

Prima Luce

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8th grade

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JUNE 27

Aunt Criya fainted onto the kitchen table.

This was my opportunity to read the strange letter that had evidently caused the faint, so I crept up quietly behind her. Swiftly and silently, I extracted the letter from her unconscious hand and read:

Dear citizen,

**As you undoubtedly know, the rebels of District 13
have recently been exterminated. As punishment for 13's actions,
the Capitol's own Crassus Snow has devised a terrific new thrill:**

THE HUNGER GAMES!

Before July 3rd, your niece, Alora Pleiades, must apply for the Games at the Justice Building.

Players will be selected on July 4th at 2:00

and immediately taken into Capitol care until the Games begin on July 6th.

What? Hunger Games? I wondered. How did the Capitol know that I, Alora Pleiades, orphaned daughter of District 13 rebels, was living here in District 11 with my father's sister and her husband? I flipped the page over.

THE HUNGER GAMES

are a form of reminding the districts
of District 13's rebellion. To punish the districts
for this act, each district must send one male and one
female "tribute," between the ages of twelve and eighteen,
to participate in the Games, where all tributes will be forced to fight to the death.

Happy Hunger Games!

- MINOS RAVINSTILL, President of Panem

I sat frozen in shock. Of course Aunt Criya fainted! These people wanted to steal district children and make them murder each other!

As Uncle Rayde entered the kitchen, I forced myself out of my stupor – or, well, my body at least. My mind was still turning the “Hunger Games” around, trying to make sense of it.

Aunt Criya was awake again and muttering things like “They can’t do this...no...we never...” Uncle Rayde was trying to console her but looked confused - he hadn't read the letter. “Breathe, Criya,” he said softly. “Everything will be –”

“THEY CAN’T TAKE OUR CHILDREN!” she screeched suddenly.

I was startled, but held firmly to the letter. Normally, Aunt Criya handles things so well – even the news of District 13’s downfall. I was here in 11 when it happened; my parents had sent me here to protect me. The news had come while we were out working in the orchards.

My parents, Orion and Andromeda Pleiades, were rebels. They were also dead. Dead because of the Capitol, dead because they couldn’t keep their heads down.

I don't resent them for it – every district-dweller dreams of freedom at some point, including me – but why did they have to get murdered for it? Why couldn't they just submit a little longer, wait until they were a little stronger?

I snapped back to reality, where Uncle Rayde was making futile attempts to prepare some tea for the now-silent Aunt Criya. I dropped the letter onto the table and took over for him. He nodded thankfully and picked up the letter. As he read, I could see the confusion in his eyes as he tried to comprehend the evilness of the Capitol. I pitied this man, my kind, law-abiding uncle. He – unlike my parents – knew how to keep his head down.

Uncle Rayde set the letter down, his face a mix of injury and rage. Aunt Criya accepted her tea from me silently, staring off at nothing, but nodded. I turned to leave, but Uncle Rayde said, “Alora...”

I turned to face him, waiting. Finally, he finished, “Alora, tomorrow we're going to the Justice Building. The best way to stay alive is to follow rules.”

My name is Alora Pleiades, and I am entering the Hunger Games.

JUNE 28

I stood facing the Justice Building with Uncle Rayde. Our shift was finally over, and now it was time to apply for the Games.

White-clad Peacekeepers lined the front steps, sunlight glinting off their deadly, often-used guns. Peacekeepers in District 11 live to shoot civilians – they murder us carelessly and call it legal, which, unfortunately, it is.

I walked into the Justice Building and approached the front desk. The large, bearded man behind it grunted, “Name's Rusty, whatcha need t'day?”

“I’m here to apply for the Hunger Games,” I said in a clear voice. Rusty started asking me a series of questions. Name? Alora Pleiades. Age? Sixteen. Date of birth? January 8th. Eyes? Blue. Hair? Dark brown curls. Height? Five feet, eight inches.

“And yer home district’s Eleven, right?” he asked.

Here we go. “I was born in Thirteen.”

Rusty looks shocked. “Orphan of rebels,” Uncle Rayde jumped in. “My wife and I took her in after the bombing. Please, is there anything I have to sign?”

“Nah, they just wanna name an’ description,” Rusty responded gruffly. “Jus’ make sure ya wear somethin’ nice ter the reapin’ – won’t want ter offend our dear Peacekeepers,” he added under his breath.

“Reaping?” I asked.

“Aye, lass – it’s what them nutjobs at the Capitol are callin’ the blasted choosin’ day. Now git goin’ – I’m ‘bout ter have a stream o’ folks in here tryin’ ter sign up their poor kids.”

In public, negative words about the Capitol would get you shot – but here, with only two Peacekeepers standing at the door and the daughter of rebels in front of you, one could risk a whisper.

That night, tossing in bed, I wondered: what if I was chosen at the reaping?

My name is Alora Pleiades, and I am a possible District 11 tribute.

JULY 4

The fateful day had come. I had donned the only nice clothes I owned – a very simple knee-length blue dress and a pair of ladylike brown boots. It was two o’clock, and the entire district had assembled in the square to find out whose children would be forced to play the

Capitol's game. The citizens waited tensely as a man in a yellow suit strutted onstage. His slicked-back hair was black except for the tips, which were dyed the same yellow as his suit. His face was relatively normal for a Capitol man, except his eyes, which were also yellow. It was Narcissus Finch, mayor of District 11.

He cleared his throat and announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, the time has come to select the world's first District Eleven tributes!" We knew he was expecting applause, but silence reigned in the square. Finch looked irritated. "Well. To continue!" He thrust his hand into a glass bowl filled with slips of paper, drew one out, and said clearly, "Our girl tribute is Alora Pleiades! Alora Pleiades, please come forward!"

Aunt Criya made a strangled sound. I didn't fully comprehend Finch's words, even as I approached the stage. You could hear a pin drop in that place – everyone seemed to be holding their breath. I could feel thousands of eyes boring into my back as I mounted the stage. I took a deep breath as I stood on the stage, waiting in the silence.

Finch selected a slip from the other bowl – undoubtedly containing the name of our boy tribute, which he read out loud: "Zephyr Charr!"

Not Zephyr...

This was a setback. Zephyr Charr was the same age as me, but that was the only similarity. He was tall, strong, and mean-tempered. It was a miracle he hadn't been shot already – he managed to contain himself around Peacekeepers, but whenever the "law-enforcers" were a safe distance away, it was all complaining and teasing. He could definitely last a while in the arena.

The Peacekeepers engulfed me and Zephyr, clapped techy-looking handcuffs onto each of us, and tossed us into the back of a van-like truck. Just before the door closed, I could see

Aunt Criya, tears streaming down her face. Uncle Rayde's solemn gray eyes searched for my face, locking eye contact with me as the doors slammed shut.

I remember Zephyr taunting me in the truck. "You've got two days to live, Pleiades," he said. "The moment those games start, you're dead."

A Peacekeeper yelled from the driver's seat to "shut up or get shot!" and pressed a button. A small screen lit up in the truck, showing the seal of Panem. Then it changed to what looked like the District One square. We were watching the other reappings.

I barely remembered any of the tributes, but some stood out. Archimedes Garde, the boy from District 3, looked thin but determined. Calypso Moore, the girl from 4, looked too kind to be a killer. The boy from 7, Theseus Birch, appeared strong but worried. Treddi Versan, the girl from 8, first appeared mild but seemed fiery underneath. And reaped from 12, two unfortunate siblings – Orpheus and Hazel Minstrill. You could tell how wounded Orpheus was when Hazel's name was drawn, and how distressed they both were when Orpheus himself was called up. What were the odds of *siblings* being reaped out of the entire district?

I drifted in and out of sleep for hours, finally waking to sunlight. It was July 5th and we were still driving. When we finally stopped, a Peacekeeper heaved the door open, twisted blindfolds around our eyes, and led us toward a loud whirring noise. From the sound, I guessed we were inside a helicopter, a flying machine I'd only read about. After another hour, someone grabbed me, dumped me onto what felt like grass, and ripped my blindfold off.

I was in a prison, hands still cuffed in front of me. Concrete walls surrounded me and grass covered the floor. Several young people were there as well – the other tributes, all handcuffed and wearing their reaping clothes. I noticed Calypso in the corner, eyes closed, back

against the wall...Archimedes nervously tearing up grass...the District 12 twins, whispering to each other.

It hit me that now was the time to make alliances – maybe Theseus Birch or the twins. I approached Orpheus and Hazel, who looked up simultaneously.

“Alora Pleiades, District Eleven,” Orpheus said immediately. I nodded, surprised.

“Are you looking for allies?” I asked. “We’ll have a better chance if we group up.”

Hazel considered this, but Orpheus shook his head. “Sorry, we’re not really looking to team up with anyone.”

My face fell. “Okay,” I replied. “One more thing. Orpheus, is it coincidence that your last name sounds like ‘minstrel’ and you’re also named after a mythical harpist?”

Both twins grinned. “We’re Covey,” they replied in unison.

“What?”

“Covey,” Hazel repeated. “Musicians. Typically, Covey just wander around, playing and singing as they go, but our parents settled in Twelve. A Covey’s name has two parts – the first from a ballad, poem, or story of some sort, and second a color, like our sister Annabel Jade. But we’re twins, so we share a name. Orpheus gets the story part, and I get the color part.”

“Wow. Nice meeting you.” I turned away and began asking others for alliances. Treddi Versan from 8 agreed immediately, which was a win, especially because she had also teamed up with Theseus Birch, who apparently was convinced that “arena” meant we’d be fighting with swords like gladiators. I suggested Archimedes from 3, but Theseus shot that idea down, claiming the fidgety boy would barely last an hour in the arena. But then Archimedes approached us, calling himself Archie and claiming to be terrific with ropes and snares. Theseus muttered

that he didn't see how that would be useful, but Treddi shut him up and accepted Archie, then started us on discussing a game plan.

That night, as I drifted off, the only thought in my mind was *How am I going to kill these tributes? Calypso looks so submissive, and Orpheus and Hazel almost felt like friends. I can't do this...*

My name is Alora Pleiades, and I am not a killer.

JULY 6

Treddi woke me up early on the day of the Games, claiming we needed to go over our plan again. I complied, forcing myself awake, and reviewed our ideas. Archie had plans for both Theseus's gladiator theory and Treddi's conviction that the arena was a forest – for gladiators, we had Plan Defensor, where we'd circle up back-to-back and defend ourselves as best we could, and for the forest, Plan Silva, where we'd sprint away from the other tributes and set up camp somewhere. Anything else, and we'd just have to improvise.

We waited tensely for several hours until at long last we heard a booming voice say, "Ladies and gentlemen, let the very first Hunger Games begin!" Every tribute - including Calypso – stood up immediately. Every pair of handcuffs gave a *ding* and fell off.

Suddenly the roof contracted into the walls, slipping away and revealing a blue sky. Then the walls began descending into the ground, revealing a natural-looking terrain with some trees in the distance and several piles of weapons scattered about. "Silva," I muttered, and the others nodded.

Once the walls were about three feet high, we jumped over the top and were quickly followed by the other twenty tributes, all of whom either fled in terror or hunted down others for kills. Theseus instantly snatched up a sword and started off for the trees. As we ran, I snagged a

pair of daggers, and Treddi got a bow and quiver somehow. Archie had a pack on his back, and by the time we were decently in the forest, everyone was breathless, but there was no time for rest. We decided to spend the night in a tree, so we climbed up. Fortunately, all four of us were decent climbers – especially Archie, who cracked open his pack and dug out a blanket, an empty bottle, a large knife, and five apples.

Everyone was thirsty, so the boys set off for water with the bottle. Fifteen minutes later, Theseus returned alone with a full bottle and a bloody sword. “District One happened,” he whispered in a choked voice. I guessed the tributes from 1 had attacked and killed Archie, and maybe Theseus had killed one of the others. I felt numb. Theseus was right: Archie was gone before an hour. We all forced down a few sips of water and a piece of apple.

Treddi offered to take first watch, perching in the tree with her bow while Theseus and I slept. Before sunrise, we followed Theseus through the dark to the water source and each drank from the clear stream, slaking our thirst in the liquid of life. Theseus cleaned his sword, Treddi found some berries, and despite my strange feelings of stabbing and numbness at Archie’s death, all was peaceful.

Until Treddi fell face-first onto the ground, a knife protruding from her back.

I whipped around, drew out my daggers, and hurled both at a shape in the trees. The lone girl from District 6 fell from the tree, but not before her knife hit home in my chest.

My name is Alora Pleiades, and I am going to die.

THESEUS

Alora glanced down at the knife in her chest, turned her face skyward, and whispered, barely audible, “Preema loochay.” As the sun rose above the trees, she fell softly to the ground, gazing up at the gilded branches.

I ran to her side. “What did you say? Preema...what?”

“*Prima luce*,” Alora breathed, turning her eyes to me. “It means...‘at dawn.’ In Latin.”

“*Prima luce*,” I repeated as my hot tears salted her bloodstained dress. “*Prima luce*.” She grasped for my hand and I held firm to hers as her eyelids fluttered closed.

“Dawn,” she whispered again, going limp. I sat in the silence for a while, numb. This was worse than with Archie – at least then, I defended him. Protected him. Gave him a chance.

I stood up and screamed at the sky, then buckled my sword on, retrieved Alora’s daggers from the dead District 6 girl – Penelope Crack, as I remembered from the recordings – and stormed off in a fury.

I went on a rampage. In one hour, I had tracked down a group of three – the boys from 2, 4, and 12.

In the next five minutes, all three of them were dead. My mental kill list grew from the District 1 girl who attacked Archie – Sheen – to include the names of Pheidias Heath, Poseidon Slit, and Zephyr Charr.

Over the next two days, the list kept growing. Nomia from 3. Whype from 5. Demeter from 9. Fortunately, Calypso Moore from 4, Oaklyn from my district, and the siblings from District 12 were gone already, which was good because I could never have killed any of them, especially not Oaklyn. Innocent Oaklyn, my little cousin, who was only twelve years old and barely five feet tall.

Another day later, it was dawn again. I was wandering aimlessly through the forest, hating the sunrise for the memories it brought, when some sort of trumpet fanfare boomed through the arena and a triumphant voice announced, “Ladies and gentlemen, may I present to you Theseus Birch, the world’s first Hunger Games victor!”

This was it. I had won. The world was silent except for my breathing, which seemed painfully loud. Everything throbbed around me as a ship appeared above me, carried me off, and dispensed me at home, where I numbly embraced my family. My parents. My little brother. My aunt, Oaklyn's mother. I was home, but the Games had changed me. Forever.

My name is Theseus Birch, and at dawn, I became the victor.