

KYLIE CORINTH, DISTRICT 1

My back aches from working, and my cheeks burn from the sun. My family's temporary money problems have been lasting for so many years we can't even afford sunscreen anymore. All of the money from Olive and I working in the orchards and the fields goes to buying medicine for mother.

She's been dying from something they used to call cancer, but everyone just calls it ginger's syndrome because ginger is a root and the disease takes root somewhere in your body and keeps growing, never letting go.

There's a drug for it in the capitol, but we couldn't afford it in a thousand years, no matter how many farm shifts Olive and I take on. She's had it for seven years, and she's getting to the end. The "doctors" we've attempted to hire say she'll die any day now.

My father works on the other side of our district, in a factory that builds farm equipment. He sends 50 panar to us every month, but no doubt he's making a lot more. He used to come home to help with the harvest for a few months every September and October, but he hasn't done that for years.

I hear a loud, ringing sound and my farming group's supervisor, Berrie, calls that the last morning shift is over, releasing us to go home and get ready for the reaping. I leave my shovel in the tool shed after rinsing it off, and jog to the strawberry fields to collect my thirteen-year-old sister, Olive.

"Hey," she says. "We should hurry, the reaping's in an hour."

"Yeah."

"Are you going to be... ready for this? To watch?"

"Of course. I'm more worried about you, Oli."

She tucks a curl behind her ear. "I know it hit you harder."

She's right. It did.

Last year in the reaping, they called my brother, Ethan. He was only twelve. There was no one to volunteer for him. He...got reaped.

He rode the train to the Capitol. He got dressed up for the parade. He did an interview so bravely. He was ready to fight to come home.

I had to watch him die.

It was right at the end of the bloodbath. Living tributes had collected their weapons and supplies and began to retreat into the bushy trees surrounding the Cornucopia. Ethan had pulled off a backpack from a dead body and started to leave the area. But he tripped on a log and others heard him.

The district 4 girl—Adrienne, sprinted over, and as he stood up, slit his throat with a hunting knife.

He placed 13th.

I haven't been the same ever since.

Olive puts a hand on my shoulder to bring me back to reality.

"You've got this. We'll go straight home after and have dinner with Mother. If she'll wake up for a bit, that is." She looks me dead in the eyes. "We're all coming home this time, Kylie. I promise."

I nod.

When we reach the front door, both of us smile before opening it to see our other brother, Arti. He's already dressed in Ethan's old reaping clothes.

Olive and I get showered and dressed, and it feels nice to not be covered in farming soil. I check on my mother before we leave. Her heart is beating and she's breathing, but she won't wake up. She's been like this for the last few days. Every few days she gets up for a few hours. She can walk around and talk to us, and it's like she's back to how it was a few years ago. But then soon, she would fall unconscious again.

Before we leave, I look at Ethan's picture on the mantle of the fireplace. His golden brown eyes are a contrast to his chocolatey skin. I miss the twinkle in the corner of them. Ethan had our mother's eyes, as opposed to the rest of us. Those eyes might disappear from my life altogether soon.

We stand in line for a long time. Olive plays hangman in the dirt with Arti while I finish the braids I started last night.

I step up to the registration table.

"Corinth family."

"3 kids, one adult?" The woman asks.

"Oh, uh, no, just 3 kids."

"Did you report to the Town Hall? If you're in a 50 mile radius, you have to report unavailable family members there. It's been announced every week for a year."

"But she hasn't come in seven years. It's on their records—it's...it's...no, please, you have to understand..." I start panicking. It's illegal to not attend the reaping without payment and a confirmation with peacekeepers. They come around every year. You tie 30 panar to your door for each unattending person, along with their name. The peacekeepers put it in the attendance system and they're excused.

But she's right. I heard it. Every week. And I thought about and thought about it. And I promised to do it these last four weeks, when it was allowed. And I didn't. I worked in the fields and I stressed about the reaping and I silently grieved Ethan.

The woman ends her stern expression. "Darling, I'm sure they won't get to your house. And they really don't care after the reaping is finished. But I do have to report it."

I nod, and silently walk past. Olive is shaking. I don't think Arti gets it. I squeeze his shoulders and nudge him towards the adults and small children section.

I walk over to the sixteens.

They're going to kill her. Before God wants to take her, before I can say goodbye. They will break in, take our money and our food and our family.

The escort dips her hand into the girls bowl as I hyperventilate over the horrific mistake I've made.

"Lettie Foster."

The crowd whispers for a moment, and then a tiny girl steps up to the stage. She's not even tall enough to reach the microphone.

"Well now, Miss Lettie, how old are you?"

"I...I just turned twelve." She fixes the flowered headband on her head.

The people next to me start to notice my panic.

"Is she your sister?" A girl next to me asks.

I shake my head. That used to be my brother, before the Capitol took him from us just like they're about to take my mother.

I can't let that happen.

They pull a boy, and then they ask for volunteers.

All I see is Ethan, in a little green shirt, standing there looking terrified. And now there's a little girl in his place.

No.

"I volunteer as the female tribute."

I run to take her place on the stage, gently pushing her off and back towards the other twelve-year-olds.

I find Lettie's face again in the crowd. Tears are streaming down her cheeks. I want to hug her, to tell her to stop crying, that I'll be fine even though I won't be. This shouldn't affect her at all. Her name shouldn't have been called.

The reaping ceremony ends.

They lead us into a room, where I say final goodbyes to Olive and Arti.

"Sprint home," I whisper to Olive. "Make sure mom is safe."

She hugs me.

I don't make eye contact with the other tribute. Instead, as we approach the train, I try to spot our house, which is right outside the town hall square.

Our front door window is broken. The panar I tied to the doorknob is sitting on the porch. And there's...there's...

There's blood splattered on the side window.

They've taken both of them.

I won't let them take anyone else.