

Sixty seconds. That's how long we're required to stand on our metal circles before the sound of a gong releases us. Step off before the minute is up, and land mines blow your legs off. Sixty seconds to take in the ring of tributes all equidistant from the Cornucopia, a giant golden horn shaped like a cone with a curved tail, the mouth of which is at least twenty feet high, spilling over with the things that will give us life here in the arena. Food, containers of water, weapons, medicine, garments, fire starters. Strewn around the Cornucopia are other supplies, their value decreasing the farther they are from the horn. For instance, only a few steps from my feet lies a three-foot square of plastic. Certainly it could be of some use in a downpour. But there in the mouth, I can see a tent pack that would protect from almost any sort of weather. If I had the guts to go in and fight for it against the other twenty-three tributes. Which I have been instructed not to do. We're on a flat, open stretch of ground. A plain of hard-packed dirt. Behind the tributes across from me, I can see nothing, indicating either a steep downward slope or even a cliff. To my right lies a lake. To my left and back, sparse piney woods. This is where Haymitch would want me to go. Immediately. I hear his instructions in my head. "Just clear out, put as much distance as you can between yourselves and the others, and find a source of water." But it's tempting, so tempting, when I see the bounty waiting there before me. And I know that if I don't get it, someone else will. That the Career Tributes who survive the bloodbath will divide up most of these life-sustaining spoils. Something catches my eye. There, resting on a mound of blanket rolls, is a silver sheath of arrows and a bow, already strung, just waiting to be engaged. That's mine, I think. It's meant for me. I'm fast. I can sprint faster than any of the girls in our school although a couple can beat me in distance races. But this forty-yard length, this is what I am built for. I know I can get it, I know I can reach it first, but then the question is how quickly can I get out of there? By the time I've scrambled up the packs and grabbed the weapons, others will have reached the horn, and one or two I might be able to pick off, but say there's a dozen, at that close range, they could take me down with the spears and the clubs. Or their own powerful fists. Still, I won't be the only target. I'm betting many of the other tributes would pass up a smaller girl, even one who scored an eleven in training, to take out their more fierce adversaries. Haymitch has never seen me run. Maybe if he had he'd tell me to go for it. Get the weapon. Since that's the very weapon that might be my salvation. And I only see one bow in that whole pile. I know the minute must be almost up and will have to decide what my strategy will be and I find myself positioning my feet to run, not away into the surrounding forests but toward the pile, toward the bow. When suddenly I notice Peeta, he's about five tributes to my right, quite a fair distance, still I can tell he's looking at me and I think he might be shaking his head. But he's in my eyes, and while I'm puzzling over it the gong rings out. And I've missed it! I've missed my chance! Because those extra couple of seconds I've lost by not being ready are enough to change my mind about going in. My feet shuffle for a moment, confused at the direction my brain wants to take and then I lunge forward, scoop up the sheet of plastic and a loaf of bread. The pickings are so small and I'm so angry with Peeta for distracting me that I sprint in twenty yards to retrieve a bright orange backpack that could hold anything because I can't stand leaving with virtually nothing. A boy, I think from District 9, reaches the pack at the same time I do and for a brief time we grapple for it and then he coughs, splattering my face with blood. I stagger back, repulsed by the warm, sticky spray. Then the boy slips to the ground. That's when I see the knife in his back. Already other

tributes have reached the Cornucopia and are spreading out to attack. Yes, the girl from District 2, ten yards away, running toward me, one hand clutching a half-dozen knives. I've seen her throw in training.

She never misses. And I'm her next target. All the general fear I've been feeling condenses into an immediate fear of this girl, this predator who might kill me in seconds. Adrenaline shoots through me and

I sling the pack over one shoulder and run full-speed for the woods. I can hear the blade whistling toward me and reflexively hike the pack up to protect my head. The blade lodges in the pack. Both straps on my shoulders now, I make for the trees. Somehow I know the girl will not pursue me. That she'll be drawn back into the Cornucopia before all the good stuff is gone. A grin crosses my face.

Thanks for the knife, I think. At the edge of the woods I turn for one instant to survey the field. About a dozen or so tributes are hacking away at one another at the horn. Several lie dead already on the ground. Those who have taken flight are disappearing into the trees or into the void opposite me. I

continue running until the woods have hidden me from the other tributes then slow into a steady jog that I think I can maintain for a while. For the next few hours, I alternate between jogging and walking, putting as much distance as I can between myself and my competitors. I lost my bread during the struggle with

the boy from District 9 but managed to stuff my plastic in my sleeve so as I walk I fold it neatly and tuck it into a pocket. I also free the knife—it's a fine one with a long sharp blade, serrated near the handle, which will make it handy for sawing through things—and slide it into my belt. I don't dare stop to examine the

contents of the pack yet. I just keep moving, pausing only to check for pursuers. I can go a long time. I know that from my days in the woods. But I will need water. That was Haymitch's second instruction, and

since I sort of botched the first, I keep a sharp eye out for any sign of it. No luck. The woods begin to evolve, and the pines are intermixed with a variety of trees, some I recognize, some completely foreign to me. At one point, I hear a noise and pull my and walking, putting as much distance as I can between

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first, I keep a sharp eye out for any sign of it. No luck. The woods begin to evolve, and the pines are intermixed with a variety of trees, some I recognize, some completely foreign to me. At one point, I hear a noise and pull my knife, thinking I may have to defend myself, but I've only startled a rabbit. "Good to

see you," I whisper. If there's one rabbit, there could be hundreds just waiting to be snared. The ground slopes down. I don't particularly like this. Valleys make me feel trapped. I want to be high, like in the hills around District 12, where I can see my enemies approaching. But I have no choice but to keep going.

Funny though, I don't feel too bad. The days of gorging myself have paid off. I've got staying power even though I'm short on sleep. Being in the woods is rejuvenating. I'm glad for the solitude, even though it's an illusion, because I'm probably on-screen right now. Not consistently but off and on. There are so

many deaths to show the first day that a tribute trekking through the woods isn't much to look at. But they'll show me enough to let people know I'm alive, uninjured and on the move. One of the heaviest

days of betting is the opening, when the initial casualties come in. But that can't compare to what happens as the field shrinks to a handful of players. It's late afternoon when I begin to hear the cannons.

Each shot represents a dead tribute. The fighting must have finally stopped at the Cornucopia. They never collect the bloodbath bodies until the killers have dispersed. On the opening day, they don't even fire the cannons until the initial fighting's over because it's too hard to keep track of the fatalities. I allow myself to pause, panting, as I count the shots. One...two...three...on and on until they reach eleven. Eleven dead in all. Thirteen left to play. My fingernails scrape at the dried blood the boy from District 9 coughed into my face. He's gone, certainly. I wonder about Peeta. Has he lasted through the day? I'll know in a few hours. When they project the dead's images into the sky for the rest of us to see. All of a sudden, I'm overwhelmed by the thought that Peeta may be already lost, bled white, collected, and in the process of being transported back to the Capitol to be cleaned up, redressed, and shipped in a simple wooden box back to District 12. No longer here. Heading home. I try hard to remember if I saw him once the action started. But the last image I can conjure up is Peeta shaking his head as the gong rang out. Maybe it's better, if he's gone already. He had no confidence he could win. And I will not end up with the unpleasant task of killing him. Maybe it's better if he's out of this for good. I slump down next to my pack, exhausted. I need to go through it anyway before night falls. See what I have to work with. As I unhook the straps, I can feel it's sturdily made although a rather unfortunate color. This orange will practically glow in the dark. I make a mental note to camouflage it first thing tomorrow. I flip open the flap. What I want most, right at this moment, is water. Haymitch's directive to immediately find water was not arbitrary. I won't last long without it. For a few days, I'll be able to function with unpleasant symptoms of dehydration, but after that I'll deteriorate into helplessness and be dead in a week, tops. I carefully lay out the provisions. One thin black sleeping bag that reflects body heat. A pack of crackers. A pack of dried beef strips. A bottle of iodine. A box of wooden matches. A small coil of wire. A pair of sunglasses. And a half-gallon plastic bottle with a cap for carrying water that's bone dry. No water. How hard would it have been for them to fill up the bottle? I become aware of the dryness in my throat and mouth, the cracks in my lips. I've been moving all day long. It's been hot and I've sweat a lot. I do this at home, but there are always streams to drink from, or snow to melt if it should come to it. As I refill my pack I have an awful thought. The lake. The one I saw while I was waiting for the gong to sound. What if that's the only water source in the arena? That way they'll guarantee drawing us in to fight. The lake is a full day's journey from where I sit now, a much harder journey with nothing to drink. And then, even if I reach it, it's sure to be heavily guarded by some of the Career Tributes. I'm about to panic when I remember the rabbit I startled earlier today. It has to drink, too. I just have to find out where. Twilight is closing in and I am ill at ease. The trees are too thin to offer much concealment. The layer of pine needles that muffles my footsteps also makes tracking animals harder when I need their trails to find water. And I'm still heading downhill, deeper and deeper into a valley that seems endless. I'm hungry, too, but I don't dare break into my precious store of crackers and beef yet. Instead, I take my knife and go to work on a pine tree, cutting away the outer bark and scraping off a large handful of the softer inner bark. I slowly chew the stuff as I walk along. After a week of the finest food in the world, it's a little hard to choke down. But I've eaten plenty of pine in my life. I'll adjust quickly. In another hour, it's clear I've got to find a place to

camp. Night creatures are coming out. I can hear the occasional hoot or howl, my first clue that I'll be competing with natural predators for the rabbits. As to whether I'll be viewed as a source of food, it's too soon to tell. There could be any number of animals stalking me at this moment. But right now, I decide to make my fellow tributes a priority. I'm sure many will continue hunting through the night. Those who fought it out at the Cornucopia will have food, an abundance of water from the lake, torches or flashlights, and weapons they're itching to use. I can only hope I've traveled far and fast enough to be out of range. Before settling down, I take my wire and set two twitch-up snares in the brush. I know it's risky to be setting traps, but food will go so fast out here. And I can't set snares on the run. Still, I walk another five minutes before making camp. I pick my tree carefully. A willow, not terribly tall but set in a clump of other willows, offering concealment in those long, flowing tresses. I climb up, sticking to the stronger branches close to the trunk, and find a sturdy fork for my bed. It takes some doing, but I arrange the sleeping bag in a relatively comfortable manner. I place my backpack in the foot of the bag, then slide in after it. As a precaution, I remove my belt, loop it all the way around the branch and my sleeping bag, and refasten it at my waist. Now if I roll over in my sleep, I won't go crashing to the ground. I'm small enough to tuck the top of the bag over my head, but I put on my hood as well. As night falls, the air is cooling quickly. Despite the risk I took in getting the backpack, I know now it was the right choice. This sleeping bag, radiating back and preserving my body heat, will be invaluable. I'm sure there are several other tributes whose biggest concern right now is how to stay warm whereas I may actually be able to get a few hours of sleep. If only I wasn't so thirsty... Night has just come when I hear the anthem that proceeds the death recap. Through the branches I can see the seal of the Capitol, which appears to be floating in the sky. I'm actually viewing another screen, an enormous one that's transported by one of their disappearing hovercraft. The anthem fades out and the sky goes dark for a moment. At home, we would be watching full coverage of each and every killing, but that's thought to give an unfair advantage to the living tributes. For instance, if I got my hands on the bow and shot someone, my secret would be revealed to all. No, here in the arena, all we see are the same photographs they showed when they televised our training scores. Simple head shots. But now instead of scores they post only district numbers. I take a deep breath as the faces of the eleven dead tributes begin and tick them off one by one on my fingers. The first to appear is the girl from District 3. That means that the Career Tributes from 1 and 2 have all survived. No surprise there. Then the boy from 4. I didn't expect that one, usually all the Careers make it through the first day. The boy from District 5...I guess the fox-faced girl made it. Both tributes from 6 and 7. The boy from 8. Both from 9. Yes, there's the boy who I fought for the backpack. I've run through my fingers, only one more dead tribute to go. Is it Peeta? No, there's the girl from District 10. That's it. The Capitol seal is back with a final musical flourish. Then darkness and the sounds of the forest resume. I'm relieved Peeta's alive. I tell myself again that if I get killed, his winning will benefit my mother and Prim the most. This is what I tell myself to explain the conflicting emotions that arise when I think of Peeta. The gratitude that he gave me an edge by professing his love for me in the interview. The anger at his superiority on the roof. The dread that we may come face-to-face at any moment in this arena. Eleven dead, but none from District 12. I try to work out who is left. Five Career Tributes. Foxface. Thresh and Rue. Rue...so she made it through the

first day after all. I can't help feeling glad. That makes ten of us. The other three I'll figure out tomorrow. Now when it is dark, and I have traveled far, and I am nestled high in this tree, now I must try and rest. I haven't really slept in two days, and then there's been the long day's journey into the arena. Slowly, I allow my muscles to relax. My eyes to close. The last thing I think is it's lucky I don't snore.... Snap! The sound of a breaking branch wakes me. How long have I been asleep? Four hours? Five? The tip of my nose is icy cold. Snap! Snap! What's going on? This is not the sound of a branch under someone's foot, but the sharp crack of one coming from a tree. Snap! Snap! I judge it to be several hundred yards to my right. Slowly, noiselessly, I turn myself in that direction. For a few minutes, there's nothing but blackness and some scuffling. Then I see a spark and a small fire begins to bloom. A pair of hands warms over flames, but I can't make out more than that. I have to bite my lip not to scream every foul name I know at the fire starter. What are they thinking? A fire lit just at nightfall would have been one thing. Those who battled at the Cornucopia, with their superior strength and surplus of supplies, they couldn't possibly have been near enough to spot the flames then. But now, when they've probably been combing the woods for hours looking for victims. You might as well be waving a flag and shouting, "Come and get me!" And here I am a stone's throw from the biggest idiot in the Games. Strapped in a tree. Not daring to flee since my general location has just been broadcast to any killer who cares. I mean, I know it's cold out here and not everybody has a sleeping bag. But then you grit your teeth and stick it out until dawn! I lie smoldering in my bag for the next couple of hours, really thinking that if I can get out of this tree, I won't have the least problem taking out my new neighbor. My instinct has been to flee, not fight. But obviously this person's a hazard. Stupid people are dangerous. And this one probably doesn't have much in the way of weapons while I've got this excellent knife. The sky is still dark, but I can feel the first signs of dawn approaching. I'm beginning to think we—meaning the person whose death I'm now devising and I—we might actually have gone unnoticed. Then I hear it. Several pairs of feet breaking into a run. The fire starter must have dozed off. They're on her before she can escape. I know it's a girl now, I can tell by the pleading, the agonized scream that follows. Then there's laughter and congratulations from several voices. Someone cries out, "Twelve down and eleven to go!" which gets a round of appreciative hoots. So they're fighting in a pack. I'm not really surprised. Often alliances are formed in the early stages of the Games. The strong band together to hunt down the weak then, when the tension becomes too great, begin to turn on one another. I don't have to wonder too hard who has made this alliance. It'll be the remaining Career Tributes from Districts 1, 2, and 4. Two boys and three girls. The ones who lunched together. For a moment, I hear them checking the girl for supplies. I can tell by their comments they've found nothing good. I wonder if the victim is Rue but quickly dismiss the thought. She's much too bright to be building a fire like that. "Better clear out so they can get the body before it starts stinking." I'm almost certain that's the brutish boy from District 2. There are murmurs of assent and then, to my horror, I hear the pack heading toward me. They do not know I'm here. How could they? And I'm well concealed in the clump of trees. At least while the sun stays down. Then my black sleeping bag will turn from camouflage to trouble. If they just keep moving, they will pass me and be gone in a minute. But the Careers stop in the clearing about ten yards from my tree. They have flashlights, torches. I can see an arm here, a boot there, through the breaks in the branches. I turn to stone, not even daring to breathe.

Have they spotted me? No, not yet. I can tell from their words their minds are elsewhere. "Shouldn't we have heard a cannon by now?" "I'd say yes. Nothing to prevent them from going in immediately." "Unless she isn't dead." "She's dead. I stuck her myself." "Then where's the cannon?" "Someone should go back. Make sure the job's done." "Yeah, we don't want to have to track her down twice." "I said she's dead!" An argument breaks out until one tribute silences the others. "We're wasting time! I'll go finish her and let's .move on!" I almost fall out of the tree. The voice belongs to Peeta