lady.”

I recall a time when she referred to me with the same words and tone. Ivy slams her fork down.
“It’s stupid. I’m not doing it.” She moves the food around on her plate. Effie watches, speechless. She looks to me, expecting me to jump in.

I watch Ivy, head in her hand, stabbing her scrambled eggs with her fork. I wonder what she’s thinking. Does she really think she’s prepared to die? To kill? Is there anything I could tell her that would change her mind?

Effie looks like she’s about to continue the conversation but I interject.

“What’s on the schedule today?” I ask as Haymitch emerges from his room.

“Haymitch, how nice of you to be on time,” Effie trills.

“I heard shouting, figured it must be the alarm clock. First few months I could hear you wailing across the street. Kid, you had lungs on you.” Haymitch points to Ivy as he pours himself some coffee.

Ivy did cry a lot when she was a baby. Peeta was always there to comfort her. I couldn’t. I would hide away in the woods or in my room, afraid to be the one to calm her down. Afraid for her to need me when any second Snow could send Peacekeepers to take her away, or have me killed.

I shake off the memory of her small fingers, her chubby legs, and look at her now. In a lot of ways she’s still that small child. Still scared and crying for me, though she doesn’t show it anymore. Bas was a quiet baby, calm and collected, who trusted us so implicitly. He’s still the same too, short on words when he wants to be. While his anger has shifted over time, his attitude growing towards action and rebellion, he’s still so trustful. He has so much faith in me and Peeta.

How can I decide which one to focus on? How can I choose which one lives?

I can’t.

So the real question becomes, how do I change their fates? How do I fight back when all I’ve done for twenty five years is tell everyone to live like me? Live in fear, passive and trapped.

Effie goes over the schedule, which I’m largely ignoring. Peeta listens. He’ll tell me where I need to go.

Soon Ivy and Bas are heading for the elevator and I realize the time is passing too quickly for these moments together. I shake my head, they can’t go. I can’t send them back.

“Wait,” I say. They stop and look at me. Bas steps forward as I walk to them. I pull him close, crushing him into a hug. He returns it, before pulling away, embarrassed.

“Don’t worry, I’ll look out for her. We’ll be smarter today,” he whispers to me. There’s no relief to his words.

Ivy waits by the elevator.

“How can I decide which one to focus on? How can I choose which one lives?”

I can’t.

So the real question becomes, how do I change their fates? How do I fight back when all I’ve done for twenty five years is tell everyone to live like me? Live in fear, passive and trapped.

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She’s turning herself into me.

When they’re gone, I stand watching the empty space. It’s only when Haymitch speaks that I’m broken from my thoughts. I force myself to put the mentor face back on. I have to be like Ivy. I have to face this and prepare.

“Are you in there, sweetheart?”

I go back to the table, nodding slowly.

“Good,” he says. “Peeta and I will take care of the trading floor and you can visit Cinna.”

“What? No, only one of needs to go to the trading floor.” We’ve never done this. It’s always been me and Peeta going to the stylists. We stick together and keep each other from drowning inside the Capitol. We’ve never split up.

Haymitch is always the one to stay on his own. He doesn’t care for the interview outfits. He usually just drinks on the trading floor.

“Johanna wants to talk to me about allying Grover. And if there’s any interested sponsors Haymitch will have to handle them,” Peeta says calmly, there’s an underlying tension in his jaw that I can see. He’s lying to me.

“Johanna?” I ask, disbelieving. “You didn’t think I would want to be there?”

“She thinks you’ll say no.”

“I would say no, and so will Ivy.” I take a bite of some bacon.

“Well, I have to meet with her. And someone has to meet with Cinna and that’s you. I’m sorry.” He shakes his head subtly and I stop myself from pressing further. Haymitch watches us, glancing around the room. I know they’re not telling me everything.

Haymitch toasts his coffee. “Mentors work is never done.”

“So it seems,” I say, an edge to my voice.

Twenty five years later and I’m still not used to walking through the Capitol. I keep expecting to be pulled into a hovercraft or grabbed by a Peacekeeper and locked in a room. But the only thing that occurs is a Capitol citizen stopping to greet me with a smile.

The fashion district is an odd place. It swims with color and a largeness that threatens to swallow me in fabrics and extravagance.

Cinna’s studio is a quiet peace amongst the noise of the city and I’m grateful once I walk inside. Sketches line the walls, some for Ivy and Bas, others for orders he’s taking. There are scraps of fabric on tables and two finished outfits, covered up, in the corner.

I open an old sketch book on a table. It’s worn with creases in the paper. When I flip open the first page I find a drawing of me and my dress from my Games. Fire plumes around me and I look dangerous, terrifying, and unreal. It’s hard to believe I once was that girl.

The next few pages have my outfits from my Victory Tour with each District being designated to each design. On the next to last page I see my wedding dress in all its beauty. I genuinely loved that dress. When I turn the page again I see a Mockingjay and freeze. It burns against the paper, threatening. Its wings are pointed up, it’s beak high, like it’s calling for war.
I can feel the hope of it burning inside me.

I shut the book quickly as Cinna walks in. He gives me a hug and a kiss on each cheek, before I take a seat across from him. I glance to the sketchbook every so often, trying to force the image out of my mind.

“Where’s Peeta?” He asks, handing me a cup of coffee.

“Couldn’t come. He had a meeting with Johanna.” I play with the wedding ring on my left hand. Twisting it, the metal cool against my thumb. It grounds me and keeps me calm.

“And you didn’t want to go to that?”

“I’m not very good at making alliances for my tributes.” I shudder, the mentor attitude comes to me so easily now.

Cinna places a hand on my shoulder. “I heard what happened when you got off the train.”

The memory of the man and his leering look at Ivy comes back to me. A darkness passes through me and reflects itself in my eyes. I wish I could have killed him.

“Are you going to tell me it wasn’t smart?” I ask, the life falling from my voice.

“It wasn’t, but it was also brave to tell them to stop.”

“Well that’s me, brave,” I say, mocking the last word. I don’t think I have any bravery left. A brave person would have let the people rise up. A brave person wouldn’t have let herself become this. She wouldn’t let her children go into the arena. A brave person would fight.

“I was just angry.”

“Sometimes they can be the same.” Cinna smiles and it makes me feel better. He’s the only person in the Capitol who I can honestly say I trust. He understands what these Games mean and what they’ve always meant.

“Would you like to see the dress?” Cinna asks. I nod.

He pulls the cover off of the dress. It’s knee length and fans out at the bottom. There are red feathers laid over it in select places with a black fabric behind them. The feathers give the illusion of flames.

“Is it going to…” Light on fire is what I’m asking. He knows. It’s a beautiful dress and it’ll suit her just fine. It has all the elements of one of mine with something entirely hers. It’s simple and perfect.

“Yes. And so will Basil’s suit.” He pulls off the cover of the suit. The feather theme runs through his as well, along the lapel of the jacket and the sleeves in various places. Both of their outfits have the feathers strategically placed in almost the exact same locations. Their colors match and complement each other. The unity of both family and district evident in the design.

I smile. “They’re perfect.” I touch one of the feathers on the suit. It’s softer than I thought it would be.

“I’m glad you like them. I think it’ll make a statement.”

I nod. “Good.”
When I return to the room, I’m the only one there. Peeta and Haymitch should have returned. I hope something didn’t happen. Maybe they actually managed to find sponsors. I consider taking a trip up to the trading floor but decide against it. I would rather wait alone than deal with the other mentors right now.

When I sit on the couch I find a white rose with a letter addressed to me on the coffee table. My heart sinks, my pulse pounding as I rip it open.

All it says is a time. Noon.

The world spins and falls from me. I clutch the letter, feeling like I’m going to be sick. I hear the ding of the elevator as Peeta and Haymitch walk in. They cut their conversation short when they see me.

“What happened?” Peeta asks, noticing my shell shocked expression. He hurries over to me.

I shake my head and hand him the letter.

“I have to meet with him.” I try to breathe. Spots form around the edge of my vision, I feel like I might pass out.

“Why?” Peeta asks.

“I don’t know.”

“He probably wants to…check up,” Haymitch offers, grinding his teeth.

“I can’t. I can’t meet with him.” My throat is dry.

“You have to,” Haymitch says. “Otherwise, he’ll force you and then he’ll take it out on them.”

I nod. Barely registering the motion.

President Snow hasn’t spoken to me in years. Something must be happening. Something big enough that he needs to make sure I’m still doing what I’m supposed to. Something must be changing. Or maybe nothing is and he just wants to make sure I’m not.

But I can feel it in my heart, like I could years ago, when the districts were fighting back.

And I feel it now.

Fire is catching.

Ivy –

The morning goes by too slow for my liking. When we walk onto the training floor, Callie and Teddy practice climbing. Bas indicates them, silently asking to join them. I don’t want to talk to any more Tributes. I shake my head and walk to the knot tying station.

Instead of joining me, he walks over to camouflage. I don’t want him to ignore the other skills, but no one forces Bas to do something he doesn’t want to. And he just wants to paint and have some remembrance of being home. I let him go. He probably shouldn’t be showing off how good he is at it, but I don’t think the Careers are going to target him for being good at painting. If anything they’ll target him to get at me.

The rope I work with frays as I fail to tie the knot. I shake my head, I should be better at this. I can
set snares and traps perfectly. I can climb trees, track better than my mother, and I always hunt down my prey. Hell, I can make arrows if I need to. Why can’t I do this?

“You’re pulling too tight,” Beck says, before picking up a piece of rope for himself. “You loop it and then gently, pull it through.” He shows me the movements as he describes them. For once he doesn’t sound like the arrogant Career, eager to show the world what he’s made of. There’s a sincerity to him that keeps me silently watching until he holds up his knot. “See?”

I imagine him blood-soaked, an arrow torn into his chest, me standing over his body. Then I see Annie, crying and covering her ears like she did at the reaping. I drop the rope and walk away.

I can’t look at the Tributes. I can’t see proud faces, hear voices giving me helpful tips, or feel grateful to any one of them. Not when I have to kill them all. I remember yesterday and the conversation I had with Grover. Am I going to be able to put an arrow in him when I remember teaching him how to light a fire?

But if he’s trying to kill me or Bas do I really have a choice?

August sits with Bas at the camouflage station, smiling as he mixes colors. Would Bas let me kill August if I had to? Would he do it to save me?

I watch Trina practice throwing knives. She holds them easily before throwing swiftly. She only gets one bull’s-eye. The rest of her knives stick in the target at various spots. When she finishes she makes her way to August. She’s frustrated from the knives and keeping an eye on him isn’t helping her mood. I wonder why she doesn’t just leave him to his own devices and practice what she wants to.

As I walk to them I think it’s because he’s the only piece of home that she has here. I don’t know her history or if her mentor parent is here with her. August is the only person she’ll have in the arena. The only person she can truly trust. I wouldn’t leave Bas, even if he wasn’t my brother.

“Try it like this,” Bas says as he shows August how to layer the greens to create different shades. It gives the illusion of leaves. August tries to imitate Bas on his own arm but it becomes a giant green mess.

“August, come on, let’s see if we can practice climbing,” Trina tries. He ignores her and continues painting up his arm.

“It’s okay, I can watch out for him,” Bas says with a smile. I give him a warning look, which he returns with a questioning one.

“Fine. If he starts, being weirder, come get me.” Trina walks off to climbing.

“She wants to protect me,” August says quietly. His focus fades out and he continues in a sing song voice, “But she can’t. No more safety, not for anyone. Back home we listen to the wind in the grass. That’s safe. I miss safe.”

He continues muttering about the tall grass and the wind back home before I have to leave. Hearing any one of them talk about home forces me to think about the people watching. District Nine knows him. They’ve watched him grow up. They know he isn’t out to harm anyone. I know it too.

If I kill him will they see me as some kind of vicious monster Hell bent on winning? Will they understand why I’m doing what I’m doing? I won’t have to live with my choices for very long. I won’t even have to see the people of Nine.
But Bas will. He’ll have to face them on his Victory Tour. I wonder what they will think of him, standing on that stage alive because of their dead. How did my parents manage it?

I hesitate to join Trina at the climbing station, but I’m bored with stationary skills. I’m used to climbing trees at home. I like climbing. I don’t need to relearn the skill, but I can’t spend another minute trying to tie a knot. I need movement and combat isn’t an option.

The trainer puts a harness on me and I approach the wall. I use my hands and feet to grip each hold to pull myself higher. I rise quickly, meeting Trina halfway up.

“I have to admit, this looked easier from down there,” she says out of breath. “How are you so good at this?”

I want to avoid being as personable with the others as possible. I don’t want to see their faces if I’m forced to kill them. But it’s difficult to build a wall and shut people out when they’re right in front of you.

Although I seemed to have no problem doing it to Beck. But that may just be because he’s with the Career group. It’s easier to think of them as willing participants rather than forced ones.

That feels like a lie I’m trying to tell myself. Like I’m pretending it won’t be just as difficult to kill them.

“I did a lot of tree climbing back home,” I finally share.

She nods, finding her balance as her hand grips another hold. “Traps, fires, climbing, and you’re the daughter of Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark. You’re going to be a problem, aren’t you?” She asks and I can’t tell if she’s joking. Her tone tries to be light, but there’s a flatness to her expression that confuses me.

“Was she really so important?” I ask. Trina looks at me, trying to determine my meaning. “My mother. Why does everyone get this look when they talk about her?”

“What look?” Trina asks. She’s twenty three now, too young to have been alive for my parent’s victory but old enough to have been around for some of the aftermath. I wonder if she heard stories of rebellion. If, like so many others, she hoped it would happen. I wonder if she believed my parents’ love story and if my birth convinced her.

She would have been about six when I was born. I bet she heard all about me from the constant coverage by the Capitol once I was given a name. Did my existence kill that little girl’s hope for a better world?

“It’s like this, hope or desperation. I don’t know.” I shrug. I remember seeing an older woman approach my mother in Twelve. She had grabbed her hand and kissed it, before repeating please over and over again. She acted like my mother was in control of everyone’s future. I can’t help but think she is.

All it would take is one word, one action, and the districts would follow her. She’s still their Mockingjay. She’s their hope, burning like the sun against a long dark night. I can see it in some of the faces of the tributes around me. They hear her name and they want to fight. They look at Bas or me and they see her.

I remember she locked herself in her room that day and didn’t come out until the next afternoon. She tried to pretend nothing happened. My father kept trying to talk to her about it. He even asked me what happened. I was five, too young to really know what was happening.
When he realized I couldn’t explain it he wanted to know if I had questions. But I saw the way it affected my mother and I couldn’t ask. If I was one of the people in the districts, I don’t know if I would go to war for the woman who rejected it all. Who I put my faith in and who failed me.

But I’m not just anyone in the other districts. If my mother called for war, I would help. Even with my doubts about her, even with my knowledge that I exist to stop rebellion. I believe in her. I would follow her. I’m not sure where this new faith is coming from. Maybe from the knowledge that I will soon die or from the possibility that I can fight against my predetermined purpose.

Or maybe it’s not a new faith at all. I’ve always held the belief that she could come back, that she could fight. And I want the world to believe it too. Or I wanted them to. That was before the attack in Twelve. Before I saw what can happen to innocent people caught up in my actions.

Trina takes a long time to answer. I can’t tell if she’s afraid she’ll say the wrong thing or if she’s trying to find the most accurate thing to say.

“Some people at home talk about her like she’s their last hope. Like she’ll miraculously save them and they can all fight. They used to talk about her a lot. Everyone would go, any day now, any day. She’s coming, the wars coming. Then they didn’t talk about it as much. Now it’s just whispers from a few people. Everyone else gave up. Stopped believing.” She shrugs and I count her amongst the non-believers. “You know, after a while, everybody realized she bought into the whole Capitol lifestyle. Figured out that the whole Mockingjay thing was just an act for sponsors.”

My hand slips and I lose my balance. I’m grateful I have the harness on to stop me from falling. I find my footing and pull myself up to Trina.

“She didn’t buy into anything.”

“Every year the cameras come to show off your family. To remind us how generous the Capitol has been to your parents. All of you smile. You’re so happy, you’re so grateful. And we have to see it every year. We hear the same speeches and questions over and over. And not once have I ever seen a flicker of doubt or pain on her face. She bought into it. And maybe you don’t want to see it, but I have.” Trina tries to climb higher. I catch up to her.

“It’s a lie.” I know I shouldn’t be trying to convince anyone of the truth. I know I shouldn’t be trying to tell the story, especially in the Capitol. But seeing the anger and bitter defeat on Trina’s face makes me want to try.

She’s not interested in the truth. “It’s been twenty five years of her lie. Maybe she finally started believing it. Or maybe it never was. Sorry.”

There’s no sympathy in her words.

I climb down, sorry I asked about my mother. Sorry I even wanted to know. Everything was so simple weeks ago. I was going to die. I was going to kill. I was going to die knowing I was a plan. I wanted to help my mother realize she could change things. I wanted her to believe again.

Now I don’t know how I’m standing. I feel like the weight of my family’s sins is threatening to bury me. I feel like the country is watching, snarling like a wounded animal waiting to die. It’s like they’re waiting to see if I’m enjoying this. If I want to join the family legacy and become an even bigger name in the Capitol than I already was. They probably look at me like I do the Careers. Nothing more than a willing participant eager to please the Capitol.

Bas has to win. He has to tell the truth. He has to make them see. Because if anyone else does, they’ll spout the same lie, they’ll pretend to be grateful, and the wounded animal will receive the
I’m quiet throughout lunch. I take small bites of my food and look around at the others. I feel like my parents failed every single person in the room. Not just them. I helped too. With my smile, my ability to be charming in interviews, I did the very thing I was born to do. I convinced people that my family had moved on. That the two teenagers didn’t defy anyone but the odds of fate and I was their happily ever after.

I knew going into the Games that I would be faced with the legacy aspect a lot more. Everyone’s always so eager to compare me to my mother. I was ready to accept the comparisons. But then I saw what happens when you challenge the Capitol. I saw what it means to restart a war. I saw the victims and why a symbol can be dangerous.

I started understanding my mother without realizing it. I knew why she followed the rules. And when she gave me the pin, when she asked me to wear it, I understood this as permission. A rebellion in its own right. Her fighting against the mask.

There are parts of me that imagine what it would be like to finally give in. To say screw it and start a war. How easy it would be with the right words, the right symbol, and we have them all at our ready.

I have the pin. Bas has the anger. My father has the words. And as my mother is the symbol, so long as she lives. It wouldn’t be difficult to make a speech, to show the Capitol that we’re done playing. Combine that with the legend of the Mockingjay and it would be so simple. To tell the truth, to be brave, and let the country be brave too.

But I know where we are, how easy it would be for the Capitol to silence us. And I can’t imagine my mother can think of anything right now other than keeping us alive. But if a rebellion meant keeping us alive, would she do it then?

If neither one of my parents has done anything by now, it’s because they don’t see a victory. And if they don’t see it, how can they convince others to see one?

“Are you okay?” Bas asks and I force a nod. I bury the thoughts of war and rebellion. Swallowing all my anger over a lie I didn’t create. I can’t think about this now. I have to focus on keeping us both alive long enough for Bas to win. Whatever happens after, whatever truth he tells, is up to him.

After lunch, Bas and I practice snares and traps. His deft hands are good at tying them down but I’m much faster at setting them. There’s an almost instinctual way we put them together. We don’t really think about what we’re doing, we just do it.

Trina and August join us a minute later. I don’t know if they think we would be allies, or if they just want to watch us and see if they can learn something. After my conversation with Trina, I’m growing wary of spending any more time with her. What I once thought was anger at the Capitol is focusing itself onto me like the Careers.

I try to ignore them as they both do their best to set one trap. They help each other put it together, eventually catching their hands in wires and breaking it. They’re forced to start all over, going slower this time. Bas and I work on our third.

Bas glances behind me. I hear the smack of a target being hit, knowing full well who’s responsible for the noise. Beck has been throwing tridents since the knot tying station. I wonder if he’s even going to bother with survival skills or if he’s relying on his district partner for that.
“He’s watching you again,” Bas says. I roll my eyes, though I’m grateful to Bas for giving me something else to focus on. And maybe to Beck for annoying us enough that it provides a distraction.

“He’s just trying to rile us up. You know, intimidate,” I tell him.

“I said he’s watching you, not us.”

“Shut up.”

He places a hand over his heart like he’s been offended. I laugh despite myself.

“Is that an actual laugh?” Bas asks in surprise.

“I know they’re so rare that I’m actually worried about my interview.”

“Oh they love you, they always do. With me, I think if I smile they won’t recognize me.” He shrugs.

I hear the smack of another trident. Bas looks behind me. His eyes narrow.

“I’m going to kick his ass in the arena,” he says.

“Is this you trying to be the protective brother? Because I’m pretty sure you’ll get maybe one punch before he destroys you.”

“One punch is all you need if it’s a good one. And if I surprise him.”

I shake my head. “Ignore him. Finnick probably told him to do it. Like mentor like tribute.”

“Yeah, mentor.” Bas emphasizes the word. We both know what he really means.

I feel Beck’s eyes on me, begging me to turn around. I finally give in.

He throws another trident. It hits the target, right in the center. I imagine it hitting little Zero as Beck looks at me, proudly. I try to wipe the image from my mind.

The pride on his face drops as he notices my expression. He takes a tentative step towards me, a look of concern on his face. He stops when he remembers Stone is right next to him. The concerned look disappears as his bravado returns in full force.

“Pretty good, huh?” He asks to the amusement of Stone. It grates on me, this back and forth between being genuine and acting like the others. I can’t tell if this tactic is being used to kill me or the Careers. Either way, I can’t buy into it.

“I’ve seen better,” I retort before turning back to Bas.

Bas’ voice lowers as he watches the proceedings behind me. “It must be hard growing up like that though. Being the unwanted bastard back in Four while your father is running around with women in the Capitol.”

“I don’t think it’s like that,” I admit. I remember the way Finnick looked at Beck, concerned, caring, distressed but doing all he could to hide it. Trying to play the part of Finnick, the Victor, Finnick, the Capitol darling, but failing. Unlike his son, who has mastered the act and uses it every chance he gets.

Except for his fleeting moments of sincerity, but it’s all a Game. I have to remind myself of that.
Everything each one of us does is an act. A strategy. I can’t trust him. He may smile now, pretend he cares but that will change when the gun goes off.

He will try to kill me as soon as he has the chance.

That feels like the only thing I can trust for sure about Beck. Killing means he gets to go home, be with his family, and never worry about this ever again. But he wouldn’t be worrying about it if it weren’t for the Quell.

At nineteen, he was ineligible, much like the Careers from One and Two. This makes them even more dangerous. Not because they’re older than me or stronger, but because they’ve had the illusion of safety and had it ripped from them.

I wonder how much hatred brews in Beck. How much he buries it, and how much of it will be used to kill the others, including me. I wonder if, like Trina, he’s focusing on me because of my family. But I think, out of all the other tributes here, he probably understands a lie and the toll it takes better than the rest.

“You don’t?” Bas asks, tripping his snare with a stick to make sure it works.

I shake off my thoughts. “Finnick didn’t look at him like he was a burden, or like he was happy that he was in the Games. It was like…how mom and dad look at you.” I struggle with the last words, choking it out in a rush. I’ve never been the wanted child, the one they love unconditionally. Bas was always the happy accident. I was always intended to end up here.

I’m the Capitol creation, the mutt designed to keep the Mockingjay in a cage.

“You think they don’t…”

“Dad, maybe, but not mom.”

Bas laughs, sharp and quick, like he’s confused at my thinking. “You can’t honestly believe that?”

“I can. I do. Why am I here, Bas? Tell me. Tell me the story that doesn’t include convincing people.” We speak in hushed tones now, but we don’t really care who hears. What can they do? Kill us. That would be a relief.

“There are times, when she thinks no one’s looking or she just doesn’t bother hiding it. And when you see it, and I know you have, you wonder how you ever doubted it.” Bas shrugs before he goes back to tying his next snare. “It’s like she’s looking at the most important thing in the entire world and you can’t fake that.”

I swallow. I wish I knew for sure. That I could see it. But maybe I have and I just didn’t recognize it when I did. If I’m lucky I might remember it before I die, that would be nice.

I turn to watch the Careers again. Do they ever question their parents’ love?

I make eye contact with Beck, my blues meeting his green. That reminder of home hits me and it’s almost overwhelming after the thoughts running through my head today. I can’t look away. For some reason, I feel grounded, like the weight about to crush me has lifted, if only temporarily.

It returns when I hear the clatter of a trident. He fumbles to pick it up. Emery and Cain laugh at him from the archery station. Victoria watches, her expression blank, glancing from him to me.

He plays it off. Giving the others a shrug before saying, “Slipped.”
He whirls the trident around with precision before throwing it into the target once again. It lands, centered, like all his other shots.

Emery nods approvingly before her attention turns to me. She gives me a cold stare as she flips her hair back. She saunters over to the archery station, taking a moment to make sure I’m watching.

I clench my fist as she picks up the bow.

“What are you doing?” Stone asks, “Cashmere told us--”

“I think my aunt will understand. Besides, how hard can it be?”

Stone sighs, almost bored. “My father says it looks better when you have the up close kill.”

“My father says variety is something sponsors enjoy more.” Emery cocks an eyebrow. Stone knows there’s no way to win this argument.

Still, he tries. “You don’t want to rely on it in the arena. It’s hard to maintain perfect accuracy.”

Emery shrugs. “Her mother can do it.” She looks over at me as she nocks an arrow. “And we all know how weak that bitch is. Have you seen her lately?” Her voice increases in its volume. “It’s sad really. She looks like she’s going to fall apart. Some people just aren’t meant to be Victors.” She indicates Bas and me with her head. “And the two of them. I don’t even know how they can stand to have a mother like that. I’d have run away long ago. Or killed myself.”

I slam my hands down and stand. That’s the last straw. I’m tired of Emery’s remarks. Of the looks from others and the lies they believe. I’m tired of pretending to be weak. Of letting the country think my mother is weak. Letting her think she’s weak. I’m tired of everything.

I march over to the archery station, passing Beck on my way. He stops throwing his trident, watching me as I reach Emery. He’s not interfering like he did yesterday. There’s no stopping what I’m about to do.

“She’s so easy,” Emery says, more to herself than the others. “Looks like all I’ll have to do is fire off a few insults in the arena and she’ll come running right to us.”

“Give me that,” I order, my voice dark, dangerous.

Emery starts to laugh. I rip the bow from her hand before she even has a chance to react.

I step up to the archery station, my blood boiling. I press the buttons and the targets begin to move. I nock an arrow and fire, hitting the first target right where the heart would be.

New targets shift in front of me in pairs and then threes. I hit all of them, but make a point not to go for the kill shot every time. I want to scare them as much as possible. I aim for legs on a few, which would incapacitate a normal person. Others I go for the eye, to prove that I know how to kill in more than one way. I shoot two in quick succession, hitting the shoulder of one and the stomach of another, before delivering the kill shot on each. Every arrow goes exactly where I want it to.

When I’m done, I shove the bow into Emery’s hands. She’s so stunned she drops it.

There’s not a sound in the training room. Everyone has stopped to watch. I take a second to look up at the Gamemakers. Most of them smile, an excitement creeping onto their faces that they can’t contain. The only one who doesn’t is Plutarch. He watches me, his brows furrowed, almost like he’s concerned.
I turn my back to them as I walk towards Bas. He looks down, shaking his head. When did he become the level-headed one?

The other tributes force themselves to go back to their stations. Little Zero and his district partner work harder to get a fire lit, like their lives depend on it. I guess it could. Callie forces herself to focus on a fish hook she’s making. Teddy chews his lip and whispers something to her which makes her nod in agreement. Grover is the only one with an actual smile on his face. He sneaks a thumbs up to me before turning back to identifying plants.

“Nice shooting, Twelve,” Beck says, lacking enthusiasm, as I pass him. “But I don’t think that was very smart.”

“Focus on your tridents, Four,” I retort. “And less on me.”

There’s a lack of color on Trina’s face when I return to the station. I’m almost glad to be the cause of it.

August laughs, muttering, “Told you,” over and over again.

I sit quietly, not bothering to occupy myself with practicing traps. There’s no point in pretending that I don’t possess the skills to kill anymore. I just have to pretend that I’m capable of it. That I don’t care what happens to the others and taking their lives is nothing to me.

This was much easier when I didn’t know their faces or their names.

About an hour after a silent dinner, I crawl into bed, my eyes glued to the ceiling. I imagine what it will feel like to take a life. If I’ll care when my arrows tear through skin and bone to the sound of a cannon.

Soon my thoughts turn to my life and what it will feel like to die. There’s a panic that overpowers me. I thought I had accepted it, that I had moved past it. But now that the day is drawing closer, I realize I haven’t. I feel the fear of it, the pain of knowing I haven’t done anything in my seventeen years to make this matter.

I’m not ready to die.

I shouldn’t have to.

But I do have to, because the alternative is not an option.

I can’t walk out and have my brother be the one to die. There’s no victory in that, only selfish self-preservation. That would be a failure to me and to him. And it would destroy me more than any sword or ax could.

Or even a trident.

I think of home. My heart aches for Twelve. I miss the smell of the woods, the fresh air, the bakery. I miss my bed and my room. I miss the quiet. Everything here is loud, colorful, fake and too bright to be real. The air is stifling and choking. I fear the arena and my death but the truth is I’m dying just by being here.

I feel the first threat of tears come to me but I swallow them down. I told myself no more crying. Not even for home. Not even for the life I won’t live. Not for anything. No more tears.

I breathe before throwing off the blankets and sitting up. I’m not going to be sleeping tonight. I wonder if this is how my mother felt before her Games. Or even my father. Had one of them come
to accept that they were probably going to die? Did both of them? Did they know then what would happen? What they should do?

The door opens and shuts, breaking me from my thoughts, as my mother storms in. Her breathing is short and panicked. She’s terrified.

“What did you do?” She asks, her voice shaking just as badly as she is.

I’m afraid to answer. I’ve never seen her this bad before. I don’t usually see her at all when she’s like this. Not when she screams from her nightmares, not when she needs someone to tell her it’s okay. I don’t want to see her. But I can’t escape her now.

“What did you do?” She repeats, her voice louder, almost yelling. “Why are One and Two asking for you as an ally?!”

I look for my father, for anyone, but they don’t come.

I finally find my voice, “I…they saw me shoot.”

Her face falls, her fear breaking over her in a devastating blow. She drops her head in her hands and repeats no over and over again. Her shaking finally stops and she’s angry.

“Why would you do that? It wasn’t enough to threaten them. You had to show them that they should kill you first?” She asks, shouting at me.

“Why would they want me as an ally only to kill me?” I ask, quietly.

“Do you want to be their ally?”

“No.”

“Then why would they let you live? If you can’t help them, you aren’t useful. They’ll target you because you’re their biggest threat.” She paces. Her hands on her mouth like she’s fighting back a scream.

“If they target me, they won’t target Bas. And if I kill them, it doesn’t matter.” The words are cold and foreign to me, like something I once thought was good but isn’t. Yesterday morning I woke up believing those words. It feels so long ago. Now I’m no longer sure how easy it’s going to be, or how much better their attention on me is.

“If. If you make it out of the bloodbath. If they don’t use him to get to you. If they don’t ki--” She can’t continue. She sits against the wall, twisting her wedding ring, trying to calm herself down. She sounds broken and far away when she asks, “Why couldn’t you just listen?”

I stand. I’m angry now. I tried to listen. I tried to go unnoticed. If they had just gone after me I wouldn’t have cared, but they didn’t go after me. They didn’t try to threaten me. They went after my family. They tried to tell me a lie. They tried to make me believe that my family was weak. Throwing the words I’ve been acting out right back at me. And I couldn’t take it anymore. They forgot and I wanted them to remember.

“They called you weak. They insulted you. And I couldn’t let them believe they were right.” She looks at me. I swallow, trying to think of how I want to approach my next words. If there’s a time for truth, it’s now. “For a while I thought it was true. That you were. And I didn’t understand why anyone would look to you as some kind of symbol.”

“Ivy,” she warns but I shake my head.
“I get it now. You stood up before you knew what could happen. And you reminded everyone that they’re people, not tributes. And for a while I thought they broke you. They haven’t yet. Don’t let them.” Her eyes meet mine and they say all I need to hear. The woman who told me to keep fighting, the angry Victor, the rebellious Mockingjay, she’s proud. Agreeing with me wordlessly. The other woman, the one riddled with fear and trauma, she knows I’m right too. It’s the one time I’ve seen both halves of her agree.

“And,” I continue, “Emery said how hard could it be to shoot and that made me mad.” I sit beside her.

“Well, if she said that, I guess I can understand.”

I smile sadly.

My mother takes a shaky breath. “Have you thought about any allies at all?”

I shake my head. “I can’t.”

Grover’s cold, pale face flashes before my eyes, an arrow through his glasses.

“I don’t know what to do anymore,” I admit. “I don’t think I can kill anyone.”

She pulls me close to her. My head resting on her shoulder as she runs her fingers through my hair. I should pull away, I should keep my distance. But I can’t.

I remember seeing the highlights from her Games. An arrow through Marvel’s heart. One in Cato’s eye after he was torn apart by mutts. Her cutting down the tracker jacker nest that killed Glimmer.

“How did you do it?” I ask and she freezes. I think she’s going to run out of the room, hide away and try to forget, but she doesn’t. She fights her instinct to flee and faces my question.

“It’s not easy,” she starts, her voice barely above a whisper. “It’s something you live with. But it was me or them. And later your father or them. And I had to choose.” Her hands start to shake again and I take them in mine. It’s the first time I’ve done this, trying to comfort her. I regret not doing it sooner. I regret a lot of things now that I’m heading to my death.

“I don’t want to have to make that choice.”

“I don’t want you to have to make that choice either,” she says quietly.

I pick at my cuticles as I avoid looking at her when I ask, “How do you live with it?”

She lets out a breath. I can’t tell if this is a question she’s been expecting for a while or if she’s just finally stopped running from the truth. There’s no long silence, there’s just a simple answer.

“I have you, your brother and your father.”

She says it so calmly, like it’s the most natural response. My heart drops. I’ve spent years rejecting her. Feeling like I was never loved by her. It’s this moment that I think I see what Bas meant. I can’t doubt her love for me when I’m what helps get her through the day.

“Some days it’s harder to forget or to live with the memories. So I just repeat to myself, my name was Katniss Everdeen, it’s now Katniss Mellark. I’m forty two. I’m one of the Victors of the 74th Hunger Games. I have two children and a husband. I have a sister. I live in District Twelve. I’m a mentor. I’ve killed people and I’ve gotten them killed.” She swallows. “And now I add, my
children are Tributes in the 100th Hunger Games.”

It seems like there’s more that she’s not saying or she can’t say. But I don’t question it.

“And that really helps?” I ask, wondering if that will help me when I’ve killed. When I’m dying in whatever way comes to me. Will I be able to think of my name as the life leaves me?

She nods. “It’s calming.”

“Thank you,” I say and I mean it. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I would have done the same thing.” She smiles then, nudging me with her shoulder. “Did they look scared?”

I nod.

“Good.” She shifts in her seat and looks to me, the old light in her eyes, the same light I saw when she saved me in Twelve. “Ivy. Promise me, you keep fighting. Even if there’s no way to win, even if it’s just you and Bas, you two keep fighting.”

“But if it’s just me and--”

“Keep. Fighting. Don’t let them win. Promise me?”

I nod. “I promise. I won’t let them win.”

She breathes a sigh of relief and I wonder if she’s fighting back. If she finally believes she can change things. If she's willing to try.

“When you break free
The powers that be
Will fail to discover the lies we believe

Your mind is clear
The things that you fear
Will fade with how much you believe what you hear

Don't let them get away with it, yeah
Don't let them get away with it”

- Don’t Let Them – Other Lives
Chapter Summary

Beck recounts growing up in Four and his experience in the Games up until the night before the assessment.

Chapter 8.5: Broken Dreams – Beck

When you grow up in Four there are three things of which you will always be sure. One, you will have an affinity for swimming or at least a basic understanding of it. Two, you will learn some combat skill, labeled as self-defense, and if you’re lucky you will be good at that too. Three, when your name is called at the reaping you better act damn proud when you walk up to that stage.

Even if you’re terrified and even if you feel like you’re going to throw up. You smile, you wave, and you let everyone slap you on the back. You raise your fist and you play the part. You act like you want to be there. Because to everyone watching, you do. You’re a Career. This is your finest moment. This is the dream.

So don’t screw it up. If you do, you’re dead. The others won’t help you and they sure as Hell won’t ally with you. So be proud. Play the damn part.

I’ve always played a part. I’ve always pretended. And I’ve gotten very good at it.

The country knows me as Annie Cresta’s son. That’s all. No father to speak of. Just a sad little boy with a crazy mother. That’s the Capitol’s understanding of me and their understanding of her.

Of course it isn’t the truth. Their understanding so rarely is.

My father is Finnick Odair. I can’t tell anyone the truth. He has a role to play just as I do. And the Capitol playboy persona has to stay intact. President Snow would do anything and everything to make sure it did just that. So publicly I have no father.

But just because my father has an image to play doesn’t mean he won’t still act like my father when he’s home. It’s something I’ve adjusted to over time.

Half the year he lives in our house in the Victor’s Village. During those times we have family dinners. My mother smiles a lot more. He gets to be a real person as opposed to the Victor he plays for an audience.

He takes me sailing. We go fishing. He teaches me how to tie knots and how to throw a trident. We stick to the Victor’s Village beach of course. To most in Four, he looks like a friend of my mother’s, one of the few she has, and an uncle to me. Very few, if any, know the truth. And they don’t question it.

For years I grow up with this routine.

It’s not all sunshine though. First couple years he’s in the Capitol for the other half of the year. I’m never told why. My mother knows and when I ask she gets this dark look to her. I stop asking.
When he comes back he’s not himself the first week. He doesn’t sleep. He spends more time watching my mother and me than he does talking. I learn to live with it. Just as I learn to live with my mother’s flashbacks and know holding her hand keeps her in reality.

I love them with their flaws but they don’t seem to want to let me see them. So I pretend not to for their sakes.

The first year I’m eligible for the Games the house is silent. Normally my father burns breakfast and my mother fixes it. They laugh, they joke, and they help each other through the day. When I look at them I know what it means to love someone.

That first year, there’s none of it. My mother’s normally bright eyes are dull and vacant. My father looks like he hasn’t slept. I try to pretend I’m excited for the audience outside our house, but inside, I know the truth of the Games. I know there’s nothing to be excited about.

I don’t get reaped that year. My mother cries that night at dinner.

When we watch the Games I feel guilty after the boy tribute dies.

I’ve inherited two things from my mother that I’m proud of, her eyes and her incredible capacity for caring about another human life.

From my father, I’ve gotten my knack for throwing tridents and an ability to talk my way both in and out of trouble.

Most people think my mother is fragile or is broken beyond repair. They call her crazy. They call her a sad story. The Capitol pities her or makes fun.

My mother is the strongest woman I know.

Every day she gets herself out of bed. She feeds me and she helps me when I need it. She walks me to school until I’m old enough to walk myself. And even then she still watches me from the house until I’m gone. She cares for me alone while my father is away. I don’t care that there are days where she has trouble. She’s stronger than all the other Victors. Without her, my father would not survive.

She’s stronger than him too.

I find out the truth about what the Capitol does to him around fourteen. It’s on accident. I overhear a conversation when he returns from a trip. He’s crying as my mother holds him.

“Sometimes I wish I never won.”

I hear my mother shush him, trying to soothe him. “But then we wouldn’t have Beck.”

I run into the room and hug him. He’s too afraid to return it. And I realize I shouldn’t have barged in.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have. I didn’t mean to overhear, but…I love you.” It’s all I manage to fumble out before I’m running for the door. I trip over my own feet halfway there. My father catches me.

“Beck, I never wanted you to hear that.” His eyes are glassy. “I’m sorry.”

My mother is quiet. She places a hand on my father’s shoulder, keeping him together. “How much do you understand what we said?” She asks.
I tell him the truth. That whatever they do it isn’t his fault. That he doesn’t like it and they should stop. They explain it all to me. I’ve never held onto both of them tighter than in that moment.

“I’m so glad I have you. Both of you,” he whispers.

When I’m fifteen, my father doesn’t go to the Capitol as much. It’s a relief to all of us. The happy days in our house go on much longer. But there are still bad days.

Days where I have to stay out of the house because my mother can’t remember where she is. Days where my father ties knot after knot until he’s capable of speaking three words. Days where I wonder if anyone understands what it truly means to grow up with the weight of your parents’ victories surrounding you.

But even with those bad times, I grow up like all the other children in Four. I play on the docks when I’m avoiding school, which is far too often. I let my hair grow out and I collect shells. I build sandcastles and swim almost every day.

I know in the outer districts there are people starving. I’m grateful district Four isn’t one of them.

I grow up hearing about Katniss Everdeen. I hear about the Mockingjay and I have questions.

“Dad, why do they call Katniss a Mockingjay?” I ask, my eyes wide.

I’ve never seen my father look as scared as he did when I asked that. “I don’t know.”

I know when to recognize a lie. “Well you’ve met her, right? Didn’t you ask?”

“No.”

“What’s she like? Is it true that she’s going to overthrow--”

“Beck!” He snaps. “Stop. No more.” He walks away and I never ask about it again.

As years go on the people of Four stop talking about her. They stop caring. The Capitol doesn’t get enough though. They show off her family. Every year they ask their questions. The entire family smiles and waves. I think they’re happy. I think Katniss never thought about rebellion at all.

I’m seventeen when I realize it’s an act.

There’s a flicker in her eyes when Caesar asks Ivy, “Do you think you’ll volunteer?”

I see Katniss’ hand tighten around her husband, Peeta’s. I recognize the signs of distress and flashbacks in her eyes. And I see anger and fire in them, too slight for anyone in the Capitol to understand.

“That poor girl,” my mother says.

I watch Ivy. She’s fifteen, eligible to be reaped, like me. With two Victor parents, she’s the Capitol’s dream contestant. She’s a princess. The daughter of the star-crossed lovers. The baby bird to the Mockingjay. A junior girl on fire. The people of the Capitol would love nothing more than to watch her compete. To watch her kill. Hell, they’d lose their minds if she won.

I’m glad the Capitol doesn’t care about me. I’ve never been more reminded of that than I am watching her force herself to act up for the cameras.
She smiles. “Now what fun is there in volunteering? Wouldn’t you rather be surprised?”

Caesar laughs and the interview goes on. Katniss looks at Ivy with an apology in her eyes. Ivy never sees it. She’s too busy smiling and pretending to be happy. I wonder what her real smile looks like.

The day I turn nineteen is the happiest day of my life. I’ve escaped the Games. I’ve escaped having to kill. I go fishing with my father for the celebratory dinner. My mother goes into town to find desert. She doesn’t enjoy sailing or swimming as much as I know she once did. It’s something the Games took from her and something I wish I could give back.

“I wish Mags was here to see this day,” my father says quietly. I nod. I miss Mags. She was kind. Even without speaking, you knew exactly what she was saying. She taught me how to make a fishing hook when I was five. And she would often take me to the beach. She would visit every day when my father was gone, keeping watch over me if my mother was having a bad day.

She loved my mother and my father like they were her own children. And she loved me like a part of her family too. I consider her as close to a grandmother as I’ll ever get.

There’s a certain weightless happiness that comes with finding out you can’t be reaped. You realize all the things you were afraid to think about are possible.

You think about the future a lot more. You think about working on fishing boats and spending long afternoons sleeping under the sun. You think about all the sunsets you will get to see. You think about owning a boat of your own.

You dream.

You can stop acting happy. You can smile wider than before. You don’t have to play the part on reaping day.

Then the Quarter Quell rolls around and shoots it all to Hell. You find all those dreams turning to nightmares of blood and death. You hear your mother screaming and crying while your father tries his hardest to keep it all together for her.

You find yourself retching in the bathroom until there’s nothing left.

The weeks until reaping day you pretend it’s okay. You try to find that old bravado you grew up with. You do your very best to be the boy from district Four who everyone should root for. You try to be the Career all over again.

You try to play the role. But it’s harder now that you know the feeling of living without an act.

My father blames himself. He calls himself selfish. Something I don’t or can’t agree with. This is Snow’s punishment for two people who dared to dream outside of his control. Who took a chance even when the odds were against them. This is all Snow and his vendetta. Against us, against Katniss, and anyone else who even showed a hint of defiance.

“I should have stayed away,” my father says defeated.

“There is nothing you could have done differently. This is not your fault at all.” My mother squeezes his shoulder. He kisses her.

“Thank you.”

She nods before returning back to weaving a knot to keep a shell in place. She’s making a
necklace, almost the same one my father wears. I know it’s for me.

This is my token. To remind myself of my family while I’m in the arena.

“There’s no use in blaming anyone but Snow,” I say.

My mother makes a noise of agreement.

“Don’t say anything like that in your interview,” my father says.

I smile. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Good. We have a few weeks to get you ready. Starting tomorrow we’re throwing tridents and practicing your Career attitude.” My father stands, pacing.

My mother stops making the necklace.

She’s frozen, caught in a flashback. She shuts her eyes. I watch her pull her hands over her ears and breathe. I’ve seen her do this many times. It’s all just to calm herself down, to keep her in the moment. She’s fine after a minute.

“You have to win, Beck. You have to come home.” My father runs a hand through his hair. It sticks up at various angles. There’s a fear in his eyes that he rarely lets me see.

“Didn’t you say you wish you hadn’t won?” I ask. He flinches. “What if that…what if it happens to me? Wouldn’t it be better if I--”

“We can’t lose you. And if…I will make sure it doesn’t happen.” There’s a promise and a threat in his words that gives me hope. I nod.

“Then I’ll win.”

For the weeks up to reaping day I throw tridents. I’ve always been good at it, but the refresher course makes me better.

Almost better than my father, though he wouldn’t admit it.

There’s constant speculation coming from the Capitol about One and Two. I’m so caught up in training for my own survival I don’t listen to them.

Until I hear them mention my name. I’m overlooked. They make their usual jokes about my mother and my imminent death.

I can’t wait to erase those smiles when I win.

Then I hear the mention of Ivy and Basil Mellark. Her picture flashes up. She’s seventeen now. She’s grown into her features much to the Capitol’s pleasure. I fear for her Victory more than my own.

They’ll take every piece of her they can.

Would it be better if I win? Can I stomach killing her if it means saving her from that fate? Does she even know what could happen?

I don’t want anyone to suffer that.

I try to force my caring nature away. I can’t be like that in the Games. I can’t help everyone I
meet. I have to be ruthless. I have to be like my father’s image even if no one else sees it.

I have to be Beck Cresta, Career. I can’t be Beck Cresta, the scared boy from Four, worrying about everyone else winning over himself.

Worrying about one person winning and the fate that comes with it.

When reaping day arrives I expect my father as a mentor. I don’t expect my mother. I should have though. She wouldn’t stay at home and miss what could be her last week with me. I may have a better skill set than most but that doesn’t guarantee victory.

Action guarantees that. Action and allies, but I’m not sure if I can stomach the other Careers.

I spent years imagining what it would be like to hear my name called. Imagining how I would act and what I would do. But hearing it on reaping day is so much different than my imagined nightmares.

It’s solemn. It’s almost too quiet through the microphone. It feels like doldrums calling for me across the sea. My heart pounds as I hear my mother break down. I go to her. I don’t care what I look like on camera. I don’t care about an act right now. I just need to get to her.

I hear no applause. No fake hollers of joy. No one wants to watch these Games here. No one, not even District Four, is happy with these events.

They all know how much of a sham this is.

We arrive in the Capitol by the end of the day. I barely speak to Minnow. Her father, River, and my parents agree to mentor us separately. Though their collective advice is, “Stick together in the arena and make friends with One and Two.”

They repeat this mantra into the next day.

Minnow and I aren’t exactly friends back home. We don’t hate each other, we just aren’t friendly. She’s one of those Victor children that views it as a point of pride. I love my family. I’m proud of my family. I’m not going around Four acting like I’m better than everyone else because of my gene pool.

Minnow likes to tell people how her father won. She probably would have volunteered at eighteen if she hadn’t been called by then. She wants to be here. She wants to win.

I don’t agree with her, but I’m still going to be kind to her. I don’t care how proud she is. I won’t kill her. I’ll even defend her if I have to. She’s from home. That’s all that matters when we’re in the arena. She’s trustworthy until we get down to the final six.

That’s our unspoken agreement. Final six, we go our separate ways. It’s what happens every year with the Career group. We both know we will be in that group.

I’ve never been turned over to a stylist before and I would like to actively avoid it in the future. They chat, they cut, they apply product after product. It smells bitter and gross. I miss the salt smell of home. The sand and the sun.

I can’t be sentimental anymore. I push the thoughts away.

When they’re finished I run a hand through my shortened hair. At least it’ll be easier to see in the arena.
I walk out in my outfit. My father bites back a laugh.

“Please, don’t.” I sigh. Of all the things they turned me into it’s a stupid pirate. Why couldn’t they just wrap me in a net and call it a day?

Although I guess I’m grateful I’m not showing as much skin as some of the other tributes have in the past. There was a brief moment when Sela, my stylist, was considering changing her design. She thought fewer layers but then just opted to undo more of the shirt.

“At least it’s not a mermaid,” my mother adds.

“I feel like I should have a peg leg.” I pull at the pants. “These are really tight.”

“Deal with it. Come on.” My father pulls me with him to the elevator. He’s all business here. I admire him for being able to keep it together. But it frightens me how easily he slips into the role. Although I guess he’s been playing it for years.

At the staging area I eat sugarcubes while we wait for everyone else to arrive. I find the sweetness strangely calming as my heart pounds in time with the crowd in the stands.

“When you go out there, try to wave and draw their attention. Smile.”

I nod though I barely hear my father’s advice. I can see the worry threatening to reveal itself to everyone around. He tries to hide it beneath the mentor façade.

We’re interrupted when Johanna arrives.

“Finnick,” she greets. He returns with a smile.

“This your…tribute?” She asks. She looks me up and down before turning to my father. She raises an eyebrow. “He looked less like you when his hair was longer.”

“Johanna,” my father warns.

“Well it’s true. What do they care anyway?” She indicates the outside world. “I have to say, kid, the haircut definitely an improvement.” She winks and I’m rendered speechless.


As if on cue, he appears. “Right here.” He takes my father’s hand and shakes it. “I know we’re not supposed to be friendly but it’s nice to meet you.”

He holds out his hand to me. I’m afraid to take it, but my father gives me a look and I do.

“And Beck. You know if you pretend that you don’t care they’ll want your approval more,” Grover tells me with a smirk. He watches every movement in the staging area. His attention being pulled in all directions.

They’ve dressed him in greens and browns. He looks like a tree. It’s worse than my outfit. He shrugs as if he knows.

Damn. I like this kid. I don’t want to kill him.

“Who says I want their approval?” I ask. Grover smiles, focusing on me.

“Have you seen her yet?” He asks in a hushed voice.
“Who?”

“Katniss. I mean her kids are in it so you have to be expecting, you know…”

“What?” I ask but I already know what he’s going to say.

“Something different.”

“Come on, Grover. Let’s get your spastic ass back to the chariot.” Johanna interrupts, a concern in her voice. She leads him away, a hand on his shoulder.

I’m guiltily grateful that One and Two didn’t see us talking. My father returns to his advice and I return to ignoring it. I don’t care about this presentation. I care about my score. I care about my abilities. I care about winning. Sponsors won’t see past my name, regardless of what I’m wearing or what I do tonight. They’ll care once I show them I’m going to win.

I hear the elevator open and my attention is drawn to the girl walking out. Her pictures don’t do her justice. I may hate what my stylist and prep team did to me but I can’t imagine she hates hers. They’re worthy of the tribute they’ve been given.

They’ve turned her into something fierce and terrifying. Her hair is darker than I thought it would be in person. Her makeup gives her an air of danger. The dark black dress sticks to her in an outfit that looks down on everyone else’s.

I once called her a princess. I’ve never felt that to be a more accurate statement than now. If there was ever a family who could be considered royalty amongst the Capitol and districts, it’s the Mellarks. They threatened the system. They can take down the system. And we look at them like they are some kind of untouchable celebrity.

Although, Ivy and Basil are in the Games, they can’t be that untouchable. However, she looks like she’s ready to dismantle this whole staging area in that outfit, so maybe they still are.

“I’ll be right back.”

“What are you doing?” My father asks.

I keep walking. “Checking out the competition.” I realize the multiple meanings as I say it. I would cringe but it’s accurate. I’m a nineteen year old idiot. Out of all the tributes here she’s probably the one who is going to kill me. At least, she’s the one with the biggest chance.

I try to come up with what I want to say. I build up my act. Play the part. Be the Career. She’s smart enough not to fall for it.

“You look very princess-like,” I begin, smiling. She turns and I’m hit with her dark blue eyes. They almost threaten to silence me. I smell salty air and I feel sunshine. I hear the ocean waves and I’m back in Four all at once.

I try to lean against the chariot but I’m distracted by her and I slip. I keep my eyes on hers until she looks away. I’m grateful and disappointed at the same time.

“What is that supposed to mean?” She asks.


“I know, I saw the reaping.” She narrows her eyes and I look into the blues again. I can’t kill
those blues. I have to outlive them. I can’t kill them. This was stupid. I shouldn’t have come over here. I should have ignored her.

“Well I saw yours, Ivy, but I was being polite.” I return. I’m much better at this act than I thought I was. Or maybe she’s just better at it and it’s forcing me to try to be too.

“What are you supposed to be?” She asks, scanning me over.

“Pirate. They thought it would be a nice theme since my mother was a mermaid during her Games and all. And this year is all about history, isn’t it?” I laugh but I don’t feel that it’s much of a joke. I’m bitter. They’re taking it out on us. They let us live. They let us have freedom, only to wait for the right time to kill us. All to make others suffer. It’s sick.

The crowd is growing outside. I can hear the noise increasing in volume from them. I look at the entrance and I feel a chill. They all want to own us. They don’t understand what any of this is for. They think this is entertainment.

“I thought they were always about history. The rebellion. Or do they not give you an education in Four outside of preparing you for the Games?” She smirks and the chill disappears. Her hands look deft enough to hold a bow. I don’t doubt her family has kept her ready in case. I’m sure most mentors here have given some advantage to their tributes and children.

I cock my head to the side and stare at her. “Oh come now, we both know I’m not the only one prepared.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She shrugs. I don’t buy it. She’s easy to read when you look for the signs. And I’ve recognized them since that day I watched her answer the question about volunteering.

“Yeah I’m sure.”

The elevator opens. Her stylist and brother walk out and head towards us. My time is up. I walk away, adding, “You know you should give the horse a sugar cube, maybe eat one yourself. Good for the nerves.” I don’t know why she would be nervous. I’m not even sure why I offer my advice. Maybe because it makes her roll her eyes and I realize there’s no way I can intimidate her. Not that I would want to. I like that she’s not afraid of me.

When I get back to the chariot my father grabs me by the shoulder.

“What the Hell are you doing?” He asks.

I shrug. I’m not sure what to say. Thankfully I don’t have to come up with anything because a voice tells us to get ready.

When I board the chariot with Minnow, we make small talk, mostly about what happened with our prep teams. Once the crowd sees up we smile and wave to them. We play our parts.

Once I get back to the room I pull my mother and father aside.

“I want her as an ally. Ivy. Her and her brother.” I know she’s going to try to keep him alive. If there’s a recurring trait in her family it’s self-sacrifice. He’s her weakness to be exploited by cold Careers. Something I am not. I want to go home. I want to win, but I won’t do it the way the Capitol wants.

I’ll join with Ivy and Bas. We’ll split at top three. Whoever wins, wins. That’s my plan. I won’t lay down my life. I won’t allow cruelty to become the Victor. I’ll marry the strategies of my father
“What?” His eyes are wide. “What about--”

“I don’t want One and Two. She’ll keep me alive.”

“You don’t know that.”

“No. But that’s who I want. Can you talk to her mentors?” I ask.

My mother sighs. “Beck. Why do you want her as an ally?”

“Do you really think One and Two will be able to take her? She’s my best chance.”

“Can you guarantee that she’s capable? No. Besides, Katniss isn’t trusting. She’ll shoot it down. Pardon the pun.” My father smirks. My mother gives him a look, the smirk fades. He adds, “Stick with One and Two.”

I stand strong. I shouldn’t be asking for her as an ally on day one, especially without seeing her shoot. She could be horrible for all I know. But I trust her. I trust the blue eyes. I trust the fearlessness that she displays.

“No. I want Twelve.”

“Fine. I’ll see...we’ll see what we can do. Until then, just, please, pretend to be friendly with One and Two. It’s much better than having them as an enemy.” The worried look is back on my father’s face. I nod.

“Okay.”

Training doesn’t disappoint me even after I’m told she doesn’t want to be my ally. I find moments to converse with her, hoping she’ll trust me enough to change her mind. I try to show my skill set. It impresses the others but she couldn’t care less.

Hearing everyone talk about their families and their legacies makes my stomach turn. I have to stop myself from punching Stone when he mentions my mother. I remember my father’s advice and I keep up appearances.

I hope Ivy will change her mind. I would love to throw my trident into any one of the other Careers. Except for Minnow. I should bring up the possible alliance to her, but I’m afraid she will go to the others with it. She’s the weakest out of the six of us. She may want to do something to prove her worth.

I have to get Ivy to agree to the alliance. I have to get her to trust me. I try a different approach. Sincerity.

I notice her struggling with a knot as my own necklace dangles in front of my training shirt. I tuck it back in before I walk to her station. I don’t want anyone to see it. It’s something for me, not the audience.

I try to give her advice. For the first time I see genuine concern and fear. I recognize the look. I saw it in my own eyes in the mirror after the chariots. That fear of killing. That fear of knowing the people you are going to be killing.

Do I tell her its okay? Do I say if we’re allies I’ll do all the killing? No, I can’t carry that weight alone.
She walks away before I can say anything.

I throw tridents for the rest of the day trying to come up with a way to get her on my team. There’s no amount of acting or bravado that will convince her. She sees through it. I could punch Stone. That would make a statement. But that also buries my chances of avoiding the Careers through training.

But it would be worth it to see the look on his face.

Maybe I just have to wait until the arena. Maybe one act could change her mind. Maybe if I help her, she’ll help me. That’s what allies are supposed to do. Screw having a plan going in. I can manage in the arena.

I watch her after I hit my targets. When she finally looks at me I say, “Pretty good, huh?”

I expect an unamused remark. She delivers. “I’ve seen better.”

I throw again. Hitting the center of the target with a satisfied smack. I shake out my arm after I retrieve the trident. I’m getting bored of this. I should look into survival skills tomorrow before assessment. I’m sure she knows how to survive. But if I don’t keep up with her after the bloodbath I’ll be lost unless it’s a water environment.

Maybe I’ll get lucky.

I really shouldn’t rely on luck. It hasn’t done me any favors.

I notice Grover in the corner and give him a nod. He returns the greeting. Maybe he can join us too. My parents have been upfront since the Games began, telling me who the others parents are and what happened to them.

I learned yesterday that Grover’s mother killed herself. She was like my father and she couldn’t keep it together. Grover has been virtually raised by Johanna and doesn’t have a father. Unlike me, it’s not a lie. I can only guess that it’s probably some client who either has no idea or doesn’t care.

If I had a little brother, I’d want him to be Grover.

I can’t think like that.

I have to keep it together. I have to play the Game. I hate this Game. I hate this place. I hate this city. I hate these people. I want to go home. I want my life. I want my freedom. I don’t want anyone to die.

I turn to meet Ivy’s eyes. I hate the blue too. I hate that I think of the ocean when I see them. I hate that I remember lying on the beach as the sun set and waves crashed. I hate that I think of home.

But I’m calmer when I look at them.

I see pain that she’s trying to mask. A question that she can’t voice. Her eyebrows are strained and I take a step forward. She straightens like she’s waiting for me. I drop the trident with a clatter.

I hear a laugh and recover, playing it off for the Careers. This is no place for me to find a girl pretty. This is no time for me to want to make her smile.

I’ve never thought myself lucky. I once had a girlfriend who got reaped. She didn’t come home. I waited to find someone after I was safe. Of course that didn’t last very long because here I am.
And now, I have that feeling again. The pit in my stomach. The dry throat. The fluttering heartbeat. I hate my luck.

I wonder what it would be like to kiss her. I force the thought away.

You’re an idiot, Beck. Just throw the stupid tridents and pretend you’re a killer. Play the part. Be the part. That’s all you can do. Win. Survive and win. Because you can’t die. You have to go home. You have to stay with your family. You can find another girl you think is pretty. You can find a boat to live on. You can hide out on the sea and live in peace.

You can have a future. You have to go home.

Play the stupid part.

I’m pulled from my thoughts when I hear laughter and Emery mouthing off. Ivy marches past me, Hell in her eyes. I wonder if I should stop this like I did the other day. No good comes from getting the attention of these people.

But today, I want to watch her take them on. Today I need to know if I’m right. Besides, I’m going to enjoy seeing their laughter disappear. I can’t be the one to do it, but maybe she can.

She raises the bow in a perfect stance and hits every target. The room falls silent and I would be terrified if I wasn’t so impressed.

She has to be my ally.

I can’t survive with the others.

She walks past me. I can’t resist telling her, “Nice shooting, Twelve. But I don’t think that was very smart.”

“Focus on your tridents, Four. And less on me.”

She heads back to her brother. There’s a noticeable look of disappointment on his face. I wonder how her mother will feel about these events.

Victoria speaks for the first time, “If she doesn’t want to join the group. We kill her first.”

Cain nods in agreement.

Emery is the only one to disagree. “You want her to join us?”

“You saw how good she is. Do you really want to risk it?” Stone asks. “Speak to Cashmere or Gloss. Hell, speak to my father. They’ll all agree.”

The last thing I want is for her to join these people. The last thing she is going to do is join them. They’ll hunt her down in the arena now. Maybe she will agree to be my ally.

It’s the only way she’ll survive.

When I’m back in my room, I feel restless. A part of me wants this to all be over with. Another part doesn’t ever want to reach the bloodbath. I know it’s inevitable. I’m going into that arena whether I want to or not. I have the interview to get sponsors. I have my assessment score to help build their desire for me.

I knew this wasn’t going to be easy. I didn’t expect it to be like this.
I hear a knock on my door.

“Come in.”

My mother enters. She indicates the end of the bed. I nod and she sits.

“Are you okay?” She asks.

I shake my head. “I saw her shoot today. She’s good. They’re going to try to kill her.”

“Everyone is going to try to kill each other.”


“I know you don’t want to kill…” She pauses for a moment, blinking back memories of her time in the arena. “…to kill anyone. I know you’re scared.”

“Yeah I am. And just because I don’t want to, doesn’t mean I don’t realize that I have to.” I am prepared for it. I just have to go through with it. And I know I will when the gun goes off and I’m trying to win.

“When your father was my mentor, he told me I had to win. And I didn’t want to hurt anyone. I didn’t want to be that person who walked out on all these dead children. But I had to win.”

“For him?”

“Because I needed to come home.”

“Do you regret it?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “I might be haunted by it. I might not be okay from it. But I got you. I can never regret that.”

I smile as she opens her arms to me. I pull her into the hug.

“I don’t want to die.”

“You have to win.”

I nod. “I’ll try.”

“You better. You’re too much like your father, don’t let her distract you.”

“Are you saying dad is distracted by Ivy Mellark?” I joke. She laughs.

“No, I’m saying the two of you get hung up on one pretty girl and let your whole world unravel.” She ruffles my hair. It’s a good day for her. She hasn’t smiled recently, but it’s nice to see it now.

“Last I checked that pretty girl he got hung up on was you. So I think it worked out for him.”

She nudges my shoulder. “Beck. I’m sorry that you’re here.”

“It’s not your fault. It’s not anyone’s, except for maybe Snow’s.” My voice darkens and she gives me a warning look. “Don’t worry. I’m not going to go shouting about rebellion.”

We’re quiet for a moment.
“Although someone should.”

She nods. “Maybe they will.”

I know better than to believe false hope. I know that, after years of hearing the whispers or seeing the faces of people who want it to be true, false hope is damaging. It kills. It makes people believe and then it destroys them.

Still, I add, “I hope so.”

My tone lightens. I see the flickers of flashbacks threatening my mother. I need to keep her in a good mood. “Do you think I would have had a chance with her if we weren’t here?” I ask.

She shuts her eyes and smiles despite herself. She looks at me with sincerity. “I’m your mother and I love you. But you wouldn’t have noticed her if not for all this.”

“So what you’re saying is this is a good thing? Or that I only want her because I can’t have her?”

“No. I don’t think it’s as petty as that. I don’t know if you would have tried without this. Maybe you would have. I can’t say. I think that things happen and sometimes they make sense and other times they don’t. And maybe they happen when they’re supposed to.” She shrugs.

For the second time I tell her, “I hope so.”

She kisses me on the forehead and leaves. I fall asleep running over possibilities. Alternate futures where there are no Games or where I’ve won. I imagine if I could pretend to kill someone and then they could sneak out of the arena. But then I realize that won’t work.

When you grow up in Four they tell you all about the Games. They train you. They make you believe you can win. I try not to let pride cloud my judgment. I know I need to win. I know I need to come home. But then I realize that won’t work.

I know what happens after. I know about nightmares and being sold. I know that it’s a possibility for me as much as my father wants to deny it. Even more so I know it’s a definite for Ivy. What’s better, winning or dying?

There is no clear answer anymore.

More than anything I just want this place to crumble. I want a wave to crash through and wipe the slate clean. I want to swim away and watch every arena crash down. I want the Games to be erased. I want the Capitol to go with them.

I want to be free.

I want my family to be safe.

I want to live.

“When the time comes put my hands on the table, they are examined for what they are
A long life line that's been cut short, by the road, the time, the battle scars
What I would give to be back home, where the sun sets over the water
Someone save me from these preacher's sons,
save me from their daughters”

- When the Time Comes by The Classic Crime
Katniss meets with President Snow. Ivy and Bas face their individual assessment.

The Games: Assessment – Katniss and Ivy

Katniss –

“I’m going with you,” Peeta says as I dress.

I shake my head.

“Why not?” He asks, sitting on the edge of the bed.

“The letter was for me. I have to go alone.” I don’t relish the idea of being in a room with President Snow, but Peeta can’t come. Whatever threat or message Snow intends to send me is for me alone. I can already imagine what he will say or who he will threaten. It’s all old threats I’ve heard before.

Peeta doesn’t need to hear them firsthand.

There’s a familiar feeling building in me. Not one of fear, not one of anger, and not uncertainty. It’s old. It comes from the survivor in me. The girl with the berries and the pin. The one ready to face her monsters.

The feeling is courage.

Courage and knowledge that I can take whatever Snow is going to say to me. He’s already throwing my children in the arena. He’s forced us through years of pageantry and threatened all the people I love to keep me compliant. He could tell me he’s going to lock me up and I wouldn’t falter. I can take it.

I have to keep myself together in front of him. I can’t let him see the parts of me that are broken. I can’t let him win.

Peeta can’t be there for that. It has to be me who shows Snow.

I hear a sigh from behind me. “If you really think you should go alone. Okay. But just promise you’ll come find me after?”

I turn around.

“As soon as I get back.”

I kiss him before I pull on my jacket and leave the bedroom. He follows me out shortly after and heads to the table where the others sit.

Ivy looks up at me as I walk to the elevator.
“You’re leaving?” She asks.

I press the button and turn to face her. I’m silent, unable to answer the simple question. It’s stupid. I should just be able to tell her. But I don’t know how to say I’m going to see the man who’s responsible for all of this. Who has kept us under a gun, waiting to pull the trigger when I didn’t follow the rules. The man who is going to force them to fight and kill, who forced me to do it.

How do I tell her I’m meeting him for breakfast?

She watches me intently waiting for a response. I’m grateful that Peeta is there to answer.

“She has a meeting.”

“Alone?” Bas asks.

“Yes,” I answer, an edge to my voice. They don’t question it further.

“Before you go then, what should I do for the assessment?” Ivy asks.

Peeta starts. “Show them your best skill.”

The elevator arrives. I lock eyes with her. “Show them everything.”

She nods and I look to Bas. He has the same look he had back in Twelve right after the Peacekeeper attack. A determination and anger that echoes my own. He nods in agreement as I get on the elevator.

Two of Snow’s personal guards wait for me outside the training center with a car. One with dark hair and too white teeth holds the door open.

“Mrs. Mellark,” he greets as I get in the car.

The other guard silently nods to his partner. The one with too white teeth sits beside me as the other drives. Neither one introduces themselves or says anything for the rest of the trip.

I feel like I’m being driven to an execution.

I can take it. I’m not afraid. He won’t win. I can take it.

I keep repeating it in my head as the drive ends and the guard opens the door for me.

I’m led into the mansion where the faint scent of roses hovers over every corner. At each turn it grows in power. I remember the white rose before the Victory Tour. Another rose accompanying a letter of congratulations. If I could destroy every last rose it wouldn’t be enough.

When we stop, it’s outside large glass doors where the smell is strongest. Of course he would have the meeting here.

“Wait a moment.” The guard with the too white teeth walks inside.

I hear a muffled question before a woman’s voice answers loudly, “I’ll see to her.”

A moment later the two guards leave as Snow’s granddaughter, Reagan, emerges from behind the glass doors. The smell of roses is nearly overpowering as she walks out. I hear a beeping before she shuts the door.

She’s wearing a black fitted pantsuit and heels, so unlike most of the Capitol couture that it’s
almost odd. She has to be doing it to stand out. When everyone else is dressed in loud colors, the only way to be different is to dress in simple, dark ones. Her heels give her an inch on my height so that she looks down at me with ice cold eyes. Her hair is a dirty blonde, curled and reaching past her shoulders. The only embellishments she has are some brown and gold highlights in her hair and a pearl necklace. It doesn’t make her seem any softer. If anything they serve as cold reminders of how powerful and wealthy she is. Like she doesn’t need any of the usual Capitol flair to get attention, she demands it when she walks into a room.

I remember seeing her on camera when she was a little girl, her hair braided like mine, wearing a flower dress and holding Snow’s hand. That little girl is long gone, replaced by a worthy successor to her grandfather’s legacy.

“He’ll be ready in a minute,” she says, void of any warmth.

“Thank you.” I try to avoid making eye contact. She continues staring, like she’s looking for an answer.

“I used to do my hair like yours.” She indicates me. I nod. I remember.

“A lot of people did,” I say, finally making eye contact. She’s just the first step in Snow’s strategy to shake me up. He wants me scared when I walk in there. She wants to be the cause. I no longer see the little girl, only the cold woman, and I have to beat her.

“My daughter does now. Funny how history repeats itself.”

She narrows her eyes at my remark. “She’ll grow out of it. Assuming she’s this year’s Victor, of course.”

“Did you grow out of it?”

“What do you think?” She asks, almost amused.

“I think you hope you did.”

“And I think your crown is finally going to break you. Because neither one of your children are inheriting it.” She watches my reaction. I give her none. “And whatever history you think is going to repeat, isn’t.”

So this is the confirmation then. There are no plans for either of my children to survive, not by Snow’s standards and not by Reagans. At least I can warn Ivy and Bas to expect the Gamemakers to come at them. How much it will help is unknown, but I can tell them.

And maybe we can defy the odds all over again.

A ring echoes from behind the glass doors.

“He’ll see you now,” Reagan says coldly. She opens the door and I pass her.

There are roses of many different colors inside the warm greenhouse. The smell infects me from every side until I’m numb and I can’t remember any other smell besides the one assaulting me. Reagan follows me as I travel down a pathway leading to a small table.

Snow sits there in his wheelchair with a large machine behind him, beeping the rhythm of his heartbeat. A tube travels from a needle in his arm to a bag on a stand, dripping a clear liquid into his veins.
He looks pale but masks whatever weakness with a strong stare. I’m not the only one trying to contain their fragile state.

He studies me as I approach, the wrinkles forming deep crevasses around his eyes.

“Miss Everdeen,” he greets, directing me to the seat across from him. “Not what you expected?”

“Nothing ever is,” I return.

“Reagan, please.” He indicates the tea and scones in front of me. She nods and obediently pours a cup for him and then for me. She moves to stand behind him, watching me with her cold eyes.

I do my best to ignore her.

“You’re not going to eat?” He asks, taking a sip of his tea.

“I’m not hungry.”

“Then let’s discuss business.” He coughs. Reagan hands him a handkerchief. When he’s finished I notice a small spot of blood on it. He tucks it away in his hand.

“Business?” I ask.

“A long time ago we agreed to be allies, yes? And we agreed not to lie.”

I nod.

“I want you to remember that, Miss Everdeen.”

“Mrs. Mellark,” I correct.

“No. That’s for them out there. In here, to me, you’re always Miss Everdeen,” he says, taking a sip of his tea. “How is your husband? And your children are they faring well in training?”

“Peeta’s fine. Everyone’s strong.” I grind my teeth.

“Well strength isn’t enough, is it? Tell me, are they planning on sacrificing themselves for the other?” He asks, a snide smile forming.

“I don’t really know what their plans are.”

“Now now, no lies, remember?” He wags a finger at me.

“Did you just want me here to discuss their strategy and serve me tea?” I ask, tired of the smell and the veiled threats.

He smiles before continuing, “You’ve been very useful in keeping the Districts in line. Your children have been even better. But recently, there’s been some talk and some actions that are repetitive. I want to make sure these things stay where they’re supposed to. In the past.”

He clears his throat. “Your children, your son specifically, made a mistake in Twelve. A mistake that I dealt with, of course. But your District doesn’t seem to have understood the message. They’re shortening their coal supply and for some reason the Peacekeepers aren’t as effective. And twelve isn’t the only district starting to question again.”

“We haven’t done anything since then,” I start.
“Not yet. Your children replanted the thought that you started. And they have the power to change
it back. They have their interview coming up. I need you to make sure they don’t say anything…
controversial.”

“Controversial?” I ask.

“You know what I mean. Make sure they mention how much they enjoy it here. And how proud
they are of their legacy.”

“I will make sure they stick to the script,” I say.

“See that you do. Because if you don’t, I guarantee that no one in your family will see Twelve
again. Even you.”

I guess I’ve outlived my usefulness. Still, I add, “Coal supply might not be the only thing you
have to worry about if that happens.”

He smiles. “Oh I’m sure I can manage the aftermath. Besides, it’s not like you’ll all go at the same
time. There are many different ways to die. And a story for each one.”

His tone lightens. “I’m very curious as to how Ivy and Basil play the Games. And how their fans
enjoy it.”

I look into his eyes. “I’m sure they’ll surprise you.”

“I don’t enjoy surprises, as you well know.” He sighs, tired. “Reagan, call Avery and Roman to
see Miss Everdeen back to the training center.”

She nods and presses a call button on the wall.

“Are we on the same page?” He asks.

“No surprises,” I tell him.

He shakes his head. He knows I’m lying.

Reagan’s watchful gaze follows as the guards lead me from the room. My hands don’t shake. I
don’t have to remind myself who I am or where I come from. For once, I’m focused, I’m clear and
my past doesn’t seep its way into the present.

I’m determined and I’m whole.

The broken woman is quiet, almost gone, and rising from her ashes is the old me. The old me who
faces the nightmares with Peeta’s help. The one who loves her children fiercely and whose walls
have been shattered by that love. The old me who’s been damaged but who has, with help, put
those pieces back together as best as she can.

And she smiles all the way back to the training center. Snow is scared. He’s sick and he’s dying.
His granddaughter sees a threat and a problem they need to contain. Twelve is fighting. Other
Districts could join.

All it takes is a spark.

An old spark, old embers, and fire plumes once again.

I can guarantee one thing. There is no script I will force upon my children. Not anymore.
Whatever actions they take are their own.

Just as mine will be.

And when we suffer the consequences, we will have to bear that weight. I most of all.

But I can take it.

I know that now. I’ve learned it after twenty five years. I am stronger than I ever thought I could be. Than anyone thought I could be, except for maybe Peeta and Gale. Maybe even Haymitch. They knew what I could be.

What I will be.

The Mockingjay.

When I walk onto the trading floor, I don’t see Haymitch anywhere. Possible sponsors mill about, speaking to mentors and enjoying their complimentary drinks and food. Finnick speaks animatedly to one, trying to hold their attention.

They walk onwards to Brutus, eager to sponsor his daughter, Victoria.

I roll my eyes at her name. It sounds like Victor. The overconfidence is ripe with them.

I look around for Peeta. The dwindling crowd makes it easier to spot him, sitting alone in the corner. He’s worn out, slumping in the seat, trying to hold his head up.

He tries too hard to get sponsors every year. This year is no exception. If anything, he’s tried harder. I hate to see the look he gets after this day. When no one wants to help our tributes and now our children, he feels like a failure. He feels like he’s letting down their family because he can’t keep them alive.

I feel it too.

Hopefully after the interviews and the scores it will get easier, but there’s no way of knowing.

“Nice of you to show up,” Johanna says, coming to a stop next to me. “He’s been running around all day trying to get someone to, and I quote, believe enough in the possibility of Twelve’s victory. Guess the last name isn’t enough to garner interest anymore.”

“Guess not.”

“So what was so much more important than this?” She asks, holding out her hands like she’s showing off the room.

“I had a meeting with Snow.”

Her smile fades. Her hands drop. “I’m sure that went according to plan.”

I don’t respond.

“Or he thinks it did. I’ll see you around.” Before she leaves she adds, “Oh and their scores, probably doesn’t matter what they show them. So I wouldn’t worry about those, just what they mean.”

She leaves. Peeta notices me and stands. We meet each other in the middle.
“What happened?” He asks immediately.

“Let’s go back.”

He nods. When we’re on our floor I tell him everything. I tell him what Snow told me, what it means for our children, and how I don’t want them to have to say what they’re told.

He agrees. It’s time for us to take a stand.

Ivy –

The last day of training, or the last half day of it, doesn’t feel like the others. Nerves are rising amongst the tributes as everyone scrambles to perfect their skills. Even the Careers are noticeably quieter than they have been.

They don’t flock to the weapons as usual. Instead, they focus on survival skills. This leaves Bas and me avoiding them whenever they go to a different station. Tributes from outer districts try their hands at weapons but they aren’t very good with them.

Springer from Three, with dark cropped hair and a burn mark across his neck, never leaves the trap station. Not even when the Careers saunter in and try to take over. He’s modifying the traps the instructor has taught him, much to her chagrin, and barely registers anyone else near him. He’s too absorbed in his work.

The Careers wait for him to leave but he doesn’t. Eventually, they do something I haven’t seen them do before. They give up. Stone, Cain and Victoria go to the plants station while Emery and Minnow choose to stay at traps. Neither one says a single word to Springer. They listen to the instructor and do as they’re told.

Beck strays from the group, occupying his time with knots. I don’t understand why he’s spending his time there. He clearly doesn’t need to learn the skill. But it’s possible he finds comfort in the familiar, just as I do holding a bow or making a fire.

Bas and I try to make fishing hooks. An hour and two finger pricks later I stop. Bas struggles at first, cursing as the hook digs into his hand when he tries to tie it. But after a while he figures it out and pulls them together easily.

“If we have to fish in the arena, it looks like you’re in charge of it,” I say. Bas nods, smiling.

“That just leaves you with everything else. Glad I can help.”

“That’s not true. You can build a fire just as well as me.” I lean against the table. “And you might have to.” He stops tying the hook and looks at me. His joking expression changes into a solemn one.

“Promise me that if I die--”

“Bas--”

“Promise me. That you won’t give up. Don’t blame yourself and don’t give up.” He waits for my response, staring at me. I can’t make that promise.

“No. You’re not going to die. We’re going to stick together and you’re going to win,” I say firmly. He sighs, disappointed, before returning to his fish hook.

“We’re both getting out. They can’t force us to kill each other. They can’t force us to do
anything,” he says.

“And yet here we are. Forced into the Games.”

“Just because we’re here doesn’t mean we have to play. They can put us in an arena but they can’t make us do anything once we’re there.” He ties string around the hook to keep it in place.

“They can have the Gamemakers try to kill us,” I say quietly. “You know if it gets too boring.”

He looks up at Plutarch and the others briefly before shrugging. “But if we survive, we survive. They can’t force us to kill someone.” He removes his finished hook. He holds it up to inspect it.

“We choose our actions. They can’t control that. Just like they couldn’t control moms,” I say, more to myself than to him.

He murmurs in agreement. I feel like we’ve just thought of something powerful and dangerous. How far does the control go? How much will get out live on the cameras once the arena starts? They can’t anticipate what we will do and they can’t make us do what they want. Even with threats, even with their own creations in the arena, they can’t force us to take a life.

It’s a kind thought but the bitterness of reality destroys it. There’s no hope for survival if I don’t play. I’m going to have to kill someone at the bloodbath, that’s been decided. There’s no chance of escape if I don’t.

And with the Career pack following us, I’ll have to kill them too.

But Bas, he can do what he wants. He can choose to play or not to. And when it comes down to the two of us, I can stand down and let the people see an act of bravery in a hostile environment.

Just as our parents did.

They can’t control us if we play the Games our way. If we honor the dead like our mother, if I save my brother, we don’t let the Capitol win. We don’t let the Games take away everything we are.

We give the people more than just a show. We make it mean something.

“I’m not going to survive.”

He tries to respond but I cut him off. “Make it count.”

I don’t ask him to promise and he doesn’t try to change my thoughts. He starts another fish hook with a small nod. I look up at the Gamemakers. Food is being wheeled in and their eyes follow the carts like gluttonous animals.

I imagine them watching us on the cameras with the same expression.

I feel sick.

At lunch the only sounds in the room are quiet small talk and forks scraping against plates.

I stab at a piece of fish, my nerves on edge. After today it’s all over. I have the interview tomorrow and then we’re in the arena the next day. Whatever time I have left is fading fast.

Grover drops his tray at our table before taking a seat.

“Hey guys,” he greets, shoveling a forkful of potatoes in his mouth. “So what skill are you going
to show them?"

He laughs at his own joke.

Bas cracks a smile. I sit, stoic, cold. Every time I look at him I see the image of his dead body being lifted from the arena.

There’s no room for jokes anymore. No time for laughter. It’s all over.

“She’s a tough one, huh?” Grover points to me.

Bas shrugs. “She’s never been one for amusing moments.”

Grover adjusts his glasses. “I can see why. It’s a tough world.”

“You didn’t want to sit with your district partner?” I ask.

“She’s kind of quiet and I really don’t want quiet right now. But it’s not like I can sit with the Careers, so you two are the best candidates.” Grover takes another bite of his food. His free hand drums on the table.

“Are you worried?” Bas asks.

“Nah. I already know I won’t get anything above a six. Never been very good with an ax, or any weapon really,” Grover answers quietly. “But don’t let them hear that.” He indicates the Careers.

Victoria watches me with hawk eyes as she cuts into meat. Stone and Cain bury themselves in talk of strategy. Emery picks at her nails as she adds one or two thoughts to the plan. Minnow, normally energetic and trying to get their attention, stares at the wall with a blank expression. Beck eats quietly with an empty seat between him and the others. They don’t seem to care that he’s distanced himself today. His loyalty and skill in the arena is secure. They don’t have to worry about his small moments of weakness here.

“Secrets safe with us,” I tell Grover. He smiles.

After lunch, we sit on benches organized by District waiting for our names to be called. Teddy and Callie sit next to Bas and I. Callie and Bas try to make small talk but fade out after Cain’s name is called.

He rises with confidence and marches through the doors.

I look over to Beck. His thumbs circle around each other in a continuous motion. He focuses on them and nothing else. I watch his hands until his name is called. He looks up, surprised by it. He shuts his eyes, breathes and stands.

His eyes find mine and he smirks. He gives me a wink before turning towards the door and walking through.

“They’re not going to just let us win,” I say with a shake in my voice.

Bas takes my hand and squeezes it.

After what feels like an endless wait Bas’ name is called.

“I’ll see you after.” He smiles and walks through the door.

I pull my knees to my chest as I wait for my turn, the hum of fans keeping me company. The room
is colder without people to occupy it. I shiver as time passes.

I don’t know what skill Bas chose to present. I’m hoping it’s the fishing hooks or camouflage. He’ll get a decent score that way.

But the longer it takes for my name to be called, the more I think he’s chosen to try something new.

Finally Claudius Templesmith’s voice rings over the speakers. “Ivy Mellark.”

I swallow and stand, walking through the door.

Plutarch and the other Gamemakers watch me as I enter, their eyes tracking my every movement. I notice a shimmer in front of them, a force field. I remember hearing about my mother shooting an arrow at them and I smile.

There’s a noticeable tension in the room. Drag marks line the floor where I walk. A table filled with paints has been pushed to the side, its colors spilling all over it. What did Bas do?

“Miss Mellark, you have ten minutes to present your chosen skill,” Plutarch says. I nod and drag three targets to the center. I pick up the bow and quiver of arrows.

Whatever tension the Gamemakers felt before is gone as I hear a sharp intake of breath. I look up towards them. A woman watches me with wide excited eyes as she hits a man’s shoulder with the back of her hand. He smiles and leans forward in his seat.

I’m reminded this is entertainment. That twenty three children will die and not one of these people will mourn them. I think of the Tributes. Grover, with his glasses and warm smile. Callie, joking with Teddy and Bas. August, muttering about home. Beck and his knots. I think of Little Zero, whose name I don’t remember to my disappointment, and how his shirt is too big for him. How he’s too small, too young. These people will enjoy watching him die. Even more so if it’s their favorite killing him on the path to victory.

I turn to the Gamemakers and I make a decision. I’m not playing by their rules today.

I load an arrow and raise the bow, but I don’t turn towards the targets. The excited faces drop one by one as they realize what I’m about to do. I pull the string tight and fire directly at them.

All the Gamemakers flinch except Plutarch. If there hadn’t been a force field, the arrow would have gone right into his head. Instead, it sparks and falls to the ground in a broken heap. The woman’s excitement has been replaced by anger. Her hand is frozen in place. The man’s jaw has dropped. I fight a smile.

Plutarch remains expressionless.

I remove the quiver from my back and pour the arrows out of it. I drop the bow in a clatter then kiss my three middle fingers and raise my hand. They can see the hatred in my eyes. They know this is no symbol of honor for them. This is defiance. This is me being my mother.

Today, I don’t care how much I resemble her. I want them to see it. I want them to fear it.

Still, even with that thought, I can’t resist saying something I wish she had said long ago. “Fuck the Games.”

I walk out to an audible gasp from the woman and horrified eyes from the rest. Plutarch never reacts, but I know I’ve probably made things about ten times worse.
And right now I don’t care.

When the elevator opens I see everyone seated and waiting in the living area. The scores won’t be released for at least a few hours. Haymitch is hiding a smile and my father has a hand on Bas’ shoulder. He must have told them what he did.

Effie stands from her chair.

“Ivy please tell me you showed them your skill and left.”

“I showed them my skill,” I answer.

“What did you do?” Bas asks.

“You first. They didn’t look happy when I walked in.”

“I painted a Mockingjay on a target, bowed and said I hope that was satisfactory enough for a score.” He shrugs. “Seemed like a good idea.”

“Young man I assure you your sense of a good idea is wildly askew. At least your sister had enough --”

“I shot an arrow at them.”

Effie lets out an exasperated breath. Haymitch smiles.

“Definitely had enough sense, this one. And an uncanny resemblance, don’t you think, Katniss?”

I look to my mother who, to my surprise, smiles.

“You’re not mad?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “Did you say anything after?”

I nod. I’m not sure I should repeat it. “It wasn’t as eloquent as what you said, Bas.”

Bas sits up, curious. “What did you say?”

I’m quiet, chewing my lip.

“Ivy, what did you say?” Effie asks, her voice rising in fear.

“Fuck the Games,” I mumble.

“What was that?” Haymitch asks, leaning in. He’s already smiling. He heard me. I’m sure he just wants me to say it loud enough for the Capitol to hear.

“I said fuck the Games. I gave them the Twelve salute and I said exactly what we’re all thinking. And I would be lying if I said I was sorry.” I sit down.

Effie’s eyes look wider than I’ve ever seen them. Haymitch roars with laughter and slaps me on the back.

“Well that’s definitely better than what I said,” Bas adds.

“Peeta, please speak to your children. This is not acceptable behavior,” Effie says, her voice tinged with worry, tone fluctuating in her Capitol accent.
My father looks to my mother. He’s paler than before, his worry rising. My mother shakes her head. She still smiles. Finally, my father says, “Katniss doesn’t have a problem with it. I don’t see why they should be in trouble either. They said and did exactly what we would have. Though, maybe not in those exact words.”

He smiles, warmly to me. I feel proud of my actions. Effie still paces.

“You may not see a problem but the Gamemakers--”

“Are already gonna do what they’re gonna do,” Haymitch finishes. “There’s nothing that could make it worse or better.”

“I’m pretty sure saying…what she said…is going to make it worse. Shooting an arrow at them will make it worse. That’s an act of aggression against them. Painting a…what he painted…that’s defiant. Openly defiant,” Effie shouts. She realizes how loud she is and drops her voice, “They will not stand for that.”

I see real worry in her eyes. Haymitch places a hand on her shoulder.

Effie slumps into her chair. “Is it so hard for this family to be sensible? Is that too much to ask for just once?”

“They’re going to target me, aren’t they?” I ask.

“You really think they weren’t already going to? This was never about you two.” Haymitch points to Bas and me.

“This was about me,” my mother says. “And we all know it. So if you need someone to blame, it’s me. Whatever the Gamemakers do, it’s to get back at me.”

“Katniss,” my father says, reaching for her hand.

She stands. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” I tell her. “You didn’t put us here.”

Bas murmurs in agreement. She twists the wedding band on her finger and looks at us like she wants to add something else. She never does.

“I need to get cleaned up,” I say.

With that I head down the hallway. I don’t care about the Gamemakers. I don’t care about the Games. I’m done trying to maintain the image that was created for me.

After I shower and change, dinner is set out. Bas and I devour as much food as we can. I feel lighter somehow even with the arena two days away. I watch my family as they talk and eat, trying to soak up as much of this moment as I can.

It’s the only thing I’ll have left when I’m trying to survive.

When the screen clicks on and Caesar appears I find myself holding my breath. The score doesn’t matter, not really. It’s not going to help either of us in the arena and no sponsor is going to want to invest in marked tributes.

But the others, the others matter.
The usual suspects get the higher scores. Stone and Emery both score a nine. Cain receives an eleven and Victoria a ten. Springer from Three surprises with a seven. Beck scores a nine and Minnow an eight.

Grover gets a six, which isn’t bad all things considered, but he will have trouble getting sponsors. Unless he outlasts a certain amount of tributes, which I hope he does.

When Trina scores an eight I find myself clenching my fist. I wonder what she showed them. It couldn’t have been the knives. I watched her throw. She missed every ring of the target. Maybe she showed them climbing or some variation of traps that she built.

Or maybe she’s just been pretending like I was supposed to be.

August receives a four. It’s nothing unexpected. When Little Zero’s picture flashes with a score of five, I have to look away. He’s too fragile. My anger rises again. I’ve known his chances were always slim. But the way Caesar announces his score like it’s nothing. Like the little boy is meaningless. It makes the acid rise in my throat. I recall the looks in the Gamemakers eyes, their anticipation and their excitement. All of this is meaningless.

We don’t matter to them.

By the time Teddy is announced with an eight, Effie is pacing. Callie scores a six. After her Bas’ picture flashes on the screen. Effie pauses in her movement and the tension rises in the room.

“Basil Mellark with a score of twelve,” Caesar announces, surprised. “Good for him.” He smiles. I keep my eyes on the floor as he says, “Ivy Mellark with a score of twelve. No surprises there.”

Then it’s over and everyone is still. My father nods and finds my mother’s hand.

“You two were always going to score a twelve,” my mother says.

I don’t ask what she means. I already know. She said it before. This is all to get back at her. And what better way to get back at her than to give us the highest score.

My father interjects, trying to still mentor us despite the obvious. “Listen. Tomorrow is the interview and after that you’re in the arena. Whatever you two do, whatever you say, it changes nothing,” he says.

“So we should what? Suck it up and pretend we’re not going to die?” Bas stands.

“Yes. And whatever questions you’re asked, answer them.”

Bas rolls his eyes, pacing. “Give them what they want then. How should I answer them? Confident? Shy? What role should I play?”

My mother stands and places a hand on his shoulder. He stops and looks up at her. “Answer them however feels right.”

She turns to me. “Both of you. But maybe refrain from swearing.” She smiles.

I nod. Tomorrow is going to be a long day. I don’t want to be paraded. I don’t want to see the Capitol faces cheering for my imminent demise. A score of twelve looks enticing from the outside but everyone in the Games knows what it really means.

It’s a target. A death sentence and a message all rolled into one. You can tell the Capitol to go
screw itself but you have to be prepared to pay the price. And they’ve told the Careers who to kill first.

Yes, they were probably going to come after me anyway. But this seals it. Scoring above them is unacceptable and they won’t stand for it. Bas may not want to play. He may want to continue to prove a point and make them remember who we come from. But I know I’m going to have to fight to keep us alive. I’ll have to play.

And I’m ready.

“So give me all you’ve got,  
I can take it  
We walked around in your city lights  
‘Cause it makes me who I am  
We lit the fire  
And it's burning bright”

- Burn Bright – My Chemical Romance
The Games: Bright Lights - Ivy and Katniss

Chapter Summary

Ivy prepares for and makes a statement at her interview. Katniss struggles with goodbye.

The Games: Bright Lights – Ivy and Katniss

Ivy –

I’m woken by a loud repetitive knocking at the door. The sun is shining brightly through the window, glaring off the building across from the training center. I shield my eyes as I force myself out of bed.

The knocking continues. I already know who it is before I open the door.

Effie stands with her hand raised. She huffs, “I thought you were an early riser.”

“Guess I’m valuing these last nights of sleeping in relative safety.” I step aside as she walks in wheeling a cart of food.

She makes a disgruntled noise as she stops the cart beside a pair of chairs near the window.

“Now is not the time for jokes. We need to get you ready for your interview.” Effie straightens the hem of her dress before sitting.

“No offense, Effie, but I’ve been in a lot of interviews. I think I can handle it,” I say, stifling a yawn.

“Ivy. Please. Just let me do this. I don’t care if you listen. I don’t care if you follow my advice. Just let me do my job.” She looks at me with an angry concern. I don’t think the anger is directed at me. But she pulls herself back into the Capitol mask before she says anything unexpected.

She indicates the chair across from her in a stiff measured movement. I join her. I realize that while my parents and Haymitch have always considered and prepared for my Games as a possible and likely scenario, Effie hasn’t. I don’t think she even wanted to think about it until it was inescapable.

And now, when my last day is upon us, she understands these are her final moments with me.

So I’ll do all I can to keep them as pleasant as possible, if only for the next few hours. I’ll do that for everyone, because this is it for the people in my life. This is all they will have of me when I’m gone.

Once the interview ends and we come back here it’ll be time for goodbyes. Then they won’t see me again. I won’t see them again.

I guess these last moments are for me too. A final day with everyone.

“I would appreciate the advice, Effie,” I say. She smiles and starts telling me how to impress the
Capitol sponsors. I slowly fill a plate with some eggs, bacon, and a bread pudding. I nod at all the appropriate moments and ask follow up questions when necessary.

Then the moment comes for her to ask me what attitude I wish to portray for the audience.

“I was just going to be myself. They want the legacy. I’ll give them the legacy. I’ll smile and wave and be charming.” I give her my best fake smile.

“It’s not a bad idea, but don’t act too proud. And don’t let them throw you with questions.” She points at me, as if driving the point home. “You need to show them what real legacies look like. And shine brighter than all the rest.”

“I’ll do my best.” I put my empty plate on the cart. Effie places her hand on mine.

“Trust me. You’re not the problem. Your brother, however, is the one that requires the most work. The stylists will be here in an hour. I’m going to go wake Bas and see if I can pull something together with him.” Effie wheels the cart out, muttering about Bas and his unbearable likeness to my mother in front of the camera.

I pull my knees to my chest and look out the window. From up here the buildings spread out like a fence designed to keep me in. I wonder if it will be freeing to be in an actual pen. To know there’s no illusion of free will or safety anymore.

I don’t think being aware of my cage is going to make running for my life and fighting for Bas’ any easier.

It just lets me know that I’m doing exactly what they want. That no matter what I do inside there’s no way to get outside. There’s no way to escape their walls. Unless I become a Victor and I won’t.

My only escape is to die accordingly.

When the prep team comes, I smile and let them do the usual routine. I sit quietly and obediently. They chat and remark on my looks like they did before. I say nothing.

I’m grateful when Cinna arrives with my dress. The prep team leaves and I change without a word.

“How are you feeling?” he asks.

I hesitate. I can’t find the words to describe how I’m feeling. Am I happy training is over? Am I glad for what I did at the assessment? Am I ready for what’s to come? Do I feel anything at all?

I wish I couldn’t feel anything.

I feel everything.

I feel my time running out. I feel my plan pulling me under just like the Capitol. I feel trapped. I feel alone. I’m terrified. I think I’m prepared. I want to think I’m ready.

I’m not.

“Like I don’t want to die,” I respond, my voice catching on the last word.

He nods and pulls me into a hug. I’m shaking but I don’t let myself cry. I told myself I wouldn’t and I won’t. I can’t. Once I start I won’t stop.
“Only one person is coming home,” I whisper. He pulls away and lifts my chin with his thumb.

“Not always,” he says with a warm smile. It makes me feel better. “Now let’s finish getting you ready.”

The dress reaches past my knees and flares out. It’s mostly black with red feathers placed delicately on it. The feathers spread along the sleeves down my arms. When I look at them they don’t seem out of place. They shimmer with the fabric and move as if a part of it.

I’m grateful the shoes aren’t as high as the women of the Capitols. They give me some height but not so much that it would impede my balance. The prep team curled the end of my hair but Cinna pulls it up. He applies finishing touches to my makeup, wiping some away and replacing it.

I look in the mirror and I feel elegant. There’s no hint of severity like there was at the chariots. The dress fits perfectly and for once, I feel like myself in it. I don’t feel an act threatening to bury me. I don’t feel like I’m playing a part. It feels like me. It looks like me.

And the real me is going to make her appearance in the Capitol for the first time.

When I walk out of the room, everyone’s eyes fall on me. Effie claps her hands together and Haymitch smiles. My parents smile as well before nodding to Cinna.

I turn to Bas. “What do you think?”

He gives me the once over. “You look weird.”

He strikes a pose. “But it’s fine. So do I. I’m sure everyone’ll love it all over the country.”

He indicates Effie who looks like she’s about to cry. He turns back at me as if to say, see what I mean?

I nod. He smiles, expecting me to return it. Expecting me to joke around like we used to. I can’t anymore.

Effie leads the group to the elevator. I’m one of the first with her. I avoid looking at Bas. He has to understand. I have to focus on his survival. I have to cut out all the rest. This isn’t even about me getting sponsors. My mind is past the interview. It’s so far into the arena, I can’t think of anything else anymore.

Maybe it’s always been there.

But now it seems to be the only thought driving me. The Gamemakers are going to come at me for what I said and did. They’ll do the same with Bas. If we’re together it’ll make it easier for them. Should we split up? Could I do that? Could I trust that he will make it without me?

No. I can’t.

Even if the Gamemakers do all they can to kill us. I’ll take it before I allow Bas to wander the arena alone.

I’m lost to the fog of my thoughts and only barely aware of my movements until I’m overwhelmed by lights and sounds behind a large stage. It’s almost a shock to my system having been so occupied in my mind.

I watch the crowd filter in from behind the stage. The colors and metallic outfits glare against the light. I feel like I’m spinning until there’s a familiar pressure of a hand on my shoulder. I blink and
steady myself.

I look up to see my father watching me. He searches to see that I’m okay. I nod.

“You’re not worried, are you?” he asks his tone light.

“About this? No. Nothing I haven’t done before.”

He nods. “Still, the crowd can be overwhelming.”

“I’ll be fine,” I tell him.

“I’m sure you will be.” He pulls me close and kisses the top of my head, holding me in the hug.

“Dad. The Careers are probably watching,” I try. I don’t want them to see anything they could perceive as weakness.

“They’re afraid of you. I don’t care.” He breaks the hug. I turn to see only Beck watching. His hair is styled up again. He wears a sea green suit with the sleeves rolled up. I can’t help but notice that it matches his eyes. A shell necklace prominently displays itself in front of his half buttoned shirt. It stands out amongst the Capitol styling, looking slightly worn as if he’s been pulling on the string.

His mother approaches him and he turns to her, telling her something. She glances at me quickly before pulling Beck towards Finnick.

The other Careers and their mentors stick with each other, never straying from the group.

Victoria briefly makes eye contact with me but turns back to her father quickly. I look ahead as I walk to my mother. There’s no use in thinking about the Careers right now. It’s best to keep my distance.

My mother watches my father and me as we approach. She looks to my father, questioning. He nods, assuaging whatever concern was growing. Our small moment of silence is broken when Johanna arrives.

She exits the elevator with Grover and bee lines straight for us. Grover follows quickly behind her, an amusement in his eyes. My mother steps in front of me, pushing me aside gently. I wonder if she expects a fight.

“You.” Johanna points to me.

My heart races. Am I in trouble with her? What did I do to her? I was nothing but nice to Grover during training. And I haven’t seen her since the chariots.

“What do you want, Johanna?” my mother asks, her voice cold.

“Relax, Katniss. I’m not a danger to your precious baby bird. That’s for the arena and the other Tributes,” Johanna laughs before continuing, “I heard a funny little rumor and wanted to know if it was true.”

“I’ve heard a lot of rumors, you’ll have to be specific,” I answer, stepping around my mother.

“Ivy,” my mother warns.

Johanna smiles. “When you saw the Gamemakers…”
“We’re not talking about this. Not here,” my father interjects.

“So it is true,” Johanna says, almost relieved. “What I would give to have been able to see their faces.”

“They were pretty shocked,” I say.

She laughs again. “Are you sure she’s yours, Katniss?”

“I have a very vivid memory of being in labor for thirty six hours. I’m sure.”

“Is that all, Johanna?” My father asks.

“For now. Good luck out there. Don’t say anything they can censor.” She walks off. Grover gives us an approving nod before following her.

I watch her slow just enough for him to catch up. They fall into step with each other almost instantly. I imagine a four-year-old Grover following Johanna around on unstable legs, learning to keep up with her without help. I imagine the years of the two of them falling into step in silence. Her trying to get him to learn to swing an ax and him never paying enough attention to pick it up properly. I imagine the years of him coming to love her like a mother and her loving him like a son.

I wonder if he ever came to her for advice as he grew. If someone back home caught his attention and he didn’t know what to do. I wonder how many times he came to her in the night because he had a bad dream. If he walked over from wherever he was supposed to live just so she could bring him right back home.

I wonder if he knows the nightmares that haunt her as well. Every Victor has damage. Even the ones who train for the arena have it. It’s only the ones closest to them that are ever able to recognize it. But it’s there in all of their eyes. They all know what it’s like to take a life. What it’s like to survive over twenty three others.

Or twenty two in the case of my parents.

“Don’t think about it,” my mother says quietly to me. She watches Grover and Johanna too.

I nod as the lights flicker.

Caesar Flickerman emerges on the stage with his wide smile and tightly pulled skin. He gives the usual gushing speech about the Games and the Tributes. He adds bits about this year being so exciting and that these are no ordinary Tributes. I barely listen.

Emery is called out first. Her dress almost diamond underneath the lights. It looks cold, severe. It’s perfect for her. She plays up the family side in her interview, but shows a fierce determination to win when speaking about the other Tributes and her preparation.

Caesar loves her. So does the audience.

When she leaves the stage she passes me.

“And that’s how you do an interview,” she says before finding her father and her aunt. They head up the elevator as Stone walks out for his moment with Caesar.

I stop paying attention to the other interviews once Stone begins speaking. I don’t care what they have to say or whether or not the audience loves them. It’s not going to make a difference to me.
I’m leaning against a wall barely paying attention to the screens when I feel a warmth beside me. A part of me already knows who it is before I face him.

“Are you going to tell me I look like a princess again?” I ask, looking at Beck.

He smiles with a genuine light to his eyes. I’m not sure he will give the same to the audience, unless he’s just that good at pretending. I don’t think anyone is. Not even me.

“No I already made that mistake. I will say you look very nice though,” he tells me.

“You look very…green,” I share.

“It matches my eyes, don’t you think?” he asks, pushing himself into my personal space for me to get a better look. I back up. He seems to realize how close he is and does the same. “Sorry.”

“No. It does.” I watch the screens again. Minnow is talking about her father’s kill with excitement.

“You didn’t even look,” Beck says slyly.

I turn to him. “Yes I did.”

“If you say so.”

I feel a heat across my face, turning my cheeks red.

“Don’t worry. I noticed your eyes too.” He laughs.

I take another step, distancing myself. “Don’t you have an interview to prepare for?”

“Ah yes. That’s right. I completely forgot about selling myself to the masses,” he says, bitterly. “Thank you for reminding me.”

The next thing I know he’s tightening his tie as Minnow is walking off the stage. His face changes and he’s the confident Beck from Four once again.

His voice drops as he says, “You know, the Careers are gonna come after you. Watch your back.”

“I’m aware, thank you. And you should worry about your own back. Not mine.”

“Fair point.”

“Good luck out there.”

“I don’t need it. And I don’t think you do either.” He winks and strides out onto the stage.

Beck’s interview starts out smoothly. He laughs and smiles to all the adoring people of the Capitol. But then Caesar asks the question he’s been asking all the other Tributes.

“Can you give us any insight on what it’s like to grow up as the son of a Victor? I’m sure everyone would love to hear it.”

Beck forces a smile, but I can see his jaw clench. His fingers twitch before he clenches his hand.

“I don’t know if anyone would want to hear about that,” he tries to deflect.

Caesar goads him. There’s an unnerving glee behind his eyes that sends a shiver up my spine.
Beck’s smile drops and there’s a sharp sincerity to his words.

“My mother is very kind and very strong. She survived and she won. Despite everything, she raised me to be the best version of myself I can be. And I am incredibly proud of that. There is no secret to being raised by a Victor. It doesn’t make me better. She made me better. And before you ask, because I know you’re going to, I will do everything I can to come home to her.”

The audience is silent. Stunned by his sheer honesty or rather what they perceive to be honesty. I know all the things Beck didn’t say. All the nights hearing his mother scream. All the days worrying whether she was okay at home. After years, the worry goes away, but the nightmares don’t. And hearing your parents scream haunts you every time you close your eyes.

“Well,” Caesar begins, “I hope you do. Don’t you, folks?” he asks the audience.

At that, they roar with applause.

Beck shakes Caesar’s hand and gives the audience one last smile before walking off the stage. His smile drops instantly once he’s out of view. I watch his shoulders fall and his mother pull him into a tight hug. She brushes his hair aside and gives him a look of concern. Almost asking silently whether or not he’s okay.

He nods before turning towards his father.

Finnick keeps his distance, rubbing his fingers together in a nervous motion. There’s nothing he can do here, no approval or affection he can show that the Capitol won’t see. Still, he slaps Beck on the shoulder and turns away.

It must mean enough to Beck because he smiles despite himself. Annie leads him towards the elevator.

Before they board he looks in my direction. “See you tomorrow.”

I roll my eyes and join my brother by an empty wall.

“I heard they’re making us go together,” Bas says to me.

“Makes sense. They want to show us off as much as they still can.”

“Do you want to do all the talking?” he asks.

“If you want me to,”

He shrugs. “Well, I usually don’t have much to say.”

“Maybe tonight you will,” I tell him.

“If there was ever a time, it would be now,” he agrees.

We feign interest as Tribute after Tribute has their turn on stage. Effie makes small comments on whether or not she would have done something differently. I tune her and everyone else out, picturing the woods back home. I imagine the mockingjays singing and the smell of the leaves.

I can feel the ground beneath my feet. I make no sound as I follow tracks towards my prey. I never catch it. I’m pulled from my fantasy once Grover’s name is called.

Johanna nudges him and he hurries onto the stage. He can barely stand still as Caesar talks to him. It seems to unnerve Caesar a bit to my delight.
The crowd finds Grover funny and he plays it up.

“Grover, you’re thirteen—”

“Fourteen. I just had a birthday. Yesterday, actually.” The crowd gives an audible aw and claps for him.

“Well then, happy belated birthday. And what better way to celebrate?” Caesar turns to the crowd. They respond accordingly.

“I can think of a few better ways,” Bas says to me. I nod in agreement.

I glance to Johanna. Her arms are crossed as she watches the screens. She keeps her expression passive, impossible to read. I look to my parents. My father’s sympathy is evident in his furrowed brow and sullen eyes as he watches Grover. My mother, like Johanna, doesn’t show much. She takes a few steps closer to Bas and me, but her expression remains unchanged.

“Being back in Seven would be a start,” Grover answers.


“Well I imagine you’d want to celebrate with your family,” Caesar says, his pleasant, sympathetic voice masking a greater warning.

“What’s left of it.”

Caesar plays up all the sympathy he can muster. “Ah yes, your mother, she had an unfortunate accident years ago in Seven.”

“That’s what they tell me.” Grover shrugs. I can hear the truth behind his words. He knows it wasn’t an accident. Whatever happened, it wasn’t fate or chance. It was designed.

“We were all very saddened to hear about that loss,” Caesar continues.

“I’m sure you were.” Grover’s usual warmth and movement has all but ceased now. He’s angry. I would be angry too. “But I know she’s in a better place now.”

“Yes. Well. I’m sure she would be proud of you standing up here.”

“She’d be terrified,” Grover adds, coldly.

I turn to Johanna and I see a smile.

Caesar rushes to get Grover off the stage. The crowd applauds politely but there’s no enthusiasm for the boy from Seven who just told the Capitol the truth. That there’s no honor, no victory, there’s only fear and regret. There’s only being controlled.

Truth seems to be a common theme running through the braver Tributes’ interviews. They imply or they flat out say what they feel and what they mean. Beck implied. Grover told. I wonder what I’ll do. I can’t let them be the only ones.

August barely manages to answer a single question of Caesars. Trina has no shortage of anger but she dials it back to appeal to the crowd. She slips up once when she says she enjoyed her life before she found out about these Games. There’s plenty of awkward silence for that answer.

Little Zero cries and talks about missing home. I don’t think he’s intentionally trying to sway
anyone’s opinion of the Games or of the Capitol. He’s a scared kid crying for his parents. I can’t watch him walk back inside to find the arms of his father. The man lifts his son and half carries him to the elevator.

I’m glad the Careers aren’t still in the room. They’d be cruel and I wouldn’t be able to resist hitting them at this point.

Callie and Teddy give their interviews without incident. Callie talks about how she’s glad to have met a lot of the people here. How she never would have interacted with other districts like this. She makes us out to be people, children, friends, not sacrifices. I’m glad she’s going before us.

Teddy gives short responses, making it seem like his head is in the game. He’s overconfident. Stern. When I met him in training he was determined. We’re all determined to go home. But he wasn’t like this. Now he’s acting like a Career. The crowd is relieved at his status quo responses and his calloused attitude. Caesar asks about him being the second Victor in his family. He waves it off, like he’s so sure he’ll win he doesn’t need to answer.

His final words are, “You won’t forget about me while I’m gone, will you?”

Caesar makes a mock frown and the crowd swoons.

“We’ll be waiting for you when you get back,” Caesar answers. He raises Teddy’s hand with his and the crowd cheers. Teddy barely acknowledges them.

After he walks off the stage, he gives us a thumbs up and wink. I realize he isn’t playing a game at all. Or rather, not the one the Capitol wants him to play. He’s done this to give the Capitol false security. Whatever we do, it has to be the biggest, it has to be the loudest, and it will shock them the most. Because now they won’t expect it. Or if they did before, it’s forgotten thanks to Teddy.

Bas and I approach the entrance to the stage, waiting for our queue.

Caesar draws it out, to the crowd’s pleasure.

“And now for our final two Tributes. You know them well. You know their family. And they are appearing together for one last time. I know, I know, I don’t want to see either one of them go either, but hopefully we will get to see one of them again. Right? Right?!?” He shouts.

The crowd roars in response.

Bas turns to me, holding out his arm.

“Ready?” he asks.

“Absolutely,” I answer, linking my arm with his.

“Welcome, the children of the star crossed lovers from District Twelve, Ivy and Basil Mellark!”

I’m dazed by the lights and the deafening sound of the crowd. It’s hard to focus on any one thing as I’m overwhelmed by just how vast the audience seems to be. It’s different at home, where I only have to face Caesar and a few cameras. I don’t see the people watching. I don’t hear their reactions. This is almost too much.

I tighten my grip on Bas’s arm. He steadies me as we walk the short distance to Caesar. His eyes are glued to us, like a snake waiting to strike. I want to look away but I force myself to keep my head up. I’m the daughter of the Mockingjay. I have to be strong. I have to show them. I won’t let them destroy me before I’ve begun.
“I have to say I’m very happy to see you two in person,” Caesar begins.

I give him my best smile. “And we’re happy to be here.”

“Are you finding the Capitol to your liking?” He asks.

“I can’t imagine leaving. In fact, if I could, I’d stick around,” I answer. Immediately I can see the tension rising in Caesar’s shoulders.

“Well if you win, I’m sure President Snow would allow it. We’d love to have you here!” He turns to the crowd. They cheer.

“Yes. I’m sure you would,” Bas says, voice cold. His eyes scan the crowd and I know what he’s thinking. It’s the same thing I knew when we arrived off the train. If I were to win, they would keep me and they would use me until there was nothing left.

Caesar keeps the interview going, moving as fast and lightly as possible. Even as he rifles through the dramatic questions.

“Now, I know this must be difficult for you two, going in together. I mean I can’t imagine.”

“I’m not going to lie and tell you it isn’t,” I say, managing a small crack in my voice. The emotion elicits the right response from Caesar and the crowd.

“I know, Ivy. You’re not a liar. I think we all know that after seeing you on our screens for seventeen years.”

The crowd laughs.

“But it’s not like it’s our decision,” Bas says.

Our routine seems to work. I make them fawn over us, Bas delivers the subtle blow. We’re waiting for the right question to really tear it apart. And I know which one.

“Now we’ve asked all the Tributes tonight about what it means to have a Victor as a parent. To have that legacy. And I’m sure no one understands that more than you two.”

“No. I think we’ve got them beat in regards to legacies,” I joke. Caesar laughs.

“Just like her father. And him, all Katniss. At least in interviews.”

The crowd really loves that joke.

“And speaking of legacies,” I start, “do you want to hear a funny story about my mother?”

Caesar perks up at that, his eyes almost burning with excitement. “I would love to.”

“Do you want to tell it?” I ask, turning to Bas. He eyes me, confused, but he plays along.

“No, Ivy, you’re better at it. Go ahead.” He smiles to the crowd.

They fall all over him.

“This is exciting, what story is it?” Caesar and the crowd are growing restless with anticipation. It’s everything I need it to be working perfectly in tandem with my goals.

“Well it comes from a long time ago, before I was born. You know how everyone used to call my
mother the Mockingjay?” I ask. “Or maybe they never really called her it, they more implied. What with the pin and all.”

I can already see the worry in Caesar’s eyes. I never give him the chance to speak.

“You see a Mockingjay is actually an interesting creature. It comes from the Dark Days, where the intelligent Capitol used Jabberjays to spy on rebels. But you see those pesky rebels figured it out and gave bad information. Now what was the Capitol to do but get rid of them?”

“They had no other choice,” Bas chimes in.

Caesar goes to speak, I cut him off. “They would die out in the wild. But you see, the thing is, they didn’t. They bred with mockingbirds and that produced the Mockingjay, a wonderful songbird which we have in Twelve,” I say.

“Really great to listen to,” Bas responds.

“So Mockingjay’s are funny creatures because they were completely unexpected. They’re strong and they exist because of an ability to survive. And the inability of people to predict change.”

“Or resistance,” Bas finishes.

“Resistant birds, who knew?” Caesar asks with a nonchalant shrug, but his eyes betray him. He’s staring us down with a fury brewing.

“It’s a nice story,” I say with a small smile.

“It’s certainly interesting,” Caesar responds. The tension is still visible in his raised shoulders and creased brow. I’m surprised he can still form any kind of wrinkle in his face. I’m sure he’ll have that fixed by next year’s Games.

“One of my favorites. That and the nightlock one,” Bas says, calmly.

“Yes. Where your parents refused to kill each other, because they were so in love. That’s quite the story,” Caesar tries.

“I don’t think it’ll be repeated,” Bas responds.

“Much to our dismay,” Caesar says with a false sympathy.

I look out to the crowd. There are looks of sadness mixed with looks of confusion. I’m not sure my words meant anything to them. They will in the Districts, I hope. I couldn’t get the words out the way they should be said. I can’t outright tell them to fight back. But I can remind them. I focus on Cinna. He gives me a slight nod.

“Shall I twirl?” I ask, turning to Bas.

Caesar’s excitement perks up, a relief washing over him. “Now this is what I’m sure we’ve all been waiting for.”

“I’ll help you,” Bas says. He raises my arm and I do so. The feathers light up and melt, turning to gold. The fire spreads from myself to Bas, doing the same to the feathers on his suit.

When I stop, when our outfits are done burning, I hear gasps and cheers. Caesar is stunned silent.

I look down from myself to Bas and realize what we look like. We are the Mockingjay pin. The perfectly placed feathers melting away to reveal the gold band and wings along our outfits. Our
hands are interlocked and raised, forming the bird with its beak upwards, screaming for the Districts to rise up. Whatever words I failed to deliver, this message will not fall on deaf ears.

When it’s over and we’re backstage, there are no words. We’re rushed to the elevator and arrive back on the twelfth floor. Bas and I split off to change out of our outfits. As I take time to hang the dress on a chair I can feel the goodbyes already, like a weight pushing me into the ground. I pick up the Mockingjay pin and turn it in my fingers, the gold gleaming off the lights above me.

It’s almost funny how small it is when it carries so much meaning. I don’t know if I’ve done right by it. If I’ve earned it. I need to give it back.

I’m in a haze as I make my way out to the living area, the Mockingjay heavy in my hands. Bas is already there, his eyes wet with unshed tears. I look around the room. My parents haven’t changed. Effie has tears in her eyes and Haymitch stands next to her, watching the ground.

Once again I’m reminded of my funeral. Of the pine box I’ll be sent home in and of the concrete stone with my name on it. Reminding everyone in Twelve that I once existed. That I was real. That I’m just a name in a long history of other names killing and dying because of the decisions made a hundred years ago.

“I’m sorry I didn’t do more,” I try. My father shakes his head. Haymitch finally looks at me with a faint smile.

“It was a good show,” he manages. “I’m sure they won’t forget it for a long time.”

“Any last advice?” Bas asks, his voice wavering.

My father pulls us into a crushing hug. Telling us both, “Don’t let them change you.”

I close my eyes and try to breathe in the smell of baking bread and home. I can’t smell it. It’s clouded by a faint scent of roses and the city stench of the Capitol. There’s nothing of home I can take with me anymore. Nothing but my memories.

I can hear Effie choke back a sob when we pull apart. I look to my mother and I can see her fighting the fear and heartbreak at our loss.

I hold out my hand. “I shouldn’t take this with me.”

She closes my hand with hers. “I want you to.” She turns to Bas then, glancing to my father. He nods before handing Bas a string with two gold bands attached. Their wedding rings.

“No,” Bas says.

“We wanted you to have something from home. This is all we have,” my father says.

Bas shakes his head. “What if I lose them?”

I want to laugh. The question is almost childish coming from him. My father just smiles. Bas pulls the makeshift necklace over his head. It falls and settles around his neck, the two wedding bands bright against his shirt.

A silence falls then and my mother’s fear only grows with it. I can see the empty space where her wedding band used to be. She touches it absentmindedly, mimicking twisting it as she’s done before when she’s stressed.

She swallows before telling us, “Keep fighting. Whatever you do, don’t give up.”
I nod. Bas falls into her arms like he did when he was younger. She pulls him closer and she shuts her eyes. She looks at me after Bas backs away. My throat tightens and I oblige, feeling her warmth surround me in the hug. I try to breathe in the woodsy scent she carries with her at home, but like my father’s, it’s gone.

I can’t take anymore. I don’t want to do this. I don’t want to say goodbye.

“I’m scared,” I whisper to her.

“Me too,” she says, pulling me closer, tightening her hold on me.

“This isn’t fair,” Effie says quietly. “They can’t do this.”

Haymitch places his hand on her shoulder. “They already did.”

“It shouldn’t be the both of you,” her voice falls.

I know time is almost up, but I can’t break away from the hug. No matter what I tell myself, I can’t move. I can barely breathe. I wish this wasn’t real.

But I know all too well that it is. And I know that this really is goodbye. I won’t see them again. I won’t have a hug again. I won’t be this close to my family again.

I remember the years of going into the woods. My mother teaching me how to use a bow. Showing me all the plants I could and couldn’t eat. I used to look at it as training for the Games. As necessary survival skills for when I would be reaped.

Now I know that it wasn’t just because I would be here eventually. Yes, my mother was afraid that I wouldn’t survive. She needed me to know how to. But it wasn’t just for me to win. It was so I could come home. Because she couldn’t lose me. And I know now that I don’t want to lose her.

I remember her telling me how she gets through the bad days. How she thinks of me, my brother, and my father. How this is truly goodbye and that she knows I’m not coming home.

So when I whisper, “I love you,” and hug her tighter, it’s more for myself than for her. It’s the only goodbye that makes sense to me. The only one that doesn’t require any more words than the ones I’ve said. It’s enough.

I can feel her breath stop for a second before she takes a deep, shuddering breath. I don’t expect a response and I never hear one as the elevator opens, interrupting the proceedings.

I pull away, keeping one hand on my mother.

We watch as about a dozen Peacekeepers file into the room, Cinna escorted with them. He has a large cut on his forehead that bleeds, but there’s no fear in his eyes. There’s only expectation, like he’s prepared for what’s about to happen.

“Cinna?” my mother asks.

“I’m still betting on you, girl on fire,” he says before a Peacekeeper pulls his gun. The sound of it rings in my ears as Cinna’s blood stains the carpet and his body falls in a thump.

“Cinna! No!” my mother screams, charging towards the Peacekeepers. They form a wall, stopping her and grabbing her.

“Mom!” I try for her.
My ears ring as everything happens at once. The Peacekeepers grab my father and Haymitch while Effie is shouting questions that no one will answer. They are all pulled towards the elevator while Bas and I try to follow.

My mother puts up the most fight, trying to get to me and my brother. I reach for her and she does the same. Our hands find each other for a brief moment before we’re ripped apart and she’s pulled into the elevator, the doors closing behind her.

Two Peacekeepers grab Bas and pull him towards his room. He kicks and punches as hard as he can, but they overpower him. Before I even have a chance to react I feel hands on my shoulders and I’m being dragged in the opposite direction. I don’t want to be in this moment. I don’t want to feel afraid or to be controlled. I don’t want to hear gunshots and see blood. Not anymore. I go limp and let the Peacekeepers pull me as the world fades.

I’m in the woods again. I can smell the trees. I can hear the animals. I forget what being afraid feels like. I forget where I’m supposed to be. I walk without sound as the sun shines on me. I feel warm for the first time in weeks. I feel safe.

Then I hear Bas calling me, like an echo dragging me back to where I belong. I feel the pin in my hand, the metal cutting into my palm as I grip it tight. And all at once I feel my feet dragging along the carpet while the Peacekeepers pull me towards the door of my room.

I struggle against them, doing everything I can to get away. I break free, running towards the living area. Before I make it the Peacekeepers have hold of me again. They half carry me, half pull me while I shout, “Find me! Tomorrow, find me!”

I hope Bas hears it.

Then I’m thrown into my room with the door slammed shut behind me, knowing this is it.

I can’t think. I can’t breathe. Cinna. He’s gone. They shot him. Just like the people in Twelve. Just like that kid.

I slide against the door, rocking gently, trying to calm myself down. I open my palm, finding the Mockingjay pin.

I remember the hug. The warmth and the comfort. I try to hold onto that as the tears start. I told myself no more crying, but I can’t hold it back tonight.

I fall apart.

Katniss –

Cinna’s body fills my thoughts. Ivy’s wide eyed stare following me to the elevator. It’s all I can see as we’re thrown into our rooms on the trading floor. Effie is nowhere to be seen. I’m not sure if they’ve taken her somewhere to be held or let her go.

I don’t know if I can even afford to think about her. Haymitch immediately goes for the liquor, falling onto the small couch.

“Why would they do that?” Peeta asks, shaken.

“Do you really need to ask?” Haymitch returns, taking a large swig out of the bottle. “To send a message.”

“What about Effie?”
“She’ll be left alone,” Haymitch answers, though his voice wavers, like he’s unsure. He takes another swig to steady himself. “We just have to play by the rules.”

My hands shake as I imagine Bas and Ivy’s faces. Their horror. Their fear. I can see their bodies lying in the arena. A hovercraft pulling them out. They can see me for what I am now. Someone who gets everyone killed. The only one who ever survives.

“It’s my fault,” I say. I don’t know how many times I’ve said it. How many times I’ve repeated these three words over the years. Hell, in the amount of time we’ve been here I’m sure I’ve said it enough. It doesn’t make it any less true.

I’m shaking worse than before. Peeta wraps his arms around me and I fall into him, struggling to breathe. He tries to soothe me, telling me, “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not,” I say.

I couldn’t say it back. Ivy said goodbye and I couldn’t say it back. I hear her whispered I love you echo in my head. I’ve never said it. I can’t say it. Once I do, once the wall comes down, I won’t be able to do my job. I won’t be able to save her or Bas.

It’s better that I don’t say it.

Tomorrow they’ll fight, but it feels like we’ve always been fighting. That it’s just an endless cycle of trying to survive, trying to stay alive. How long before the clock runs out for them? How long before I lose my children?

Will it be tomorrow?

Will the Gamemakers do everything to make sure they never get past the bloodbath? Will they kill? Can they kill?

I brought this on them. My fear brought this. And that fear will never go away.

It’s my fault.

Gale is my fault.

The Tributes I’ve failed are my fault

Cinna is my fault.

What happened in Twelve is my fault.

Ivy and Basil dying will be my fault. And them never knowing that I do love them will be my fault too.

I am no Mockingjay. I’m not something that strikes fear into the Capitol. I’m broken and I’m afraid. And President Snow knows it.

Peeta and I fall onto the bed, finding each other’s arms and holding each other close. He tries to comfort me but neither one of us is finding comfort tonight. Neither one of us can sleep. We both know what the sunrise brings.

“I should have eaten the berries,” I say, to the silence.

“I’m glad you didn’t,” Peeta answers.
“Why?” my voice shakes. “It would have been better.”

“Not for me.”

I can’t argue with him. I think about the alternative. If he had died and I was left to face these years alone. I’m glad we both took that handful of berries.

I only wish I can hold onto that thought as the Games begin. That, and the image of a gold Mockingjay burning for the Capitol to see.

“And I’ve found that I am not so strong
And I’ve found that I’ve a long, long way to go

Because all that I’ve been living for
Is a better way to make it
All that I’ve been living for is a dream
With the magazines and television
Calling out my name
All that I want lately is a change”

- The Current State Of Things – Noah Gundersen
Katniss faces her regrets as the Games are set to begin. Ivy is led to the arena.

Katniss –

I sleep in fits and starts, never really resting. Every time I’m pulled under, I’m greeted by the frozen face of Cinna lying on the floor, his blood staining the carpet while Peacekeepers pull my family apart.

I feel Ivy’s fingers slip from mine as the elevator closes.

I see the glimmer of the wedding rings shining off of Bas’ neck while his wide eyes say goodbye.

I see my children’s fear. And I’m terrified it will be the last thing I ever see on their faces.

And when the nightmares turn to the riot in Eleven. The attacks in Twelve. I feel the failure to stop all of this consuming me. Threatening to break me further than I thought I could be broken.

But I can’t let myself be broken. Not anymore.

Peeta’s arms hold onto me, keeping me safe in our small room. My head finds its place on his chest. His warmth is comforting. And it puts me back together, knitting my shattered pieces firmly in place, preparing me for what daylight brings.

I know he’s not asleep but there’s nothing for us to say to each other. Every so often I feel his arms tighten around me. I know he’s remembering the very things I am. And his fears are my fears.

What if we never see them again? What if we have to watch them die? What if we watch them become just like us?

His thumb rubs circles on my back as sunlight begins to filter into the room. With it, I find myself shaking again.

Peeta kisses the top of my hair and holds me closer.

I remember our second year as mentors. When we said goodbye to our Tributes and came into this room.

“You’ll get used to it,” Haymitch had said.

And I wanted to believe that I could. I had tried to. It would have made things so much easier. Saying goodbye, watching them die. It would have all been easier. But I’ve never been able to make things easy.

“I don’t want to,” Peeta had replied.
And I knew then that I couldn’t try to forget whether I wanted to admit it or not. I spent so long trying to fight that truth. Trying to force myself to bury the memories.

But trying and succeeding are two very different things. And trying to forget, trying to be numb, trying to get used to how things are, playing a part. It was always going to come crashing down.

I can only pretend for so long.

As the sun rises, my heart sinks. I slam my eyes shut, knowing that at any minute there will be a knock on the door. And it will mean that it’s time for us to get ready. Time for us to face these Games.

I feel like I’m in the arena all over again. Like I’m following my children into it.

*I love you.* Ivy’s words repeat in my head over and over again. Her whispered voice, fragile, like it was the last thing she’d ever say. And it very well could be. And I couldn’t say anything back. Gale begging me to fight follows. Then I see Rue’s face. I hear her Mockingjay song and the tears start.

I buried her memory. I let her die in vain. I forgot her.

Her and the fifty other Tributes I’ve led to the arena. I killed them all.

And soon my children will join them. That is, if I let them.

I have to be better than before. I have to be stronger. Peeta and I need each other to get through this, to get them through this. They have to win. Both of them.

No exceptions.

I’ll find a way. I have to. For them. For Rue. For Peeta. We have to find a way.

The knock comes. Short and loud. Haymitch telling us it’s time.

“*I don’t know how to do this,*” Peeta says, and his voice shakes.

“*Me neither,*” I reply before repeating the words that started all of this, “*Together?*”

“*Together,*” he answers with a small smile.

The trading floor no longer bustles with sponsors and sales pitches. Mentors pace, nibble on small bits of breakfast or talk quietly with allies. Each District is given a small seating section and screens for each of their Tributes, but no one has taken a seat yet.

Peeta and I follow the pace of the others, never wanting to give away our worry. They can’t see weakness. Even when we’re not the ones fighting for our lives, we have to remain vigilant. We have to pretend and keep up the act.

Cashmere and Gloss, normally reserved and put together, look just as sleep deprived as I do. They’re still dressed all too well and wear large smiles but I can see the way their eyes hang heavy, fighting to stay open. They walk like they’re carrying a weight.

“*Katniss,*” Gloss manages as he passes me and there’s sympathy in his eyes. It’s brief. All too fast for anyone to notice but me. Instantly it turns back into an unyielding mask of pride and excitement. All I can manage is a nod before he’s on his way to get something to eat.
I glance around the room. Some hide their fear better than others, the more damaged don’t.

The boy from Ten’s father is the worst out of all of us. He can’t stand still. His eyes are bloodshot and he picks at his cuticles until they bleed. He’s on the verge of tears and the bloodbath hasn’t even started.

I hope his son goes quickly. I hope Ivy isn’t the one to do it, though I know if she is it’ll be painless. But I can’t bear to look at him knowing what could happen, what will happen.

Annie stands quietly in the corner, Finnick beside her. His hands twitch and his thumbs circle around each other. I’m surprised by how still Annie is while Finnick shifts his weight from foot to foot.

She takes a step closer to him and he stops fidgeting, if only for a minute.

I meet his eyes and he takes a step away from Annie. She looks from him to me and gives a small smile. It’s then that I notice her shell necklace, hand woven, just like the one Beck was wearing the night before. Just like the one Finnick tries to hide behind his shirt.

It’s then that I put it together. Their closeness. Finnick’s fear and worry, so much like Peeta’s, so much like a father. The way Beck acts just like him.

I wonder what they’ll do to me if Ivy kills their son.

What would I do to them if Beck killed Ivy?

The screens change from the faces of the Tributes to Claudius and Caesar. Their excitement is written all over their faces. It makes my stomach turn.

“Here we are folks, another exciting Hunger Games. In a little while we’ll be seeing all our lovely Tributes begin the competition. But before we do that, let’s recap.” Caesar smiles.

“Yes, let’s begin with the current favorites,” Claudius says before breaking into a long speech theorizing strategies and advantages amongst the top scores. Ivy and Bas are the first to be discussed with their impressive twelves, but I barely pay attention.

Their theories and discussion won’t make a difference once the cannon goes off and the frenzy for survival begins.

The only thing I listen to is a rundown of the arena. Where the water is, where there’s places to hide, if there’s places to go.

Peeta grabs my hand when they finally show the cornucopia.

And my grip tightens when there’s a wide shot on every screen of the whole thing.

Ivy –

I manage to drag myself to bed after I’ve cried myself to the point of exhaustion. I’m not sure when I fall asleep or if I ever really do. The next thing I know its morning and there’s a loud knocking.

I grip the pin tight and open the door. The Peacekeeper, a tall man with dark eyes and a hooked nose waits.

“Get dressed.” He throws black pants and a long sleeve shirt to me. The fabric is tough, thick to
keep warm, but breathable. A pair of boots and a belt soon follows.

“Do I get breakfast?” I ask.

He sighs, annoyed with the proceedings before shoving a plate of some toast and eggs in my hands. He waits by the door as I balance the plate on the clothes.

I eye him as I sit on the bed and eat quietly. The food is cold and hard to swallow, but I know I need to eat. I look for a glass of water, but I never get one. When I’m done my guard takes the empty plate.

“You have one minute to get ready,” he says, shutting the door.

After I dress and braid my hair, I open the door once again. The Peacekeeper grabs my shoulder and leads me from the room, making sure to keep one hand on me and another on his gun.

I keep the Mockingjay pin hidden from sight. It’s my token, something I’m allowed to bring into the arena, but I’m sure if they saw it they would take it. Anything that reminds people of my mother will be destroyed.

Including me.

I glance towards Bas’ room but there’s no sign of him or any Peacekeeper posted at his door. I wonder when he was pulled from his room. And if he slept. I wonder if I’ll see him again or if last night was goodbye for me and my little brother as well.

My little brother.

I was three when he was born. Six when he tried to chase me through the house, falling down more than he could stand. When I was ten and him seven, we would play hide and seek through the Seam.

He would hide as best he could, leaving me false trails, moving from spot to spot. But I always found him. And when we took our game to the woods, I found him there too.

But this Game. This one will be the hardest to play. And my only hope is I’ll find him again. I have to.

The ride to the arena is met with the hum of the hovercraft and a brief sting of a needle as a tracker is implanted in my arm. All the while the Peacekeeper guards me. Ensuring I arrive to my death sentence.

“What’s your name?” I ask. I’m not sure why. I’m tired of the silence, of the constant sound of the blood rushing in my ears as my heart pounds. Maybe I’m just hoping for one moment of decency before I fall into an arena of blood and violence.

He only sighs in annoyance.

“I’m Ivy,” I offer.


And I know I won’t get any note of human kindness from the Peacekeeper with the dark eyes and hooked nose. So I shut-up and listen to the hovercraft and my own heartbeat for the rest of the trip. Thinking of all the other Tributes and wondering if they feel what I feel now.
Are they afraid? Are they worried? Do they know that they won’t come home? Do they know that I could be the one to kill them? Are they trying to work up the courage to kill me?

I remember my mother’s words. How she had to make a choice, them or her. Even when she wasn’t fighting to save my father, she was fighting to go home.

It’s them or me. Them or Bas. And I’ll have to choose. I’ll have to kill whoever gets in my way. Even if it’s Grover. Even if it’s little Zero from Ten.

If they try to stop me from saving my brother, I’ll kill them.

That’s my choice.

My footsteps echo through the metal hallway of the staging area and my hands begin to shake. I grip the pin tighter until it hurts, reminding me to breathe.

I’m led to a solitary room with a locker and a platform that I know will take me into the arena. I freeze before I can take another step. My stomach clenches and drops as I look at the platform. This is it. This is where it ends. Where it begins. And I can’t move.

“Sixty seconds,” a voice says through a speaker and I can’t tell if it’s Claudius or Caesar.

The buzzing of the lights drowns out the Peacekeeper. He’s shouting something but I can’t make it out anymore. I’m barely aware of the gun being pressed into my back. And I keep staring at the platform, knowing that once I step onto it I’m in the arena.

My breathing sputters and I can no longer feel the air I’m trying to force into my lungs.

I want to go home.

“Move!” the Peacekeeper shouts through the fog in my brain. And I’m shoved onto the platform. He opens the locker and removes a jacket, throwing it to me as the tube descends to keep me here.

I hear the faint sound of something moving in the locker. And it sounds like metal hitting metal as if something sways inside and clashes against the door of the locker. He’s forgotten something.

Something I’m supposed to have.

Or maybe he never intended to give it to me at all.

“Hey!” I try but I’m surrounded by the glass tube now and there’s no way for him to hear me. I bang against the glass. He turns, watching me like an animal in a pen. And I see no pity, no apologies.

I see the faces of the soldiers who shot the people back home.

I see helmets and boots crushing those beneath them.

I see his dark eyes reflecting years of order and hatred for anyone who threatens the system.

And I stop slamming my fists into the glass, trying to get him to save me. I know he won’t. No one will. No one but me.

I grab the jacket. It’s made of heavy, black leather, similar to my hunting jacket at home only this one has a hood and pockets. Whatever environment I’ll be in won’t be warm. That much I can gather.

After I securely zip up the jacket, I pin the Mockingjay where it will be visible for everyone. I
After I securely zip up the jacket, I pin the Mockingjay where it will be visible for everyone. I watch the Peacekeeper as his eyes fall on the gold pin and he shakes his head.

And I think that’s all he’s going to do until he points his gun at the glass and fires. I drop to the floor but no bullets crash through. There’s only the muffled sound of the gun.

When I stand I see cracks where the bullets hit and two more Peacekeepers yelling at the one who escorted me.

He points to me, smiling, making a joke. One laughs with him. The other, probably a commander turns to face me. He’s gauging my reaction, analyzing me like a rat in a cage.

Like I’m some kind of experiment.

Then the platform starts to rise. And I stand tall, watching them. They can’t do anything to me. They can try to scare me, in fact I’m sure they were ordered to, but they don’t. Not anymore. The only thing that scares me now is not finding Bas and failing to keep him alive.

My escort mocks the salute in Twelve. Kissing his three middle fingers before spitting on the ground towards me. His friend continues laughing and I want to wipe the smiles from their faces.

I watch them until the platform rises into darkness. Then, my guard falters and I find my breathing quickening. What will I face? Where will Bas be?

I try to form a plan. Get a weapon. Get water. Find Bas.

That’s my goal. That’s my task.

When daylight breaks through the darkness I shield my eyes and feel the air on my face. It’s cool. Almost welcome from the stale air underneath.

And once my eyes adjust and I lower my hand, I finally see where I’ve been set to die.

I face my arena.

“We must be killers
Children of the wild ones
Killers
Where we got left to run?”

- We Must Be Killers – Mikky Ekko
Ivy faces the arena and the bloodbath.

The Arena: Run – Ivy

I’m in an alley, or what feels like an alley. Large stone walls surround me, its path narrow, leading me to one place, one exit.

The cornucopia.

It’s placed center in a large square. And I’m facing it directly.

No matter what I do, I’ll have to run towards it. I’ll have to be faster than the others. I need a weapon. I need to find Bas.

I can’t see any of the other tributes. Across from me I can just make out the tops of walls with spaces in between. Everyone must be in their own alley.

The clock counts down atop the cornucopia.

Five seconds left to go.

My heart beats rapidly in my chest.

Four.

The blood pounds in my ears.

Three.

I take a breath.

Two.

I focus. Find Bas. Find a weapon. I repeat it in my head.

One.

“Let the 100th Hunger Games begin!”

I jump off the platform, running as fast as I can. Every sound blurring together in a rush.

The walls around me start to lower, revealing more of the city square, but my focus is on the cornucopia.

I have to make it first. I have to find Bas. I have to find a weapon. I have to make it first.

I don’t.
When I reach the square, there’s about five others barreling towards the center. Three Careers, Trina, and the girl from Six.

Six is dead before she even grabs a weapon. Emery wields the knife triumphantly, earning the first kill.

Gradually more tributes make their way out of their alleys. The walls have completely lowered now, leaving only open space and ruined buildings.

I see Cain before he throws the spear and I turn on my heel, narrowly avoid it.

The rest of the Careers join Cain. Grabbing at whatever they can carry. I won’t be getting a weapon. It’s too dangerous to try. I have to get as far away from here as possible.

But I can’t leave without Bas.

I turn in a circle, looking at the spaces where the alleys were, and the spots in between. But I can’t find him. He must have run for safety without stopping.

There’s a lake to the left of the square, beyond where the alleys once stood. On the right there’s a quarry. Each half surrounds the square, leaving only two methods of escape.

It’s chaos as the tributes try to avoid being killed all while picking their route away from here. I don’t have time to reflect on my choice, instead running as fast as I can. I need to put as much distance between myself and here, but I need my brother too.

I look for blonde hair as my lungs burn with each push further. I can’t leave here without him, but the longer I stay the closer to death I am.

“Bas!” I shout, running towards the lake. And I keep shouting for him over and over, my voice croaking and winded. As I pass scared tributes all clawing for breath while they run, I pray that I find him. It’s all a blur of black jackets, short breaths, and heavy boots running on concrete, but I never see my brother.

I can’t find him.

An arrow flies by me and I’m tackled to the ground. I roll over and find Trina staring at me, her eyes cold, merciless. And I think this is the first time I’m seeing the real her.

“Nothing personal. I just want to go home,” she says, raising a knife. She slams it down and I think this is it. But instinct takes over and I’m holding her arms back, or trying.

I’m fighting to stop her. But the knife inches closer and closer. My strength unable to hold. I try to wriggle out from under her, but she’s taller and heavier than me. And the knife keeps getting closer.

There’s no escape. I’m done for.

I failed.

Bas will be alone.

But then I hear a smack. The crunch of bone beneath blood and tissue. Trina stiffens, her last breath coming in a sharp huff, and the life leaves her eyes. She drops to the side and there’s a trident sticking out of her back.
I grab the bow off the ground and force myself up. Taking an arrow from the quiver beside Trina’s body. I load the arrow and face my target. Beck.

He stands over her body, trident in hand, but he doesn’t throw it at me. He only holds his hands up. Surrendering. But I can’t trust him. And I can’t stay here. I have to kill him. But he just saved my life.

Why did he save my life?

I want to ask him. But there’s no time. I have to run. But I can’t turn my back on him. Not when he could so easily kill me.

And then I see August running towards him, a large rock in his hand, anger in his eyes. It’s the first time I’ve ever seen August angry. And I understand this anger. No. Not anger. Vengeance. The same vengeance I would have if Bas was the one lying dead on the ground.

And I can let August be the solution. Let Beck and him fight it out while I run away.

But Beck saved my life. And I can’t just let that go. And I hear Annie screaming at the reaping. And I see him quietly tying knots. And his green eyes watch me, his hands up, unthreatening.

Why doesn’t he just try to kill me? Why does he have to make this so damn hard?

I look to August, almost pleading. Hoping maybe Beck will turn around and see him. Or that August will decide to run away. Neither happens. And I hear August talking about the grass at home. And I see him painting with Bas and laughing. And I don’t want to kill him.

But Beck saved my life. And August is only coming this way because of Trina. Because he’s alone.

I have to choose.

I have to kill one of them.

It’s the only way.

I fire.

The arrow sails past Beck, hitting August right through the heart. He’s dead instantly, never even feeling it. At least I hope. And Beck turns to see what I’ve done for him. That I’ve returned the favor.

I use that moment to take Trina’s knife. Then pick up the quiver of arrows, securing it to me as I turn and run. Leaving behind the one I saved and the one I killed.

As I run, I check for any sign of my brother but I never see him. The cannons don’t sound yet. I won’t know who made it through until they show the dead to us. I won’t know if my brother made it.

Still, I have to find him. Alive or dead. I have to find him.

He can’t die alone. He can’t be pulled into a hovercraft without me seeing him. Without me saying goodbye.

Most of the tributes make for the quarry, but I know, even if he was on the other side of the cornucopia, Bas would go for the lake. It’s the safer route.
I see no body on my way, but I find footprints at the shore.

There are three pairs of boot prints. Different sizes, all hurrying and circling. They tried to avoid each other. But ultimately decided to just dive in, ignoring the others. I recognize Bas’ steps. Or I hope they’re his steps. I won’t truly be able to breathe until I find him.

I double check the quiver of arrows to make sure they’re secure and I dive into the lake. Death and screaming behind me. My own work buried amongst it.

The swim takes the remainder of my energy from me, but I have to push myself. And I keep pushing until I’m beyond feeling. For a little while at least.

I can already feel my throat ache. I need water. One taste of the salt water around me lets me know I’ll have to find another source.

I crawl onto the rocky shore, out of breath, with my heart beating rapidly. I drop, rolling to my back to face the sky, my arms throbbing and limp at my sides. The sun warms me despite my wet clothes and the creeping cold in my stomach.

I know I should movie. I should keep going. But I can’t will myself to get back up. So I lie on the shore, closing my eyes, trying to make this all go away.

But it doesn’t.

My muscles, my lungs, my throat, they all ache and burn. My breath returns to normal, but the pain never goes away. And all the while I see my arrow pierce August’s chest. And the life leaves his eyes. I hear his laugh. I see his smile. I remember him trying to build a trap. And I think about my mother watching me kill him. What must she feel knowing I ended someone’s life? That I made the choice.

The cold travels from my stomach to my bones.

And I see Trina dying. Trina climbing the rock wall. How protective she was of August, despite her annoyance with him. And I feel her weight on me as she brought a knife closer and closer to my chest.

And I see Beck saving me. I see how certain he was in it. How he watched me after. There was no asking for forgiveness. No apologies. And I wonder how anyone can be so sure when they kill. If there was any hesitation or if he had already decided when the countdown ended.

He saved me.

The cold feeling disappears.

I can’t let that go to waste.

I have to find my brother. I have to survive.

So I pull myself to my feet and risk one look back. I ignore the bodies, only noticing there’s not nearly as many as I thought there would be. The square has cleared save for Cain, Emery, Stone, Victoria, and Minnow. Their focus lies towards the quarry. Clearly choosing the easy route for hunting the other tributes.

I don’t see Beck among them and I wonder if he was killed. But I can’t think of him now.

I saved him too. I owe him nothing. Whatever happened after I ran was on him. There’s nothing I
can do about it.

There are two small buildings in the square. Both are half in ruins but it’s enough to provide shelter to those worthy of it.

The Careers have claimed it and I know there’s no way I’ll be able to return there.

I look down the shoreline. It dips and breaks, forming into a river ahead. I suspect, through the arena. There’s a bridge farther ahead, above the river. It must really go deep. Above the shore there’s grass taller than me, rising in waves and hills. There could be anything in there.

My clothes are mostly dry now. I can’t spend any more time waiting around.

I check the tracks and find the footsteps heading away from the shore into the grass. And I start my trek. The grass surrounding and towering above me. It’s cover, which is good, but my visibility is threatened, which is bad. If anyone sees me, there’s no guarantee that I would see them.

I walk slowly, my muscles still ache. I feel the scratching at my throat, the gnawing need for water.

I don’t know how many days I can last without it. And I don’t know where I’ll be able to find fresh water. I hope I come across it soon. I’m reminded of my mother’s Games. How she almost died from dehydration. I would laugh at the similarities but I’m more concerned with survival.

I push aside grass, checking the path in front of me, ensuring I’m following the tracks. I keep my steps light despite my exhaustion. Everything is silent except for the occasional breeze whistling through. I can almost pretend I’m not in the arena. That I’m out tracking in some other District or some part of the woods I just discovered.

Then the cannons start and I’m reminded what I’m doing here. I count.


Seven cannons. Seven are dead. And seventeen are still alive. Including me. I wonder how the Gamemakers will react to that.

The sun hangs high in the sky. I can feel the weariness of the day taking its toll. My limbs are heavy. My mind screams for Bas. Praying he’s alive. Praying he’s looking too. But I’m so tired. I can’t keep searching. I want to take a break. I want to shut my eyes and rest, but I have to keep going. I have no other option.

I’ll rest once I’ve found my brother.

I follow the tracks until the path diverges and I’m faced with a choice.

One path turns back towards the river. The other goes deeper through the grass, heading towards a tree line that I can just make out in the distance.

The river is probably made up of salt water like the lake. Bas would know that. He would look for shelter. He would go to the place that’s always been safe for us. He would go to the trees. He would go home.

I push onwards. I hope I’m right.
The grass is endless, growing darker and more sinister as I walk on. I hear the occasional flap of wings but never a sound to indicate what bird it is. The breeze that once felt welcoming whistles through my tired mind like a howl. I can feel the strain of searching. My legs ache from the walk. My eyes fall as my body droops, begging for sleep.

I just want to be at the trees, but I can’t be sure how far that is. I can’t be sure how long I’ve been in the grass or if I’m even following the tracks anymore. I’m so tired and I’m thirsty.

I stop to take a breath. I can feel the eyes of the arena watching me. Every camera, every Capitol citizen cheering. I imagine Plutarch calling shots while his commands are obeyed and reflected on screens across the country.

I can feel my mother’s eyes. And I can see her watching. Her hands twisting where her wedding band used to be. My father’s eyes riddled with worry as he watches her and the screens.

I have to keep going. I have to find Bas for them. I have to keep going.

So I do.

And when I find myself on the edge of a field, the tall grass nowhere in front of me, I’m relieved. But then I hear footsteps and I drop back into my previous surroundings, crouching low. I ready an arrow, waiting, watching.

The girl from Three steps out of the grass a couple feet to my right. She travels directly into my eye line, never aware that I’m watching. She stops and removes a canteen at her belt.

She drinks from it, the setting sun shining off the metal. My throat burns at the reminder. She’s close enough that I can read the number engraved on it.

Three.

It was meant for her. Given to her before she entered the arena.

And I remember hearing something rattling in the locker. Something made of metal swaying back and forth against the door. I knew the Peacekeeper forgot something. And he had known just what he was doing. He sent me in here without it.

My canteen. My water. It’s hanging in a locker somewhere underneath the cornucopia while President Snow smiles at me burning without it.

What if there isn’t any other fresh water? I could die. I could die and the Gamemakers wouldn’t have to do a damn thing to make it happen. Snow already did.

Then a thought hits me. And it’s dark and sinister and it feels like what a Career would think.

I could kill her and take hers. I could live.

I need it more than her. I need to find my brother. And she would have to die anyway so that he could win. Why not now?

She would never see me coming. She wouldn’t even feel it.

I need the water. I need to find Bas. I need to live. He needs to win.

My hand shakes as I raise the bow. I’ve done it once. I can do it again. It’s nothing more than hunting.
She has something I need. She’s prey. She’s a deer. She won’t feel it. I have to live.

It’s nothing more than hunting.

But I see how out of breath she is. How she glances around as she closes her canteen. She’s scared. She’s a person. She’s not a deer. She’s not prey.

And I remember August. And I feel cold again.

I’m not a Career.

I lower the bow as she turns her back.

She walks through the field towards the woods and I let her go. Possibly signing my death certificate with it.

My hands shake as I put the arrow away. And I stay crouched for a long time after the girl leaves. My mother had told me she made a choice. It was her or them.

And it felt that way at the cornucopia.

Even when I knew August wasn’t going to hurt me. He was going to hurt Beck. I knew, it wasn’t the same. It wasn’t killing to kill.

And maybe if I had killed the girl from Three it could be considered justified. But I couldn’t live with it, for however short a time that might be. I can’t accept becoming a cold hearted murderer, even if it is for survival.

And I knew that when I arrived in the Capitol. I was afraid of that weakness.

But it’s not a weakness.

And I can see my father smiling. He’d be proud of my choice.

So I can live with it. Though it’s becoming less likely the longer I go without water.

How many days can I last? How much energy have I wasted already? When was the last time I had water? Was it yesterday? This morning?

The air feels dry here. And as the sun sets it gets colder. And I have to force myself to stand and leave the tall grass.

I can’t search tonight. I won’t be able to see the tracks. I have to sleep.

The field slopes upwards towards the woods. And I’m heading uphill despite my aching limbs. I look back to see how far the grass stretches. It surrounds everything in an outer circle. To get anywhere near the river or close to the cornucopia you have to pass through it.

There’s a brief break in it where the river is. And in the growing darkness I can just make out the bridge. I don’t think I’ll be heading back this way. Once I find Bas, we’ll stick to the woods. Unless the Gamemakers force us out.

Suddenly, I feel small and I wonder how long I’ll stay alive. How long Bas can manage. He’s not the only one who won’t survive alone.

I continue through the field and reach apple trees on the edge of the forest.
My stomach growls at the sight. And I’m grateful that at least it’ll be some hydration as well. But as I grasp the shortest branch I hear a faint buzzing and I think better of it. It’s too dark to really know what the buzzing is. And I can’t risk it being what I suspect.

I push into the woods and I’m relieved to smell the dirt and leaves that welcome me home.

I set a trap at the tree line. If the Careers decide to follow I’ll get rid of at least one of them. Hopefully. Either way it’ll help me sleep a little more soundly knowing the trap is there.

I can’t find any tracks in the darkness. And I won’t go further into the woods without the light. I look up at the trees. I don’t think sleeping in one would be a good idea, but I don’t have anyone to watch my back while I rest.

So I find a fallen log near my trap and do my best to hide behind it. They shouldn’t notice me if I’m still. I lie on the ground, the fallen leaves surprisingly soft beneath me, and I watch the sky.

There are stars I don’t recognize, if they’re real stars at all, but I trace shapes in my mind anyway. I create patterns, pictures of anything and everything I can make. I’m only trying to ignore the aching hunger in my stomach and the savage burning in my throat.

Tomorrow I’ll catch some food.

I play with the pin on my jacket absentmindedly. It reminds me of home, of my family. And even with all the pain in my body, I feel a peace wash over me as my eyes close and I start to drift off.

But then the anthem plays and my heart drops. This is it. This is when I know for sure whether Bas is looking up at the same sky or not. If he’s alive or not.

The faces come onto the sky one by one. The number of their District with them. For every face there’s probably a grieving family. A friend who knew them. A mentor who cared for them. The parent who could be their mentor. The one who is watching from the Capitol. Who had to see them die.

Even Trina and August. Neither one of their parents are here. Their mentors are just the ones who survived their traumas. But those mentors knew their parents. Those mentors were probably helped by their parents. And they will mourn. And District Nine will bury them. Friends will say goodbye. They will curse my name. They will curse my family just as they’ve been doing for twenty five years. And they’re right to do so.

The girl from Six is the first face. Beck made it then. And I’m not sure why I find relief in knowing that, but I do.

The girl from Seven’s picture follows. And somewhere in the arena Grover is seeing her face and saying goodbye. Whether he knew her well enough or not, he would mourn for her.

Both tributes from Eight appear. Then Trina and August. And I remember firing the arrow and I try to look anywhere but at the sky. But it’s too big and the anthem is so loud. And August’s face watches me. And I feel the pull of the string and the release when I let go. And I see the arrow pierce his chest. And I watch him fall. And I can hear his laughter. And I ended it.

I can’t escape what I’ve done.

It feels like an eternity until August’s face fades and the girl from Ten’s face appears in the sky. And I feel sorry for Little Zero. He has to face this place alone. Alone and small and fighting for his life. He’s probably crying. He’s probably looking for his father or his mother and he’s crying. And no one comes to help him. No one comes to make his nightmares go away.
He’s alone.

No one survives alone. Not even me.

No more faces appear and silence follows the end of the anthem. And in that silence, I find hope. Bas is alive. He’s out here somewhere and he’s alive. I will find him. I have to find him. I can find him. He’s alive.

I close my eyes. The smell of the woods surrounds me, comforting me, even when I know I’m not safe. I can hear the sounds of animals scurrying along the ground and up into the trees. And it’s like a lullaby calling me home.

Then I hear a song in my mother’s voice and it’s only in my imagination, but it reminds me of times when I didn’t know what killing felt like. When I didn’t fear an arena. When I could still play and be a child.

When I wasn’t aware of my purpose.

When I didn’t know firsthand what this world is. When I didn’t know any better.

Now I do.

And it feels so long ago that the words of the lullaby disappear and all I can hear is the melody. And I wish I could go back. Back to when I believed that lullaby. When I believed I could be safe.

But I don’t think I ever really believed.

And I don’t think my mother did either. Not when she sang me that lullaby. In small moments of weakness, when she couldn’t keep me away and my father wasn’t home. She had to sing it to me, but I don’t think she ever believed fear could go away.

Now I know that it can’t.

Not with a song. Not with a hug.

And God how I wish I could curl up in one of my parent’s arms and believe that lie all over again.

But I can’t. And as sleep pulls me under I think of days in Twelve with my family. I remember walking in the woods and running around the Seam. And I’m grateful that I’m too tired to dream.

I would only dream of home. And it would be all the more difficult to wake.

“Deep in the ocean, dead and cast away
Where innocence is burned in flames
A million mile from home, I'm walking ahead
I'm frozen to the bones, I am...

A soldier on my own, I don't know the way
I'm riding up the heights of shame
I'm waiting for the call, the hand on the chest
I'm ready for the fight, and fate”

- Iron – Woodkid
The Arena: Searching/Watching - Ivy and Katniss

Chapter Summary

Ivy faces a life or death situation as she searches for Bas. Meanwhile, Katniss is forced to watch her daughter struggle to survive.

The Arena: Searching/Watching – Ivy and Katniss

Ivy –

I dream of my mother. She’s younger, lying in a tree watching a dark sky. And I realize she’s in her arena. I’m dreaming of her in the arena.

The scene changes. She’s crying over a little girl, Rue. And she’s singing to her. She’s placing flowers. She’s honoring the little girl who died. Who was so much more than just another tribute.

And no one will do the same for me here. Maybe Bas if I find him. But I don’t know how far apart we are.

A cannon wakes me. And I’m immediately on my feet looking around. I won’t know who it is. Not until later. Please don’t be Bas. Please don’t be Bas.

It’s the only thing I repeat as I start to move. The second thought creeps in; please don’t be close to me. Please don’t be near me. I’m not ready for another fight.

It’s still dark out, but the sun is just beginning to rise. And I keep running, shaking off any last remnants of sleep as adrenaline kicks in. I trip over a rock and roll down a small slope. My back lands against a tree. The wind knocked out of me.

I force my breathing back to normal and stand, my back throbbing.

The sound of rustling and footsteps crunching through sticks and leaves approaches. My muscles tense as the footsteps grow closer and my heart pounds. I listen, hoping it’s just an animal, but there’s no mistaking it. Someone is coming this way.

My throat burns and I feel the ache in my body from both a lack of water and yesterday’s exertion. But I push through it, the adrenaline dulling everything but my survival instincts. I reach for the bow and remove an arrow from the quiver before standing, using the tree for cover.

And I wait.

The footsteps grow closer and closer, as the sun peaks through the trees, shining brightly. I hope whoever it is isn’t one of the Careers. I don’t know if I have the strength to face them. I hear the squawk of a bird as the rustling slows then stops. Whoever was coming this way saw me, I have no doubt. They peer out from behind a tree and I hesitate to fire.

The sun shines off a pair of glasses.

“Grover?” I ask the boy in front of me, my voice coming out creaky and hoarse from running and lack of water. He steps out further from the tree and smiles, relief washing over the both of us in
an instant.

“I’m glad it’s you,” he says looking around. “Did you hear—?”

“Yeah. I heard. Did you see who…?” I can’t finish the question.

He shakes his head as he continues to glance around.

“We’re safe.” I move towards him, though the pain begins to return. I slow my movements.

He sighs, “Yeah, until we’re not.”

“Still trying to joke about everything?”

“All I’ve got left is my sense of humor,” he says with a chuckle.

I glance to the canteen at his belt, the number seven shining in the sun. He follows my eye line and removes it without hesitation. Once again I’m reminded of how he’s too kind for this arena.

He unclicks the lid of the canteen and looks inside. He frowns, shaking it before turning it over. There’s nothing, not even a drop, left.

“I’m sorry, Ivy. I must have finished it on my walk up here. That tall grass…”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll be fine.”

He glances at my belt and I’m grateful he doesn’t ask where my canteen is. Instead he shrugs and says, “We’ll just have to find some water then.”

“And you can look for the both of us.” I adjust the quiver on my back and force a smile. He’s confused for a second before understanding my meaning. He takes a step forward, the concern etched onto his face.

“You’re not coming?”

I feel the sting of the reminder of my little brother. How many times had he asked me that question when he would run off to play? How many times had I asked him when I wanted to go home from the Seam?

And I know it’s not the smart thing. Grover could help me. He’s had water. He’s good to search for more for at least another two days. I don’t know how much longer I can go without it. But like both my mother and my father I have a fierce stubbornness that won’t bend or break. It’s steel inside of me that’s never been malleable once my mind has been made up, just like them.

My brother is much the same. We vary in how we handle it. My brother is more vocal when he’s forced to do something he doesn’t want to. I resist quietly, and stick to my choices despite whatever else is going on. My father and I share that.

“I have to find Bas. Have you seen him?” I ask, hoping against hope. That somehow, someway, Grover knows where he is. And hoping that the cannon wasn’t for him.

“At the cornucopia, for maybe a second. He grabbed a knife and ran right by me. I didn’t see where he went. And then I saw Cain…”

I nod, remembering Cain during training. How deftly he handled nearly every weapon, how strong and capable he is for this environment. And the cruelty that comes with being a trained killer. The cruelty I almost succumbed to. But none of that matters because Bas has a knife and for
that I’m grateful. He has something he can use, whether it’s for protection or making a fire or trap. He’s got a knife.

“I saw you too,” Grover adds with a hint of sadness. And he doesn’t have to say what he saw. I know. I have to clench a fist to stop my hand from shaking.

“It was my…I had to.”

“I know. I saw August with the rock, but I was just, I wanted to get out of there.”

“You did what you had to.”

“And so did you.” I nod, but my neck is stiff and I can’t tell if Grover sees the movement or not.

“I’m sorry about your District partner.”

He nods. “April. Her name was April.”

“I’m sorry about April.”

“She made me a little card for my birthday. I don’t know how and I wasn’t gonna ask, you know, it’s a gift, but she made me a card. It was nice.” He stares at the ground for a minute and I think he’s done. But then he adds suddenly, “Johanna hated it.” He looks up at me and before I ask why he says, “I asked her why and she…just you know, flat out said, you can’t kill someone who gave you a gift. Or you can’t just push it aside, something like that.” Grover shrugs.

“She’s not wrong,” I say after a long silence. He half nods in response.

I feel a little faint, but I steady myself. Grover must see it because his next question is, “How long has it been since you’ve had water?”

I shrug. “Probably two days. Maybe yesterday? I can’t remember.”

“You should come with me to find some. I’m sure it’s not far. And we can help each other, like allies.”

I sigh, giving Grover my best camera voice. The voice of reassurance and calm, peace and routine. The Princess of Panem. “Tell you what, you find some, you come back to this spot, leave a mark on this tree and I’ll find it. Fair?” I ask. I have no intention of returning. I have one mission. Find Bas. He’ll have water. He’ll share. And then we can find some more. I can’t worry about Grover too. I can’t protect him and us. I can’t make the choice of him or us. Because I know how I would choose and I can’t see Grover’s eyes when I make that choice.

It’s better if I go it alone until I find Bas. The cannon wasn’t for him. It can’t be for him. I have to believe it isn’t his cannon.

“Yeah. I can do that,” Grover agrees with a nod, “But you have to promise to check, ‘cause I’m coming back.”

“Sure.” I smile, but it fades as soon as he turns his back.

“Ivy,” he says, turning back around, the camera smile returns, “Good luck.”

“You too.” And I drop the smile, sincerely adding, “Stay alive, Grover.”

He nods and walks away. I turn and head in the opposite direction, further into the woods. I
wonder if the Capitol is shouting because Grover and I left each other alive. How are the mentors fairing as they watch all of this play out? Did Johanna watch me with worry in her eyes as we approached each other? Would she have reacted at all?

She must love him. No one cares for another person if they don’t. Or maybe they do. I’m no expert on what true love is. I only recently started to realize and accept that my mother loves me and I’m still struggling with that. Love is protection. That much I know. Self-sacrifice and protection. Johanna protects Grover. She must love him.

Just like my mother must love me. Just like she loves my father, my brother, and my aunt. She protects us all, or tries to and she’d walk through Hell if it meant we would live. That I’m sure of.

I don’t know why I go back and forth. Why I can’t just say definitively one way or the other. Why I’m even thinking of this now. And as the day drags on and I still find no sign of my brother or any water I start to realize why.

I’m in Hell. I’m walking through it. My time is running out. I’m dying and I keep wondering why my mother didn’t say I love you back.

I shouldn’t be wondering that. I shouldn’t be wondering if she’s watching me with fear and panic that she’s going to lose me. I shouldn’t be concerned that she isn’t. That she’s staring passively at a screen with my sweat and dirt streaked face, huffing at each labored step forward. Though I’m sweating much less now, and I’m sure that’s bad.

But that doesn’t make sense. She doesn’t want to lose me. She wouldn’t train me just to not care that I’m in here.

But I haven’t gotten any water from a sponsor, so how hard are they trying? Is the Capitol laughing at me tripping over my feet walking through these woods? It’s only the second day. I’ve only heard one cannon so far. Although I’m sure another will sound once I fall. And I know it’s coming. I can feel it with every step.

And I should be far more concerned with that. With how dizzy I’m getting. How at each breath my throat burns and my lungs ache. My muscles are screaming still. Shouldn’t it have gotten better today? My hands can barely hold the bow anymore, I feel so weak. And I feel heavy, like I’m collapsing in on myself as the arena pushes me towards the ground. The quiver is weighing me down, each arrow feels like rocks on my back. And I should worry about all of this more than the last time I saw my mother. Than the fear I saw in her eyes as we were pulled apart.

She loves me. But she didn’t say it. So how real can it be?

But love isn’t based on words. It’s based on action and her actions say she does. But my father has said it. Why can’t she?

A stick cracks somewhere to my left and I jump, dropping the bow. The sound echoes in my head and I’m no longer sure where it came from. I turn to the right and back to my left, but there’s no one there. No animal to be seen. I reach down to pick up the bow and find the broken stick beneath my feet.

But the sound was somewhere else. No, I’m just confused. My hand shakes as I pick up the bow. It feels so heavy. It’s not. I’m just weak. I lean against a tree, trying to breathe, but it feels like I can’t get enough air. And every breath seems to burn. My heart hammers in my chest, too loud for me to make out any other sound. It’s beating so fast it hurts. And I don’t know where I am anymore. Or what I’m supposed to be doing, but I know I had a reason for being here, for not getting water.
And I remember a blonde curly mess of hair throwing a snowball at me. I hear laughter as I chase that head of curls through rich green trees and the smell of earthy woods.

It doesn’t smell the same here. There’s no life here. Not like there was back home.

Home. Bas. My brother. That’s what I’m supposed to be doing. I need to find him. But I’ve lost the trail. I’m so far off the trail. Was there even a trail to begin with?

I should worry about that, but I can’t. My mind won’t let me focus on anything. Even my surroundings are starting to fade in and out. But that’s from lack of water. I should be looking for water. I should worry about that. But I’m not worrying about it.

All I can see. All I can think about is the room back in the Capitol. The Twelfth floor where I said goodbye. Where I said I love you for the last time.

And I should have said it more. She should have known that I never hated her. I’ve always loved her. She should have known that I don’t regret that she’s my mother. I don’t regret her winning or what that meant for us. I’m glad she’s alive. And I miss her. I miss my father. I miss Bas. I miss Haymitch. I miss Effie. I miss home.

I don’t want to die.

And I realize why I’m hung up on my mother not saying I love you back. Why I care so badly that I didn’t hear it.

Because I never will. And I would have liked to die having heard it once. Having known for sure, with no room to doubt.

And I fall. And I can’t get back up. I’m too weak. And I’m blinking slowly, watching the sun set above the trees. And the anthem starts playing as soon as the darkness blankets the sky.

The girl from Three stares at me. And I remember standing in the tall grass, waiting to shoot her. And in another life, maybe I did. Maybe the cannon sounded because I took her life. And maybe I walked through the woods, confident, drinking the water that I took from her.

But that’s not possible. Because even in another life I wouldn’t do that. I couldn’t do that. And I’m lying so still, I wonder when the world with finally fade and I’ll die. I can’t move anymore. And I barely feel anything.

How long until the cannon sounds for me? When will my face appear in the sky? How will Bas feel when it does? All I can think is how sorry I am that I didn’t make it farther. That I wasn’t strong like my parents.

“I’m sorry,” I choke out through my labored breathing, but it’s so quiet, so cracked and broken. I don’t think anyone will hear it. Not the cameras. Not my parents. No one but me.

The Mockingjay pin stares at me from my jacket. And I’m too weak to hold it, too weak to even try. I can only stare at the stars as they blink into existence from whatever sky and universe the Gamemakers have created.

I fight to keep my eyes open, but I lose quickly and the world finally fades into nothing. And I imagine my mother telling me it’s okay, telling me she loves me. But it brings me no comfort.

Because it isn’t real.

Katniss –
I want to scream. I should scream. I should be shouting, making a display of myself. But I’m
frozen. I’m too used to pretending. Even though this isn’t an act. I can’t move. I can’t do anything
but watch the screen. And it’s been this way since the bloodbath.

Bas is asleep, or as asleep as anyone can be in the arena. He’s well hidden in the tall grass. And
he’s been moving carefully for the past two days. He’s safe. He’s killed a squirrel, he’s eaten, he
has plenty of water. He’s safe.

But Ivy hasn’t been safe since the bloodbath. She hasn’t been following the right trail, and I can’t
send her anything to tell her that. And now she doesn’t move. And I’m just like her. Stuck lying
on the ground, lying in the arena, dying. I’m dying too.

And I wish I could save her. I wish I could hold her. I barely watch the screen, so lost to my own
thoughts as she croaks out I’m sorry. And my heart shatters.

Hours pass as contraction after contraction hits. Each one worse than the last. When it’s finally
time for me to push, I’m glad it’s almost over. Until I remember what that means and the
crippling fear that’s been pulling at me these past nine months takes over me again.

I can’t do this. Why did I do this? Why did I let this happen?

Prim tells me to push as another contraction hits. I can’t be afraid right now. I shove the panic
down and do as I’m told, gripping Peeta’s hand in the process.

When it’s over I hear a soft cry and my heart swells before breaking. I’m so sorry, I keep thinking.
I’m so sorry I did this to you. I’m apologizing to her and to Peeta.

“Congratulations, I have a niece,” Prim says, breathless. “It’s a girl.”

I sit up despite my muscles begging me to stay put as Prim hands my daughter to me. She’s so
small I’m afraid I’ll break her. Peeta’s eyes are wide, on the verge of tears.

She continues to cry and I want to do anything I can to make it stop. She’s scared. I can’t let her
be scared. She’ll spend far too much time feeling that way. I have to do what I can to keep it from
her for as long as I can.

I shush her. “It’s okay, baby girl, I’m here. You’re safe,” I croak out. She quiets at the sound of
my voice and I fight back tears.

Prim laughs. “Lucky you, not many babies stop so easily. I’ll give you two a minute.” She walks
out as Peeta comes closer, drinking in the sight of our daughter as much as me.

He kisses my forehead, and runs a finger over her fine dark hair.

I’m terrified that at any minute she’s going to be taken. That some Peacekeeper is going to run in
and rip her from my arms to be used as Snow’s personal anti-rebellion poster child. I pull her
closer to me, afraid to look away, afraid that I’ll forget what she looks like.

That’s impossible. I don’t think I’ll ever forget a single strand of hair.

But I know. I know that it might be weeks, it might be years, but they will come for her. They will
use her. They will show her off to the districts, like they do me and Peeta. She’ll end up in the
arena, I can feel it, and I need her to be ready for it. I can’t lose her. We should run, we could
run, but where? I can’t bring a newborn into the woods. But I can’t just stand by and let the
world destroy her.
It happened somewhere around the third month of my pregnancy. I stopped crying, I stopped hoping something would go wrong and that there would be an excuse not to follow through with Snow’s message to us. I started wanting her. And at each kick, I imagined what she would look like, sound like, and I felt myself loving her. And then I tried to stop myself, but I couldn’t.

I know now that it was selfish. That I should have started building a wall, because having to build it now hurts so much more. She can’t have a mother, she needs a mentor. I can’t watch her die in the arena. She’ll have to win. She’ll have to live. I can feel a ticking clock above her head, staring me down as Snow watches.

“Peeta, take her please,” I say, he looks at me confused.

“Katniss, I think—“

“Take, Ivy please.” I realize what I’ve done as I hand her to him. I’ve shut her out and named her at the same time. Peeta takes her and she starts crying again. He tries to calm her down but she doesn’t stop.

I bite back tears, gripping the sheets of the bed until my nails dig into my palms.

“Let’s let mommy sleep, okay, Ivy. I like that name, it’s pretty, like you,” he coos as he leaves. Once the door shuts behind him I let myself cry with her, my being shattering with each sob until I have nothing left in me.

I have to be strong so that she can live.

I remember that day as I watch Ivy lie on the ground, dying. She won’t make it through the night. I can feel Peeta pacing behind me, glancing from screen to screen. Checking on the child who’s safe and the one who isn’t. The one who we will lose if something doesn’t change.

Haymitch talks to a sponsor as I twist my hands watching her. The empty space where my wedding ring used to be reddens as my finger grips the bare skin.

“No. She’s just lying there why would I send her anything?” I overhear the sponsor, some Capitol man with blue hair, ask.

“If you send her some water she won’t be lying there,” Haymitch tries, but the man shakes his head. I can hear the worried tone in Haymitch’s voice, the waver that betrays his steadiness. Things are bad. They were interested before, but barely so. She had killed someone. She looked confident, a possible victor, but then she couldn’t stand upright. Then she started looking worse for wear. And they didn’t want her anymore. They understood that she wasn’t going to win.

“I’m not going to sponsor someone who can’t even find water. The others have canteens why didn’t she fill hers?” The man walks away. And before I can even register my movements, I’m chasing after him. Peeta and Haymitch try to stop me but I force my way through.

“Hey! Come back here.”

The man keeps walking, ignoring me. I want to hit him, but if I do I know he definitely won’t send the water. I’m in front of him before he reaches the elevator. And I’m worried my voice will waver, that it will betray the fierce anger I’m trying to show.

“She needs water.” It comes out flat. But I know there’s still time to strengthen the threatening tone I want to deliver.

“That’s not my problem, she’s not my tribute,” the man says stepping around me. I grab him by
the lapel, his wide eyed expression satisfying. And rage is burning through me, radiating off my skin, breaking through the Capitol façade I’ve crafted.

“Send her the water,” I threaten. Haymitch pulls me back quickly and I fight against his grip, but I can’t break free.

“I’m sorry about her, she hasn’t slept.”

“See that you do,” the man says to me before walking away.

“Threatening the potential lifesaving individuals is not helping,” Haymitch says, dropping his hand from my arm.

“Then tell me what to do. How do we help her?” I ask, my voice cracking. I know we can’t be the ones to send her water. They don’t let mentors be sponsors. But we can’t just stand here and do nothing.

I pass Finnick who watches Beck’s screen intently. His eyes are red and tired and he hasn’t slept since the Games began. Just like me.

He couldn’t watch the bloodbath. Annie did, which surprised everyone. There were no screams, no covering of her ears. She just watched, her hands clinging to her chair, threatening to rip through the fabric.

There was a moment when I thought she was going to lose it. It was when Ivy could have killed her son. She looked at me. She didn’t watch the screen, just me. And when Ivy killed August instead, she turned back to her screen, but not before she gave me a nod. It was grateful, I think.

We haven’t said a word to each other the entire time we’ve been here. But there’s an understanding we have between each other.

She glances over to me, giving me a look of sympathy as I reach Peeta, who has returned to watching the screens and pacing. He’s focused on Ivy, whose eyes are closing. And I feel sick.

Any minute now I expect to hear a cannon blast. My hands shake.

“Get up,” I whisper to myself, hoping maybe she can hear it. Maybe my words can fix this, they certainly helped create this.

Annie leans over and says something to Finnick. He straightens in his seat, turning towards me, his hand in his hair. He opens his mouth to say something, but closes it, unsure. His hands circle around each other for a second and he tries again. And I’ve never seen Finnick at a loss for words. He’s always been able to create some remark, a smirk. This is the first time I’ve seen the man beneath the act. And I’m sure I’m just as much of a mess, but my anger doesn’t allow me any time for sympathy.

“What? Here to say I told you so?” I ask him, bitingly. He shakes his head before looking back at his screen.

“Katniss,” Peeta says, his voice tinged with worry.

“What?” My anger fades as I wonder what else could worry him. What could be worse than watching our daughter fade away? “Is it Bas?”

“Look.” He points to our screen and glances over to Finnick and Annie’s. It follows Beck who heads towards the very spot that Ivy now lies in. It doesn’t take long before both screens show the
same image.

He stands over her, trident in his hand.

I’m screaming to myself for her to wake up, for her to see him. Beck steps closer to her and I’m ready to hurl myself at Finnick if Beck kills her.

Peeta grips the back of his chair so hard his knuckles turn white. I watch Finnick, trying to figure out the best way to attack as Beck crouches down beside her. Is this how Johanna felt when Grover and Ivy crossed paths? She had stood from her chair and stepped closer to the screen, her expression darkening as Ivy raised the bow, but it lifted once Ivy didn’t fire. And she let out a breath, almost like she had been trying to scoff, but she couldn’t manage it. And then she sat back down, pretending to be disappointed that Grover didn’t have a kill yet.

She even said as much. But Finnick and her had looked at each other, and they shared the same look, the same worried look that most of the mentors who are also parents share. Well most of them except for Brutus and Cain’s father, Roman. They’ve been nothing but confident and even annoyed at everyone else’s stress and worry.

Stress and worry that I’m sure is now apparent on my face, because Beetee is watching me and Wiress is muttering. Repeating, “mother,” over and over, growing louder as other mentors turn towards me.

And I don’t care. All I keep thinking about is how fast I can get to Finnick before I’m removed from this room by Peacekeepers. I stop and stare at the screen dumbfounded when Beck drops his trident, and crouches near Ivy. He removes one of three canteens from his belt, carefully unclicking the lid so as not to spill any water. He lifts her head up and helps her drink. She’s groggy, but comes to her senses. He continues to help her until she’s able to take the canteen from him and hold it on her own.

“Easy,” he says, never taking his hand from behind her head. “Can you sit up?”

She nods and struggles to pull herself up into a sitting position, but she eventually does, resting against the tree. She takes a few more swigs of the water, her strength returning. Peeta relaxes but I’m afraid to be relieved. More confused as to why this tribute from Four is helping her for the second time since they arrived in the arena. Why would he leave the Career pack and risk the open arena to help her?

Ivy looks at the canteen, reading the number four on it.

“There are giving me your water?” She asks and it comes out hoarse and shaky.

He points to the other two canteens, both with the number nine. “I have extras.”

Her face falls when she reads the numbers and I know she’s remembering the two they both killed. “You took theirs?”


“I didn’t get one.” And I know what was done. I knew it the second I saw the others had theirs and she didn’t. The Peacekeeper must have shoved her in the tube and never gave her the canteen. She’s lucky she got the jacket.

Beck nods, putting it together, his joking tone gone. “You can hold onto that one.”
Ivy shakes her head, trying to stand. Beck places his hands on her shoulders. “You should sit for a little bit.”

“Can’t.” She uses the tree to help herself stand and leans on it to stay balanced but stumbles, almost tipping over. Beck catches her, almost tripping over himself in the process.

“You can barely stand. You really think you can just start trudging through the woods? Have some more water.” He reaches for the canteen in her hand, trying to help her lift it. She shakes him off.

“I’m trying to help you.”

“Can’t. Trust you,” she answers flatly, her words broken. I can tell she’s trying to be strong, trying to play the role of Career like all the others, like she’s meant to. But she’s failing and she’s still shaken. And I don’t care what the sponsors will think right now, I’m just happy she’s alive. Beck sees through it, he can see that she needs help. He rolls his eyes and lifts the canteen for her anyway. She drinks from it despite her previous protest. She knows she needs it.

“If I was planning on killing you, why would I save you? Twice.” She shoves him off, or tries to. She’s too weak to do any damage. He helps reposition her at the tree, and this time she manages to lean on it on her own.

Beck reaches down and picks up his trident before reaching for the bow. She stiffens as he hands it to her. Snatching it from him, trying to hold onto it as her hand shakes.

She repositions the quiver on her back. Somehow it managed to remain in place when she fell with only a few arrows falling from it. Most of them fell beside her, or nearby. Beck picks them up quickly, putting them back in the quiver. Once again I’m grateful it wasn’t worse than it could have been.

Ivy tries to stand up straight, but has to put her hand back on the tree shortly. She’s still too shaken and dizzy to walk, but she’s going to try. She’s too much like me not to. And she’s too much like Peeta not to have a comment to match Beck’s. Her voice comes out a little stronger when she says, “I don’t know, maybe your Career pack friends wanted the opportunity.”

“They’re not my friends.”

“Right. Tools.” She rolls her eyes. Beck fights a smile. “Either way you were close with them during training.”

“Not really. I just blended in with them. It’s better for them to think you’re useful than to stand out against them. Which you know all about.” He gives her an amused look which she doesn’t buy into.

“I’m leaving now,” she says taking a step forward, walking stiffly and too slow to really go anywhere. Beck follows her. She stops instantly once she realizes and sways on the spot. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going that way.” He points forward.

“No, I’m going that way.”

“Yeah and so am I. You don’t own the arena.” He takes a step closer to her. She backs away, going right. He follows.

She turns around, almost falling once again. “Why are you following me?”
“Because you need my help.”

“I don’t.”

“You can barely stand upright. You almost died, again. I know you don’t like it and you don’t want to believe it, but you can’t do this alone.”

And before she begins her argument, she sways again, dropping the bow. She reaches for it and is slow to get back up, but she holds onto it once she rises. Once again finding another tree to support herself. Beck takes a few steps closer to her but she holds a hand up to stop him. “I’m fine.”

“No you’re not.”

“I am.”

“Walk in a straight line, go ahead, from here to that tree, if you can do it without tripping, I’ll admit you’re okay and move on.”

She looks at the tree and I see a determination and denial in her eyes. She’s going to try. I remember when she took her first steps, how many times she fell over, how many times she cried because she couldn’t do it. Until one day, she didn’t cry. She let go of the table, falling at first, until she used it to pick herself back up again. And then she stumbled her way over to me. Not to Peeta, who sat with his arms outstretched waiting for her. To me. As I was putting on my coat to go out to the woods, she hobbled her way over to me, grabbing onto my pants once she got there. I couldn’t move. She held her arms up, she smiled, and I picked her up and handed her over to Peeta without a word. He nuzzled her close, cuddled her and told her he was proud, and they went to bake cookies while I left.

I cried once I was safely hidden in the woods where she couldn’t see me. And once again I had to remind myself to be strong so she could live. Be her mentor, not her mother.

She moves slowly. Letting go of the tree and walking forward, towards where Beck had pointed. It reminds me so much of that day, only this time I can’t be the one to catch her or hold her and tell her how proud I am. I can’t be there to help. I can’t do it over. And I wish I could go back and change it all. She’s stiff as she moves. Each step meticulous, slow and calculated.

She manages to keep herself in a straight line, fists clenched at her sides, her eyes opening and closing to stop any dizziness. When she reaches the tree, she leans on it, breathing deeply. Beck stands, a little impressed, a little annoyed. I smile. She tries to smirk at him but her expression comes out flat.

“Alright fine, you made a point but now you’re pale and you’ve exhausted whatever energy you had left. How long do you think you’re gonna make it without help?” He asks, staring her down.

“Why do you…why do you…?” She shakes her head trying to clear the confusion from her mind. She can’t find the word. Her voice is tired, drained, and what little strength she managed in it before is gone. She needs to rest. She needs to recover. She won’t get far alone.

“Care?” He asks, finishing. He sighs, “Because of this.” He removes an arrow from a sheath on his back. “You saved my life with it, so I owe you.”

“Well you saved my life too, so we’re even.” She can’t look at the arrow. The thing that killed the boy from Nine. Beck realizes this quickly as he puts it back in the sheath. He looks apologetic as he puts his words together. When he speaks it’s with a sincerity that I didn’t expect.
“Look, the only way either one of us is going to survive is with each other. I didn’t spend two days trying to find you just for you to go off on your own and get us both killed.” He clears his throat. “The others, they’re not equipped for survival. They can kill, but they won’t survive. I want to survive. And you’re the best person for that. And if you don’t help me, I’m dead. You’re my last hope.”

Ivy looks him over, determining whether to trust him. She takes a breath. He’s winning her over, but I can see a darkness behind her eyes, a warning. “If you really want to be my ally, you should know my only interest is in finding my brother and keeping him alive. That means we don’t win.”

He taps a rhythm on the trident with his fingers. “I can be okay with that.”

“What?” She’s surprised.

“There’s many ways to die in this arena. With you at least I know when. Top three?”

I look over at Annie, expecting her to curl up and retreat into herself at her son’s words. She watches intently, a small line of worry in her forehead, but an otherwise passive expression.

The other mentors, namely the group from One, Two, and River from Four, watch our screens, glancing between us, waiting to see if they should fear this new alliance. Gloss grinds his teeth as Stone tries and fails to start a fire for the other Careers. Emery pulls her jacket closer, fighting against the chilly weather. Minnow does the same. Cain and Victoria sit and watch, neither trying to help nor really seeming to care about the lack of a fire. Beck is right. They have no survival skills. But soon enough a silver parachute falls and Stone takes a box of matches from it, lighting the fire. The Career mentors shake Roman’s hand on that one.

They may not have all the skills, but they have the sponsors. And as a group those sponsors are just as deadly as the Careers themselves. But Ivy and Beck are Careers too. Or at least just as capable as them. Between Haymitch, Finnick, Peeta, Annie, and myself, we should be able to gather enough support. Now Bas just needs to be found and brought into the alliance of Twelve and Four.

Beck smirks, “Top three?” He asks again.

Ivy nods, giving in. “When you turn on me, I’ll kill you.”

“You’ll try.” He twirls the trident.

“I’ll succeed,” she adds, moving forward, Beck following. He keeps an arm out, in case she needs it for support, but she ignores it, trying to keep up the appearance that she’s stronger than she is.

“Are you so sure?” He asks, his voice feigning amusement, or at least, I think it’s fake. I can’t tell with him, just like I can’t tell with Finnick. “You’re not expecting me just to lie down and die, are you?”

She shakes her head. Taking large breaths between her sentences. “You’ll put up a good fight. But I’ll still win because I’m a better shot than you.” Her voice is louder and much less hoarse than it was before.

He laughs, handing her the canteen again. “You think so?”

“I know so.”

“I guess we’ll find out.”
“I’ll make it quick,” she says after she takes a large drink then hands the canteen back to him.

“I hope so,” Beck adds quietly before his business-like demeanor returns. He’s all trained Career now, a tribute vying for victory and safety. “We should find somewhere to sleep.”

Ivy nods in agreement.

I turn to look at Finnick and Annie. Haymitch has wandered over to their side, pulling up a chair beside them.

“Looks like they’re allies,” Finnick says as Haymitch raises a glass to me and takes a drink.

“For now,” Peeta responds, his voice so quiet only I can hear it.

I watch Ivy and I remember how small she used to be. How fragile she was, how fragile she can still be. I wish I was there with her. I wish I was there to save her. I wish I was better. I should have been better. I should have been stronger.

I should have told her I love her.

“When darkness comes upon you
And colors you with fear and shame
Be still and know that I'm with you
And I will say your name”

- Be Still – The Fray
Katniss finds herself questioning alliances and motives as the Games continue. And a new threat in the arena worries everyone.

I’ve never been very good at friends. I’ve been even worse at being an ally or getting allies. Whether it was for my tributes or for me when I was in the arena, I haven’t been good at it. Rue was because I saw my sister in her. She was someone I genuinely wanted to protect. I didn’t expect for her to save me. And Peeta. I wasn’t prepared to ally with Peeta. I thought he was going to die. But he saved my life. We saved each other. But all of that was because of them, not me. It was he who wanted to keep me out of harm’s way first. It was my love for Prim that made me ally with Rue, and it wasn’t even allies, not really friends either. And since those Games, no one wants to ally with Twelve. No one who wants to win. And it’s been that way for twenty five years.

Until now.

Now there’s a chance. Now there are others, or rather one, who’s persistent at wanting to be close to them. Whether it’s by some imagined idea that they’re stronger than the rest, that they’re better liked and more likely to have sponsors, or because he thinks he has a chance to kill them if he’s closer, I’m not sure. But for now, I’m living with the situation because it’s their best chance.

My children have always been good at making friends. Though I’m sure that’s because of Peeta. I certainly haven’t given them anything to help socialize. The only reason Peeta and I work so well is because he knows me. Because we need each other to survive. Gale and I worked as friends because we understood each other and we both knew it was easier to feed our families as a team.

I had another friend back in Twelve. For a while, at least. Madge Undersee. That wasn’t a friendship based on survival, but I guess, more of the fact that I didn’t really have many people to talk to. Madge was easy to talk to. And she always listened and she could talk back when she needed to. And I would listen.

She was the only person I called when I moved to the Victor’s Village. And she understood a lot more than she would say. She knew just how dangerous my life was. Just how controlled I was. And she said nothing.

Before the wedding I told her outright that my relationship with Peeta was a lie. That I didn’t love him.

And all she said was, “No one is that good of an actor. Especially not you.”

“You’re wrong.”

“When you walk down that aisle, when you see him, whatever you feel or don’t feel, well, you’ll know whether I’m wrong or not.”

And she wasn’t wrong. And when I was pregnant and I was so terrified I could barely hold
myself together, Madge was there. And as it progressed and I couldn’t go into the woods anymore, Madge would keep me company at home.

She wouldn’t say anything. She wouldn’t ask about my fears. She didn’t have to. She just kept asking other questions, normal questions for normal expectant mothers. Did I want the baby to be a boy or a girl? What names had I picked out? Would I take the baby out into the woods? Did I want them to learn to hunt or to bake? How was Peeta doing?

And for a while I forgot that I wasn’t a normal mother. I didn’t have normal fears. I could just be. It wasn’t like being in the woods with Gale. It wasn’t like lying in Peeta’s arms. It was just being.

She would babysit Ivy when I went hunting alone and Peeta was at the bakery. I didn’t know why she offered, why she was so happy to help, that was just the way she was. Gale used to tell me he would see her walking around Twelve bouncing Ivy in her arms and smiling. She was always smiling.

And Gale would smile when he talked about her. I noticed it as time went on. How much he started smiling when he talked about Madge. How he always talked about Madge. And she would do the same.

When the mine collapsed Madge stopped smiling.

And even though she never asked before, she started asking about revolution, about the Mockingjay, about my fears. Something broke inside of her. Or maybe it was always there and she finally let it loose. But she changed. She got darker. She didn’t laugh. She still came around. She still came to babysit. But she wasn’t who she used to be.

Until one day, she stopped visiting. And she stopped walking around Twelve. And then she didn’t leave her house anymore.

I went by one day, after weeks of her absence. Her father had come to the door. When I asked to see her there was a grave silence on her father’s face. A mask of pain and confusion. Grief. It was grief.

“Where is she?” I had asked. And he shook his head.

“I don’t know. She hasn’t been home since last night. We informed the Peacekeepers, but they haven’t seen her.”

I left and I looked. I walked around the Seam. I asked everyone I could. No one had seen her. And when I went to the woods thinking maybe I’d find her there, that maybe she needed to get away, I had found a sign. She didn’t enjoy the woods as much as Gale and I. She had only come out there once or twice and I didn’t think she’d go back, especially with Gale gone. But she had.

It was in the hollowed tree where Gale and I stashed our weapons. A note so small, so worn, I didn’t know how long ago it had been written. How long she had been thinking about leaving it. And for a second I thought it wasn’t hers. But there was no mistaking the handwriting. Neat. Legible. Tidy. It wasn’t a goodbye. It wasn’t even an explanation. It was just an answer.

She went in search of District Thirteen. A place the Capitol wouldn’t and couldn’t touch. A myth. A long dead District full of ash and bone. But it was the place Gale thought we could run to. He had been talking about it, considering it. And with him gone, she went to find it.

She never came back.

I don’t know if she ever found District Thirteen or if she even survived long enough to get close to
it. I don’t know what happened to Madge. All I know is I don’t have friends now. I try to close myself off from forming attachments. I’ve done it with my tributes the past twenty five years. I’ve done it with my children, even if I wasn’t successful at it. And I’ve done it to Peeta to an extent. I don’t let him in all the time. Even when he’s seen the worst of me, when all my guilt has pulled me under and I can’t get out of bed, I don’t talk about it. I don’t let him talk about it. I don’t want to talk about it.

I don’t want to attach myself to him anymore than I’ve had to. Because if I lose him, if he’s ripped away from me like so many others, I’ll have nothing left. Our children are in the arena. My friends are dead. Even Prim, my sister, the only person I can say for sure I truly love, she has her own life now, her own family. She doesn’t need me. Not nearly as much as I need her. And she can be gone in an instant. It’s safer for her if I try to keep my distance, and it’s been that way for a while now.

Normally I don’t speak to the other mentors, or I speak about as much as they speak to me. But this year it’s different. This year I have allies. And I have to be friendly. As friendly as I can be with people I don’t trust. People whose friendship will wear thin once one of our kids kills the other.

I watch my screen. Ivy and Beck continue walking through the woods. I can tell she’s frustrated by the way she steps through thickets and crunches the branches. She doesn’t care about being quiet.

“Found any food yet?” Beck asks.

“Does it look like I have?” she returns. She spots something before he responds. She hurries towards it with him following.

It’s a small pond with plants growing around it. Plants that I recognize. And I know she recognizes them too.

“You found water at least.” Beck fills a canteen and she fills hers. “But what about food?”

“You can eat this.” She pulls out one of the plants.

“What is it?” He stares at it, taking it tentatively from her.

“Katniss.”

He laughs. “Seriously? That’s its name?”

She nods. “When my mom was teaching me about the plants you could eat she told me if you can find me, you won’t starve.”

“That’s good advice. Alright then, let’s eat.” He pulls some from the pond, holding it out to her. She waves her hand.

“No. I’m hungry but I’m not that hungry.”

Haymitch laughs loudly at that and I turn to him, trying to glare to get him to stop, but it only makes him laugh louder. Finnick and Annie do their best to hide their smiles, but I can tell they’re laughing too by the way their tired eyes crinkle at the corners.

Beck chews some of the katniss and stashes some more inside an empty canteen.

Peeta and I watch our screens from our seats, but Haymitch stays beside Finnick and Annie. He’s
been there since the alliance began and I suspect he won’t be moving until there’s only one Victor.

I can feel my exhaustion weighing on me. While Peeta and I alternate between who sleeps, I haven’t fully rested since before we came to the Capitol. I’m used to barely sleeping while we’re here, but this is different. I couldn’t sleep even if I tried. And I have tried. But every time I close my eyes I hear a cannon and I see one of my children’s bodies being carried out by a hovercraft.

It’s been three days since the Games began and almost a full day since the last tribute died. I know something is coming. The entire room can feel it. The Gamemakers will not let this go on. The Capitol needs its entertainment.

My only hope is my children can get out of the way in time.

Bas has been on his own since the Games began and has done a good job of avoiding the other tributes. He keeps himself to a schedule, sleeping in confined safe spaces for short periods and moving frequently. If he keeps it up I hope he’ll run into Ivy. But he’s been staying close to the river, keeping the water at his back where no one can cross over and kill him. Even as the ground rises and the river gets further down, he keeps his back to the cliff face. At one point I thought he was going to roll over in his sleep and fall off, but he woke up before that happened.

He still keeps his back to the edge, but he’s moved slightly further inland. Not enough for anyone to sneak up on him, but enough for him not to roll off the side.

Ivy has been searching in the woods. The two of them are far enough apart that they won’t find each other unless one’s path diverges. And with each step that becomes less likely to happen.

Bas comes to a stop at the bridge, weighing whether or not he wants to cross it. There are train tracks over it with a few spots where they are missing. And he could climb down it to stay beside the river. But he’s unsure of where he wants to go.

The little boy from Ten approaches from the other side heading straight towards Bas, but there’s no fear in my son’s eyes. He steps closer to the tracks even as the little boy freezes. Bas holds up his hands.

“I won’t hurt you,” he says. The little boy takes a small, hesitant, step forward. Bas nods, reassuring him while waving him closer.

I glance over to Ten’s sitting area. The little boy’s father, all red eyed and twitching movements grips his seat. Peeta gives the man a smile, the same reassuring one Bas just gave the man’s son. And it works for a short while, but soon a light bulb clicks on at the town square and the Careers start drinking from the running water inside the half ruined building.

There has never been electricity in this arena before now, and I don’t understand why it would appear all of a sudden. Not unless there was a reason for it. Beetee leans forward in his chair and I can see the gears turning in his mind. Wiress twitches and points to the screen.

“Sparks. Tracks,” Wiress repeats and a coldness creeps into my stomach as a chill runs up my spine.

The mentors from Six step closer to the screens. They’ve lost one tribute already, the girl, and have tried their best to get sponsors for the boy, but have largely failed. They’ve been defeated and talking with the mentors from Eight, who have lost both their tributes. No mentor is allowed to leave before the Games end. They can walk around the Capitol for a short period if they so choose but they always have to come back here. The pair from Eight have mostly been eating and drinking trying to wait it out while Six has been sitting on the sidelines and hoping their remaining
tribute can survive on their own. They haven't done much until now. They're interested in the tracks though. They watch both Ten and my screens, straightening as they analyze the tracks. I'm sure they've seen them before, given that their industry is transportation. And whatever they recognize, it isn't good.

The man from Ten notices their reaction too and soon he's shouting at his screen, “Run!” It's desperate, a plea, begging that his son makes it.

But he never does. He’s almost to Bas when a buzzing sound starts and the tracks are live with electricity. The boy’s body convulses without control. Bas shouts incoherently, trying to reach over and grab the boy without stepping on the tracks himself.

It lasts for a few minutes but it’s agonizing and long and feels like hours. The man from Ten watches wide eyed, horror stricken, his mouth hanging open in a silent scream.

And when the electricity stops, the boy’s body drops onto the tracks. Bas runs to him, pulling him off. The cannon sounds before Bas even has a chance to check his pulse. The hovercraft follows shortly after.

The man from Ten drops to his knees the scream finally escaping him. It’s broken and hollow. A wretched sound. Everyone else is silent in the room. The boy was too young; we all knew he wouldn’t make it, that he didn’t have a chance. And still I blame myself for him being in this arena.

The Peacekeepers turn to each other, clearly trying to decide on something. Haymitch goes to the man and hands him a drink, which the man takes instantly, drowning himself in it. Peeta helps lift him back into a chair while Haymitch refills the glass.

“I’m sorry,” Peeta tells him and even the Career mentors nod along in agreement. The silence that follows is long and so quiet only the sounds of the arena fill the room. It’s like I’m back inside, lying in a tree, wondering who the cannon just sounded for. Only now I know, now I’ve seen and I see them all. Every single death, when they happen live, when they play over and over on repeat during the highlights of the day as Caesar and Claudius run down their comments. I see them when I close my eyes. And there’s no stopping it.

But I should stop it. I should try. I hear the wracking sobs as the man from Ten drinks himself into a stupor. And no one tells him to be quiet or to stop. We all understand. And the ones who have already lost their tributes and their children are quick to help him over to the side where they can offer words of comfort and more drinks. I wonder if I’ll be joining that group, if they hate me for having children who put them in that group.

The woman from Nine, the mentor who watched as my daughter sent August out of the arena, is too strung out on morphling to pay much attention to me. But Peeta apologized to her. And she had smiled. She had put her hand on his face and smiled. And I wish I could be like Peeta sometimes. So good. So thoughtful. But I’m not. And even if I had told her sorry, it wouldn’t have mattered. I don’t think she knows what’s going on here.

Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to not be able to feel it all. To be so far gone and unaware that I don’t have to face this room or these people ever again. To give myself over to self-medication or drink like Haymitch and bury whatever feelings I have left under a haze. But I couldn’t do that to Peeta. Leave him to take care of all of this and me. I can’t become my mother.

Bas holds the little boy’s body, preventing the hovercraft from taking it. All he does is stare at the burnt hair and frozen eyes, trapped in the moment that caused it. He closes the boy’s eyes and brushes his hair back, trying to comfort the dead boy. He lays the boy down and finally takes a
He watches the hovercraft take the little boy away. I can see the pain in his stiff jaw as he throws a stick onto the tracks with more force than is necessary. The stick bounces off the track and falls towards the river below, but the electricity is gone. He hurries across, his anger booming in each loud step. And then he turns, faces the tracks and spits at them.

It’s not the first time he’s reminded me of myself, though he’s bolder and a lot braver than I could hope to be. But I feel pride in that boldness. That somehow, despite my lack of it, he’s got enough for the both of us.

And then the rain starts to fall.

It starts slowly. A few drops here and there, sizzling once they hit the ground. One drops near Bas’ foot causing him to stop. Then he looks up at the sky as another drop lands on his jacket, burning a hole through it. He rips the jacket off before the water touches his skin and throws it to the side. He leaves it behind as he starts to climb down the bridge, trying to get underneath it for cover.

He moves quickly and efficiently. He was always good at climbing and as he descends the rain drops splash onto his face and arms. Red welts begin to appear but he forces himself to climb faster despite the pain.

When the raindrops start to fall in the forest, Ivy and Beck are quicker to notice. A drop lands on Ivy’s hand and starts to burn. She’s shouting and trying to wipe it away as a large welt appears. Beck looks around as more raindrops fall around them, landing on his shoulder and neck. The welts spring up and the two are in pain as they start to run.

They’re moving downhill trying to escape, but it’s difficult to move fast with the bushes and thickets in the way. Still, they try, almost falling several times.

I don’t know where they can go but the rain falls faster, smoke rising up from where the water lands. The rain falls all over the arena. The Careers shelter themselves in their ruined building, safe from the storm as a crack of thunder hits and the rain picks up.

Ivy and Beck run faster, jumping over rocks and trees to escape as the storm approaches them. My heart is pounding as I try to watch two screens at once, glancing from Ivy’s to Bas’. He drops into the river when he’s close enough to the ground, swimming underneath the bridge, safe from the storm.

Or so I think at first.

“Acid rain,” the boy from Three says. He’s Beetee’s nephew, the only one who doesn’t actually have a Victor as a parent, or so I’ve been told. Apparently there was an exception made in Three when there weren’t enough Victors with children. They had to move onto other relatives. From what I’ve gathered Beetee is as much a father to him as his own, maybe even more so. I think his name is Springer. There’s a scar on his neck, a burn that seems long healed, from what I don’t want to know. And from the way he watches Bas, with cold calculation, I know to be worried. Bas reaches for his knife, waiting for an attack that I don’t think will come. Springer doesn’t seem like the type to get into an altercation if he can get around it.

“Don’t come near me,” Bas threatens, but Springer keeps stepping closer.

“You’re standing on a trap. And if you don’t want to die, I’ll have to step closer.”

Bas looks down at his feet. There’s something metal beneath him, a pressure plate that Springer
set up. He comes to a decision, putting the knife away. Springer leans down and quickly undoes the trap, pulling Bas to the side as the trap resets itself.

“Thanks.”

“You can stay here until the rain stops.” Springer walks back to his spot, settling next to a small fire he’s built.

“You’re not gonna kill me?”

“I don’t much see the point in killing you. Not at this moment, at least. It wouldn’t benefit me.”

Bas watches the rain outside, inching closer towards the fire. But he’s unsure and I don’t blame him. I don’t trust Springer. I wouldn’t trust anyone in that arena.

“You can sit if you want,” Springer adds and Bas does, holding his hands up to the fire to get warm.

A cannon sounds and I jump to Ivy’s screen. I’ve been focused on Bas, I wasn’t watching her. And I can’t see her running. I can’t breathe. Is she gone?

“Peeta? Where is she?” My voice shakes.

Peeta watches the screen intently. Glancing at Four’s as well. “I don’t know.”

Finnick’s hand twitches and his thumbs circle each other quickly. Annie is frozen in her seat, staring at the screen. Her hand inches towards Finnick’s but she stops herself. Haymitch shifts in his seat, leaning forward almost afraid to look at anyone. I make eye contact with him and we share the same worried expression. I feel like the world is about to collapse and I’m going to crumble with it.

But then Ivy emerges from the steam filling up the woods, Beck right behind her. My breath returns and I find myself standing. Finnick covers his mouth with his hand while the other rubs his neck. He’s relieved but he tries to play it off as if he wasn’t worried. It’s not working.

Haymitch still doesn’t look away from me. I don’t know how I’m watching the screen right now, but I am. And I want to close my eyes, have Peeta tell me when they’re safe, if they’re safe.

But I can’t.

I have to watch. I have to see. I have to know. I don’t know how long they can keep outrunning the storm and I need to see my daughter until she’s gone. I need to see her alive and running. Breathing, before she never breathes again.

Ivy notices it before I do. When she pushes Beck he isn’t prepared, the wind knocks out of him as he’s thrown off balance by her. He tumbles through the opening into the small cave as she dives inside behind him.

The rain catches up to them and downpours while they lie on the ground trying to breathe. They’re slow to get up, the welts painful. And I hear her whimper as she slides to sit up. Beck remains lying down, too injured to move.

And that’s when Annie looks away from the screen. Her hands are shaking and inching towards her ears. Finnick touches her shoulder and says something to her. She shakes her head but finally listens to whatever he’s saying. Her hands stop shaking for a second before she nods, leaving the room shortly after. Whether or not she’s about to have an episode is unclear but something’s
changed about Finnick when he stands from his seat. There’s a harsh determination in his eyes, so
bloodshot from his lack of sleep that it’s almost frightening. I think I see the Finnick that won his
Games years ago. The one whose purpose was survival and coming home to Four.

“They need medicine.”

“What sponsors should we talk to then?” Peeta asks and I nod.

“I’ll get it. I’m better at this than you.” He tries to smirk but with his red, tired eyes, it comes off
almost maniacal. Haymitch comes with him to help and between the two of them I feel almost
confident. I’m glad that I have allies this time around. I’ve never been able to get medicine to my
tributes before. But I know Haymitch has accomplished it from first-hand experience and I know
he will get them what they need. And so will Finnick. If not for Ivy, he will for Beck.

The silver parachute travels through the rain unaffected, landing inside the cave. Ivy forces herself
to stand, detaching the parachute from the canister. She struggles to open it, her hands in too much
pain. She winces as her fingers try and fail to pry it open.

She drops it with a clatter. Groaning as she goes to pick it up.

“Do you want some help?” A voice asks from the shadows of the cave. Ivy jumps, ready to dive
for her bow, when Grover steps into the dim light. It’s the second time in two days she’s been
ready to kill him, but somehow that doesn’t seem to faze him one bit. She relaxes as he picks up
the canister with a smile. “Or do you still think you don’t need it?”

“I would really appreciate it, Grover.”

He opens the container, removing the medicine from inside. He untwists the cap on the salve,
handing it over to her. She applies it to Beck’s welts before she does her own.

“Thank you.” She sits as the rain continues to pour.

“I got the really good stuff,” Haymitch says to me after he and Finnick return. “Well, he got it, but
I helped.”

“What can I say, the Capitol loves me.” Finnick shrugs but his eyes lack any warmth or any hint
of a joke. Haymitch shakes his head subtly and I see Finnick cover what looks like bruised
knuckles with a cloth.

The salve works quickly. And when Beck sits up his welts have almost completely disappeared.
Ivy’s have healed as well and she appears relieved when Beck finally speaks.

“Grover,” Beck greets. “Glad to see you alive.”

“You too,” Grover returns.

Beck turns to Ivy. “And you.”

“That’s it?” she asks.

“What more do you want?”

“A thank you would be nice.”

“It’s the Games, there’s no thank you’s here,” Beck quips, standing and looking around the cave.
Ivy grimaces, annoyed by his response.
“There’s a tunnel.” He points towards a dark shadow that stretches further away, his voice echoing off the walls.

“Oh good, maybe the tunnel can save your life,” Ivy mutters, standing as well. Beck looks to her a smirk lining his face.

“Are you angry that I’m not acting all grateful for you doing what allies are supposed to do?” She’s taken aback. “No, I would just appreciate--”

“What? I’m trying to survive, not maintain social etiquette. Besides, you didn’t thank me when I saved your life.”

“That was different.”

“How?” he asks, taking a step towards her.

“I didn’t want your help.” She matches his step.

“But you needed it.” They’re inches from each other, the argument escalating.

“You didn’t really want my help either,” Grover interjects, “But you definitely needed help.”

“Stay out of this.” Ivy points at him and Grover backs away from the two of them.

“What are you really angry about?” Beck asks, his voice dropping.

“Because you’re being an ass.” Her voice cracks and it’s clear that’s not what she’s mad about.

“No. That’s not why.”

“He’s really not,” Grover says, instantly regretting it when the two of them turn to glare at him. “Sorry. Continue.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t know.”

Beck’s smirk turns into a smile and the two of them are silent.

“What’s going on?” Annie asks as she returns, her voice low and croaking. She was crying.

Finnick tries to answer but can’t manage it. I don’t even know what’s going on. Johanna’s laugh rings through the room. It’s sardonic, short, and almost cold. And when she turns towards us, she’s rolling her eyes.

“Your *tributes* are about a second away from having their tongues down each other’s throats.”

I stiffen and Peeta does the same. I turn to Haymitch shaking my head.

“Thought that was apparent, sweetheart,” Haymitch shrugs.

“No,” I mutter to myself as I turn back to the screen.

Beck eyes Ivy like he’s waiting for something and my fist clenches. He swallows and his voice is low, the confidence gone, “Well.”

He leans in towards her and I can feel my anger rising. This can’t be happening again. I will not let this happen again. I will not let her become me. She’s unsure as he leans closer. But something
takes over and she leans in to meet his lips. But at the last moment he pulls away and pecks her forehead.

The smirk returns, “Now we’re even.” And he steps back from her. She’s flustered. And I see nothing but red as I head towards Finnick. He’s standing and he looks afraid. His hands are up trying to surrender but I don’t want an apology. There is no apology for this. And soon my hand connects with his face in a loud slap followed by a punch to his nose. The next thing I know Peeta is pulling me back.

“Did you tell him to do this?”

“Do what?” His nose is bleeding and I try to push myself out of Peeta’s grip to hit him again. It’s not enough.

“You know what! Did you tell him to do it?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You don’t?! I doubt that. Play it up right? They’ll love it all over again!” I escape Peeta and hit Finnick again. Haymitch is the one who grabs my arms this time, but I’m done.

“Calm down.” He signals to the Peacekeepers who have started towards us and they back off.

“It’s not real. She doesn’t know that. She can’t…” My anger turns to worry and I remember Peeta in the days after he understood the game we were playing. The game I had been playing. He was so hurt. And I knew his feelings were real, but mine, they took longer to develop. And when they did he still questioned it, until he realized that it was real. And I know only one of them will survive, that Ivy plans to die or to kill Beck when she has to, but I don’t want that to become more complicated. For her to question it, for him to just turn on her. I couldn’t bear seeing that pain, that betrayal, not on her face.

Finnick finally understands my meaning, “No. Katniss, I swear.”

“Come with me. Both of you.” Haymitch leads me towards our room, Finnick following. Peeta starts but Haymitch shakes his head. “Someone has to watch.”

Peeta is reluctant but listens as the three of us walk off. We pass Annie who hasn’t moved from her spot. She looks at Finnick and he nods, an entire conversation passing between them without a word. I feel bad for hitting him, but not enough to apologize. Though I think I feel worse for the two of them. I don’t think there’s a doubt between them of their love for each other. And yet I doubt myself every day. But I’m the one married with children, not them. I can walk hand in hand with Peeta if I so choose while they have to be careful that no one sees.

I’m still not apologizing for hitting him.

When we’re safely behind the door Haymitch lets go of me. “Don’t hit ‘em again.”

I back away and Finnick applies a towel to his nose. Between that and his bruised knuckles he looks just as battered as the tributes.

“What happened to your hand?” I ask.

He sighs, “The sponsors were reluctant.”

“You can’t just--”
“You were about to when Ivy didn’t have any water. Be grateful I did.”

“But if they--”

“They won’t,” he sighs, the sound muffled by the towel at his nose. “I know what you think, but I didn’t tell him to do that, I wouldn’t.”

“You wouldn’t? Not if it meant getting more sponsors and the entire country on his side? That your son could win?” I ask and my voice cracks.

“Don’t say that here.” And his eyes are burning with fear.

“I don’t understand why you didn’t just say something.”

“Yes, you do.”

And I do. It’s been obvious from the beginning. If I was him I wouldn’t have said anything. How much more dangerous is the world for Ivy and Bas because of me. Because of their connection to me. If I could hide them, wouldn’t I? And from what I know of the Capitol and what I’ve heard about Finnick, I would have hidden them as far away as possible.

I’m still not apologizing for hitting him.

“And I swear, whatever Beck is doing is on him. I haven’t told him anything but to stay away from Ivy. But, he wanted her as his ally.”

“Yeah and now I’m starting to see why.”

“Can you blame him?” Haymitch asks. “It’s a good story, a twist on the star-crossed lovers from the same district. It plays well. They’ll think of you, make the comparison. They’ll buy it instantly. It’s smart.”

“I don’t care how smart it is. It’s not continuing.”

“Even if it benefits Ivy too? Think about it, sweetheart, that medicine isn’t the best we can get.”

I freeze. He’s not wrong. But I don’t want her to be condemned to that story. I don’t want the obvious jokes that Caesar and Claudius will make and I know they’re going to, if it hasn’t started already.

I don’t want to return to the main room. I don’t want to hear their commentary. But if it means getting Ivy through the arena easier, should I suck it up and hear it? If it can benefit Bas once they’re back together, will it matter what the Capitol thinks or says? President Snow won’t stand for it. He won’t let this go on again. The sponsors won’t matter when it comes to his response to this.

“This ends.” And it’s final. But I can see Haymitch isn’t convinced and Finnick glances to him for an answer. “Did you two hear me? No more. Send him a message with the next parachute that he backs off. It’s done.”

“So is the damage. Why not play it out?” Haymitch asks.

“Snow won’t let it.” That seems to scare Finnick enough to get him on my side.

“I agree with Katniss. We’ll get them some food and tell him to stop. Now if we’re done?” Finnick heads to the door, tossing the towel into the sink on his way out.
I sigh. Haymitch stands beside me. “You ready to go back out there?” He asks.

I nod reluctantly.

“Okay then, let’s go.” We walk side by side back down the hallway, towards the screens and the other mentors we’ve made a scene in front of. To their credit they largely ignore us, but I catch the last line of a comment by Claudius and the glances that follow bring about a fresh wave of anger.

“Like mother like daughter, right?” And he laughs along with Caesar.

“I for one am not surprised. But I have to say, I’m intrigued by these two. Established killers in the arena, allies, and lovers? It’s unfortunate that only one of them is going to survive,” Caesar responds and my heart drops into my stomach. That last line is aimed at me and I know it. There will be no berries, not again. And Snow will not fall for this charade if it continues.

Peeta finds me as I return.

“How long have they been talking?” I ask.

“Long enough,” he responds. “Are you okay?”

I nod. “It’s fine.”

“And Haymitch? He’s not thinking of--”

“No.”

“Good.”

I smile. And it’s not the first time I’m glad that Peeta is here with me. That he’s been with me since this all started. I lean forward and kiss him. He’s surprised at how forceful it is but returns it just the same.

“What was that for?” He asks, face flushed, glancing around. I’ve never been one for public displays of affection without being forced to for a camera or audience. But right in this moment, I don’t care. I need Peeta to know. The Careers are watching us. Johanna makes a noise as if she’s about to be sick.

“I’ve had enough of the lovey dovey eyes today. Can we all just get back to doing what we’re here for and get these Games over with? I’d like to go home eventually.”

The sound of a pack of heels clicks and clacks down the hallway. The sound grows in volume until its right outside the door. When it opens, the Peacekeepers allow a group of colorful individuals to pass through. Their hair ranges in shades of pink to bright blues, with their skin occasionally matching. Their outfits are all adorned with icons from their respective districts as if to honor their team. The escorts have returned. Some go to comfort the mentors who have lost their tributes. Others are caught up on the events of the Games and confide who the Capitol has shown the most interest in.

I never hear any of the conversations but it always seems that at one point eyes fall on myself or Finnick. The damage is done.

“What happened?” Effie asks and I hear Haymitch groan. She points to Finnick, “He looks like he’s been in a fight.” She points to me, “And I’m fairly certain she had something to do with it. Peeta? What happened?”
He’s flustered. Usually able to respond, or at least, come up with some story, but unable to at the moment. Effie glares at him then me, her eyes unblinking, accusing. I feel like a child again.

“It was me,” I admit.

“Yes, I know that. Why?” And she continues to look at Peeta.

“Effie,” he answers and that’s all the response she needs.

“Never mind. I’ll just have to try to make the best of this situation like I always do. And whatever the Capitol gossip is, well I’ll just have to deal with that as well.” She stalks off, muttering, “Always something.”

“She’s back. I’m gonna need a big drink,” Haymitch grunts but I can hear the faint sound of relief in his words. I’m relieved too. I wasn’t sure what happened to her after the Peacekeepers came, but I’m glad it wasn’t anything like what happened to Cinna. Though I’m not sure nothing happened.

She’s dressed in a gold dress, her hair matching, and her usual painted makeup on her face, but compared to the others she looks subdued, almost normal.

I catch the slight quiver of her hands as Haymitch hands her a drink and I know he catches it too. But she covers. Giving a curt nod of thanks and heading to sit beside Annie. She talks about the Capitol and the reaction our children have gotten. And in her lilt it sounds positive, like it’s only good news. But she hides behind the voice like Haymitch hides behind his liquor. I know to see through it, though I’ll never say anything to her.

I go over to them and I still don’t want to apologize but I know I have to. Effie makes that clear.

“Katniss, do you have something you want to say to your ally?” She asks but she makes it sound like a command, not a question.

“I’m sorry, Finnick,” I mumble.

“What’s that? I couldn’t hear you,” Finnick says and I glare at him.

“Finnick,” Annie warns.

“I missed it.” He smiles, but she doesn’t play along. “Fine, I accept your apology and honestly, I probably would have done the same.”

“Good,” Effie trills, tossing her hands in the air. “We’re a team. We can’t be fighting or holding grudges. Now let’s discuss strategy. What shall we ask the sponsors for?”

Finnick and Haymitch discuss what will be needed and I settle into my chair to watch. The rain continues in the arena and I don’t foresee anyone going anywhere for a while.

Annie leans over to me and says two words so quietly I almost miss them. But they carry more weight than any two words I’ve ever heard in my life. And my worry and fear increases the more I think of them and what they mean.

All she says is, “It’s real.”

My heart plummets into my stomach. She’s going to have to kill him. Or he will kill her. Or Bas could kill him. There’s no way around it. There’s only one Victor. There will only be one Victor.
This alliance needs to end, but I can’t end it. We all need each other right now. And when we don’t, I’ll have to end it. I’ll have to send something to Ivy, something to warn her. And she can get away. That’s the only thing I can do. That’s what I’ll have to do. I have no other choice.

I only hope Peeta understands when I tell him. Because he’s the only one I can tell. And I hope Ivy understands when I send the message. That she isn’t afraid to do what she has to do and I know she will do what she has to. She will survive. She will make sure Bas survives. And then her plan hits me all at once.

She will survive until she makes sure Bas does. Then she won’t survive any longer. There can only be one Victor. And she’s decided who that Victor will be. And maybe it’s the right choice for her but it isn’t for me. There is no choice to make. Because I can’t choose. And no matter which one walks out a hole will shatter within me and it will never go away.

There can only be one Victor. And I will have to face whoever that lone survivor is. And I will have to comfort them. And when my guilt becomes theirs I will have to take that guilt away. They can’t blame themselves. They can’t. I won’t allow it. They can’t become me. They have to be better than me. Stronger than me. And they will be. I’ll make sure. Peeta will make sure.

But until that happens I have to prepare myself for the loss I know is coming. Even if there is no way to prepare for it. I watch the man from Ten. He stares vacantly at the wall in front of him. There’s no screen for him to watch anymore, no hope for him to carry. His escort tries to talk to him but he largely ignores the woman with green skin. He finally meets my eyes and the pain is indescribable. There’s nothing left inside but a broken shell of a person. And I’m terrified I’ll end up like him. And I won’t need morphling or liquor to disappear. And I will become my mother, but this time I’ll understand her.

“Now I cannot reap
What I cannot sow
I’ll never keep
what I can’t get to grow
Now I can’t be done
Cause I can’t begin
I don’t want you to be alone again
And I don’t wanna be alone again”

- Afraid – Bad Veins
Chapter Summary

Ivy, Beck, and Grover find themselves traveling the cave tunnels after the rain. With Effie's help, Katniss and Finnick form a plan of attack to help their tributes find Bas.

The Arena: Drowning – Ivy and Katniss

Ivy –

I dream of home. I do that a lot in here it seems. I dream of the smell, of the coal being produced in the mines, and the dark dust that seems to cover everything. I dream of my family’s bakery, my uncle’s laughter as he passes me one of the rejected cookies. He’s the only Uncle I like. Uncle Rye. The other two are married and work in the bakery too, but they don’t really talk to our family. At least, not since my father won the Games and married my mother. I’ve never really asked what happened to cause that. And now I never will.

I’m doing that a lot lately too. Realizing all the questions I should have asked, all the things I should have said, and all the things I’ll never get to say. Some, maybe most of which are probably better left unsaid. I find myself dreaming of those questions too and all the answers that I’ll never hear for myself. But most of the time it’s just silent moments in the woods with my mother, my father trying to teach me to paint, reading to me at night, or my brother and I racing to see who could get home from school first. All the little moments that mean a lot more to me now than they did before.

When the dream changes to the attack in Twelve I stiffen. I don’t want to have nightmares in here, not when there are so many already. Even worse I don’t want to wake screaming, that will appear weak. I can’t seem weak. But even though I’m aware of it, it doesn’t change the fact that I’m still having this nightmare.

The child’s laughter echoes throughout my head and then I see the firing squad again, but this time Cinna has joined them. He smiles at me and the shots go off. And I smell the Capitol’s stench. It smells like the rich lush of roses and the copper of blood.

Then the bodies rise and my nails dig into my palms. They watch the sky, their eyes wide and unblinking, their three fingers raised towards the sky. And from the sky a Mockingjay flies towards me, screeching as fire burns all around. And then I’m with my mother, standing in her arena, saluting for the fallen tribute Rue. And the fire spreads. It destroys the arena, the Capitol, and all of Panem.

Everything burns.

I wake with the fading smell of smoke and flame and the call of the Mockingjay fresh in my mind. For a second I half expect my father to come in, to make the last of the nightmare fade. Then I feel the cold damp of the cave and see the fog creeping in from the entrance and it reminds me that I am not home. And that there’s no one here to make the nightmares disappear.

I turn to find Grover fast asleep beside me, his glasses askew, hair even more disheveled. He looks younger when he’s asleep. I stare at him and I think of my brother and it feels like a wire
tightening and cutting into my heart.

Did Bas survive the rain?

I watch the steady rise and fall of Grover’s chest. How many more breaths does he have left? How many more do I have? Is Bas breathing at all? Is Johanna happy that the three of us are here together? Is she scared? Will she blame me if Grover doesn’t make it? When, I correct myself, when he doesn’t make it.

I try to shake off the thought but I can’t. It’s a truth I can’t forget even if I don’t want to face it. We’re all going to die here.

When it all gets to be too much I finally look away and find Beck watching me from his corner of the cave.

“Rain stopped,” he says.

I nod, picking myself off the hard ground. I try to shake off the thoughts that won’t stop. The thoughts of death and torment, of endless running and starving. Of killing. Once again I hear August laughing and I see Trina climbing up the rocks and I’m plagued with the constant, nagging feeling that we shouldn’t be here. That all of this is wrong.

“You were twitching in your sleep. Nightmares?” he asks, his voice tired. I wonder how long he’s been awake, or if he’s even slept at all. The rain had pretty much guaranteed we wouldn’t need a look out, maybe he felt differently. “Do you want to talk about it?”

I shake my head. “It wouldn’t do anything.”

“You know, my mom used to tell me whenever I had a nightmare to go outside and tell the moon about it.”

I look at him, disbelieving. He smiles, and it’s so earnest and bright that it warms the air around him, making the cold cave, the arena, feel a little bit more like home. He’s lost in his story and when I watch him speak I see him. The real him. The one he hides under layers and years of trained acting.

The one who almost kissed me the day before and who I’m grateful didn’t. Aside from the peck on the forehead, which was, admittedly, nice.

“She said there was a man who lived on the moon and every night he listened to anyone who had a nightmare. And he would take that nightmare and turn it into a star. And that’s how new stars are made. He takes the bad and dark thing and turns it into something beautiful.”

I wish I could see this version of him more. The boy who grew up in Four with a loving family despite the Capitol, who managed to slip past the reaping until this year, who would have had a good life if not for my family. But I know it will disappear. Just as I will and am starting too beneath the tribute I’ve become. The killer I’ve become.

“And you believed that?” I ask, breaking his silence.

He shrugs. “I was a kid.” The layers build again, and whatever sincerity was in his eyes is gone. And I don’t know how to bring it back. I wish I could. I know I shouldn’t think like that. I can’t afford to think like that. One of us is going to end up killing the other in here. And nothing is going to change that. I am not my mother. We are not star-crossed lovers who have the whole of the nation at attention and who can try to defy the Capitol. We are just tributes, doomed to play the Games our parents couldn’t finish.
“We should move, sun’s coming up and I don’t know how safe this place is,” he says, grabbing his trident and walking to Grover. He shakes the younger boy to wake him. Grover stirs, fixing his glasses and mumbling about five more minutes.

“Where do you want to go?” I ask, picking up my supplies, putting on my own mask.

Beck peers out of the entrance of the cave. The light fog has become dense after the rain, thick and alive. The forest seems to have joined in that new life. I can hear all kinds of movement from creatures through the fog. There’s a distinct sound of growling and Beck turns back inside. “Follow the tunnel. At least we have walls to protect us.”

I nod, adjusting the quiver on my back. Grover shivers and I look around for his jacket.

“Grover, where’s your--”

“I left it back at the tree with the water. I was hoping you’d see the sign and bring it back.”

“I said you could leave a mark.”

“I didn’t think that’d be enough.” He shrugs, shivering again.

I feel guilty. He shouldn’t freeze because of me. He would have if I had died. I remove my jacket and hand it to him. He shakes his head. “You need it more than I do right now.”

He concedes and puts it on with a grateful nod. The sleeves are a little long on him, he’s smaller than me, but at least it will keep him warm. I catch the glint of the gold pin on the jacket but I say nothing. It can stay with him. I remember the fire of my nightmare and the screaming bird and I can’t bring myself to look at the pin. There’s a knot in my stomach from it, a fear that seems so old and so new at the same time and I can’t quite place it.

We’re about to start walking when a silver parachute floats in. Two in two days? It feels odd, or maybe, we’ve done something right. Maybe taking on another ally makes us look better. But a part of me knows what the Capitol saw the day before, what I’m sure Haymitch is using to get us things we need. Another story to spin for entertainment. And I feel angry about it, a lot angrier than I think I should feel. I refuse to play the role, to play up whatever feelings could be there, that I don’t want to be there, but I know are.

It’s another truth I can’t escape, that I think I’ve known for a little while. Something shifted in the night. And there’s a trust that I finally acknowledged, even after I was so angry about something that doesn’t make sense now. Because it doesn’t make sense, what I’m feeling, what I won’t say I’m feeling but I know I am. And those feelings have settled into my stomach like a deep pit, waiting to consume whatever is left of me when it comes down to killing him.

In another life maybe we would’ve had a chance. But there is no other life, only this one, and we don’t get a chance to be happy, to be whole. It’s all gone. And it doesn’t matter what I feel, because that will be taken from me too. And maybe he thinks it’s an act, maybe he wants it to be, but there was something there, the same something that I feel. But there’s no use thinking of it now.

Beck opens the canister from the parachute. Inside there’s a lantern with a box of matches. A note falls to the ground from the lantern. I pick it up.

A new star.

I hand the note to Beck. It feels like it should belong to him, like it’s a secret message between him
and his mother, something to comfort him when he needs it. If he ever does need it. He seems to be holding up in here. I guess that’s to be expected though. He is a Career. He reads it and hands it back to me without a second thought.

“It’s yours.” He strikes the match and lights the lantern, leading the way down the tunnel. Grover follows. I read the note again and imagine the woman writing it. The woman with the green eyes that she shares with her son, the same son who’s my ally, who I’ve helped keep alive and who has done the same. And who I know I’m going to have to kill. And the note feels wrong. It feels too kind for the place we’re in. And I should burn the note, I should throw it away. It’s not supposed to be mine.

But I fold it and put it in my pocket anyway. And I follow after Grover down the tunnel.

“So you heard one of my family stories, what about yours?” Beck asks after a long silence. The tunnel is long and growing colder as we continue through it. I rub my arms to keep warm, the goose bumps rising with the chill.

We keep ourselves in a line as parts of the tunnel narrow and then open up again. Beck in front with the lantern in one hand, trident in the other, Grover in the middle, protected from whatever could attack, and me following from the back with my bow and arrows. There’s the occasional drip of water and the echoing sounds of our footsteps, but no sign of anything in the tunnel that would mean us harm. It would be a safe place to hide if we could hide, but I have to find Bas.

“I don’t really have any,” I try. It’s mostly stories of hunting or running through the woods beyond the fence, there’s a few of baking with my father, and playing in the Seam, but mostly things that I can’t exactly broadcast to the Capitol. Besides those, all I have are stories about my parents’ traumas, which again, are things I can’t say. There are a lot of stories I could tell, but I can’t.

“Your parents are probably the most famous Victors, you definitely have a story or like five,” Grover says with excitement in his voice.

“I don’t. So leave it!” I can hear the echo of my anger through the tunnel. And I didn’t mean to shout, but it happens anyway. I know I should apologize, I can’t really fault them for asking, but they should know better. Especially Beck. He knows what it’s like to grow up with the nightmares, with the trauma. He should know not to ask.

We stop walking and Beck faces me from the front of the line. The lantern casting shadows on the tunnel walls. His is a giant towering from behind him. And even as his voice is calm and kind, it seems threatening with the dark looming all around him.

“You don’t like to talk about them, do you?”

I shrug. “Not in here I don’t.”

“It’s not just in here. Do you hate them?”

“No.” And I don’t. But my voice is too defensive. Too cold. But I know I don’t hate them. I hate the situation more than anything.

“What is it?”

“Ivy, you don’t have to lie in here, you know?” Grover glances around, “There’s nothing more they can do to you. That’s what my aunt says.”

“I don’t hate them. I swear. I just don’t have any stories.”
“No, come on, what is it?” Beck asks and he’s persistent, like he needs to know or he wants someone else to know. He watches me with a force in his eyes that makes me feel like there’s a power in my words to erase whatever damage has been done.

And I want to believe I have that power or that someone does and someone can use it to change things. I sigh, relinquishing whatever doubts I have left. If I’m going to die, I might as well get it out. “Sometimes, I just…I don’t know. My mother. I don’t…” I try to find the words but I’m at a loss.

“You don’t know if she loves you.” Beck finishes and I’m relieved that I don’t have to be the one to say it. I can feel her watching me and I’m sorry. I wish she didn’t have to see it. That she didn’t have to hear it at all. And it’s the first time I’m telling someone else, someone who isn’t my brother, who told me that I could see it if I looked. And I remember the day I showed the Careers I could shoot and my mother was so worked up, so scared, and I thought I did see it. But she didn’t tell me she loved me before I left. Fleeting looks, fingers brushing through my hair, the occasional smile, it’s not something I can hold onto, it’s not tangible proof that she loves me.

“It’s stupid,” I try, but I’m given no relief.

“It’s complicated,” Grover says with a reassuring smile. “I don’t know if my mom loved me. Especially with everything that happened, I mean I don’t know. But I have my aunt and she doesn’t say it, because she’s well, you’ve met her. She’s complicated too. But she shows it. I think that’s how they say it when they can’t say it. You know, once I got in a fight at school, kids were bullying me and she told me what to do, how to hit them where it hurts. And if she didn’t love me I don’t think she would do that. And another time I couldn’t get to sleep, so she stayed up with me and she made me tea and she told me stories about before she was reaped and my mother and no one just stays awake with someone if they don’t love them. I don’t think it’s possible to do that if you don’t care. Not more than just putting up with someone, you know?”

I try to picture things my mother’s done with me. The times she’s come into my room when her nightmares have stopped, when she was sure I was asleep. She’d never say anything, but she’d watch me. And I know she’d end up in my brother’s room more often because he knew what to do. He knew how to care for her when she’d had those nightmares. But I didn’t know what to do so I would just stay in bed, pretending to be asleep. And eventually she stopped watching, but she would, and does, still check in. She taught me to hunt, but I don’t know if that’s love, if that’s anything more than teaching me to be able to survive.

She came for me in the cold back in Twelve. She wouldn’t do that if she didn’t care. But could I call that love? Could I call that anything other than just protecting people? She’s always protecting people. Why would I be any different? But she was so worried about me, so broken. But she loves Bas more, she can love him more. He isn’t the voice of the Capitol. He can see it because it’s true for him. How true can it be for me when I’m the one who caged her?

Maybe she wanted me in the arena. Maybe she’d be happy to finally be rid of me. But that sounds even more ridiculous to me than thinking she could love me. She cares, that much I know. But love? That I can’t decide whether to believe or not.

“This is going to sound weird, but who eats first at dinner?” Beck asks and I’m broken from my mind running circles around all the things my mother’s done.

“What?”

“Foods like important in Twelve, right?”

“Most people are starving in Twelve so yes.”
“So I’m assuming dinner is like a thing where you all sit and eat together.”

“Most meals actually.”

“Then who eats first?”

I try to picture our dinners. My father passing out the plates but that’s all I can see. I never took the time to notice, always just digging in once I had my plate. It seems so far away when we last ate together, though it was about a week ago when we were in the Capitol.

“I don’t know. My brother and me, I think.”

“And when does your mother eat?” He asks and his voice is steady, so serious that I try to understand the point but I just can’t see it. Then I remember the last time we ate together in Twelve. My mother waited. And it all clicks. She always waits until after my father. Until after the rest of us. She waits.

“Last.”

“And she grew up starving, yes?”

I nod.

“There’s your answer. She eats last.”

“How is that an answer?”

“Love is putting someone else first, especially someone else’s needs before your own. She eats last.” Beck shrugs like it’s obvious and I see it. I get it. And her coming for me in the cold makes that much more sense rather than just being protective of people.

And it’s the most reassuring thing I’ve ever heard in my life. She eats last. She loves me. And it’s definitive, something I can hold onto. She eats last. And I wish I could look into a camera for her to see me. For her to know I know and that she doesn’t have to say it. Because she’s complicated, like Grover said, and I get it now. And I’m so stupid for not getting it earlier. She eats last. And it’s so important that she does. That even without saying it, she shows it.

I stand there, feeling dumbfounded and struck all at once. She eats last. More pieces fall into place as I remember the same conversation back in the Capitol, when I had shown the Careers everything I could do. She told me how she gets through the day. How she lives with her choices and I was one of those. And I can’t remember all of the things she said, it feels so long ago now, but I remember that.

She eats last. And it’s something that can’t be taken away, an action that can’t be explained with a different reason. She eats last.

“Let’s keep moving. If this thing doesn’t open up somewhere it’s going to be a pain to backtrack and Bas’ll only get farther away.” Beck turns and the shadows disappear.

I nod, though I barely register the movement, and follow Grover as our line continues through the tunnel.

“Thank you,” I tell the both of them, even taking a moment to ruffle Grover’s hair. He doesn’t turn around but I can tell he’s smiling. How he manages to I’ll never know, but I’m glad he does. I’m glad Johanna was there for him. That he had someone to keep a smile on his face. He has the
type of face that needs a smile.

Katniss –

“You don’t know if she loves you.”

I’m vaguely aware of Effie’s hand on my shoulder and eyes turning towards me. And then I feel a shard of something sharp and biting in my chest, like a knife or an arrow piercing me. And I want to die, I want to fall into the Earth and disappear.

“You don’t know if she loves you.”

And it’s true. And I’ve done nothing to make that better. I couldn’t tell her when there was nothing left to lose, when she was leaving, when they were both going. And why is it so much harder with her than it is with my son? Why is telling her so difficult when he has never asked or never needed it said?

Why can’t I say it?

“You don’t know if she loves you.”

And the words bite and freeze like the night we laid out in the cold back in Twelve. When she almost died and I would have gone with her. And yet I couldn’t tell her. And it’s a thought that runs through me over and over. It has since they left.

And I don’t want to hear what comes next. What she says next. And it’s all a humming in my head until Beck mentions dinners back in Twelve.

“She eats last.”

It’s three words I hold onto just as Ivy does. Three words that hold as much weight as the ones I can’t say.

Effie’s grip on my shoulder tightens and loosens. And I finally turn to see the look in her eyes. It’s a mix of emotion, a tight nod, a small smile, but I feel a comfort. A relief that comes with the words and the reassuring squeeze of her hand on my shoulder.

Haymitch forced Peeta to get some sleep an hour ago. I’m glad he’s not here for once, because I don’t want him to hear these words. These words are for me and Ivy and us alone. Even with the Capitol, even with all of Panem hearing it, these words are for us.

“She eats last. She loves you.”

I catch the glance from Johanna and there’s something I could mistake for sympathy in her curt nod. But I don’t know if there’s any sympathy left in Johanna Mason. Even as her fingers twitch and pick at her chair as she watches Grover walk through the tunnel with a focus that puts all other mentors to shame.

“You can take your hand off her, she’s not gonna run anywhere,” Haymitch tells Effie and she pulls her hand away. I give Haymitch a small smile, which he returns. He leans over, “Not that it means anything but I’ve seen you with your girl and your boy, and it doesn’t matter what you don’t say. Anyone could see it.”

“She couldn’t,” I mumble.

“She can now.”
I watch the screens again, at her stunned reaction that I’m sure mirrors mine, and I want to wrap her in my arms, tell her I love her over and over again until she believes it, until all the wasted years without those words are gone.

But I’m stuck in my seat and she’s stuck in the arena and there’s no way to get to her. And the final pieces fall away, all the fear, all the time I’ve spent trying to mend what I broke, trying to save all the lives I’ve since ruined.

“I want them out,” I say and Haymitch nods silently, but he offers nothing else. He has to have something. He cares about my children too. He can’t just sit by while this happens. He has to be doing something.

But he stays quiet and even if I tore down the walls of the arena myself I’m not sure he would ever tell me his plan. If he even has one.

He has to have one.

I catch the slight shake of Finnick’s head, a warning for me to back off, and I listen. There is a plan. I know there is. And the shake, it tells me everything I need. I have to be smart, I have to trust them. I have to wait.

The fog turns into a mist as Bas and Springer stay beside their fire.

Bas digs into his pockets and produces some roots and plants he’s been eating. “Hungry?”

Springer nods and takes some of the roots. He hesitates to eat them.

“They’re not poison,” Bas says, “I wouldn’t do that.”

“Not on purpose,” Springer mutters.

“That was my father. He didn’t know the difference. I do.” Bas shrugs then looks around at nothing in particular, “Sorry dad.” I fight a smile. Peeta isn’t here but I know he’d smile too.

Springer takes a bite of the roots, grimacing but swallowing it down.

“They’re not great, but it’s something.” Bas eats some of his own.

“How much do you have left?” Springer asks.

“That’s it. It’s fine, I can find more.”

“Where?”

“By the river. At the edge. It looks like this.” Bas draws a small image of the root in the dirt by Springer. The older boy watches, scratching his nose as he studies every line Bas puts in the ground.

When he’s finished drawing Springer just nods. “I can find that.” He shifts back to lean against the cement wall holding the bridge up.

“Uh…you’re welcome.” Bas rolls his eyes and shrugs.

“What’s with your kids and politeness? Is that a Peeta thing?” Johanna asks as she passes us in route to find some food of her own at the banquet table.
I glance to the screen with Ivy, Grover, and Beck. They’re still walking, nothing to be concerned with, which is why I assume she picked now to get something to eat.

I shrug. She points from my screen to Bas.

“You two look frighteningly alike when you do that.” She turns away and busies herself in attempting to fill a plate. Though each time she goes to pick from the assortment she puts it back. Eventually she doesn’t take anything and heads back to her seat. She moves her chair closer to her screen, watching Grover like a sentry keeping guard. She hasn’t slept more than a few hours at a time. And each time she’s on the verge of passing out the other mentor from Seven forces himself to sit in her chair. She argues, she always argues, but she goes. Until she’s back less than two hours later with tired eyes and an even more annoyed sneer.

Haymitch heads to the banquet table and picks around in it. He seems to be looking for something but ultimately settles on a piece of bread. When he returns he drops onto the chair beside me, “How long are they gonna walk for?”

“Until they get to the other side,” Finnick says, his red eyes and messy hair making him look just as worn and terrified as the ones in the arena.

Haymitch smirks, “That could almost sound poetic if this turns ugly.”

“Haymitch,” Effie warns and I catch Johanna’s cold stare towards him.

He looks at her raised eyebrows and he relents. “I’m sorry, I’m just restless. Stifling quarters and all that. Maybe I’ll go check in to see if we can get some proper food sent out.” He stands and notices the Peacekeepers stiffen. They’ve been letting us come and go but lately they’ve been getting more and more nervous, like they’re waiting for something. Or waiting for one of us to crack and break down like the man from Ten. They almost pulled him out, but the other mentors kept him inside. They’ve been leaving once a day to get some air but always return to their rooms. They’re always questioned about their whereabouts or sent with an escort. Since the boy from Ten died on the tracks there’s been two additional Peacekeepers added.

Haymitch seems largely unshaken by the increased security and tension, “That is if I’m allowed to do my job. Or are we not allowed to do that anymore?”

“How long will you be gone?” One of the Peacekeeper’s asks.

“I’m not sure, depends on the sponsor. I’ll keep you posted.”

They let him pass without another question.

“I swear it’s like we’re prisoners,” Effie remarks, and it sounds like she’s unaware but a part of me knows better. Knows she’s keeping up appearances because she does know better. She knows that we are trapped here. We are prisoners.

And even when this is all over, I don’t think I’ll be allowed to go home.

“Katniss, the fog’s lifting.” Finnick points towards the screen with Bas.

“You should go,” Springer tells Bas after the fog fades. “Take two steps to the left and walk straight four steps then two to the right, you’ll be okay after that. No traps.”

“Maybe we could be allies,” Bas offers. “I can find something for us to eat. Something more than roots and plants.”
Springer shakes his head. “It’s better without them.”

“For who?” Bas asks.

“Everyone.” Springer picks up a wire and starts to bend and work it into the shapes he wants. “You don’t grieve when someone you don’t know dies. It’s better.”

Bas nods and his mouth forms a thin line on his face. I know he wants to say more, but he stops himself. He takes the two steps to the left and turns back to Springer, who wraps the wire around a piece of metal.

“Good luck.” Bas attempts but Springer ignores him. Or tries to, he stops working for a minute as Bas follows the directions away from the bridge. The river flows beside him as he travels upstream; the mist the fog has become now all but gone.

“Is there a way to tell them to go to the river?” I ask, pointing towards the screen with Ivy and the others.

“We could try to send them something, maybe a message they can figure out, but I don’t think the Gamemakers will allow us to tell them to go there.” Finnick twists his hands around and pulls at his hair, trying to come up with a solution.

I grab the absent space where my wedding ring used to be. It feels odd to have the band missing, the skin lighter where it once resided. And a part of me is almost glad I don’t have to wear it.

Peeta and I never had a toasting. It didn’t feel right given the Capitol glamor and the act that our wedding was. And as time went on it never felt like the right time or the right thing to do.

He brought it up once, after Ivy was born, but I came up with some excuse and he never asked again. Maybe he knew I didn’t really want it. That as long as we were playing these parts, as long as the cameras were always going to be a part of our lives, even if I did love him, something as intimate as a toasting wasn’t right.

If the Games were gone, if I had made different choices, if we hadn’t done our jobs so well, maybe it would have felt right.

“Send them water,” Effie suggests, shifting in her seat, her voice falling into a hush. “They already have some, they’ll realize it isn’t for drinking and they should put it together. Ivy’s smart and from the short time I’ve known your Beck he seems to be capable and resourceful as well. And Grover’s not unintelligent either. Between the three of them someone should get the message.”

She clears her throat and I catch the quiver of her hand again. She’s worried. Her eyes glance to the Peacekeepers and then to the door like she’s waiting for something to happen or for someone to walk in. And I think maybe she’s worried for Haymitch but I can’t be sure. They’re always at odds, always insulting the other or making some remark. I don’t understand why she’d be worried for him. He’s only visiting a sponsor, something she should be happy he’s doing. He hasn’t done so for our other tributes. She should be relieved he’s committed to being a mentor now.

I know I am. He helped me get through my Games, I’m glad he’s helping my children get through theirs.

“That could work,” Finnick says and looks to me for confirmation. I don’t know if water will be enough to let them know, if they’ll automatically think to find a source. I don’t know where the tunnel will let out, if it will let out anywhere. But I don’t have a better idea.

“Maybe fish too,” I add. “As soon as they come out whatever side they’re on.”
Finnick nods. “If we can get that too.”

Effie sighs. “Good. We have a plan.” And she glances back to the door again.

Ivy –

It feels like we’ve been traveling all day. I’m sure we have been traveling all day or at least most of the day. I lean against the walls of the cavern we’ve entered, the dripping water echoing all around. I’m concerned that it isn’t going to open up at the end, that it’s all just an endless darkness that’ll go on and on until we die.

Grover picks up a rock and throws it. It clatters down into the darkness away from the glowing light of the lantern. He does it a few more times and I wonder how anyone could find the time to play around in a dark tunnel, in an arena, in the middle of the Games.

“Let’s go,” Beck says in a huff as he pushes himself off from the boulder he’s been sitting on.

“Why don’t we just rest for a little longer?” Grover asks, brushing rock dust from his hands.

“We don’t have time. And we need to get out of here.” Beck eyes him like a reprimanding parent.

“I’m tired.”

“We’re all tired. But we’ve gotta find a way out.”

“What if there isn’t one?” Grover asks and it’s what we’re all afraid of. How much time have we wasted walking through here? How much more will we waste going back? What if we can’t find the way back? We’ve taken some turns, had to choose some tunnels, what if we’re stuck here?

“Then we turn back around.” Beck starts to move, leaving no more room for argument.

Grover grumbles but follows after him and I do the same. We climb over some rocks and pass through another narrow path.

It opens up and widens. We start to pass cross beams and supports holding it up. And whatever fear I had of the tunnel turning into a dead end is gone. It’s not a tunnel. It’s a mine. And a mine has an exit.

“Look for tracks, or an elevator shaft,” I say. Beck looks around confused. “It’s a mine. That means there’s a way out.”

“Are you sure?” Grover asks.

I nod. “I’m from Twelve. I know mines. Keep walking, we should see something soon.”

We pick up the pace, the hope giving us a second wind. There’s a way out. There has to be. Then there’s the distinct sound of a crack and the ground shakes. The dripping water turns into a steady stream as the sound fills the chamber.

“What is that?” I ask, though everyone’s in the dark like me. There’s another crack and then a rush of air followed by the sound of a wave. Beck grabs Grover and pushes him in front.

“Go,” Beck spits out as Grover starts running. He pulls me forward and I follow him as we do our best to find an exit.
A wall of water follows us, the mist from it hitting me as I stay ahead. It doesn’t burn, thankfully. It’s just water. Though just water is hardly a relief given the space we’re stuck in.

I keep on the lookout for any light, any promise of escape.

It crashes into us before anyone spots anything. I collide with the wall as the water takes us through the tunnel. I’m pulled under, struggling to find air, when I hit a wall of rock. I swim up the steadily rising tide, finding air and coughing out the water that went up my nose and into my throat. The lantern is out leaving nothing but darkness as I feel around.

It’s all stones fallen in. A collapse. And I have a vague recollection of something like this occurring in the mines of Twelve. The mine caved in, the tunnel took all the rock and coal down with it, killing five miners, including my Uncle Gale. But that memory is wiped as the water rises and I swim to keep my head above it. I hear another person breach the surface and two voices coughing.

“Beck!” I pull myself towards their sounds as a hand grabs me and pulls me closer. I can barely make out the two of them in the darkness.

Grover clings to the rocks as Beck treads water. It’s rising too fast. There’s no way out. It’s over.

A rock falls from Grover’s hands and he splashes into the flood. Beck pulls him upright, keeping him on the rock wall. There’s a small hole where the rock fell and Grover peers through it.

“There’s more tunnel. And I see light!”

“Grab the rocks,” Beck orders. We pull and claw at any rocks we can. They don’t budge and whatever we manage to remove is soon replaced with more gravel and sediment.

I dive under, trying to find the biggest rock, the one that’ll take all the others with it. I locate the large rock, feeling the pebbles loose around it. I try to pry it but it doesn’t move. I push at it, nudging it slightly inwards. But I have to swim back up for air before I can do anything.

“There’s a large rock underneath, if we can kick it loose the rest should move too,” I tell them. We get to work as the water continues to rise.

We work until we need air, which becomes less and less available as the space in the tunnel disappears. We don’t have much time and even as Beck and I push on the rock together, it won’t move.

Grover dives in as we rise up for air and I can’t see what he’s doing, but the wall budges, a few more rocks falling off it. He comes up for air.

“What did you do?” I ask.

“The big rock there’s dirt and stuff and small ones and I just…” he hits a knife against a rock and I get the message. Then he dives.

Beck and I dive too. Pushing on the rock and digging around it as Grover chips away around the smaller ones. For a second there’s hope as the rock groans and moves slightly, but other rocks fill in the spaces and I know it’s over.

We come up for air, an inch of tunnel left. I’m breathing heavily, it’s over. Beck seems to know this too.

“I’m sorry,” he says.
“For what?”

But he doesn’t answer. He pulls at the rocks on top, revealing a small hole of light and breathes in some clean air.

“I can hold my breath longer, give me the knife, maybe I can open a hole with it and my trident,” he offers, looking at the empty space beside him. Grover hasn’t resurfaced yet. We look around for him. Maybe he’s clinging to the rocks away from us.

“Grover,” I say, but he doesn’t answer.

The water fills the tunnel. I take a deep breath, knowing it’s my last. Beck and I dive, trying to find Grover.

I see him first, struggling to kick a rock, losing what’s left of his breath. I grab him, helping him kick. Beck takes the knife, stabbing at whatever space. He digs his trident into the ground, using the back end to provide leverage against the rock. All three of us do our best to make a final, valiant effort to survive.

I’m weak and losing my vision when I notice Grover stops moving. Beck still keeps pushing; a determination to him that I think is useless now. My hand finds his arm, the grip weak, but I have to hold onto someone as the water fills my lungs.

I close my eyes when the hole opens and the rock moves. We fall with the water, crashing through what’s left of the tunnel, out into the cool air.

The first thing I notice when I open my eyes is a sea of white and at first I think I’m dead. But the pounding in my ears as the pressure releases from my head is enough to confirm I’m alive. And I need to figure out where I am. There’s an open valley and white stone all around me. My stomach drops.

The quarry.

I cough up the water in my lungs. And I thought I was done with my lungs burning, guess not. It hurts much worse than when I was dehydrated and exhausted from running. This is a deep ache. Made all the worse by the cold air. I’m shivering and I know I’m going to need my jacket back. Although a wet jacket probably wouldn’t do much to keep the cold out. Still, I’ll need it back and we’ll need to find Grover a jacket of his own.

Beck sputters out the water in his lungs and takes a deep shaking breath. I look back at the mine behind us, the water still leaking out of it. We made it. Once again I’ve managed to escape death. I’m not sure why I’m so lucky, but right now, I’m glad I am. That we all are.

And then I see Grover on the ground, still not moving.

“Grover?” I crawl to him, but he doesn’t stir. Beck moves faster, standing and running to Grover’s side.

He checks his breath and tilts his head back, breathing air into the younger boy’s lungs. He pumps his chest and breathes again.

“Come on,” Beck repeats as he continues the motions. I rise, subtly checking the arrows on my back. Thankfully I didn’t lose any. I pick up Beck’s trident, forgotten as he works on Grover. I know I shouldn’t be concerned about the weapons, but right now, I need to be.

We’re too close to the cornucopia.
I watch Grover. His eyes are shut, his lips blue and the color in his cheeks is gone. And I know it even before the cannon goes off. The smiling boy from Seven is gone. The boy whose hair I just messed with an hour ago, the boy who told me about his aunt, who wasn’t afraid to tell the Capitol that they were responsible for his mother. He’s dead.

And I’m angry. And a part of me hopes that he will wake up, that by some miracle, he will get lucky and survive too. But life doesn’t work that way. And the arena is no place to believe in miracles.

Beck continues to work furiously, his words turning rough, harsh, and broken.

“Don’t do this! Wake up!” He hits Grover’s chest, hard enough to bruise, but the boy doesn’t wake.

Finally, the cannon sounds and Beck screams. And I see the tears start. And I wish I could cry, but only one of us can right now. One of us has to be the strong one.

I see Grover’s glasses to the side, droplets of water on the lenses, fogging them in the cold. My hands shake as I pick them up and wipe them off. I bend down and place them over his eyes, staring at the pale pallor of his skin. I brush the hair from his eyes.

Beck grips my hand as I pull it away from Grover’s face.

“I suggested the tunnel,” he whispers and I shake my head.

“It’s not your fault.” It’s theirs I want to say as the hovercraft descends. And I see the Mockingjay pin still on the jacket. And it’s not the symbol that’s important, it’s who its from. But I don’t want to take the jacket from Grover. I gave it to him, he needs to keep it. Even if I need it more right now as the cold descends and I start to shake.

Beck let’s go of me and I fumble to unhook the pin with an unsteady hand, pocketing it as the hovercraft waits. But Beck doesn’t move. He’s on his knees staring at the boy from Seven, the dust from the rock around us covering his pants, the water dripping from his hair, and he won’t move. He can’t move. His hands twist and circle each other, like he’s missing something.

And I know I need to move him. It isn’t safe here. We need to leave. But my eyes fall on Grover again and I can’t shake the memory of the smiling kid who was bright despite the Capitol and the Games. Who still smiled in spite of it all, who knew he was loved, who was able to joke.

And I think of Johanna back in the Capitol. How they fell in sync as they walked back before the interviews. How she loves him. And I can’t make Beck move. I can’t move.

Then I look up and see the Careers staring at us from the top of the quarry. And I know we have to. They stand like a pack of wolves who have just found a wounded deer. The hungry look in their eyes is all I need to justify what I know is going to happen.

“Beck.” I drop the trident with a clatter. Something in my tone snaps him out of it because he looks up at the top of the quarry too.

He grabs the trident and his grief turns to steel. I can feel the tension and anger rolling off of him in waves. My hands find an arrow and I load it.

I can see a small tree line above the slope of the hill from the quarry. We’re going to have to be fast. We have to survive. We have to kill.
There’s no other choice.

Beck eyes Minnow at the top and his knuckles whiten on the trident.

“Looks like we don’t need you anymore,” Stone says as he brings his machete down onto her neck.

The cannon sounds and her body, or rather what’s left of it, falls into the quarry, followed by her head. And Beck watches, the rage filling his eyes with a fury I’ve never seen before. It scares me, though I’m sure I have the same look. There’s something else taking over though. Whatever trepidation I had about killing August isn’t shared for the Careers. I want to kill them. And that thought scares me more than anything.

“Now,” Stone continues, “Let’s see if you made the right choice, Beck.”

“And if you’re really worth a 12,” Emery directs at me.

Beck and I start running as Cain throws a spear.

“There's no saving anything  
Now we're swallowing the shine of the sun  
There's no saving anything  
How we swallow the sun”

- Runaway – The National
The Arena: Survivors - Bas, Katniss, and Ivy

Chapter Summary

Bas faces a challenge in the arena. Katniss witnesses Johanna's reaction to her lost tribute. Ivy and Beck fight to survive the Careers.

The Arena: Survivors – Bas, Katniss, and Ivy

Bas –

Springer’s kind of a dick, but I can’t blame him for being so. This is the arena, it’s all about getting through and you have to choose how to do that in the best way that works for you. Being alone works best for him, it doesn’t for me.

I know Ivy’s alive but I don’t think I’m ever going to see her again. I’m not getting out of this thing. I know that too.

I just don’t want to go alone.

Maybe this line of thinking runs in our family, because even though my sister isn’t here I know she’s thinking the same thing. And if it were her or me lying on the ground I know I wouldn’t leave her, she wouldn’t leave me.

And we’d fight to the end to save the other.

I rinse off the welts in the river, the salt helping to heal the wounds. They’re still sore, but they don’t hurt as much as they did when I first got them. And they don’t hurt nearly as bad as seeing that little boy die on the tracks.

I can’t imagine what that boy’s father must feel, or his mother back home. I know Ivy plans to die for me, she plans to lose, but I don’t want to imagine what it’ll feel like if she succeeds in her plan.

I don’t think she’ll miss me as much as I’d miss her. No, that’s a lie I’m telling myself to feel better. She will miss me. They’ll all miss me. Whatever empty space I leave behind though, they’ll fill it. It’ll get better a lot quicker than it would with her.

Sometimes I think my mother loves her more than me, but I know that’s silly. She loves us both, in different ways, but we occupy her heart in an equal space.

I think she regrets how things are with Ivy, which is why it’ll hurt her more if Ivy dies instead of me.

And maybe that’s dark, maybe that’s too dark for this place, but I don’t care.

I hear a cannon and I crouch down. Who was it? Was it Ivy? Is she gone? Was it Springer? Callie?

It could have been anyone. It could have been anything that killed them. Hell, they could have fallen and that’s it. But I don’t want to hang around by the river any longer. I’m exposed and all I have is a knife.
It’s better than nothing, but it won’t do much in a fight against a sword or trident. Maybe if I had been faster at the cornucopia I could have grabbed something better. But I didn’t want to risk it. I wanted to put as much distance between myself and that place as possible. And maybe I should have looked for Ivy, but a part of me didn’t want her to find me.

I thought maybe it would be easier for her to win if I wasn’t there for her to save. But now I’m thinking that maybe it would be easier for her to win if I was there to help. Either way, she’s not here and I’m not with her. So we both have to fight on hoping to get to the other soon.

I pull on my jacket and make my way up river.

Then I hear another cannon and I’m frozen.

One could mean an accident or someone succumbing to the elements, one could mean anything. Two means someone’s attacking. Two means a fight. Two means Careers.

I haven’t seen any sign of the Career pack around here, but that doesn’t mean they’re not close. They could be picking off tributes as I stand here, trying to figure out where to go.

I turn around; maybe Springer will let me stay for a little longer. Or at the very least I can hang around by the bridge until the cannon’s stop. I take a swig of my water. I’ve been rationing it but it’s running out, I’ll need to find more soon.

I hear a hiss followed by a low growl as something moves in the mud at the banks of the river. And I’m supposed to be brave, right? I’m supposed to have a weapon. Be the son of the star-crossed lovers, the son of two victors. This is supposed to be easy. It’s supposed to be in my blood.

Bet the audience is really disappointed.

I can’t move as the mass in the mud continues to rise and I see a tail with spikes coming out of it. The hissing and growling gets louder and more guttural. What’s left of my water falls to the ground as I drop the canteen trying to put it back on my belt.

The mud mass opens its eyes. They’re red. Large and red. And then its massive jaw opens and it looks wide enough to swallow me whole. I can see what looks like a thousand razor sharp teeth all ready to tear me to shreds. It lets out aroad and I start to run while it chases me on all fours.

I have no idea what this muttation is. I catch a glimpse and see scales in the light as its claws dig into the ground and snaps it’s jaw at my legs. I barely manage to avoid the bite. Whatever this thing is, it’s going to kill me if I don’t outrun it. And it’s fast, so fast that I don’t think I can outrun it for very long.

I follow the river as the path winds and the tall grass thins out beside me. There’s nothing but a field and some sparse plants now. I don’t know where I am. The creature follows me and I cut upwards towards the field.

I feel the heat of the monster’s breath on the back of my arms. How big is this thing exactly? And I have to push myself to run faster. It’s too close.

I can’t maintain my speed as another bite almost catches my leg again and I jump to the side to avoid it. The creature turns but slows, trying to regain its speed, but I’m staying ahead of it easier now that I’ve changed directions. I do it again before the monster catches up and again I create a gap between us.
I run in zig zags, cutting in all directions, and it keeps me at a safe distance. But I’m not really safe from this thing. And I’m getting tired. And running like this works better than just a straight line but for how long? I need rocks, I need something to kill it or escape it. The knife isn’t going to help me right now.

I can barely make out the cornucopia as I race uphill. It’s so far away, farther away than I should be. And I’m running in the opposite direction of it, I’m running away not towards. It’s only getting smaller.

That’s not good. I’ve wanted to be close to it in case Ivy returned for supplies, but now I’m way off course.

I feel the mutt lunge and I dive out of the way. Sliding and cutting my leg on a rock. I roll as I face the creature head on. It stands tall on all fours, looking like a monster from a nightmare. Its jaw opens powerful and huge, the teeth ready to tear out my insides. Its red eyes stare me down hungry. It hisses and growls and my heart feels like it’s going to explode with how hard it’s beating in my throat.

The mutt swings its tail, the spikes heading straight for me, the scales almost glimmering in the sunlight, the mud dripping off of it. I force myself to move despite my injured leg. I try to run back towards the river, hoping maybe there’s something I can use down there. I can’t make it to the woods. And with my leg, now I’m too slow. Now, it’s catching up and I can’t zig zag. I’m doomed.

And then I see someone yelling at me, a girl. When I get closer I recognize her. Callie.

She throws a rock and I duck. I vaguely hear it connect with the mutt behind me but I keep running. It’s not slowing down and I can’t either.

“Run!” I shout, but I’m sure Callie was going to do that anyway. We’re side by side as we continue towards the river.

And when we reach where the river should be there’s a cliff and nowhere to go.

I hear the growling again and that horrible hissing. I pull my knife. I need a plan. I need a way to get out of this. I have to think.

I need to attack. Or make it attack. Make it charge.

And I have to be quick.

What was that thing that Uncle Gale used to tell me? A good trap is the one they never see.

“What do we do?” Callie asks.

I say nothing. I throw the knife, it hits the mutt’s leg. Even if I didn’t need the knife to actually land a blow that was a damn good shot.

It’s pissed as it charges us and I wait, letting it run at me.

“Don’t move,” I tell Callie, grabbing her arm as she’s about to sprint away. She’s fighting against my grip and I struggle to hold her in place, but I can’t risk her running and the mutt following her.

It gets closer and closer. When I smell its breath, the stench of the Capitol thick on it, Callie is screaming. I’m not sure why I’m not screaming too, but I’m not.
Maybe the audience won’t be disappointed after all. Maybe I am brave. Maybe I am like my parents and my sister.

It swings its claws, still charging, lunging. I push Callie out of the way and dive to the opposite side.

And that’s when I hear the third cannon go off.

Katniss –

Johanna stares. She does nothing but stare.

The cannon sounds and she just stares.

The room feels like it just got about ten degrees colder. And silent. There’s a silence, the same silence that follows a tribute’s death. But this silence is different, this silence feels like a weight.

And Johanna just stares. Her nails digging into the chair, staring at her screen. Finnick approaches her, his hand up, indicating he means her no harm but she doesn’t see it. She doesn’t move. She doesn’t look at him. She just stares.

He touches her shoulder and she keeps staring.

Then Caesar and Claudius are on the screen, and they’re talking and chatting like nothing happened, like it was an unfortunate accident. And they’re happy. Glad that Ivy and Beck escaped, their new favorites. The new, tragic romance they can’t stop talking about.

Grover’s name disappears in the graphics and the count of those remaining goes from thirteen to twelve. The boy from six collapsed from hunger an hour ago.

Peeta emerges from his room in a panic, his hair a mess, his eyes wild and red.

“I heard the cannon, what happened?” And he’s shaking. I stand to stop him, trying to reassure him as Johanna watches the grief on Beck’s face and Ivy returns Grover’s glasses.

“Grover,” I tell Peeta. But I can’t tell him how I had to watch Ivy almost die once again. How I thought about running from the room because I couldn’t bear to see it again. But I can’t. He’ll see the highlights. He’ll know, but I can’t tell him. I don’t know how to get the words out.

And the room is silent once more while everyone waits for Johanna to react, to do something, but there is nothing. It’s like she died too.

And then we’re back to Caesar and Claudius, because the Capitol won’t show grief, it won’t show tributes caring for each other. Ever since my Games, ever since Rue, they’ve been quick to spot it whenever it comes. The mentor’s see more before they cut. They let us see the humanity behind the killers.

For what reason I’ll never understand. Maybe to make it harder, maybe to drive home the point for next year. There’s no room for humanity and kindness in the arena.

“Johanna…” Finnick tries, attempting to coax her up out of her seat, to get her away. She doesn’t need to hear the Capitol treat Grover like he’s nothing. “Come on.”

She nods, resigned, standing stiffly and allowing herself to be guided out by Finnick.

“And with a mentor like Johanna Mason, I have to say I’m disappointed we didn’t see more from
Grover,” Caesar says through a wide smile.

“Well honestly I’m surprised he lasted as long as he did. I mean he was awfully clever, but he was by no means a Victor.” Claudius laughs.

He laughs and Johanna turns back to the screens. The empty stare is gone, replaced with one that’s dark and full of rage. Her nails dig into her palms and the tense wire she’s become is about to break. I can see the worry in Finnick’s eyes as he drops his hand from her shoulder.

The Peacekeepers stiffen too, the air around the room screams with a storm about to come.

But Haymitch enters and he reads the room and he knows. He just knows.

And he’s beside Johanna before anything happens, pulling her with him, practically dragging her. Effie jumps to attention, following them without being asked. And a door slams.

The room returns to normal, or as normal as it can be. Finnick stares after them glancing back to the screens and then down the hallway, a debate going through his mind. He finally sits back beside Annie, his hands twisting around each other.

And then I look over to the Careers and there’s a smugness, a collective excitement that they all share. All except for Gloss. Once again there’s something I can almost mistake for sympathy in his eyes before he pulls the mask on and plays the part.

I’m too caught up in watching the group to notice Peeta pushing past me in a rush. And when Annie screams I’m caught off guard, ready to fight whatever is attacking, my mind flashing back to a night in the arena when mutts chased me and Peeta.

I hear the cannon and I don’t know what I’m fighting, where I am. I’m reaching for a bow that I don’t have and Peeta’s arms are around me, telling me I’m safe and I’m back in the room again.

But he’s shaking and he isn’t looking at me and Annie is covering her ears and whimpering. And I don’t know what happened.

Finnick covers Annie’s ears with his hands, shielding her from something he can’t look away from. And Peeta is doing the same.

The screens, I remember, the screens. I have to watch. I’m supposed to do my job. I’m supposed to watch.

Finnick glances to River in sympathy but River gives him none in return. His face is steel, his eyes cold, full of blame. And he grabs Stone’s father by the throat, shoving him into the wall.

The Peacekeepers are on him before he kills the man.

They drag River out of the room. He fights and tries to break free, shouting at Stone’s father, blood running down his nose.

“You laughed!” River shouts. And there’s so much rage, so much hatred.

He looks at me then back to Stone’s father. Whatever he wants to say is cut off by the Peacekeeper hitting him with the barrel of his gun. They get him out of the room, the door shutting with finality.

And then we hear a gun shot. And Annie is screaming again. And I remember Twelve. The fire, the bodies, Ivy lying on the ground. I remember Cinna.
And I force myself to look at the screen.

“Peeta,” I choke out, my heart racing, gripping onto his arm as my knees threaten to give out. I’m terrified. They’re both running. Ivy and Bas. In separate parts of the arena, too far away to for me to help, too far away to find each other and save the other. Both running from enemies that will rip them from this world and take them away from me. And I can’t do anything. I can’t do a damn thing.

And I don’t know which one to watch, which one I want to watch. Wherever this ends, whoever is left standing, I don’t know if I can stand to watch the outcome.

I hear furniture crashing and glass breaking from another room. It’s followed by anguished screaming and I know Johanna has snapped.

I know I won’t be too far behind.

My children can only escape death so many times before it catches up to them.

And I remember Bas when he was born, so small, smaller than Ivy. My pregnancy with him had been easier. I wasn’t as sick with him. I wasn’t as tired.

I forgot that I wasn’t supposed to be happy and even when I was reminded; when I had to go mentor another year, pregnant with my son, the Capitol fawning over me, asking about Ivy, I forgot that I wasn’t supposed to feel anything.

The walls were easier to build and easier to break with him because I was so tired of fighting to build them with Ivy.

And in some respects I think I succeeded, in others I know I’ve failed, because if I had built them better I wouldn’t be half lying on the floor ready to break down right now. I wouldn’t need Peeta to keep me standing. To keep me watching.

If I had been stronger, I wouldn’t be here at all. No one would.

There’s no room for sympathy and emotion in the arena. But the truth is there’s no room for it in Panem. Not when you’re a victor. Not when the Capitol keeps a watch on you. You have to play by the rules if you want to live.

And right now, watching what my actions, what Peeta’s and my own words have brought, seeing where the rules have gotten us. I’m done playing.

Ivy –

The spear misses as Beck pulls me to the side, picking up his trident in the process. We start to run as fast as we can and I hear the hovercraft finally descend for Grover. Another follows for Minnow. They hold the Careers back for a moment, enough for us to get a good head start.

I’m breathless as the cold air cuts into my lungs. My head is still a little lightheaded from almost drowning and I’m sure I need to rest. But right now that isn’t an option.

I just hope I don’t pass out and make it easier on them.

I can hear Beck behind me as we run through the quarry. The dust kicks up around us from our boots and the hovercrafts. Over the noise I can hear Stone bark orders. They break off into pairs. Cain and Emery slide down the slope of the walls into the quarry to pursue us while Stone and Victoria follow from above.
The hovercrafts fly off. The Careers all laugh and shout as they hunt us.

But I’ve been trained to be the hunter, not the prey. And I will not fall to the Career pack.

I turn and fire a shot. The arrow strikes Emery’s leg and she drops. Cain keeps up the chase even as she screams in pain. And I can see the cold calculations going in his mind. He’ll leave her for dead. He’ll leave them all if it means he can win. If it means he can kill us.

He wants the glory. And there’s no fear, just pure desire for something I was never raised to want. And maybe for the first time ever I’m so grateful to have been born in Twelve, to have the parents I have, to have had the life I had. Because I was never brought up to believe that there was any honor in winning the Games. I knew what they meant.

For Cain they mean something else entirely. And it’s almost too frightening to understand.

“Get Emery, we’ll take care of them!” Stone shouts but Cain doesn’t stop. He throws a knife and I push Beck to the side, the knife managing to slice my arm as it passes. I’m bleeding and the pain runs through me like a shock, but it’s not that bad and I have to keep going. I have to survive. We have to survive.

And for a moment I wonder when I became we.

“You’re hurt,” Beck says breathless and he slows.

“No. Keep going.” And I grip his shoulder practically pulling him with me, some of my blood dripping onto his shirt. He keeps the pace and I drop my hand.

“Cain!” Stone shouts and Cain stops. Emery is struggling to stand, to keep up. Cain turns back, following his orders. His mouth a thin line, his eyes glaring after us, his shoulders rising and falling with each heavy breath he takes.

Two down. We can take the other two. It’ll be difficult but we can work with this.

We reach the end of the quarry and climb the slope towards the woods. And I’m so grateful to see trees instead of tall grass and endless shadow.

We push forward as Stone and Victoria arrive on our heels.

And it’s like I don’t need to tell Beck what to do, he just knows. He grabs a rock and throws it. Victoria breaks off to the side and they split up. We lose them in the trees and thickets. They struggle to keep up with us.

I half expect to see Victoria but she never appears.

And we keep running, Stone the final pursuer. He uses the machete to smash down the thickets, to cut through branches and keep us in his sights. We slow down, keeping up the chase. We have no other choice.

When we break into a clearing, I turn as Stone cuts through a branch. Despite the cut on my arm I manage to fire and the arrow hits his knee. He struggles to stay standing and I fire again. The second arrow finds his other knee with ease.

I duck. Beck throws the trident; I can feel it pass over me, the wind off of it moving my hair. Stone struggles to get back up, groaning and panting in pain, as the trident pierces his chest. The cannon booms instantly.
I stand without words. Beck pulls his trident from Stone and my arrows with it, handing them back to me. I can’t look at him. I can’t afford to feel guilty, but I take the arrows and put them back in the quiver.

The hovercraft starts to descend as Victoria enters the clearing from the opposite side, sword in hand. I fire an arrow and she avoids it. Beck and I run towards the east. We can’t go back towards the quarry, Cain might be on his way, and Victoria is good at keeping to the tree line. I can’t shoot her down.

And as a knife lands in a tree beside Beck, we know we’re in for a Hell of a fight with her when the woods run out.

And they do.

But we’re not in open space, we’re in the tall grass. And I’ll have just as hard a time firing an arrow at her in here as she will throwing a knife. And she has a sword, even with Beck’s trident, there’s no way he’ll see her with enough time to throw.

We have to keep running. We have to stay ahead of her.

“Victoria!” Cain calls from the tree line.

“Here!” She returns.

Great. Two of them. I didn’t hear another cannon so Emery must still be alive, but for how long I don’t know. They won’t deem her useful if she’s hurt, especially now that her district partner is gone. It doesn’t matter, if they take care of her that’s one less Career to worry about.

I can hear them pushing into the tall grass as Beck and I do the same. But we’re ahead enough that we have a chance. It’s a slim one, but a chance all the same.

But then there are footsteps near us and we freeze, crouching low. There are more voices, Cain and Victoria’s, followed by the sound of the grass being stomped through. It approaches and fades, sounding like it’s coming at us from all sides.

There’s the occasional sound of wings mixed in, but then it all stops.

“Ivy,” someone whispers, and I think it’s my mother’s voice. I’m wrong, I have to be wrong. I’m just tired. I’m exhausted and injured, she’s not here. I check my forearm, the cut still bleeds, but it has slowed. Still, I’ll need to wrap it.

We wait in the silence before standing to leave. We walk through the grass with sound seeming to fade and echo all over. I can’t help but feel like something is watching us, something other than the cameras and the audience. Something else.

“Beck,” Finnick’s voice says and Beck stops. I try to push him but he won’t move. “Beck!” And it’s Annie screaming and Beck won’t move.

I can hear more footsteps coming closer and we have to get out of here.

“Ivy!” Bas shouts and I look around for him, he’s close, he has to be. And I’m pushing towards the side looking for my brother when I make out Cain. I duck, pulling Beck with me as a bird flutters by Cain’s face.

He shouts, slicing at it with a machete, Stone’s machete I think. The bird is followed by three
more and he’s screaming.

I can only make out some of it. “You have to win! You’re from Two! You’re a Victor! Cain! You’re a Victor!”

I hear Victoria screaming further away followed by more fluttering. And I know what’s happening.


I grab Beck by the shoulders and pull him forward when the birds descend on us.

“I don’t want him to end up like me,” Finnick’s voice screams in Beck’s ears. “I don’t have a son,” another bird imitates. And Beck tries to keep going, tries to keep fighting. My hand finds his and I keep pulling him with me.

Then I hear my mother, “I can’t love her. I don’t love her.” I shake my head. It’s not true. She eats last. It’s not true. And I keep going.

A baby’s crying. My mother’s crying. My father’s crying. My brother’s screaming. My brother’s calling for me. My mother’s screaming from one of her nightmares. My father calls my mother’s name. My mother calls my aunts name.

Over and over it goes, the voices growing louder as we keep walking. And all I want to do is close my eyes and beg for it to stop but I have to keep us moving, we have to get out of here. I can hear the jabberjays surrounding Beck.

His mother screams. She calls Beck’s name. She tells him he’s doomed to die. That he’ll never be happy. He’ll never have a life. She’s dying because of him. He’s the reason his father is gone. She hopes he doesn’t win, he doesn’t come home. All things I know aren’t true. Fears he must keep to himself.

And then Grover calls his name. Tells him he wants to go home. And Beck drops his trident, his other hand barely holding onto mine. Even as I try to pull him, he can’t walk anymore. He can’t move.

“It’s not real!” I try but Beck shakes his head, his eyes red and watering.

“They copy. They copy,” he repeats.

“These ones are different.”

“How do you know…you can’t know.” He sounds like he’s about to break down and cry. I shake my head.

“I just do.” They can’t copy the dead. It’s not possible. Even if they had some words, they can’t do that. These are new. These are different. These jabberjays were made just for the tributes in here.

My jabberjays increase in their volume. My brother tells me he hopes I die. He hopes he wins. And then I hear Cinna tell me it’s my fault. And I hear laughter from a child and I shouldn’t, they couldn’t possibly have that. But they do. And I can’t move anymore either and I let go of Beck’s hand.

I turn towards him. And he hears waves crashing against shores and laughter of his own. And the laughter turns to screaming and more jabberjays join the frenzy. Every voice we’ve ever heard or
known. Every fear making its way into our ears.

“It’s not real!” I scream over it but neither one of us can keep going, can keep fighting this. The birds just keep flying around us. He falls to his knees as the jabberjays swoop in and continue their assault.

“Beck! It’s not real!” I try again as jabberjays do the same to me, trying to keep us separated. I fire at one, then another and I push towards him. The wings flap around me, the voices mixing together and one takes a bite out of my hand, but I keep pushing through them until I reach him.

“Beck!”

He won’t look at me. And I hear the child laughing again. I hear gunshots. I hear the Capitol chanting and then my mother screaming the worst I’ve ever heard. I won’t last much longer. I have to fight through the fear, through the flashbacks I know are threatening me. One of us has to be functional when the jabberjays disappear. And I already know it’s not going to be me. And I do the only thing I can think to do. The only thing I know he would recognize.

I shove my hands over his ears and block out the noise, dropping to my knees in front of him. And I close my eyes as the jabberjays fly around me echoing the screams of my family and friends.

“You’re going to die here,” a voice I don’t recognize says. And it chills me more than the cold around us.

“Help us!” All of Twelve seems to scream.

“Ivy!” Bas repeats over and over. “Help!”

And I’m losing myself to this. But I need to keep Beck safe and my hands push harder on his ears. He can’t hear any of this even if it’s no longer for him to be tormented by.

Beck’s hands find mine and he watches me, the expression curious and grateful all at once. He’s coming down from the voices and he sees me. He recognizes me as another scream rips by my ears. I’m going to come undone soon. I can feel it in my shaking fingers, my weighted body. This torture is working.

I focus on his eyes. I focus and think of home as the jabberjays continue. And I can barely feel anything. I can’t remember anything but the green before his hands land on my ears and the sound around me is gone.

It’s just my breathing, just mine and his, and his eyes to keep me from losing my mind.

And we stay like that until the jabberjays fly away. Surviving to fight another day.

“And I'll never go home again (place the call, feel it start) Favorite friend (and nothing’s wrong when nothing’s true) I live in a hologram with you”

- Buzzcut Season – Lorde
Ivy and Beck recover after the Jabberjays while Bas finds an ally.

The Arena: Homesick – Ivy and Bas

Ivy –

It feels like hours by the time we get out of the tall grass and find our way into the open field. The sun is setting as we push ourselves into the woods. We’re exhausted and I can feel the cold starting to set into me. I rub my hands along my arms, trying to warm them up. And I remember my jacket, gone with Grover, and I should have taken it back. The arena is no place for mourning and no place to be sentimental.

But I am mourning and I am sentimental. I turn the pin inside the pocket of my pants to remind myself that it’s there. The chill runs up my spine and my breath clouds in the air. We come to a stop, we can’t go on anymore.

It’s safe to light a fire, or safer than it was before. Cain and Victoria are probably still recovering from the jabberjays and reuniting with Emery. At least, that’s what I hope. We set the brush silently and I get to work lighting it. It sparks and burns easily, the warmth seeping into my skin as wood is added, but it’s not enough. And we need something to eat.

Beck keeps watch as I leave the camp in search of game. We haven’t spoken since the jabberjays. I don’t know what to say and neither does he. I heard some of his fears, he heard mine, there’s not much we can offer the other, not without talking about things we can’t tell the people of Panem.

I see a rabbit and load my bow. I fire, the arrow misses and I curse under my breath as the rabbit hops away. The sun continues to fade and darkness sweeps over the woods. I feel lightheaded and exhausted, but we need something to eat and we need it fast. I won’t be able to find anything in the dark and it isn’t safe for me to do so either. I retrieve the arrow and keep going, careful to make sure I can still see the light of our fire. I don’t want to be out here on my own if something attacks, or leave Beck behind if something comes for him. Or someone, it could be a someone too, I remind myself.

I find the rabbit and fire once more, the cut on my forearm starts bleeding again as the arrow finds its mark. I breathe a sigh of relief and pick up my kill. It’s not enough to keep both of us full, but it’s better than nothing.

It’s dark as I find my way back to camp, my arm stinging from the cut and the cold. I shiver, my breath misting in the air, my exposed skin growing numb. I step on a stick when I walk into camp. Beck turns quickly, trident raised. He lowers it when he sees me in the light.

“Sorry.” I carry the rabbit towards the fire and get to work cleaning it. I’m not the best when it comes to cleaning food, especially food that I’ve caught. Bas was always better with a knife than
me. Usually I just handed anything I caught over to him and he would take care of the rest, I always end up leaving some fur or skin behind and then it burns. I take my time with the rabbit, making sure I get everything, I don’t want to look like a failure in the arena.

“You should wrap that,” Beck says, indicating my arm.

“I will. We need to eat first.”

“I don’t really want your blood all over my food,” he says quietly. It’s a joke but its flat, broken. And when I meet his eyes the light is gone. There’s a concern he’s attempting to mask underneath the practiced even tone, but for all his practice and perfection, it’s gone now. Gone just like Grover.

He wants to help me. I have to let him help me. He needs it. And my arm does hurt and it would be difficult for me to wrap it myself. I nod, forgetting the rabbit for a moment as he produces some cloth from his pocket.

“Where’d you get that?” I ask, it’s the color of our shirts but there’s no pieces missing from either one of ours.

“When I took out the arrows, I cut some…I didn’t take any of the blood,” he scrunches his nose, that didn’t come out right. And I can tell what he means. He took the cloth from Stone. I recall the words he said when he showed me Trina and Augusts’ canteens. ‘They weren’t using them.’ And at the time it was cold, it was survival at any cost, and I understand it more now. We take what we need from those that don’t, because it’s how we get through this. And there’s no more room for regret, for remorse, not when we won’t be shown any.

And I know the time is soon coming when we’ll have to split up, when it’ll be me against him, and I’ll have to take what I need from him to survive. Will I be able to put away the remorse then? Will I be able to live without regret of it?

I move closer to the fire, the numbness leaving me as a piece of wood cracks and sparks. Beck is slow as he sits beside me, taking my arm into his hands.

I can’t watch him as he pours some water on my wound, cleaning it. It stings and I flinch. He wraps my arm, careful not to touch the cut or cause me any more pain. He’s gentle, his breathing quiet, calm, even as his fingers work to keep the cloth in place.

“It’s not too deep. That’s good,” he mumbles.

And then we’re quiet, the only sound the fire and the slight breeze rustling the trees and the leaves on the ground. I do my best to avoid looking at Beck as he works but I can feel him watching me, checking for a sign of pain and I can’t help but look at him.

He finishes by tying a small knot and brushes his thumb over the bandage. “Done.”

“Thanks.”

He holds my gaze and we’re quiet again. It was easy to talk to each other before, to fill this silence, but now, after Grover, after we’ve been brought right back into the horror of these games there’s nothing more to say. But I can’t take the silence, I have to break it. “You’re good at that.”

He shrugs, moving to sit beside me near the fire, the moment over. “I’ve had my fair share of cuts and bruises over the years. And my mother is really good at taking care of them. So I learned from the best.”
“My mom’s pretty good at it too. She doesn’t think she is, mostly because my aunt is, but she is. At least with me.” I smile, remembering times when I was learning to shoot and had cut hands from the bow string and bruised knees from playing at school. And she never said much but she took care of them and I was on my way.

My father liked to distract me whenever I was hurt, but his worried eyes usually made me feel like it was worse than it was. My mother just fixed me up in the best way she could and that was it. No talking, no distraction, just stopping the hurt and letting me go.

And I think of the nights I heard her scream in terror, of when my father wouldn’t sleep and I could hear him downstairs hard at work painting something he would never show me. And I’ve seen death and destruction and I’ve killed just like they have. And I know the nightmares that haunt them, know what it’s like to see the things that they’ve seen. And now I’m just like them.

“I never wanted to know what it was like,” I mutter, my voice small, like the thought is escaping me and Beck’s eyes find mine.

“What?”

I indicate everything around us. The fake sky, the trees, the arena. “This. I never wanted to understand them.”

He nods, turning back to look at the ground before half whispering, half mumbling, “Me neither.”

I stare at the fire, watching the flames lick at dark wood, destroying brush and dead leaves, ash left in its wake. Shadows dance across Beck’s face, his mind far away, lost in his own thoughts.

“What was it like?” Beck asks, dredging himself from whatever memory he’s in. “You know, with the cameras, and your family.” And I wonder if some small part of him is imagining life if Finnick were named his father. Wondering what it would be like if he had grown up being the progeny of a famous victor, famous just for his name, the nation knowing it just as much as they know mine. And in a way the country does know his name, knows his mothers, but it’s not the same as what it could have been. He could have had the interviews every year, the fans that watch him, the whispers, a nickname like mine.

I wonder if he’s glad Panem thinks of him as just a fatherless child with a crazed victor mother.

I shrug. “It just…was.” And I know it’s not much of an answer but I don’t really have one to give. Beck watches me, awaiting a more specific response.

I sigh, “You get used to the cameras. You don’t get used to people recognizing you. I mean, I haven’t. I guess you could get used to it. I don’t think I could. But, I never left twelve before now, and they all know my name. I’m not used to it.” I shake my head, I’m rambling.

“But the cameras, they’re not always there. And then it’s just us. My brother and I, you know we go to school. My dad has the bakery, sometimes we help. My mother, she does what she does.” I smile, I can’t exactly say she hunts, but it’s not a big secret. “Typical family stuff. They try to keep us grounded, don’t want our heads to get too big.”

I smile; playing it off, the glory of the Capitol has given me and my family this life. I have to be grateful for it, love the cameras, love the fame, love the Capitol, that’s who I have to be. The Princess of Panem.

I hate that nickname but it’s one I have to live with.

I can’t tell the truth. I can’t say all the other stuff, the things I hate, the truth. My parents are still in
the Capitol and President Snow is watching, always watching. I can’t make them pay for what I say and I’m sure it’ll happen. I know it will. I’ve seen the attack in Twelve when even the symbol for the mockingjay reappeared. I can’t tell the truth now. I can’t say how much the games cost, what the Capitol takes, not when they can harm the family I love.

They could even take it out on Bas while we are in here, and we both said we didn’t care long ago in training, we both said what’s the worst they could do. But they’re doing it, they’re keeping us apart and I can feel it just as surely as I can feel the cold.

And I need to find my brother.

“I used to watch them you know,” he adds after a long silence.

“What?”

“Your interviews. I watched them every time they aired, even when they re-aired them.”

“Why?” I ask and my voice is barely above a whisper.

He watches the ground, avoiding my gaze as he opens and closes his mouth trying to form an answer. It’s the first time I’ve seen him genuinely nervous, or at least the first time I’m sure he’s nervous. And there’s a flutter in my heart and stomach and I’m nervous too.

And I wonder if the people watching are enjoying this.

He clears his throat and his voice evens out, steady, purposeful, “Was it difficult, having your parents away every year?”

The moment’s over, I shrug, putting on the princess mask all over again, “You get used to it, like everything else. I mean I don’t think it’s fair to expect my parents not to enjoy their fame. And it’s not like we were alone, there’s my aunt, my grandmother, my uncles, Haymitch and Effie. Although they usually go with my parents but Haymitch is around during the year too. He’s family. I imagine when you’re a victor you’re close with the others from your district.”

A part of me hates how easy it is to pretend, how calmly I can say they enjoy their fame when I know the truth.

He nods. “One of my mother’s mentors, Mags, she was kind of like a grandmother to me. She used to teach me how to make fish hooks and then we would go to the beach. Sometimes my mom would come but whenever she wasn’t feeling well, it was me and Mags. Until she died.”

“I’m sorry.”

He sucks in a breath staving off whatever emotion is creeping up on him and his voice wavers when he speaks, “But you must have gotten lonely.”

“I had Bas. And sometimes I like being alone.”

He throws a stick into the fire and it sparks up. And there’s another question I want to ask, but I know I can’t. I want to know more about his life with his family, about what it was like for him to grow up with Finnick. But I have to be tactful about it. And it’s a dangerous game this conversation, and I can’t sow seeds I shouldn’t sow, but there’s a part of me that has to know, that has to ask.

“Finnick was your mother’s mentor too, right?” I ask and the wording comes effortlessly to me. Beck straightens involuntarily at the mention of Finnick but he pulls himself together, controlling
his movements like he controls everything else. His eyes find mine and he plays the game with me.

“He was. The great Finnick Odair. He got my mother through the games. I guess I kind of owe him my life, which I expect to pay back with a victory.” He smirks and it’s a smirk fit for a victor, it’s the smirk that’s going to earn him the love of the Capitol if he wins.

Hell, it’s probably earned him that love now. And I remember a stranger’s hands on my arm, a Capitol accent and the uneasy feeling that came with it. They’ll take and take from Beck if he wins, they’ll take until there’s nothing left. Just like his father. And I know the stories, I’ve heard the whispers from my mother and father, from Haymitch when he was drunk and didn’t realize the stories he was telling. And it’ll happen to Beck, it’ll happen to me if I win.

Maybe it’s better if we both die in here.

“You’re not gonna win, though you’ll put in a good effort,” I remark, trying to tease him but inside I’m twisted up at the memories of screaming Capitol citizens staring and leering, their faces hungry and vicious. I clear my throat, “What was that like though, seeing him, growing up around him?”

He shrugs and his voice remains that steady aloofness he’s perfected, “He used to take me sailing, showed me how to tie the best knots, throw a trident, which I don’t think he was supposed to do but who cares,” he continues and his voice falls, the tone changes, and he’s lost in memory. And in being lost he’s not the Career, he’s the boy from Four who had a loving family he can’t talk about, “he took me to the beach a few times too.”

And then he pulls it back again, swallowing hard as he says, “But sometimes I think he just liked to hang around the son of the Mad Girl from Four to make himself look better to his… companions.”

There’s a hardness in Beck’s eyes that sells the words and he can’t mean them, I know he can’t mean them, but he’s so convincing. And I know he has to be. Just as I have to be and he’s asking me to continue the game, to sell the moment too. So I swallow down my own rising emotions and shrug.

“I wouldn’t put it past him.”

“Me neither.” He lets out a breathy, forced laugh and I wish I could fix all of this, everything, make it as it should be.

“What was your mother like?” I ask. “I mean I know she was good at patching up wounds and she told you to count the stars but what else?”

“Why do you care?” His words are biting and harsher than I feel they need to be.

“I’m just curious.”

“Don’t be.” He stands then and he’s angry, annoyed and the fire makes his shadow loom over the ground.

“You were curious about my family.”

“My mother is not for you or for anyone to ridicule.” And he’s losing it and he needs to pull himself back together, he can’t lose it in here, not when we need to survive, not when our families are still in the Capitol and in harms way.
“I’m not. I wouldn’t. Do you really think I would do that?” I ask and I’m genuinely hurt. “Is that what you were doing when you asked about my mother?”

“No. I just wanted to know about…I just…you didn’t know if she cared.”

“And I know your mother cares, that’s not why I’m asking, I just want to know…”

“About the mad victor from Four and her bastard son?”

I shake my head and I’m standing too, I put my hand on his arm and he stops pacing. “I’m sorry I asked. I didn’t intend to make it seem like…I’m sorry.”

He softens and I drop my hand. “I’m sorry,” he responds. “Sometimes I can’t tell.”

I nod, “Well you should get better at it.”

The smirk returns but fades, “I heard her voice in the jabberjays.”

“I heard my mother too. It’s been a hard day.”

And then I remember Johanna and how she’s still in the Capitol and how she had to watch Grover drown.

Beck seems to figure out what I’m thinking because he stares at his hands and they twist around each other, “For Johanna most of all.”

“There was nothing you could have done.” My hand finds his shoulder, the bandage almost staring at me as Beck refuses to look up. I catch sight of the shell necklace, half hidden beneath his shirt. “Did your mother make that?”

He follows what I’m indicating and fights a smile. He sucks in a breath, “She said it was how we always stay together. No matter how far we are.” Then he adds, almost too quiet for me to hear, “I want to go home.”

I stare at the fire for a long time before I nod. His hand finds mine still resting on his shoulder and he leans into the touch. And I should pull away, I should end this, but I need it just as much as he does right now.

I turn the mockingjay pin in my other hand and I want to go home. I want to be back in my room, back in my woods, back in Twelve.

We hear the sound of the parachute and look up. It drifts before landing in front of our feet. Beck picks it up and opens it. And my hand feels colder without his holding it but I try my best to ignore the fleeting feeling.

He stares at the contents, his eyes watering, on the verge of tears, and in the light of the fire they look like glass about to break.

“What is it?” I ask.

“A compass,” he says, his voice cracking on the last syllable. He removes the piece from inside the parachute. It’s gold, just like my pin, but it’s weathered, the chain eroded and bronzed. He points it around, finding north and he smiles. “Mags,” he forces out, and I know he means Finnick, before he continues, “She said it was the only way to find home, that no matter where I was, it would lead me where I needed to go.” He clutches the compass to his chest. He looks up to the night sky, grateful to whoever sent it. I wonder if it means more, especially after the words he
said about his father. I wonder if it means Finnick knows Beck didn’t mean them.

I notice a small vial fall out of the parachute. “There’s something else.” I grab the vial, holding it to the light of the fire. “Water?”

I open it and smell it, it’s not medicine, but why so small an amount. I take a taste, just one drop and the salt hits me. I spit it out. “Salt water. Why would they send us salt water?”

Beck shrugs, then takes a second look at the compass. “Find my way home.”

“What?”

Maybe the compass wasn’t just for me.”

I think. Why salt water? Why that little piece of a larger puzzle and surely Haymitch sent that. But then it has to be a message. There has to be a reason. “Salt water. What’s made of salt water in the arena?”

“The lake.”

“And the river.” I perk up, my mind turning, the message getting clearer the more I think about it. “And where would Bas hide out? Not by the lake. But where he could know which direction he was going and still be safe.”

“It runs through the center of the arena, you’d have to pass it eventually regardless of where you were.”

“He’s by the river.”

“That’s miles though.”

“But it’s better than what we were doing which is searching blindly.”

Beck nods. “Then tomorrow we head for the river, we’ll go up stream then downstream until we find him.”

I breathe a sigh of relief and my stomach growls. “But first we eat.” I turn back towards the forgotten rabbit.

“Yes, that would be great,” Beck says, his voice lighter. He picks up his trident and patrols the area as I finish cooking the rabbit.

“Bas hates rabbit,” I add quietly, remembering his scowling face whenever we had rabbit for dinner. I have to stop myself from laughing.

“Then good thing this one’s for us.”

And I can’t help but smile even though we’ve both just been through Hell. I have hope. I have a plan. I have a place where I’m likely to find my brother.

And then the anthem starts and the sky shows us the faces of the dead. Stone’s face is the first and I stare hard at it. Minnow’s face follows and Beck clutches the compass tighter, his knuckles turning white. Grover’s face appears and I can’t look. I have to close my eyes. And I don’t care if it makes me look weak, not in this moment. Not when I remember his glasses on the ground, his pale face, and the last smile I ever saw on him.

When it’s over I open my eyes and turn to Beck. He looks shaken, the color gone from his cheeks
but he holds it together, turning the compass in his hand.

“I’m sorry about Minnow,” I say.

He pulls the mask on in what feels like an eternity of silence before finally saying in a hard voice, “She made her choice.” Then, he resumes his patrol and I resume cooking the rabbit.

We eat and it’s not much but it’s enough to keep us going. I take the first watch. I don’t plan on sleeping tonight. Not after what I heard from the jabberjays, not when I know what nightmares will come from that and I’m not sure Beck does either, but he tries.

I sit against a tree, my eyes glancing around as the stars shine above us and the fire dies down. It’s easier to see in the dark, even though it’s cold. It’s a down side I’ll have to deal with, a down side I’m worried is going to get worse without my jacket.

I wonder what the Capitol must be thinking now that we’ve killed Stone, we’ve taken out a Career. I wonder if they’re clamoring to sponsor us now. Although, if they were I’m sure we’d have been sent a meal instead of having to find our own rabbit.

But maybe our families are working on it, maybe food isn’t the priority. I can hunt after all.

There’s nothing for me to do but stare at the sky and I’m growing tired, but my watch hasn’t ended yet. I shift in my seat, my legs falling asleep. I keep playing with the pin in my hand, my bow beside me, ready to be picked up at a moment’s notice. I braid and rebraid my hair, but even that gets boring. And then I just sit and stare again, fighting off sleep.

I remember the few times I’ve ever heard my mother sing. And they’re rare occasions, one’s in which we’re all alone in the woods and there’s no one but the mockingjays to hear. And me, but I don’t think she cares that I’m there at that point.

She’s never sung directly to me, at least, not that I can remember. But I do remember the mockingjays getting quiet when she sang. Some of them copying, some just listening. And I remember wishing she would sing more often, even if it was never to me.

Sometimes I imagine her singing to me whenever I can’t sleep. In the times when she wakes and checks on me in my room, I imagine she sings me to sleep. And it works almost every time. And I drift off feeling at peace.

I only wish it were real.

The songs are real though. And it’s too quiet right now and I’m about to fall asleep, I have to stay awake.

So I do the only thing that’ll keep me awake. I start to sing.

“Are you, are you, coming to the tree? They strung up a man they say who murdered three. Strange things did happen here, no stranger would it be, if we met at midnight in the hanging tree.”

The night goes on and I watch the stars as I keep singing all the way through to the end of the song.

And then I fall silent.

“That’s a sad song,” Beck says from where he lies on the ground. I jump at his voice then settle back down.
“I’m sorry I didn’t mean to wake you,” I tell him.

“You didn’t. What’s the song called?”

“The hanging tree.” I can’t bring myself to look at him, and to be honest, I’m kind of embarrassed. I’m not the best singer.

“So the man dies? And his love, does she escape?” He asks.

“I don’t know.”

“Why?”

“I never asked my mom when she sang it.”

“It’s sad,” Beck repeats.

“It depends on how you look at it.” And now I risk a glance at him. He’s staring at me and there’s something in the way he looks, something that’s struck a chord in him and I can’t explain what I’m seeing, just that it’s something new. And I don’t look away from him.

I’m briefly taken aback before I continue, “I like to think of it as a love song. He loves this person so much that they have this tree devoted to them. And maybe he’s dead, maybe he isn’t, but she can visit him. They have a place.”

“I don’t know how you can look at it like that.”

“How do you look at it?” I ask.

“Maybe death isn’t the worst thing to happen to two people,” his voice is dark and solemn before he perks up, “But I wouldn’t know I’ve only heard it once.”

He smirks and his eyes find mine, and he’s half sitting now, his shoulder half shrugging.

“Do you want me to sing it again?” I ask and I’m almost amused by it.

He lies back down, “If you feel like you have to.”

“I think maybe I should sleep, or try to. It’s your turn for watch,” I lie down, a smile crawling its way across my face. I hear Beck sigh as he sits up.

“Fine, Twelve, but you owe me a song.”

“And you owe me a meal, Four,” I grumble as I turn my back to him, rubbing my arms to keep the cold away.

“If you can find fish, I’ll eat it.”

“Then I’ll check the river when we get there.” I can hear him pacing around, twirling the trident in one hand, playing with the compass in the other.

“Sounds like a plan,” I say, closing my eyes, and I feel very tired even when I thought I wasn’t. I can feel the exhaustion, the weight of sleep pressing on me. And it comes easily even as Beck moves around me.
Then something with weight but not heavy enough to be threatening is placed onto me. I can feel the lining and the warmth spreading through me. I don’t open my eyes, too tired to even try but I know it’s his jacket. And I worry he’s going to get cold but I feel the heaviness of sleep stopping me from arguing.

“Goodnight, Ivy,” Beck says quietly, barely above a whisper and I drift off to a dreamless and warm sleep.

Bas –

The anthem finishes as I huddle into my jacket. I didn’t want to risk lighting a fire so far away from cover and in the dark it burns all the brighter. We can’t be sure who’s around, who might try to kill us, though Callie might be about to kill me in a few seconds.

She stares at me, she’s pissed, and has been since the mutt fell off the side of the cliff.

“I’m sor—“

“I don’t want to hear it,” she says in a huff. “You could’ve gotten me killed.”

“But I didn’t,” I try and I shake my head, that was rude, “I really am sorry. It was the only way to make it keep charging. I should have told you but everything was happening so fast and I didn’t want to risk you running for it. It could have chased after you. I’m sorry.”

She nods, mulling over my words and even in the dark I can see the creases on her forehead as she thinks. Eventually she relaxes, “It’s okay, we’re still alive, that’s what matters I guess.”

I let out a breath. “You’ve been on your own this whole time?”

She shakes her head, “Teddy went to find food before I saw you. We have a plan if we get separated, so…we’ll go find him in the morning.”

“You and Teddy are friends?”

She shrugs, “We’re kind of the only two kids of Victors in our district, well who are still alive, so we stick together, you have to.”

“You don’t have any other friends?”

“No. It’s just…they don’t…they look at you differently, because you are different.”

I stare at the ground, she isn’t wrong. It’s not that I don’t talk to other kids in school, not that I don’t hang out with them on occasion, I have friends. But they don’t understand what it means to be a child of a Victor. They look at you and they see your parents’ accomplishments, the wealth they’ve earned, they don’t understand the cost. They say you’re lucky to be who you are, and I don’t know how true that is, but I know I wouldn’t trade my family for the world. I wouldn’t trade them to win these Games.

“Yeah, I guess growing up in front of cameras does tend to alienate you.”

“Well I wouldn’t know anything about that,” Callie says, “but I can see how it might make things a little more…difficult.”

“They like to make comparisons, don’t they?” I ask. “At least that what it’s always seemed like.”

Callie nods, “They love to decide who you’re more like, everyone does.”
“Did you know Ivy can draw? No one ever asks about that, and she doesn’t think she’s very good, but she can draw. I can paint, I’ve spent more time on it, but she’s not bad. And I can shoot an arrow, I can hit a target, I’m just not as good as her.” I don’t know why I’m saying all these things, why it matters that I say them, but it’s all spilling out, all the things no one ever sees or knows.

“So why didn’t you want a bow in here?” She asks. “Or were you not fast enough to grab one.”

“You really think I’d go for it, it was in the middle of the cornucopia, bad plan.” I’m joking but I know one person who would go for it, my sister, she would have taken the risk. I know she’s still alive. I’m constantly thanking my lucky stars that she’s still alive. But I don’t know for how much longer, Hell, I don’t know how much longer I’ll be alive.

I don’t even know if I’ll see her again, though I keep searching, and I keep sticking to the river. The very river that I need to get back to once the sun rises.

“Then what’s your point, you can shoot an arrow, she can draw. Good for you both, doesn’t change the fact that you’re in here.”

I shrug, “I’m just saying, we aren’t the sum of one of our parents, we’re different things, different skills, we’re our own people.”

“I never really knew my dad, he was the victor, and my mom, she died shortly after I was born. Dad kind of just left. So I was on my own, I never really wanted to be like either one of them. But Teddi, his mother, she won, and she’s…kind, so kind, and gentle despite everything. And his father, he does everything he can to take care of her when she needs it. Teddi, he’s a good person, his family is good. They’re kind of my family too I guess. He’s strong, but I don’t think he’s going to get to go home.” She takes a deep breath and it makes her shudder, “I never wanted to be like my dad and here I am in an arena just like him. Only I don’t think I’m going home either.”

“Don’t say that, you don’t know…”

“I do. Because if your sister is anything like your mother or your father, even so much as a fraction, and we both know she is, she’s going to make sure you get to go home.”

“I don’t want her to,” I admit.

“We don’t always get what we want. Case in point,” Callie says indicating the arena around us. And we’re talking too openly about this but I want the world to hear it, I want the Capitol to hear it, I want my parents to hear it. I want them to fight, I want them to make everyone stand up and listen. I don’t want to live under the threat of cameras, under the weight of the Capitol, holding up their ideals with words that I don’t believe.

I want to be free from all of this.

I’ve always hated the cameras, the way that I had to force a smile or try to pretend and I was terrible at faking it. There’s a reason everyone flocks to Ivy, she’s a better speaker, a great actress, and they all buy whatever she says. There’s a reason they call her the Princess of Panem and I am just my mother’s son. I don’t get a nickname for the Capitol to fawn over. I don’t get adoration and Caesar’s attention whenever the cameras come to town.

And I’m glad that I don’t, but sometimes I wish I could have that attention. That I could take it away from my sister, who doesn’t let it show how much she hates the prying eyes, the adoration, the fawning.
And even more so I wish I could change it, say something to relight that fire my parents tried to put out. And I did it once, I painted it once, and it ended badly. It ended in death and Twelve being held under even more weight.

But I don’t regret it. I’d be lying if I said I did. I regret what the response was, I regret that my sister almost joined the dead. But I showed them something, I had to make them believe it, that the mockingjay never went away, and that she can come back. I hope she can come back.

I still believe in my mother. I still believe that things can get better. I have to.

I have to make them see it.

And it starts in here. It starts where they have to listen, where they have to see me.

“Do you ever wonder what would have happened if your dad hadn’t won his Games?” I ask.

“I wouldn’t be in the arena right now. Or maybe I’d be dead already from another one, I don’t really know. Do you?”

I nod. “Sometimes. But it’s more I wonder what it would be like to not have people know my name. And then I imagine that this quell doesn’t exist and that I don’t exist, and…”

“What?”

I shake my head, “Nothing.” I can’t say the last part, I can’t go that far, I can’t talk about no games, or even being so bold as to talk about President Snow. I know even if there’s nothing worse that can happen to me, other than dying in an arena, I don’t want Ivy to suffer, I don’t want my parents to suffer.

I clear my throat, “We need to find my sister.”

“We need to find Teddy.”

“And then?”

“I’ll talk to him, but he might not want to risk it. The arena, it’s easy to get lost in.”

“I know that, better than most.” And I remember running at the cornucopia and for a moment I thought I saw Ivy, I thought I could make it to her, but one of the Careers spotted me, the large brute, Cain I think, and I had to run.

Thankfully, he didn’t follow.

But I don’t know for how long that’s going to keep up, because eventually I’m sure our paths will cross. And I can’t be sure of the outcome.

“But, I don’t see why we can’t try.” Callie smiles in sympathy and I feel a little hopeful even though I know I shouldn’t. It’s a long shot, finding Ivy again, or maybe it isn’t, there has to be some point where we will be near each other, there are only so many places we can go.

At least that’s what I tell myself to keep my spirits up, but it’s getting more difficult to do as the days wear on and more tributes die.

“So allies then?” I ask, holding out my hand.

She rolls her eyes but takes my hand and shakes it, “Allies.”
For how long? I wonder but I don’t say it aloud.

I don’t sleep. And every time I close my eyes I picture the house back in the Victor’s Village. I hear Haymitch stumbling around outside, coming over to eat when my father forces him. I hear Effie annoyed and trying to get our family together for the chaos of interview day.

I miss Ivy. I miss her watching out for me even when I didn’t want her to. I miss her smile. I miss her laughter. I even miss our fights and arguments. I miss my sister. I miss my family.

I miss home.

And as I look at Callie, her hands ripping up grass, her jacket pulled tight around her I suppose she must miss home too. I guess we all do, which is why everyone is fighting so hard to get back to it.

“In the darkness before the dawn
In the swirling of this storm
When I'm rolling with the punches and hope is gone
Leave a light, a light on”

- Midnight – Coldplay
Chapter Summary

Bas allies with Teddy and Callie and comes up with a plan to find his sister. But the Gamemakers have their own ideas.

The Arena: Sting – Bas

Bas –

We start walking once the sun rises. I’m ready to go before then, sleep never really coming to me. I’m a heavy sleeper, or I used to be, not in here though. My stomach growls and a part of me regrets giving Springer the last of my roots. I’ll find more. Right now finding Ivy is more important. If I can find her, that is. I don’t have any idea where to look and I’m not even sure Callie and Teddy will help me look.

Still, sticking with Callie and reuniting with Teddy seems like the smart move. At least for now. Haymitch told us to have allies and that’s what I’m doing. They’re good people. No, I can’t think that. I can’t think that when they’ll probably be dead.

But I can’t help thinking it.

I’m not a killer. I’m not a victor. I’m just a kid from Twelve born with the unlucky last name of Mellark. That’s not true. I don’t think it’s unlucky. It won the games before. It got the attention of people willing to fight. The name carries weight. The name is mine. I won’t let it be unlucky.

My mother thinks she’s a curse, doomed to live while everyone around her dies. I do what I can to try to make her feel better, to be there for her, but there’s only so much I can do. My father is better at it and my sister worse. There was a time where I thought learning how to shoot and go into the woods would help her feel better, but it didn’t and I hated it. So I stopped.

I don’t know if that was a smart move or not. I’d probably be better off in here if I had stuck with it. It’s probably what’s kept Ivy alive. I don’t know how I’ve managed but I have. Maybe I’m not the target yet or maybe the Gamemakers are waiting to target me when it’s convenient, when it’ll matter more.

It’s probably the same reason my mother is still alive. They couldn’t kill her yet, they had to wait. They had to kill her in other ways before taking the rest of her.

I won’t become that. I won’t let them do that to me. I won’t let them do that to my sister or anyone else I love.

I’ll die before that happens.

I’m sure the arena is going to end me anyway, but I like to think I’m noble. I like to think I’m a better man and not just a scared boy. I saw Grover’s face in the sky and even though another boy was dead I saw myself. He was my age, his life cut short just like mine will be.

And I can’t help but think there are things I wish I could have done before ending up here. I wish
I could have said I love you more. I wish I could have had a first kiss. I wish I could have spent more time in the bakery even though I hated it. I wish I could have spent more time in the woods even though I hated it. I hated a lot of things and I wish my family knew that I didn’t really hate them. I want them to know that I’m sorry for being stubborn and occasionally mean. I’m sorry I couldn’t be better than I was. I should have been.

And even more I wish my mother could stop being afraid, to do what she needs to do, and I wish I could help her. I tried to help her, it went badly, but I tried and I would try again.

Ivy needs to know that I love her, that whatever happens to me isn’t her fault, and that she needs to keep going.

I feel like I’m already dead and all I’m doing is walking closer towards it. But my goodbyes have been running through my head since the cornucopia. My goodbyes and my regrets and they’re only getting worse as time goes on.

“Keep up,” Callie calls in front of me as I stop to take a breath. It’s still morning but it feels like we’ve been walking all day. Maybe that’s just my exhaustion getting to me.

A few trees come into view and I see someone in the distance standing. They watch us as we approach, one hand at something on their belt.

“Teddy!” Callie starts to jog and the figure relaxes. Teddy comes into view a moment later, a stern look on his face.

He picks a pack up from the ground and swings it over his shoulder walking towards us. The stern look never leaves him as he rounds on Callie, “I told you not to go too far.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I got held up.”

He relaxes as he pulls her into a hug then he points to me. She nods.

“A mutt attacked. He killed it,” she says.

“Then I guess I owe you,” Teddy tells me with a slap on my back. He indicates the backpack around his shoulder. “What do you want? Some apples, some roots, I might have some fish left.”

I shake my head despite my growling stomach. If there was ever a time to ask for help this was it.

“I need to find my sister.”

“I haven’t seen your sister.”

“Can you help me look?” I ask.

Callie gives Teddy a look as he starts to shake his head. “Listen, we kind of have a survival strategy in place and I’m not about to go wandering around the arena to look for someone who we probably won’t find. At least, not until the end, if you both survive.”


“No. I’m sorry it’s not happening.” He scratches at a small welt on his neck that he probably got from the acid rain.

“I saved her life,” I try.

“You put it in danger in the first place,” Callie says.
“You did what?” Teddy asks.

I talk over him, “Please, okay. I just, I can’t look for her by myself. I need to find my sister. Can you understand that? Imagine if it was Callie lost, wouldn’t you go looking for her?”

“That’s why we had a plan.”

“She did too. And I didn’t find her when I had the chance. I thought it was better if we were apart but I know now that’s not true. Please, it’ll be easier with three of us.” I take a breath, my throat swelling, and I remember the cornucopia. I saw her, I know I did, and I saw Cain, and there was a chance I could have made it to her. I could have gone to her, but I ran away.

Teddy looks down, and I don’t know if he’s coming up with another way to say no or actually thinking it over. Callie watches him, waiting for his lead and arguing is wasting time. I have to keep looking.

“You don’t have to help me. You can just do what you’re doing. Good luck,” I say and I start towards the woods.

Callie says something to Teddy that I can’t make out but it’s followed by muffled arguing that gets further away the more I continue walking.

I hear footsteps behind me and Teddy’s hand finds my shoulder. I take a relieved breath and turn around to face him.

“We’ll help you, but once we find your sister we’re gone.” Teddy looks to Callie and she nods in agreement.

“Deal.” I hold out my hand. Teddy looks at it.

“This is the arena, no handshakes.” He raises an eyebrow and gives me a smirk, he’s joking but the tone is still there, I need to take this seriously. And I will. I do.

“So where would she go?” He asks, tossing Callie an apple.

“You checked for tracker jackers before you climbed the tree, right?” Callie asks. Teddy waves her off.

“It was fine. So where would she go?” He repeats.

“She’d feel safest in the woods.”

“You think she has allies?” Callie mumbles through a mouth full of chewed up apple.

“I doubt it. She was very clear about not wanting any.”

“Is she…” Teddy trails off, watching something over my shoulder. He shakes his head, “Sorry, thought I saw someone. Is she the type to attack first and ask questions later?”

I shake my head. “She’s never been like that.”

“A lot of us have never been like a lot of things, but you do stuff in here.” Teddy stiffens at some memory. Callie puts a hand on his shoulder.

“We were attacked by the Careers. They almost had us when he managed to stab one of them.”

“Which one?”
“Cain.”

“How bad?”

“Not that bad. Got him in the stomach, he walked away fine. We ran. Still, never thought I’d be capable of that.” He rubs a hand on the back of his neck and I notice sweat forming in beads, running down onto his shirt. It’s not that hot out, he shouldn’t be sweating. He sucks in a breath, “We need to get moving. I don’t want to be out here when night falls. Here.”

He tosses me an apple, but I keep watching the sweat on his neck. Is he sick? He turns and starts walking, Callie right beside him, and my stomach growls again. I take a bite. It’s sweet, almost sickly sweet compared to the roots I’ve been living off of, but I’m happy for the change of flavor.

“Don’t fall behind, toast boy,” Teddy calls back to me with a laugh.

“What did you call me?” I run to catch up.

“Well, your sister is the princess, and your mother is the girl on fire, your father is the baker, so that makes you toast. The Capitol didn’t give you an interesting nickname that’s what we call you,” Callie tells me, her smile mirroring Teddy’s.

“Does anyone else call me that?”

She shrugs, “Not as far as we know.”

“They probably will now though,” Teddy adds as we reach the woods. We walk inside, the shade engulfing us. The temperature drops a few more degrees and I zip up my jacket, shoving my hands in the pockets. Teddy doesn’t seem to notice, wiping more sweat from his forehead, drinking from his canteen like he’s been in the desert.

Callie spares the occasional worried glance, but otherwise says nothing. Maybe he’s not one to be told he’s sick or babied by others. Maybe he’s worried too. Whatever he has could make it easier for another tribute to kill him. Maybe that’s why he says nothing and Callie follows his lead.

And I follow hers. I need them to help me find Ivy. Three sets of eyes are better than one. I can’t lose these allies.

“Bas, maybe you should lead,” Callie starts, “She’s your sister, you’d know her best.”

I nod and take point. Teddy and Callie fall behind me, their feet crushing leaves and sticks as we walk further into the woods. The wind picks up a bit and more leaves fall around us. This isn’t the place Ivy would hide. It’s too loud, too easy to get lost in. She’d look for shelter, where there was less brush to get caught up in. She’d go somewhere easy to escape if necessary and easy to hunt silently in.

“We need to find some water. She’d stick by that. And watch out for traps, she’d set those too.”

“And what happens if we step on a trap,” Callie quips.

“Then we know we’re in the right place,” I reply, picking up the pace. They follow behind, though I hear heavy breaths coming from Teddy. Again I want to know what’s wrong, but there’s nothing I can say. Callie knows him best. Callie will say something if she has to.

I just have to trust them as much as I can.
I really wish I still had my knife.

We keep moving but don’t find any sign of shelter or water. It goes like this for hours until we have to stop to rest.

Teddy gulps down water.

“You should pace yourself. We don’t know if there’s any water in here,” I try.

“Who are you my mother?” Teddy asks his voice harsh and strained.

Callie gives him a worried look. He sighs, “Sorry. I’m just…I’m tired sorry. Heads a little fuzzy. I’ll be okay.”

“Are you feeling alright?” I ask, approaching him. Teddy glances to Callie and there’s an almost disappointed look to his face, a worried one following.

“Yeah. Like I said my heads a little weird, I’ll be fine. I probably just ate some bad fish yesterday.”

“We didn’t have fish yesterday,” Callie says quietly.

“Then the other day, I had some left over. It’s fine. I’m fine.” He stands and heads off, “I’m gonna get some firewood, we should camp here.”

“It’s not even close to dark yet,” I argue, following after him.

“I don’t want to be searching when it is dark. You want to find your sister, we do it smart. I’m getting firewood.” Teddy marches away, finishing off what’s left of his water and dropping the canteen on the ground.

I pick it up and walk back to Callie. I hand it over to her wordlessly. She bites her lip as she examines it.

“What do you think is wrong?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “I’ve never seen anything like it before. At first I thought it was a tracker jacker sting, but that hits you quick, you start hallucinating and you can’t stand up. This is something different.”

“Maybe it was just some bad fish.”

“Maybe,” she continues to chew her lip, gripping the canteen, “Or maybe it’s something worse.” She closes the lid of the canteen and shakes it. “He’s going to need more water. Let’s hope your sister has some.”

She smiles, ending the conversation, trying to pretend nothing is wrong. We have to pretend, especially in here, especially when there are sponsors on the line. Sponsors that could send Teddy medicine if he ends up needing it. And I understand why neither one of them brought up his sickness. If he can still move and fight and survive, even when he’s ill, and she pretends like it’s nothing, if they act like careers, then they have a better chance.

And I ruined it by asking.

Teddy returns with a stack of firewood, a hatchet buried in one of the logs. A knife still hangs at his belt and I wonder how he managed to get two weapons from the cornucopia and a pack of
food. Unless Callie and he had a strategy for that too, they probably did.

I should have planned better. I should have tried harder to convince Ivy of a plan. And maybe we would have come up with one the night before the arena, but then the peacekeepers arrived and Cinna…

I remember the gun shot, the blood, being dragged away from my sister, from my parents. And any hope of surviving together was gone.

I remember the night before the arena where I stared out the window of my prison. They call it a bedroom. They give you luxury and expect you to be grateful. But it’s a lie, it’s a cell. One you’re trapped in until they drag you out to play their games. And I watched the sky go from dark to grey to the purples of dawn from that cell.

I watched the possible last night of my life fade before my eyes. And I thought about throwing myself from that window. I thought about making it easier. I don’t want to die in their arena. I don’t want to play their game. But I have to.

And I’m sure there’s a force field on that window anyway, preventing anyone from playing out that plan. You’re doomed the moment they call your name at the reaping. I was doomed the second they announced the Quell. There’s no way out.

Teddy hacks at a log while Callie sets some dried twigs and leaves after digging out a small pit. Callie pulls a box of matches from the pack and lights the brush, Teddy throws a log on the fire. They’re silent and in sync like it’s a routine, like it’s the way they’ve always done things and maybe they have. Once again I’m reminded that I should’ve had a plan.

“Don’t make it too big, we don’t want the Careers to see it,” I warn them. I don’t know how far they are from us but I don’t want to draw attention to ourselves regardless. Although I suppose there is a chance Ivy could see the smoke and come looking. No, she wouldn’t look. She’d leave whomever the tribute was at peace, for whoever wanted to play to find.

Teddy freezes in his chopping and reattaches the hatchet to his belt next to the knife. He pushes the wood to the side. “That’s good for now.”

He scratches at the welt on his neck. It’s larger than it was before with what looks like a green spider web of veins running out from it.

“Teddy, how did that happen?” I point to the welt. He touches it with his hand.

“I…the rain,” he tries, his voice wavers and he looks around, he’s not sure.

“Can I?” I move forward, my welts have been healing, drying and disappearing. The rain was days ago and this doesn’t look the same. This is something else.

Teddy backs away. “It’s nothing.” His eyes are glaring and I know to back off. He can’t seem weak. None of us can afford that. So I listen and I sit down beside a tree.

“I’ll keep watch if you want to sleep,” Callie says to us. Teddy nods, sitting directly across from me at another tree. He watches me and I can’t tell if he’s looking at me like prey or a threat. It’s a radically different Teddy from the one I met in training and the one who I allied with earlier today. Whatever is causing this and I have a good idea that something poisoned him; it’s making him act different. It’s creating fear and rage where there was none. And I don’t know what could cause that.

Even worse, I don’t know what to do about it.
“Teddy, I need the knife,” Callie says holding out her hand. His eyes dart to her and he grips the weapons on his belt. His eyes come back to me and I notice they’re starting to become a bright red. Something is very wrong.

“Teddy,” she repeats and he snaps his attention back to her, nodding, forcing a smile.

“Right. Here.” He pulls the knife from his belt and holds it out for her to take, his hands quivering and shaking. She takes it slowly, watching the way his fingers twitch involuntarily. I don’t have to see her face to know she’s concerned. Her shoulders sag as she takes the knife and places a hand on Teddy’s head.

“Get some sleep,” she whispers. He smiles weakly and leans against his tree. His eyes close shortly thereafter and I can feel the tiredness weighing on me as the sun starts to set.

Callie circles around us, holding the knife by the hilt, watching Teddy and the woods as she passes. Her footsteps are a constant that lulls me to sleep despite my anxiety. She shouldn’t be the only one awake worrying about Teddy and other tributes.

But I can’t fight sleep anymore. I almost want to say I’m sorry as my eyes close but I don’t. I’m too far gone.

The cannon wakes me and it feels like my heart is going to explode out of my chest. How long was I asleep? What happened?

A full moon has risen, casting light and shadows all over the woods. Teddy and Callie are gone. The fire is down to embers and I’m alive. But they’re gone.

What happened?

I jump up, the pack is still here, the knife forgotten on the ground, but Teddy and Callie are gone. I pick up the knife and it’s wet. I drop it before I realize why it’s wet. My hand is red and I notice it’s shaking now. There’s blood on my hands. There’s blood on the knife.

What happened?

I pick it up again. I have to find them.

There are scratches on the trees and broken branches and blood marks as I walk further. I don’t even need to know how to track to follow this path. It’s everywhere. Whatever happened it was violent, it was fast, and it left me alive and I don’t know why.

Unless it was going to come back and it didn’t count on the cannon waking me.

I hear a scream and its rage and anguish all curled into one. I start to run, the knife slipping in my hands forcing me to grip it tighter, the blood sticking to me. The trees start to close in and there’s only a small path to move, but I keep running.

I slide on a slick rock, careening into a tree where more blood and scratches greet me. I feel the scratches, they aren’t claw marks. This was done by someone with something sharp. I look at the knife and imitate the marks. It’s close but not quite. This was something flat and wide.

Then I remember the hatchet.

Teddy had the hatchet.

But he wouldn’t. He couldn’t.
I hear the scream again and it doesn’t sound like Callie. It sounds like Teddy. I move as fast as I can in these close woods, maybe they were both attacked. Maybe the blood is from whatever Teddy tried to fight off.

But the cannon sounded and Callie is gone too. Which means…

I have to help.

I stop when I come to a large rock surrounded by trees, there’s barely any room to move but I see him standing beside something on the ground, propped against the rock. He screams again at it. In the moonlight I can make out the glistening of tears on his cheeks and the blood on his shirt and face.

What happened?

“T-Teddy?” I call out. He turns, straightening, and he raises the hatchet. Blood drips off the side and down his arm. I glance to the rock and I can make out what looks like some fingers shining in the moonlight. They shouldn’t be shining. And then I realize why as a pool of blood circles what looks like a leg. I fight a wave of nausea and I don’t need to see the rest to know what he was screaming at. Callie. He killed Callie.

“You did this!” He shouts and he charges at me and there’s nothing I can do but struggle through the narrow pathways to get away. He’s not himself, whatever poisoned him did this. The Gamemakers did this. He has to know that.

I stay ahead of him until I break free from the tree line and he tackles me. We roll down a small hill and we’re heading straight for a cliff when I take the knife and slice at his leg. He yells and I pull myself out of his grip and away from the edge.

He stops himself from falling off with the hatchet, pulling himself up to face me, the open cavern behind him. The wind rips around us as a hovercraft picks up Callie and Teddy watches it, the anger returning.

I hold my hands up, the bloody knife in one. “Teddy,” I try but he can’t hear me over the hovercraft.

His breathing is labored and heavy, his eyes red and veins bulging. The welt covers half of his neck and I finally know what it is.

He moves forward and I swing the knife. He backs off, waiting for a sign of weakness.

“You were stung by a tracker jacker,” I say. And Callie had said she didn’t think it was a sting but it is. It’s the first time it’s actually looked like a sting. And the Gamemakers must have modified them to delay the effects, to make the hallucinations feel more threatening, to make you act out.

He shakes his head. “You killed…you career…you mutt…you monster…you.”

“No.”

He jumps at me again, swinging the hatchet and I avoid him. I don’t want to kill him. He needs to know it isn’t his fault. This is their fault. This is the Gamemakers. This is President Snow. This is the Capitol. He’s just a victim of this game, just like Callie.

He slashes with the hatchet catching my side in it. I can feel it rip through my jacket and tear into my skin. It’s not deep but it doesn’t feel pleasant. I kick him back and cut with my knife again but
he’s quick and punches me in the side of the face. He throws the hatchet and I duck. He wrestles me to the ground. I punch him in the stomach before I kick him back once more.

“Teddy!” Something in my voice causes him to hesitate and he needs to see that I’m not a threat, that I didn’t do this.

So I take a leap of faith. I stand and I hold the knife to the side, dropping it. The blade sticks into the ground. He watches it like he’s thinking about trying to grab it, but something stops him. I breathe heavily, trying to find my words. I’ve never been the talker, that’s always been Ivy. She’s the actress. She can make the entire country adore her in two syllables. Not me.

But if there was ever a time for me to learn this is it.

“Teddy, l-listen to me. I didn’t kill Callie. And you didn’t either.”

He shakes his head and the tears are starting to fall, “I did.” He claws at his neck and grips his hair.

“No. It wasn’t you.”

“I felt the blood. I pulled her from the camp, I…” He falls to his knees, heaving onto the ground, the contents of his stomach spilling out. The moon shines almost directly behind him across from the cliff and I wonder if we are at the edge of the arena.

“It wasn’t you. It was that thing on your neck. It was them!” I point around to the sky, to no one, to all of them, sitting in their room watching and manipulating everything in here.

Teddy stares at me but the tears don’t stop and neither do his shaking, clawing hands. He draws blood from the scratches he tears into his neck.

“This is what they do. You didn’t want to be a killer, so they made you one. They wanted to make it interesting, to give the audience emotion, so they had you kill her. It wasn’t you, it was them.”

“You can’t…you shouldn’t…” He stops clawing at himself.

“But I am! And you need to listen to me. We can survive this. We can get out of this.”

“There’s only one winner,” his voice cracks and fades, he’s giving up. He drops his head into the dirt, shaking with shallow breaths.

“Not always,” I say and my voice is loud and angry and bitter. I remember the boy from ten electrocuted on the tracks. I remember Springer too afraid to leave the bridge. I remember faces in the sky of people who should be alive. I try to keep Callie’s face from my mind but it’s too hard when the loss is so fresh.

“We can win.” And I don’t think I’m talking to Teddy anymore. I’m talking to the country, to the Gamemakers, to the Capitol, Hell, to President Snow. “We can win,” I repeat.

And that seems to convince him. That pulls him back. He wipes the tears and picks his head up. I hold out my hand.

“She’s dead.”

“It wasn’t you.”

“It wasn’t me. It was them.”
“We can win.”

He nods, “We can win.”

He reaches for my hand and I remember the mockingjay that I painted. I remember the fear it caused and I want the Capitol to be afraid. They should be afraid. I whistle the mockingjay song, the song Rue told my mother to sing. And I’ve had that song imprinted in my mind since I watched the highlights from her Games.

I can see the hope in Teddy’s eyes, like something restored beneath the pain and he’s going to have a long way to go but there’s hope despite everything. And maybe I’m not so bad at this talking thing after all.

Suddenly, there’s a large cracking sound and I can feel the ground shake. The hope dissolves in an instant, replaced by fear. And Teddy is no longer reaching for my hand. He pushes me away as the rocks fall beneath him and I’m on the grass by the trees staring at nothing in front of me.

Nothing but the moon.

I hear a cannon and the distant sound of a hovercraft in the canyon below. I can’t move. I just stare at the empty ground, my hand clinging to a tree, the wind whistling up at me.

I feel numb. I feel nothing.

We can win. What a bullshit statement. We can’t win anything.

I pull myself further into a standing position and my bones ache with a chill. My hand lands on the hatchet, buried into the tree, the blood dried on it. I stare into the canyon again and I rip the hatchet from the tree.

I walk into the woods. I reach our camp where there’s more dried blood and a fire long since out. Still, I feel nothing.

I pick up the pack and I keep walking, going nowhere. And I’m still numb, I feel nothing. I don’t think I’ll ever feel anything again. Until I feel the pinch of pain at my side and I have to stop. And it’s then that the tears finally start, that I choke back sob after sob as it wracks my body.

What hope is there here? None. And now I finally understand why my mother is so afraid. We survive and others die, others face the consequences. And it goes like this over and over and over again. I’m a liar. We can’t win. I brought this on them. This is what trying to win looks like.

I just want it to end.

I should have never helped Callie. I should have taken some food from Teddy and moved on. But what then? Would he have died thinking he was responsible? Would he have died without knowing the truth?

Is this better?

I patch myself up with some gauze in the pack and wander through the woods until the sun rises. I end up back in the field and I don’t know where I’m going. I’m not going anywhere. I can’t find Ivy. They won’t let me find her.

I’m alone. And when the Gamemakers finally decide to put me out of my misery, I’ll be alone then too.

Maybe Ivy will survive. Maybe she gets to be the lucky one. The Victor.
There’s only one Victor.

Not always I had said. Not always.

What was I thinking?

I wander and I keep wandering until I hear the rush of water beside me and I’m back at the river again. Of course I would be back here, of course. Where else would I go?

I feel like I’m supposed to eat, that I should want to eat. I have to keep my strength up, right? Isn’t that what I’m supposed to do? I’m supposed to be a survivor. I’m supposed to be the son of the star-crossed victors from Twelve. I’m supposed to be important, a fighter, a victor too.

I’m supposed to save people right, isn’t that what I should have done? I should have been faster. I could have been smarter.

I don’t even have a nickname for anyone to rally behind. No one would follow me. No one would listen to me.

But Teddy did. And what did that get him? A cannon and a hovercraft ride back home in a box. I’m not a leader. I’m not anything. And it’s been that way for years. No one should listen to me. I’m not someone to be listened to. I’m not someone to be noticed.

Maybe I am unlucky.

“Bas…”

It’s a whisper over the rush of water and it’s probably in my head. I don’t stop walking, I can’t stop walking. It’s the only thing I can focus on. The ache in my muscles, the burn running up into my chest, it’s all that matters.

“Bas!”

Someone is shouting, screaming, a voice cutting through the ache in my bones. And I have to stop. I know that voice.

“BAS!”

I turn and see her. She’s tired, she’s definitely seen her fair share of loss in this arena but her eyes are wide and she’s shouting and she’s alive. Ivy. She’s alive.

The breath leaves me lungs and I’ve never been so happy to see my sister in my entire life.

She’s across the river on the other side when I first see it. And I can’t believe she’s really here. I have to get to her. It’s shallow, I can get to her. She’s already halfway across before I even register her movements.

And then I start to hurry towards her. The water is cold and cutting and it wakes me up even more than her voice did. Ivy. I repeat her name like a prayer, she’s alive, she’s alive and she’s here.

I suck in a breath and I realize I’m crying and she is too. Her hands brush my hair and she stifles a laugh as she pulls me into the tightest hug she can manage.

It’s then that I remember the cut at my side and all the pain comes rushing back. I can’t help but wince. She breaks the hug and immediately her eyes fall onto my side.
“I’m okay,” I croak out and I can’t help but smile.

“You’re alive,” she breathes.

“So are you.” I wipe the tears from my eyes and I see Beck Cresta standing at the other side of the river watching us.

“Ivy,” my voice drops to a warning and she turns.

“Oh yeah, he’s fine, he’s…ally.”

I raise an eyebrow and she shrugs. I guess she realized she couldn’t go it alone.

“I hate to interrupt this joyous reunion but you might want to get out of the cold water before you get sick,” Beck calls and I’m reminded that I can’t feel my legs anymore.

We make our way to shore where I turn the pack over to Ivy and Beck to dig through. She checks my bandage and hands me some of the remaining salve she received after the acid rain. I apply some to the last of my welts and the cut. Whatever is in it makes the wounds feel immediately better.

We eat some of the fruit in the pack though neither Ivy nor Beck asks where I got it from and I’m grateful for that. And a part of me wants to ask how they got medicine and what happened to Ivy’s jacket but I won’t.

There are some stories that are best left for the cameras and not for each other to tell.

“And you’ll find loss
And you’ll fear what you found
When weather comes
Tear him down”

- Oats in the Water – Ben Howard
Chapter Summary

Katniss prepares for the top eight interviews.

I learned Teddy’s mother couldn’t come to the Games. She had some kind of flu and was too sick to travel, which means the last time she saw him was at the reaping, if she was even healthy enough for that.

She’s a kind woman, one whom I’ve only ever spoken to maybe a few times throughout my years here. She won the 67th Games. It was a big deal at the time. An outer district winning is always a big deal but it’s quickly forgotten when the Capitol doesn’t find the Victor as interesting as others.

“What an unfortunate end to a potentially fantastic partnership,” Caesar says brightly, his eyes burning into the screen as if he’s staring right at me, “Basil Mellark is proving quite a firecracker, just like his mother. Let’s hope that attitude keeps him alive.” And I know the threat beneath the kindness telling me not to do anything stupid in my interview, not to make it worse for my children.

“But,” Caesar remarks with a wide smile, “that brings us to the top eight. And what a top eight it is, don’t you agree Claudius?”

Claudius and Caesar continue on their assessment of how the games are going so far and already I can hear it in their voices, this is an exciting one, this is a popular one, this is one that the Capitol and Panem are going to remember for a while. There will be highlights, the Victor is going to be sold, I can see it so clearly as if the path is laid out for me to take. And maybe once upon a time it was my path. If Peeta had died, if it had just been me, my Games may not have been as memorable, but I would have been.

And it could be my daughter or my son who has to face that path now. But the truth is I don’t want it to be either of them if there’s no way out. It would be a mercy if they didn’t survive given what the future holds.

I look at Finnick and I know what the Capitol has done and I didn’t want to see it, I never wanted to know the truth, but deep down I always knew. I saw. I saw the sponsors come in, the Victors brought out by an escort. I saw that look they brought back with them. And they all had it, no matter which district they came from, no matter how much they pretended they liked the attention, they all had the same look. They all shared the same vacant stare even as they tried to focus on their tribute, the same shaking hands, the same chewing lip or picking of their cuticles until they bled.

Bas had said we can win and I want to believe him. I want to believe that look in his eyes more than any haunted look I’ve seen before, more than my own look or knowledge that we can’t. That everything I do, anything I say, it’ll all be paid back by the Capitol with interest.

And President Snow said Twelve was stopping production, they were starting to fight without my words, without me doing anything. Maybe they got tired of waiting. Maybe other districts got tired too. Maybe they’re taking matters into their own hands.
But it doesn’t matter if it was their decision or not. President Snow will only see me and my influence, my children’s influence. And I have to make sure my interview makes it clear that it has to stop, that I have nothing to do with this, that the Capitol keeps us safe.

Or I can tell the truth, but that’s not an option. That’s never been an option.

“We have an interview to prepare for,” Haymitch interjects.

“After that?” Peeta asks.

“After that,” Haymitch repeats, “Everything is good. Everything is normal.”

“Top eight is good. You’ll be able to send them more,” Effie says, her voice quiet, her eyes watching the screen and she’s shaken up by everything.

Good. I can’t help but think. Maybe she isn’t the only one.

And I don’t think like this. I haven’t thought like this in years, but it feels good. It feels great. And I’ve spent so long burying my anger, so long trying to hide, and I can’t anymore. But even with that anger I won’t add to the fire. My children are still in the arena, they can still pay for my words. And I won’t let them, even if Bas may have already done it for me.

“Yeah I’m sure Snow loves that they’re in the top eight,” Johanna calls.

“Johanna,” Finnick warns. Annie watches him and his eyes stare down Johanna. And he looks genuinely threatening even without a trident in his hand. She backs off. Annie returns to watching her screen.

Beetee goes to the table and picks up a piece of bread. Haymitch watches him and looks back at Johanna who does the same thing.

They’ve been doing this dance since the games started. One of them going to the table, leaving the table, taking one piece of bread, taking two, and the others watch. Peeta does too. And I know he’s thinking the same as me. That there’s more to it than hungry mentors.

“We need to get you ready for your interview,” Effie says to me, breaking my concentration from the table. Effie starts to lead me and Peeta out of the room. We’ve never been in the top eight before I’ve never had to do this part.

“Good luck,” Johanna calls, “Don’t say anything stupid."

I turn back to the screens, “Haymitch make sure…”

“You got it, sweetheart,” he says giving me a thumbs up, taking a seat beside Annie.

She says something quietly to Finnick. He nods and follows us out for his own interview, though his eyes drag back to the screen like he’s hoping he can take it with him. Peeta and I have always been a pair in interviews and it would be a disappointment to the Capitol if we were to suddenly change that habit. Especially now in these Games when both of our children are in the top eight. Thankfully, Haymitch is here, there were some years where he wasn’t. But we’ve never been in the top eight, so this is new.

Finnick is the mentor interviewee for Beck. Cashmere chooses to take the interview for Emery. Gloss won’t move from his seat in front of his screen. His daughter’s face plastered on it, his hands locked in a prayer position.
Cashmere plays it off like he’s concentrating, like he’s strategizing, but I know the truth. I recognize that look and I wonder how many layers he lives under, if it’s more than me or less. I wonder what kinds of Hell the Capitol has put him through over the years and what acts he’s played. What acts Cashmere has had to play as well. And I’ve seen the look of a victor being sold on her eyes, but she’s better at hiding it than the others. And maybe it was the fact that most of their tributes usually killed mine but I’d never had much sympathy for the Careers.

But all of a sudden it isn’t as easy to hate the Careers for being the Careers. At least not Cashmere and Gloss. Brutus and Roman still irk me. And the pair of them are laughing and celebrating their children being in the top eight, as if they had expected anything less.

Stone’s father has been pretending to be annoyed that his son was weak and stupid. And maybe he’s not pretending. Maybe he was proud that his son was here, maybe he’s angry that his son is dead but for reasons that are different than Johanna’s.

And in a lot of ways Grover was her son, but she won’t talk about it, she won’t say anything. She can’t even look at her screen, which now shows what the regular audience of Panem gets to see. Every so often some Capitol bred assistant, who’s probably hoping to become a Gamemaker, will come in and hand a card to one of the mentors who have lost their tributes and that mentor will leave and come back an hour later with tear stained cheeks and red eyes, but never Johanna, they don’t come for her.

I’ve never gotten the privilege of saying goodbye to my tributes, not like others. That’s what the card is. An invitation, a reminder, that you’re doing what the Capitol wants you to. And in doing so you get the honor of a final farewell before the dead tribute is shipped back home to be given the funeral of their district. And I’ve never been able to do it. Not that I think I could face the dead, especially the dead that I’m responsible for not being able to save, but still, the invitation has never come.

And it won’t for Johanna. It won’t for Finnick. It won’t for anyone the Capitol doesn’t deem worthy enough for one. The one’s they think are dangerous, who don’t listen, they don’t get to say goodbye.

I take one last look at my screens. Seeing my children together brings me some hope, some peace. And that final look is over too quickly as Effie leads me and Peeta out with the other mentors and escorts, the doors sliding shut behind us.

The interview takes place on the stage in the tribute center. We never really leave this building even as mentors, unless it’s to go see a sponsor or get certain things settled for our tributes. In a lot of ways I’ve grown and lived and will die in this building.

We are guided down a long hallway past a room with a metal door. There’s a cold breeze coming from it and a chill raises goosebumps on my arms. The man from ten steps out of it, shaking and pale, and I know what that room is. I’ve never seen inside it, I’ve never been invited, but I know what that room holds. The dead.

I keep watching the man from ten as he’s escorted back towards the elevator. Why do they take us down this hallway? Why make us see this and know that it’s there?

And I could spend years asking why. I have spent years on it. The answer is always the same. Because they can. President Snow can and will keep you in your place for as long as he is alive. And when he dies someone else will do the same. I’m their puppet, we’re all their puppets, and they will break us and remake us and use us until we are gone.

My tributes were in that room. And no one came to say goodbye to them, no one cared for them in
Did anyone come to see her in that room? Or was I the only one to say goodbye? To remind people that she was a person who should be missed.

“Katniss,” Peeta’s voice cuts through the fog and I realize I’m still staring at the metal door.

“That’s…”

“I know what it is,” he answers before I can tell him. His arm loops around mine and we walk together towards a waiting Effie at the end of the hall, her heels clicking on the floor in an impatient rhythm.

“I’m sure they’re just walking us past it to remind us what the Games mean,” he says in a steady voice.

“Yeah, I’m sure they are. Reminding us that they kill children to prove a point.” I feel a squeeze on my arm.

“And that those children are there because of a war long ago, and that we do this, because it’s necessary,” he keeps speaking in the steady voice and it’s frightening how calm he can be when I feel my stomach in knots.

“What do you think we should talk about in the interview?” I ask.

“Whatever keeps our children alive,” Peeta responds, “And in the Capitol’s good graces.”

I nod and we follow Effie once more. He’s too steady, he’s too calm, he has to be planning something. He’s only like this when he’s about to say something in an interview that could turn the tide. I’ve only seen it a few times. In our Games before he said he loved me, on our victory tour when he gave the families money, and throughout the years when he spoke of our children to the Capitol.

And this is the most steeled I’ve ever seen him before an interview. I don’t know what to expect from him. I only hope it won’t put our children in danger.

I can’t help but feel anxious every second I’m away from the screens. The lights are up on the stage, the stylists are working on us, making sure we don’t overpower the tributes we are supposed to be talking about, but at the same time still make a statement. They dress me and Peeta in similar colors of blacks, greys, and greens. I’m in a simple dress while he’s in a suit and we pair together as we always have.

The stage is well lit, but it doesn’t overpower the two chairs and the intended intimate setting. Cameras surround the chairs with a crew sitting behind them. The screens on the stage show the number of district and the image of the tribute.

One of the crew has a small screen where the Games are being played. The sound is low so as not to disturb the interview, but I can just make out the picture. There’s nothing of note happening, just someone who’s face I can’t see walking beside a river. The crew’s attention is more focused on the stage.

There is no audience for these interviews, just Caesar and the mentor before him. Cashmere goes first, smiling just as much as he is.
“My dear, it’s so good to see you,” Caesar says with a kiss on her hand. She plays along, apologizing for her brother not making an appearance.

“He was too busy strategizing. You know how he can be,” she laughs and Caesar does too.

“I’m sure it’s all for a good cause. Emery is really proving herself. She had an injured leg, healed up quite nicely.”

“Well, she’s had amazing sponsors who we couldn’t more thankful for. I’m sure she won’t let them down.”

It goes like this through Brutus and Roman, bragging about their children’s skill sets, their kills, their ruthlessness. Beetee is more quiet and calm when he speaks about Springer, but Caesar doesn’t show much interest in the boy from three.

And neither does the crew, they’re attention back on the screen in front of them. I watch the screen too, someone is running, and they’re larger than the person who was walking by the river. My best guess is it must be Cain. My fingers twist around the empty space where my wedding band would be.

After Beetee finishes Caesar sends him a few jokes about inventions and wondering if Springer would join him in that front. Beetee smiles sternly and answers with a quick, “I don’t think so,” and then it’s over.

Caesar takes a break for some water, shaking off whatever boredom he was in. But he perks right back up when Finnick steps onto the stage. The camera crew does as well. The lights of the stage seem to brighten with his presence like they’re trying to keep him shining, like he’s their sun.

“Finnick Finnick Finnick, we are always delighted to see you.” Finnick straightens at Caesar’s words, like he’s ready for battle, and in a lot of ways he is going into one.

“And I am delighted to be here,” Finnick says with that same charming smile he’s mastered for the cameras.

I turn to the screen again and it’s switched from the person running to two people walking side by side. I know it’s Beck and Ivy without having to see their faces.

“Of course, I have to say I wasn’t sure about Beck Cresta. His mother being who she is, no father, I had my doubts.”

Finnick clears his throat, “As did I, who wouldn’t? Are you glad to be proven wrong?”

“No, you can’t.” Caesar grabs one of Finnick’s hands, slapping his own on top. “I think that’s very noble. Isn’t that noble?” Caesar asks to no one and if there were an audience they would be swooning and cheering. Finnick smiles in kind.

“And his allying with Ivy Mellark, honestly it’s one of the things I can’t stop watching.”

My pulse starts pounding and for a minute I see red. She’s being pulled into the same lie, the same
story, and I want to tear the cameras apart, tear Caesar apart. I just want it to stop.

I look at the screen again but they’re not on it. Instead there’s more running. I’m confused. Something must be happening. Tributes must be colliding.

And then I start to worry again, something is happening. I need to get back to the screen. I need to see. I need to know. But I’m trapped.

“He’s very clever. When he told me he wanted her as an ally, at first I wasn’t sure, but now I see it was the right call.”

“He’s smarter than you,” Caesar jokes.

“He just might be,” Finnick returns, “But that shouldn’t reflect poorly on me.”

“Of course not.”

There are a few more compliments and then Finnick is done. He spares me a glance as he passes and it appears apologetic. His escort says something in his ear and he’s gone before I can question him. And now I know something really is wrong. Haymitch would have come to get me, right? He would have done something.

I wish I was back upstairs. Standing in front of the screens, sending parachutes, doing the only things I can. And what more can I do? What help can I give them? I just need to make sure they’re still there, still together. I need to know.

I am back staring at the screen and I can make out a group. There are weapons. There’s what looks like yelling, but I can’t see their faces. I count the figures, there are five. My children have to be in that group.

The mentor from five is brought out and I don’t bother to listen, I’m too drawn into trying to figure out what’s going on in the screen. I’m stepping out and the mentor from five is boring the crew and Caesar.

“Katniss,” I hear Peeta say but I keep walking. The person running is scared. They’re screaming. Something is happening. Something bad. The crew looks to me and there’s something in their eyes, something scared and almost excited. And I want to tear their eyes out. They shouldn’t look excited.

Something is wrong. And I feel like I did the day of the reaping. I knew. I knew it was going to happen twenty five years ago when Prim’s name was called. I could feel it. Whether I knew it or not, there was something in the air, a change, a death sentence.

And I can feel it now. I’m aware of it now. Something is wrong. I need to see a screen. I need to know. I need to be sure I’m just overreacting.

But Peeta is following me and he says nothing. He feels it too.

I don’t even realize I’m out on the stage until Caesar is looking at me and so is the mentor from Five. And I’m staring at the light from the screen. And I can see a face. It can’t be that face.

And then I hear it. The cannon. Even in the lowest sound for the screen it booms throughout the room, through my nerves and my heart. It shatters me.

And I know.
That cannon was for me.

One of my children are dead.

“Sometimes I get tired of pins and needles
Facades are a fire on the skin
And I'm growing fond of broken people
As I see that I am one of them”

- Pins and Needles – Mute Math
Chapter Summary

Reunited in the arena, Bas and Ivy make plans for their continued survival with Beck, but Cain and the Careers have their own strategy for victory resulting in an unthinkable loss.

Bas and I check the remaining supplies by the river while we dry off. It’s warmer down here with the sun shining right on us. Maybe the Gamemakers are just trying to keep us in good light. Whatever the reason, I’m grateful for it.

The contents of the pack are spread out before us. There are two apples left, some wire we can use for traps, and a grey plastic tarp.

“The fish I don’t think we should eat.” Bas throws the remaining fish to the side. By the looks of it, it’s the right call.

He pulls up the corner of the grey plastic tarp. “This might be useful.”

“Any water?” I ask. Bas opens his canteen, its low. He checks the pack and removes a canteen. He shakes it, it sounds empty. The number reads eleven.

“There’s some left in mine.”

“How much do you have?” I ask Beck. He checks the three canteens at his belt. We’ve been smart, rationing the water, but still we should be running low soon.

“This one has half and this one is just about empty.” He shows the two with water. I nod.

“The last thing I have is this hatchet,” Bas says, pointing to it at his belt.

“That’s good.” I take a breath, figuring out what to do, “We need to find shelter. We need water. Some food wouldn’t hurt.”

Bas checks where his cut was. The salve is working, healing him. There won’t be a scar once it’s done. He reapplys the bandage to keep it covered.

“How many tributes are left?” Beck asks.

I try to count the faces I’ve seen, both in person and in the sky, the faces I don’t want to remember and the faces I never really knew. Bas beats me to the number, his voice dropping at the realization, “Eight.”

I take a deep breath. I don’t know how I’ve made it this far, but I have. My brother and I both have. But in order to stay alive we have to be smarter. The Gamemakers are going to try to push the tributes together. They’re going to want to keep things exciting.

“We could hide out. Keep moving every day. Make it harder for anyone to track us,” Beck suggests.
“You really think the Careers are good at tracking?” I smirk, though I know I shouldn’t. At the moment I’m too flooded with relief at finding my brother again that I can’t help it. My plan is back on track. He can win. He has to win. He has to go home.

“You really think the Careers are good at tracking?” I smirk, though I know I shouldn’t. At the moment I’m too flooded with relief at finding my brother again that I can’t help it. My plan is back on track. He can win. He has to win. He has to go home.

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Bas watches us and rolls his eyes, scoffing. He crosses his arms, staring me down. If we were younger and at home this would be the moment I push him into the mud and he runs crying to our father. But we’re not at home. And we’re not safe.

“We’re not fighting them,” I say with finality. His eyes narrow and I’m waiting for the fuse to snap. It doesn’t take long.

“You’re afraid of them,” Bas says, his voice rising. Whatever peace we’ve been in since our reunion is gone now with the weight of survival.

“I’m not afraid. I don’t want to go looking for a fight,” I lie. Of course I’m afraid of them. They’re bigger, they’re stronger, and they want this victory. Cain more so than anyone. He’s hungry for blood, especially mine. I killed one of his allies. I’m the daughter of two victors, two victors who won the same Games. I’ve been on camera since I was born. The country knows my name. They love me. I’m the kill that makes him a household name. I’m the kill that puts him above any other tribute from Two.

Bas knows I’m lying, he’s always known when I lie. He shakes his head, “You’re scared. Admit it.”

“Fine,” I snap. “Yes, I’m afraid of them. And you should be too.”

“Well I’m not. The only thing I’m afraid of is what we can’t fight.” He drops his voice, “What we can’t control.”

I know he’s talking about the Gamemakers. And I’m sure right now they want us to go to the cornucopia, they want us to take risks, and they want us to keep it interesting. They won’t do anything if we try to pick a fight or if we have a plan. But if we run they will. And Bas knows that.

If we stick around the river, if we make it look like we’re going to fight them, maybe it’ll buy us some time. But it’s too close. I don’t want to take my little brother anywhere near that kind of danger. If I die before they do, there’s no way for me to make sure he would win. Even if Beck promised, even if he would keep my brother safe, there’s no guarantee. I’m the only guarantee. And the woods are our safest option.

“No,” I tell him and his anger falls.

Bas sucks in a breath, standing, “Back to the woods, then.”

“It’s the best option, Bas,” I repeat, standing with him.

“You won, stop trying to convince me,” he says.

“It’s not about winning.”

“Funny, considering we’re in the Games.” His mouth forms a flat line as he avoids looking at me.

“Bas,” I try.

“We should get moving.” He throws the pack over his shoulder abandoning the empty canteen with the shining eleven on the case.

Beck picks up his trident and hurries to follow Bas. I’m behind the pair of them, hearing everything whether they want me to or not.
“Who was it? That you saw go.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Seems to matter to you,” Beck replies with ease, it’s the same candidness that works on camera and cuts right to the truth.

Bas sighs, “The two from Eleven.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah. So am I.”

“Are you angry at Ivy?” Beck asks.

“It’s not really your concern.”

“I’m your ally, I’m her ally. If you two are fighting it does concern me, because my life is in your hands. I know you’re not used to me and you probably think I’m going to turn around and…”

“Why do you care what I think?” Bas asks sharply. “If you don’t want to be around us, leave. Don’t put your life in my hands. I’m not in charge of it. I don’t want to be in charge of it. And my sister isn’t in charge of it either. Just as much as I’m not in charge of hers. So if us fighting bothers you, go.” He breathes out through his nose, “And we’re not fighting.”

“She didn’t stop looking, you know that, right?” Beck asks and his voice is small, his eyes narrowed like he’s trying to understand Bas’ anger or frustration.

“Of course I know that.”

“Then what’s…”

“We’re not friends. Back off.” Bas picks up the pace and Beck waits for me to fall into step with him.

“What’s with your brother? One minute he was happy the next he’s…that.”

“He’s fourteen,” I try but Beck gives me a look and I know he doesn’t believe me. I sigh, “We’re at the top eight. He knows it’s not going to be much longer now.”

“Until you kill me?”

“Or you kill me,” I say and it doesn’t come out as a joke anymore. Beck’s smile fades and he understands the joke is gone too. The Games aren’t games, but at this point in them the weariness starts to creep in, the survival instincts are too much, and the tributes are ready for it to end. The Capitol is ready for it to end. They want to celebrate their Victor. It won’t be long now.

I’ll be dead soon and Bas knows it. We both know it.

We’re in the tall grass by the time clouds start to hide the sun. I feel a chill creep from my spine to my neck forcing me to look around. No one is here, no one is watching, but it feels like they are. There’s the sound of flapping and I catch up to Beck and Bas, reaching for an arrow just in case.

“We need to hurry, the jabberjays…” I hear another sound and turn, stopping, the arrow drawn. There’s still no one.

Beck pushes Bas forward. There’s no attack, nothing, and it all falls silent. There’s not even a
breeze.

“Ivy,” Beck whispers and I follow them.

The clouds cover the sky in grey when we exit the grass and reach a small clearing. The trees aren’t far. We’ll be in the woods before it starts to rain. And if it does, we’ll need the tarp. I only hope it can stop the acid. I don’t want to be running for shelter again in the downpour.

As if he’s reading my thoughts Bas asks, “If it rains will we be safe?”

I shake my head, “I don’t know.”

“Maybe it’ll be regular rain,” Beck says with a smile before, “What? I can’t be hopeful?” He laughs and I find myself smiling. Bas fights his smile but not for long. And it’s a small moment of relief that fades before we can truly appreciate it.

“We should keep moving,” I say and Beck leads. Bas waits for me before we walk side by side.

“Are you going to apologize?” I ask.

“No,” he answers, “Maybe. I’m not sorry for being mad. You shouldn’t have come looking for me.”

“Why wouldn’t I look for you?”

He stops. His voice softens to barely above a whisper, “I don’t want you to die for me. I don’t want anyone to die for me or because of me.” His eyes drop to the ground and he’s thinking of Teddy and Callie, I know he is. And I don’t know what happened. I don’t really want to know, not unless it makes Bas feel better to talk about it. But he’s like our mother in that respect. He doesn’t like to talk about whatever he’s feeling. And I don’t much care for it either, but it’s always been easier with him.

“Bas…”

He shakes his head and shifts the pack. He cringes.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. The salve helped. I just…I’m sore.” He rubs the side where the cut used to be.

“Want to switch for a little bit?” I reach for the pack.

“I’m not the best shot.”

“You’re good enough.”

He smiles and nods. I hand him the quiver and the bow and take the pack from him. It’s heavy, the wire weighing it down more than anything else, but I can carry it.

“Beck’s already at the trees,” Bas says and I can see him waiting for us, watching.

“Powers back on at the cornucopia,” Beck calls. I can’t make it out over the tall grass behind me, but when I reach him I can see the lights in the ruins.

They go out a few minutes later.

“Do you know how long it was?” Bas asks.
Beck shrugs, “Maybe ten – fifteen minutes.”

“The boy from ten died on the train tracks when the power came on,” Bas says, his voice far away in the memory.

I look over at the large bridge and tracks where the ground bottoms out below it.

“Springer from Three was hiding there, setting traps,” he continues, “Maybe we don’t go near there when we’re moving.”

“Good idea,” I tell him.

Beck faces the opening to the woods and sighs, “Back in we go.”

“It’s the…”

“Safest option,” Beck finishes for me, “I know.”

There’s rustling in a nearby bush a few steps in and we all stop. Bas removes an arrow and waits. A squirrel comes running out and Bas fires. He misses. When the squirrel climbs the tree he fires again. The shot lands and the squirrel is pinned to the tree, dead.

“That solves the food problem,” Bas says as he pulls the arrow from the tree with the squirrel still attached.

I nudge him on the shoulder, “It’s a start.”

“Probably need about two more of these, don’t we?” He asks and he looks so much younger than I remember him looking before.

“It’s better than nothing,” I tell him. “Told you, you were good enough.” He smiles.

The woods seem darker as clouds continue to fill the sky, hiding the sun. I’m starting to get cold again with the possibility for rain worrying me. I hope the tarp can keep us safe.

I remove it from the pack once we find a spot to make camp. The trees have low branches for us to climb if we need to and there are clear exits if we need to run. The only problem is that means there are clear entrances for someone, or something, to get to us. I pull the wire from the pack and set it on a small rock. I can use it to set a warning system or at the very least it could slow someone down.

I look for the best branches to set the tarp when Bas steps up beside me. He holds the quiver out for me to take, “I’ll set up camp if you want to go find some more food.”

I shake my head. “We shouldn’t split up. And if it rains…”

“So don’t go far. We need firewood too and we have to find some way to tie the tarp up. The wire won’t work for that.”

I look at the bow and quiver. I feel free without them, like I’m not a killer or a weapon, like I’m not me. But it’s stupid to go without it in here. Still, I like not having the weight. I don’t want to go back to holding the thing that has taken lives. In Bas’ hands it’s clean. It’s just a tool for survival. In mine it’s another piece of the arena, another piece in their Games.

“I know how to make rope,” Beck announces, walking to us. “I can find some plants, or the tall grass would work better.”
“That’s too far,” I interject, “If it starts to rain.”

“I’ll stick around here,” Beck replies, “I’ll find something useful.”

“How do you know how to make rope?” Bas asks.

“We make fishing nets in Four all the time.” Beck starts to pass one of the trees. I want to stop him. We can’t split up. We shouldn’t split up. Not with the clouds darkening the sky, not with the Gamemakers waiting for something. It’s been a quiet day, that’s never good.

I say nothing. I don’t stop him. We need the rope. We need to get supplies.

And if he dies out there at least I don’t have to be the one to kill him.

It’s a cold thought, but we’re at the top eight now. I have to think like that. I have to start considering how to cut ties, how to kill him. There’s no more room for kindness here. And I know there never was room for it, there never should be room for it. But even trust has its limits in here. And those limits are going to be reached soon.

Bas holds the quiver out to me, shaking it a little to grab my attention. “You want to find some food, princess?” He asks with the hint of a smile.

I cock my head to the side, my mouth falling into a stern line.

“I’m sorry,” he says abruptly, almost scared by my look, “I know you hate that.” I push the quiver away, back into his hands.

“Yeah I do. We’re not splitting up. Now go clean the squirrel,” I tell him, handing him my knife. He stalks off to where he left the arrow with the squirrel.

I have to set the perimeter. I grab the tarp and shake it out, throwing it over a branch. It’ll do if we have to duck under it, but I’d rather tie it up with the rope if Beck comes back with it.

And then I start to wonder what would happen if he didn’t come back. If he ran off to survive on his own. Would it be easier? I don’t know the answer. I can’t think of the answer.

I have to set the perimeter. I have to focus on setting up camp. I can hear Bas working on cleaning the squirrel. He cuts swiftly, cleaning it with ease. I know it’s not much for the three of us, but it’s the only food we’ve got.

I turn back to the rock where I left the wire, but it’s gone.

“Hey Bas, did you see--” I hear a breath as the wire comes over my head and wraps around my throat. It stings at it digs into my skin. I grab at it, pulling as hard as I can, but it’s cutting off my airway and cutting into my neck. My feet are off the ground with heavy hands dragging me back.

“You’re done, Ivy,” Cain huffs in my ear. “This was always my game.”

The blood is rushing in my ears while more of it trickles down from where the wire cuts into me. The world gets darker with each passing second.

“Beck!” Bas is shouting as Cain’s arms hold me in place. I can’t breathe. I can’t feel anything but the tearing at my neck. I can’t even hear anymore.

An arrow flies by me and slices into Cain’s shoulder as it passes. The blood spurts from the wound and spatters onto the side of my face, mixing with my own.
And then the wire is gone and I can breathe. I’m choking, sucking in as much air as I can but it hurts, it burns.

Every sound comes back in a rush while I still see spots. There’s rustling. There’s running. There’s shouting. I blink desperately, standing on shaky limbs. I have to help. I have to do something. I don’t know where I’m going.

A trident flies from the tree line as Victoria avoids it. Victoria is here too. Which means Emery can’t be far behind. They’re all here. The ones I’m afraid of. The ones I didn’t want to face. And I have no choice but to.

Victoria tackles Beck. He rolls to the side, struggling with her. I see someone running just outside the perimeter, but I can’t tell if they’re joining the fight or leaving it.

Cain throws Bas through the tarp. Bas kicks him in the side. Cain must have an old injury because he doubles back.

I pick up a rock and jump onto Cain’s back. I’m clawing and trying to rip at any piece of him I can. I have to keep him away from my brother. I scratch his cheek before I bring the rock down onto his neck and I draw blood. But he’s too strong and he throws me off of him.

Bas fires another arrow and this one misses Cain, landing in the ground behind him. I need something else. The trident. It’s still in the tree. I can use the trident.

I’m running for it as Bas fires once more. I’m just about to reach it when Emery makes her appearance. I see her sword before I see her face and I drop to the ground. I kick her leg and grab her wrist, pushing her as hard as I can. She kicks me back. I swing around to grab the trident from the tree. I use the hilt to block the swords next blow as I see Beck punch Victoria across the face.

“It’s over. We win,” Emery says, the sword getting closer and closer. Bas is trying to keep distance between himself and Cain but he’s failing. Beck pushes Victoria off of him as she brings her spear down. He barely makes it out of the way in time.

Cain punches Bas in the stomach, the arrows spilling out of the quiver as he falls. The bow is gone from his hand and forgotten to the side. I need to save him. I need to save my brother.

I gather whatever strength I have left to fight Emery. I’m against the tree when I knock her sword away. I swing the trident and the point catches Emery’s stomach. She lurches to avoid the full blow as the edge drags across her skin. She backs off and she’s running before I have a chance to finish it.

Beck grabs Victoria’s spear, hitting her with the back of it in the nose. Her face is more red than her natural skin tone. I have the trident. I have to throw it. Cain picks Bas up off the ground.

Bas’ eyes find mine and there’s a determination in my brother’s eyes, an anger. He notices the bow and he kicks as hard as he can before Cain drags him. The arrows are all over the ground, but it doesn’t matter. I only need one.

And that’s when I throw the trident at Victoria. It doesn’t get far, but it’s enough to grab both her and Beck’s attention.

Cain tries to hold Bas in a chokehold but I fire before he can position himself. The arrow pierces his hand and he drops my brother. There’s blood dripping from the wound when Bas knees him in the stomach then kicks him in the chest. He falls back beside the same tree I was at a moment before.
Bas picks up the hatchet and I grab the closest arrow and fire it at Victoria. It lands in her shoulder as Beck picks up the trident.

I’m reaching for another arrow when it happens.

I turn to fire at Cain, to help Bas finish him, when I see a flash of something shiny and metallic in the last beam of sunlight. I hear a crack of thunder and Bas swings the hatchet.

I try to scream at Bas, to tell him not to, but it doesn’t come out in time through my still raw throat. Bas swings the hatchet and Cain is ready. Bas swings the hatchet and the sword pierces him in the stomach.

“Cain, we need to go!” Victoria yells as another crack of thunder sounds. And I don’t know if Beck survived. I don’t know if they’re still fighting. I can’t look at anything but my brother crumbling to his knees, the blood seeping into his shirt.

Beck tackles Cain before I can move. I see him twist the arrow at Cain’s back before he’s punched in the jaw. Cain runs away as the first rain drops hit the ground. But they don’t burn. It’s just water, not acid.

Bas coughs, the shock of the moment still on his face. I finally move, grabbing him before he falls. I hold onto him, gripping the edges of his jacket, his breath shallow against my skin.

“No, no, no,” I repeat as his hands grab my wrist. It’s weak, fading. This can’t be happening. This isn’t real. This can’t be real. He’s not dying. He can’t die. I have to save him. I’m supposed to save him.

“Ivy,” Bas croaks out as I lay him on the ground. Blood soaks the dirt beneath him and I find myself kneeling in it. He needs salve. He needs bandages. He needs something. Why isn’t there a parachute? There should be a parachute. They wouldn’t let him die. They can’t let him die.

“Please, please,” I start quiet before I’m screaming to the sky, “Mom, Dad, someone, please!” And I keep screaming for help through my mangled throat until my voice finally gives out and I can’t scream anymore.

My hands try to stop the bleeding. I can’t remember how my aunt does this. I can’t remember what she told me about wounds and pressure. And I should have learned. I should have paid attention. I’m stuck in this moment, watching my brother die, and more than anything I just want my parents to make it better.

“Fix it, please, mom, dad, please,” I whisper, trying and failing to keep it together.

“It’s okay,” Bas says in a shaky voice, “It’s okay.”

My throat hurts worse than ever as my eyes well up and my stomach constricts. I feel like I’m being crushed, that every bone in my body is breaking. This can’t be happening. I shake my head.

“It should be me. You were supposed to go home,” my voice breaks and cracks through the tears that are already falling.

I smooth his hair back and he’s breathing too quick, too shallow. He’s scared. His eyes are red and he’s crying too and he’s scared. I can’t help him. I can’t make it better. I can’t stop the inevitable.

I can’t do anything.
He takes my hand and guides it to the wedding rings hanging around his neck.

“You need to bring these….they need…need them back,” he breathes out. I shake my head and I’m scared. I can’t be alone. My breathing hurts, everything hurts. I reach for the pin still in my pocket, still safe and I nod.

“And you need to hold onto this for me.” I pin the mockingjay to his jacket, sniffling, as more tears fall, mixing with his. “I’m sure mom won’t mind.”

He takes another shallow breath, “It doesn’t hurt,” he says, surprised.

I nod, closing my eyes. It won’t be long now. There’s a knife in my ribs, twisting and clawing and cutting me until I’m nothing. I can barely breathe. My hand shakes as it runs through Bas’ hair. And there’s blood on it, there’s blood in his hair, there’s just so much blood.

“I ran from you…at the cornucopia…I ran.” He swallows. “I didn’t want you…to…”

“I love you,” I tell him in a rush. I don’t know if he hears it. I don’t know if he sees me anymore. He’s no longer breathing.

And then I hear the cannon and everything inside of me breaks. I fall forward, sobbing, my brother’s eyes frozen in his last moment.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” I keep repeating as I bury my face in his chest. I failed. I couldn’t save him. I couldn’t do what I was supposed to. I failed him. I’m supposed to protect him and I failed.

I take a shuddering breath as more sobs wrack my body and my throat is ragged and raw. I can’t move. I’ll never move again. They’ll have to drag me out of the arena with him.

The rain stops just as quickly as it started. The sky stays grey and I have no tears left in my body. I have nothing left. I curl my knees into my chest, staring at Bas’ frozen face, one hand still holding onto his jacket. They can’t take him. I won’t let them take him.

“Ivy,” Beck’s gentle voice breaks the silence. He sits beside me, his hand resting on my shoulder while the other closes my brother’s eyes. He’s got a split lip and some bruises starting to spread on his face and I’m sure I look no better, but neither one of us cares about our injuries.

He sucks in a breath, holding his canteen over Bas’ face. He pours a little bit of water onto his hair and forehead. “In Four, when we lose a loved one, we bury them with some salt water and sand to bring them peace and remind them that we’ll see them again. And then we decorate their headstones so that they know they were loved and that we won’t forget them.” He closes the canteen and picks up some of the dirt, “It’s not sand, but it’ll do.” He places the dirt in Bas’ hands and crosses them over his chest.

“How will we see them again?” I ask, my voice small and child-like. We don’t put much thought into the after in Twelve. It’s more burying them, sending our quiet sympathy to the family, and if they were older celebrating their life. There’s not much to it. There’s some singing. They wrap the body, not many in Twelve can afford a casket, and then they bury them. Like everything else in Twelve, the coal dust covers them after death too. We are born in it, we die in it. That’s how it goes.

That is unless we die in the arena, unless we go like Bas. I look at his cold face again and there’s something crawling inside of me, something raw and unhinged. And it’s screaming, trying to tear its way out of me.

“All water leads to the ocean.” Beck places a hand on mine, “That’s how it was explained to me.”
“And you believe it?” My voice is shallow, so quiet it would be lost to the wind. But somehow he hears it.

“It’s a nice thought.” There’s no mask in his eyes, no hint of a lie or a front. He’s not doing this for sponsors or to make himself look better. He’s telling the truth, the real him.

I look at Bas again. I’ll never hear him laugh. I’ll never see another painting. He’ll never make me another terrible cookie because he wants me to feel better. I’ll never get to thank him for saving my life. He saved me. I should have saved him. This is my fault.

“We can’t stay here,” Beck says, and he says it like he’s apologizing, squeezing my hand as he does so. And I know we can’t stay, but I can’t stand. I can’t leave.

There’s one thing we do in Twelve to honor the dead when they’ll be missed most. One thing my mother did for the girl who died during her Games. The very same thing the people of Twelve did for my brother and I when we were reaped.

But I can’t bring myself to move and to do it for him now. I can’t leave him. But I can’t stay.

I close my eyes. How do I keep going when all I want to do is lie in the dirt? I remember the snow. I remember my mother telling me to fight. And I have to fight. I have to remember what she said. How does she do it? What was it that she told me? How does she get through the day?

It was a mantra she repeated to herself, with people who helped her, who mattered to her so that she would have a reason to stay. And one of those things was my brother. But he’s gone. And I feel like I’m falling and I’m burying myself as deep as I can. The person I would think to help me get through the day would be Bas.

This is all my fault.

No. It’s not just my fault.

My hands curl into themselves, the nails digging into my palms and I feel everything. That thing screaming and clawing through me tears into my stomach and lungs, curling around my heart and setting it on fire with some new emotion. It burns into my skin and through my veins, thrumming in my blood and giving me a purpose, a focus.

“Cain, Victoria, Emery. They all did this.” My voice is low, dark and angry, and filled with all the rage I can muster. And I remember what my mother said. I remember her words. I start with what I know and I end with what I need.

I hear her voice telling me what to say and then it’s my own. And I repeat it until I can stand. I repeat it as I kiss Bas’ forehead and then I salute him, my hand raised high and strong. I repeat it when the hovercraft comes and I wear the wedding rings on my own neck. I repeat it as I pick up my arrows and bow and we leave the place where my brother died.

I repeat it like a prayer, like it’s all I have left. I repeat it and repeat it until it’s the only thing I know.

My name is Ivy Mellark. I’m seventeen years old. I’m in the 100th Hunger Games. My brother is dead. I’m going to make them pay for it.

“Just close your eyes, the sun is going down
You’ll be alright, no one can hurt you now
Come morning light, you and I’ll be safe and sound.”
- Safe and Sound – Taylor Swift, The Civil Wars
The Arena: Burn the Cage - Katniss

Chapter Summary

Katniss deals with a great loss and finds a part of herself long forgotten.

Start with something simple. Start with what you know. That’s how you get through the day. That’s how I’ve always done it.

My name is Katniss Everdeen. No, it was Katniss Everdeen. It’s Katniss Mellark. It has been for a while.

I ran from the stage the second the cannon sounded. No one stopped me. No one tried to. And when I emerged back onto the trading floor no one said a word, not even Haymitch. He didn’t know what to say.

There is nothing to say.

I am forty two years old. Sometimes I still think I’m sixteen. I won the seventy fourth hunger games. I wish I hadn’t.

I deserve this. I can’t help but feel that I do. I should have done better. I’m not a mother. I’m not a mentor. I’m nothing. I’m no one. I’m still a child. A child who grew up too fast when her father died, her mother disappeared, and she was forced to survive. A child who went into the Games and lost herself to them, who killed, who made a choice so she wouldn’t lose another person she cared for, and who became property of President Snow. His symbol. His Mockingjay. A voice to silence others.

I couldn’t watch Ivy. I couldn’t handle it. I couldn’t watch her eyes staring ahead, a storm raging, as Bas lied on the ground beside her. He’s gone and I don’t know what to do. And they’re expecting me to do an interview. I still have a child alive in the arena and they want me to speak about her when I just lost my son.

I can’t handle anything anymore. I wonder how I ever did. Is this what it feels like to fall apart? To really shatter into a million pieces and feel the world shift? What did I think it felt like before? It’s nothing compared to the Hell it is now.

I’m married to Peeta Mellark. We have, had, two children. They’re both in the 100th Hunger Games. No, that’s not true anymore. Only Ivy is in the Games.

I hide in my room. I feel like I should be in a small space, a dark place, somewhere that no one can find me, but there’s nothing like that here. It’s all bright and open in the Capitol and not the open I prefer. Not the woods.

I want to go home. I want to hide there. I don’t want anyone to find me or see me. I don’t want them to make me pretend anymore, but they will. They want me to stay in my cage, to say the words they tell me to. They want me to boast about Ivy being the superior child, the clear winner. They want me to make everyone forget about Basil.

We didn’t plan him. The Capitol didn’t plan him, though I’m sure Snow was all too happy to learn
he was a boy. Especially given the plans that were surely in motion the moment Ivy was born.

He was small with a shock of blonde hair and a loud cry. The walls were built with Ivy, they were in place with Bas and it was easier to hold him because I knew I was prepared. And I thought it would make it easier when they were taken, but it didn’t. The walls were a lie, they were something I hid behind and pretended to have when all along there was nothing, nothing but dust and a story to keep myself from feeling.

I should have taken my children and run the day of the Quell announcement. I should have hidden. I should have fought for as long as I could have and we should have run. I should have called for rebellion. I should have been the symbol they needed me to be. I should have done a lot of things. Gale, Madge, the others in Twelve, and now Bas, they might all be alive if I had done things differently. If I had made different choices.

And now my son is dead. And there’s no room to run. There’s nowhere to hide. And my son is gone. And there’s a piece of me that’s been torn out. That’s gone too. And I didn’t think I could feel a pain this bad. And I’ve been trying to keep them alive, trying and hoping that there would be a way out of this. But there’s not.

I don’t know what to do anymore.

I pull my knees to my chest and wait for my sobbing to stop, for my tears to stop, but they don’t. They won’t. And my throat is dry and it burns and my stomach hurts. I want to throw up but I haven’t eaten anything to throw up.

I try to repeat my mantra but it doesn’t work. There is no Katniss Mellark anymore. There’s not even a Katniss Everdeen. I don’t want to be Katniss anymore.

I just want to disappear.

There’s a hole in my stomach that swallows me up and drowns me and my bones are ice, my blood nothing but dirt.

The door opens and someone walks inside, finding me behind the couch instantly.

“Katniss,” Finnick says, his voice is small and quiet and unlike the confident Victor he’s always pretended to be. I wipe the tears, trying to put on a brave face but there’s no bravery left in me. I don’t think I was ever brave. He indicates the empty space next to me with his hand, his eyes avoiding looking at mine. I slide over and he sits down.

There’s a frayed rope in his hands that he plays with, tying knots and loosening them with ease. I wonder how long he’s had the rope and where he’s been keeping it all this time. It’s been used, well worn, like my mantra. And just like me he’s kept it out of sight, put on airs, pretended to be strong.

But there’s only seven tributes left, there’s no more room for pretending.

“Where’s Peeta?” I ask, barely croaking it out.

Finnick doesn’t look up from the rope in his hands, “With Haymitch and Effie, he’s throwing himself into keeping Ivy alive…he’s planning on doing the interview alone.”

Of course he is. Of course he’s doing the right thing while I sit here and hide. Our children are better off without me. Maybe they would have lived without me. And I realize I’m counting Ivy amongst the dead too. There’s no way she’s going to win. Snow won’t let her win. This is all to punish me. And when it’s over, when he comes for me I’ll let him take me. I’ll give him exactly
what he wants. A broken Mockingjay whose song is ready to be ended.

“Do you ever think it would have been better if you had died in the arena?” I ask. I’ve asked Peeta this question what seems like a thousand times and he always says no. But Finnick nods. And I see that Finnick and I aren’t so different. And I know that I could have become him if things had been different, if there was no Peeta, if there was no story.

“Sometimes I don’t even know how I’m still here.” He tightens the rope, clenching it in his fingers until they’re red.

“You have Annie. And Beck.”

“I’m not good enough for them. For him.” He pulls the knot loose and starts over. “At the cornucopia, I couldn’t even watch. I tried but I had to leave and…Annie was, is, the strong one. And Beck…that’s all her. They’d be fine without me. They’d be safe without me.”

I feel the truth in Finnick’s words. Bas and Ivy they would have been safe without me. If I had had an accident like Grover’s mother, if I had disappeared like Madge, they might not be here.

He takes a breath, putting down the rope, “But I can’t leave them. They’d never forgive me and that would mean Snow wins.” There’s a long stretch of silence before, “I can’t imagine…I don’t want to imagine what it’s like. And I’m so sorry.”

“I don’t know what to do. Peeta knows what he’s doing. Haymitch and Effie know. I don’t know.”

“I don’t know either. You lost your son, but your daughter, she’s alive. You should keep her that way or you can let Peeta handle it. No one’s going to expect you to do anything.”

“They do. They will. They want their Girl on Fire.” And I feel so bitter while the bile rises in my throat. I swallow it back down, feeling my insides burn. And I think of Ivy, of her still in the arena, still breathing. And I think of that look on her face, the very one I don’t want to think about, the one I couldn’t watch.

She’s going to play. She’s going to give in to what they want. She’s going to give them a show. And I’m supposed to do the same. I’m supposed to give in to what Snow wants me to do. But I can’t. I can’t live in the cage anymore.

I told her to keep fighting, and she is, and I have to do the same.

The Capitol may want their Girl on Fire, they may want to see their Princess kill and claim victory. But they’re not getting that from me. They’re not getting Katniss Mellark.

Start with something simple. Start with what you know.

My name is Katniss Everdeen. I won the seventy fourth Hunger Games. I lost my son to the Games. My daughter is still in the arena. And I’m going to save her. I’m going to be the Mockingjay.

I stand on shaky legs, using the couch to pull myself up. Finnick follows me as I walk to the door, pocketing the rope as he does.

“Katniss,” he calls.

“I have an interview,” I say, opening the door, leaving him behind. Before it shuts I manage out a soft, “Thank you.”
I walk down the long hallway, past doors with Districts who no longer have tributes, whose mentors are sleeping off a hangover, or waiting for things to be over. I move slowly, my limbs ready to collapse, but I have to be strong, I have to do this interview. I can’t let the Capitol see me cry. I can’t let President Snow win. I can’t let him see me broken. I have to be whole.

Start with something simple.

Just keep walking, I tell myself. Just keep moving. I have to keep moving. I have to do this. My legs feel stronger, my posture straightens, and I no longer have a hand on the wall as I move. I can walk. I can breathe. I can do this.

Start with what you know.

They have to pay. Twelve was fighting. Snow was worried. The rest will follow. And all it takes is one word. All it takes is a spark. And I remember long ago, a meeting in my house, the first time I ever met with President Snow alone.

He had told me to convince him and for the longest time I thought I did. I thought I had succeeded. And the Districts had thought so too, at least most of them. They lost faith. They lost that spark.

And now I have to convince them all over again. And I’m going to.

Peeta is the voice. Peeta makes the speeches and I stay quiet. I smile and wave and play the part, but he speaks. Not this time. All I need is something to say. The right thing to say.

I exit into the trading floor and all eyes turn to me. I can’t look at the screens, but the sounds are enough to send me spinning. It’s all crashing leaves, Beck trying to call for Ivy and her pushing onwards. I don’t even have to see it to know what’s happening, to imagine how she looks.

I have to keep my head up. I have to do this. I have to be stronger than I’ve ever been. I think of Prim at home, of the day I volunteered and I thought I was going to die. I never thought I’d win, but here I am. I thought I was going to starve to death after my father died, but here I am. I’m still standing. And if my life has been about defying the odds then they’re in my favor and I have to defy them once again.

“Hey there, Sweetheart,” Haymitch says, his voice quiet but still trying to comfort me. Effie stands up dramatically, already hurrying over to me. I shake my head and she backs away. Then my eyes look up and they find Peeta.

His hair is a mess, like he’s been running his hands through it too many times. He’s pale and his eyes are red and glassy. I know he’s stopped himself from crying, but he looks like he might break soon. He sucks in a breath and turns back to Haymitch.

“She needs a jacket. We have to focus on keeping her warm. They’ll need food soon.” His voice cracks and fades but he keeps it going. He’s keeping busy, trying to stay strong. And I don’t know if I should go to him, if I should even tell him what I’m going to do.

I can’t tell him. I don’t even know what I’m going to say yet. I have to pretend if only for a little while longer.

Finnick emerges behind me and immediately veers off to speak with Johanna, but before they say anything to each other he turns to Peeta, “I’ll help make sure Ivy gets a good jacket. I have some sponsors I can speak to, they’ll be more than happy to help.”
“I’m sure I can find someone as well,” Beetee says from across the room. Why is Beetee helping? Why would he care about Ivy? Her dying would mean Springer has a chance to win.

Haymitch shakes Beetee’s hand. I can’t focus on this now. I can’t question it. I just have to be grateful. I try to nod but the movement is so slight I don’t know if Beetee even catches it. His small smile makes me think he does.

My eyes fall on Cashmere and Gloss talking to each other. They whisper, glancing around the room, watching the other mentors. And I can see the groups forming. Beetee and Wiress have moved closer to where Finnick and Annie were sitting with Haymitch. Johanna has made a spot for herself there as well. The ones who have lost tributes are wandering the Capitol, visiting their dead loved ones or staying in their rooms now.

But the Careers, the ones who are left, they have their corner of the room. And I realize it now more than ever. If this were a war, they would be standing with the Capitol.

I can’t avoid the screens anymore and when I look up I see Ivy with that dark look in her eyes. It’s a severe determination, an anger that I don’t know if I can match. She’s following a blood trail. Or what was a blood trail and muddy footprints that are drying up now. Her hair is wet but she makes no indication that she’s cold. She’s just focused on the task at hand.

Beck tries to keep up with her, tries to do what he can to stop her. But she’s not hearing him.

“They’re expecting you two for the interview,” Effie chimes in, breaking my concentration on the screen. And whatever look I have in my eyes causes her to look away from me.

“You don’t have…” Peeta starts.

“I do,” I respond and I’m surprised at how loudly I can say it. I turn towards the door and lead the proceessional with the sound of Effie’s shoes behind me and Peeta’s loud footsteps hurrying to catch up.

I focus on walking when I can’t focus on the words I’m going to say. I’m hoping they’ll come to me, but I don’t know how much I will be able to get in before I’m cut off. And they will cut me off. It has to be quick. It has to be enough that they’ll all see and they’ll all want to fight.

I have to be like Peeta, but I know I can’t be. And maybe I should just tell him, just ask him to say what he’s feeling. He’ll know what I really mean. But it has to come from me, I know it does. The Districts need me to speak.

The world seems to spin all over again when we pass the cold metal door, my heart bottoming into my stomach. And I know Bas is in there. They’ll fix him up, they’ll send him home and I won’t get to see him before they do.

Start simple, start with what you know.

I have to repeat it, I have to remind myself. Do it for him. Do it for Ivy. Do it for all the tributes you’ve failed the past twenty five years. Find the words and start the fire.

They re-do my makeup and my hair, the stylists making some remark about how I messed it up and should have known better. I’m silent. I do what they ask as they fix me and Peeta and make us look good as new, like our world doesn’t suddenly have a hole where a person should be.

The lights come up and we’re sitting before Caesar but all I hear is white noise. I look and see the camera crew watching me with interest. Ivy excites them. She’s doing what they want. She’s playing, but there’s an unease to Caesar and I know she’s not playing the way they want her to.
She’s their Princess, not a ruthless hunter.

There are many things I could say, many things I could try to say. It’s a lie. They killed my son. But it’s not enough. And I don’t know what will be enough.

That is until Caesar gives me my moment. And it’s right there, right off the bat. Because his false sympathy is enough to send me over the edge and that’s all I need.

“Let me begin by saying, I think I can speak for everyone when I say that seeing Basil lose his life like that, it’s truly a tragic loss, especially after Ivy had come so far to find him. And after seeing him grow up before our very eyes, I honestly think his death is one that’s hit us the most so far in these Games. And in many ways I think we all lost a brother and a son.”

He puts his hand on mine and the white noise disappears, the blood in my veins boiling and turning to acid. Peeta straightens, ready to fill the void of silence but I don’t let him smooth it over, I don’t let him be charming.

It’s not about being charming. It’s about being angry. It’s about telling the truth. And judging by the way his other hand grips his knee, the knuckles turning white, he’s just as angry as I am right now. And he should be.

I think of Bas, of watching him grow, of loving him even when I didn’t want to admit to it. I think of teaching him the plants he could eat, watching him learn to bake with Peeta. His first steps. His first words. The first time he held a bow and how he hated it. And now it’s all gone. He’s gone. His drawings, his smile, his calm that came from Peeta and the anger that came from me. He was ours and they took him.

“Does it feel like you lost a son? Do you even know what that feels like? Would you even know?”

This is entertainment for them. Fun. And when it’s over, when they break us they don’t want to see the damage. They can’t see it. They bury the dead and move on to the next year, the next show. They kill us, they threaten us, and they don’t care.

And my son isn’t the only victim. I watched that man from Ten lose his son to these Games too. I watched twenty five years of tributes die for them. Grover is gone because of them. River was killed because of them. Teddy forced to become a monster for them, because any shred of humanity in these Games is met with a swift end.

People in my District were killed over a symbol because they were afraid that entertainment would be taken. And they don’t care. They want control. President Snow wants control.

“You take and you watch and you let us starve and kill each other and for what? Because you think it solves something that happened a hundred years ago? It doesn’t. You think that two tributes who want to die because they don’t want to kill each other is romantic. And you invade their lives so that they become yours.”

Ivy and Bas grew up in front of cameras, their lives on display. But they loved Ivy more and they wanted her more, because she looked like me and because she acted like Peeta. And it’s their fault, they took her life and they took mine and they made it theirs. They let the country forget those that died because we were entertaining. They don’t care that people are starving, they don’t care that they’re dying, they just want their Games.

And I remember Peeta telling me he didn’t want to be a piece in their Games but we became them.

“And you pretend to care, you pretend that we matter. But the truth is we don’t matter. We’re just
pieces, playthings. Those are our children in that arena, our children who are starving and killing and dying because President Snow wants them to. Because he says they do. Because it’s his game.”

I see nothing but red, but fire and ash and dust and I want this whole city to bury itself in it. I want all of them watching to know. I want President Snow to know. I want him to feel my rage as it consumes this city, these Games.

And that’s when I turn to the camera.

“Well I have a message for President Snow. I’m done playing.”

I think about the years I’ve spent watching parents mourn their children. The years I’ve spent trying to get tributes through Games I knew they couldn’t win. I remember Rue. I remember her face and how she reminded me of Prim.

And I think of Prim and Rory and their son. Would he be reaped? Would he die too? Would I have to watch Prim and Rory mourn?

And I think of all the other mentors back on the trading floor. The ones who are trapped, who don’t get to say goodbye to their dead. Finnick, who can’t acknowledge his son, who can’t be with the one he loves. Annie, who became just the poor mad girl to the Capitol, and who is no more than a joke to them even as she fights to protect her son.

And they took our children. They raised them to be killers in Two to impress the Capitol. And the Capitol has done nothing but break our children and I remember the look on Ivy’s face and the Games have turned her into a Career, a killer, just another piece in these Games.

They’ve turned me into their symbol for obedience. And all those dead children have been forgotten with the Games, with the weight of President Snow.

“And if he wants to kill my children, then I’ll make sure he dies too.”

I rip off the mic to Caesar’s frantic covering, but I know it’s all there, I know they’ve all seen it and there’s no taking it back.

“Someone must be tired,” Caesar jokes, “Peeta would you care to speak for your wife here?” His voice is strained, trying to threaten, and I turn to look at Peeta.

He smiles, puts on the Baker’s boy charm but all he does is whistle and it’s a tune I haven’t heard since my Games. The tune that Rue used as a signal. And then he stands.

“I think Katniss said it all,” he adds before he walks off the stage. Caesar is shouting then, the camera crew stunned.

Peeta pulls me into his arms in a strong hug.

We turn and Haymitch is waiting for us. He grabs my arm and leads Peeta and me backstage. “Nice show,” he says, dragging us past the elevator and I don’t know where we’re going.

“Haymitch, the trading floor is that way,” Peeta tries.

“We’re not going to the trading floor. We need to get the Hell out of here.” He leads us to a back door through a small hallway where no Peacekeepers are waiting.

We’re whisked into a car that’s been waiting for us and I realize this route, this escape, it’s been
planned. I don’t know what to think of it or what to do about it. Is he taking me to President Snow? Has he been working with him this whole time?

The car moves down the streets of the Capitol, the windows tinted, Capitol citizens passing by in a blur of bright colors. Of pinks, oranges, and blues all mashed against the gray of the buildings. I feel nauseous and I have to keep my eyes inside the car.

“What’s going on?” I finally ask after a long bout of silence. Peeta watches Haymitch and he’s looking for a way out if we need one, I can see it in his eyes.

Haymitch sighs, reaching into a compartment of the seat, pulling out a small bottle, “You just shot the plan to Hell, that’s what’s going on,” he sucks in a breath, “Although maybe it’s for the best that you did. The Districts certainly needed it after twenty five years of nothing.”

The car makes a sharp turn down an alley as Haymitch considers whether to take a drink from the bottle or not. Given how things are going, I might need one too.

“We should save this. But, what the Hell.” He smirks, giving me a look I haven’t seen in years before toasting me, “Welcome back, Girl on Fire.” And then he takes a swig before passing the bottle to me.

“When the fires, when the fires have surrounded you
With the Hounds of Hell comin’ after you
I’ve got blood, I’ve got blood on my name”

- Blood On My Name – The Brothers Bright
The Arena: Predator - Ivy

Chapter Summary

Ivy hunts the Careers while facing the reality of becoming just like them.

“Ivy, we need to rest.”

I push another branch away from my face to find more blood on it. The footsteps are fading in the dried mud, but the blood is still fresh enough to follow. Cain ran, he’s still running, and I’m going to catch him.

I remember the feel of his blood on my face as an arrow tore through his arm. He took another in his hand and one more in his back and he’s still alive, he’s still running. I’m going to end that.

“Ivy, please,” Beck calls from behind me, he sounds tired. But I’m not tired. I’m not allowed to be. I have to keep going. I have to find Cain. He has to pay. They’ll all pay.

I remember watching Cain in training, how poised and deadly he was even when his life wasn’t on the line. He’s strong, much stronger than me. And in here that strength has only magnified with the desire to win. It won’t be easy to take him down. The ache from where the wire attached to my throat seems to remind me of that fact. I’ll have to kill him from a distance. He can never see me coming.

“Ivy,” Beck says again and I snap. Cain will hear us. I can’t let him hear us.

“Go!” Shouting hurts but I don’t care. Beck steps back and I think he’s scared. I keep talking despite the pain it causes, “You don’t have to help me. No more allies. Go.”

“You can’t kill them on your own.”

“I can and I’m going to.” I shift the quiver on my back and find a broken arrow on the ground. There’s some blood on it and in the surrounding area, but it’s lessened now. Cain pulled this out. I’m going to lose the trail.

“And what if they kill you?” Beck asks, his voice dropping as wind rushes through the trees. The grey skies have rolled back in leaving a chill in the arena. I expect it’s going to stay this way for the rest of the Games. The Gamemakers are nothing if not dramatic.

“So,” I barely manage to say as I keep walking, the broken arrow still in my hand. I hear his footsteps following. He grabs my arm, stopping me, and I point the tip of the arrow at his throat. He backs up, never raising the trident to me, and I lower the arrow. I’m not this harsh. I’ve never been this harsh, but it’s a harsh environment and it’s time I learned that.

He doesn’t look scared so much as sad, like he knows there’s no getting through to me. And I can read it in his eyes, the indecision of whether or not I’m worth following. And I’m not, he should know I’m not.

He shuts his eyes and lets out a breath. When he opens them again he’s staring at me hard, asking me if I’m really going to do this. And he knows I am. And his decision is made.
“If you want to kill them you need to be smart about it,” Beck offers. “I was around them during training, I know their weaknesses.”

“I know them too. Cain will use a sword. I’ll have to kill him from the trees. He’s decent with a spear, but not as good as Victoria.”

“And if you’re not in a tree, if he’s out in the field, or in the quarry where there’s nowhere to hide?”

“Then I have to be faster.”

“He took three arrows and he still walked away.”

My nails dig into my palm and my other hand grips the arrow. My anger is burning through me, killing me, and I can’t make it stop. The only way to make it stop is to destroy the cause of it.

“Which is why I’ll aim for his throat.”

My own seems to throb at the reminder, “Show him out it feels.” And it’s not really showing him. I can’t take away someone he loves. I can’t make him feel what I’m feeling, but it’s close enough. And it won’t be quick.

When I was about seven and still learning to hunt, I shot a deer in the throat. It stumbled, it fell, and it was still breathing by the time my mother and I got to it. She finished the job. I dropped the bow and I ran. The deer was so scared, blood filling its lungs with shallow breaths as more blood dripped from the wound. And it’s the only time in my life I’ve ever run from prey in a hunt.

And my mother had tried to be comforting, or as comforting as she could be. She said it was an accident, that I was learning, that mistakes happen. But words have never been her strong suit, especially when it came to me, even less so when I was a crying scared child. I’m sure knowing she couldn’t make me feel better hurt her. Another thing I’m responsible for. Another failure on both our parts.

It was my father who made me feel better at the end of the day with a hug and the right words. I didn’t want to go hunting any more. I didn’t want to keep learning when I saw what it did. But he told me what it meant. It meant helping the others in Twelve. We had enough food but they didn’t. And Bas was too young to start learning, it was just me. And it was important to them that I keep learning, but not to feed Twelve, I understand that now. It was important for the Games. It was important so I could survive.

And I know my mother loved me, though I’m sure she can’t now. She can’t love what I’m becoming. And neither can my father. I’m not worthy of being loved. I killed their son. I killed my brother. I may not have delivered the final blow but it was my fault. It was my failure to keep watch, to save him.

I have to make up for that even if it kills me.

I remember the deer and its fear and I’ll see that in Cain’s eyes before the end. An arrow in the throat, him choking on his own blood, it’ll be slow and painful. Perfect.

“And what about Victoria?” Beck asks, destroying my mental image of Cain on the ground.

I don’t have an answer. She’s the one who’s hardest to kill. She knows how to hide. She’s perfected close combat and fighting from a distance. She’s fast, she’s strong, and she’s motivated, even more motivated than Cain.
“Catch her by surprise. Get her with an arrow before she sees me coming. Emery dies last.”

“It won’t work,” He argues. “Not alone.”

“You have an out, take it,” I tell him. He shakes his head. This is not his fight. This is not his Game. I won’t have his blood on my hands.

“You’re my ally. I’m not leaving you until the top three like we decided.” He watches me and I can’t look him in the eyes.

“There is no top three anymore, there is no plan. I…it’s over. The only thing left to do is make them pay for it.”

I look around but there’s no more blood, no more footprints. The trail is gone. I drop the broken arrow and I take a breath, swearing under it as I rub the aching skin around my throat. My fingers twitch and all I keep seeing is Bas with the sword through his stomach. I hear Cain’s breath in my ears and my head is pounding.

I see that shocked look on Bas’ face. I hear the cannon and then its static and white noise splintering through my whole body. This can’t be real. It doesn’t feel real. I don’t feel like I’m here anymore. I don’t feel real.

I’m not going to live through these Games, I know that. There is no making it. There is no survival without cost. There’s no coming back. The best thing to do is give into it. Just let the arena claim me. Play the Game. Kill the Careers and lose myself to it.

And I could choose a different path, a smarter and safer one, but they killed my brother. And that anger pumps through my veins with every heartbeat I have and he doesn’t.

I lean my head against the tree and I want to scream. There has to be another way to find them. I will find them.

“Ivy…” Beck tries and his voice practically drips with sympathy. I don’t want to listen to him now. I don’t want to hear anything he has to say. I can’t hear anyone. The static gets louder and it turns into the cannon and I feel Bas’ blood on my hands all over again. I feel dizzy, like I’m going to be sick.

“You should rest.” Beck puts a hand on my shoulder but I shake my head and shrug him off, stepping away from the tree. I’m not trying to prove a point this time. I don’t want anyone near me. I don’t want anyone to see me. I just want to disappear.

“I can’t.” My voice shakes and I feel like I’m going to cry all over again and I look at Beck, he’s worried and it’s real and not an act to make himself look good for the cameras. It’s not the Son of the Mad Girl from Four caring for the Princess of Panem from Twelve. He’s not playing up the lovers 2.0 that he came in here with. And when my eyes meet his, the static stops and I don’t feel like I’m fading, at least for the moment.

It’s then that I hear the faint sound of a parachute as it drops between Beck and I. He picks it up and opens it. The case is larger than the others. When the sleeve of a heavy hunting jacket falls out, we both know the parachute is for me. The jacket is lined better than the one I was originally given, with a hood sewn into the lining. I wonder which sponsor sent it. How do I still have sponsors? And even worse, what does that mean when this is over? What will they want in return?

A part of me doesn’t want to live through this.
“That’s a nice gift,” Beck says, and he clears his throat, as he drops his eyes. He knows what it means just as much as I do. I’m too well liked in the Capitol. It was never going to end any other way for me if I won. And it was part of the reason I didn’t want to win.

“You should put it on,” he says, untwisting the cap of his canteen, “And you need some water.” He holds it out and I do as he says, taking a sip from the canteen before I slide the jacket over my arms.

It’s warm and its instant relief the second I put it on. It’s something tangible keeping me on the ground. It smells new, the leather fresh and clean. It doesn’t smell like the arena. I pull the hood up as the wind shakes leaves from the trees.

Beck looks into the canister the jacket came in and removes a note from it. I don’t want to know what it says. I don’t want whatever advice I’ll be given. If anything, it’ll just be another reminder that I lost my brother and that I’m alone.

I readjust the quiver on my back as I pick up my bow. The chain necklace that the wedding rings reside on scrapes against my red and raw throat. I cringe from the momentary pain, but I won’t take them off. The metal cools on my skin behind my shirt and it’s another reminder of home. A reminder I didn’t want to feel but now I’m feeling everything.

I see the blood again. I see my brother’s eyes, vacant and lifeless. And I hear him telling me he ran. He was apologizing, he was saying goodbye. I shut my eyes, trying to make the images go away, but they don’t. It’s worse in the dark.

I open them and find Beck. He’s reading the note with far greater care than I would have given it, holding it with delicate fingers as he reads then re-reads the words. He looks at me and he swallows back some emotion he’s trying desperately not to show. His eyes are glassy as he folds it back up.

“What’s it say?” I ask.

He hands it to me without a word and I’m almost afraid to take it. I turn the note over. It’s handwritten, it must have been slipped inside before the canister closed, or even put inside the jacket and fallen out in transport.

Don’t worry, we’ve got you.

I turn it over, expecting there to be more but there’s nothing. It doesn’t say who it’s from or who it’s for, but I know it’s not for me. There’s no advice, no warnings, just five words that are meaningless to me. I look at Beck as a tear falls down his cheek. And it’s five words that mean the world to him.

“What’s it mean?”

His hand falls to the shell necklace, patting it under his shirt as if to remind himself it’s there. He takes a breath, wiping the tear as he shakes his head.

“I don’t know.”

I don’t believe him and I can read it on his face not to ask, so I don’t. I shrug and hand him back the note.

“Well, maybe you should hold onto it. It could be important.” His eyes are grateful as he pockets it.
I shift the quiver on my back and zip the jacket all the way up. The wind rustles the trees once again and I’m ready to move. I’ll follow where the blood stopped. I’ll pick up the trail again I’m sure. I just have to keep moving.

But my legs are tired, my entire body is begging for a break. And I should rest. But I can’t. I can’t even close my eyes without seeing my brother with a sword through his stomach.

“Your mother,” Beck starts and I can’t face him. He’s digging deep now, he knows what he’s saying, he has to know. I stop and I feel frozen at the mention of my family.

He continues, “What would she say if she were here? What would she do? Because if it’s this, if you know it’s what she would want, I’ll follow you and I’ll shut-up. But if it’s not, if even Katniss Everdeen wouldn’t go so far as to hunt someone down, then maybe you should stop before it goes too far.”

I finally bring myself to look at him and I feel the bite of my anger. He doesn’t get it, how could he?

“And what would your mother think of it, if it was you?” I ask bitterly. “If you had a sister in here, and you lost her. If you had to watch her die, while the people responsible got away. What would Annie Cresta want you to do? What would she do?”

“I can’t answer it because I’m not you. I didn’t…”

“That’s right you didn’t. And you don’t know what I’m feeling or what my mother would say. You don’t know her. I barely do.”

There’s truth in my words but not all of it. I know enough to know she wouldn’t want me doing this. She wouldn’t want me to be a killer, even if she trained me to survive. That’s all it was. Survival. Never murder. Never revenge. Never killing to kill.

Even when she killed in the arena it was to save another or to save herself. Even when it was Rue dead on the ground and she killed the one who threw the spear, it was because she thought she was protecting them. It was never about revenge, just survival.

They like to show that kill a lot on the highlights of my parents. I’ve seen it nearly a thousand times. Marvel throws the spear, my mother fires the arrow, he goes down and she realizes Rue is dying. The Capitol loved that moment. What came after, they don’t show. They don’t like to remind everyone of what my mother did for Rue.

But I’ve seen that too, in my father’s paintings, the one’s he never wanted me or my brother to see. But we did. And it’s one of many memories that I have with my brother, of the two of us realizing that our parents weren’t like other parents, and he handled it better than I did. He was there for them when they needed them.

I don’t know what my mother thinks of me now. When I was younger, I used to think she thought I was a burden, something she never wanted. And now I know that’s not entirely true. But I can’t imagine her wanting me to come home after this. But I think she would let me do what I’m doing. Or she’d do it herself. It’s Bas. She wouldn’t let it stand. I can’t let it stand.

“Then what about your father? What would he say to you right now?”

I can hear his voice. I know what he would say. He wouldn’t want me to do this. He’d want me to hold on. He’d be mourning. He’d be angry and sad but he would want me to come home with as much of myself in tact as possible. And I feel like I’m about to fall into this pit, like I’m standing on the edge of it and if I step off the ledge, if I give in, there’s no climbing out. I become just like
them.

My mother’s voice floods my mind as well, repeating the mantra over and over. And then Bas’ voice grows the loudest, telling me not to play, telling me the Capitol can’t force us to do what they want. And he had said it with so much hope, but there’s no hope left now. They can make us play. They can make me be their star tribute. They took him away. And I’m not strong enough to fight them.

“It’s okay,” Beck says and he pulls me into a hug and I let him. I fall into the embrace like a blanket covering me and I let out a breath. I can’t cry. I can’t do anything but lean my head into his chest and close my eyes. He places his chin on top of my head and he keeps telling me it’s okay but it’s not, it won’t be. And I just want to sleep. I need to sleep. I need to forget.

One second I close my eyes and the next the anthem wakes me and I’m sitting against a tree. Beck is beside me, woken from his own sleep and I’m staring at the sky. There’s one face, the same face that’s burned into my memories and seared onto my heart until the day I die. My brother.

The anthem plays and I’m on my feet. I grab the quiver and bow and follow where the trail last stopped. It’s still light enough that I can see and I wonder if the Gamemakers are keeping it that way. Beck quickly scrambles for his trident and he’s hurrying to catch up to me, calling my name as I push further.

It doesn’t matter what my mother or father would say or what they would think of me. If anything, getting the jacket means I’m on the right path. I’m sure my mother would make Cain pay if she could. They took my brother. They took him, they killed him, and I had to watch him die.

And I’ve always been like them. A Career. Trained to survive the Games, trained to be a Victor, a fighter, a survivor. And it’s so easy to slip into that thinking in here. I knew it the moment I saw the others in training, I knew how to kill them. And now it’s all lining up and falling into place. It’s easy to put that mask on, to be the Career. And I fall over the ledge, I drop into the pit. And it’s so easy to fall.

There’s never been any coming back from this.

I’m picking up speed and Beck’s voice fades, he’s farther away now, but I can hear him running to catch up. He can’t stop me no matter how hard he tries and he’s going to keep trying. I have to leave.

He can’t follow me in this. His mother wouldn’t forgive me for it. And I can’t have someone else die because of me.

So I start to run and I hear him yell after me but I just run faster.

There’s a loud crack that echoes through the forest. I stop and look around, trying to find the source. Smaller cracks sound out, followed by a creaking and a tree falls in front of me. I turn as another falls and I’m bottle necked. I run straight from the fallen trees when another cuts off my path, forcing me to change direction.

I start to wonder if Beck is okay. I didn’t hear a cannon. He has to be okay. But I can’t think of him. I can’t worry for another tribute in here, not anymore. I have to focus on what I have to do. I’m breathless as cracks keep ringing out and trees splinter and fall.

I jump a smaller tree as it drops in front of me and then all at once silence falls and I can catch my breath. I have to get my bearings, figure out the best path to find Cain. I stand on a rock, trying to find where I’m at in the forest, but then I see Beck emerge from the shadows.
He’s clutching his side, blood beginning to seep into his shirt. His eyes tell me all I need to know. They tell me to run. He turns as Victoria jumps over him and I fire. The arrow misses, my shaking hands too full of anger and fear to fire straight.

“Get away from him,” I growl and I fire again. It hits her shoulder and she’s chasing me. I can’t be in a close fight with her, she’ll win. So I listen to Beck, I run.

And Victoria follows, leaving him alone.

I move as quickly as I can, jumping over fallen trees and branches and narrowly avoiding rocks. But it’s not easy and my mind wanders back to Beck. I have to double back for him, I can’t leave him. No, I have to leave him. I can’t let him die. I have to focus. I keep expecting to hear a cannon and it’s like whatever’s pushing me to keep going buries the thought of him until I can’t feel anything but the ground beneath my feet and the breath in my lungs.

I can’t focus on anything but this fight. If I don’t, I’ll die.

I turn, ready to fire again when Victoria swings her sword over my head. Damn, she’s faster than I gave her credit for. I duck as quickly as I can and I feel the sword hit something, shaking the quiver on my back.

The feathers fall and I realize she just cut my arrows. They’re useless now. A swift kick in my stomach reaffirms the fact that I’m going to die.

And I’m not afraid.

Honestly, I’ve faced death so many times in this arena that I’m starting to forget what it feels like to be safe. I’ve forgotten what it feels like to be home, to laugh, to smile. And maybe that really sunk in when Bas was gone, but it all started the day of the Quell announcement.

I knew it was going to end here. There was no way I was coming home.

And I feel guilty. I feel so guilty for letting it happen this way. It isn’t right. I shouldn’t be the last one to leave. Bas should be running away while I take the blows, while I keep him alive. And Beck needs help but I won’t be there to give it.

And if he dies that’ll be my fault. If one of the Careers wins, and they’re going to, that’s on me too. I should have been better. I should have been smarter.

I should be dead by now.

But I’m still breathing, still fighting, and I’m not sure how. I’m not sure what’s driving me, but I’m not stopping it. Victoria has her foot on my chest, pinning me to the ground. I grab one of the useless arrows from my quiver and jam it right into her ankle. She doubles back, dropping her sword. I grab another and hit her knee, jumping onto her as she falls.

And I see her and Cain and all the destruction they’ve brought into my life. I grab another arrow as her arms punch and her nails claw but I don’t feel it. I grab another one and it’s in her chest, the next one in her stomach, and I keep going until she’s not breathing and there’s a cannon telling me I’m done.

I stare at her eyes and they’re cold and dead. And I thought I would feel satisfied, I would feel good about this, but I just feel empty.

Beck was right.
There’s blood on the ground and on my hands and all of my arrows in her body. I don’t know what to do. I feel my stomach churn and I’ve never been this. I’m not this. I don’t know what I am anymore. I’m nothing.

This isn’t being a Career. This isn’t survival. This is vengeance. And the rage that burned through me stifles but I don’t feel better. I’m just like Cain. I’m worse than him. I’m a mutt. I’m the Capitol’s creation. Their Princess, designed to speak their words, fight in their Games, and die.

They don’t want me to survive this.

I hear footsteps and I can’t bring myself to move. I hear heavy breathing and I look up to see Beck. His eyes are filled with worry until they settle on mine and he lets out a breath. He’s using the trident to keep himself upright, his other hand clutching his bleeding side where Victoria’s sword struck.

And the Capitol doesn’t want him to survive either. He’s a reminder that Victors can’t be controlled. He’s defiance, living and breathing and fighting to live.

We were both meant to die once we were raised into this arena.

“I thought you… I thought…” He doesn’t finish and something in the way he says it snaps me into autopilot. It makes me move.

I grab his hand, squeezing it to reassure him. “I’m fine.” My voice is too cold, it’s too far away and I know I’m not, he knows I’m not, but it doesn’t change anything.

“We need to…” I look at his wound, its deep enough that it needs stitches or salve. He shakes his head.

“I don’t think we’re getting any more parachutes.”

I want to ask why but there’s no time. He needs to be patched up and I have to figure out how. The hovercraft arrives but I need Victoria’s shirt. I take whatever cloth I can cut from her and leave the arrows.

We find a creek where the river runs off and I have Beck lift up his shirt. I rinse off the cloth as best I can before pouring water on the wound in his side. He winces, shaking at the pain.

And still, I don’t feel anything for what I’ve just done. I don’t feel bad. I don’t feel sad. I just feel nothing. It’s an empty feeling settling into my stomach and I can’t even be unsettled by it.

“I’m sorry,” I say when Beck winces in pain again. Even as my words claim apology, there’s no emotion, there’s nothing to tell him it’s true. I can feel his breath on my neck as I start to wrap the cloth around his stomach tight enough to hold off the bleeding. He’s going to need help soon. He won’t last long with this, the wound is too deep.

And it’s what President Snow wants, to see him disappear. It’s what he wants for me. I’ve outlived my usefulness. Beck’s outlived his invisibility. We are both living on borrowed time.

“Are you okay?” He asks in a voice that cracks and shakes. My eyes meet his and I don’t have anything to say. We both know I’m not. Neither one of us is okay at the moment.

“Are you really the one who should be asking that?” He cracks a smile and something fragments through the cold inside my bones and warms them. And it’s a light that spreads and grows without me fighting it, and that’s when I start to feel it all.
And I feel ashamed for what I’ve done to Victoria, but I’m more afraid that I don’t regret it at all.

I tighten the cloth and Beck winces once again, his breath shuddering before falling back into the same heavy, shallow, rhythm. I don’t know how long he has.

We have to survive.

“You said there’d be no more parachutes. Why?”

He shakes his head, “Just a feeling.”

We’re too close, my face inches from his. I should back away, but I can’t bring myself to do it. Because I know, once I do, that light, that warmth is going to disappear and that coldness, that darkness swirling in my blood will claim me once again.

“What did the note mean?” I ask and he sighs. I should pull away, I should take my hand off his stomach. I should probably let him put his shirt back on. There are a lot of things I should do. But he doesn’t stop this either, he doesn’t push me away.

His hand runs through my hair, settling beneath my ear against my neck and I can’t help but lean into the touch. And the sounds of the arena fall away, the weight in my heart disappears, and it’s just us.

“I thought the cannon was for you,” he says as his thumb circles my cheek. He stares so hard into my eyes that it feels like I could shatter beneath the gaze, like he’s trying to get me to see something, but I don’t want to see it.

I know what happens to people I care about, especially in here. I can’t care anymore, no matter how hard it is not to. I can’t let him in anymore.

And I think for the first time I understand why my mother did what she did to me, why she wanted the distance. And even worse, I can’t help but feel the eyes of the Capitol on us. Like the Gamemakers planned this moment and we’re both acting according to plan.

And as much as I don’t want to, as much as it hurts me to, I remove his hand from my face and I back up. The cold descends on me quickly as my blood turns to ice and all I can feel is the darkness creeping back in.

Beck swallows, his eyes still watching me, and they look sad. Still, he puts on a smile and a brave face and I don’t know whether or not I want to believe the mask anymore. I don’t know if I can manage my own.

“I’m gonna be fine.” He pulls his shirt on and tries to bury the pain he feels as he does so. But I can still see the blood as he zips up his jacket to cover it.

“I don’t have any arrows,” I say and all I have is a knife and a useless bow. I should have picked up Victoria’s sword. I’m an idiot and Beck is injured. How is he going to throw a trident? How are either of us going to survive?

“There’s one,” he says as he reaches into the sheath that held his trident. He removes the first arrow I fired in the Games and twirls it in his hands, like he’s admiring it, considering it. He hands it to me and it’s the arrow that killed Trina but it’s also the one that saved his life. It’s the one that I couldn’t look at. And it’s the only one we have now.

We need help.
“And if you're still breathing, you're the lucky ones
’Cause most of us are heaving through corrupted lungs
Setting fire to our insides for fun”

- Youth – Daughter
Chapter Summary

Katniss and Peeta learn about the plans kept from them while Ivy struggles to hold onto her sanity and keep Beck alive.

The Arena: Exit Strategy – Katniss and Ivy

Katniss –

The car comes to a stop outside a spice shop. Haymitch watches until its clear then practically shoves us out and the car drives off. We travel down streets and side alleys until it’s a maze of towering buildings and old blocks where few Capitol citizens pass by. I wonder if they’re all gathered watching the Games somewhere or if this area has fewer residents than others.

For all my years spent traveling here for the Games, I still don’t know much about the Capitol itself. I never really had a reason nor the desire to explore it. I hated it. I never wanted to step outside the training facility or the fashion district. I still hate it, even when I’m hiding here.

Haymitch throws his arm up, halting us. He pushes Peeta and me against the wall blocking us as a woman with purple hair walks by. She’s followed by a child wearing a pristine dress and matching purple curls that bounce with each step. They don’t pay attention to us. They don’t even acknowledge us.

“Mommy, if she wins can I meet her?” The child asks, “The Princess?”

My stomach coils and I press myself further against the stone wall until the back of my hand scrapes against the brick. Peeta holds his breath and clenches his eyes shut, trying to do all he can to block it out. And I imagine Ivy winning. I imagine these people standing in hordes calling her name as they grasp and claw for any piece of flesh they can. And I see her face locked in an emotionless expression. I see her eyes staring coldly ahead. She doesn’t scream. She doesn’t cry. She just stares.

“They can’t have my daughter.” My voice is a whisper. I can’t let this happen. I want the laughter to stop and for the screaming to die. They can’t have my daughter.

They keep walking, the child mimicking Ivy shooting someone with a bow.

“And the way she stabbed that one from Two!” Is the last thing I hear the child say before they turn a corner. My heartbeat picks up. She killed someone else. She’s hunting them. She’s playing. And even if she’s rescued, even if she doesn’t end up in this city with these people, I don’t know how to help her. I don’t know if she’d even want my help. I failed her. I failed her and I failed Bas.

“Haymitch,” Peeta says when the mother and child are gone and it’s all he needs to say. Haymitch nods and pushes us down another alley that twists and narrows until we stop once more.
He knocks on a steel door, glancing around until a latch clicks and the door slides open. We walk inside, the door sliding shut behind us. A light clicks on once we’re inside and I’m shocked to see people in the room with us. After all, who would still follow the Mockingjay now? Who would even want to help?

But here they are.

Johanna. Finnick. Annie. Beetee. Wiress. They all sit around a table. Johanna has her legs propped up as Wiress mutters to herself off to the side. Finnick and Annie sit closer than I’ve seen them do before. And I realize this isn’t like before anymore. This is something new, different. And for the first time I think I feel hopeful.

“What is this?” Peeta asks.

“A blind spot,” Beetee replies.

Haymitch points to two empty chairs for Peeta and I to sit in. I want to ask what’s happening but a part of me already knows or thinks I know. I sit silently, waiting for Haymitch to start, waiting for it to be explained to me. And Peeta does the same, but there’s an agitation to him. I can see it in the way he rubs his thumb and first two fingers together. It’s something he does when he’s trying to calm down, usually he’s rolling dough between his fingers but he doesn’t have any here.

Haymitch clears his throat, standing before an attentive audience. He turns to me first. “We’re getting her out. We’re getting all of them out,” he adds to Finnick, Annie, and Beetee.

“I knew once the quell announcement happened, that we needed a plan,” he continues, “That this was going to be different. That people were going to respond differently.”

“Why not tell us?” Peeta asks, his voice rising, his fingers still. “Why wouldn’t you get them out sooner? Bas died and you couldn’t figure out a way…” And Peeta’s standing now and I feel angry too. I feel lied to, but I know the answer. I know why they couldn’t act sooner.

Haymitch looks at me and I say it before he can. “Because of me.”

Peeta turns and his face falls with his anger. He shakes his head. “I don’t believe that.”

“You can’t have a revolution without support. You can’t win a war when there’s no hope, no focus. When the announcement came out, it was only a matter of time before…”

“Before you finally saddled up and said what needed to be said,” Johanna responds. And I expect her voice to be angry but it’s not. She says it so matter of fact and with the hint of a smile that despite her pain I think there’s pride. I think she’s been waiting a while for this. Maybe I have too.

“Shut it down,” Wiress mutters.

Beetee nods.

“We tried to keep them alive, to get them sponsors,” Finnick says. “We should have done more but…they were separated, we can’t control all of it.” He stares at the wall, looking anywhere but at me. Annie looks, she watches me, and there’s sympathy. Did she know? Did Finnick tell her there was a plan? Did everyone know but Peeta and me?

“You could have tried harder,” I say and despite my guilt I can’t stop the flow of anger through me. I can’t stop my rage. And Haymitch lied. He stood there and he pretended there was nothing to be done. And Peeta and I we’ve been lying to ourselves thinking we’d find a way when both of
us knew there was none.

But Haymitch knew there was one.

“You could have told me,” I say. “I would have… I could have done something sooner.”

“Snow was watching you.”

I remember the meeting, I remember the rose. He would have been paying extra attention, especially to me. This was always about breaking me. It was always about putting me where he needed me and then finally killing me when there was nothing left for him to take. It wasn’t just to eliminate me. It was to eliminate every trace. Make everyone lose faith, make them fall back in line, and then kill me and everyone I love so it never happens again.

“And to be honest, Sweetheart, you’re not the best at faking the part.”

“I’ve done it pretty well for twenty five years.” I’m almost surprised at how restrained I sound, how steady despite the ache in my stomach.

“Not telling the whole truth and trying to inspire people to follow you are two very different things,” Haymitch says and Peeta huffs, backing up from the table. He starts to pace, breathing out through his nose. I twist my finger where my wedding band used to be and it’s another reminder of the child I lost, and of the child I can still save.

“We don’t have time for this,” I start, my voice louder than I expect it to be. “Every second we waste here Ivy’s playing the way they want her to. I heard that child out there, she killed someone.”

“The girl from Two, Victoria,” Beetee answers before I have a chance to ask. “I saw it before I made my way out.” He swallows, and there’s something in the way he doesn’t look at me that scares me. It’s not like Finnick’s look. It’s not avoiding my eyes out of guilt, its worry, its concern. It’s the same look Prim gets when she has to tell the family of one of her patients that they died. It’s the same look I saw on my mother for years.

“What happened?” Peeta asks and his forehead creases, the worry lines etched across his face as deep as I’ve ever seen them.

“The Gamemakers pushed them together by bringing down trees. Ivy and Victoria crossed paths, your daughter walked away.”

“That’s not all of it.”

“You don’t want to know all of it,” Beetee warns. He clears his throat before he continues, “But the Peacekeepers certainly seem more interested in watching the Games rather than the mentors they’re supposed to be imprisoning.”

Peeta runs his hand across his face and he’s on the verge of falling apart. I can see it in his tense shoulders and in the restless way he keeps rubbing his fingers together. It’s only a matter of time before he crashes.

“Of course they’re more interested, a little bloodlust is entertaining, but too much,” Johanna responds, her eyes fixated on the table, “Too much and they’ll get scared they broke their Princess. Good thing she has the star crossed romance to humanize her.”

“Johanna. Don’t.” Peeta stares at her hard. She shrugs with the bare hint of a thin smirk and its bitter, like her words.
“I’m just saying what Flickerman and Templesmith surely are.” Her eyes return to the table.

“Beck?” Annie asks, “Is he?”

“Alive,” Beetee tells her, he removes his glasses and cleans them with his shirt. “But for how long, I can’t say. He was injured in the fight.”

Annie lets out a breath. “So…” Her voice bottoms out and she can’t say anything. She shuts her eyes, pulling something in, taking another long breath and she’s calm when she speaks again, “I need my son back. How are you planning on accomplishing that?”

Haymitch turns to Beetee who stands and starts speaking, “We know where the arena is, we need a hovercraft to get there, preferably with some medical equipment on board for Beck. It’ll be faster than the attack hovercrafts, but we lose fire power to take down the shield around the arena and to stop any other hovercrafts coming after us. And they will send ones after us, but we should have enough time.”

“How much time?” Finnick asks.

“Five minutes,” Beetee answers. “It’s not much, but it’s enough. I can send word to Springer. He’s been sticking close to the bridge and the power comes on twice a day. He can use it to shock the boundary; it won’t be enough to bring down the shield, but…” Beetee lifts a hatch on the floor, fishing out a bag that he drops onto the table. He eyes me and I open the bag. There’s a bow and arrows, all in black, the arrows with different colored feathers. It’s sleek, light, and perfect.

“The blue ones, they’re electrified with enough volts to...”

“Shut it down,” Wiress mutters.

“What are the red ones?”

“You don’t want to use those on the shield.” Beetee gives a half smile and I’m too in awe of the weapon in my hand that I forget about the rest of the plan. I imagine what it would be like to hunt with this. I imagine the silence and smooth delivery of an arrow from this weapon. I wonder when Beetee made this and how long he’s had it stashed away for this moment.

“How do we get the hovercraft?” Peeta asks, his voice is rough, strained, his eyes weary. I’m brought back to the reality of this room as Peacekeeper uniforms are pulled from the hatch.

“We dress as the enemy,” Haymitch says.

“The easiest and closest medical hovercraft is in the training center. I can shut down the power. Then we get to the hangar and take off.”

“And what about our weapons?” Johanna asks, “I’m not going in there unarmed in nothing but a disguise.”

“There’s more in the bag,” Beetee responds.

“So that’s the whole plan? Just get a hovercraft and take off? And then Katniss shoots the arena?” Peeta asks his voice full of disbelief, the tension in his shoulders even more pronounced in the way he holds himself upright.

“I expect there will be some fighting involved. But yes, that’s the plan.”

“That’s not a plan that’s a prayer.” Peeta’s hand falls at his side as he stares Haymitch down.
"You honestly expect us to trust that this will work?"

"Do you have anything better?" Haymitch asks.

Peeta glances at me, almost asking, but he shakes his head.

"Then trust it'll work." Haymitch closes the hatch. "When the sun sets we move."

Peeta stalks over to a corner of the room never looking back at the others. I follow him right after. We’re given our space, no one comes to talk to us and no one expects us to talk to them.

Johanna takes a nap on a cot in the back of the room while Beetee and Wiress talk about volts and shutting down the electricity of the training facility. There are some technical words I don’t understand and I tune them out as I get closer to Peeta. Haymitch leaves to send Springer the message or at least that’s what he says, I don’t know how much of what Haymitch says I believe now.

Annie and Finnick take their own corner, their hands never leaving the others as they sit close to each other, their voices never rising above a whisper.

Peeta doesn’t sit. He doesn’t lean against the wall. He doesn’t do anything but pace in our corner. His breathing is heavy as he walks and his eyes follow me.

"Peeta," I start, swallowing the rising lump in my throat. "I’m…"

"Don’t. Don’t apologize. You and I both know that no matter what they say, the Mockingjay, that’s not on you. They could have…they didn’t have to lie. It’s not your fault. Bas…it’s not.” He keeps pacing, his hands curling into fists.

"I should have known. I should have…I didn’t know he would go off on his own. He saw her… and Cain…he…it’s not; none of this is how it was supposed to go. We did what Snow wanted, we said what he wanted. We don’t deserve…” He snaps and his fists connect with the wall. He punches until his knuckles bruise and crack, leaving marks of blood on the wall. He finally stops punching and that’s when I hear the sobs.

He crumbles and I’m there to stop him from falling. His head lands on my shoulder and his body shakes with each fresh wave of tears.

"I know," I tell him as he breaks.

"He’s gone," Peeta chokes out and I fight the tears forming in my eyes as I hold him.

We stay like that even after the sobbing stops and Peeta’s tears have dried. I think I fall asleep for a little while because when my eyes open Haymitch is back and it’s time to go.

We put the Peacekeeper uniforms on and I don’t know if this is going to work. I don’t know if any of this is going to be worth it. She could be dead. We could die trying. But there’s worse ways to go and I would rather die trying than hiding.

I put the helmet on, my heavy breath the only sound I hear until Beetee’s voice crackles through the communications he added. He repeats the plan, but I can’t tell which Peacekeeper he is. And we all look the same in these uniforms but Peeta’s gloved hand finds mine as the door opens to the Capitol.

Beetee tells us to move and my hand squeezes Peeta’s before we let go of each other.
Ivy –

I try to scrub the remainder of the blood on my hands as hard as I can while Beck sleeps. His breathing is still pained and short. I don’t know if he has much time. I did what I could, what I knew how to do, but I don’t think it’ll be enough.

I look up to the sky once again, my eyes squinting against the brightness. The sun is high and shining. It’s been the same for hours. I don’t think it’s going down anymore. I think they want us to stay in the light. It’s more dramatic.

The single arrow in the quiver at my back rattles as I stand. I shake off whatever tiredness I’m feeling. I don’t want to sleep. I’ll only have nightmares and one of us needs to stand guard. One of us needs the rest more.

I look to the trees and for a split second I think I see blonde hair but I know it’s not real, it can’t be real. I’m just tired.

A shadow passes by me and I raise the knife but it’s gone. And then I see him standing there.

Bas.

He stares. That’s it. That’s all he does. And I can’t do anything but stare back. He’s not really here. I know that. But I can’t help that I see him. I can’t help but pretend he is.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him. He says nothing. And then his stomach bleeds and there’s so much red spilling out he looks like he’s drowning in it. “I’m sorry!” I try again, my voice rattled and shaking. He’s gone before I can say it again.

I watch the place where he stood but the only thing there is a tree. I take a deep breath. I have to stay calm. I have to keep myself steady.

Then, there’s an explosion and a cannon and I grab Beck as he startles awake. He can’t move fast. He can’t risk hurting himself more.

“What…” He breathes.

I look to the bridge where smoke rises and then the face appears in the sky. It’s the tribute from Five.

“He must’ve set off a trap. Bas said…” I shut my eyes and I can’t shake him from my mind. He’s not real. He’s not here. Ghosts don’t exist. “He said Springer was putting traps there, hiding out.”

“Bet he’s not hiding anymore.” Beck tries to stand but he groans in pain. I check the bandage. Blood is starting to seep through it, he doesn’t have much time.

“You shouldn’t…”

“We can’t stay here.” His eyes find mine and I know he’s right. I hand him the trident so he can use it keep himself upright if I can’t. He still needs to defend himself and I only have one arrow. I help him stand, keeping myself positioned under an arm to help him walk.

“I can do it on my own,” he says.

“Yeah? Take five steps and prove it.” He huffs a small laugh.

“I say we move away from the bridge. Cain probably heard that too,” Beck says through labored
breaths. I nod.

The slope up from the creek is the toughest. Beck strains himself, his breath getting shorter, and we have to slow down. His arm tightens around my shoulder and I’m carrying more of his weight as we ascend. He uses the trident to try to level out his weight and I’m grateful when the ground flattens and we can pick up the pace.

I ignore the shadow of my brother following me from the trees, the grey eyes and blonde hair that surrounds me with every step I take. I don’t hear his voice yet, though I’m sure it’s coming.

I’m losing it in here. I can feel it. And I can’t stop it. I want to say it started when I killed Victoria, or even when Bas died, but the truth is it started long before that. It started the second I shot August. And I kept it at bay for as long as I could. I focused on finding my brother while I left pieces of my soul scattered about the arena with each death and each choice. Grover drowned and I hardened myself to it. I killed Stone and I didn’t blink but I felt it after. And then Bas was killed and whatever strength I had left to fight this was gone and I gave in.

And even though the sun shines on everything in here all I see is darkness, all I see is blood and death.

Bas stares at me from the river and then I see August and Stone. Grover follows from the trees and Victoria stands in front of me. All my ghosts are in here. There’s no escape.

Beck stops and his eyes fall on another shadow but he can’t see my ghosts, he can’t see what I see. He can’t see Victoria blocking our path. Unless the arena is doing this, unless we’re both going crazy, but I don’t know which would be the more comforting outcome.

I don’t have a chance to find out. The dead disappear and all I see is what Beck sees, all I see is the source of all my hatred, all my rage.

He stands ten feet to the side of us, sword in hand and spear at his back. He’s bruised and there’s dried blood on his shirt and hand. He grips the hilt of the sword readying for a fight. I can’t fight him. We can’t fight him. I hear rustling and I know Emery isn’t far behind.

We have to run.

“This is gonna hurt, but you have to move,” I tell Beck and he nods and we do just that. We move as fast as we can. I throw the knife in the hopes of keeping Cain at bay. He dodges it as it sticks into a tree, picking it up while he runs. Great, now I’ve just given him a knife too.

I half expect him to throw it back but he’s moving slower than before. His injuries must be taking their toll. And then I remember the arrow that went through his hand. The hand he uses to throw with. He can’t use the spear unless he’s in close range.

“Emery!” He’s panting through his words and I think that I could kill him if I tried, but I can’t try. I have to keep moving. I have to help Beck keep moving.

I’m not paying attention as Beck and I slide down a hill full of loose rocks and dried mud. My hands are scraped up as are my legs but I’m mostly fine. Beck groans and he can’t stand. I hear two pairs of footsteps catching up. Emery’s here too.

I look around for anywhere to go and then I see a building looming in the clearing, the quarry behind it. It looks like a factory, a little old and rusted, but its shelter, it’s safe.

I help Beck up and we half limp, half run our way to it. We can block the doors and wait the two out. They’ll need to find food. They’ll need to break apart. We can outlast them.
A spear lands to our left and I turn to see Emery watching us, disappointed. Cain rubs his shoulder blade and there’s fresh blood on his hand. His wound is open again. Emery stops to check it but he shrugs her off, brandishing the sword as he follows Beck and I.

The clearing feels larger than it is and it very well could be. The Gamemakers could be changing the landscape in bits and pieces, drawing this all out, building up the excitement. The dust in the air from the quarry swirls as a breeze flows through. The sun shines brighter if it’s possible and I’m so tired of all of this. I’m so tired of cameras, of the show, of the act I have to put up. All I want to do is scream.

We make it inside as my knife hits the door. I slam them shut, shoving Beck’s trident in between the handles of the doors to keep them closed. Beck and I lean against them, and this is it, this is the last place I’m going to hide, the last place I’m going to run to.

And I’m starting to think Springer might be the biggest challenge out of everyone. He’s well hidden. He’s got traps, supplies. He’s the tribute no one saw coming.

And I’m glad he’ll win over Cain or Emery. I’m glad he gets to go home because I know I’m not going to. Not with two Careers outside, no weapons, and an ally close to death. And I’ve faced death several times. I’ve expected it and it didn’t come. But this time I know it’s real. This time I know it’s the end.

“You can’t hide in there forever!” Cain huffs and I hear him circling, waiting. He says something to Emery that I can’t make out, but I know he’s right. We won’t be able to hide in here forever. Sooner or later, I’ll have to face them.

There are old benches and tables in the factory that Beck and I slide in front of the door to ensure our safety. He moans in pain as the table scrapes across the floor, checking his bandage as more blood seeps through. I search through crates filled with threads and needles, making sure to find one that’s not rusted over and unusable. If I can stitch up Beck’s wound enough, I can get him further, I can keep him alive a little longer. It’s dusty in here and there’s old fabric littering the floor. There’s no food or water. There’s nothing that will help us survive and no back way in or out. There are small windows at the top to let some light in, but nothing we can climb out of.

Cain bangs on the door, kicking and yelling, but the table and trident holds it closed. I turn to Beck and show him the needle and thread. He sighs and I know whatever I’m doing is just delaying the inevitable. He’s pale and his hand shakes as he drinks from the canteen.

When I remove the bandage there’s more blood than I thought there would be. I try to block out Cain as I do my best to sew the wound shut. Beck hisses and winces in pain, looking like he’s going to pass out any second.

“You have to stay awake,” I tell him.

“I know,” he responds. He tries to sound confident, he tries to sound like he’s in control of whatever he’s feeling but he looks scared, and there’s no hiding that. “Ivy…”

“Don’t. I’m not leaving you here, not to them.”

He smirks, his fear abating for a small moment. “I knew you liked me.”

“Shut up.”

I get about halfway through when I start to smell smoke. I look around and it begins to fill the room, blanketing the ground with swirls of white and grey. Beck whips his head around too, the
worry lines etched into his face. He looks older than he did when this started, I’m sure I do too.

I cut the remaining thread with the tip of the arrow and bandage him back up. It’ll have to hold. It’s the best we can do. I hurry to the door and it’s warm, a light spreading around the edges of the factory. A spear flies through the window and lands in the middle of the room, fire burning on its tip and pluming inside the factory.

And it’s ironic that this is how I’m going to die. My mother was the girl on fire and here I am about to be set ablaze too.

I honestly didn’t think this is how I would go.

“I got this target
Right here on my back
They're aiming where I was
Not where I'm at
They ain't stopped me
Since I was eighteen
I'm moving faster
Than my enemies”

- Feet, Don’t Fail Me Now – NEEDTOBREATHE
Chapter Summary

Katniss flees the Capitol in the hopes of rescuing Ivy from the arena, but things don't go as planned.

It starts as planned.

The Peacekeepers are being dispatched to the training center as part of President Snow’s reaction to his Victors going missing. We blend in to the incoming units, sticking together, following orders, and no one questions us.

Haymitch and Beetee disappear to deal with the power and the hovercraft. At least, I think it’s them. We all look the same, it’s hard to tell. The rest of us stay with the Peacekeepers. It starts out almost too easy. And I think this is working. I think we have a chance. I have hope.

We stay in line. We don’t say a word. It’s going well. It’s going to be okay. We’re going to rescue her. I’m going to see my daughter again.

And then we’re stopped by a large Peacekeeper with his helmet off. He has a hooked nose and a beard. He surveys the units. He’s in charge, he’s making the orders, and he’s dividing up the reinforcements. He points and sends each person to their post and to their new assignment. I step forward in line, praying I’m with the others, praying we aren’t split apart. He reaches me and shoves me to the left. Peeta was next to me, he’s not anymore. No one is. I’m the last to join this group.

“Head up to the trading floor and keep the mentors in line. It’ll be over soon.”

I freeze. What does he mean? It can’t be almost over. What’s happening in that arena? I need to know. I have to stop myself from running as a hand pushes me forward, keeping me with the unit.

Under the synchronized marching of boots a voice whispers, “Don’t draw attention to yourself.”

“Johanna?” I question.

She shushes me, sticking beside me as we march on. I want to ask about Peeta. I want to know if she saw him or if she can even tell which one he is, but I can’t. I have to be quiet. I have to stick with the plan as best I can. There’s no turning back even if one of us gets lost or left behind.

We have to get to Ivy. Whatever it takes, I have to save her. I have to undo what I’ve done. I trained her for these Games and it’s my fault she’s in them. It’s my fault I played the part. It’s my fault she’s losing herself in the arena. And I know what it’s like to lose yourself both to the ghosts of the Games and to the image of a Victor. I have to salvage whatever’s left of her and bring her back. I can’t lose her too. I can’t let it happen.

She has to know I love her. She has to know for sure. I can’t let it go unsaid anymore and I hate that I let it happen. I hate all the things I never said to Bas, all the memories I never shared with him and yet he never questioned it of me. And I regret that I couldn’t show Ivy that same absolution. And she said she’s seen it, she said she knows, but she can’t until I tell her.
I owe her a better life, whatever life she can have after this. I owe her so much more than I’ve given.

I used to think I would be better than my mother, that I wouldn’t do what she did to me, that I wouldn’t disappear on my children. And maybe I didn’t disappear but I wasn’t myself. I wasn’t who they needed. Maybe that’s worse. Maybe it’s the same.

I never let them starve. Even at my absolute worst, even when I couldn’t get out of bed, I never let them starve. And maybe that’s better than my mother. Maybe I am better, but not by much. And I can’t live with that.

We keep traveling down the hallway and I know we’ll be at the elevator soon. And I know it’s only a glimpse, I know it’s temporary, but I need to see her. I need to know she’s still alive.

“Keep up,” Someone shouts behind me and then it’s followed by, “Move!”

I can see the elevator. I can keep going. I can see her before the power shuts off, before I take the chance to escape.

“What are y--”

I hear a commotion, more shouting mixed in with the sound of someone being beaten, and I turn. It’s Wiress. Her hands are twisted around themselves, her face bleeding where she was hit as the Peacekeeper who beat her stands with his baton raised, ready to deliver another blow.

“They’re here! They’re wearing uniforms!”

Wiress looks at me and she looks through the helmet as if she can see right to my eyes. And I can see that she knows it’s me. I try to get to her, to stop what I know is about to happen, but Johanna pushes me back as she raises her gun.

“Shut it dow--”

The final blow is delivered and Wiress’ face is frozen in her last words. A gunshot rings out and the Peacekeeper falls beside Wiress. Johanna removes her helmet, throwing it to the side as she grabs me and we start running.

“Helmets off!” The Captain orders but no order to shoot follows and no gun shots threaten me.

“Snow wants her alive!” Is the final order I hear as I throw my helmet off and we turn down another hallway. We slide as I hear more boots and we turn. I can see another elevator but we don’t take it. We can’t go up. We can only keep running.

The alarms start to sound through the building, mixing with the shouts of Peacekeepers as they march towards us. We’re trapped, or about to be, there are only so many hallways for us to run down.

And I thought I had hope, I thought I could have hope. Hope is wasted here.

We hear more boots and Johanna pulls me through a steel door. And I know this door. It haunts my dreams with its silence. It’s the door I was never allowed to go through, the invitation I never received, the goodbye’s I could never give. The dead door.

I can see my breath in the air as Johanna shuts the door behind us. And then the power goes out.

Even in the darkness, I slam my eyes shut. I’m afraid to look. I’m afraid to see what I know I’ll
see. It’s too cold here. It’s freezing. I can feel my skin start to numb the longer I stand still.

I keep my eyes closed as the emergency lights turn on and there’s a dim red glow against my eyelids. But I can’t open them. I can’t see what I don’t want to. I can’t face it.

I can hear the Peacekeepers outside the door and there’s no way out. I don’t know what President Snow will do to us. I don’t know what horrors he could possibly come up with but I know they’ll be nothing good.

And my thoughts are on Ivy, on her still in the arena, and I can only hope Peeta will get to her. I can only hope one day she’ll forgive me for all I’ve done, even if I’m not there to apologize and tell her myself.

I finally open my eyes to stare at the steel door. Johanna’s Peacekeeper baton is jammed in the handle, stopping the door from opening. It shakes and rattles as our pursuers try to pry their way in. It won’t be long before they succeed.

“He looks so small,” Johanna says in a low, wavering voice. And I don’t want to look. I don’t want to see them. I don’t want to see him. But this is the only time I’ll ever get to see him, the last time I’ll get to say goodbye. I won’t get to bury him in Twelve, I realize that now. He’ll be stuck here. He deserves a goodbye. He deserved so much more than what he got. He deserved a mother who would have fought for him, who wouldn’t have let him go into that arena. I have to make up for some of that. If the Capitol takes me, if President Snow gets me, I’ll never have the chance.

Another chill runs through my bones as I take a breath and turn, trying to stay strong, trying to keep my face stoic. The tributes are placed in order by District, just like everything is done in the Games. I pass Stone, his wounds have been fixed and all the imperfections from survival erased. He’s dressed in a white suit, prepared like a doll. That’s how they like it when they bury the dead from the Games. Clean, honorable, and made up just like the chariots. It’s all a lie, a façade, all of it. And there’s no escape, even in death.

I stop beside Victoria and I can’t help but look at her. Ivy killed her. That’s what Beetee had said and he had looked solemn, he didn’t want to tell me, but I can see it. Whoever cleans the bodies hasn’t gotten to her yet. Her wounds are still clear and on display. It was violent, it was angry, and a part of me doesn’t want to believe Ivy did this, but I know she did. I know she’s capable of it. The same rage flows through her veins as it does mine. It’s my rage, my fire that she got. And Bas had it too, but it wasn’t enough to save him. And judging by the tears in Victoria’s flesh and the amount of blood on her clothing that fire won’t be enough to save Ivy either, if anything it’ll destroy her.

Ivy and Beck killed Stone to survive and they did it together. Ivy killed Victoria alone. And as I stand between the two bodies I can see the difference. I can see the marks of survival and the marks of vengeance. And I don’t know if I would have acted the same. I don’t know if I could. Even worse I don’t know if bringing Ivy back from this is possible.

My eyes fall on Johanna as she stands over Grover. She’s right, he does look small. And for all her hardened edges, for all the bitterness and loud anger, she’s quiet, her eyes staring at the boy lying in front of her. He’s pale, his glasses foggy from the cold and he’s been fixed up too. He’s been turned into a lie. Johanna’s eyes soften the longer she looks at him, like she’s lost in a memory. And she sees past the lie, she sees the boy that was, not the boy they created.

“I was his mother’s mentor, she was in…it was bad when she came back. She had to go to the Capitol a lot, they liked her.” Johanna watches Grover, as if hoping that by mentioning his mother it’ll bring him back, but he doesn’t move. “And then one month she didn’t have to go and a couple months later he was born and she was…I thought she was getting better, I tried to…I
watched out for him. And her. I tried.”

Her hands are tentative, slow and caring as she removes the glasses, folding them and placing them at Grover’s side. Her other hand finds his hair and stays there, her palm pressed to his forehead, fingers brushing his locks.

“I tried. I should have tried harder,” her voice cracks and I don’t know whether I should say something, I don’t know what to say. My loss is as fresh as hers. There is nothing to say.

If Grover looks small it’s nothing compared to the boy from Ten. His feet don’t even reach the bottom of the metal table he’s laid on. I can’t look at him. I keep walking and as I do I finally bring myself to look down the end of the line towards the two from Eleven and I’m getting closer. The girl, Callie has been put back together with Teddy beside her, and they’d look like they were sleeping if not for the lack of color in their skin and breath in their lungs. And I could pretend they were sleeping if I wanted, if I tried hard enough, but I know it’s a lie. Like the way they’re prepared, like the way the Games are presented, like the way my life has been since I became a Victor, it’s just another lie.

And I can’t lie anymore.

When I stop in front of Bas I can’t feel the cold of the room anymore. I can’t hear the Peacekeepers outside. I can’t even hear Johanna. I’m alone standing before my son and everything is quiet. The red lights bask him in a glow that reminds me all too much of the moment he faded from the world as blood seeped into the ground and tears fell from his eyes for the last time. He was scared and I should have protected him. I should have done better.

I couldn’t help him. And I can barely look at him now without feeling like a piece of my soul is being torn out. And I didn’t realize how much I ached, how much I hurt, until I looked at him, until I faced him. And it’s so much worse than I imagined. It feels like I’m a statue, like I’m frozen and cold and I can’t feel any of it. But somehow I move closer to him, somehow I stand near enough to see the Mockingjay pin returned to the lapel on the suit they dressed him in. They let him keep it.

I stare at the pin and my fingers fumble over themselves to touch the golden bird with the arrow in its mouth. Madge gave it to me. She told me it was a gift and it was. It was a token, it was hope. That’s what the country saw and felt once before and it’s what they need to see again.

I draw my gaze from the pin to Bas’ face. His eyes are closed, his hair combed back and his face still. He looks older now that I see him. He looks worn and weary. I close my eyes and the tears come but I don’t fall apart. I don’t break down like I thought I would. The cold burns against my skin from this room and the silence I felt before disappears.

I can hear what’s happening outside. I can hear the Peacekeepers barking orders, ready to break down the door.

“I love you,” I tell Bas in a voice that barely produces any sound. And he always knew but saying it aloud makes it real, even if he can’t hear it now. I take the pin from him and I pocket it. I need to carry it for him. I need it so I can remember how I held this country’s hope in my hand and I let it die. I buried it. I can’t do it again. I have to keep it alive for him, for my son, for everyone. And he painted the symbol before, he tried to remind everyone that I was still here, and I let him down. I won’t let him down again.

“They’re going to be in here soon,” Johanna says, her voice back to a steady and controlled tone. She doesn’t say anything to me about Bas and I don’t say anything to her about Grover. We let it be. Two mothers mourning their sons in silence while trying to survive.
The door shakes and rattles and there’s the distinct sound of drilling. Johanna pulls her gun and waits.

“I’ll fire, you run.”

“I can’t let you…”

“You’re not. No matter what, keep running. Get to the hovercraft and go.” Johanna gives me a smirk, “Be the big savior, Mockingjay.”

The door slides open but before Johanna can fire a Peacekeeper drops to the ground, unconscious. There are two gun shots and Gloss steps into the room.

“What the Hell?” Johanna asks.

“I should be asking you that,” Gloss replies.

“I thought you’d be on their side,” Johanna says, kicking the unconscious Peacekeeper, blocking me from Gloss, “Or are you looking to take Katniss to Snow yourself?”

He shakes his head, “I wouldn’t do that.”

“Is that so? Funny. How exactly did you walk out of that arena, was it by being honest?” Johanna remarks.

“I thought that was you,” he retorts but there’s a tiredness to his words, a worried edge in them. “We need to go.”

“We don’t need to do anything.” Johanna points the gun at him but he doesn’t flinch. Instead, he drops his and waits.

“I want what you want,” he says, staring at me pointedly, “Before it’s too late.”

And I remember how he’s been these Games. Sleepless, red eyed, always watching the screens, never leaving the room unless Cashmere forced him to. The other Careers, namely the ones from Two always sleep just fine and this year is no exception, but Gloss has been different. He’s worried about his daughter. He wants to save her just like I want to save mine.

“You want to save Emery,” I state and he nods.

“She helped kill my son,” I tell him and my voice is cold, “Why would we help you get her out?” And she didn’t deliver the killing blow but she was there, she helped. She’s as much to blame as Cain and Victoria.

And I realize a part of me is relieved that Ivy got to Victoria, that she made them pay. And I wonder if my rage will consume me just as it’s doing to Ivy. And even worse, I wonder if I’ll let it.

“Because I just saved your lives, and because…we’re different in the arena. She’s different in the arena. She just wants to go home, like we all do. You both know what that’s like.”

We can hear more boots marching their way down the hallway.

“More will be here soon,” Gloss says and his hands are curled at his sides and he’s pleading. His eyes, everything about him is screaming to let him come with us. And I have to. I have to get to Ivy. There’s no time for this. We need to get to the hovercraft. We need to go. I have to save her.
“We need to go,” I say. “This doesn’t mean I trust you. And if you do anything, if you’re trying to get me to Snow or to stop this, I’ll put an arrow in you myself.”

I head out first with Gloss and Johanna following. “We need to get to the hangar,” I say and Gloss nods.

“I know a way,” he says and starts down the hall. Johanna stops him.

“No, we’re not following you.”

“I’m not your enemy.”

I push forward, there’s no more room for arguing. He’s right. He’s not my enemy. He’s not who I’m worried about. President Snow is our enemy, all of ours. He’s the one we should focus on fighting. For now, there’s just this mission, just the rescue.

Johanna keeps her gun on him as we move. The alarms continue as emergency lights blaze in the hallways down to the hangar and I’m relieved when we make it there. But there’s no one else around and I think we’re too late, I think they left without us.

There are no enemies to fight and from what I can gather, no missing hovercrafts, no empty space for us to realize we’ve been abandoned. Maybe we’re the only ones who made it.

I’m about to ask if Gloss knows how to fly a hovercraft when Haymitch storms in holding the bag of weapons in one arm and helping Finnick carry an injured Beetee with the other.

Blood covers the back of Beetee’s uniform and his head lolls against Finnick’s shoulder. There’s blood on Finnick’s face but he’s unharmed, or looks it. Johanna glances behind them for anyone else and I can feel the absence where Peeta should be. My heart falls into my stomach.

“Where’s Peeta?” I ask and my voice turns frantic as I push past them. Haymitch grabs my arm, stopping me from leaving.

He shakes his head. “We need to get to the hovercraft.”

“Not without Peeta.”

Finnick and Johanna share a look, “Annie’s not with you?” He asks and his voice is frail, like glass being scraped against the ground. And I know what he’s feeling. Peeta’s not here. I can’t keep moving. I have to wait for him.

“We never saw her,” Johanna answers, “Wiress is gone.”

Finnick nods and takes the full weight of Beetee onto him as Haymitch shoves the bag of weapons into my hands.

“We need to move,” Haymitch repeats with force, “We’ll be surrounded soon.”

Finnick’s hands grip Beetee so hard I’m sure they’ll leave bruises. I swing the bag over my shoulder and Johanna pushes me towards the hovercraft, but I can’t move. I don’t want to move. Finnick struggles to keep his feet moving forward and I know it’s not the weight of Beetee on his shoulders.

I can’t breathe even as we board the hovercraft. It’s a medical one, the same ones they use to take tributes out of the arena after they win. There are no weapons on board, save the one’s we have on us. If the Capitol follows, and they will, it’s going to get a lot harder to escape them.
Haymitch knew this was a possibility, he knew we were going to face this and he warned us, or tried to. Still, it’s hard to face the truth.

Finnick lays Beetee onto the ground, putting an IV into his arm. His every motion is mechanical, his eyes trained on what he’s doing, afraid to look anywhere Annie isn’t.

“Finnick,” I try and my voice has the same edge, the same broken sound as his.

“I hope they’re dead,” he responds quietly, “If Snow...I hope they’re dead.”

And I understand. Peeta being dead would be better than what the Capitol will do him. And I don’t know what kind of world there is without him in it. He’s been a part of my life for so long. I love him. I believe I do, I know I do, even if I can’t find the words to say it. He knows. He’s always known. And living without him. It doesn’t seem possible. I don’t know if it is. He should have heard it too. I should have told him.

There’s Ivy. I have to focus on her. I can mourn later. I can worry after. I have to save her. He would do the same.

Haymitch goes to the front and starts the hovercraft. Gloss looks around frantically, his worry taking over and someone’s missing for him too. The cold metal of the hovercraft seems to surround me and the glass in my voice travels into my veins.

We should wait. We have to wait, but we can’t. I know we can’t. I know we have to go. Beck and Ivy need us to leave and Annie and Peeta would want us to go. I would want to be left behind if it meant saving Ivy. I would let the Capitol tear me apart if it meant saving her.

The engines come to life and everything begins to lock down for flight. The door starts to move downwards, ready to seal off the hovercraft so we can take off. Finnick sits back after he finishes working on Beetee and his hands twist into themselves, his fingers turning white as he grips his knuckles.

My fingers press the empty space where my wedding band was until they reach into my pocket for the pin I took from Bas. I press it into my palm and I try to remember the days after I won, the days when Peeta and I wouldn’t talk because it was just an act, an act we had to keep up. And then I remember the days when it stopped being an act, when we laid in bed beside each other and there was peace and warmth and I forgot to pretend. I remember him throwing me bread when I was starving. I remember the dandelion that meant hope. And I try to picture that feeling when I look at the Mockingjay pin. Is this what they see?

I don’t know how to live without the dandelion in the spring, without the warmth that only Peeta can give me.

The door keeps closing and I look out into the hangar. How can I give them hope when I have none for myself?

And then I can see them. Two people running towards us as fast as they can, desperately trying to escape. Peacekeepers follow with some breaking off to get into hovercrafts of their own. They fire and the two keep running.

“Haymitch!” Johanna screams over the engines but the door keeps closing. Finnick runs towards the door, his eyes alight with the same hope that burns in my heart. And as they get closer I can see Peeta pushing Annie forward, keeping her in front, making sure she gets there first.

Finnick holds out his hand, Gloss keeping him in place so he doesn’t fall. Annie picks up speed,
sprinting as the Peacekeepers get closer. She reaches when she’s close enough and Finnick pulls her up, falling back, barely able to catch his breath. His arms encircle her into a hug and there are tears in his eyes, but the moment is short lived. Peeta is still running. He still needs to get here. He’s not safe yet.

I tear open the bag of weapons and remove the bow and arrow, careful to use only the standard arrows, not the electrified ones. It’s easy enough to notice the difference. The regular ones are silver tipped and it reminds me of my Games, of the bow I took from the hands of the girl from One after I helped kill her. Glimmer. That was her name.

I load the arrow and I fire at the Peacekeepers behind Peeta. He’s slowing down but he can’t stop, he has to keep going, he has to make it.

I’m yelling as I fire, Peacekeepers falling with each arrow, and I’m calling Peeta’s name. Finnick is back beside me, ready to grab Peeta when he can. Gloss extends further, holding onto the door and about to fall out. We are approaching the edge and Peeta’s running out of room to run. The door is going to close. He’s not going to make it.

“Jump!” Gloss reaches and Peeta jumps. I can’t breathe. I only hear the door shut and I don’t know if he made it. I’m afraid to look and see no one there.

And then I hear Peeta say, “Thank you,” and he’s breathless and I can feel my heart beating again. And before he has a chance to say anything else I pull him into a hug and his strong arms circle me. I bury my face into his neck and breathe him in. He doesn’t smell the same here as he does back home, but he still somehow smells like him.

“I thought you were gone,” I tell him and I can feel him nod against me.

“It’s okay, I’m here now,” he says with his breath against my ear, “Always.”

“Well that was entertaining,” Plutarch Heavensbee interrupts, emerging from the front of the hovercraft, a drink in his hand. “I wish we had a camera.”

Peeta and I break apart as the air around us darkens and Haymitch pushes Plutarch back to the front.

“What’s he doing here?” Annie asks, her hand finding Finnick’s.

“Helping,” Haymitch answers sparing a glance at me, “You should get ready to fire that arrow.”

He turns back inside to fly the hovercraft. Gloss presses his head against metal side and I can’t tell whether he’s going to be sick or worse. He turns to Peeta, his voice lowering.

“Cashmere?” He asks.

Peeta swallows and shakes his head. “We were cornered and she…I think they grabbed her. We kept running.”

Gloss nods, taking a seat, his eyes glazed over. And I can tell Peeta wants to say more, he wants to apologize, do something for Gloss and I can’t understand why. Gloss has never helped us. He has never allowed his tributes to ally or done anything that could be construed as kindness. If anything, he’s kept to himself and looked down on us. He’s only allying now because it’s convenient. And I wonder what he’ll do when it no longer becomes convenient. Or maybe he’ll try to save his sister, maybe he’ll still help. But I can’t be sure. He’s spent years perfecting his persona just as much as we all have, only his was never far from the truth, or so it seemed.
But he’s not the enemy. Not right now. And I have greater things to worry about.

I find the electrified arrow and I look around. The others all watch me and it’s what I didn’t want, it’s everything I tried not to become. I didn’t want to be the symbol, I didn’t want to have people looking for me or to me but here I am, right where I was always going to end up. I squeeze the pin in my pocket and I think of Bas. I have to do this for him. I have to save Ivy.

Haymitch walks back out from the front of the hovercraft, tending to Beetee’s wounds.

“Where are we going?” Annie asks, “After we…”

“Thirteen,” Haymitch responds, tightening the bandage on Beetee’s back, “They’ll be able to… they have a medical team.”

“They? They’re alive? It’s real?” Peeta asks. Haymitch nods and the words fade in my mind. It’s real. Thirteen. Madge went looking for it. Gale wanted to find it. Maybe Madge made it. Maybe that’s why she never returned. But if they’ve been there all along why haven’t they helped before? Why haven’t they fought back? What have they been waiting for?

I watch Haymitch work, wondering about all the lies he’s told and how many times he’s had a plan in place. I want to punch him. I want to scream. He knew it was there. Plutarch is helping, he was helping this whole time and Bas is dead. We could have acted sooner but they didn’t. And I don’t know what to say, I don’t know if my anger will ever fade. I’m tired of being a pawn, of never knowing if I’m safe or if they’re telling me the truth.

But right now I don’t care about any of it. Right now, I just want to save Ivy. Right now I need to focus. I need to fire an arrow and bring down the arena.

Peeta’s hand finds my shoulder and gently squeezes it. I give him a nod to tell him I’m okay even though every nerve is buzzing and shaking. I’m not okay. I don’t know if I’ll be okay. Maybe when I see Ivy again, maybe when we’re safe, if we can ever be safe, maybe I can start to be okay, but I don’t think I will be. Bas is still gone, we’re starting a war, and there’s going to be more dead before this is all over.

“Ten seconds,” Plutarch calls over a speaker in the hovercraft. The door opens and the wind whips through as the others strap themselves into seats or hold on to whatever they can inside. I take a breath and approach the edge, my steps unsteady as I find my balance. I just need one good hit on the shield to bring it down, as long as Springer does what he’s supposed to, as long as he got his message.

I look down and I can see the metal barrier of the arena. The shield blocking it from the rest of the world, keeping everyone inside isolated and everyone outside entertained. There’s a large flicker of light, a surge of power running through it and there are sparks coming from the side.

And I take that as the sign. I have to do this now.

More hovercrafts are following, war hovercrafts. I can make them out in the distance. We’re running out of time. I load the arrow and take a breath. And I only have one shot, it needs to be perfect. I exhale and I let the arrow fly.

It lands right on target.

There’s a large blast as the metal and Capitol created boundary breaks apart, shattering and fracturing below me. The force sets the hovercraft off balance and my foot slips out as I’m thrown back inside.
My head collides with a metal beam and everything disappears into instant blackness.

“All you have is your fire,
And the place you need to reach,
Don’t you ever tame your demons,
But always keep them on a leash.”

- Arsonist’s Lullaby – Hozier
The Arena: Fall of the Princess - Ivy and Katniss

Chapter Summary

The 100th Games come to an end, but the rebellion is only just beginning.

NOTE: this will be the last chapter of this fic. There is a sequel entitled The Mockingjay's Fire. Thank you so much for reading!

“Far off in the distance
Somewhere you can’t see
Allegiances have formed your destiny

Opposition all around
Feeding off your soul
Trying hard to swallow up you whole

And the demons all around you waiting
For you to sell your soul”

- Black – Kari Kimmel

Ivy –

Freezing to death was slow. It was quiet too and almost calm. Slow, calm and quiet while everything around me blurred and darkened and I went numb.

Burning to death is none of those things. There’s no numbness. There’s no quiet. It’s choking, scalding, and bright. Everything is way too bright.

I try to climb towards the window by positioning anything to give me enough height to reach it. I stand on a table, pull a bench on top, but I still can’t reach the window. And even as I see it I don’t think I could get through and I don’t think Beck could make the climb with his injury. I don’t have a lot of time left to decide if I want to keep trying. The smoke gets too thick to see and I can’t find the window anymore.

The only thing I can see is bright oranges and reds dancing around me through thick smoke as the fire burns.

I drop back off the table and find Beck waiting for me. He’s close enough to see the worry in my eyes. I knew when we came in here there was no way out and now he knows too. He can see it in me. We’ll die if we stay. We’ll die if we leave. It’s just a matter of which death we prefer.

His hand clutches his side and there’s fresh blood staining his fingers. His stitches must have ripped open. He looks pale and faint as sweat drips down his neck, but somehow he still manages a smile.

“If you weren’t in these Games I think I would have won,” he says in a light tone.

“So this is my fault? Because I was, what? Born?” And I’m taken aback by the shift in blame, a
frustration and anger that only he seems to bring out in me, even now when we’re faced with death once again. And how many times have we faced death now? I lost count. This is the one that sticks though, that I’m sure of.

“Not entirely. I did team up with you.” He shrugs and I want to push him until I realize what he’s doing. He’s playing it off. He’s playing the valiant tribute from Four. He’s saying goodbye.

So I play too.

“Yeah, well, you are a lot dumber than you look.” I wipe sweat from my forehead as the fire travels up the walls and its starting to surround us now. We don’t have much longer before this whole place collapses.

Still, his smile grows, “Oh I’m the biggest idiot in Panem. But you wouldn’t have made it this far without me.”

“And you really think you would have made it without me? What would you have done if I wasn’t here?”

He grabs my arm while his other encircles my back pulling me to him. My breath hitches, my pulse pounds and everything blurs around me as his lips crash onto mine. All I can feel is him. All I can taste is him. And he tastes like salt and sun and hope. I imagine him sitting on the beach while the ocean crashes behind him, the sun on his face and a smile in his eyes. And it’s the real him. And it’s the real me. There’s no fire. No Games. No Arena. There’s just us, in this moment, with no role to play and no masks to wear.

And I kiss him back with a shared desperation. One hand winds around his neck pulling him closer as the other falls on his chest feeling his heart beat with mine. And I remember when we first met at the chariots and I wonder if it was all going to end up here. His eyes had reminded me of home. He feels like home. A part of me wishes I could see that beach and feel that sun. I wish we could go home.

But we can’t. We aren’t home. We aren’t safe. He’s dying and this is goodbye.

He winces and all my senses flood back. We break apart and I can feel my pulse beating a little faster and it has nothing to do with the fire making its way towards us.

He finds his voice through shallow breaths, “If you weren’t here, I’d probably have done that earlier.”

“You wouldn’t have known me.” I feel more awake, alive, and it’s almost cruel to feel like this right before it’s all going to be over.

“I would have tried to know you. The cameras, your interviews, I saw past it. I would have seen past it. I would have tried.”

I have to stop myself from kissing him again as a beam crashes down and he pulls me to the door. The bench we put in front of it is gone. He must have moved it while I was trying to get to the window. The only thing keeping us in here is the trident but no one outside is trying to get in anymore. They’re waiting for us to come out.

“So what do we do now?” I ask and I can still taste salt but I ignore it. I have to ignore it. Everything is sweltering now, stifling, and I can no longer breathe as I once did. And this has everything to do with the fire, everything to do with the fact that we are dying in here.

His eyes find mine and there’s a challenge in them. He smirks, “Run.”
And with that he pulls the trident from the handles and rips open the door. And there’s no room for arguing, there’s no way for me to stop him. So I just start moving.

I grab the knife from the door and pick up my bow. I’m out into the open air, the breath coming easily and the wind drying the sweat on my skin. I don’t look for Beck. I can’t look to see if he’s gone. I can’t know. So I just run. And I keep running while Cain waits, sword in hand with victory in his eyes like a wolf ready to devour its prey.

I pull my last arrow, loading it with a prayer fresh on my mind. I’m about to fire when there’s a large explosion that throws us all to the ground. Everything flashes then goes dark as the false weather disappears. All I can hear is the ringing in my ears while I struggle to get my bearings, but it’s too dark to see.

Light breaks through as the dome fractures across the sky. I hold my breath as a loud creak resounds through the whole arena before the fractures fall apart. I push myself to my feet as metal beams and broken pieces drop to the ground, bursting into flames on impact.

Emery drops her spear and watches the sky as real sunlight pours in, wiping away the darkness. And it’s warm. It’s so warm and real, but how can this be real? How can the sky be that bright? The blues and clouds above are so much more colorful than I remember. Through the broken dome I can make out a hovercraft, a black mass against the blue, and it’s getting closer.

This can’t be real. This can’t be happening. This is just part of the Game. It’s always part of the Game.

Another beam falls and Emery dives out of the way to duck behind a tree, her eyes still on the hovercraft. And I look around but I don’t know where Beck fell or if he fell at all. I can still hear ringing and the collapse of the arena around me as metal shards hurl to the ground. I’m in a daze and somehow I’m still moving forward, though I’m not sure why.

The hovercraft has to be from the Capitol. Something must have happened, something bad. My mind doesn’t allow me to think of the possibilities. I’m hyper aware of my feet moving and the breath heaving in and out of my lungs. I grip the knife and bow in my hands with the last of my strength, though I’m not sure how much longer it will last.

My eyes fall onto my hands. They’re rough and calloused and have felt too much blood and taken too many lives. The string around my neck holding the rings seems to pull me further towards the ground like a weight, but I keep pushing forward. I have only one goal, one focus, and it’s to keep going. And in my haze I see my brother again. I see his blonde hair and his eyes watching the sky like Emery. I see him smile. And then I see him bloody and dead.

He disappears and then my eyes fall on Cain, on his retreating back, as he runs towards the river bank. And there’s a stinging and throbbing in my throat, a reminder of what he did. I can feel the fire he tried to burn me in. I can feel Bas’ breath leave his lungs. And Cain is responsible for that. He can’t get away. He has to pay.

The haze disappears the ringing in my ears stops. The sound of the world comes to me in a flood of broken metal pieces and burning trees. I hear the whirring of engines and what sounds like someone screaming but all I can see is Cain. He’s getting away. He can’t get away.

So I run. I run as fast as I can while my blood boils and my lungs ache with all my hatred towards him. I pass his sword and he dropped it. He’s afraid. He’s afraid of what’s happening in this arena.

Good. This makes it easier.
I tear my way through brush and broken branches but I barely feel them as they cut into my cheek. Cain keeps running, the arena keeps falling, and I have my target.

I sheath the knife as I load my arrow. I wait to fire once he reaches the river bank. The arrow lands in his ankle and he screams in agony. And then I’m on top of him, throwing him into the ground, knife back in hand ready to finish this. But he’s stronger than me and I’m tossed into the edge of the river.

The water soaks into my clothes, my bow ripped from my hand by the force of his. Somehow I hold onto my knife but his knee pushes into my shoulder to keep me from using it. His hands are around me as he shoves me further into the water, trying to drown me.

I’ve felt what it is to drown. I’ve felt what it is to burn. And I’m sick of it. I’m sick of all of this. He’s too far in, too close to harm. I can see his ankle, the arrow still sticking out it. I kick as hard as I can and he doubles back, the blood pooling in the water. His hand pulls my necklace with him, breaking it as I stand.

I kick him hard in the neck as my knife lands in his knee cap. He punches me hard in my cheek and I taste blood. I claw and punch as he tries to choke me again and when I grab the arrow in his ankle, I twist it hard. He stops. I have the advantage. There’s no escaping this for him.

I catch my breath, spitting up blood and water as Cain kneels before me, dirt and mud from the river caked onto his clothing, bruises forming around his face.

“You win,” he says to me, closing his eyes, welcoming it. And I killed Victoria like this, with vengeance and hatred in my heart, and I want to kill Cain the same way. I want him to pay for everything he did. He deserves this.

But still, I can’t bring myself to finish it. I can’t make the final cut. I look over his shoulder and I see Bas again. I see him watching me with disapproval in his eyes and I can’t bring the knife down into Cain’s throat.

And it doesn’t make sense. What’s one more life taken in here? What’s one more kill? He deserves to die. I hold the knife closer, my hand steady even though everything inside of me is shaking and screaming. And he deserves this. He deserves to feel the pain he caused. He deserves to die.

But I can’t be the one to do it. My eyes lock onto Bas’ and he shakes his head. He looks back up to the sky, the real sky, and everything around us is crumbling but the sky is real. The wind is real. The light from the sun catches on the rings spread across the ground and they shine in it. And it’s another reminder of home, another piece of me that I need to hold onto.

And I can’t kill Cain no matter how much the darkest part of me wants to. It won’t bring Bas back. It won’t make me feel better. Killing Victoria proved that much. Beck was right. My family wouldn’t want me to do this. And I didn’t care then, but I do now.

I have to find Beck. I have to get out of here.

The ground whips up as the whir of engines sounds overhead and Bas disappears. Cain opens his eyes as I pull the knife away from his throat and there’s a confusion and anger in them. He reaches for my hand to take the knife but I kick him in the throat, knocking him to the ground.

I look up to see the cold metal of the hovercraft descending towards us, ropes dropping from the side of it. It blocks out the sun as it approaches.
And I know the Games are over but something else is starting, something more.

I raise my arms and drop the knife as boots land behind me. Cain sprawled out on the ground, still breathing, still alive.

Katniss –

I come to amidst the sounds of beeping monitors, hurried footsteps, and muffled voices. I’m not in the hovercraft anymore. I don’t know where I am.

I’m lying in a bed with scratchy sheets and thin blankets. It’s not a Capitol bed. I’m not in the Capitol. Or at least, I hope I’m not but I can’t be sure. I’m no longer wearing the Peacekeeper uniform. Wherever I am, they changed me into a hospital gown. The lights are dim in here with no windows to look out of. This can’t be the Capitol. They always have windows.

Unless Snow doesn’t want me to see what’s out there. Unless he wants me to think I escaped only to realize he still has me right where he wants me for as long as he wants me there.

There’s a curtain blocking my bed. And the voices all seem to come into focus.

“I need morphling,” someone says.

“He’s going to need surgery,” another voice replies.

Everything spins around me as I try to stand up and I feel the pinch of a needle in my arm. My eyes follow the tube to the bag providing me fluids. I pull the needle as my feet land on the cold floor. How did I get here?

I hit my head. I remember that. My hand finds the cut where I can feel the stitches. I was in the hovercraft. I fired the arrow. The blast knocked me back and the Capitol was coming. I see no Peacekeepers around me. This can’t be the Capitol, which means it must be Thirteen. We made it. My heart springs to my throat at my next thought.

Ivy. I have to find her.

I take one step forward and the world spins once again, this time faster. The curtain opens and strong hands stop me in my place.

“Whoa there, Catnip.”

My whole body freezes. He’s dead. He’s gone. The mine collapsed. He can’t be here.

And I look at him and he is. Gale. He’s alive. A little gray, with wrinkles around his eyes, wearing what looks like a black military uniform, but alive. He’s alive. Or am I dead too? Is this all a lie my dying brain constructed? Did I die when I tried to save Ivy?

But his hands are warm and the pain is real. He’s alive. I’m alive. We’re in Thirteen.

“You…you can’t…” I feel the acid in my throat and the raw taste of copper as a wave of nausea hits me. I think I might throw up but I don’t. There’s nothing in my stomach for me to manage it. Gale tries to help me back into the bed but I push away his arm, not as strong as I want to but it gets the point across.

“You’re dead,” I finally breathe out and he has the decency to look down. He left his brother, his family, Madge. He left me. He left everyone. All that talk about fighting and about protecting Twelve and the people he loved. And he left. He ran away.
And I remember Rory, working in the mines and putting on a brave face, taking charge when his brother was gone. I remember Madge who became a ghost. I remember Gale’s mother, crying and sobbing at the news of the collapse. And Twelve mourned for Gale. I mourned for him. My children mourned for him too.

“Twelve was never gonna survive with me. Not with the Capitol watching. I had to die so I could live to fight.”

My hand connects with his face in the hardest slap I’ve ever managed, “You’re a coward.”

He sucks in a breath and there’s a deep hurt and anger in his face that matches my own, “Look who’s talking.” He pulls it back, standing straight, a soldier of Thirteen.

“I want to see Ivy,” I order. He looks down again and even now I can read him. Even now, I know that look. It’s the same look of mercy he gave a wounded animal before he finished the job.

I shake my head, pushing him aside and tearing open the curtain. He doesn’t stop me but I can hear his footsteps following. The adrenaline helps to stave off my nausea but I still have trouble seeing straight.

I round a corner and press my hand to the wall to keep myself upright as I enter the chaos of running doctors and nurses trying to treat incoming mentors and tributes.

It’s a long, slow walk as I pass by bed after bed. Most are empty but there’s the few with people I don’t recognize receiving treatment. They all wear grey. The doctors and nurses wear white. Some spare me a glance and then look to Gale with a question in their eyes, but none stop me. I wouldn’t let them stop me even if they tried. I need to find my family.

Johanna sits on a metal bench as a nurse cleans a cut above her eye. She stares at me and Gale as we walk by her, a hard edge in her stare.

“You should lie down,” Gale tries as I stumble but remain upright. He holds out his arm, ready to push me back into my room but I don’t need his help. I don’t want his help. I want to find my daughter and Peeta.

“Katniss,” he says and I snap again.

“I don’t need…” I take a breath, the dizziness creeping back in. He grabs my arm this time but I smack him back. “I don’t need you.”

It’s then that Johanna shrugs off her nurse and puts herself between me and Gale. It’s good that she does because I’m about ready to hit him again.

“Maybe you should take a walk yourself,” Johanna directs to Gale and I’m grateful for her words when I can’t find mine.

He glances from me to her and she never moves from her spot. She keeps staring him down, almost asking for a fight.

“I’ll…” He doesn’t say goodbye, he barely looks at me as he leaves. I hope he never looks at me again.

My anger fluctuates between cold shock and burning rage and it’s all the lies that I’ve been told and all the cowards that abandoned me to rot in my cage. Panem stopped caring about the Mockingjay. They stopped fighting. They shouldn’t have put that responsibility on me to guide them. They should have fought for themselves. Cowards, every single one, Gale included. He ran
away to Thirteen and left all that he once said he cared about. And for what?

Haymitch is a liar too. He had a plan and he never told me about it. He omitted the truth which is just as bad as telling a lie, especially when it comes to the Games and especially when my children were in them. He let me try to save my children and he let me watch one of them die and all along he knew there was a plan. He could have said something, he could have told me, and I would have fought. He could have tried harder. They all could have. I’m tired of lies. I’m tired of fear. I’m just tired.

“Where are you going, Mockingjay?” Johanna asks and her voice has dropped to a quiet tone, reserved but not unkind.

“Don’t call me that,” I say, the tiredness aching in every syllable. I keep walking. She doesn’t stop me. She doesn’t even try to. All she gives me is a small nod.

I pass Annie and Finnick standing over an unconscious Beck. He lies in his bed, machines working to keep him alive, bandages wrapped around his midsection. Annie holds onto her son’s hand and doesn’t look anywhere but at him. A doctor checks his vitals, distributing morphling as Beck groans.

“It’s okay. It’ll be okay,” Annie says, pressing a kiss to his forehead. “You’re safe.”

Finnick twists and ties knots in a fraying rope as he stands against the wall. His eyes move back and forth from the rope to the heart monitor with every beat, like he’s reminding himself with every beep of the machine that his son is alive. His son survived.

I can make out Emery sitting up in her bed, staring at the floor, a bandage being applied to her ankle. Gloss sits with an arm around her, talking to her in a quiet voice while she struggles not to cry. He looks up to see me and his eyes fall back to focusing on his daughter. If it’s possible he holds her tighter.

“Katniss,” I turn and find Peeta walking towards me. He looks different. He looks colder, broken. His eyes are red, his jaw is set in a thin line and he keeps his hands curled at his sides, like he’s struggling not to hit something.

“Where is she?” I ask. Haymitch grabs my arm but I pull it back, “Where is she?” I repeat and I can see the pain in Haymitch’s eyes and it has nothing to do with his broken nose.

“She deserves to know,” Finnick says from beside me. It makes my heart drop into my stomach.
I turn to Haymitch and he owes me the truth. He owes it more than he’s ever owed me anything. She has to be alive. I have to believe that she is. I have to believe that I would know if she wasn’t, that something would tell me that she wasn’t. I would know. She has to be alive.

Haymitch swallows hard before saying, “She still has her tracker in.”

“Where?!” My voice echoes off the walls, sounding frayed and broken.

There’s a long silence before Haymitch delivers the news, my eyes meeting Peeta’s as the words fall around us, burying me and breaking me with them.

“She’s in the Capitol.”

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