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THE BALLAD OF SONGBIRDS AND SNAKES

SUZANNE COLLINS

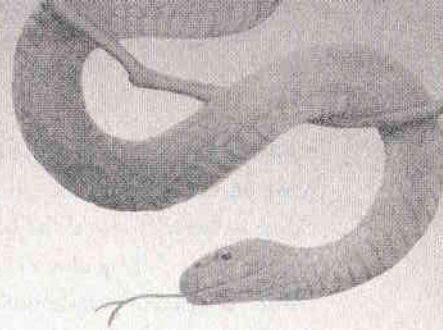
SCHOLASTIC

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PART I

"THE MENTOR"

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1

Coriolanus released the fistful of cabbage into the pot of boiling water and swore that one day it would never pass his lips again. But this was not that day. He needed to eat a large bowl of the anemic stuff, and drink every drop of broth, to prevent his stomach from growling during the reaping ceremony. It was one of a long list of precautions he took to mask the fact that his family, despite residing in the penthouse of the Capitol's most opulent apartment building, was as poor as district scum. That at eighteen, the heir to the once-great house of Snow had nothing to live on but his wits.

His shirt for the reaping was worrying him. He had an acceptable pair of dark dress pants bought on the black market last year, but the shirt was what people looked at. Fortunately, the Academy provided the uniforms it required for daily use. For today's ceremony, however, students were instructed to be dressed fashionably but with the solemnity the occasion dictated. Tigris had said to trust her, and he did. Only his cousin's cleverness with a needle had saved him so far. Still, he couldn't expect miracles.

The shirt they'd dug from the back of the wardrobe — his father's, from better days — was stained and yellowed with age, half the buttons missing, a cigarette burn on one cuff. Too damaged to sell in even the worst of times, and this was to be his reaping shirt? This morning he had gone to her room at daybreak, only to find both his cousin and the shirt missing. Not a good sign. Had Tigris given up on the old thing and braved the black

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market in some last-ditch effort to find him proper clothing? And what on earth would she possess worth trading for it? Only one thing — herself — and the house of Snow had not yet fallen that far. Or was it falling now as he salted the cabbage?

He thought of people putting a price on her. With her long, pointed nose and skinny body, Tigris was no great beauty, but she had a sweetness, a vulnerability that invited abuse. She would find takers, if she had a mind to. The idea made him feel sick and helpless and, consequently, disgusted with himself.

From deep in the apartment he heard the recording of the Capitol anthem, "Gem of Panem," kick on. His grandmother's tremulous soprano voice joined in, bouncing off the walls.

Gem of Panem,
Mighty city,
Through the ages, you shine anew.

As always, she was painfully off-key and slightly behind tempo. The first year of the war, she'd played the recording on national holidays for five-year-old Coriolanus and eight-year-old Tigris in order to build their sense of patriotism. The daily recital hadn't begun until that black day when the district rebels had surrounded the Capitol, cutting it off from supplies for the remaining two years of the war. "Remember, children," she'd say, "we are but besieged — we have not surrendered!" Then she would warble the anthem out of the penthouse window as the bombs rained down. Her small act of defiance.

We humbly kneel
To your ideal,

And the notes she could never quite hit . . .

And pledge our love to you!

Coriolanus winced a little. For a decade now, though the rebels had been silent, his grandmother had not. There were still two verses to go.

Gem of Panem,
Heart of justice,
Wisdom crowns your marble brow.

He wondered if more furniture might absorb some of the sound, but the question was academic. At present, their penthouse apartment was a microcosm of the Capitol itself, bearing the scars of the relentless rebel attacks. The twenty-foot-high walls were veined with cracks, the molded ceiling was dotted with holes from missing chunks of plaster, and ugly black strips of electrical tape held in place the broken glass of the arched windows that looked out over the city. Throughout the war and the decade that followed, the family had been forced to sell or trade many of its possessions, so that some rooms were entirely empty and closed off and the others sparsely furnished at best. Even worse, during the bitter cold of the siege's final winter, several elegant, carved wooden pieces and innumerable volumes of books had been sacrificed to the fireplace to keep the family from freezing to death. Watching the bright pages of his picture books — the very ones he'd pored over with his mother — reduced to ashes had never failed to bring him to tears. But better off sad than dead.

Having been in his friends' apartments, Coriolanus knew that most families had begun to repair their homes, but the Snows

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could not even afford a few yards of linen for a new shirt. He thought of his classmates, riffling through their closets or slipping into their newly tailored suits, and wondered just how long he could keep up appearances.

You give us light.
You reunite.
To you we make our vow.

If Tigris's revamped shirt was unwearable, what was he to do? Fake the flu and call in sick? *Spineless.* Soldier through in his uniform shirt? *Disrespectful.* Squeeze into the red button-down that he had outgrown two years ago? *Poor.* Acceptable option? *None of the above.*

Perhaps Tigris had gone to ask help from her employer, Fabricia Whatnot, a woman as ridiculous as her name but with a certain talent for derivative fashion. Whether the trend was feathers or leathers, plastics or plush, she could find a way to incorporate it at a reasonable rate. Not much of a student, Tigris had forgone university when she'd graduated from the Academy to pursue her dream of becoming a designer. She was supposed to be an apprentice, although Fabricia used her more as slave labor, requiring her to give foot massages and clean clumps of her long magenta hair from the drains. But Tigris never complained and would hear no criticism of her boss, so pleased and grateful was she to have a position in fashion.

Gem of Panem,
Seat of power,
Strength in peacetime, shield in strife.

Coriolanus opened the refrigerator, hoping for something to liven up the cabbage soup. The sole occupant was a metal saucepan. When he removed the lid, a mush of congealed, shredded potatoes stared back at him. Had his grandmother finally made good her threat of learning to cook? Was the stuff even edible? He replaced the lid until he had more information to work with. What a luxury it would be to toss it in the trash without a second thought. What a luxury trash would be. He remembered, or thought he did, being very small and watching garbage trucks operated by Avoxes — tongueless workers made the best workers, or so his grandmother said — humming down the streets, emptying large bags of discarded food, containers, worn household items. Then came the time when nothing was disposable, no calorie unwanted, and no item unable to be traded, or burned for heat, or tucked against a wall for insulation. Everyone had learned to despise waste. It was creeping back into fashion, though. A sign of prosperity, like a decent shirt.

Protect our land
With armored hand,

The shirt. The shirt. His mind could fixate on a problem like that — anything, really — and not let go. As if controlling one element of his world would keep him from ruin. It was a bad habit that blinded him to other things that could harm him. A tendency toward obsession was hardwired into his brain and would likely be his undoing if he couldn't learn to outsmart it.

His grandmother's voice squeaked out the final crescendo.

Our Capitol, our life!

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Crazy old woman, still clinging to the prewar days. He loved her, but she'd lost touch with reality years ago. Every meal, she'd rattle on about the Snows' legendary grandeur, even when their fare consisted of watery bean soup and stale crackers. And to hear her tell it, it was a given that his future would be glorious. "When Coriolanus is president . . ." she often began. "When Coriolanus is president . . ." everything from the rickety Capitol air force to the exorbitant price of pork chops would be magically corrected. Thank goodness the broken elevator and her arthritic knees prevented her from going out much, and her infrequent visitors were as fossilized as she.

The cabbage began to boil, filling the kitchen with the smell of poverty. Coriolanus jabbed at it with a wooden spoon. Still no Tigris. Soon it would be too late to call and make an excuse. Everyone would have assembled at the Academy's Heavensbee Hall. There would be anger to deal with as well as disappointment from his communications professor, Satyria Click, who had campaigned for him to receive one of the twenty-four coveted mentorships in the Hunger Games. Besides being Satyria's favorite, he was her teaching aide, and doubtless she would need him for something today. She could be unpredictable, especially when she'd been drinking, and that was a given on the day of the reaping. He'd better call and warn her, say he couldn't stop vomiting or something but would do his best to recover. He steeled himself and picked up the phone to plead dire illness when another thought hit him: If he failed to show, would she allow them to replace him as a mentor? And if she did, would that weaken his chance for one of the Academy prizes presented at graduation? Without such a prize, he had no way to afford to go to university, which meant no career, which meant no future, not for him, and who knew what would happen to the family, and —

The front door, warped and complaining, scraped open.

"Coryo!" Tigris cried out, and he slammed the phone down. The nickname she'd given him when he was a newborn had stuck. He flew out of the kitchen, almost knocking her over, but she was too excited to reproach him. "I did it! I did it! Well, I did something." Her feet did a rapid little run in place as she held up a hanger draped in an old dress bag. "Look, look, look!"

Coriolanus unzipped the bag and stripped it from the shirt.

It was gorgeous. No, even better, it was classy. The thick linen was neither the original white nor the yellow of age, but a delicious cream. The cuffs and collar had been replaced with black velvet, and the buttons were gold and ebony cubes. Tesserae. Each had two tiny holes drilled through it for the thread.

"You're brilliant," he said earnestly. "And the best cousin ever." Careful to hold the shirt out of harm's way, he hugged her with his free arm. "Snow lands on top!"

"Snow lands on top!" Tigris crowed. It was the saying that had gotten them through the war, when it was a constant struggle not to be ground into the earth.

"Tell me everything," he said, knowing she would want to. She so loved to talk clothes.

Tigris threw up her hands and gave a breathy laugh. "Where to begin?"

She began with the bleach. Tigris had suggested the white curtains in Fabricia's bedroom looked dingy and, while soaking them in bleach water, had slipped in the shirt. It had responded beautifully, but no amount of soaking could entirely erase the stains. So she'd boiled the shirt with dead marigolds she'd found in the bin outside Fabricia's neighbor's, and the blossoms had dyed the linen just enough to conceal the stains. The velvet for the cuffs was from a large drawstring pouch that had held some

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now-meaningless plaque of their grandfather's. The tesserae she had pried from the interior of a cabinet in the maid's bathroom. She'd gotten the building maintenance man to drill the holes in exchange for mending his coveralls.

"Was that this morning?" he asked.

"Oh, no, yesterday. Sunday. This morning, I — Did you find my potatoes?" He followed her into the kitchen, where she opened the refrigerator and pulled out the pan. "I was up until all hours making starch from them. Then I ran down to the Dolittles' so I could have a proper iron. Saved these for the soup!" Tigris upended the mess into the boiling cabbage and stirred it around.

He noticed the lilac circles under her golden brown eyes and couldn't help feeling a pang of guilt. "When was the last time you slept?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm fine. I ate the potato skins. They say that's where the vitamins are anyway. And today's the reaping, so it's practically a holiday!" she said cheerfully.

"Not at Fabricia's," he said. Not anywhere, really. Reaping day was terrible in the districts, but not much of a celebration in the Capitol either. Like him, most people took no pleasure in remembering the war. Tigris would spend the day waiting hand and foot on her employer and her motley crew of guests while they exchanged morose tales of the deprivation they'd experienced during the siege and drank themselves senseless. Tomorrow, nursing them through hangovers, would be worse.

"Stop worrying. Here, you better hurry up and eat!" Tigris ladled some soup into a bowl and set it on the table.

Coriolanus glanced at the clock, gulped down the soup without caring that it burned his mouth, and ran to his room with the shirt. He had already showered and shaved, and his fair skin was, thankfully, blemish-free today. The school-issued underwear and

black socks were fine. He pulled on the dress pants, which were more than acceptable, and crammed his feet into a pair of laced leather boots. They were too small, but he could bear it. Then he pulled the shirt on gingerly, tucked in the tails, and turned to the mirror. He was not as tall as he should have been. As for so many of his generation, a poor diet had likely compromised his growth. But he was athletically trim, with excellent posture, and the shirt emphasized the finer points of his physique. Not since he was little, when his grandmother would parade him through the streets in a purple velvet suit, had he looked so regal. He smoothed back his blond curls as he mockingly whispered to his image, "Coriolanus Snow, future president of Panem, I salute you."

For Tigris's sake, he made a grand entrance into the living room, extending his arms and turning in a full circle to show off the shirt.

She squealed in delight and applauded. "You look amazing! So handsome and fashionable! Come see, Grandma'am!" It was another nickname coined by little Tigris, who'd found "Grandma," and certainly "Nana," insufficient for someone so imperial.

Their grandmother appeared, a fresh-cut red rose cupped lovingly in her tremorous hands. She wore a long, black, flowing tunic, the kind so popular before the war and so outdated as to be laughable now, and a pair of embroidered slippers with curled toes that had once been part of a costume. Strands of her thin, white hair poked from the bottom of a rusty velvet turban. This was the tail end of a once-lavish wardrobe — her few decent items were saved for company or the rare foray into the city.

"Here, here, boy. Put this on. Fresh from my roof garden," she ordered.

He reached for the rose, but a thorn pierced his palm in the

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shaky exchange. Blood welled from the wound, and he held his hand out to keep it from staining his precious shirt. His grandmother seemed perplexed.

"I only wanted you to look elegant," she told him.

"Of course, you did, Grandma'am," said Tigris. "And so he shall."

As she led Coriolanus into the kitchen, he reminded himself that self-control was an essential skill, and he should be grateful his grandmother provided daily opportunities to practice it.

"Puncture wounds never bleed long," Tigris promised him as she quickly cleaned and bandaged his hand. She snipped away at the rose, preserving a bit of greenery, and pinned it to his shirt. "It does look elegant. You know what her roses mean to her. Thank her."

So he did. He thanked them both and sped out the door, down the twelve ornate flights of stairs, through the lobby, and out into the Capitol.

His front door opened onto the Corso, an avenue so wide that eight chariots had comfortably ridden side by side on it in the old days when the Capitol had put on displays of military pomp for the crowds. Coriolanus could remember hanging out the apartment windows as a young child, party guests bragging that they had front-row seats to the parades. Then the bombers arrived, and for a long time his block was impassable. Now, though the streets were finally clear, rubble still lay in piles on the sidewalks, and whole buildings were as gutted as the day they'd been struck. Ten years after the victory, and he was dodging between chunks of marble and granite as he wove his way to the Academy. Sometimes Coriolanus wondered if the debris had been left there to remind the citizens of what they had endured. People had short memories. They needed to navigate the rubble, peel off the grubby

ration coupons, and witness the Hunger Games to keep the war fresh in their minds. Forgetting could lead to complacency, and then they'd all be back at square one.

As he turned onto Scholars Road, he tried to measure his pace. He wanted to arrive on time, but cool and composed, not a sweaty mess. This reaping day, like most, was shaping up to be a scorcher. But what else could you expect on July 4th? He felt grateful for the perfume of his grandmother's rose, as his warming shirt was giving off a faint scent of potatoes and dead marigolds.

As the finest secondary school in the Capitol, the Academy educated the offspring of the prominent, wealthy, and influential. With over four hundred students in each class, it had been possible for Tigris and Coriolanus, given their family's long history at the school, to gain acceptance without much difficulty. Unlike the University, it was tuition-free and provided lunch and school supplies along with uniforms. Anyone who was anyone attended the Academy, and Coriolanus would need those connections as a foundation for his future.

The grand staircase up to the Academy could hold the entire student body, so it easily accommodated the stream of officials, professors, and students headed for the reaping day festivities. Coriolanus climbed it slowly, attempting a casual dignity in case he caught anyone's eye. People knew him — or at least they had known his parents and grandparents — and there was a certain standard expected of a Snow. This year, beginning this very day, he was hoping to achieve personal recognition as well. Mentoring in the Hunger Games was his final project before graduating from the Academy in midsummer. If he gave an impressive performance as a mentor, with his outstanding academic record, Coriolanus should be awarded a monetary prize substantial enough to cover his tuition at the University.

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There would be twenty-four tributes, one boy and one girl from each of the twelve defeated districts, drawn by lottery to be thrown into an arena to fight to the death in the Hunger Games. It was all laid out in the Treaty of Treason that had ended the Dark Days of the districts' rebellion, one of the many punishments borne by the rebels. As in the past, the tributes would be dumped into the Capitol Arena, a now-dilapidated amphitheater that had been used for sports and entertainment events before the war, along with some weapons to murder one another. Viewing was encouraged in the Capitol, but a lot of people avoided it. How to make it more engaging was the challenge.

With this in mind, for the first time the tributes were to be assigned mentors. Twenty-four of the Academy's best and brightest seniors had been tapped for the job. The specifics of what this entailed were still being worked out. There was talk of preparing each tribute for a personal interview, maybe some grooming for the cameras. Everyone agreed that if the Hunger Games were to continue, they needed to evolve into a more meaningful experience, and the pairing of the Capitol youth with the district tributes had people intrigued.

Coriolanus made his way through an entry draped in black banners, down a vaulted passage, and into cavernous Heavensbee Hall, where they would watch the broadcast of the reaping ceremony. He was by no means late, but the hall was already humming with faculty and students and a number of Games officials who were not required for the opening day's broadcast.

Avoxes wove through the crowd with trays of posca, a concoction of watery wine laced with honey and herbs. It was an intoxicating version of the sour stuff that had sustained the Capitol through the war, supposedly fending off illness. Coriolanus took a goblet and swished a little of the posca around his mouth, hopefully

rinsing away any trace of cabbage breath. But he only allowed himself one swallow. It was stronger than most people thought, and in previous years he had seen upperclassmen make complete fools of themselves by imbibing too deeply.

The world still thought Coriolanus rich, but his only real currency was charm, which he spread liberally as he made his way through the crowd. Faces lit up as he gave friendly hellos to students and teachers alike, asking about family members, dropping compliments here and there.

"Your lecture on district retaliation haunts me."

"Love the bangs!"

"How did your mother's back surgery go? Well, tell her she's my hero."

He traveled past the hundreds of cushioned chairs set up for the occasion and onto the dais, where Satyria was regaling a mix of Academy professors and Games officials with some wild story. Although he only caught the last line — "Well, I said, 'I'm sorry about your wig, but you were the one who insisted on bringing a monkey!'" — he dutifully joined in the laughter that followed.

"Oh, Coriolanus," Satyria drawled as she waved him over. "Here's my star pupil." He gave her the expected kiss on the cheek and registered that she was several glasses of posca ahead of him. Really, she needed to get her drinking under control, although the same thing could be said for half the adults he knew. Self-medication was a citywide epidemic. Still, she was amusing and not overly uptight, one of the few professors who allowed students to call them by their first names. She drew back a bit and surveyed him. "Beautiful shirt. Where did you get such a thing?"

He looked at the shirt as if surprised by its existence and gave the shrug of a young man of limitless options.

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"The Snows have deep closets," he said airily. "I was trying for respectful yet celebratory."

"And so it is. What are these cunning buttons?" Satyria asked, fingering one of the cubes on his cuff. "Tesserae?"

"Are they? Well, that explains why they remind me of the maid's bathroom," Coriolanus responded, drawing a chuckle from her friends. This was the impression he fought to sustain. A reminder that he was the rare person who had a maid's bathroom — let alone one tiled with tesserae — tempered with a self-deprecating joke about his shirt.

He nodded at Satyria. "Lovely gown. It's new, isn't it?" He could tell at a glance that it was the same dress she always wore to the reaping ceremony, refurbished with tufts of black feathers. But she had validated his shirt, and he needed to return the favor.

"I had it done especially for today," she said, embracing the question. "Tenth anniversary and all that."

"Elegant," he said. All in all, they were not a bad team.

His pleasure drained as he spotted the gymnasium mistress, Professor Agrippina Sickle, using her muscular shoulders to maneuver her way through the crowd. Behind her was her aide, Sejanus Plinth, who was carrying the ornamental shield Professor Sickle insisted on holding for the group photo each year. It had been awarded to her at the end of the war for successfully overseeing Academy safety drills during the bombings.

It was not the shield that caught Coriolanus's attention but Sejanus's outfit, a soft charcoal gray suit with a blinding white shirt offset by a paisley tie, cut to add flow to his tall, angular frame. The ensemble was stylish, brand-new, and smelling of money. War profiteering, to be exact. Sejanus's father was a District 2 manufacturer who had sided with the president. He had made such a fortune off munitions that he'd been able to buy

his family's way into a life in the Capitol. The Plinths now enjoyed privileges that the oldest, most powerful families had earned over generations. It was unprecedented that Sejanus, a district-born boy, was a student at the Academy, but his father's lavish donation had allowed for much of the school's postwar reconstruction. A Capitol-born citizen would have expected a building to be renamed for them. Sejanus's father had only requested an education for his son.

For Coriolanus, the Plinths and their kind were a threat to all he held dear. The newly rich climbers in the Capitol were chipping away at the old order simply by virtue of their presence. It was particularly vexing because the bulk of the Snow family fortune had also been invested in munitions — but in District 13. Their sprawling complex, blocks and blocks of factories and research facilities, had been bombed to dust. District 13 had been nuked, and the entire area still emitted unlivable levels of radiation. The center of the Capitol's military manufacturing had shifted to District 2 and fallen right into the Plinths' laps. When news of District 13's demise had reached the Capitol, Coriolanus's grandmother had publicly brushed it off, saying it was fortunate that they had plenty of other assets. But they didn't.

Sejanus had arrived on the school playground ten years ago, a shy, sensitive boy cautiously surveying the other children with a pair of soulful brown eyes much too large for his strained face. When word had gotten out that he'd come from the districts, Coriolanus's first impulse had been to join his classmates' campaign to make the new kid's life a living hell. On further reflection, he'd ignored him. If the other Capitol children took this to mean that baiting the district brat was beneath him, Sejanus took it as decency. Neither take was quite accurate, but both reinforced the image of Coriolanus as a class act.