Phoenix

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by mariannalark

Summary

Mockingjay AU. "If you’d been taken by the Capitol, and hijacked, and then tried to kill Peeta, is this the way he would be treating you?" Peeta is rescued from the Quell, and Katniss is taken by the Capitol. With Peeta as the new symbol, does the Rebellion survive?
Chapter 1

I come to in a bed, alone, my arms attached to machines with tubes and wires. I have a bandage over my left temple and eye. The only sounds are the steady beeps of the machines, and my suddenly fast and harsh breathing.

'Katniss! Where is Katniss?'

The last thing I remember is being with Finnick, Katniss shooting an arrow through the forcefield - and then nothing. Just being here. She should be here.

Questions spin around and around my head as I look wildly around with my one uncovered eye. I look down at my body - it seems whole, except for the healing scars on my arms, and the legs exposed by what appears to be a hospital gown. I must have been injured when the force field blew. But what happened after that? I find myself standing up, and the machine beeps wildly as I rip the wires from my arms.

I have to find Katniss. I was supposed to keep her alive - Haymitch and I made a promise - but she is nowhere in sight and I am terrified.

I open the door to the room, and am faced with a small, narrow hallway. A door is ajar only 10 feet away and I try to be quiet, try to be stealthy, try to step with all the cat-like grace of Katniss when she’s hunting. I manage to get to the door without making a sound, and then my legs fail me, my head swims, and I fall into the metal door, the weight of my body opening it with a booming crash.

"Peeta!" I hear Haymitch, shocked at my sudden entrance.

A large man looks up, startled, then grins. “Ah! He’s awake.”

It takes me a minute to realize who he is. “Plutarch. The Gamemaker.”

“You remember me.” He sounds delighted.

“So we’re in the Capitol? Who won? Where is Katniss?”

Haymitch approaches me, cautiously, reaches out a hand to place on my shoulder.

“We aren’t in the Capitol. We are on a hovercraft headed to District 13.”

This doesn’t register.

“Where is Katniss?”

“We got you out of the arena just in time - the forcefield blew everything sky high. We were able to get you and Finnick out, but-” begins Plutarch, but I cut him off.

“Where is Katniss?!”

My voice rises to a shout, more anger in it than I have ever heard, the pain and terror building when I realize that there is something big, something important, that neither of these men are telling me.

“Peeta, we- we couldn’t get her out. We grabbed you, and then the Capitol got her. We only just made it out before you passed out, unconscious.”
Haymitch’s eyes bore into mine, surprisingly sober, begging me to stay with him, begging me to handle this, because he needs me to handle it. But that is just too monumental a task to ask.

My jaw drops open, and a gut-wrenching howl leaves my mouth. My knuckles are suddenly bloody, there is a crack as the bones in my hand break when it makes contact with the wall, then another as I punch Plutarch, punch Haymitch, throw a chair. But I don’t feel a thing.

I am in agony - because Katniss isn’t here, she’s in the Capitol, in their hands, and without a doubt, President Snow is going to kill her. I couldn’t save her.

Something sharp pricks my shoulder, and I am falling, the world blurry and swirling, and then black.

...

I come to strapped down to a table. The bandage over my head is gone, and I can see out of both eyes. But my arms and legs ache, my head feels leaden, and my throat is hoarse. None of this compares to the weight in my chest, the awful hole torn through me. I’ve been screaming while sedated, thrashing about so much that they had to keep me pinned to the table with leather straps and buckles.

It doesn’t matter.

Katniss is in the Capitol, probably being tortured this very moment, strapped down to a similar metal table with similar leather straps, but not for her own safety. No, she’s strapped down so she can’t resist when President Snow takes a knife to her beautiful olive skin, or breaks her leg, or pulls her arms out of its socket--

I begin to scream again, the animal-like howls tearing from my already ravaged throat because I am a failure, because I deserve to be the one tortured in the Capitol, because I had nothing to live for but Katniss and she’s as good as dead, maybe better off dead, maybe -

Someone pushes a button, a machine beeps, and I am launched into a dreamless state hovering between asleep and awake. I can’t move my limbs, I can’t speak, I can only think- and this thinking makes everything worse and worse, because all I see is Katniss being tortured, Katniss’ face, the last time we kissed, the pearl, the locket, and my own stupidity and failure.

I wake up again, days later, hours later, minutes later - I have no concept of time. When I gather the energy, I look around - and notice that the room is different, larger with more beds. There are no more straps holding me down, just a hospital gown around my body and my arms still attached to the eternally beeping machines as I lay in an actual bed, with pillows and blankets and metal railings. I am also no longer alone.

Finnick is in the bed next to mine, staring at the ceiling, his eyes unfocused and his hands clenching the sides of the bed tightly enough to make his knuckles go white. This is enough to make me lurch out of my own head and my own agony, even for a brief moment.

Because the pain in Finnick’s face, the emotions in his eyes, the tension in his hands and his entire body mirrors the awful black maw gaping within me.

“Finnick,” I rasp, sitting up.

He doesn’t respond; the words don’t even seem to register.

“Finnick Odair,” I repeat, louder, harsher, my voice grating against the remains of my throat. He starts slightly, looking around, his eyes darting around the room.
“Peeta,” he says, breathing a sigh of relief when he meets my eyes. “You’re awake. You’ve been out for days.”

“Where are we?”

“District 13.”

“But District 13 was bombed to pieces by the Capitol. Why not District 12? Or 4? Anywhere else?”

Finnick looks at me, blankly. “I - I don’t know. No one has explained anything to me after the Quell.” His face turns up towards the ceiling again, his eyes becoming unfocused.

I stare at the ceiling myself, trying to think things through. There has been outright rebellion, that much is certain. Why else would the Head Gamemaker and a mentor rescued me - and failed to rescue Katniss - from the Quell. That’s why Finnick is here; he must have known about the rebellion from the start. He could have let me die when I walked into the forcefield, or let Katniss and I die when the mist nearly killed us. And under that logic, Johanna must have known too - although she did not seem to take to Katniss, she still tried to keep both of us alive.

But something must have gone wrong. Because Finnick and I were taken out of the arena, but Johanna and Katniss were taken by the Capitol. Someone still needs to explain to me why I was saved, and Katniss wasn’t.

It does make sense why we aren’t going back home. District 12 would be the first place the Capitol would look. I just hope that everyone back home is okay, even my family - I wouldn’t want them to suffer for what the rebels did, and -

The door to the hospital room opens, cutting off my last thought. Haymitch enters, looking at Finnick and I in turn, looking incredibly solemn and his mouth set in a grim line. He’s followed by an equally solemn Plutarch.

“Peeta?” Haymitch asks, his voice surprisingly quiet, but his eyes are glassy and starting to turn red.

I look at him, waiting for him to being speaking again. There is no anxiety or apprehension - his bad news can’t be worse than what I have been feeling ever since he dared to take me out of the Quell without Katniss.

It’s Plutarch who begins talking.

“Peeta, I don’t know if Finnick has told you, but we’re in District 13 now. We were en route for a few days, dodging Capitol hovercrafts and trying to remain undetected. We didn’t send out any communications, didn’t draw any attention to ourselves - but because of that, we didn’t receive any communications either. Something has - well, something happened while we were in the air, and we wanted you to hear it from us.”

I was wrong. It could be worse. Did Snow kill Katniss? My stomach heaves and froths with anxiety as I finally sit up, give them both my full attention.

“What? What happened?” I choke out, each word painful.

Haymitch is the one who answers.

“Kid - the moment we took you, Finnick and Beetee out of the arena, the Capitol snapped. They - they sent in bombs. The coal dust - just - everything went up in flames.”
My head reels. District 12 bombed? Everything up in flames? Does that mean -

“- that District 12 is gone?” I finish my thought out loud.

Haymitch nods. But I know him, and I know that there is something else that he can’t bring himself to tell me. The anxiety nearly makes me vomit, but I merely gag, and try to steady myself.

“Is- is anyone okay?” I whisper.

“Some,” he replies. “Gale Hawthorne got a lot of people out and into the meadow, away from the bombs- but a lot of people didn’t make it.”

“Mrs. Everdeen? Prim?”

“They’re okay.”

I breathe a slight sigh of relief. At least they are okay. At least something of Katniss’ life survived. But I look at Haymitch again, and Plutarch, and their faces are still filled with foreboding and sadness - and is that pity?

“What - what about my family?”

“I’m so sorry, Peeta. But they didn’t make it. No one from the Village Square made it.”

My breath catches, and I fall back onto the pillows. I don’t notice what they are telling me, the words don’t register. Finnick says something, but my ears and minds are closed to anything but what is going on in my own head. Eventually, they must leave and night falls, because a nurse comes in and turn off the light. But my mind is still going.

My family is dead.

That thought hurts, stings, opens the hole in my chest wider until it’s threatening to consume my entire body.

I wasn’t particularly close to either of my brothers, or my mother. My brothers were older than me, stronger, braver. I was the unwanted son, the afterthought, the extra burden on a family with two teenage boys who were always hungry and growing. But they took care of me, sort of. They raised me.

I was close to my father. He let me decorate all of the cakes when he saw how much I loved doing it. I was the only one who would eat the squirrel with him; him, because he liked the taste and me because it connected me, in some way, to Katniss Everdeen.

Other than Katniss, my father was the only one who ever believed in me.

And if my family is gone, lost in the Capitol’s flames, and my father is gone, and Katniss is gone -

What the hell do I have to live for?

The last question swirls around and around in my head as a dose of medicine takes hold, and drags me down into what is unfortunately only a temporary respite from this nightmare.
Chapter 2

I am in District 12.

I stand near the Hob, where Katniss and Gale came to trade, game in hand. Sometimes I would see them go together after school, to live a life that a child of the Square could not know, and I would watch them, jealously, shyly, silently.

It is nothing but jagged pieces of wood sticking out of the earth now.

My stomach is sloshing with nausea, my breathing tighter as I pass body after body while I make my way towards the Square. The bodies are unrecognizable, charred and blackened with ash and dust. With each one I pass, the guilt - a knot in my chest that never seems to ease - tightens, the weight of it almost crushing. These people are dead because of me.

I reach the Square and look around at the destroyed buildings. I can no longer identify the bakery my family owned; the ruin all around me is disorienting, making me unable to navigate the District I called home for sixteen years.

Eventually, I find it in northeast corner. The sign that hung over the door is burned, and only half of it is still legible. The house attached is still standing, shaky and filled with holes where bombs fell through. It had smoldered and burned, not blown up - there was no coal dust from the mines in the merchants' houses.

I stop in front of the door to the house, hesitating. I don't know if I even want to go inside. This place never felt like home, with my mother and her ever present rolling pin and my father who would soothe me and dress the cuts burns and bruises, but failed time and time again to actually protect me. But it was also the source of some happiness; it was where I learned to paint, to bake, to find beauty in a world filled with drab, gray ugliness.

I sigh. Steeling myself, I walk up the steps and open the door.

What I see takes the wind out of me, crumples the little resolve I have managed to regain since the Quell. There is no way I could have ever prepared myself enough for the sight of 4 charred corpses - my mother, my father, Rye & Nickel - huddled around a melted, twisted hunk of metal that had once been our Capitol-mandated TV set.

I hear a scream. I realize that is my own as Haymitch's voice bursts from my forgotten earpiece.

"Kid? Kid, are you okay?"

I don't answer, I just scream, waiting to wake up, because the nightmare usually ends by now.

But the longer I stand there, an inhuman sound pouring out of my mouth, the more I realize that it's real.

"Peeta! That's it, we are getting you out of there right-"

"No!" I gasp, finally gaining control over my voice. "No, I'm okay, just a shock, just give me a minute."

Haymitch replied, but I don't hear it. My thoughts are a jumble and I'm trembling. My breathing is ragged, air forcing its way through my chattering teeth. I know that the sight of my family's corpses
will be a fixture in my nightmares tonight.

I stumble out of the house, down the steps and into the dirt-covered street, the smell of dust and decay fresh in my nostrils. My family is dead - I knew this - but seeing them, seeing their bodies, was a wallop to my already fragile psyche. They are dead, and it was my fault. My rescue, my insistence on playing this game, my ignorance in not realizing that a rebellion was hatching right under our noses meant that my mother, my father, and my brothers were burned alive by the Capitol. The knot of guilt twists tighter in my chest and I gag.

I touch my forehead with shaking fingers as I tried to repeat the mantra my head doctor taught me. Having diagnosed me with something he called 'post-traumatic stress disorder,' he developed a technique for when my thoughts swirl around and I encounter a fresh trauma. It was supposed to help with the flashbacks and nightmares; it hadn't yet, but I had nothing else to try.

I breathe deeply, trying to organize my thoughts and push away the horror of what I just saw, packing it into a box in the back of my mind to deal with later, when I am not putting myself and others in danger.

My name is Peeta Mellark. I am seventeen years old. District 12 is gone. My family is gone. Katniss Everdeen is in the Capitol. The Capitol wants her dead. I want her alive. I love her.

The mantra is not comforting, but I feel reoriented. It pulls my brain away from delusions and abstract thoughts of what if, and centers it around truths. The truths are not pleasant, but they are solid and grounding.

Haymitch's voice crackles through the earpiece again.

"Peeta. If you don't answer me right now we are going to swoop down there and take you out."

"I'm okay, I'm okay. I just need to be here a little while longer."

"Fine, but you are wearing that earpiece for a reason. Use it, damn it," he grumbles.

I grunt in return. He's not used to being this gruff with me, or having to yell at me to do what he wants. Before the Quell, I had been compliant. But that was before he decided to rescue me, not Katniss, and broke his promise. Now, I was angry, angrier than I had ever been, and that anger was made sharper by the fear of what fate he had left Katniss to.

Besides, he and Plutarch wanted me to go to District 12; he can't very well complain that I am taking my time while I am here.

I had been catatonic for weeks. I didn't move, barely ate, and spent each day dreading the nightmares that were growing steadily more horrid. The hospital room, with its double beds, was the only place I had seen in District 13 and I had no intention of leaving. Doctors came and went - I was physically healed, but losing Katniss, District 12, and my family had completely unhinged me. I had nightmares, flashbacks while I was awake, heard their voices begging me to stop. The knot of guilt formed and tightened, constricting my breathing. I had killed my family and ensured Katniss would die as well because I was too blind and dumb to see the part we played in the Rebellion.

Finnick was in the bed next to me, alternating between silent weeping and fitful sleep. When my nightmares were so intense that they woke me out of my drug-induced stupor, I would hear him whisper the same phrase, over and over again.

"Annie - oh, Annie, I am so sorry."
He would cry out, shout, and then fall back into a fitful doze, the drugs only prolonging the nightmares where the girl he loved was tortured and killed a thousand different ways.

Sometimes Prim would come into the ward with Mrs. Everdeen. Prim was training to be a doctor, and Mrs. Everdeen was using her talents as a healer as a nurse in District 13. They were both observing the doctor's administer mine and Finnick's medicine. They would smile calmly & make eye contact - Mrs. Everdeen's eyes sometimes filled with tears, but she would pat my hand before she left.

Prim would take notes, her tongue poking out of her mouth the same way Katniss' would, and I the guilt would tighten again. Her sister, her protector, was being tortured or killed or was already dead. And it was all my fault.

Once, when Prim was observing the doctors replacing the bandages on the gash in my arm where my tracker had been removed by Finnick, a siren blew. I flinched at the sharp sound and the sudden commotion beyond the ward door.

"What's going on?" I asked, my voice raspy and hoarse. It hadn't been used for anything other than screaming for weeks.

"An emergency drill," Mrs. Everdeen replied.
"For what?"

Prim looked at me. "In case of a bombing."

She didn't need to say who would be dropping the bombs, or why they would want to attack Thirteen.

Later that night, I was actually coherent when Haymitch came into mine and Finnick's room. Haymitch had taken to visiting every night; he had nothing better to do, he had said, since District 13 banned the consumption of alcohol, and kept mouthwash and rubbing alcohol under lock and key. He had been forced into sobriety, cold turkey. I had taken to ignoring him, taking my medicine and becoming unresponsive. I was still so angry with him: for breaking our deal, for leaving her behind, for sentencing her to certain death.

"Haymitch," I began.

He looked at me and smirked.

"Well, that's different. Actually want to talk to me, kid?"

"Haymitch, I repeated, sitting up straighter. "I need you to get me out of here."

Haymitch choked on the water he had poured for himself out of the pitcher on my bedside table. He coughed, then wiped his mouth.

"What?"

"I need you to get me out of here." The words fell from my mouth in my rush to explain myself before my thoughts became tangled up again. "It not safe, the Capitol, I will bomb everyone here because of me and the Rebellion and more people can't die because of me or you or anyone else involved in - "

"Whoa, kid, slow down. What the hell are you talking about? What makes you think that I would help you get out of here?"
"Because you owe me."

"Owe you?"

"You went back on our deal. Katniss was supposed to leave the Quell alive. Now she's worse than dead." My voice faltered on the last word.

He looked at me, a mixture of frustration, pity, and a hint of understanding on his face.

"Kid, I can't do that. Not only are there armed guards at your door to make sure you don't leave, you are the only reason anyone in this District is still alive right now."

That made absolutely no sense. I was putting these people in more danger, danger that most of them never sought out or asked for.

Haymitch saw the confusion on my face.

"Keeping you alive is the only thing ensuring Katniss' cooperation. She knows that if she does the wrong thing, refuses to talk, or attacks anyone that they will bomb District 13 to hell and back. And if you die, they lose all leverage; she won't care anymore, and she'll try to take them all out - and die in the process. They need Katniss to cooperate, to counteract the Rebellion. So they need you alive. And if you're alive, the hundreds of people who live here with you stay alive too."

"But everyone in Twelve is dead because of me. How can anyone think that I can protect them? I couldn't even keep the girl I love safe," I whisper.

Haymitch shook his head.

"It isn't your fault that our District was bombed. That's on the Capitol, not you. And it isn't your fault that Katniss wasn't rescued, Peeta. Both of you were supposed to be, but we couldn't get to her in time. I'm sorry about that."

I arched my eyebrow.

"Really, I am. But lying in bed doesn't help the Capitol and it doesn't help Katniss."

His voice took on a rote quality, like he had rehearsed them.

"Helping the Rebellion helps Katniss."

"But the Rebellion might make the Capitol retaliate against Her."

"As long as the Rebellion exists, kid, they are going to retaliate. They think they've won - they have the Mockingjay, don't they? The symbol of the rebellion? The Rebellion needs a new symbol to survive, and fast."

"Why?"

A new voice cut in.

"Because if the Rebellion falls, all of us, including Ms. Everdeen, are dead. The Rebellion needs someone new to rally behind."

Plutarch turned to Haymitch.
“President Coin wants to see you.”

Haymitch stood, grunting "Why now?"

"To see if you've been able to convince Peeta."

Haymitch shook his head. "Doesn't look like it."

He walked to the door to join the former Gamemaker, shaking his head. I was curious in spite of myself, even though I knew that they were manipulating me and trying to make me a piece in their game.

"Convince me of what?"

"To be that someone. To be that symbol."

I shook my head. I wasn't the symbol, the person the country rallied behind, the person people rebelled against the Capitol for. Just Peeta. Useless, clueless Peeta, who won the games by accident and failed to keep Katniss safe.

"I can't be the Mockingjay. That's Katniss, not me."

Plutarch answered first.

"No one is asking you to be a Mockingjay, Peeta. We were thinking something along the lines of - "

Haymitch cuts him off. "Plutarch, I have a better idea. Instead of talking at him, why don't we show him? Show him just what the Capitol is capable of, and what will happen to us if he says no."

Plutarch looked thoughtful.

"What do you have in mind?"

I answered before Haymitch has a chance to.

"I want to see District 12."

After an argument with President Coin, Haymitch and Plutarch loaded me onto a hovercraft headed for District 12, on the condition that I be equipped with an earpiece and that at the first sign of trouble, we leave. They dropped me off in the meadow just outside of town. I was given an hour to explore.

As I descended, I heard Plutarch mutter, "I think a little tour of Twelve is just what he needs to convince him."

Outside of the bakery, I squint up at the sky. Half an hour of my allotted time has passed, and there is still one place I want to go.

My steps are shaky as I walk towards the Victor's Village. I feel the ground change under the ash and dust, shifting from cobblestones to grass under my intact right foot.

It is easy to find my own house. The entire Village is still standing. Maybe it's to remind everyone who exactly was responsible for the deaths and destruction - Haymitch, Katniss, and I, the non-compliant Victors. Maybe it's to show anyone who returns - rebels, clean up crews from other Districts, reporters - that the Capitol decided what got blown up and what remained, who died and who survived. That they are always watching.
My house looks exactly the same, not really a home but some place to lay my head at night. I trudge inside. Grabbing a bag from the closet near the door, I walk purposely into the living room, the room that Portia, my stylist, called my 'studio.' The floor is covered in cloth splattered with paint, and filled canvasses line the walls. An easel stands in the corner, and next to it is a table covered with my supplies.

I shove paints, a sketchbook, pencils, my pallet, and some empty canvasses into the bag. The head doctor in Thirteen thought painting would help, be therapeutic for me like after the first games. I catch sight of my paintings from then, the ones I showed off as a talent, when really they were just an attempt to purge the nightmares from my mind.

The muttation with Glimmer's eyes.
A river, it's banks dotted with rocks and small patches of grass.

Katniss, silhouetted in light pouring from the cave mouth, her eyes sparkling in my fevered memory.
My fingers dance across her face, the paint rough under my fingertips. In those games she was pretending, acting for the cameras to save our lives. But her eyes were earnest, open, still unmarred with suspicion and showing only a hint of pain.

I gently place the painting in my bag.

In my bedroom on the second floor, a few other items make it into the bag. An afghan my grandmother knitted, one of my father's rings, and a picture of my brothers.

Back downstairs, I pause in the kitchen before moving towards the front door. The kitchen in Thirteen is regimented and tightly controlled; no baking there.
I shut the front door behind me, locking it with the keypad above the doorknob. I check the time with Haymitch, who replies that I have about fifteen minutes left. Glancing around, I wonder where else to go. I want to soak up the time I have outside of Thirteen, beyond the beds and stifling walls, no matter how horrifying I find it. My eyes find Katniss' house, directly across from my own.

Prim and Mrs. Everdeen have been so kind, not blaming me for being saved instead of Katniss.

My feet are moving before my brain catches up, and I am at their front door within seconds. I type in the code, remembering it from when we were training for the Quell. I drag my bag behind me, and place it down when I close the door. Moving quickly, I find the book of plants and flowers and the wedding portrait on the mantel and place them both in my bag. I want them to have a piece of home, to give them something to show how grateful I am for their kindness and understanding.

There's something else I am searching for, but before I locate it I hear a soft mewing at my feet.
Buttercup, Prim's ginger cat, brushes against my prosthetic leg and purrs faintly. I bend down and scratch between his ears, glancing around until I spot the open window he must have been using to enter the house. He has never hated me like he does Katniss; perhaps he knows that I like cats, that I would have loved a pet had my mother allowed it.

"You miss Prim, boy?"
He looks up at me. It's uncanny, the way he responds like he truly understands.

"Do you want to see her?"
His ears flick upwards, and he purrs again. I grab Katniss' hunting bag from where it hangs on the coat rack by the door.
"You'll have to get in here. It'll make it easier for me to sneak you in."

I feel ridiculous, talking to a cat. He's oddly compliant, though, and allows me to place him gently into the bag, loosely tying the ties at the top. I place it by my mine.

I climb the stairs slowly, and enter Katniss' room. Her hunting jacket hangs off the knob closest to the door on the footboard of the bed. I grab it, clutching it to my chest and sitting down on the bed. I close my eyes, the soft leather comforting.

I try to soak up as much of her as I can, in her room where we added to her family's book, where she rested after hurting her ankle, where she'd asked me to stay with her.

"Always," I murmur, the word floating in the air and echoing off the walls in the silent house.

I sigh, breathing deeply. A sickeningly familiar scent wafts towards me. I open my eyes and look around wildly, anxiety churning in my stomach as I search for the source of the cloyingly sweet scent.

On her dresser, a white rose sits in a small glass vase, its petals fully open to release the smell of power and poison, of the Capitol, of President Snow.

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