

THE HUNGER GAMES



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For James Proimos

PART I
"THE TRIBUTES"



When I wake up, the other side of the bed is empty. My fingers stretch out, seeking Prim's warmth but find only the rough canvas cover of the mattress. She must have had bad dreams and climbed in with our mother. Of course. This is the day of the reaping.

I prop myself up on one elbow. There's enough light in the bedroom to see them. My little sister, Prim, curled up on her side, cocooned in my mother's body, their cheeks pressed together. In sleep, my mother looks younger, still beautiful, but so beaten-down. Prim's face is as fresh as a rain-kissed flower as the primrose for which she was named. My mother was very beautiful once, too. Or so they tell me.

Sitting at Prim's knees, guarding her, is the worst of them, a cat. Mashed-in nose, half of one ear missing, eyes like rotting squash. Prim named him Buttercup, insisting

the vermin and he's a born mouser. Even caught a seasonal rat. Sometimes, when I clean a kill, I feed him entrails. He has stopped hissing at me.

Entrails. No hissing. This is the closest we will ever get to love.

I swing my legs off the bed and slide into my worn, supple leather that has molded to my feet. I pull on my shirt, tuck my long dark braid up into a cap, and grab a cheese bag. On the table, under a wooden bowl to protect it from hungry rats and cats alike, sits a perfect little wheel of cheese wrapped in basil leaves. Prim's gift to me on reaching the city. I slip the cheese carefully in my pocket as I slip outside.

Our part of District 12, nicknamed the Seam, is crawling with coal miners heading out to the mines at this hour. Men and women with hunched shoulders and calloused knuckles, many who have long since stopped talking about the coal dust out of their broken nails, the lined faces. But today the black cinder streets are empty. The shutters on the squat gray houses are closed. The red light is out til two. May as well sleep in. If you can.

Our house is almost at the edge of the Seam.

three hours of electricity in the evenings, it's u
touch. Even so, I always take a moment to liste
the hum that means the fence is live. Right now,
stone. Concealed by a clump of bushes, I flatten
ly and slide under a two-foot stretch that's b
years. There are several other weak spots in the
one is so close to home I almost always enter the

As soon as I'm in the trees, I retrieve a bow
arrows from a hollow log. Electrified or not,
been successful at keeping the flesh-eaters out
Inside the woods they roam freely, and there a
cerns like venomous snakes, rabid animals, and
to follow. But there's also food if you know how
father knew and he taught me some before he
bits in a mine explosion. There was nothing e
was eleven then. Five years later, I still wake up
him to run.

Even though trespassing in the woods is illeg
ing carries the severest of penalties, more peopl
if they had weapons. But most are not bold enou
out with just a knife. My bow is a rarity, crafted

someone might be arming the Seam would never be allowed.

In the fall, a few brave souls sneak into the woods to pick the best apples. But always in sight of the Meadowlands, close enough to run back to the safety of District 12 if they're caught. "District Twelve. Where you can starve to death." I mutter. Then I glance quickly over my shoulder. Even in the middle of nowhere, you worry someone might overhear you.

When I was younger, I scared my mother by saying the things I would blurt out about District 12, about the Capitol who rule our country, Panem, from the far-off Capitol. Eventually I understood this would only get me more trouble. So I learned to hold my tongue and put a neutral features into an indifferent mask so that no one could read my thoughts. Do my work quietly in school, be polite small talk in the public market. Discuss illegal trades in the Hob, which is the black market where I earn most of my money. Even at home, where I am supposed to avoid discussing tricky topics. Like the reaping, the Hunger Games, or the Hunger Games. Prim might begin

“Hey, Catnip,” says Gale. My real name is Katniss. I first told him, I had barely whispered it. So he said Catnip. Then when this crazy lynx started prowling around the woods looking for handouts, it became a nickname for me. I finally had to kill the lynx, a scared off game. I almost regretted it because he was my company. But I got a decent price for his pelt.

“Look what I shot,” Gale holds up a loaf of bread with a row stuck in it, and I laugh. It’s real bakery bread, dense loaves we make from our grain rations. He holds the hands, pull out the arrow, and hold the puncture to my nose, inhaling the fragrance that makes me drool with saliva. Fine bread like this is for special occasions.

“Mm, still warm,” I say. He must have been at the crack of dawn to trade for it. “What did it cost?”

“Just a squirrel. Think the old man was feeling generous this morning,” says Gale. “Even wished me luck.”

“Well, we all feel a little closer today, don’t we?” I say, even bothering to roll my eyes. “Prim left us a chance to get out.”

His expression brightens at the treat. “Thank you.”

I catch it in my mouth and break the delicate teeth. The sweet tartness explodes across my tongue. "I'm *ever* in your favor!" I finish with equal verve. We're not about it because the alternative is to be scared of our wits. Besides, the Capitol accent is so affected, all of it sounds funny in it.

I watch as Gale pulls out his knife and slices a piece of bread. He could be my brother. Straight black hair, olive skin, and he has the same gray eyes. But we're not related. We don't even live closely. Most of the families who work the mines don't know one another this way.

That's why my mother and Prim, with their blue eyes, always look out of place. They are from a family whose parents were part of the small merchant class. My mother is a doctor, officials, Peacekeepers, and the occasional Seer. They ran an apothecary shop in the nicer part of town. Since almost no one can afford doctors, apothecaries are the healers. My father got to know my mother because on his hunts he would sometimes collect medicinal plants and bring them to her shop to be brewed into remedies. She really loved him to leave her home for the Sea.

place, we are invisible but have a clear view which is teeming with summer life, greens to g dig, fish iridescent in the sunlight. The day is g blue sky and soft breeze. The food's wonde cheese seeping into the warm bread and the be in our mouths. Everything would be perfect if th holiday, if all the day off meant was roaming t with Gale, hunting for tonight's supper. But inste be standing in the square at two o'clock waiting to be called out.

"We could do it, you know," Gale says quietly.

"What?" I ask.

"Leave the district. Run off. Live in the woods could make it," says Gale.

I don't know how to respond. The idea is so p

"If we didn't have so many kids," he adds quic

They're not our kids, of course. But they mig Gale's two little brothers and a sister. Prim. An well throw in our mothers, too, because how w without us? Who would fill those mouths that a ing for more? With both of us hunting daily,

The conversation feels all wrong. Leave? How can I leave Prim, who is the only person in the world I'm attached to? And Gale is devoted to his family. We can't leave. Ever talking about it? And even if we did . . . even if we did, where did this stuff about having kids come from? It's never been anything romantic between Gale and me. When we met, I was a skinny twelve-year-old, and although he was two years older, he already looked like a man. It's not the time for us to even become friends, to stop our own every trade and begin helping each other out.

Besides, if he wants kids, Gale won't have any chance of getting a wife. He's good-looking, he's strong enough to do any work in the mines, and he can hunt. You can tell by the way the girls whisper about him when he walks by that they want him. It makes me jealous but not for the reasons other people would think. Good hunting partners are hard to come by.

"What do you want to do?" I ask. We can hunt for food, or we can fish. Or we can do anything else we want to do. Or we can do nothing. Or we can do anything else we want to do. Or we can do nothing.

"Let's fish at the lake. We can leave our poles in the woods. Get something nice for tonight," he says. We can do anything we want to do. We can do anything we want to do. We can do anything we want to do.

Tonight. After the reaping, everyone is supposed to be happy.

found the patch a few years ago, but Gale had strung mesh nets around it to keep out the animals.

On the way home, we swing by the Hob, the market that operates in an abandoned warehouse that once stored coal. When they came up with a more efficient system that transported the coal directly from the mines to the trains, the Hob gradually took over the space. Most businesses are closed this time on reaping day, but the black market is busy. We easily trade six of the fish for good bread and two for salt. Greasy Sae, the bony old woman who serves hot soup from a large kettle, takes half the fish in her hands in exchange for a couple of chunks of bread. "We might do a tad better elsewhere, but we make do," she says. We keep on good terms with Greasy Sae. She's the one you can consistently be counted on to buy wild dog. "I don't buy them on purpose, but if you're attacked and you need a few or two, well, meat is meat. "Once it's in the stew, it's beef," Greasy Sae says with a wink. No one in the market turns up their nose at a good leg of wild dog, but the poorer folks who come to the Hob can afford to be a little picky.

When we finish our business at the market,

next to each other at assemblies, partnering for projects. We rarely talk, which suits us both just fine.

Today her drab school outfit has been replaced by an expensive white dress, and her blonde hair is done up with pink ribbon. Reaping clothes.

"Pretty dress," says Gale.

Madge shoots him a look, trying to see if it's a compliment or if he's just being ironic. It *is* a compliment she would never be wearing it ordinarily. She puts her hand together and then smiles. "Well, if I end up going to the Capitol, I want to look nice, don't I?"

Now it's Gale's turn to be confused. Does she think she's messing with him? I'm guessing the second.

"You won't be going to the Capitol," says Gale. His eyes land on a small, circular pin that adorns her dress. Gold. Beautifully crafted. It could keep a family for months. "What can you have? Five entries? I had five when I was just twelve years old."

"That's not her fault," I say.

"No, it's no one's fault. Just the way it is," says Madge. Her face has become closed off. She puts the money

and so on until you reach the age of eighteen, the eligibility, when your name goes into the pool. That's true for every citizen in all twelve districts of the country of Panem.

But here's the catch. Say you are poor and struggle to survive. You can opt to add your name more times to the pool for tesserae. Each tessera is worth a meager year's worth of grain and oil for one person. You may do this for yourself and family members as well. So, at the age of twelve, my name entered four times. Once, because I had to feed myself, and three times for tesserae for grain and oil for myself, my mother, and my sister. In fact, every year I have needed to do this. Entries are cumulative. So now, at the age of sixteen, my name will be in the reaping twenty times. Gale, who is poor, has been either helping or single-handedly feeding my family for five for seven years, will have his name in forty-times the pool.

You can see why someone like Madge, who has no tesserae, is at risk of needing a tessera, can set him off. The odds of a name being drawn is very slim compared to the number of people who live in the Seam. Not impossible, but slim. And remember, the rules were set up by the Capitol, not the districts.

thereby ensure we will never trust one another. The Capitol's advantage to have us divided among ourselves might say if there were no ears to hear but mine. It's a reaping day. If a girl with a gold pin and no testaments made what I'm sure she thought was a harmless mistake.

As we walk, I glance over at Gale's face, still so pale underneath his stony expression. His rages seem pointless although I never say so. It's not that I don't agree with him. But what good is yelling about the Capitol in the woods? It doesn't change anything. It doesn't make things fair. It doesn't fill our stomachs. In fact, it scares them. I let him yell though. Better he does it in the woods than in the district.

Gale and I divide our spoils, leaving two fish, two loaves of good bread, greens, a quart of strawberries, and a bit of money for each.

"See you in the square," I say.

"Wear something pretty," he says flatly.

At home, I find my mother and sister are ready. My mother wears a fine dress from her apothecary. I wear in my first reaping outfit, a skirt and ruffled blouse.

“Are you sure?” I ask. I’m trying to get past my need for help from her. For a while, I was so angry, I wouldn’t let her do anything for me. And this is something she knows. Her clothes from her past are very precious to her.

“Of course. Let’s put your hair up, too,” she says. She towel-dry it and braid it up on my head. I can hardly look at myself in the cracked mirror that leans against the wall.

“You look beautiful,” says Prim in a hushed voice.

“And nothing like myself,” I say. I hug her, but I know these next few hours will be terrible for her. He’s here. She’s about as safe as you can get, since she’s never been hurt once. I wouldn’t let her take out any tesserae. I’m worried about me. That the unthinkable might happen.

I protect Prim in every way I can, but I’m powerless against the reaping. The anguish I always feel when she’s hurt is up in my chest and threatens to register on my face. Her blouse has pulled out of her skirt in the breeze, so I force myself to stay calm. “Tuck your tail in, little bird,” I say, smoothing the blouse back in place.

Prim giggles and gives me a small “Quack.”

“Quack yourself,” I say with a light laugh.

rough bread made from the tessera grain, although I have little
much appetite anyway.

At one o'clock, we head for the square. Attendance is mandatory unless you are on death's door. This evening the guard will come around and check to see if this is the last time you'll be imprisoned.

It's too bad, really, that they hold the reaping here — one of the few places in District 12 that can hold a crowd. The square's surrounded by shops, and on public days, especially if there's good weather, it has a holiday feel. But today, despite the bright banners hanging from the buildings, there's an air of grimness. The camera crews, like buzzards on rooftops, only add to the effect.

People file in silently and sign in. The reaping is an opportunity for the Capitol to keep tabs on the population, well. Twelve- through eighteen-year-olds are roped off in roped areas marked off by ages, the oldest in the front, young ones, like Prim, toward the back. Family members line up around the perimeter, holding tightly to each other's hands. But there are others, too, who have no one to hold their hands, or who no longer care, who slip among the

Anyway, Gale and I agree that if we have to choose between dying of hunger and a bullet in the head, the bullet is much quicker.

The space gets tighter, more claustrophobic as we move inside the square. The square's quite large, but not enough to hold District 12's population of about eight thousand. Late in the afternoon, the square is directed to the adjacent streets, where they can watch the ceremony on screens as it's televised live by the state.

I find myself standing in a clump of sixteens for a moment. We all exchange terse nods then focus our attention on a temporary stage that is set up before the Justice Building. It holds three chairs, a podium, and two large glass cases, one for the boys and one for the girls. I stare at the papers on the girls' ball. Twenty of them have Katniss Everdeen's name written on them in careful handwriting.

Two of the three chairs fill with Madge's father, Mayor Undersee, who's a tall, balding man, and Effie Trinket, District 12's escort, fresh from the Capitol with her scandalous pinkish hair, and spring green suit. They murmur to each other and then look with concern at the empty seat.

Just as the town clock strikes two, the mayor

brought peace and prosperity to its citizens. The Dark Days, the uprising of the districts against the Capitol. Twelve were defeated, the thirteenth obliterated. The act of Treason gave us the new laws to guarantee our yearly reminder that the Dark Days must not be repeated, it gave us the Hunger Games.

The rules of the Hunger Games are simple. In response for the uprising, each of the twelve districts must send one girl and one boy, called tributes, to participate in the Games. Four tributes will be imprisoned in a vast outdoor arena that could hold anything from a burning desert to a snowy mountain and. Over a period of several weeks, the tributes must fight to the death. The last tribute standing wins.

Taking the kids from our districts, forcing them to fight each other while we watch — this is the Capitol's way of reminding us how totally we are at their mercy. How likely we would stand of surviving another rebellion.

Whatever words they use, the real message is that we will take your children and sacrifice them for the Capitol. There is nothing you can do. If you lift a finger, we will kill the last one of you. Just as we did in District Thirteen.

and even delicacies like sugar while the rest of vation.

“It is both a time for repentance and a time for tones the mayor.

Then he reads the list of past District 12 victors. In four years, we have had exactly two. Only one, Haymitch Abernathy, a paunchy, middle-aged man. At this moment appears hollering something unintelligible, tumbles onto the stage, and falls into the third chair. Very. The crowd responds with its token applause, confused and tries to give Effie Trinket a big hug, but barely manages to fend off.

The mayor looks distressed. Since all of this has been revised, right now District 12 is the laughingstock of the world, he knows it. He quickly tries to pull the attention away from reaping by introducing Effie Trinket.

Bright and bubbly as ever, Effie Trinket trots forward and gives her signature, “Happy Hunger Games! And may the odds be *ever* in your favor!” Her pink hair must be because her curls have shifted slightly off-center. She goes on a bit about counter with Haymitch. She goes on a bit about v

are not in his favor. Not compared to a lot of
maybe he's thinking the same thing about me be
darkens and he turns away. "But there are still
slips," I wish I could whisper to him.

It's time for the drawing. Effie Trinket says
does, "Ladies first!" and crosses to the glass ball
names. She reaches in, digs her hand deep into
pulls out a slip of paper. The crowd draws in
breath and then you can hear a pin drop, and I'
seous and so desperately hoping that it's not m
me, that it's not me.

Effie Trinket crosses back to the podium, sm
of paper, and reads out the name in a clear voi
me.

It's Primrose Everdeen.



One time, when I was in a blind in a tree, waiting for game to wander by, I dozed off and fell to the ground, landing on my back. It was as if the ground had knocked every wisp of air from my lungs, and I was struggling to inhale, to exhale, to do anything.

That's how I feel now, trying to remember her name, unable to speak, totally stunned as the name booms from the inside of my skull. Someone is gripping my shoulder from the Seam, and I think maybe I started to run when she caught me.

There must have been some mistake. This was not my opening. Prim was one slip of paper in thousands of openings of being chosen so remote that I'd not even bothered to think about her. Hadn't I done everything? Taken the time to refuse to let her do the same? One slip. One slip.

me, and I see the back of her blouse has become a tail that hangs out over her skirt. It's this detail, the unbuttoned blouse forming a ducktail, that brings me back to myself.

"Prim!" The strangled cry comes out of my throat. My muscles begin to move again. "Prim!" I don't know how I get through the crowd. The other kids make way in front of me, allowing me a straight path to the stage. I reach the top of the steps about to mount the steps. With one sweep of my hand, I push her behind me.

"I volunteer!" I gasp. "I volunteer as tribute!"

There's some confusion on the stage. District 12 has never had a volunteer in decades and the protocol has become a bit of a rule is that once a tribute's name has been put in the hat, another eligible boy, if a boy's name has been read, or girl, if a girl's name has been read, can step forward to take her place. In some districts, in which winning the Hunger Games is such a great honor, people are eager to risk their lives by volunteering. But in District 12, where the word *tribute* is pretty much synonymous with the word *death*, volunteers are all but extinct.

"Lovely!" says Effie Trinket. "But I believe t

ken of on occasion. The girl who five years ago
with her mother and sister, as he presented her
child, with a medal of valor. A medal for her father
in the mines. Does he remember that? "What do
he repeats gruffly. "Let her come forward."

Prim is screaming hysterically behind me. She
her skinny arms around me like a vice. "No, Katniss
can't go!"

"Prim, let go," I say harshly, because this is
and I don't want to cry. When they televise the
reapings tonight, everyone will make note of my
be marked as an easy target. A weakling. I will
that satisfaction. "Let go!"

I can feel someone pulling her from my back.
Gale has lifted Prim off the ground and she's there
arms. "Up you go, Catnip," he says, in a voice he
keep steady, and then he carries Prim off toward
steel myself and climb the steps.

"Well, bravo!" gushes Effie Trinket. "That's the
Games!" She's pleased to finally have a district
tion going on in it. "What's your name?"

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