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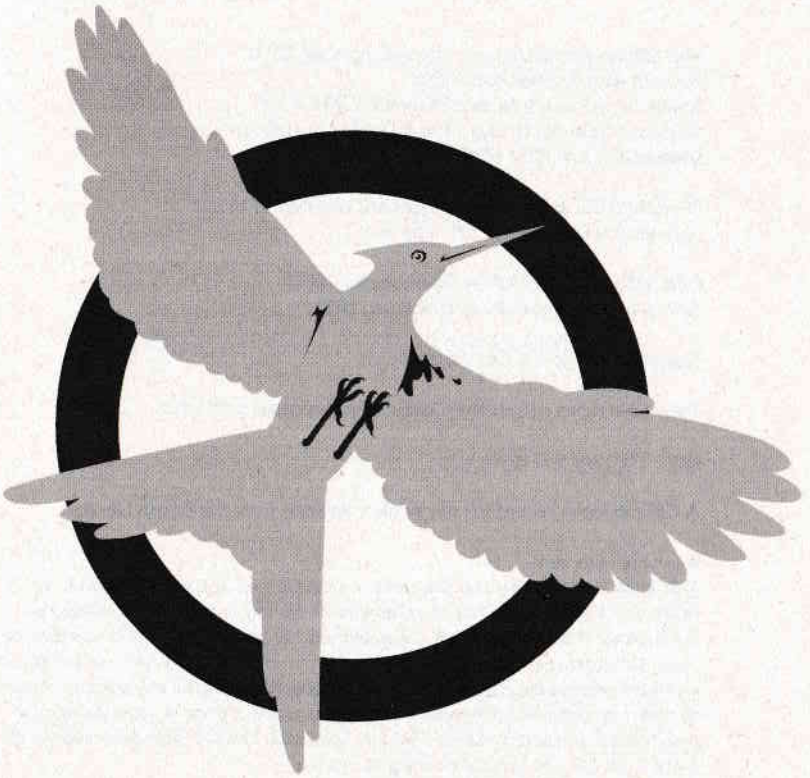
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THE HUNGER GAMES
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SCHOLASTIC

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PART I

THE ASHES

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1

I stare down at my shoes, watching as a fine layer of ash settles on the worn leather. This is where the bed I shared with my sister, Prim, stood. Over there was the kitchen table. The bricks of the chimney, which collapsed in a charred heap, provide a point of reference for the rest of the house. How else could I orient myself in this sea of grey?

Almost nothing remains of District 12. A month ago, the Capitol's firebombs obliterated the poor coal miners' houses in the Seam, the shops in the town, even the Justice Building. The only area that escaped incineration was the Victor's Village. I don't know why exactly. Perhaps so anyone forced to come here on Capitol business would have somewhere reasonable to stay. The odd reporter. A committee assessing the condition of the coal mines. A squad of Peacekeepers

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checking for returning refugees.

But no one is returning except me. And that's only for a brief visit. The authorities in District 13 were against my coming back. They viewed it as a costly and pointless venture, given that at least a dozen invisible hovercraft are circling overhead for my protection and there's no intelligence to be gained. I had to see it, though. So much so that I made it a condition of my cooperating with any of their plans.

Finally, Plutarch Heavensbee, the Head Gamemaker who had organized the rebels in the Capitol, threw up his hands. "Let her go. Better to waste a day than another month. Maybe a little tour of Twelve is just what she needs to convince her we're on the same side."

The same side. A pain stabs my left temple and I press my hand against it. Right on the spot where Johanna Mason hit me with the coil of wire. The memories swirl as I try to sort out what is true and what is false. What series of events led me to be standing in the ruins of my city? This is hard because the effects of the concussion she gave me haven't completely subsided and my thoughts still have a tendency to jumble together. Also, the drugs they use to control my pain and mood sometimes make me see things. I guess. I'm still not entirely convinced that I was hallucinating the night the floor of my hospital room transformed into

a carpet of writhing snakes.

I use a technique one of the doctors suggested. I start with the simplest things I know to be true and work towards the more complicated. The list begins to roll in my head. . .

My name is Katniss Everdeen. I am seventeen years old. My home is District 12. I was in the Hunger Games. I escaped. The Capitol hates me. Peeta was taken prisoner. He is thought to be dead. Most likely he is dead. It is probably best if he is dead. . .

"Katniss. Should I come down?" My best friend Gale's voice reaches me through the headset the rebels insisted I wear. He's up in a hovercraft, watching me carefully, ready to swoop in if anything goes amiss. I realize I'm crouched down now, elbows on my thighs, my head braced between my hands. I must look on the verge of some kind of breakdown. This won't do. Not when they're finally weaning me off the medication.

I straighten up and wave his offer away. "No. I'm fine." To reinforce this, I begin to move away from my old house and in towards the town. Gale asked to be dropped off in 12 with me, but he didn't force the issue when I refused his company. He understands I don't want anyone with me today. Not even him. Some walks you have to take alone.

The summer's been scorching hot and dry as a bone.

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There's been next to no rain to disturb the piles of ash left by the attack. They shift here and there, in reaction to my footsteps. No breeze to scatter them. I keep my eyes on what I remember as the road, because when I first landed in the Meadow, I wasn't careful and I walked right into a rock. Only it wasn't a rock – it was someone's skull. It rolled over and over and landed face up, and for a long time I couldn't stop looking at the teeth, wondering whose they were, thinking of how mine would probably look the same way under similar circumstances.

I stick to the road out of habit, but it's a bad choice, because it's full of the remains of those who tried to flee. Some were incinerated entirely. But others, probably overcome with smoke, escaped the worst of the flames and now lie reeking in various states of decomposition, carrion for scavengers, blanketed by flies. *I killed you*, I think as I pass a pile. *And you. And you.*

Because I did. It was my arrow, aimed at the chink in the force field surrounding the arena, that brought on this firestorm of retribution. That sent the whole country of Panem into chaos.

In my head I hear President Snow's words, spoken the morning I was to begin the Victory Tour. *"Katniss Everdeen, the girl who was on fire, you have provided a spark that, left unattended, may grow to an inferno that destroys Panem."* It turns out he wasn't exaggerating or simply

trying to scare me. He was, perhaps, genuinely attempting to enlist my help. But I had already set something in motion that I had no ability to control.

Burning. Still burning, I think numbly. The fires at the coal mines belch black smoke in the distance. There's no one left to care, though. More than ninety per cent of the district's population is dead. The remaining eight hundred or so are refugees in District 13 – which, as far as I'm concerned, is the same thing as being homeless for ever.

I know I shouldn't think that; I know I should be grateful for the way we have been welcomed. Sick, wounded, starving and empty-handed. Still, I can never get around the fact that District 13 was instrumental in 12's destruction. This doesn't absolve me of blame – there's plenty of blame to go around. But without them, I would not have been part of a larger plot to overthrow the Capitol or had the wherewithal to do it.

The citizens of District 12 had no organized resistance movement of their own. No say in any of this. They only had the misfortune to have me. Some survivors think it's good luck, though, to be free of District 12 at last. To have escaped the endless hunger and oppression, the perilous mines, the lash of our final Head Peacekeeper, Romulus Thread. To have a new home at all is seen as a wonder since, up until a short time ago, we hadn't even known that District 13 still existed.

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The credit for the survivors' escape has landed squarely on Gale's shoulders, although he's loath to accept it. As soon as the Quarter Quell was over – as soon as I had been lifted from the arena – the electricity in District 12 was cut, the televisions went black and the Seam became so silent, people could hear one another's heartbeats. No one did anything to protest or celebrate what had happened in the arena. Yet within fifteen minutes, the sky was filled with hoverplanes and the bombs were raining down.

It was Gale who thought of the Meadow, one of the few places not filled with old wooden homes embedded with coal dust. He herded those he could in its direction, including my mother and Prim. He formed the team that pulled down the fence – now just a harmless chain-link barrier, with the electricity off – and led the people into the woods. He took them to the only place he could think of, the lake my father had shown me as a child. And it was from there they watched the distant flames eat up everything they knew in the world.

By dawn the bombers were long gone, the fires dying, the final stragglers rounded up. My mother and Prim had set up a medical area for the injured and were attempting to treat them with whatever they could glean from the woods. Gale had two sets of bows and arrows, one hunting knife, one fishing net, and over eight hundred

terrified people to feed. With the help of those who were able-bodied, they managed for three days. And that's when the hovercraft unexpectedly arrived to evacuate them to District 13, where there were more than enough clean, white living compartments, plenty of clothing and three meals a day. The compartments had the disadvantage of being underground, the clothing was identical and the food was relatively tasteless, but for the refugees of 12, these were minor considerations. They were safe. They were being cared for. They were alive and eagerly welcomed.

This enthusiasm was interpreted as kindness. But a man named Dalton, a District 10 refugee who'd made it to 13 on foot a few years ago, leaked the real motive to me. "They need you. Me. They need us all. A while back, there was some sort of pox epidemic that killed a bunch of them and left a lot more infertile. New breeding stock. That's how they see us." Back in 10, he'd worked on one of the beef ranches, maintaining the genetic diversity of the herd with the implantation of long-frozen cow embryos. He's very likely right about 13, because there don't seem to be nearly enough kids around. But so what? We're not being kept in pens, we're being trained for work, the children are being educated. Those over fourteen have been given entry-level ranks in the military and are addressed respectfully as "Soldier". Every

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single refugee was granted automatic citizenship by the authorities of 13.

Still, I hate them. But, of course, I hate almost everybody now. Myself more than anyone.

The surface beneath my feet hardens, and under the carpet of ash, I feel the paving stones of the square. Around the perimeter is a shallow border of refuse where the shops stood. A heap of blackened rubble has replaced the Justice Building. I walk to the approximate site of the bakery Peeta's family owned. Nothing much left but the melted lump of the oven. Peeta's parents, his two older brothers – none of them made it to 13. Fewer than a dozen of what passed for District 12's well-to-do escaped the fire. Peeta would have nothing to come home to, anyway. Except me. . .

I back away from the bakery and bump into something, lose my balance and find myself sitting on a hunk of sun-heated metal. I puzzle over what it might have been, then remember Thread's recent renovations of the square. Stocks, whipping posts, and this, the remains of the gallows. Bad. This is bad. It brings on the flood of images that torments me, awake or asleep. Peeta being tortured – drowned, burned, lacerated, shocked, maimed, beaten – as the Capitol tries to get information about the rebellion that he doesn't know. I squeeze my eyes shut and try to reach for him across the hundreds and

hundreds of kilometres, to send my thoughts into his mind, to let him know he is not alone. But he is. And I can't help him.

Running. Away from the square and to the one place the fire did not destroy. I pass the wreckage of the mayor's house, where my friend Madge lived. No word of her or her family. Were they evacuated to the Capitol because of her father's position, or left to the flames? Ashes billow up around me, and I pull the hem of my shirt up over my mouth. It's not wondering what I breathe in, but who, that threatens to choke me.

The grass has been scorched and the grey snow fell here as well, but the twelve fine houses of the Victor's Village are unscathed. I bolt into the house I lived in for the past year, slam the door closed and lean back against it. The place seems untouched. Clean. Eerily quiet. Why did I come back to 12? How can this visit help me answer the question I can't escape?

"What am I going to do?" I whisper to the walls. Because I really don't know.

People keep talking at me, talking, talking, talking. Plutarch Heavensbee. His calculating assistant, Fulvia Cardew. A mishmash of district leaders. Military officials. But not Alma Coin, the president of 13, who just watches. She's fifty or so, with grey hair that falls in an unbroken sheet to her shoulders. I'm somewhat

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fascinated by her hair, since it's so uniform, so without a flaw, a wisp, even a split end. Her eyes are grey, but not like those of people from the Seam. They're very pale, as if almost all the colour has been sucked out of them. The colour of slush that you wish would melt away.

What they want is for me to truly take on the role they designed for me. The symbol of the revolution. The Mockingjay. It isn't enough, what I've done in the past, defying the Capitol in the Games, providing a rallying point. I must now become the actual leader, the face, the voice, the embodiment of the revolution. The person who the districts – most of which are now openly at war with the Capitol – can count on to blaze the path to victory. I won't have to do it alone. They have a whole team of people to make me over, dress me, write my speeches, orchestrate my appearances – as if *that* doesn't sound horribly familiar – and all I have to do is play my part. Sometimes I listen to them and sometimes I just watch the perfect line of Coin's hair and try to decide if it's a wig. Eventually, I leave the room because my head starts to ache or it's time to eat or if I don't get above ground I might start screaming. I don't bother to say anything. I simply get up and walk out.

Yesterday afternoon, as the door was closing behind me, I heard Coin say, "I told you we should have rescued

the boy first." Meaning Peeta. I couldn't agree more. He would've been an excellent mouthpiece.

And who did they fish out of the arena instead? Me, who won't cooperate. Beetee, an older inventor from 3, who I rarely see because he was pulled into weapons development the minute he could sit upright. Literally, they wheeled his hospital bed into some top secret area and now he only occasionally shows up for meals. He's very smart and very willing to help the cause, but not really firebrand material. Then there's Finnick Odair, the sex symbol from the fishing district, who kept Peeta alive in the arena when I couldn't. They want to transform Finnick into a rebel leader as well, but first they'll have to get him to stay awake for more than five minutes. Even when he is conscious, you have to say everything to him three times to get through to his brain. The doctors say it's from the electrical shock he received in the arena, but I know it's a lot more complicated than that. I know that Finnick can't focus on anything in 13 because he's trying so hard to see what's happening in the Capitol to Annie, the mad girl from his district who's the only person on earth he loves.

Despite serious reservations, I had to forgive Finnick for his role in the conspiracy that landed me here. He, at least, has some idea of what I'm going through. And it

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takes too much energy to stay angry with someone who cries so much.

I move through the downstairs on hunter's feet, reluctant to make any sound. I pick up a few remembrances: a photo of my parents on their wedding day, a blue hair ribbon for Prim, the family book of medicinal and edible plants. The book falls open to a page with yellow flowers and I shut it quickly because it was Peeta's brush that painted them.

What am I going to do?

Is there any point in doing anything at all? My mother, my sister, and Gale's family are finally safe. As for the rest of 12, people are either dead, which is irreversible, or protected in 13. That leaves the rebels in the districts. Of course, I hate the Capitol, but I have no confidence that my being the Mockingjay will benefit those who are trying to bring it down. How can I help the districts when every time I make a move, it results in suffering and loss of life? The old man shot in District 11 for whistling. The crackdown in 12 after I intervened in Gale's whipping. My stylist, Cinna, being dragged, bloody and unconscious, from the Launch Room before the Games. Plutarch's sources believe he was killed during interrogation. Brilliant, enigmatic, lovely Cinna is dead because of me. I push the thought away because it's too impossibly painful to dwell on

without losing my fragile hold on the situation entirely.

What am I going to do?

To become the Mockingjay . . . could any good I do possibly outweigh the damage? Who can I trust to answer that question? Certainly not that crew in 13. I swear, now that my family and Gale's are out of harm's way, I could run away. Except for one unfinished piece of business. Peeta. If I knew for sure that he was dead, I could just disappear into the woods and never look back. But until I do, I'm stuck.

I spin on my heel at the sound of a hiss. In the kitchen doorway, back arched, ears flattened, stands the ugliest tomcat in the world. "Buttercup," I say. Thousands of people are dead, but he has survived and even looks well fed. On what? He can get in and out of the house through a window we always left ajar in the pantry. He must have been eating field mice. I refuse to consider the alternative.

I squat down and extend a hand. "Come here, boy." Not likely. He's angry at his abandonment. Besides, I'm not offering food, and my ability to provide scraps has always been my main redeeming quality to him. For a while, when we used to meet up at the old house because we both disliked this new one, we seemed to be bonding a little. That's clearly over. He blinks those unpleasant yellow eyes.

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"Want to see Prim?" I ask. Her name catches his attention. Besides his own, it's the only word that means anything to him. He gives a rusty meow and approaches me. I pick him up, stroking his fur, then go to the cupboard and dig out my game bag and unceremoniously stuff him in. There's no other way I'll be able to carry him on the hovercraft, and he means the world to my sister. Her goat, Lady, an animal of actual value, has unfortunately not made an appearance.

In my headset, I hear Gale's voice telling me we must go back. But the game bag has reminded me of one more thing that I want. I sling the strap of the bag over the back of a chair and dash up the steps to my bedroom. Inside the wardrobe hangs my father's hunting jacket. Before the Quell, I brought it here from the old house, thinking its presence might be of comfort to my mother and sister when I was dead. Thank goodness, or it'd be ash now.

The soft leather feels soothing and for a moment I'm calmed by the memories of the hours spent wrapped in it. Then, inexplicably, my palms begin to sweat. A strange sensation creeps up the back of my neck. I whip around to face the room and find it empty. Tidy. Everything in its place. There was no sound to alarm me. What, then?

My nose twitches. It's the smell. Cloying and artificial. A dab of white peeks out of a vase of dried flowers on

my dresser. I approach it with cautious steps. There, all but obscured by its preserved cousins, is a fresh white rose. Perfect. Down to the last thorn and silken petal.

And I know immediately who's sent it to me.

President Snow.

When I begin to gag at the stench, I back away and clear out. How long has it been here? A day? An hour? The rebels did a security sweep of the Victor's Village before I was cleared to come here, checking for explosives, bugs, anything unusual. But perhaps the rose didn't seem noteworthy to them. Only to me.

Downstairs, I snag the game bag off the chair, bouncing it along the floor until I remember it's occupied. On the lawn, I frantically signal to the hovercraft while Buttercup thrashes. I jab him with my elbow, but this only infuriates him. A hovercraft materializes and a ladder drops down. I step on and the current freezes me until I'm lifted on board.

Gale helps me from the ladder. "You all right?"

"Yeah," I say, wiping the sweat off my face with my sleeve.

He left me a rose! I want to scream, but it's not information I'm sure I should share with someone like Plutarch looking on. First of all, because it will make me sound crazy. Like I either imagined it, which is quite possible, or I'm overreacting, which will buy me a trip