

The sand crunches between my toes.

I hold my shiny dress shoes, the only part of my outfit that is at all new, in one hand. In the other, I crush small pieces of sadstone, crumbling it so it falls back into the flat sandscape.

I needed a quick break from this day. I had a 6:00 am crab trapping shift, then a 10:00 am boat matinance, an hour break, then a packaging and loading shift at 3:00. I rushed home to shower and change for the reaping. The sun is about to set, and the reaping's about to start, yet here I am, kicking rocks on a beach.

The shore is still covered in clear, plastic-like jellyfish. They're a gorgeous cobalt blue, and they washed up this morning. People here in Four call them sailor jellies, but their fancy name is vellella vellella. These washed up jellies are meant to be a good omen, bringing pleasant supprises and good news. A bit ironic that they show up on reaping day, huh?

My parents believe in all of the sea lore, and on the day my sister and I were born, they washed up and they named my sister after them, though we call her Ella because Vellella is kind of a mouthful. I got stuck with part of an ugly fish, a carp, who isn't even native to our ocean.

"Carper!" Ella calls, sitting on one of the many docks around the beach. "I know you like going late so we don't have to wait, but I'm pretty sure waiting in a line for a little bit is better than getting shot!"

I laugh too loudly, trying not to accidentally let her know that the giant guns the peacekeepers carry scare me more than they should. I'm too old for that, way too old now. But I've seen them use them and I'd rather Ella and I not be around.

But, I decide to listen to her and we start the short walk from the docks to the Council building.

The closer we get to the square, the more people there are. Peacekeepers are everywhere, keeping everyone in order. I can see them scanning for anyone they might need to put in their place. I feel like throwing up, I'm so scared I might just vomit right here on the spot. The sun has almost fully set by the time we reach the town square.

The escort this year is a young man named Orpheus. His greenish hair, streaked with pink, is neatly combed, his is shirt crisp, his face is caked with makeup. He looks like he doesn't belong here. He's already at the podium, microphone in hand, waiting for the Mayor to start his speech.

The Mayor is the same way as he is every year during the reaping. Stoic, serious and to the point. Today, however, even he seems a little on edge from what I could tell. The Mayor finishes his long-winded speech, finally getting onto the main event of the day: the drawing of the names. He gestures for the escort to step forward, and he reaches into a glass bowl, and I watch in a sort of morbid anticipation.

Most districts do the girls first, and we're no different. He twirls his painted fingers around in the massive bowl and plucks one out.

"Delani Avery."

It takes a moment for me to find the tiny girl in the crowd. She's short, and really skinny. She looks like a baby version of my sister.

Delani makes the short walk up to the podium. She's shaking like a leaf, her eyes wide and

panicked. Her parents watch helplessly at her. Her dad is crying, clenched and unclenching his fists. Her mom is stock still, just watching as her young daughter walks up to face the news of her coming death.

My stomach is turning to knots. I hate when little kids get picked. It just feels so... wrong.

The Mayor steps forward to introduce her, a rehearsed speech I've heard on every reaping, including my own. But I'm too focused on Delani and how she's shaking, looking like she's about to run for the hills. Her face is pale, her eyes almost looking like they're about to pop out of her skull. I can see her parents behind her, tears on the verge of coming. Her dad is crying into his wife's shoulder, while she stands still, staring at his daughter.

And the reaping goes on. I watch the Mayor reach back into the reaping bowl, the boys this time, and watch the names come out. My attention is all on the bowl and its contents, praying that name that comes out isn't mine.

Then the Mayor pulls out the slip of paper, holding it up for us to read it. My heart is in my throat as I watch the whole square hold its collective breath. Silence fills the air, and the whole square is a blur around me.

The words from the Mayor, clear and concise, come through the microphone and the square. They're two words that I would've done anything not to hear at the reaping. this lifetime.

"Carper Conch."

I feel as if I'm frozen in place, but my legs start the march to the stage. When I pass the girls on the way to the stage, a frail hand grabs my forearm. Ella's milky blue eyes glare up into my own.

"The jellyfish are never wrong," she whispers. "You're going to win."

I nod shakily, and slowly pull my arm out of her weak grip.

The steps up to the platform feel like I'm walking up a mountain. I keep my head down, my eyes locked on my shoes as I take each step in slow, deliberate steps. I finally make it to the podium, and I'm greeted by Orpheus with a tight, nervous grin.

He motions for me to join him. The cameras, which have been filming this whole time, swing around to film us up close. All I can do is clench my jaw, fighting the urge to run and to hide somewhere, anywhere.

No one volunteers. I didn't expect them to.

Then Orpheus speaks. The words are loud and clear and I hear them like the clash of a wave.

"And that concludes the annual reaping! Thank you, everyone, for joining us— and may the odds be ever in your favor!"

I turn to Delani as she reached out to shake my hand. Her handshake is strong, almost as strong as mine even though her arms are tiny.

For the first time ever, I feel like I'm actually looking at the reaping for what it's really supposed to be: a display of the Capitol's major power. I've always known the games were designed to showcase the Capitol's might, but looking at all of the citizens and seeing the fear on their faces just proves it's true. I am one of those people now.