Amortize

by orphan_account

Summary

An alternate universe where Katniss gets her name pulled, and Gale volunteers for Peeta to be with her. She comes home the sole victor and isn't sure what to do with her life now. Not much left for her to do, except perhaps find a way to pay back an ever-growing debt.

(Or; In which Katniss and Peeta are get to have a normal relationship... or, as normal as things get with Katniss anyway)

Notes

Amortize; verb. The process of paying off a debt over time

This story is OLD and I am leaving it on the site but at the cost of my dignity
I sit in the once familiar woods. It was one of the things I had most looked forward to returning to District 12. The last week had been so exhausting. Coming home, the interviews, the celebrations, moving into the new house. I couldn’t wait to get to the forest and be at peace with my thoughts. But somehow everything is different when you don’t have a hunting partner there to watch your back. I think of the last conversation we had in this woodland together, about how petty the argument was. About how petty all the arguments were. Sometimes, when I look at the mountains across the way, I still remember those words he said.

“We could do it, you know.”

“Hmm?” I grunt, opening my eyes and turning to face him. Unlike me, he’s sitting up straight, tense, ready to attack at any moment. I feel a bit guilty, being able to take a nap in the sunshine on a day like this, but I was up late the night before. If I wasn’t coping with my own nightmares, I was calming Prim down from hers.

“Leave the district. Run off. Live in the woods. You and I, we could make it.”

Even if I was fully conscious I wouldn’t have been able to think of response. It’s so preposterous

“If we didn’t have so many kids.” He adds.

“Right.” I agree. “I could never leave Prim, and we both know she could never manage.” I glance at him, and despite the fact I agreed with his statement he seems almost disappointed. I’m confused and curious, but mostly I’m tired.

I’m almost asleep again when Gale asks a second question. I can’t decide which I find stranger, the question itself or his intense tone.

“Katniss, if my name were called, do you think you’d volunteer?”

“I’m not a boy Gale, I can’t.”

“I mean volunteer in the girl’s place, to be with me.”

The question takes me by such surprise. I’ve never heard Gale say things like this before, the only time he talks about the Games is to make fun of Effie Trinket. Or scream about the unfairness of them.

“Well, I wouldn’t have a chance because they reap the girls first. By the time you were chosen I wouldn’t be able to.”

“I’m not asking if you can,” he says, a little irritated. “I’m asking if you would.”

“I don’t know...” I respond, trying to organize my thoughts. “I mean, who would look after Prim?”

Gale shakes his head. “Well what if Prim could hunt? Or if she was already 19 and wasn’t in danger of being reaped?”

“But she’s not.”

“It’s hypothetical.”
“Gale…” I respond. “Are you asking, if I would die for you?”

“Well, would you?”

“I… don’t know. That’s really not a fair thing to ask. Maybe if it guaranteed your life, but it won’t! Then we’d both just die in the games and our families would starve to death.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” He says coldly, and I can’t help but feel like I’ve given the wrong answer. I’m so confused, I have no idea where any of this stuff came from. I narrow my eyes and turn back on my side. But I know I’ll never be able to fall back asleep. Not with the looming threat of the reaping, suddenly made more real with our argument.

Argument? Maybe that’s too strong of a word for it. Disagreement. But either way, I feel unhinged. On today of all days, I really needed to feel like Gale would have my back.

We’re silent for the rest of the evening, going about our usual trade route. Gale makes a jab at Madge, the Mayor’s daughter, and I’m not sure if his anger is at the reaping or at our earlier exchange. He parts with a gruff goodbye and I make my way home to get ready.

I feel uneasy and distracted while getting dressed. A bad start to a terrible day. I finish washing up when my mother tells me she has an outfit laid out for me. Despite not wanting any help from her, I’m touched. I know how much things from her past mean to her.

When I’m finished Prim gives a smile. “You look beautiful.” she whispers.

“And nothing like myself.” I respond with a grin, because I can’t forget this day will be hard for her too. First reaping always are. I need to be there for her, not wrapped up in my own doubts.

We get to the town square uneventfully, and anxiously wait for the names to be called. There are some basic announcements but I hardly hear any of it, thinking about the twenty slips of paper with my name on them. The Capitol escort reaches into the large glass bowl, and reads the name.

It’s Katniss Everdeen.

My mind goes into shock, and my body moves of it’s own accord. I somehow make my way up to the stage, breathing quick and shallow. The world seems too bright and I want to throw up. But I don’t, all of Panem is watching.

I look into the audience and see Prim’s eyes, wide with disbelief, wet with tears. I turn my head, it is too painful to look at, and nearly brings tears to my own eyes. At least she in no harm, I think. But it is little comfort. Who will look out for her when I’m gone?

The Capitol woman pulls the boy’s name next, Peeta Mellark. My already suffocating lunges feel another sharp impact.

Not him.

Not the boy with the bread.

However, I have little time to worry about that, as before he’s even on the stage I hear a gruff voice from the audience yell. “I volunteer!” It shouts. My heart drops even further.

There are quite a few gasps, but I can’t look to the crowd. I can’t bring myself to look at Gale, or his family, or my own. Instead I glance at the boy, Peeta. His eyes are wide with disbelief, but rather than seeming relieved at his place being taken, he looks anxious and panicked. I’ve seen the look in
cornered animals, when they aren’t sure whether they should fight or run.

Effie Trinket is surprised by the sudden volunteer. District 12 has had one probably never. She looks at the Mayor, then at the boy, then at Gale. She clears her throat. “Well, how exciting! Come on up.”

Gale makes his way through the crowd and up on the stage next to me. Peeta gives one last look at me, blue eyes full of something that look like regret and sorrow. As if it was someone he really cared about going to die. Underneath layers of shock and panic, I’m confused.

Effie Trinket is reading her closing lines when Gale turns towards me. “It’s alright,” he mouths silently. “I’m here.”

Then we are escorted into the Justice Building to say our goodbyes. I’m visited by my mother, sister, and even surprisingly Madge with a token for me. I stand up at the next knock on the door, thinking it’s an escort to take me to the train. Instead I am given one more surprise visitor.

Peeta Mellark.

I’m so shocked that all my anxiety is forgotten. The two of us stand in silence for a few moments, and then he clears his throat.

“I um… I’m really sorry. And you’re boyfriend.”

“He’s, not my boyfriend.”

There is another awkward pause.

“Oh. I uh… I’m sorry.”

“You already said that.”

“It’s not fair for him. Or you. It was supposed to be me.”

I shake my head. “Then you would have just had to kill me or died yourself.” What is going on in this boy’s head?

He clears his throat again and looks up at the ceiling. He’s making me nervous with all his damn fidgeting. Just spit it out already!

“What?!” I demand, a bit harsher than I meant. He looks at me with a panicked expression, then runs his fingers through his hair. He opens his mouth, and then closes it. Opens, and close. The behavior is not unlike a fish on land, gasping for air.

“Don’t worry about Primrose!” He suddenly blurts out, causing me to jump. “I’ll make sure she doesn’t starve or anything! I live at the bakery and I have a bit of money saved up. So uh… don’t worry about her. Or your mother. So just focus on winning, okay?”

I’m confused by his words, and dubious to say the least. I know next to nothing about this boy and can hardly say I trust him. But, when I look into his eyes and I remember that day all those years ago, in the rain, the beating he took to give me those loaves. I can’t help but believe his words. Relief floods over me, glad someone will take care of Prim if neither I nor Gale is there to do it.

I say nothing though, unsure of what I’m supposed to respond with. He reaches out and pats my shoulder. I give him a blank look and he retracts his hand.
“I’ll uh… be going now.”

“Wait.”

He turns around just before he opens the door.

“Why?” I ask, my curiosity apparent. I can’t even begin to understand where all this came from. Does he feel responsible for me because he saved me from starvation once? I doubt he even remembers that. Is he guilty Gale took his place? Is he damaged in the head?

“Oh…” He looks at the ground and mumbles incoherently.

I can tell he isn’t going to answer my question. Is it because he doesn’t want to or he doesn’t really know the answer himself? Everything about this boy is strange to me. But either way, I’m still grateful. This time I reach out and pat his shoulder.

“Thanks.” I say sincerely.

He tenses up, staring at the hand on his shoulder, then at my smile. His lip trembles and suddenly, out of nowhere, he begins sobbing uncontrollably.

I panic, not at all sure how to react to this. Before I can stop him, he pulls me into a tight, near bone-crushing hug. He buries his head into the crook of my neck, tears wetting my shoulder. Unsure of what to do I awkwardly pat his back.

“It’s uhm… going to be ok?” I try to comfort him as best as I can in my confusion. He nods but continues to wail, arms shakily wrapped around me. I feel a pang of annoyance at how ridiculous and backwards all this is. If any of us should be crying, it should be me! I’m the one going to die! Why does he even care, anyway? I’m really starting to wonder if this boy isn’t right.

I’m so relieved when a peacekeeper calls and says our time is up. The boy removes his arms from me, and I can finally breathe again. He looks sheepish, wiping away the last of his tears. “I’m sorry.” He mumbles, for the third time.

He gives me one last glance with those sad blue eyes before leaving me in a whirlwind of confusion. I’m not quite sure what just happened, but I did know one thing for sure. My unpaid debt just got a whole lot bigger.

I shake my head, trying to clear my thoughts of the Games. I didn’t come out in the woods to reminisce about things I’d rather forget. About the gore and brutality, the betrayal and mysteries. I came here to empty my head. But I suppose that’s not an option, since every tree, every rock, every clearing and every stream has a story behind it. A story that involved the days when me and Gale could here and just be free.

I can’t decide if I mourn his death or not. But then again, was that really Gale who died in the arena? Was he really still himself? He was more like a Capitol’s pawn, a piece in the game.

No, I guess Gale died somewhere on the rooftop in that last argument we had. I feel guilt, but most of all I feel anger. I don’t know what he was thinking, volunteering for me. It wasn’t noble, it was stupid. And it got neither of us nowhere. Besides, it didn’t take him long to turn on me. I remember the screams echoing in the hall, waking up a very startled Effie.

She had sent us to bed instantly. But if she hadn’t, what more would have been said. Would it have turned violent? I can still hear his words, muttered under his breath as he was escorted back to his room.
“I don’t know why I ever volunteered for you.”

That still makes me furious. I never wanted him to. Unable to sit still any longer I get up and go hunting. It’s not my best job, constantly whipping my head around to see what’s there. I keep having to remind myself I’m not in the arena anymore. *Deep breaths, Katniss,* I think to myself. *You’re safe Katniss. You’re home, Katniss.*

I find that I need to be in constant reminding.

Making out with only two squirrels and three scrawny rabbits -again, not my best work- I exited the forest, crawling under the fence and stand in the meadow. Despite my family having more money and food than we’d ever need, I still hunt daily. It keeps me sane.

The food goes to Gale’s family, who is suffering greatly. They’ve not only lost their eldest son, they’ve also seen him lose his mind in a sick game. I drop off the game at his house. Only the mother is home, Hazel.

She looks up when she’s sees me, and smiles sadly. "Thank you, Katniss."

My chest tightens. She sounds so hollow.

"It's nothing." I mutter, placing the fresh kill on the table. Our eyes meet for a second, but I quickly turn my head away in shame. I'm almost out the door when she speaks again.

"I don't blame you."

I look back at her, working away at the laundry, despite being crippled with grief. She smiles sadly again, and I return it hesitantly. This house is suffocating to be in.

"I need to walk Prim home from school." I blurt out, leaving quickly. It wasn't really a lie, but it is an excuse. Either way, I'm glad to be out of there.

I make my way across town to the school building. The day has just ended and the schoolyard is filled with kids ambling about. When they see me, the olders ones nod and the younger ones smile, wave energetically. A few even hug me.

I smile, knowing that they recognize me as the girl who is the reason lots of food was delivered to their house. That was the one good thing about winning the games. Seeing all these kids have something to eat for a change.

Prim sees me and I have to detach several children from my legs. She runs up and hugs me too. "Hi Katniss!" She says brightly.

I ruffle her hair, grinning. I suppose that's another good thing about winning the games. Prim is fine. "Ready to go?" I ask.

She nods and entwines are fingers. But before she leaves, someone catches her eye. She smiles widely and waves excitedly at them, then answers me. "Yup." She chirps.

I take her bag, despite her protesting, and walk back across the town. It's getting chilly and the leaves have started to fall. "Who was your friend?" I ask conversationally.

"You mean the person I waved to? Oh, that was Peeta."

"Peeta Mellark?"
"Yes, the boy whose name was originally called. Do you know him?"

"Not really..." I mumble, looking pointedly at my feet. It's not a lie, but Prim can tell it's not the truth. She looks at me knowingly, but shrugs it off.

The walk is quiet again, but this isn't as pleasant as the first one. My mind is burning with questions. I remember his promise to me before the Games. It was so confusing. I never really had much time to think about it though. I was too busy trying to stay alive.

Did he really keep his promise? Why? Why did he even say anything in the first place? I hadn't seen him since I had gotten back from the games. But what would say if I had?

"How do you know him?" I ask.

"Well," Prim looks thoughtful. "It was a little odd. Sometime after you left he just showed up one day and introduced himself. Then he started coming over more and more, until he was over everyday. He always brought bread or some food. And he would help around the house."

She looks up at the leaves floating gently down from the trees, and then back to me. "And mom did stay strong, you know? But sometimes, when things looked... really bad... she'd break down a little. He was always there to comfort her."

Prim looks elsewhere again. "And me." She adds softly.

I have no idea what to make of this. What was he thinking? Not only did he do what he said, he did that and more! I can't decide if I'm grateful or furious.

"Well did he ever demand anything in return?" I ask. Prim shakes her head.

"No, it was odd. Now that you mention it, we'd offer food and he'd just turn it down. He never told us why he was helping, and every time interviewers came over he'd just leave. In fact, it would take a lot of convincing just to have him agree to a cup of tea. He even turned down herbs and treatment. We had to take care of his injuries by force sometimes."

That just confuses me further. I narrow my eyes, trying to find an answer. A reasonable solution. Nothing comes to mind though. We are nearly home when Prim's last words dawn on me.

"Wait, injuries?"

"Yeah. It was almost like..." Prim stops suddenly, clamping her mouth shut.

"Almost like, what?"

"Uh nevermind." She says. I want to ask further but she suddenly becomes very interested in her ugly cat Buttercup, lying in the yard of our house. She scoops him up and starts babbling to him sweetly. I decide to drop it, but I still don't have the answers I was looking for.

Almost like what?
I hadn't slept well at all that night, tossing and turning. Except for the first time in awhile, it wasn't thoughts of the game that kept me wide awake and worried. It was that boy. I was beginning to hate him, just the thought of him brought confused irritation. And guilt. And the feeling of a debt needing to be paid.

A huge, ever-growing debt.

And I hate owing anyone.

Speaking of, that reminded me I had a few other debts to be paid. I had found out that some people in The Hob had thrown together a sponsorship for me. I don't know how much, but it might have saved my life a number of times in the arena.

However, this debt makes sense to me. There reasons for supporting me were obvious, they knew me. I think they respected me a little too, and they wanted their district to win.

Besides, this was something I could pay back easily. It was more like a trade, they'd help me in the arena, and I'd repay them when I got home.

With this in mind, I got up early on Sunday and went about my usual run. I foraged, hunted, checked the snares. I buried myself in the work, trying to forget my annoyance at the boy and the hole in my chest ever since the games.

I made out well, several turkeys and rabbits. They were fat this time too.

After a few hours, when the sun starts to set, I finish my day's work. I enter the Hob, trading with the stands and shops. It's not my usual trading though, it's much more generous. A whole turkey for a swatch of cloth. A large bag of herbs for a third dozen eggs. I even throw in a tip because, why not? I don't need all these coins in my pockets, and they do.

I save Greasy Sae for last, two extra fat rabbits for a large bowl of soup. Her eyes widen at the exchange.

"Not your best trade, Katniss."

"Really?" I say with a fake gasp. "I'm sorry. I'll just take these back then." I reach for the rabbits, and she snorts and smacks my hands away with her ladle.

"I never said I wouldn't accept it." She grins mischievously.

"How generous." I reply.

Greasy Sae laughs again. "Don't feel so indebted girl. We didn't sponsor you so you'd give us a bunch of rabbits. We sponsored you so you could win, and you've done that."

I nod, my cheeks heating up. Everyone's support has been a little overwhelming, I wasn't aware how much my district cared about me.

"Besides," she adds, cutting up the rabbit. "It wasn't all me. Someone else came up with the idea."

"Oh?" I ask, trying very hard not to make a face at today's soup. The menu says it's pork and carrot stew, but I'm pretty sure it's actually tree bark and squirrel.
"Yeah." Greasy Sae finishes with rabbit and throws it in a pot, entrails and all. "A merchant boy actually."

I choke on the soup. "Really?" I cough out, pounding on my chest.

"Easy there girl." The old woman pats on my back. "Really. Some pretty blonde thing. Boy, was he nervous! Shakin' in his boots as if I were gunna put him in the soup." She pumps some water into the pot. "It was one of the darn funniest things I ever saw. He swaggered up and bought a bowl a soup, then starts to gag on it."

Greasy Sae starts cackling at the memory. "I say to him, boy you didn't come for soup. And he starts chuckling and asked if it was so obvious. He was real sweet though too. Calling you Miss Everdeen and goin' around convincing everyone to chip in a bit."

I stare down at the soup. Not only did he see to my family, he worked hard to sponsor me. A merchant boy. He had probably never broken a rule in his whole life and yet he came into a Black Market to convince a bunch of criminal folks to give up their money for me. A stranger. Why?

I grit my teeth. What is his problem? What does he want? Why is he doing all this? Just to mess with me?

I think back to the games, all the parachutes I had gotten. Medicine when I needed it, the gift from District 11. And, the meals that saved my life. Bread. There was an awful lot of bread.

Suddenly, I'm not too hungry. I tell Greasy Sae so, and she gives the bowl to her granddaughter. "What?" She jokes, "wild dog ain't good enough for your refined palate?"

I shrug, thank her and exit the Hob.

Over the next two weeks I haven't been able to shake that boy's presence at all. I keep hearing his name everywhere, hearing of his good deeds, of his favors.

Somewhere along the way, I develop a headache. Mild at first, then slowly growing in pain and intensity. And it only grows stronger with every mention of him. Hearing how he found Lady when she ran away, how he taught my mother how to bake bread, that he even brought Prim cake once.

Each mention of him just makes the throbbing worse. At first I could ignore it, but soon all things began to remind me of him. Bread, bright blue skies, dandelions. It makes me sick.

After a few days, Prim starts to notice it. How irritant I am, how spacey I've been. She began to worry, and demanded I stay in bed.

So I layed down and rested. I wake up on the third morning of my confinement, the air stuffy and hot. I get up to open a window but the sudden pounding causes me to stumble and fall back on the bed.

I try again, slower, and carefully make my way across the room. I open the window and collapse, slumping down onto the sill.

The worse part is I still don't know why. The confusion was driving me into insanity. I suppose I could just go ask him, but if simply the smell of bread throws me into hysterics I'm not sure what actually meeting him would do.

I think often think back to seeing him in the Justice Building. How he started crying. I think of the bread in the arena that gave me the strength to fight. Of his face when Gale volunteered for him, how
he was anxious and not relieved.

But it goes back much farther than that, doesn't it? To that day in the rain and those two loaves. His eyes on me at school, quickly leaving whenever I glanced back.

And it wasn't just me, he looked after my family for me too. Prim has said so. I think of her last words. It was almost as if...

Almost as if what?

I might have stayed lost in my thoughts forever if it weren't for the smell of freshly baked bread wafting into my room. Am I imagining it?

There's a knock on the door.

"What?!" I snap.

"It's me." Prim replies calmly. Oops. I never meant to yell at her. I open my mouth to apologize but she speaks first.

"Don't worry Katniss. I know you're not feeling well. Anyway, Peeta heard you were sick and he brought some bread."

I stand up so fast my head spins and collides with the window. Neither improve my headache.

"He WHAT?!" I scream.

"Maybe you should lie down." Prim suggests, "I'll be downstairs if you need anything." Then she leaves.

He's already done more favors than necessary, and here he is again. Bringing me even more things. Why? I'm rich now, I can take care of myself!

Then, suddenly, it all clicks. I know why he was doing me all those favors, why he was so interested in me after I was in the games. The sponsoring! And why he is still coming around after I won. It all makes sense now!

He was doing it for the money. He must have known that the victor would be filthy stinking rich and he wanted in on it! He was betting on me! What little respect I had for him dies. I can't stand people who bet on the games. In the Capitol it's disturbing enough, but a boy in District 12? It makes me sick to my stomach.

More than just that, he wants a share of my winnings. That's why he's still coming around. Well, if that's what he wants he can have it. I get up and furiously rummage through the drawers of my room. I find a burlap bag lying on the floor and fill it with coins. It's only an increment of my fortune, but it's still a very large amount. Enough to buy at least two cows.

I stomp downstairs and surprise my mother and Prim with my sudden appearance. "Are you feeli-" My mother starts but I cut her off.

"Wonderful, all better." I interrupt, despite the fact my head was throbbing worse than ever. "Did Peeta go home?"

"Yes," she answers, shocked to say the least. "He went home awhile ago."

"Alright." I say, hastily pulling on a jacket. "I'm going out for a walk." I impatiently pull on my
boots, and then violently lace them up. I swing the sack over my shoulder and march out the door.

"Katniss, what in the world?"

But I'm gone without a response. The temperature had gone down quite a bit since I had been locked up in my room. The sky is a dark gray and it almost looks like rain.

I try to calm down a bit on the walk there, but it's hardly any use. I'm furious with him for toying with me like that. And for what? Money? Absolutely disgusting.

I knock impatiently on the door, forgetting about his witch of a mother. It's too late though, the door is opening and I'm wondering if I should run for it. Just as I was getting ready to tear off the door opens to reveal not the witch, but the baker.

He is usually a very stoic man, but surprise is evident on his face now. He raises his eyebrows, as if to ask why I'm here.

"Is Peeta home?" I ask, politely. I feel guilty after banging on his door. It's his son I'm mad at, not him.

The baker nods, and points upstairs, then walks back into the house. He leaves the door open, which I guess is an invitation. I take off my boots and step inside.

The bottom floor seems to be all bakery, one half shop and one half kitchen. I've only been in the storefront, and even then just a few times. Mostly we trade at the back door to avoid the witch. The baker said, well, gestured upstairs so I look for a staircase and make my way up.

I realize now I should have asked which room on the second floor. It's very dark and hot on the second floor. Boiling even, I wouldn't be able to stand living here. I walk up and down the hall, wary on which door to try. I decide to knock on the only room the seems to be lit. Fortunately, it's Peeta who answers.

"Come in."

He's sitting on the edge of his bed, drawing something in a book. I suppose he was expecting a family member, because he jumps when he sees me. Paper scatters everywhere.

"Katniss? Wha-?!"

I toss the sack at him, and it hits him in the stomach. He doubles over with a painful "Oof!" I hadn't meant to throw it so aggressively but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't pleased.

"Now we're even." I spit. "You don't need to bother with me anymore."

"I don't understand." He replies, looking distressed. "What's this?" The stocky boy picks up the bag and looks inside. "Money?"

"Don't play dumb with me." I snarl, "I know this is what you wanted. Why you sponsored me."

"Katniss." He says levely. Slowly, as if talking to a madman. "I didn't do any of that for money. I promise."

He almost seems mad. I frown, realizing he probably is. I just barges into his home and accused him. I even hit him with a sack of coins. But still, he has to have done it for a reward. Why? There is no other possible explanation.
"Why?" I ask. I seem to ask him that a lot.

Again, he waffles in response to the question. Just like in the Justice Building. First the shifting, averting the eyes, the fish-like opening and closing of his mouth. Peeta sighs. "I just... can't tell you."

"Then why should I believe you?" I challenge.

"Please do." He almost sounds like he's begging. Those sad blue eyes plead at me, and I notice something odd. He is not nearly as well-built as I remember. Somewhere between the last time I saw him and now he's lost a bit of weight. Cheeks hollow, a scar under the eye, bruises on his arm.

I remember Prim's words. Almost as if...

Almost as if he was starving himself to feed them. Giving up his own portions. And receiving beatings for doing so. If two loaves got him a black eye, what did two months bring? I dread to know the answer.

Somehow, knowing this, I do believe him. He didn't starve and take those beatings for money. But this leaves me even more confused, and even further in his debt. Not only did he protect my family, he gave up what he had to do so.

"I believe you." I murmur, looking down. Embarrassed is not enough to describe my feelings. Ashamed. Regretful. Sorry. I say the last one allowed.

"I'm sorry."

He smiles joylessly and hands me the bag. I just push it back into his hands. "No, you keep it." I mutter.

"I don't want it. Honest."

"Then how am I supposed to pay you back?" I exclaim.

"You don't need to worry about that."

"But I do. You don't understand, I hate debts. I can't stand owing anyone."

"Well in that case," he places the bag back into my hand, closing my fingers around it. "Don't pay me back with money."

"Well with what then?" I snap.

"Time. Company." He says, a bit sheepish.

His answer confuses me. "How many?"

"No I mean... I want to be friends."

"You... what?"

"I want to get to know you better. To talk."

I have no idea what to make of this. What a useless thing to ask for, friendship. Friendship won't fill your belly, friendship won't stop wolves from tearing apart your limbs. Friendship can't stop your name from being pulled out of a large glass bowl.
But if this is really what he wants in return, I guess as the debtor I owe it to him. As arbitrary as it sounds.

"Alright then." I respond, a bit exasperated. "If that's really what you want."

Peeta's face lights up at my answer. It’s almost embarrassing to look at how honestly and genuinely pleased he is. It's all too confusing. Is that something people do? Is this how you make friends? If that's how painstaking it is, I'm glad I never bothered with it.

I nod and turn to leave, but as my hand encircles the door knob one last word slips past my lips.

"Thanks."

I don't want to see what dumb expression that will bring to his face, so I exit his room before he makes another puppy dog grin. Yet again, I'm left with the impression that this boy isn't quite right.

Despite all my efforts, my anxiety has not left. Now I must worry about making this boy my friend, a long and tireless escapade.

At least the stupid headache is gone.
Chapter Three

I’m not sure when he was intending for us to meet. Whether he had something planned or if he meant the next time we bumped into each other. Just in case is was the latter, I stayed away from the town. I spent all day in the woods, afternoons in the Hob and nights in the Victors’ Village. It didn’t vary much from my original schedule, but I was careful to avoid him.

Whatever his plan was, when almost a week passes I wonder if he has forgotten. Or perhaps he realized his request was silly and changed his mind. Either way, come sunday morning I’m beginning to relax and think the whole thing is forgotten. However, just as I’m lacing up my boots and thinking maybe I can risk going into town to buy some bandages, I hear a knock on the door.

Prim goes to answer it, and from my place in the living room I can see her face brighten when she sees who it is.

*It could be anyone,* I remind myself. *Maybe some old neighbor of ours found Buttercup by the meadow again.*

“**It’s Peeta.**” Prim informs me, “He says he wants to talk to you.”

I nod and walk to the doorway hesitantly. Of course he didn’t forget! He must have been just waiting for his day off from school. He’s waiting outside, wearing warm clothes in this weather. I bet those are store bought. I bet he never had to sew his own clothes or patch them when they ripped. I wrinkle my nose in distaste.

“Hi.” He greets me nervously. “I was thinking if you’re free today, maybe we could do something together?”

“I’m really busy,” I begin, knowing how obvious of a lie it is. I’ve never been a good liar. Even if he doesn’t catch on, my sister quickly does. Prim nudges me in the side with her elbow. She is surprisingly strong for her petite form.

“Come on, Katniss.” She hisses under her breath. “Don’t be mean, you owe this to him.” Don’t remind me, I sigh internally. Owing him is how I got into this whole mess.

“But, uh, I’ve got some time now I guess.” I grit my teeth, trying to smile. “What did you have in mind?”

“A walk?” He offers with a shrug. My eyebrows raise. Really? A walk? That has to be the most useless activity possible. Walking with a destination maybe, but roaming around aimlessly with no objective? Well, a simple-minded idea from a simple-minded boy.

“That sounds lovely I say.” My smile is a little painful. I turn back to Prim. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.” I tell her. She shakes her head, looking annoyed. “Uh, an hour?” I try. Another shake. Seriously? I need to spend that much time with this guy? “A few hours.” Final offer.

That seems to please her because she nods and calls out, “Have fun!” She says it more like a requirement than a reminder though.

And with that she closes the door, leaving me alone with this possibly unstable man. I look at him and he smiles goodnaturedly. “Ready to go?” He queries. As I’ll ever be.

In just the week since our encounter at the bakery the temperature has gone down even further. I
shiver, pulling my jacket tighter. The wind has picked up in the past few days too, blowing the newly fallen leaves around. I don’t particularly like autumn, but I have to admit how pretty it looks. Various shades of orange floating along, spiraling and spinning in the air.

The two of us walk in an uncomfortable silence. Peeta keeps fidgeting. Twiddling his thumbs, wringing his hands, rubbing the back of his neck. It makes me want to wrestle him down if for no other reason than to make him hold still.

“So, how are you?” He attempts after a while.

“Delightful.” Is my short reply, trying to shoot down any hope of he had of a conversation. “Look, if it’s alright with you I’d like to just walk in silence.”

He chuckles and I shoot him a look. “Wait. Are you serious?!”

“Yes, why wouldn’t I be?”

Peeta lowers his head a bit. “Oh.” He mumbles. “Yes, I guess so. I mean, if you want to we can.”

We make our way out of the Victor’s Village. The housing complex is so far out of town, it’s very inconvenient. I don’t know why the builders made it so isolate. Maybe so the famous and rich victors wouldn’t have to mingle with the poor, starving citizens. Or maybe so no one would be kept awake at night by the screams that victors are often plagued with.

We make our way to the town square, and I purchase the bandages my mother needs. I’d really like to pay the Hob a visit, but it’s not the best idea to go with Peeta. We walk down the streets of the wealthier merchant houses, the shops. We even pass the bakery. District 12 isn’t very big, and we have to circle back around. Peeta keeps trying to comment on things but when he sees my expression he quickly clamps his mouth shut.

Almost two hours pass and my feet are starting to hurt. I’ve walked for much longer on far more uneven terrain but when I’m out hunting, I’m not nearly as tense. I figure enough time has passed that Prim will not lecture me if I return now. We’re in the meadow, taking the long way back to the Square when I ask him if he’s ready to go.

“Is it because of the reaping?” He asks quietly.

I whip my head around. “What are you talking about?”

“Are you mad at me?”

I shake my head and scoff. “No, stop being dramatic. I just didn’t see why we needed to talk.”

“Because I wanted to get to know you better!” He exclaims, somewhat frustrated. “Have you ever had a friend before?”

“Yeah, one.” I reply coldly. “And he tried to kill me.”

“I didn’t want to force you to spend time with me. If this is really so horrible for you, why don’t you just go home?” Peeta snaps.

“I was just about to suggest the same.” I snarl, taking no time in changing direction. His jaw drops, I guess he didn’t expect me to just up and leave.

“What am I doing wrong?” Peeta shouts.
I stop. His honesty throws me for a loop. As aggravating as he is, he really is trying hard. And maybe I haven’t really been so nice to him. Yelling at him, accusing him of being greedy, throwing a sack of coins at him. I sigh, blowing stray strands of hair out my face. I suppose he deserves an explanation. I definitely owe him that.

“ I don’t really understand you, nothing you do makes sense to me. It’s exhausting trying to figure you out all the time. I don’t know anything about you, and I can’t say I trust you.” I blurt out all at once. “It gives me a headache.”

I look up at his face, and as usual, I can’t decide what his reaction will be. I can’t help it, but I compare this to Gale. I could read Gale like a book, I almost always knew what direction he would go to, what he was thinking, what his instincts were. Whereas with Peeta I have no idea.

And yet again, he takes me by surprise with a small, quiet laugh and a shake of his head. “Katniss,” He begins softly, “You say you don’t know know why I wanted to talk, and then you say you know nothing about me. Do you see the point now?”

Oh. My heart sinks. I really haven’t been giving him a chance, have I?

“I’m sorry. I’ve never been good at making friends.” I admit.

He smiles at that. “It's ok,” he says. “I can help you. Let me start.”

Peeta sits down on the grass and gestures for me to do the same. I sit besides him and he offers me his hand. “Hello, I’m Peeta Mellark.”

“Katniss.” I say shortly.

“What do you like to do for fun?”

“I can’t tell you that.” I instantly respond. My only hobby is hunting illegally, and somehow I don’t think this decent and law-abiding boy will react well to that information.

“Everyone knows you hunt, Katniss. We’ve been buying you’re squirrels for years. It doesn't bother me.” He thinks for a moment, then adds. “But it does make me nervous you’ll get caught.”

Huh, I guess I underestimated him. Though maybe I haven’t been as sneaky as I thought I have. I wave his concern. “My biggest customers are the peacekeepers.” I tell him.

“Well, in any case Katniss, you should trust me a little more. I would have thought that my efforts to help you make it obvious I want you to stay alive, not sell you out.”

“Well, maybe. If I knew why you did all those things.” I counter.

At first he looks a little taken aback, but then grins. “Well,” he replies, a bit mischievously. “That’s something I’d only tell a friend.”

His response annoys me a little, but I can’t help but grin at the cleverness of it. I see his bargain now, my friendship in exchange for his motives of helping me. The mystery that drove me insane and gave me that crippling headache.

“I already know what you like to do for fun." I say haughtily. Peeta raises his eyebrows. "You like to bake bread."

"Uhm. Not so much. That's my job, not my passion."
"Oh." I mumble.

"I guess I like it well enough." He confesses. "I like decorating the cakes anyhow. But no, my real hobby is drawing."

"Drawing?" I think of when I barged into his room. There were sketches up on the wall. And he had been holding what I guess was a sketch book.

"Well, I'd rather be a painter. But that's too expensive."

I frown, feeling some sympathy for him. I value art as much as I value hair ribbons, which is to say, not at all. But it's sad that in District 12 people can't even do simple things like paint. That is too much of a luxury.

"So," Peeta breaks the silence. "What's your favorite color?"

"That's kind of personal." I tell him. He frowns, clearly unamused and I laugh. "Okay, it's green."

"Mine's orange." I wrinkle my nose. Orange is too artificial, it's bright candy color reminds me of the Capitol. "Not what you're thinking of. The pastel sunset kind."

"Ah, how masculine." I quip.

"You looked like Buttercup when you wrinkled your nose." Peeta informs me, then he laughs when I make the face again. I can't help but think there is something nice about it, how genuine his laughter is and how easily it comes. I kind of want to hear it again.

But just as I think that he stands up and holds out his hand for me. My first reaction is to push it away, but instead I let him help me up. That's something a friend would do, right?

"I need to get back to the bakery." He says. Then he looks at his feet sheepishly. "Sorry for wasting so much of your time."

I want to agree with him and chastise him for how fruitless this was, but I can't. Now that I don't need to attend school or hunt for my starving family, I spend most days drowning in freetime.

"It's alright." I tell him.

"Want me to walk you home?" Peeta offers. I can't decide if this is some sort of pity where he thinks I can't take care of myself, or just friendliness. Either way, I turn it down.

"Well, I'll see you around I guess." He pauses before adding, "are we going to do this again?"

"I don't know." Why is he asking me? "Why, are we friends yet?"

I didn't expect him to, but he laughs again. "I spent three hours with you and all I learned is you like green."

"Oh." I can't really think of a response to that. "My middle name is Maylisee."

"Eustance."

"That's terrible." I tell him. He starts laughing.

"I know." He chuckles, and then walks away.
I watch him exit the meadow, his loud steps so unlike Gale's soft tread. He turns back once to smile at me. It's so bright it's almost blinding.

As soon as I notice I'm returning the grin I stop and leave as well. I make my way back from the Victor's Village, my feet sort of wandering as my mind races. I'm wondering if I'll have time to hunt today. Peeta only wasted half of my day, so maybe I can make a quick route.

Well, maybe it wasn't that much of a waste. He did make me laugh. I stop, shocked by this fact. He made me laugh, something only Prim, Gale, or sometimes even a handful of people at the Hob, could manage after my father was blown to bits. For the first time I realize maybe we could actually be friends.

I don't know how I feel about that. I didn't have many friends, less than three infact. I'm not sure how close Madge and I are, but Cinna has clearly proven his worth to me. Gale was my most trusted friend. He could make me laugh for hours without trying, to the point where I'd be angry with him for causing me to scare away all the game.

I almost smile at the memory, but quickly it turns to a frown when I remember the arrow he had trained on me. The very same weapon I taught him to use, that he would protect me with. Maybe I don't want Peeta to be my friend after all.

I'm weary when I get home, reconsidering my choice to hunt today. Prim is doing the dishes in the kitchen. She tells me mother is out checking on a sick child, too young and fragile to make the trip across town. I nod and join her, drying the dishes.

"How was your walk?" Prim asks me, handing me a wet bowl. I look at it's exquisite design, white with blue flower patterns. When we moved into this house we didn't need to bring anything but ourselves. The beds were made and everything was in the shelves.

Knowing my mother was a healer and my sister had pets they even accommodated us with herbs, a goat pen and a small door for the cat. The Capitol made no short of effort to make their new victor and her family feel right at home. Ironically, it makes me long for our small shack of a house even more.


"You've been such a liar lately." Prim scolds.

"Have not!"

She splashes me with the soapy water.
Chapter Four

Peeta and I meet a few more times. Soon our visits become more casual and spontaneous. Meeting in the square, visiting my family, seeing him at the bakery. I must admit, we've gotten closer. But I'm not sure how I feel about us being friends and there are times when I'm not sure I trust him. He is yet to reveal why he helped me.

Whatever happiness I had with him though seems to have just been a vacation. A short break from the reality of the Games. But as the victory tour begins to creep up the nightmares come back in full force. They plague me almost every night.

The night before I'm supposed to leave I awake. I have drenched the mattress through and I can hardly breathe. I open the window but it isn't enough. I need to leave, I can't stay in this beautiful, Capitol-issued home any longer.

Still dresses in my drenched night gown I leave the house without thinking. I run through the night, stumbling and tripping. My feet don't know where to go but anywhere is better than the confinement of that perfectly crafted house.

When I'm near the meadow and out of any the village I begin to slow down. Where am I going? I sit down on damp grass and try to slow my breathing. I notice the sky is misting lightly. The night air is freezing. I throw my head back, welcoming the cold.

I would easily spend the night here if it weren't for the possibility of hypothermia. What little I am wearing is totally soaked. I need to go home. Home? My feet return there without any guidance.

Home, the small, worn down shack I grew up in. It's not much but I feel an instant relief upon entering. Not to mention it’s warmer than outside.

Since I have calmed down my sleepiness returns, and I waste no time in stripping off these wet clothes and replacing them with some clothes in our old closet. I crawl back into my old bed and pull up the covers, smelling the familiar smell of home and feeling comfort in it. I drift back to oblivion in no time.

I do not wake until late morning, the sun pouring in and revealing the even more worn state of our old house. Without much maintenance a thin layer of dust has appeared, along with some, who knows how it got in, coal dust. The state of the room is the only thing that reminds me I don’t live here anymore. The past half year wasn’t a dream, and I still need to get on that train today.

I groan, pulling the covers back up over my face. The worst thing I can think of is parties in the Capitol to celebrate all the deaths I've caused. To look at the faces of the families whose children I murdered, whose friend is dead because I’m alive. Maybe someone even had a little sister counting on them to come back home. The thought makes me dizzy.

I know I must return the Victor’s Village. That soon the prep team will be here to tear all the hair from my body, the cameras that will question me about every detail of my private life, the train that will bring me to the dreaded Capitol itself. I begin to bite my nails without noticing. I can’t muster any energy to go back there, even though I know my mother and sister must be worried sick. Though they must know I am safe somewhere.

It is, as usual, the thought of Prim’s anxious face that pulls me out of my discouragement. I get out of the bed and neatly tuck the blanket back even though no one will be using it. I indulge in some
procrastination and even clean up the house a bit. I lose myself in the work, dusting and mopping and chasing out mice.

When at least an hour passes I know my time is up and must return now. I need to get home and explain to my family where I have been before the cameras arrived. Maybe they will believe me if I say I got up early to go hunting. But since I left without telling them, maybe they think I ran away.

I leave the house, locking the door behind me in case more animals try to go inside. I make a mental note that I should see to the house more often when I get back from the tour. I slowly trudge through the damn ground. I’m properly dressed in some old clothes of mine, but I didn’t bother finding shoes. I’m caught up with thoughts of the tour so I don’t notice him until he calls out to me.

“Katniss! What are you doing out here?!”

I turn to face him, doubled over and panting. His face is flushed with effort and there are lines under his pretty blue eyes too.

“What are you doing here?” I ask Peeta, not realizing it’s the same thing he asked me.

“Looking for you.” He says. “Your mother figured you were out hunting, she got worried when your stylist called saying your prep team would be there soon.”

“Oh great,” I grumble.

“I think he said something about how there was no stopping them.” Peeta adds, grinning slightly. “I’m guessing they’re not the best company?”

“Imagine loud, colorful birds that never shut up and have dedicated their lives to ripping out your leg hair.”

“Ah, sounds like the Capitol.” He chuckles lightly, and I can’t help but feel comforted by his calm and cheerful attitude. I’m grateful that the first person I ran into didn’t yell at me for leaving. I smile a little as well, and Peeta turns away. His face looks a little red, but it’s probably because he ran here. “Come on, we should get back before your mother tears her hair out.”

My relief doesn’t last too long though, as I am soon again filled with dread. My thoughts of the parties in the Capitol and the creepy president are pushed aside. Instead I am filled with terror of what is immediately to come, my prep team’s waxing.

Our hands bump on the way back. I dislike the contact and make sure to step to the side so it doesn’t happen again. Peeta gives me a puzzled. It’s awkward, so I quickly say the first thing that comes to my mind.

“How did you know where I was?”

“I just had a feeling you’d go back to your old house.” He says with a shrug. He states it so casually, but I’m shocked that he knew so much about me. While this boy still remains a mystery to me, he understands me fairly well.

I consider my last statement. Maybe I do know him better than I think. I don’t understand his motives nor can I predict him, but this boy isn’t a stranger. Over the past few months I’ve learned about his personality and hobbies. I know his likes and dislikes and that his laughter comes easily. Over the past months we have found out a lot about each other. And he’s made me laugh quite a bit. Maybe Peeta and I are closer than I thought.
I’m still not sure if I like that or not.

When we’re outside to my house I know something is wrong. There is a car in the yard, which can only mean one thing. Peeta realizes it too.

“Looks like they’re here already.” He says.

I hear shrieks from the house and the door opens, the three of them piling out. I turn to Peeta, eyes wide. “Run.” I whisper.

He laughs despite the fact I was totally serious. He does know it’s time to leave though, and says goodbye. Just before he leaves though, he surprises me with a hug. He hasn’t given me one since that day in the Justice Building. Unlike the previous one, I lean into his touch and hesitantly hug him back. “You’re going to be okay, it’s just a few days.” He says softly. I nod slowly, and we break apart.

He leaves just before my prep team descends on me. Lucky for him. I spend the next hour being bathed, waxed, plucked, scrubbed and decorated. As usual, their chatter is non-stop. Somehow, in their minds, I’m sure they think this is a conversation. That their constant speaking over each other is in someway an exchange. I’m not actually included in the conversation until I am almost finished, with just my hair left to beautify.

“So who was that boy?” Octavia asks. It takes me a moment to register that she is speaking to me and not at me.

All I need to say though is “He’s just a friend.” and then they are off again. Octavia for some reason begins to tell me of every boy she had ever known in her life and her opinion on each of their choices in lipstick. Venia informs me about all her close friends and Flavius mentions he has had his fair share of boys that we’re “just a friend” too.

I don’t listen to any of it. Instead I am more interested in the fact I had called Peeta a friend without thinking twice of it. I guess I really shouldn’t be so hesitant towards him, he really is a good friend.

The only good part of this trip is seeing my stylist, Cinna, again. He has helped me with my fake talent of fashion over the past few months. Each victor is supposed to develop a talent to show everyone what they are doing now that they are out of the games. As my real hobby, hunting, is illegal, Cinna agreed to help me develop something else.

I must appear very girly to the Capitol, because all I’m known for beyond being on fire is twirling around and giggling on stage. And now my life passion is designing clothes.

The trip is it’s own special kind of hell in many ways. First is having to keep up my appearance of being a lighthearted, silly girl. My exact opposite. The second are the terrible nightmares I get on the train, and now I have no home to run to. And third, the worse of all is going to those weary districts and giving speeches. Speeches that are not written by me and are full of propaganda. The very same speeches that make me cringe at every reaping.

I have to look into a mother’s eyes, a little brother’s stare, the entire crowd of people and say this disgusting nonsense. I need to state how wonderful the Capitol is and how lucky we are. I need to say this with a smile in front of people whose children I have killed.

The most terrible family to face is the one of the little girl who reminded me of Prim. Her mother looked heartbroken, but her little siblings, five of them, look angry. I don’t blame them. Their older sister is dead and I’ve forgotten her name.
I’m nothing short of relieved when we arrive in the Capitol. Despite my hatred for it, it is the last stop before home. The parties are extravagant, the citizens excited and the food is almost worth the visit.

The most painful part is the interview with Caesar Flickerman. While I’m fond enough of him and I know he does try to help, that doesn’t change the fact I hate interviews. I can’t stand talking about myself, and I’m not a good liar. I try my best to maintain the public’s image of me, a happy, girly teen, but it’s no easy task.

I answer most of the questions with something witty or something I think a pretty merchant girl would say, and I think I’m doing alright. It isn’t until Caesar asks if I have a boyfriend do I realize how in over my head I am.

“Oh,” I giggle. “Not really.”

“Awh come on, that’s not an answer Katniss! Why not?”

*Because of your sick practice of killing children, I have decided to never have one,* I think bitterly. Instead I laugh again because I could be hung for saying that.

“There must be one boy you’re close with.” He prompts. I consider it a moment, and then decide I should talk about Peeta. It’s not anyones business, and he really is just a friend but I’m at such a lost for words It’s all I can think to say.

“Well I did meet this one guy—”

“Details, details! What do you like about him?”

“Uh,” I freeze. *What would those girls at school say?* Nothing comes to mind. Maybe I should just answer honestly. “His laugh. And that he makes me laugh.”

“Awwh.” Caesar coos, sounding entirely genuine. “Sounds like you really love him.”

“Love? No way!” I blurt out. “We’re really just friends!”

“Riggghhhttt.” He says with an eyebrow wiggle. I want to further convince him that Peeta and I are in no way romantically involved, but he changes the subject after that. I do my best to finish the interview, but I want to bury my head in my hands. I can’t believe I even brought him up!

I can’t enjoy the after party, despite it’s grandeur and amazing food. All I can think about is how I messed up the interview. What’s Peeta going to think? He must feel so used. I would be furious if he lied about us being in love on national television. I had only just begun to think of him as a friend, and now I wouldn’t be surprised if he says he doesn't want to see me anymore.

And the idea of me being in love with him? Preposterous. I wasn't sure if I even trusted him until recently.

*Maybe I am in love with him.* The stupid thought crosses my mind before I have a chance to stop it. I don’t love anyone. No one but Prim and maybe my mother. Just because I enjoy his company and his laughter and yes, even his hugs doesn't mean anything. Even if my heart does beat a little faster around him.

I need fresh air. I notice some people have been talking to me, but in a chattering way so they haven’t seemed to mind I didn’t respond at all. I tell them I need to fix my makeup, even though they don’t seem to hear me, and sneak through the ballroom out onto a balcony. There is no one out here, they are all enjoying the party. I welcome the cool night air and kick off my heels, hoisting myself up
I sit on the balcony for the rest of the night. Hours tick by, but no one seems to miss me. If I cared at all, I would think it’s funny because this is my party in the first place. I ponder over the three questions, but when Effie comes to collect me I’ve only found a solution to the first.

“Katniss, have you been out here all night?” She asks. “I couldn’t find you! Come now, we’ll be late for the train home.” I can tell she’s upset with my disappearing, so I apologize graciously. I even curtsey. I need to have her in a good mood so I can make my request.

“Effie,” I ask politely. Causally. “Do you think you could get me everything a painter would need?”

She beams. “Oh Katniss, did you take up on my suggestion? I know you are very artistic, you’ll make a lovely painter!” Effie pulls me into an embrace. I wonder if she is going to cry of happiness. “Of course! Only the best for my precious victor. I can get you the finest paints, brushes and canvases by tomorrow!”

I try to return her enthusiasm but it is impossible. Instead I thank her and get on the train. Just one more night until I’m home. I’ve been itching to go to the woods, to get away from all these glamorous, unnaturally colored, man-made thing.

The next morning I am again attacked by my prep team. After the interview they have several questions about who that boy that hugged me was. Thankfully, none of which the expect me to answer. However their mentioning of him just makes me more anxious. I really hope he doesn’t hate me.

The harvest festival eventually takes my mind off of him. The celebration is usually just starving people starving a little less. But today since it is a Capitol-thrown banquet in my honor, it will be starving people getting to eat their fill for the first time in a long time.

I spend the evening getting ready at the Mayor’s house and my spare time with Madge. The festival is wonderful, seeing all those skinny kids gorge on Capitol dishes. I have a few appearances to make, but I skip some of them. I’m more interested in spending the day with Prim after the days away.

While she was luckier than most and has always had fresh kill and forest greens, she has never had the luxury of Capitol food. I sit with her, enjoying her reactions to the dishes, pointing out my favorites. It’s fun, but I’m still a little distracted. I keep glancing at Peeta, sitting with his family. He doesn’t seem to be upset with me, he even waves. I want to go speak to him, but I know his mother wouldn’t appreciate it. So I wait until after the celebration is over.

I don’t get a chance to see him before it ends though, there are too many people I need to meet and shake hands with. By the time I am finished almost everyone has left, so I decide I’ll go to the bakery later tonight.

I return home to find that, true to her words, Effie has left enough art supplies for me to paint all the houses in town. I wash off my makeup and dress myself in normal clothes, and somehow manage to fit all the brushes and cans into one bag. I tell my mother and Prim I’m going to the bakery, and they give each other knowing smiles which annoys me greatly.

When I arrive I am more careful this time to avoid his mother. I am happy to find that his father is at
the storefront again. He nods when he sees me, then goes back to his work. I make my way up the stairs to the sweltering second floor, knowing my was this time and knock on his door.

“I’ll be down in a minute.” He tells me. I figure that again he isn’t expecting me, but I guess I didn’t tell him I was coming over. I open the door.

This is only the second time I’ve been in his room and this time I take more interest in it. It’s not extravagant, not like my house in the village, but it has a pleasant feeling to it. The blue walls trick my mind into thinking this is a cool place despite the hot, stale air. And the sketches on the wall are beautifully done. Scenes in town, trees, skylines, even one of Prim laughing. I look at the picture and feel happiness bubble up inside of me. He has captured her brightness well. It’s a pity they aren’t in color, but I guess that’s what I’m here for.

I turn to Peeta. He looks at me a little surprised that I’m in his room, but quickly smiles. “That better not be money in that bag, Katniss.”

I look at the sack in my hand and laugh nervously, realizing how much this situation is like the first. “No,” I tell him. “It’s an ‘I’m sorry for talking about you in front of thousands of people’ present.”

“I didn’t mind.” He says, walking over to where I’m standing.

“Then I guess you don’t want this.” I’m so relieved he isn’t mad at me that I can’t help teasing him and pulling the bag out of his reach. His playfulness is infectious.

“I never said that!” Peeta whines, trying to push me to the ground. We shove each other around like children playing keep-away, which I guess we are.

“Don’t mess with me Mellark,” I warn him. “If you haven’t noticed I’m the victor of the 74th annual hunger games.” It’s weird for me to be able to joke about the Games again. I haven’t been able to since they became a part of my life. But it’s nice to mention it again as if it didn’t matter.

“Wouldn’t dream of it, girl on fire.” He says cheekily, still trying to push me to the ground despite his words. I lose my footing and we both slip, landing on the floor with a thump that I’m sure must have shaken the whole house. He takes a moment to recover, slightly breathless, before he lunges for the bag again. I pull it away from him, but accidentally spill the contents.

The cans of paint roll everywhere around his room and then brushes clatter to the floor. “Shoot.” I grumble, not because of the mess I’ve made, but because this means he won. I turn to look at Peeta and find him speechless, mouth unhinged and eyes wide.

“Katniss,” He says after a while. “You got this for me?”

“Uhm, yes.” I say, his reaction making me a little nervous.

“Thank you so much. Katniss, I…”

He reaches out to hug me, which is hard to manage since we’re both on the floor. “This means the world to me.” He says quietly.

I’m nervous he’s going to start crying again. “It was no big deal.” I tell him. He shakes his head and holds me there for what seems like minutes. My face begins to heat up. I can’t decide if I enjoy this physical contact.

When we do break apart, he seems embarrassed. I cough and fiddle with my hair, trying to think of something to say.
“So uh, you feel like telling me your secret yet?” I try. Peeta jumps a little, looking panicked. “Why you helped me out in the games?” I clarify and his shoulders relax a little.

“Oh, that.” He pauses. “That’s not why you gave me all this stuff, is it?” I’m about to get defensive but I notice he’s grinning.

“No,” I shove him. “It’s a ‘sorry for talking about you in front of thousands of people’ present.”

“Oh, right.” He thinks for a moment, then shrugs. “Maybe another time.” I scowl at him. He smiles. “Tomorrow, then.”

I can’t wait to hear it, the mystery that was driving me crazy. The sign that may debt will be payed. Suddenly, I feel a bit guilty. Like I haven’t done enough for him. Sure I gave him this present, but that required no effort on my part.

I have an idea.

“Meet me in the meadow at dawn.” I say, standing up. It’s getting really late.

“I’m afraid to ask why.” He says, but he’s still smiling.

“You’ll see.” Is all I tell him before leaving the room. I’m feeling giddy for some reason so I don’t notice where I’m going. I bump into her before I can come to my senses.

“Watch it,” she snarls. I look up, panicked. I forgot about the witch. She glares at me and looks me up and down. “What the hell are you doing here?”

I clench my fists. I hate this woman, and there is nothing I’d like to do better but give her a nice punch, but somehow I don’t think Peeta would agree with me doing that. “I wanted to speak with your son. Your husband let me in.”

“Did he now?” She makes a face. “I’ll have a word with him about who he lets in from now on.”

The comment fills me with rage but instead I just smile pleasantly. I’ve had more than enough practice with dealing with people who disgust me. I try to step past her, but she grabs my arm. The woman’s talons dig into my flesh and I can’t help but think of how fitting it is. A witch and her claws.

“Listen girl,” she spits. “Just because you won the hunger games, doesn't change the fact you're from the seam. And unlike your mother, I don’t think highly of running off to marry a coal-miner.”

I yank myself free and try my best to keep smiling at her. She gives me one last disgusted look before clamoring up the stairs. Well that killed my mood, I think grimly.

I walk home quickly. It’s starting to get dark. I keep thinking about what the witch said and I can’t help but burn with rage. Everything about that statement made me furious. That she insulted the seam, my mother and father. That she’s acting like I think I’m some celebrity now that I won the games. I don’t! I know I’m still a girl from the seam. I clench my fists tightly. I’m proud of it too.

The thing that annoyed me most though was that she implied I was going to run off and marry Peeta. I grit my teeth. As if! Where the hell did she get that idea?
Chapter Five

Despite my fury at his mother, I quickly forget about it the next morning when I remember what I have planned for today. I feel anxious, wondering if it was really a good idea. Either way, I do really want to show him the forest. I pack enough food and water to last the day and then some, leave a note for my family that says I’ve gone hunting, and I am gone before the sun rises.

The morning is bitterly cold and I am glad I dressed warmly. I can only hope Peeta thought to do the same. I wait for him in the meadow, wondering if maybe we shouldn’t go into the woods. He might panic, or something could go wrong, or…

Peeta arrives soon after me, and I can almost see him in the dim light of the small hours. I’m grateful to see he’s dressed warmly and in what looks like convenient clothes for the outdoors. I’m also happy to see him.

“Morning.” I say.

“Hardly.” He replies, narrowing his eyes at the sky. “Sun hasn’t even risen yet.”

“Well it’s starting too,” I shrug. “Come on, let’s go.”

“Go?” He looks confused. Maybe he thought I just wanted to spend the day in the meadow. “Go where?”

I listen to the large fence that surrounds the district. I hear no hum of energy, and deem it safe. They never really bother with it anyway. They either don’t know how much I sneak out, or don’t care enough to waste the electricity. I lift up a corner of the fence where there is a fairly sizeable hole, and pull it up so it’s farther off the ground. Then I gesture to Peeta.

“Oh no,” He groans. “I should have seen this coming. You can’t be serious.” I smile and give the fence another tug. Peeta sighs. “You don’t expect me to do this, right?”

I’m a little disappointed by his reaction. I knew he was a law-abiding merchant kid, but I didn’t think he’d be so against it. I guess I hadn’t realized it, but it meant a lot to me to share this place with him. Somewhere I have only shared with Gale and Prim.

I guess he sees how upset I am because he gives another dramatic sigh. “This is crazy, we’re going to get caught.” He mumbles, climbing under. I slip in after him.

“Oh no,” He groans. “I should have seen this coming. You can’t be serious.” I smile and give the fence another tug. Peeta sighs. “You don’t expect me to do this, right?”

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“Don’t worry, I do this every day.” I tell him brightly, turning to the trees and taking a deep breath of fresh air. I only ever feel alive in the woods.

“That’s what worries me.” He grumbles under his breath. I just smile and take his arm.

“Come on!”

I had planned to retrieve my bow and arrow, but I seen now that this probably isn’t the best idea. While he must know I have illegal weapons stashed around here, I don’t think he’d react well to watching me use him. Besides, I hadn’t planned on hunting today and I feel safe enough with just a knife. After the Games, wild dogs don’t seem like such a big deal.

Peeta is weary, reminding me of Prim when I brought her here when she was young. Jumping at every little sound, constantly looking about, flinching at every tree branch that brushes against him.
He keeps asking me about the possibilities of wolves or bears or large cats and whether or not the peacekeepers patrol this area. He seems to calm down eventually though, and we make our way through the woodland.

It feels like it’s been forever since been here and I enjoy every minute of it. Peeta gives me an odd sort of look and I turn back to him, trying to figure out what he’s thinking.

“I’ve never seen you so happy.” He tells me.

Feeling a little insulted I snap, “Well it’s not like I’m always irritable, but I don’t go around smiling for no reason.”

“No,” he shakes his head. “I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just kind of,” He looks for the word. “Cute, I guess.”

That pulls me up short. Cute? I haven’t been called that since I was a baby. I frown. I’m not cute, Prim is cute. Small animals are cute, young children are cute. How am I cute? It sounds to me like an insult, cute things are things that you need to protect. But I suppose that’s not how he meant it. Besides, if anything were to attack us now, he’d be the one who needs protecting.

We walk around kind of aimlessly, I didn’t really plan somewhere for us to go. I suppose he’ll feel more comfortable out in the open, so I decide on a clearing nearby. The sun is beginning to rise, lighting up the trees and casting shadows through the branches. This small, mundane thing seems to really excite Peeta and I realize this is because he’s hardly ever been under trees. I suppose if I hadn’t seen it before, I’d be in awe with the patterns of light and dark on the forest floor too.

“I want to paint everything here.” He tells me, and I’m happy that he’s taken his mind off of a gruesome death by bears or being taken into custody by peacekeepers.

“Just wait until you see where we’re going.” I say. Because while I’m not really interested in beautiful things, -I fail to see their value. It’s more important me if it’s edible, not how it looks.- I can’t deny how pretty the clearing is. The river has grown from the rain, but it is perfectly calm now. There are banks of wild flowers of various colors up and down the waters edge, tall patches of soft grass.

Peeta, it turns out, was serious about drawing everything. Well, maybe not everything. He did, however, bring his sketch book. And once we were settled on the soft mossy ground, he pulled it out and got to work. His fingers flew with an admirable precision across the blank page, and I watched him in awe. Maybe I never saw the value of art, just another pretty thing you can’t eat, but I can’t help but be impressed with his work.

I could watch him for hours, outlining the wildflowers, shading the grass. His face furrowed with concentration, isolated for the outside world. I quickly get hungry though, and pull out the food I packed. I offer him some and he turns away from sketching.

We talk a bit, but I’m happy with the lazy, sunny silence. He goes back to his drawing soon enough and I entertain myself by fishing with only the knife. It’s difficult, but the river is so calm I bet I can manage to catch one or two. At first I try scaring them and leading them to my knife, which I hold still until they get near enough for me to stab them. This proves to be a useless method though, so I switch to just trying to grab them.

My reflexes are quick and sharp, and they don’t disappoint. I am able to yank the fish out of the water, but the challenge is holding on to them. Slimy, slippery and wet. They are very good at escaping my grasp. When I finally do get one and wrestle it to the ground, I hear Peeta call “Good
job!” I look up, a bit embarrassed. I didn’t know he was watching me flail about in the stream.

He doesn’t seem to mind though, and after I rinse the mud off of my clothes I join him. “Thank you for bringing me here.” He says as I sit beside him.

I avert my gaze. “No problem.” I say, my face heating up for some reason. “I’m just glad you came.”

Out of the corner of my eye I see him smile. “Don’t get me wrong, I still think you’re insane and we’re going to die horribly. Or get shot on site when we try to leave. I’m just pleased to spend my last few hours with you.”

I can’t think of a reply so I look ask to look at his drawing. I see I have been added into the picture. Rather than splashing around without dignity, I am a poised huntress. I stand tall, watching the fish swimming around with a fierce intensity, knife held steady and ready to kill.

“I’m not that pretty.” I tell him with a frown. He just gives me a light shove and puts away his sketch book.

“It’s getting hot.” He says with a stretch. I nod, figuring it must be about midday now. He takes off his shoes and dips them in the water. I see him make a few efforts to grab at the fish, but he fails miserably.

“I have a newfound respect for you.” Peeta says, laughing. “This is harder than I thought.”

“Like hunting anything, you need to realize your presence scares the prey. Since they’re in water, you don’t need to worry about scent or being quiet, but your shadow is what’s chasing them off.”

“I see. Thank you Ms.Everdeen.” He says, but not in a mocking manner. He changes his position so that no shadow is cast and tries again. He follows my advice well, but his reflexes aren’t very fast and he quickly gets bored. Instead he holds still, telling me that if you do so the fish will nibble at your feet.

I’ve always been so preoccupied with catching them, I had forgotten they do that. The last time I had sat peacefully in water I had been very young, with thoughts in my mind that didn’t include survival. I stick my feet in as well, and sure enough in a few minutes some guppies have gathered around, swimming through my toes and tickling me. The sensation is so odd, but not necessarily unpleasant. I can’t help but laugh at the way it feels.

I feel eyes on me, and glance up at Peeta. He has that strange expression on again, just like the one when we first entered the woods. He’s smiling but his eyes look sad. I have never seen anyone make such a face before. Again I wonder what he’s thinking.

“Katniss, I have a confession.” He pauses and looks down at his feet. “About why I helped you in the Games, and all that.”

I sit up straight, intrigued. Somewhere in the excitement and anxiety of taking him into the woods, I had forgotten he was going to tell me that today. Peeta takes a deep breath and starts without looking at me.

“When we were five on the first day of school, my father pointed you out.” He chuckles, but it sounds joyless. “I can still remember, you were wearing a plaid red dress and two braids instead of one. He said to me, ‘See that little girl? I wanted to marry her mother but she ran off with a coal miner.’ and I asked him why, and he told me that whenever the man sung all the birds stop to listen.”

I am shocked. I hadn’t expected this at all. Where did any of this come from? I wonder if he’s
making it up, but there are too many truths behind it. I remember the dress, and what he said about my father.

“Peeta,” I ask him, “What does this have to do with the sponsorship?”

“I’m getting there,” He says, glancing up at me, but he quickly looks back down again. “So that day in music assembly, the teacher asked who knew the valley song and your hand shot right up. She asked you to sing it for us, and I swear every bird outside the window fell silent. And I knew, just like your mother, I was a goner.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, confused beyond belief. Did he help me during the Games because I’m a good singer? Gave me those loaves of bread because he appreciated my musical talent? That doesn't make any sense at all.

“I’m… I’m in love with you Katniss. I have been for a long time”

I try to let that sink in. I stare at the water, watching the fish swimming under the surface create ripples in the brilliant blue water. The sky is clear today, and the river matches the hue of blue perfectly. Both remind me of Peeta’s eyes. At one point I had wondered if I had been in love with him, but I never even considered he may have felt the same. I try to think if I share this affection, but all I feel is confused and surprised.

“You don’t need to do anything.” He blurts out. “I don’t care that you don’t feel them same way.” His face is very red. “I can understand if you want to be alone right now, I won’t bother you.”

It’s a very considerate thing to offer, and I’m happy he did. I nod slowly. “That would be nice, thank you.” I say levely. “I’ll walk you back to the fence.”

I help him pack up his things and we exit the clearing and make our way through the woodland silently. When we get to the fence he says a brief goodbye and slides under it. I think he is preoccupied and has forgotten his fears of the peacekeepers arresting him.

I decide to stay in the woods. I hunt, forage, set up my snares and check the old ones, his words swimming through my mind all the while. I drop off some food at Hazelle’s house. The family seems to be doing better, and it is no longer so painful to be there. I visit despite the fact there was a large feast yesterday I’m sure their stomachs are still full.

I make my rounds at the Hobs to, trading and purchasing what I need. When I return home it is already time for dinner. I don’t speak at all except for when Prim asks me how my day went, to which I simply say it was alright. I help with dishes and then take a shower and climb into my bed.

After all that thinking, the only conclusion I’ve come to is that his words have made me ridiculously happy. Rather than worry about what this will mean for our friendship, a stupid smile comes to my face and I bury my head into my pillow. Maybe I was a little in love with him all along.
Chapter Six

Most of my nightmares are gruesome, violent, bloody. They originally were just my father trapped in the mines, or me in his place, feeling the explosion burn me to a crisp. But after the games they evolved into something new and far more sinister. Mutilated corpses, long painful deaths, horrifying creatures. But tonight’s was different from these, far more realistic; And so much worse.

It starts the day of the reaping, and Prim’s name is called, then Peeta’s. I watch them, shaking and screaming, and there is nothing I can do. I have to sit there and watch the games, watch them get slaughtered horribly, facing the same gory end as Cato with the mutts.

The dream doesn't end there, it shows me another possibility My own children being reaped, a young boy and older girl, both blond with grey eyes. Watching them fight each other to death. Every single route ends gruesomely, no matter what choices I make. It ends the same, with me not able to do anything but watch everything and everyone I love being killed.

I wake, and it’s long before dawn. I’m covered in sweat and shaking horribly. Memories of the dream keep flashing through my mind, mingling my own experiences. My own reaping day, the time Peeta was actually called, my fight with Gale, him trying to kill me. I can’t tell what’s real and isn’t anymore.

The realization hits me before the sun rises. I don’t need to waste any time figuring out how I feel about Peeta. It doesn’t matter if I love him or not because I can never live happily ever after with him. The Capitol is in control of my future, not me. If they knew I had a lover they’d throw him into the game for a dramatic effect. And even if that doesn't happen, our children still wouldn’t be safe. And Prim still has six reapings to go.

Who was I kidding? Thinking that I could ever love him. He pulled down my protective walls and like a fool I let him! I got so caught up in debts to pay and his warm laugh and bright blue eyes that I had forgotten all about what a threat a life with him would hold.

I get out of the bed. Well, I’ve caught myself before it was too late. I need to tell him I can’t see him anymore. But how can I? He tried so hard to get to know me, and if what he said really was true, and he was in love with me for so long, I’m crushing what hope he ever had of a future with me.

I hesitate, feet resting on the cold wooden floor. I sit back down on the covers. How can I tell him that?

But it’s better for him this way, if he ever found out of my refusal to marry, he’d probably leave. Be furious with me and frustrated with my stubborn oath. It doesn't matter how I feel about him because a future together would only bring misery to the both of us. I just need to figure out how to tell him.

Days pass but I keep pushing it back. I don’t want to see him because I know it will be the last time. It has to be. I already miss him terribly, but I scold myself everytime I catch myself looking longingly at the sky that so reminds me of his eyes or dandelions that make me recall that day in the rain where he saved me. I stay away from the clearing in the woods, haunted by the memories of us laughing by the riverbed, of his drawing of me, of his confession.

Around two weeks pass when he comes to see me. I sit with him on the front porch, this whole speech prepared, but I never say it. I feel my voice catch when I see his pretty blue eyes and nervous smile, as though I’m going to tell him good news. All I can manage is a quiet “I can’t see you any more, this has to stop.”
This time it’s his turn to ask me why, looking crestfallen, and, well, heartbroken. But it’s my turn to shake my head, unable to give an answer. He nods and says he understands, and then, for some reason beyond me, thanks me. Then that’s the end of it.

I don’t see him anymore. I go back to my daily life. I hunt, I trade, I spend time with Gale’s little siblings, teach Rory to hunt as he would have. I spend time with Prim and help my mother with the chores. I continue with my life the way it was before I met him. I paid back my debt, we became friends and that was all.

I absorb myself in my daily routines, constantly trying to distract myself. Trying not to notice how much I miss him, how much I never appreciated him. The fact that I haven’t laughed since.

Months tick by and the Games start to approach. I refuse to go to the school house anymore, as any of the students there might be one I have to mentor. I even avoid the town square, not able to help myself from wondering which child I will have to help slaughter other children. To try to keep alive in the arena, against all odds.

Just an ordinary Hunger Games would be horrible of course, but every 25 years they have a Quarter Quell, and that is always extra horrible. They add some sick new twist and say it’s because they’re trying to keep the horrors of war fresh for the new generations.

The first time, during the 25th Game, they had the Districts vote on the children who would be chosen. I can only imagine how terrible that must have been for the district people, knowing that what gruesome end came to that tribute would be their fault. Even worse for the tribute, knowing that they were dying because their District voted for them to.

The second time, the 50th year, they increased the tribute pool by two extra kids, so 47 would die instead of 23. That must have also been a tough year, the odds were even less in everyone’s favor. That was the year Haymitch won.

This year they announced on the television a few months before the Games would start. The President, creepy, snake-like Snow, reads from a card that in this year, the 75th Hunger Games, that there will be an extra tribute from each District, chosen of random gender. To remind us that the rebels not only crushed the lives of the their own children, but that it also crushed the lives of the children yet to come.

I turn off the tv and think of what that meant. The unborn child, the genderless, nameless one inside a mother. The one that showed the love of a couple, the hope of a family. The child whose fate would be unknown, but being born in this terrible world, couldn’t be pleasant. This year they chose to remind us that even our potential children are under their control.

As if I needed reminding.

It makes me so sick I kick a hole through the tv and badly injure my foot. It was a very stupid thing to do, and my mother had to explain over the phone to a very ruffled Effie that we needed a new one incase more updates came on the Quell.

As soon as my foot healed, I begin to spend as much time as I can in the woods. The games keeping growing closer and closer and with each day that passes I feel suffocating me. Even the fresh forest air starts to stop working and my lunges always feel half-full, like my worries are occupying space.

If Prim will be reaped, if it is someone I know, how they will die, what the arena will be. How can I manage re-living the games? How can I manage re-living them every year for the rest of my life?
The nightmares begin to come to my every night and I can hardly sleep. Each new mention of the games on the tv, person speaking of it in the Hob, sends me into a panic.

The games are almost a month away when I start teaching Rory how to hunt in the woods. We’ve made some progress, I’ve even let him borrow one of the bows, Gale’s old one. I think of he is 13 now, around the age I when I first met Gale. He is really starting to look like him too, the dark olive skin, the grey seam eyes. I know he has signed up for the tessera, that even between all my efforts to help and Hazelle’s job it wasn’t enough.

At first the two of us hardly spoke except for me to point out something or he to ask the occasional question. He even initially turned down the offer until Hazelle yelled some sense into him, telling him that learning to feed his family was more important than whatever stupid grudge he held against me.

As awkward as it is, I’m happy he agreed eventually. It gives me something to do and reassures me that someone can still bring the family fresh kill. I had always wanted to teach Prim how to hunt, but the woods made her so nervous and she cried whenever I shot anything. It quickly became obvious that she was made for healing, not killing.

I watch Rory, he is low to the ground, bow strung, arrow loaded, watching a rabbit carefully, waiting to get a better shot. While he doesn’t seem to hold the same talent Gale had for snares, he’s definitely become good with a bow. He can skewer animals through the neck and even kills them with the occasional eye shot. His only problem is range, he needs to get very close to animals to get a good shot, which is problematic because it scares them away.

He has gotten down the basics of hunting, and I think it’s time I start teaching him things like fishing and gathering. He doesn’t know much about plants beyond the lesson both Gale and I have drilled into his head, never eat any plant if you’re not hundred percent sure it is safe.

Rory narrows his eyes and lets the arrow go, getting it wedged perfectly in the eye. He smiles to himself and I offer words of praise, but distantly I’m thinking about the Games. Is he more likely to be chosen since he is related to a tribute? Could he win with the skills he has been taught? Reaping day is only a month away and questions like these keep me up every night. I hardly sleep any more, only taking naps during the day in the comfort of sunshine.

Maybe its because I’m so tired or maybe because I’m so stressed but I don’t here Rory until the third time he asks, “Katniss, are you alright?”

He’s already skinned the rabbit so I can tell I’ve been out of it for awhile. “Sorry, I’m fine. I’m just worried about the games I guess.”

I realize this is kind of an insensitive thing to say, because he frowns. If either of us are at risk here, it’s definitely him. I’ve still got Prim to worry about, but she hasn’t signed up for the tessera yet.

Rory looks away and sighs. “Mom was right, I’m not being fair to you Katniss.” I give him a confused look and he continues."I was so angry at you for so long. But it wasn't your fault, right?"

I don't know how to answer him because I'm not sure myself. I never blamed him for hating me, because I hated myself too. "I mean, it's not like you asked him to volunteer for you."

"But it was because of me."

"Why? Because it was your name that was pulled? Because you guys were such close friends? That's no reason to blame yourself."
He sits by me on the ground and looks up at the sky. Another day is almost at it's end, one day closer to the games. "So after I thought it wasn't your fault, I got mad at Gale. For leaving us, for choosing you over his family."

"But it's not really his fault either." I say, sighing. Rory seems to have gone through the same train of thought that I had. "I don't think he really thought it through, we got in an argument earlier that day and I think he just wanted to prove something."

I look at Rory's hardened face. He has grown quickly, and not just in size. He is the eldest child in his family now, and not only has to deal with what happened to Gale but also provide for two younger siblings. I wonder if his mother ever shuts down, like mine did. Probably not, Hazelle is a very strong woman. But it isn't easy for either of them.

"He tried to kill you." Rory mumbles bitterly.

"I know," talking to him has helped me understand how I feel about this. "But that wasn't Gale. The Games do strange things to people. It turns them into animals, all they care about is surviving, and getting home to their family."

I think about what Gale told me when we fought on the roof that night. "He didn't choose me over you, he just wasn't thinking straight. He apologized for volunteering, and said he wished he was home with his family."

That's what he said right before the fight actually started. I had then gotten angry rather than accept his apology. But now, sitting in our old hunting spot, a victor of the games and his younger brother beside me, I have forgiven him.

"So in the end, I guess that's just how things are." Rory says, looking sad. I feel bad for him, it was probably easier for him when he had someone to blame. I almost want to tell him it's the Capitol, the government, President Snow behind all of it, but I don't. Gale knew that and look where it got him. Yelling and screaming, talk of revolution. Rory doesn't need those ideas in his head too.

"I'm not mad anymore." He tells me, and I smile.

"Neither am I." I say, and I'm not. I had tried my best not to think about it, it was too painful. Instead I just silently hated myself and got angry at memories of Gale. But talking about it with this him has made me feel so much better. "It feels good, doesn't it?"

Rory nods, and smiles a little too. "It's getting dark and we've got a rabbit to eat."

"You go on ahead," I say, wanting to stay for awhile longer. My family shouldn't worry and I don't want to go home incase there's another Quell announcement. I offer to walk to the fence with him but he declines.

My first instinct is to insist, what if something dangerous happens? But instead I just say goodbye and tell him how impressed I am his progress. After all, hadn't I been running around in these woods when I was younger than he is now? He can handle any dangers.

I'm not sure if it's my imagination but his steps seem a little lighter. Well, I hope they are. He has enough burdens on his shoulders just from being born into District 12, he doesn't need any more.

I almost feel like I can breathe fully again, and I relish in it. The cool evening air against my lungs. I hadn't realized how much Gale had been preying on my mind until now. But now I see it wasn't his or my fault. I can finally remember him in peace.
I say a sort of silent goodbye to him in the woodland. The memories of the good times we had together, how much he helped me, how much we both learned and taught. I let it all go, like birds caged in my chest.

Almost all the light is gone by the time I've finished my sort of internal funeral. I'm starting to get hungry so I make my ways out of the trees and towards the fence.

I hear her before I see her, a small voice calling my name. "Katniss?" Prim whispers in the twilight. I wonder if she is checking to see if the electricity is running since I haven't come back.

"Sorry, Prim. I guess I didn't realize the time." It's hard to see in the light, but I can tell where she is because she has a flashlight. But when I get closer I notice something else, something is wrong. Her fingers are shaking and she hasn't been holding the light steady.

"What is it?!" I ask quickly. "Is everyone okay?!"

"Yes, we just have a patient. He's badly injured, and mom just ran out if the herbs we need to treat him. I know it's dark, but can you get me these?" She is trying to remain calm, but her voice is too level.

Through the fence she hands me the flashlight and a piece of paper. "Mom wrote down a list of the plants we need, and some descriptions next to the ones you probably don't know."

She's about to leave when I call out her name. I know my top priority should be finding the herbs, but the way her hands shake unnerve me. Prim is not scared of sickness or injuries, unlike myself, her hands are always steady and strong, unless the patient is someone she knows.

"Is it Rory?" I ask, panic rising in my voice. Why didn't I walk him home? How could I have let this happen?

Prim shakes her head and I am flooded with relief. She opens her mouth, hesitates, then says, "No, Katniss, Rory is fine." She calmly tells me.

For a moment, I’m reassured. But if not Rory, who? A friend of hers from school? I don’t think she has anyone she is really close with. Maybe someone I know? I distantly wonder if it’s Haymitch, but somehow I don’t think she’d react like this. It would have to be someone close to our family, who visited a lot. And suddenly it dawns on me.

"Prim, it’s Peeta, isn’t it? What happened?" My voice is shaking. “Is he okay?”

"Katniss, please." I can hear the plea in her voice, and I know I’m right. "Just hurry and get those plants. I need to get back to him. Be careful, alright?" Then she's off.

I can barely breathe and my head is spinning. Peeta? What harm could have come to him? Did he venture out into the woods alone? If so... then it's all my fault for ever bringing him here.

I will myself to stay calm and head back out into the forest. I won't do any good if I'm panicking. I look at the list, only three plants are needed. Two of them I know grow closely, the third I don't recognize. True to Prim's words, it has a brief description and a simple sketch. My mother is no artist, but this should be enough to find it.

The once familiar forest looks far more sinister at night. I don't let it scare me, but I am more watchful. Anything could be out there.

I find these first two herbs with no problem and carefully hang them from my belt. The third is
supposed to grow nearby water, so I walk alongside the river. My feet fumble and my breathing is shallow, but I do my best to focus on the task at hand.

It's hard work though, because after all this time of refusing to think about Peeta, it all comes flooding back. As I stumble up and down the river bed, trying not to trip, all I can think about is him. The memories, the happiness he brought, the pain when I had to cut him out of my life.

I'm so caught up my thoughts I almost don't spot see it, the plant that matches the description perfectly. Luckily I trip before I can pass it, landing somewhat painfully on my back.

My leg slips off the riverbank into the water, freezing in the night air. I wince, some rocks scraped my calves. But I stand up right away and collect the leaves like my mother told me to. My leg hurts too much to run, but I still push myself to go as fast as I can. Whatever pain I'm in, Peeta is probably feeling a whole lot worse.

By the time I am home it is very late, by my mother is still working in the kitchen. Prim won't let me go inside, but she thanks me for the plants and quickly goes to give them to mom.

I sit down in the living room, bouncing my leg nervously, not noticing the blood I'm getting on the carpet and trying to breathe. Prim comes out a few moments later and clean up my leg. She also offers me some bread, but I turn it down. I'm too tense to eat.

"He'll be fine Katniss." She tells me firmly. I look at her hands to find them firm and steady again and I nod. I let myself believe her, as it is the only way to get any peace of mind. "Now go clean up. Bandage your leg after you wash and then go to bed."

"Thank you, Dr. Everdeen." I say, and she gives me an odd smile.

"Peeta called me that too." She says before running back to the kitchen.

I do as she says, a little bit relieved since her hands have steadied. I soak in the bath for a long time, even after I am clean, just thinking about Peeta and how much I hope he's okay, that it isn't my fault, about what could have happened.

I bandage up my leg and climb into bed, my mind racing a mile a minute. I wonder how I'll ever fall asleep.

Easily, as it so happens. I'm so exhausted emotionally and physically I fall asleep in a matter of seconds. I have no dreams, just a few hours of deep, heavy sleep. After so long without proper rest, I guess my body decided to stop giving me nightmares. It doesn't last long though, and in a few hours I'm wide awake. I almost think of trying to stay asleep, but I'm far too hungry and restless.

The sun isn't up yet, but I can tell by the temperature it's early morning. I get dressed and make my way downstairs to the kitchen. The table is set up for a patient to rest, but there is no sign of Peeta anywhere, he must have gone home. That's a good sign if he was well enough to leave. I rummage around and find some potatoes that have already been cooked, probably from the dinner we were supposed to have last night. Not in the mood to deal with heating it up, I just eat it cold and unpeeled. It's a not very good flavor but whatever, it's food.

I have so much energy, it's been such a long time since I slept properly. I wonder how I should pass the time until it's bright enough to go hunting.

I step outside and it turns out it's very bright. The sun is nowhere to be seen yet, but it's a full moon and everything is drenched in a blue light. This is why I'm able to see him, bundled up in a blanket and sitting on the porch steps.
I breathe a sigh of relief, just to see him sitting there, the rise and fall of his shoulders proving whatever happened didn’t kill him. I don’t say anything, I just stand in the doorway and look. I wonder if I should sneak back upstairs before he notices me, but without even turning around he already has.

“Couldn’t sleep, Katniss?” He asks. I wonder how he knew it was me, and not my mother or Prim. Maybe he knows I’m the only person that would be walking around at this time. I walk over to the steps and sit next to him.

“I did for awhile. You?”

He shrugs, then winces. I see his left shoulder and upper arm have been bandaged. There are also some bruises on his chest and a scratch under his eye. I look closer and realize that the cut has been stitched shut. It must have sliced deep, whatever it was. “No, my arm hurts too much. Anyway, I’m not tired.”

“What happened?” I ask him.

“I got in a fight with my mother, and she got really mad.”

“She did this to you?!” I always knew the witch was a violent creature, but I never knew she was ruthless.

Peeta gestures to his chest and face with his right arm. “This was on purpose.” He points to the bandages, “This is when I she shoved me and I fell into the fire.”

I cringe. Burns are the worst injury, I remember the fireballs in the games and what they did to my calf. And he got some it all across his left side. I see now it covers some of his back and up his neck.

“Oh Peeta, that’s horrible.” I exclaim. I can’t imagine a worse pain, and to be inflicted by a family member.

“I’m just glad it wasn’t my right arm, or my hands. Your mom said it shouldn’t damage the muscle though, so I guess it doesn’t matter where as long as I can still use it.”

“And here I thought you got mauled by a bear in the woods.” I mumble. I know it’s not a very nice thing to think, but I’m glad it wasn’t my fault.

He gives me a puzzled look. “No, just my mother.” He looks sadly at the ground and is silent for a moment. “We were fighting about you.”

“WHAT?!” I shout.

“It was for your honor.” He tells me dramatically. “She mentioned that she was rude to you once and I told her off for it.”

I wonder if he expects me to laugh or sarcastically call him my hero, but I don’t. “Peeta,” I growl. “Don’t do things like that! It isn’t worth it if you get hurt!”

“Well why should you even care,” He spits back, surprised at my outburst “You said I wasn’t allowed to see you anymore.”

“That doesn't mean I want you to do stupid things on my part! You’re not doing me any favors if you kill yourself.”
“It wasn’t for you! I couldn’t stand her bad-mouthing you like that.”

I frown, trying to figure out how his brain works. He values my dignity for more than I do, even after I cut him out. “Why do you still care?” I ask. I had expected him to find someone else, to live happily ever after with another girl, one who didn’t have nightmares or protective walls. “I thought you would have found someone else by now.”

“Katniss, I’ve been in love with you for 11 years. I’m not going to just get over you like that. Believe me, I’ve tried. There’s no one like you!” Peeta blurts out. I know some people are supposed to find this flattering, but instead I’m angry. He’s supposed to move on and find happiness, how can he do that if it he still loves me?

Peeta sees my glare and it’s mirrored in his own. He opens his mouth to add more, but then stops himself. His expression softens and he sighs, wrapping the blanket around himself. Peeta looks back at me and smiles a little. “Except maybe Buttercup.” he adds, with the same affectionate tone he used at the river.

I don’t know why that comment sends me into hystericis, but it does. It’s probably all the stress and the early morning air, but once I start laughing I can’t stop. There is just something so funny about the comparison between me and that disgusting cat. Maybe because as repulsive I find the idea, I can’t deny there’s some truth behind it. Our untrusting nature, our love for Prim, the habit we share of wandering back to the old house.

Peeta looks concerned, as though I’ve lost it. And maybe I have, but I’m enjoying my first laugh in months. I guess it’s contagious though, because after awhile he starts laughing too.

“Stop!” He says breathlessly. “It hurts my shoulder.”

“I can’t.” I say, taking deep breaths. Finally, I manage to silence myself, but we make eye contact and the whole thing starts up again.

I hug my sides, they burn so badly but it’s still a while before I cease. When I do, Peeta is still chuckling lightly. He turns to me, smiling brightly, and I shiver. He offers me some of the blanket, and I don’t hesitate to join him. I could say it was because I was that cold, but that wasn’t the real reason.

He looks so pale in the moonlight, and I can tell his shoulder is hurting him, but there’s something about his face that is so wonderful I can’t tear my eyes away. It’s probably his grin, his bright blue eyes shining. I finally find the answer to that question on the President's balcony. I am in love with Peeta, maybe hopelessly so.

Without thinking, I lean in and kiss him. It’s my first, but that doesn’t make any impression on me. The only thing I notice is that it’s warmer than I had expected, and that I can feel his smile pressed against mine.

It’s short, and I pull away quickly. I’m still smiling, but suddenly I’m hit with the memory of his name in Effie Trinket’s hand. The mood changes in seconds, a sharp pain stabs at my chest. What was I thinking?! I am so disgusted with myself, and Peeta looks so confused.

He’s dumbfounded, trying to form a question but I don’t give him the chance. Before he can stop me I tear off. I follow my instincts without thinking, and before I know it I’m under the fence and into the woods. I keep running and find myself at the clearing.

The sight of it feels like another punch. I collapse on the ground, shaking with exertion, and maybe
something else too. I’m holding back tears, that was such a horrible thing to do. I told him to get over me and then I go and kiss him. I can’t believe I did that!

And what did I come here for? I better go back, find someway to explain myself. But I don’t know how since I don’t even know what I’m doing. And anyway, how do I explain a thing like that? I don’t even know how I would begin.

I’m so caught up in my brooding, I don’t notice the approaching footsteps. He already walks so loudly, more so now with the pain of the burn, wincing with each step. It takes his shadow falling over me, blocking out the blue moonlight, that alerts me to his presence.

“What is going on?” Peeta demands. I see has left behind the blanket in his perusal, and now all he has on are pants and bandages to protect from the cold of the small hours. “Why did you kiss me?”

“It doesn’t matter.” I grumble. I notice he has been bleeding, a steady trail of blood dripping down his face and onto his bruised chest. “Go back, you’ve opened your stitches and who knows what else.”

“Not until you tell me why.” He says, sitting beside me.

I can tell he is in great pain, but he is stubborn and true to his words. He doesn't move.

“You can’t be serious.” I proclaim. But he is, I know he is. This fool is going to bleed to death before he gives up.

“I am, so spill.” He snaps. “What is wrong with you? I get it, you’re not interested in me and didn’t want anything to do with me after you knew how I felt about you. So why did you go and kiss me? Is there something I’m missing?”

“No!” I shout. “I mean- yes. But that’s not at all why I shut you out!” I take a deep breath, trying to prepare myself for what I’m about to say. Words of affection I have never told anyone but my family. “I think I love you.” I shake my head. “No, I know I am. I’m in love with you, Peeta.”

“Then? Why-?!”

“But don’t you see?!” I blurt. “You can never be happy with me! I can’t be your beautiful bride, or your child’s mother! I can’t be that for anyone. All I can think about everyday is just how damn scared I am.” I’m crying now, but I still continue. “I never want to bring a child into this world. You can’t live happily ever after with me. Every year I’m going to be dragged off to the Capitol and help some kid kill other kids and every night I’m going to dream about it and wake up screaming!”

The shaking comes back, this time time in full force, I hug myself tightly and try to calm down. “I just, I can’t be that for you Peeta. I can’t give you a happy ending.”

He’s silent, and I can tell he’s thinking. I wonder what he’s going to say, I never could figure out his thought process. When he does open his mouth to speak, his voice is soft and his words, as always, surprise me.

“Katniss, I don’t want that. I never wanted anything from you.” He takes a deep breath too. “I fell in love with you, and I’m happy if I can be with you. I don’t care if you don’t want to marry me, or have children.” He smiles, and it’s that sad expression again. I wonder if that’s the face of a person who really loves someone. “I was happier in that day with you than I had been in months. Years, even. My future doesn’t hold much. I’m going to be a baker, that’s already been decided. I had nothing to look forward to. But when.. you told me you loved me, I felt like I finally did.”

He’s almost crying too.
“You really don’t care? About marriage?” I ask.

“Nah,” He says, wiping his eyes.

“Kids?” I question.

“Too noisy.” He replies with a smirk.

“You’d really be okay with that?” I ask, allowing myself to be hopeful, to tear down those walls.

“Katniss Maylisse Everdeen, I can’t think of greater pleasure than not being your husband, if that means I can still be by your side.”

We’re both crying now, and I’m laughing a little too. I was so worried he would leave me if I he knew, and here he is, completely okay with it.

I don’t know how long we sit there, but at some point when the sun is up I notice he’s losing quite a bit of blood.

“We need to go back and get your stitches fixed.” I say. He nods, and I help him up. He tries not to, but he relies on me to walk. I don’t mind, I don’t even notice my own wounds have re-opened until after he points it out to me.

Quite a pair we make, bleeding and sniveling as we drag ourselves out of the forest. And yet, somehow, I feel better than I have in months. Maybe even years. Somewhere between the travel back and arriving, our hands find each other, and don’t let go for a long time.
Epilogue

It took until Peeta was passed reaping age for me to breathe again, and even then I worried constantly about Prim. It wasn’t easy, and going to the Capitol every year was torturous. Haymitch’s thoughts seemed to have been if there was me to mentor, he had nothing stopping him from being flat-out drunk.

But I did my best with work, trying as best as I could to bring one of the District 12 kids home. After six years of mentoring, I did succeed and the Victor of the 80th Hunger Games was Naylee Lastor, a very tough merchant girl. After that the three of us victors took turns so I didn’t have to mentor every year.

True to our words, Peeta and I never got married. He became a baker as his parents intended him to, and I spent my time in the woods like always. And when Posy and Vick were old enough I began teaching them how to hunt too, as Rory started to work in the mines.

I still saw Peeta very often though, he had become used to the forest and we went there frequently. He also stayed at our house for periods of time. The two of us were very careful, and I kept my vow, never having a child.

However, I could tell Peeta wanted to be a father badly. But he gave up that dream for me. Maybe he even had some of the same fears, knowing that any child of ours would probably go into the Games. It happens so often for a Victor’s child that it’s probably rigged.

I mention this to one of the victor’s during the 83rd Hunger Games, a woman from District 8 named Cecelia. Over the years I’ve come to know the other victors better, some of them I like, some of them I don’t trust. I like Cecelia though, she was very motherly and kind. She had three children back at home wans was pregnant with a fourth, and hated leaving them behind for the games.

I figured I could confide in her since she was a loyal wife and good mother, but she didn't seem to understand the problem. “Well Katniss, if you can’t have a child why don’t you adopt one? They have a community home in your District too, right?” She asked.

At first I was annoyed because that hadn’t been what I meant, but the more I thought about it the more it made sense. I of course, wouldn’t adopt a child as that would just increase their odds of being reaped, but to look after them. That couldn’t increase their odds at all, because none of them would officially be my children.

I remembered how after my father died, how Prim and I were starving to death. How I would rather die out in the rain than be taken to that place. There was no way I was the only child who had felt that way. Maybe Peeta and I could fix that somehow.

I was hesitant, because this means getting to know children that may be sent into the Games. But I do it anyway, because I might not be able to save them all but it is a small difference we can make.

It takes almost a year to fix the foundation. The building is shabby and worn, the children untrusting. We come every Sunday, fixing the house, bringing warm bread, fresh kills and forest greens. The younger children warm up to us quickly, but the older ones take more convincing. Peeta is a natural with them though, knowing how to make them laugh and tells incredible stories.

I have a bit of experience with younger children from raising Prim, sometimes if they are sick I will even sing for them.
It isn’t easy, and every few years one of them are sent into the Games. But we do our best. I still get nightmares, and sometimes Peeta does too, but things are better than I had expected them to turn out. I figured after Prim would grow up, I would be spending the rest of my life alone. Hunting, providing, mostly just trying to distract myself until the day I died.

That isn’t how things turn out though. Instead I find myself sitting on a floor next to a warm fire watching Peeta animatedly tell a story to a group of children. They gasp at the exciting parts and laugh at the humorous ones, even though they have heard this story a hundred times. They convince him to tell it almost every night.

I smile to myself. Maybe it isn’t easy, but it’s worth it.

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