All eyes on us.
Being unpopular won’t kill you.

or,

Will it?
Finch slinks through the wilds, flanked by walls of vibrant green, illuminated by the sickly neon glow emanating from the holographic countdown in the sky. 10 hours remaining.

Night is falling quickly, Finch thinks anxiously.

What’s worse is that she can’t see very far in any direction either, because of the fog. It’s so thick that she can’t see where the horizon meets the milky pastel of the sky. Here she is struck by the pungent smell of vegetation and the aroma of fresh earth. Here, she tastes the warm humidity of the air.

Here, she is alone—

Or, as alone as she can be.

The Stalkers are always watching. They are omnipresent; like light, or the suffocating absence of it, like a bruise that won’t go away. She pauses and looks up at the dying sun. Then, she tips her head back and downs the last contents of the water bottle into her mouth, savouring every drop.

It does nothing to satisfy her insatiable thirst. Finch finds it surprising that after nearly two full days trekking out in the wilds, alone, that it’s the thirst that gets her and not the hunger. After all, she’s not sure she can digest the thought of eating after what had happened…

There’s a flurry of wind that stirs the sparse canopy above and with it, a whiff of something acrid assaults her nostrils. Something spoiling. It’s a cold smell, like decaying meat. The taste hits the back of Finch’s throat before she is upon it. She rounds the wall of trees and comes upon a fug of a stench so overpowering she involuntarily gags. It is not an animal at all. Turning away quickly, she squeezes her eyes closed. But the image of it haunts the backs of her lids. Finch’s stomach clenches like a fist in her gut and she doubles-over, gritting her teeth. She dry-heaves once, twice, before she is sick in the bushes. That boy, she thinks, I knew him. What seemed like a lifetime ago, when it all first began. He was just like her.

Just another one of them trying to survive by getting a high enough rating to live. They were supposed to fear what happened when that countdown in the sky came to its end, but instead, they had begun to fear each other and who they had become themselves. Righting herself again, Finch spits into the soil and wipes her mouth with the sleeve of her shirt. The taste of vomit lingers.

God, she wishes she had another bottle of water.

9 hours 52 minutes remaining.

Ten hours, ten hours, ten hours, ten hours, ten—

Finch fights hard against the inundating wave of anxiety overcoming her. She needs shelter. She needs to find an abandoned Smart Home. Each Smart Home on the island is controlled by Hydra, the same smart AI that powers The Dispensation Station where everyone collects their food (their options were determined by their ratings, of course).

Every Smart Home is equipped with an automated bathroom sink, a glass cube of shower that remembers the individual’s ideal water temperature for ‘maximised comfort’, a bed that’s fine-tuned to the individual’s sleeping habits and patterns, and even walls that listen in constantly for a request but no kitchen (because of The Dispensation Station).

Before, Finch and her friends camped out in the living room of an empty Smart Home—sleeping bags and night torches. It made them feel like kids again but it also numbed a sliver of their reality. The reality of what would happen if they had a rating low enough for The Stalkers to come for them.
But Finch didn’t want to remember her friends or anything that had happened. What she wanted was a hot shower.

Returning to the Smart Home that she grew up in feels both uncomfortable and soothing at once. *It is disturbingly silent,* she thinks. And standing in the bathroom, she realises that she’d forgotten about the mirrors and how they smooth over the blemishes in your appearance.

“Huh,” she says, standing awkwardly in front of the mirror, sensing the ways the mirror distorts her reflection. Gone were the cuts and marks on her face. Gone, too, was the beauty spot on her chin that she never asked for. Surprisingly though, she found her appearance unsettling without the parts of her that didn’t always like.

“Shower, start.”
Testing it out, she cupped the hot water and brought it up to her face. The shower felt good but she couldn’t overcome the growing sense of unease; like someone was watching her. They were. Of course. Only, thankfully, the live feed to The Spectators blurred any, uh, *personal images...*

“Hydra, shower off,” she commands once clean. But the water doesn’t stop. It comes down upon her skin, hotter now, *scalding* even. Finch winces away from the water.

“Hydra, SHOWER OFF.”

Hydra’s voice in the walls answers her, finally, and the shower stops. “*Turning shower off.*”
But something else has Finch’s attention now. The security pad. A red alert sign flashes repeatedly on the screen, signalling that there’s movement on the property outside.

*The Stalkers,* she thinks and curses loudly. *Or others from the island, coming for me.*

“Hydra, lock the doors.”

“Unlocking the doors.”

Finch lurches for the security pad.

“NO!” She commands, “Hydra, *lock* the doors.”

“Unlocking the—” Hydra’s voice cuts off suddenly and the lights go out, plunging Finch into an unnerving still and silent darkness. Finch wonders, in momentary panic; could it be possible that her score was one of the lowest, condemning her to The Stalkers?

No, *no,* it wasn’t possible. She still had nine hours before the end of the countdown.

But after what had happened just days before, it might not surprise her. Everything is different now. The rules, as she knew them, were changing.

Finch turns her head to a gleam of light coming from her mirror, which now projects her current rating—a shockingly low *4.1.*

And something else, too. The live countdown.

*9 hours 10 minutes remaining.*
Finch had a childhood. An innocence period. A before. Her grandmother raised her because Finch’s mother gave birth to her when she was just sixteen, right before her countdown began. And she didn’t make it. Finch always blamed herself; as if being a young mum, isolated, uncertain, was what brought about her mother’s death. Why The Stalkers judged her so poorly. Unknowing to this as a child, her grandmother was able to give her something that resembled a normal upbringing even despite Grams being the only one on the island who didn’t own a Smart Home. Their house was old and traditional with a real kitchen and a vegetable garden out front by the chicken coop. This is her childhood:

Finch is a young girl; a gap between her two front teeth, big curls of fawn hair and large round eyes like blue marbles. Like the glassy sea when the sun hits it at midday. It smells of salt and sea and Grams cooking in the kitchen. Finch would spend hours out on the beach, exploring their little chunk of the wilds around their property until returning in the afternoon for an early dinner. Grams would cook peculiar, delicious meals to both surprise and please the senses; fragrant lavender roast potatoes, seared apricots and garden vegetables, or oats simmered in rose water.

And when Finch would ask her grandmother, where is my mummy? Grams would grin and say she’s right here and press her dainty wrinkled fingers to Finch’s chest where her heart was. So Finch grew without her mother—nurtured by her aging, though well-spirited grandmother—with sea salt knotted in her hair and curiosity blooming inside her little mind.

Why did everyone board up their houses and never say hello?
Because of this fact, it felt like they lived in their own paradise, ignorant to their neighbours who isolated themselves entirely. Afraid of the wilds. Afraid of each other. Waiting for the next countdown.

When all the youth aged from twelve to eighteen on the island were forced to be ranked and rated by The Stalkers. The countdown came every sixteen years. Nobody knew when it had begun but it was a tradition, or, more accurately, a non-negotiable.

Grams told Finch about this fact when she was ten years old.
“... And what happens to the teenagers with the low ratings?” Little Finch had asked, brow furrowed.
Gram smiled softly, brushing a lock of Finch’s hair behind her ear. “The Stalkers take them away dear.”

To where? Finch wanted to ask, but even at the age of ten, she could guess herself.

That day marked the denouement of her innocence as her childhood began to fall away from beneath her. Then came Grams sleep-walking. She’d wade out into the ocean in the middle of the night and wouldn’t stop. Wouldn’t stop as Finch fought against her to pull her back to shore. Wouldn’t stop as the black waves crashed against her. Finch began to worry that if she didn’t pull Grams back to shore each night, Grams would just keep walking into the ocean until it swallowed her whole.

And then some days Grams would wake up and look at Finch strangely until a flicker of recognition crossed her face. “Finch… Finch… my little granddaughter birdie Finch,” she’d sing-song. Then, her expression turning serious, “That reminds me… beware the birdies in the wilds. They watch, Finch. They are always watching.”
It was an old rumour on their island that The Stalker’s cameras were hidden in the glassy orbs of birds’ eyes.

“They are always watching.
They are always watching.
They are always watching.
They are always watching—”

Grams continued to heave out the words on repeat, becoming more and more distressed with each repetition. She did get better before she got worse though. Tending to the garden outside their sleek Smart Home, snipping away at the weeds and pruning the plants. The sun was on their necks and Grams had been grinning for the first time in weeks. That day she had playfully tugged on the brim hat Finch wore which was too big for her and flopped over her eyes awkwardly. It felt like she was getting better again, little Finch thought. If only.

A week later, Grams died in her sleep.

Finch went around to all the Smart Homes, sobbing, begging for someone, anyone, to help her but nobody opened their door for her. She pictured them inside their sleek modern homes watching her sob but doing nothing. That day she went into the wilds and met a group of orphaned kids like her; Dev, Remi and Ivey, who were trying to survive on their own like her. Ant came later. Just twelve years old, they found her unconscious and near-starved. The group had stared down at her and Dev poked her with a stick, to see if she was still alive. She stirred a little in her delirious state and they gave her some space.

“Can we keep her?” Remi asked then, like she was a pet and not a living, breathing human girl. But they did.

As the grew, the kids looked after one another; slept in an abandoned Smart Home they claimed for themselves; played hide and go seek in the wilds; laughed and smiled often; argued with one another like family; fell in love— all with the knowledge that soon they would evolve out of innocuous childhood into an idiosyncratic near-adulthood filled with anguish to be liked and rated highly.
“Hey, come on away from the window now. You’re going to spook yourself,” Dev’s voice is close at her ear, comforting and gentle, like his hand placed faintly on her back. Finch is standing by the window, waiting. Her lips are dry and cracking, peeling like old skin from a wound. Realising she had been tapping her foot anxiously, she rights herself and stops. But it’s a more difficult task to draw her gaze away from the wall of glass out into the wilds beyond them that seem, almost, unending. Finch shivers at the thought of being out there in the open; the suffocating, sticky jungle wasteland beneath the sun.

*That suffocating heat... peeling damp clothing off skin... wiping away sweat from your dripping brow—
“... listening to me?” Dev is staring at her expectantly.*

Finch steps away from the window. Towards Dev.

“Of course I’m *listening* to you. Relax, or you’ll start to sound vain like Remi,” she teases, affectionately shoving him aside. Remi sticks his head into the room and gives Finch a look that makes her laugh.

“I’ll have you know I’m extremely modest,” he says.

“Alright, alright,” Finch concedes, raising her hands defensively. Dev presses his lips together—a poor attempt to suppress a smirk. They join the others in the living room, where their sleeping bags and stack of canned goods are kept. Ivey’s busy doing calculations on the modest remains of their stockpile meanwhile Ant’s curled in a ball beside her but seems to be watching very intently nonetheless. Clasping her hands together, Ivey puffs out an exhale. “Okay,” she announces, a little too loudly, Finch thinks, “this should last us—”

Only days before, the group had collected what food they could at The Dispensation Station. Dev took inventory of what everyone had gotten based on their ratings. “Alright, what’ve you got Rem? Tinned tomatoes? *Nice,*” he’d said, his face then twisting with a frown as he turned the can over in his hand. “Oh, but this one’s expired.”

Remi shrugged, elbowing Dev in the ribs. “Won’t hurt us. Bit of extra flavouring, if you ask me.”

Finch screwed up her face. “And, folks, he’s only partly joking,” she deadpanned.

*Your options at The Dispensation Station were determined by your rating alone. So, their options had been limited to canned goods. Diced tomatoes. Lentil soup. Refried beans. Corn. Peas. Mixed fruit. Water chestnuts. Green berries. Sour cherries.*

*Very high-end cuisine,* Finch thought sarcastically.

The group had been taking collective inventory of their food stock when suddenly a boy jostled his way past them to collect his rations.

“Jesus. I haven’t seen one of them in weeks,” Dev controlled his voice to a whisper.

Coming out of hiding from the wilds was rare for them. Teenagers with dangerously low ratings. Who had also rejected the sleek and scary Smart Homes. He was one of the ones who would probably not survive once the countdown hit zero.

“Gotta eat somehow,” Ivey muttered but there was no sympathy in her tone.
A floating 4.1 hologram hovered above his head. Finch startled, jumping in her skin a little when the boy thudded his fist against The Dispensation Station’s screen.

“Come on!” he cried, thudding his fist against the screen again and again. 

**INSUFFICIENT FUNDS, it said, RATING TOO LOW.**

“Hey buddy, I wouldn’t do that if I were you. Cause a scene and The Stalkers will come out out of hiding,” Dev warned him. The boy spun on his heels and got all up in Dev’s face. There was something off putting about him even beyond his dishevelled appearance, like there was a ball of anxious energy barely contained inside him. Beneath his oily thinning hair, his scalp was red and his flesh was flaking. Dark circles rimmed the flesh beneath his hollow orb eyes.

It looked like he hadn’t slept in more than a week.

“Don’t you see?” he seethed through gritted teeth, “The Stalkers aren’t the ones we have to be afraid of. The only ones we have to fear are ourselves.”

His words rang in Finch’s ears: **The only ones we have to fear are ourselves.**

Dev had stumbled backwards, holding out his hands defensively. “Hey man. Calm down, alright?” he said then, looking back at the others over his shoulder. “Come on guys. We should go.”

And they did. They went back to the shelter, where they had grown from children into young adults, and started getting prepared for the next 90 hours.

So then, back to Ivey rationing the food—

“—barely a day between the five of us”

“That’s only, like, 24 hours. That’s not enough,” Remi says.

Ivey claps him on the back. “Well done,” she mocks, “maybe you’ll get a higher rating based on your deduction skills alone.”

Finch gives Ivey a reprimanding look. “Be nice.”

Only Remi doesn’t seem too bothered by Ivey’s comment anyway. “Refried beans,” he says as he inspects a can very closely, “huh… you think they’d have just done it right the first time.”

The group might’ve indulged in a moment of comedic catharsis if it wasn’t for the bone-splitting scream that tears through the wilds then.

“What was that?” Ant whispers, her body assailed by a violent shiver.

Dev looks sideways at her. “There’s been rumours of The Stalkers taking kids in their sleep, picking them off one by one even though the countdown isn’t over yet.”

“That’s not fair,” Remi shakes his head sadly.

Finch laughs dryly. “Is any of it?”

It feels like a small act of defiance to talk so openly about The Stalkers; not when they are always watching, listening close.

There comes no reply.

It’s decided that they take rounds of keeping watch while the others sleep.

“I’ll go first,” Dev offers. Then, just to Finch, “you should get some rest.”

She nods but sleep feels far away.

There are too many thoughts knocking around inside her skull; chafing and overleaping one another.

*What if that boy had been right? What if they only had to fear themselves?*

*Was it really The Stalkers out there, ruthlessly culling loners in the wilds—or had they started to turn against one another?
She would find out for herself soon enough.

“Can’t sleep?” Ant says to Finch in the dark. Trying to make herself more comfortable, Finch smooths out the wrinkles in her sleeping bag. “Doesn’t look like it.”

Ant nods like she understands. Like they are somehow united by their shared insomnia.

“It’s not our faults. I blame the screens. Every time I close my eyes, the colours and the lights haunt the backs of my eyelids. I think…..” Ant swallows loudly, trailing off before finding her words again, “...I think I’ll never sleep again.”

Finch doesn’t know what to say to that, so she said nothing.

*If you survive after the countdown, Finch thinks. If any of us survive.*

She squeezes her eyes shut and wills sleep to come. Tries not to think about ratings, about glowing screens, about the countdown or The Stalkers who are always watching.

And she thinks: *How long?—*

\[
\text{How} \\
\text{Long} \\
\text{Will} \\
\text{They} \\
\text{Watch} \\
\text{Me} \\
\text{Sleep?}
\]
7 hours remaining, Finch thinks and another wave of nausea quells inside her. She’s long since left the abandoned Smart Home. Even it has turned against her now— the shower trying to scald her skin, the house playing tricks on her, like an entity lives within the walls. But Finch knows the only thing that lives and sees and watches in those houses are The Stalkers. They might as well live in the walls. Also, The Dispensation Station now denies her attempts to get food. *INSUFFICIENT RATING*, the machine had told her. Her odds are not looking good. Hungry, hopeless, exhausted, she spends the rest of the day wandering the wilds, thinking too much. *You think a lot when there’s nobody else around to fill the gaps and spaces.*

She thinks and she thinks and she tries not to think about Dev. What really happened out there. To distract herself she thinks about Ant: sweet, innocent, kind little Ant. She thinks about how she was like a younger sister. About how, in the end, Finch let her down. Disappointed her. She finds her mind is working hard against her, trying to make her replay the events that have happened, but Finch fights the flashbacks just as she fights her swelling exhaustion.

Rest. She needs to rest. So much energy spent on thinking, energy she doesn’t have. *I’ll just rest my eyes for a moment,* she thinks, and lies under a shaded canopy, but already the exhaustion that’s clung to her for days overtakes her and she slips into unconsciousness.
Clumps of thick black hair fall to the lacquered floor.
Drops of blood, too.
It is years before the countdown; only mere months since the group found Ant and took her in.
Remi and Ivey and Dev don’t understand Ant like Finch does. That the reason Ant is so withdrawn is because she struggles to accept that her fate will be decided by strangers, by spectators. The Stalkers.
“Ant,” A younger Finch croaks, what are you doing?”
Ant does not turn to look at Finch standing in the threshold of the bathroom. Does not stop snipping away at her hair maniacally. Finch grasps her wrist and twists the scissors away from her. “Stop.”
Ant yanks her hand away from Finch and curls her lip at her.
“Are you on a suicide mission? You could get a horrible rating from The Stalkers if they don’t like this,” Finch presses on, gesturing to the mess that Ant’s made of her hair.
Ant tips her chin up defiantly. “Well, I don’t care what anyone thinks about me.”
Despite the pang of something deep and painful rooted in the knots of her stomach, Finch can’t help the pitiful laugh that falls from her lips. But the humour is sucked from it dry. “Oh, you will.”
“And why should I?” Ant counters, though both of them already know the answer. Because being liked is what keeps you alive. It’s a numbers game. And the numbers here count for life and death.
A metallic smell hits Finch’s nostrils.
“Here, let me look at you,” Finch turns Ant’s face by her chin to study a bloody red mark.
She must’ve knicked herself with the scissors while cutting her hair because there’s a smudge of blood at her temple. Finch licks her finger and thumbs the spot.
Ant visibly softens, an indication of how much she sees Finch as an older sister figure. A protector.
Tough love and all.
“You better hope The Stalkers like you, rate you highly enough. Like your life depends on it,” Finch tells her, voice low and firm. “Because it does.”
There is a storm brewing when Finch wakes. The windows weep; rain drizzling down them, glossing the glass. The sky, thinks Finch, looks like a bath of milky pastels; blue-hued, like a bruise. It is early morning despite the storm that rages outside—suffocating the light from the sky, beating against the house, the stiff trees in the wilds shuddering. Her friends are still asleep or at least pretending to be so she goes for a cold shower upstairs. The brutality of the knife-cold water is enough to jolt her into a conscious wakefulness. But her serenity, it seems, is fleeting.

“—can’t just make decisions for the whole group,” Ivey is saying as Finch comes downstairs. She’s talking to Dev, or more like talking at him. His hands are spread out in front of him as if trying to get his point across. “But that’s not what’s best for us all.”

Finch’s eyes ping-pong back and forth between them. “What’s going on here?” She asks. Both of their gazes snap to Finch, where she’s paused on the stairs cautiously.

There’s a crease between Dev’s eyebrows. “Finch,” He sighed, sounding beyond exhausted. “Ivey thinks we should start rationing out the food and water depending on our ratings.”

Finch grimaces at the idea. “No way.”

Dev crosses his arms over his chest, nodding quickly. Like he’s relieved someone agrees with him. “That’s exactly what I said. It’s not fair. Ivey and Remi have the highest ratings.”

Right on cue, Remi saunders into the kitchen rubbing the sleep from his eyes, yawning obnoxiously. His hair is sticking up and he’s mid-stretch when he realises there is a situation unfolding in the kitchen.

“Welcome to the debate, Bed Hair,” Ivey says dryly. “I could cut the tension in here with a knife,” Remi remarks and then proceeds to make knife-slicing motions in the air, sound effects and all. When nobody laughs, the smirk dissipates on his lips. “Geez, alright then. Why’s everyone so serious?”

Ivey tries to plead her case. “Remi, you and I have the highest ratings—don’t you think that should count for something? Don’t you think we should get priority on the stock?”

Finch blows out a frustrated breath and clenches her fist. “Are you even hearing yourself?” She fumes, “How about Ant? She has the lowest rating of all of us. You think she should get the least just because of what The Stalkers think?”

Dev gives Finch a warning look. Don’t talk about The Stalkers. “It’s not my fault I’m liked more than you,” Ivey spits. “Or Ant, either.” It’s a low blow, and she knows it too. Remi stays painfully silent. It makes Finch think he could swing either way of the argument.

“Look,” Finch says, sighing. “If it’s the food we’re worried about then we can ration more smartly…. Go back to The Dispensation Station.”

“You know we can’t. We claimed all we could already,” Ivey huffs. She’s right. And Finch knows it too. It scares her, that and something else too: Ant’s already looking too thin.

“OK, OK, here’s an idea: we raid someone else’s stock then… Get food and more water and some other supplies too,” Dev offers. Always trying to please everybody, always trying to be the good guy.
Remi finally gives, looking back and forth between Dev and Ivey. “How? You know how impenetrable the Smart Houses are. That’s how everyone on this island manages to stay so bloody isolated.”

It strikes Finch how rattled Remi looks—she’s surprised she didn’t notice before. She mistook his silence for cautious thought and contemplation but it was something else entirely. Something that frightens her. He twitches anxiously, tapping his finger on his thigh rhythmically.

Just then, all of their phones chime: a message from The Stalkers.

A package of bottled water and fresh food waits in the wilds, find it before nightfall and it’s yours.

This is a game to The Stalkers. All a game! Their lives, their hurt, their survival...

“I’ll go,” Dev decides instinctively.

Ivey and Remi look at each other for a long moment before Remi finally speaks. “I’ll go too,” he says. Finch tries to meet Dev’s eye to see if he too shares her unease, but he doesn’t. “Good man. We’ll leave in five.”

In the kitchen, Ivey and Remi share a clandestine conversation controlled to a back-and-forth of low murmurs.

Is Ivey manipulating him? The thought pinches Finch’s stomach as a fresh wave of panic coils her innards.

“I don’t like this,” Ant whispers beside her. Finch startles a little, not realising that Ant was standing there, watching her watching Remi and Ivey. Neither do I, Finch thinks nervously but says nothing. Finch gets an itch to volunteer to go as well but thinks better of it. She should stay with Ant. Yes. That’s the right thing to do. She doesn’t trust Remi or Ivey anymore, she realises in momentary distress.

Before they go, Dev says goodbye. Careful, she wants to say to him. I don’t think we can trust Remi or Ivey anymore. She wants to say keep an eye out for The Stalkers and any trouble and did you notice how those two are acting strange—

Instead, she nods and wishes him good luck. That’s what she regrets most, she thinks. Saying nothing at all.

Remi returns alone.

In some way, Finch is already expecting this.

“Where is he?” She demands as he comes inside. It is night already and Remi has the package but Dev isn’t with him.

Ivey looks at Remi with a look that Finch can’t discern.

Remi keeps his demeanour cool and calm. “We got split up in the wilds after we found the package. Thought we heard trouble coming. You shouldn’t worry though, Dev knows his way home. I’m sure he’ll be back by sunup.”

Finch rakes in a shaky breath, and it feels like there’s a hand at her throat.

She looks at Ivey and then back at Remi again. It feels like something is falling away beneath her. Something beyond her control.

That night, Ivey and Remi feast on the fruit they found inside the package: crisp apples the colour of a red dawn. Finch goes hungry.

I’m sure he’ll be back by morning.

Dev does not come back.
There comes a desperate thudding on the door and Finch all but throws herself at the front door thinking that it is him. Dev has come back to them. Dev is home. But then a voice, unfamiliar and male, calls out and she feels her body deflate with devastation. It isn’t him.

“HELP ME. HELP ME PLEASE. YOU HAVE TO LET ME INSIDE.”

The others shuffle behind her, slow and cautious. “What do we do?” Remi hisses.

“We talk to him,” Ant says, taking a step closer to the door but Finch is ahead of her first.

“Hello. Hello, who’s there?” She says loudly through the door.

“I need your help! The Stalkers are coming! They’re coming for me! God, please, please, just let me in,” The voice wails, pleading. Finch looks to Ivey who looks to Remi who looks to Ant who looks to Finch who—

“HELLO? LET ME IN. THEY’LL KILL ME!”

Finch imagines the boy on the other side of the door; imagines there are hot, angry tears rolling down his cheeks.

Their phones chime and they all look down. A message. From The Stalkers:

*Don’t let him inside.*

*Your reward will be a rating increase by 1 point for each of you.*

“What do we do?” Remi repeats himself, sounding more uneasy now.

“We listen to our phones and get the reward,” Ivey says, like it’s obvious. “We don’t let him in.”

“We have to let him in,” There is no quiver in Ant’s voice, only strength and sureness, “he’ll die if we don’t.” It surprises Finch a little, to see Ant confident and strong like this: a stark contrast to her usual shy and thoughtful demeanour that the others sometimes mistake for a dullness of mind.

“Yeah, well, so will we if we don’t take the rating reward. Do you understand or should I spell it out for you, stupid?” Ivey snaps.

“Don’t call her that,” Finch warns.

“LET ME IN!” The boy cries again. The Stalkers must nearly be upon him.

Ant looks at Finch and then at the door.

“Finch,” she whispers, near breathless. Then, more pleadingly, “Finch.”

Finch swallows thickly and squeezes her eyes shut, flexing her fingers.

“Hydra unlock the—” Ant starts, but Finch interjects, throwing out her arm to stop Ant.

“No.”

Ant blanches, blinking at Finch. “What’s gotten into you? We’re not just going to leave him out there for The Stalkers!”

Finch isn’t proud of what happens next.

“Finch, come on, don’t do this,” Ant’s voice is low but there is a firmness in her pleading.

It’s too late. There comes a soul-splitting, gut-wrenching scream that cuts through the Smart Home and tears through the wilds. “Hydra,” Finch says despondently, “mute outside.”

His scream cuts off.
Later, to try and justify her decision to leave the boy outside, she could maybe convince herself it was for Ant: because Ant needed the reward points most out of all of them. Maybe she was broken because Dev was gone and was probably not coming back. Or, maybe, if she was really honest, it was because of her own selfishness too. That she wanted those points. That she was willing to risk that boy’s life for her own. The way that Ant looks at Finch after though is what breaks her finally.

“I don’t recognise this version of you. Who are you?”

*I don’t know I don’t know I don’t know anymore.*

The next morning, Finch wakes to realise that Ant has gone. Maybe to look for Dev, but probably just to get out and stay away. Finch thinks about how Ant’s voice had trembled with rage, and maybe, Finch thinks, fear too. Fear that Dev was gone and Remi and Ivey were different now. Fear at what Finch had become. Fear of the things she was now capable of.

And if Finch was being honest, it scared her too.
The sun is in her eyes and the heat is on her back and the wilds are loud and smelly and her throat is so dry an acrid taste is stuck to the roof of her mouth and there’s a dull pulse at the back of her skull that threatens to turn into a throbbing, blinding migraine.

Who am I who am I who am I

She staggers forward and bright white stars distort her vision as she falls down down down.
It’s the day after Ant leaves. Remi is eating an apple noisily when Finch confronts him.

“Tell me what really happened out there with Dev.”

Remi pauses mid-chew, eyeing her carefully. “I already told you,” he spits. “We found the package and then Dev thought he heard something. The Stalkers coming, maybe. Or others from on the island wanting to steal our goodies. So we ran and got split up.”

Finch glares at him. “Stop lying.”

He laughs nervously and his eyes flit to the door, probably searching for Ivey to smooth this over. “I’m not… I’m not lying,” he says, but not convincingly.

Finch walks calmly towards him, pulls out a chair, takes a seat.

“You know what I think?”

Remi doesn’t answer.

“I think,” she goes on, “that Ivey convinced you to do something to Dev. Something to make sure he wouldn’t come back.”

Again, he says nothing. But he’s squirming under her gaze. She’s so close to prying the truth from him.

“Tell me, Remi.”

No answer.

“Remi. Tell me the truth. You did something to Dev didn’t you?” She presses, “Didn’t you?”

“YOU DID SOMETHING TO DEV DIDN’T YOU—”

“Fine!” He thunders finally, then, controlling his voice, “Just listen, would you? Yes. Ivey and I got a message from The Stalkers saying that if we stopped Dev from coming back then we’d get a rating reward. I never meant to hurt him, OK? Not bad anyway. But when we found the package we started arguing and then he was getting all up in my face and I shoved him—all I did was shove him away from me! But he fell, Finch. He fell, OK? And there was a rock and he hit his head and he… he…”

Remi is sobbing now.

“… he was dead and I left him there,” is how he finally finishes that sentence.

The air leaves Finch’s lungs.

She goes. Packs up her things and staggers outside, thinking she might vomit and she does. There is nothing in her stomach but bile.

She gets the feeling of being watched and looks up. Birds.

Hundreds of them all perched around in the wilds, watching her with their black orb eyes.

There is snot and bile dribbling down her chin and she sobs, thinking of Grams.

_They are always watching._

_They are always watching._

_They are always watching._

_They are always watching—_

She runs.
She is running.
It is her eleventh birthday today and Grams said that after she does her chores—tend to the chickens and get the vegetables for breakfast—she’ll get her present. She comes inside noisily and Grams is already waiting at the kitchen table, looking absent-mindedly out the window at the beautiful landscape beyond their home. To one side there is the sea and to the other, the wilds. It is more or less a month before her death. She hasn’t noticed Finch has come inside yet.

“Grams?”
She startles, turning to look at her granddaughter. Finch is holding a basket filled with vegetables from the garden. “I did my chores, Grams,” she says.
Grams nods like she isn’t really listening. Still, she’s looking out the window.

“Grams?” Finch repeats.
She snaps to suddenly. “Yes, yes, sorry dear. I just need you to promise me something before. Can you do that, can you promise me?”
Little Finch nods. “Yes, Grams. Anything.”

A fog mists over in Grams’s eyes and Finch thinks she is having another moment, that she is not really here right now but dreaming of her youth, dreaming of a time before her own traumatic countdown. But then she speaks, slow and purposeful. “I need you to promise me that you’ll never lose your spark. Never lose who you are because of what someone else wants you to be. I want you to be happy and to be loved and to never question your worth. Promise me.”

“Yes Grams,” Finch had said and had given Grams her promise, though she would later break it.
And then Grams was handing over her present and it was inside a sleek white box.
For her eleventh birthday she gets a phone.
Finch keeps her eyes closed, listens hard. She collapsed before but now she’s listening. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she knows she’s listening for them. For Dev and Ant. For Ivey and Remi even. She realises that all this time she’s longed for them, her family, for her life to return back to the way it was before the countdown began. She misses them like a limb.

Listen. Judging by the ache throbbing her skull, it’ll hurt too much to open her eyes. Listen. She imagines calling out. Pleading and wailing and scratching the soil with her fingernails. Wake up Finch, she thinks she hears. The voice echoes; like it’s knocking around in her skull. Finch listens harder for the voice again, but there is only stillness; only the sound of the wilds. Only the sound of her own hard laboured breathing. She sleeps again.

Someone sloshes cold water onto her. She pitches forward, gasping for air, awakening instantly from her delirious unconscious state. Her body aches all over. And then there comes a voice: “Morning, Sleepy.” Finch thinks she must’ve imagined it. Ant’s voice. But then she’s blinking up into the hot red sun and her face is there, right there. Rust-coloured eyes and brown skin.

“Ant,” Finch wheezes. And then. Throat, she thinks desperately, clawing at her neck, it feels like there are knives in my throat. “Here.” Ant tips some water into Finch’s mouth but slowly, and not too much, just in case she can’t keep it down. It tastes clean and cool on her tongue; inarguably the best thing she’s ever tasted. Eagerly, she gulps down more until the pain in her throat dulls and her belly is bloated with water. And then.

“Where are we?” Finch asks, sitting up and looking around for the first time. They’re on the beach. The wilds are at their backs. And there’s the sea. She hasn’t seen the sea since she was a child and she had Grams and endless happy days in the sun.

“You haven’t washed in days,” Ant is saying, drawing her back to the present. “You stink.” “Nice to see you too,” Finch quips. But she doesn’t really believe Ant is actually here yet.

“Go wash in the sea,” Ant tells her and for what very well might be the first time ever, Finch complies without argue. She goes down to the lip of the angry sea and wades into the water fully clothed. What do the spectators think of me now? Finch thinks and laughs, surprised that she doesn’t even care anymore. She bends over, cupping her hands into the seawater and brings it up to her face. The salt stings the abrasions on her face but the cool water feels good. It’s as though she’s awakening from a long surreal nightmare. She finishes washing and starts to drags herself, sopping, back onto the sand. Ant has made a little fire on the sand with driftwood and is opening two cans of beans for their dinner. “Eat up,” she says, handing Finch one of the cans. They eat with their hands, saying nothing.
“How did you find me?” Finch asks after a while, pausing from shovelling food into her mouth. 
“I’d been following you for a bit before you collapsed,” Ant admits. “Why were you out there? What happened after I was gone?”
Finch lowers her eyes to the ground. “Remi told me what really happened with Dev. He killed him. But I can’t really judge him, can I? Not after what I did. I killed that boy that The Stalkers took. I’m just as terrible.”
Ant says nothing for a long while and Finch knows she is trying to get her head around it all: that Dev is dead. That he is gone and he’s never ever going to smile or laugh in that way he did or offer to carry something heavy just to be helpful. “Dev’s dead?” Ant repeats.
Finch can’t find words and so she just nods.

Dev’s gone Dev’s gone Dev’s gone Dev’s gone Dev’s gone...

“A after Remi told me I had to get out of there. I just ran. He’s a murderer but so am I. We’re the same.”
Ant shakes her head. “No, you are not the same.”
Finch realises that Ant still thinks she’s infallible and brave and tough and too many things that she is not. That she cannot bring herself to be. Not now.
“I let you down Ant. I let you down and I’m sorry. I’ll never stop being sorry for not letting that boy in.”
Ant looks at her then. “You don’t need to apologise to me,” she says. “You need to help me finish this. Finish the countdown for good. No more spectators. No more ratings.”
It’s do or die. Both of their ratings are too low. The Stalkers will take them and they will be nothing but numbers. Their rating.
Almost as if on cue, both of their phones chime with a notification from The Stalkers:
ALL MUST ASSEMBLE IN THE CLEARING FOR THE FINALE.
Finch hisses out a sigh through gritted teeth and looks up at the glowing sky.
30 minutes remaining...
They go to the clearing with ten minutes remaining. Everyone else who is still alive is already waiting. Gathered in a perfect circle. Except, there used to be twenty of them. Now there is only fourteen. Finch can only imagine what happened to the other six. Dev, she thinks, and wards off tears.

“Hi,” Ivey says stiffly, “Finch.” Her name coming out of her mouth sounds like an assault. Anxious, Finch’s stomach roils with nervous energy and she feels tingling in her fingertips. A quick rhythmic drum pounds in her chest; the percussion of her heartbeat knocking around in her ribs.

“Ivey,” Finch returns, keeping her voice even. She steps into the circle and looks around at each of them. Bags under their eyes. Skittish gazes and anxious movements. So, Finch thinks, they feel it too.

The countdown in the sky says nine minutes remaining.

There’s a new message on all their phones:

_all ratings will be dismissed from here on. Now, your survival depends on this final vote. You will vote on one person. You have one minute remaining to vote._

There’s a crowd circled around them now. All the island inhabitants have come out of isolation to watch them. To see if they’ll let The Stalkers control them.

_They’ve been controlled by The Stalkers just like we have, thinks Finch, we all have been for too long._

It’s what killed Finch’s mother. It’s what pushed Grams to insanity before she died.

The onslaught begins now: people talking over one another to justify why they shouldn’t be voted on. Why they should live.

“Don’t vote for me, I’ve got an 8.2 so it wouldn’t be fair…”

“Well, I have an 8.3…”

“… I had to do some unthinkable things to maintain my 8.5.”

The voices and yelling amplifies, reaching a great crescendo. Finch closes her eyes and tries to block out the cacophony, slowing her breath but realising that her heartbeat is in time with the countdown in the sky. Thirty seconds remaining...

Something thrusts into Finch’s side and she’s knocked horizontal, pain shooting across her chest. Two boys in a scruff, one of them caught in a headlock, have rammed into her. Straightening up again, Finch blinks at the chaos unfolding in front of her and her gaze instinctively finds Ant, Remi and Ivey. Ant is cowering away and Ivey, true to nature, is trying to bargain for her life. Remi is looking at Finch.

_I’m sorry_, she thinks she sees him mouth to her. She looks away. Her vision is blurring. Her breath is short. It is a laborious task to think, especially with all this noise.

_It’s all just noise. All of it. The Stalkers. The ratings. Why does it matter? What happens if they refuse it? DING DING DING DING_

The time is up.

The countdown hologram in the sky turns blood red: 00:00.

Instantly, the noise falls away and a piercing silence follows as everyone looks up. Finch looks at Ant. She nods at Finch. Go on, that nod says. It’s now or never.
“We don’t have to vote,” Finch says, but it is merely a whisper. A thought that she says aloud.
And then, surprising herself, she repeats herself. “We don’t have to vote.”
The others look at her, cocking their necks like birds with their watchful orb eyes, uncertain.
What will happen if we don’t vote?
Finch doesn’t know the answer to that. And sometimes, the unknown is the most frightening prospective.
All of them look down at their phone screens, where the message glows threateningly: VOTE NOW!
Finch wishes she could make them all see; make them realise that living the way they have been isn’t really living at all. Why can’t they see it?
Wake up wake up wake up wake up wake up—
They’ve been simply surviving, trying to live each day to the next to satisfy their spectators. But Finch can’t make them open their eyes, not when their eyes are constantly fixed to their phones.
Aha. That gives Finch an idea.
She tosses her phone to the ground and cracks the heel of her boot against the screen until it dies.
It feels terrifying and exhilarating all at once.
A terrifying silence follows. A sea of unblinking eyes taking in the unbelievable act she has just committed. And then Ant is standing beside her; tossing her phone away too.
“I won’t vote either,” she says.
And then, incredibly, this act of defiance ignites something in the others too.
One by one, they lift their eyes from their screens and copy Finch and Ant until the ground is littered with a pile of discarded phones. A sea of cracked screens.
A tremor of something like hope swells in Finch. They are not powerless.
After a long moment, “what comes next?” comes a small voice.
“I don’t know,” Finch answers honestly.
But whatever they face now; the unknown, The Stalkers, they’ll face it together. It feels like the calm before the storm but Finch thinks let the thunder come and let it rain and—
Without the weight of her phone, Finch feels freed of something; like finally waking from a deep slumber.
We are young, Finch thinks to herself, this should be a time of growth. Not of judgement and competition against one another. We are the youth and we hold the power and the future in one.
And they will shape the future, change it and make it theirs entirely.

Just watch.