Always - A Peeta Mellark Love Story

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by KariRogers
(This chapter contains scenes of a sexual nature)

It was November now; the snow had come in and the miners were working twice as hard to make sure Panem had enough coal. Peeta and I hadn’t spoken properly in a couple of months at least now, and yet in just a few days, we would be expected to reunite for the country and go on our Victory Tour. Twelve districts in twelve days, then coming back to our own District for the final celebration. After Peeta had made it clear to me that he wasn’t sure where his heart lay when we got back home, I found it hard to speak to him. He had said a lot of things in the Games, mostly about how he was in love with me, how he felt the same way about me as I did about him. But when we got back, he said he still wasn’t sure who he wanted to be with - Katniss or me. I told him that when he worked it out, he knew where I was. Twenty five feet from his doorstep to be exact.

We were now living in Victor’s Village; winning the Games had meant we were now bathed in riches; we had anything we wanted, all the money we could ever ask for. Each district had one - twelve houses, three stories high, plus a basement in each, for the winners of the Games. There were only three living in the District Twelve Village - Peeta, myself, and Haymitch Abernathy, our mentor. We still kept our old house in the Seam though. Technically it still belonged to mum and my brothers and sister, so if I were to die, they would have to go back there. Mum, Vick, Rory, and Posy lived with me in the Village. Gale had stayed behind in the Seam. He was eighteen now, so was able to live on his own, but despite of anything to do with the Capitol meant he didn’t want to live in a house provided by them. He worked in the mines for six days a week, but I didn’t have to go to school anymore. Katniss did however, so I went into the woods for them most days. Mostly to keep myself occupied, but also to help them out. Mum was able to afford fresh meat from the butchers now, but we all preferred the game I brought home. Mrs Everdeen didn’t want any help to start with, but after a lot of persuasion, she agreed to let me help her out, as I know Katniss would have done the same for our family if the roles were reversed. Sundays, however, Gale and Katniss went into the woods together, just the two of them. That’s where they were today. I had gone to the Hob to buy alcohol for Haymitch, to soften him up.

"Haymitch! Haymitch!" I called, banging on his door. He wasn't answering, I assume because he was slumped in a drunken heap at the table. I pushed the front door open and stomped the snow from my boots on the welcome mat. Pulling my woolen hat off and shaking the snow from my coat, I found Haymitch exactly where I thought he would be. He was drunk and surly most of the time, but he did his job - he did more than his job - in keeping us alive in the arena. Because of him, not one, but two tributes were allowed to win. It was history in the making. So matter who Haymitch was, I owed him. That was something I could never finish repaying. He had run out of liquor a few weeks ago and there was none for sale, so he went through pretty severe withdrawal symptoms; seeing things that weren't there and scaring Posy and Rory when they had come over with some pies mum had baked for him. Ever since then, I'd been stockpiling some just in case that happened again.

"Get up," I said, nudging his arm. "Haymitch, wake up." I learnt very quickly not to be all delicate when it came to waking him up. Being loud was the easiest way, but not even that was working, so I grabbed a small jug and filled it with icy water. I threw it over him and jumped back, knowing he would retaliate.

"Argh, what the fu-" he jumped up from his chair, brandishing a knife. "You are an extremely unlikeable person," he growled as he saw me stood with the empty jug. I placed the bottles of liquor down on front of him. "But you do have your virtues," he smiled, perking up and sitting back down. "If you wanted to be babied, you should have asked Peeta," I huffed, sitting down with him.

"Asked Peeta what?" I looked up as Peeta walked into the room carrying two loaves of freshly baked bread. Just the sound of his voice still made my heart flutter and the longing return for him.

"Asked you to wake me without giving me pneumonia," Haymitch said, glaring at me. I watched as
Peeta crossed to the table, the sunlight glinting off of his snow covered blonde hair. I could barely see his limp now, he was used to walking on the metal leg, and he hadn't used the cane in a while now. He looked so healthy, so strong, so different to the sick and starving boy I saw in the arena. He took the knife from Haymitch, sterilised it in a bit of the alcohol, and once it was dry, began to slice into it.

"Would you like some bread Cora?" he asked.
"No thankyou, I ate earlier." We were polite but stiff.
"You're welcome," he replied, just as stiffly.
"Brrr, you two have alot of warming up to do before the cameras arrive," Haymitch said, chucking his wet shirt into a pile of mess. He was right of course. The audience would be expecting a couple of love birds, not two people who were barely talking.
"Take a bath, Haymitch," sighed Peeta, leaving the house. My chance was now, it was now or never. I left Haymitch where he was and ran after Peeta. I got to him just before he opened his front door, on the top of his steps.
"Peeta," I panted. "Peeta, can we talk.""Sure, whatever." He walked into his house, leaving the door open for me to follow. Inside, I once again stomped the snow off of my boots and shook the snow from my hair. My hat in the pocket of the jacket I hung up by the door. I followed him into the kitchen where he was slicing up some cake to eat. Strawberry and chocolate cake. I hovered by the door for a moment, just watching him potter about his massive, well stocked kitchen.
"Want a slice?" he asked quietly.
"Sure, thanks," I smiled, sitting down at the round oak table in the middle of the dining area. I picked at my slice of cake, glancing over at Peeta every now and then. He had his head hung low, trying not to look at me. One of us had to say something. My stomach was churning, I didn't know how to start. I opened my mouth to say something, anything, but Peeta got there first.
"Cora, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said anything on the train," he murmured. His head was still low, his blonde fringe hanging low over his eyes, inching ever more slowly towards his cake.
"Peeta, I -"
"No, it's my fault." He looked up at me, and took the hand I had been sliding over to his. Just feeling his soft, gentle touch on my skin made me tingle all over, his blue eyes piercing my brown ones. I squeezed his fingers and he moved in closer to me.
"You're all forgiven, completely," I murmured. "I don't want to be acting all happy and in love for the cameras and then ignoring each other in real life. It hurts." "What do we do then?"
"Well, we could be friends, we have to start from somewhere," I smiled, our fingers starting to entwine.
"Friends, hmm," he smiled cheekily. "And what does being friends involve?"
"Friends spend alot of time together, they share things -"
"Share things? Like what?" He was getting closer to me as we were talking, until there was only a few inches between us.
"Mostly food," I grinned, "but then there is all the deep stuff."
"The deep stuff?"
"Yeah," I grinned. "Like 'What's your favourite colour'?"
"Wow, that is deep," he chuckled lightly. "Okay then, you go first."
"Hmm, my favourite colour. It would have to be red. You know, like a fat, fresh, juicy strawberry, nestled in between the green leaves of a wild strawberry bush. Like the strawberries inside the chocolate and strawberry cake you make at the bakery."
"That's making my mouth water," he smiled. "Okay, mine is orange. You know, like a sunset, although it's more like the burnt orange you wore for your dress in your first interview." Before he could say or do anything else, I leaned in and pressed my lips against his for the first time in months. Our bodies reacted as one and we moved in so close to each other that I could feel his heart beating wildly against his chest. His arms were wrapped around my waist, holding me in as close as he
could, my fingers were running through his soft blonde locks. I was sat on his lap now, straddling him on the kitchen chair and I could feel his excitement straining against his trousers and onto my groin. He pulled away, panting slightly, resting his forehead against mine.

"Cora, I've never meant this more than I mean it now when I say this. I love you and I want you."

"Then let's go upstairs," I smiled, standing up and leading him slowly up to his bedroom. He stopped me outside his door and pushed me lightly up against the wall, grazing his nose softly against the inside of my neck. If he hadn't have been holding onto me, my knees would have buckled to the floor. As I couldn't help but let out a small moan, I felt his lips brush against my ear.

"Are you sure you want this?" he asked me.

"I do." I looked into his eyes and kissed him again. He opened the bedroom door and pulled me in, laying down on the bed with me sat on top of him. This was my first time. I think I was Peeta's first time aswell, and I figured that no matter what happened, it's not like we each had anything to compare it too. I wanted it to be special though. Not rose petals and candles, just intimate, just the two of us, something I wouldn't come to regret in later years as so many do. Peeta slid his hands up my waist, up my torso, and slipped my top up and over my head, so I was just in my bra. I felt his body tense up at the sight of my topless body, he gasped inwards and I could feel him bulge against my groin again. I began to run my nails up his chest, under his shirt, and it was his turn to moan in pleasure. He flipped me over, so I was now led on the bed, and Peeta was straddling me. Sitting up, I unbuttoned his shirt and he threw it to the floor with my top, and then moaned once more as I lightly ran my finger nails up and down his chest. Pressing his lips against mine, he pushed me back on to the bed and slowly started to kiss down my neckline, my collar bone and then my cleavage.

"I've wanted to do this for such a long time," he murmured, looking up at me for a moment, before his finger hooked the strap of my bra and slid it down over my shoulder. Just feeling him touch me was making me wet down there. We both pulled our trousers off and discarded them to the floor, just as our tops had been moments before. For the first time, I could see Peeta as he was, and I could truly appreciate every single inch of his sculpted body. I saw him naked in the arena, but that was different. This time, however, I was going to be feeling each and every part of his body pressed against me. Once we were both naked, he leaned me back on to the bed and straddled me. He was trembling a little, though whether it was with desire or nervousness, I couldn't say. I was quivering, too, and my shudders were definitely a combination of need and worry. What if we couldn't work it all out? I needn't have worried, though, when the time came, everything worked out just perfectly. And as he ripped the packet open and slid the condom on, I thought in the back of my mind that maybe I should be more nervous than I now am. I'd been expecting a lot of pain and pressure, stopping and starting, but there wasn't really any fumbling about to speak of. Either Peeta had done this before or he was a complete natural at it because he coated himself with the moisture that had gathered between my legs, and started to gently push himself into me. It didn't hurt at all at first, but then as he dipped deeper, my body's natural resistance kicked in, and as he broke through the barrier, I felt a slight burning sensation. I gasped and he stopped immediately.

"Are you alright?"

"I think so," I whispered, and he held himself still and kissed me, his tongue caressing mine.

When I'd relaxed again, he pushed forward once more, still kissing me, until he was buried inside me as deep as he could get. I wrapped my legs around his and some kind of primal instinct took over the pair of us. We were both sliding along back and forth until our bodies took over and we both came. He pulled out of me and curling up next to me, our arms wrapped round each other, we just lay there for a while, kissing, and talking. We were just leaning in for another kiss when a bang on the front door downstairs made us both jump. We looked at each other for a split second, then jumped up and threw our clothes back on as fast as we could. I tried to search for my top, and stood up to ask Peeta if he had seen it, when I turned around and burst out laughing.

"Um, Peeta, you might want to reconsider that outfit."

"What? Why?"

"Because you're wearing my top." Peeta went bright red as I failed to hold in more laughter, and he took it off as quickly as he could, passing it to me, then searching for his own.
"Peeta? Cora?" We could hear Haymitch calling out from the entrance hall. We were all so close that although we respected the fact we each had our own homes, at the same time we walked in and out of each others places as though they were an extension to our own. 

"Haymitch, hi," I said, as we both suddenly appeared at the bottom of the staircase, trying to arrange my face into what I hoped was as innocent as possible. "Well, look at you, you finally saw eye to eye," Haymitch grinned, as I jabbed Peeta as he blushed furiously and coughed. "I came over to use your phone," he said to Peeta. "Mine, er, still doesn't work."

"Yeah, because you ripped it off the wall Haymitch," I said dryly. "That could have something to do with it, but I need to talk to Effie about something."

"Yeah sure, you know where it is," Peeta said, moving out of his way. "It's on the wall," I called, grinning, then ducking as he threw something in my direction. "Listen, I have to go," I said, turning to Peeta. "Do you have to?"

"N - yes, Vick got an award for something at school today and mum wants us all there for dinner. I'm sorry." He helped me into my jacket, even though it was only across the path, and I stood at the top of the steps as he gave me a long, lingering kiss. "See you tomorrow?"

"See you tomorrow."

"Does this mean you're gonna stop moping about every day now?" Gale was stood at the bottom of the steps, grinning at the pair of us. I looked at Peeta, and we both grinned. "Shut it you," I told my brother as Peeta watched us walk into my house.
Chapter 2

I opened the door to my house to find myself greeted with the unusual sound of silence. It had been a few days since Peeta and I had gotten back together, and today we were expecting Effie to arrive with Cinna, Portia, and our prep teams because today was the start of the Victory Tour.

"Did you have a nice walk, dear?" Mum came out to the entrance hall to greet me. Walk? She knew I was in the woods checking on Gale's snares. I was about to tell her so, when a well tailored man walked out from the study.

"Miss Hawthorne, would you come this way please?" Looking at mum questioningly, I followed him and was greeted by a set of very familiar, snake like eyes, and the heavy aroma of blood and roses. President Snow.

"Let's take a walk, just to get some fresh air," he suggested, standing up and indicating towards the door. I followed him out of the door and we slowly strolled along the path from the Victor's Village, down to the Peacekeepers headquarters, behind the Justice Building. We passed the guard at the front entrance with just a slight wave of the President's hand. Turning and twisting down several different corridors, I began to worry about what we were doing here. I would never be able to remember my way back out if I had to. But after a few minutes, we stopped outside a seemingly unassuming door. However, upon opening it, I discovered that was not the case.

"Have you ever seen one of these before, Miss Hawthorne?" I couldn't quite suppress a shudder as I took in the image before me. The device was fairly basic in design, consisting of a rectangular, black metal frame, slightly raised off the ground, with a roller both ends, and it didn't look like much, but I had a feeling it was capable of inflicting horrendous pain on whoever was unlucky enough to be its victim.

"No, no I haven't seen one before," I whispered, unable to keep the tremor of my voice in check.

"It's very simple, really," the president said conversationally, as though we were discussing the mechanisms of an ironing board rather than an age-old method of torture. "The prisoner's ankles are fastened to one roller and the wrists are chained to the other. As the interrogation progresses, this handle and ratchet here - " He pointed to the items attached to the top roller. " - Are used to very gradually increase the tension on the chains, inducing excruciating pain. By means of various levers and pulleys, this roller can be rotated on its own axis, thus straining the ropes until the sufferer's joints are dislocated and eventually separated." I could feel nausea bubbling within me, and I swallowed hard in an effort to contain it. Snow must have seen my disgust and discomfort, because he gave me a few moments to process the information before continuing. "One particularly gruesome aspect of being stretched too far on the rack is the rather loud popping noises made by the ligaments and bones as they snap..." I whirled away, knowing I was about to throw up, but President Snow gripped my upper arm with such force that it stopped the inevitable, and he dragged me forward so I was standing directly before the device. "Over the years, I've discovered one very powerful method of putting pressure upon people is to force them to watch someone else being subjected to the rack... Perhaps seeing your precious Peeta, or possibly even one of your siblings tied to it will bring you round to my way of thinking." He smiled a humorless smile, and released me from his grasp. "I keep it especially for people who feel their love is greater than the wellbeing of Panem, in honour of two lovers who thought they could defy the Capitol. Remember this, Miss Hawthorne: Nothing is more important to me than the wellbeing of our country."

The walk back to the house was unbearable. He kept in perfect step with me, though thankfully there was no-one else on the streets to see us. Back in the warmth and safety of my home, we sat down in the study.

"Now, I think we can make this whole situation a whole lot easier if we agree to not lie to each other," he said, silkily. "What do you think?"

"Yes, I think that would save time," I said stiffly, once my tongue had unfrozen.
"So I have a problem, Miss Hawthorne. A problem that began the moment you pulled out those poisonous berries in the arena." That had been the moment I had realised that if they wouldn't allow both of us to win, then they would have no victor at all. The moment I realised I couldn't go on without Peeta in my life. "If Seneca Crane had had any sense, he would have blown you both to bits, but unfortunately for him, he had a sentimental streak."

"And where is he now?" I asked, bravely, not sure I wanted to know the answer.

"Seneca made the choice to stop breathing." Yes, I was right, I hadn't wanted to know the answer.

"After that I decided to let you play out your little game. The people in the Capitol may have fallen head over heels over your little romance, I however, was not as convinced. Nor was anyone in the districts." He flicked a switch on a silver tube next to him, and a holographic screen lit up above it, with shots of Peeta and I ignoring each other, or arguing, and then one last one of the two of us, our first long lingering kiss on the top of Peeta's steps, the day we got back together. My face must have registered a flicker of bewilderment, because he simply smiled. "This, of course, you don't know. You have no access to information about the mood in the other districts. In several of them, however, people viewed your trick as an act of defiance, not an act of love. And if a girl from District Twelve, of all places, can defy the Capitol and walk away unharmed, what's to stop them from doing the same. What's to stop them from uprising?"

"There have been uprisings?" I asked, both chilled at the thought, and slightly elated.

"Not yet, but it's coming. If the districts expect the Capitol to release it's grip on any of them, then the entire system would collapse." I was taken aback by the abruptness in his speech, as though I was to believe that the people of Panem were his priority, when nothing could be further from the truth. He was a cold and calculating man, and anyone who knew him, or anyone in the districts really, knew this. Though there were very few who could ever correctly guess the extent of his cold heart.

"It must be very fragile if a handful of berries can bring it down," I blurted out before I could stop myself. He examined me for a few moments, his eyes narrowed, before seemingly remembering that we had agreed to be entirely honest with each other.

"Yes, it is fragile, but not in the way you would suppose." He began to say something else, but a knock at the door interrupted him.

"Her mother would like to know if you would like some tea, sir?" The well-tailored man had stuck his head around the study door.

"Yes I would. I would like some tea," Snow smiled, and the door opened wider to allow mum to come in with a tea tray filled with our very best china, and a plate full of biscuits that were delicately decorated. "Thankyou Mrs Hawthorne. You know it's funny how often people forget that presidents need to eat too," he smiled. Mum chuckled lightly, blushing as she left the room with the well tailored man. Snow pours tea out for the both of us, then picks up a biscuit. "These are exquisite. Did your mother decorate them?" he asked, taking a bite.

"No, Peeta did."

"Ah yes, Peeta. And when exactly did you learn of his indifference to you?"

"He's not indifferent-" I tried to say, but President Snow, banged his fist on the table, spilling tea and cream all over the tray.

"Don't lie to me," he snarled. "You promised."

"I didn't mean to start any uprisings."

"I know. I believe you. But it doesn't matter. Your stylist turned out to be quite prophetic in his wardrobe choice. Cordelia Hawthorne, the girl who was on fire. You have provided a spark that, left unattended, may grow into an inferno which will destroy Panem."

"Why don't you just kill me now?" I wondered aloud.

"Publicly? That would only add fuel to the flames."

"Arrange an accident then."

"Who would buy it?" he asked. "You wouldn't, if you were watching."

"Then I'll convince them. The districts."

"No, you will convince me. Convince me, or we shall have to visit the Peacekeepers headquarters again," he told me, pointedly. And with that, he stood up and left the room. I didn't dare breath again
until I heard the front door click shut.

~ Peeta's POV ~

I was in my bedroom, getting ready for a deep, hot bath before my prep team arrived in an hour, when movement outside Cora's house made me look out of the window. President Snow. What was he doing here? And why was he visiting Cora? I was sure I would find out later on, so I didn't worry too much as I slid into the deep bubbles, allowing the steam to unblock the sniffles that had threatened to hit me for the last couple of days.

"Peeta!" I jumped from my relaxed state and water splashed across the bathroom, causing the voice that called my name to squeal.

"Portia?"

"No silly, it's Calypso." Calypso was one member of my prep team; the other two being Atlas and Athena, fraternal twins. Athena had embraced her love of her home Capitol and every time I saw her, she would be sporting the latest in the growing fashion trends of the city. Her brother Atlas preferred to stick with his lurid green hairstyle and violet face tattoos. Under any normal circumstances, I would have been highly embarrassed if someone had just wandered into my house and then burst into my bathroom as I lay in the water, naked and eyes closed. But then I had been through so much with my prep team and they had seen me more naked than anyone else before that I didn't have anything left to hide to hide anymore.

"Calypso, can you help me with this box?" That would be Atlas, calling from my bedroom. As I pulled the plug and watched the water drain away before climbing out and wrapping in a bath robe, I wondered how long I had been in the bath for. Judging by the wrinkles in my finger tips, it had been quite a while. As we waited for Portia to arrive, I showed them my paintings, which had been the activity I chose as my talent. Each victor had to have one, seeing as we didn't have to go to school or work anymore. Technically I had been painting and drawing since I could hold a pencil, but that wasn't important. I showed them the ones I had painted of the arena, and they oohed and ahhed, just like I thought they would. I then pulled out my paintings of Cora, and once again, as expected, they oohed and ahhed. But they didn't see what I saw. They saw a young girl in love. I saw the little things about her, only the things I noticed. Thankfully before they could begin to ask any questions about them, Portia turned up.

"Peeta, are you ready?" she asked, smiling. I nodded, leading her into my walk in wardrobe. She chose me a pair of my favourite brown trousers, with a light blue shirt and a fitted brown jacket. An hour later, as we stood in the living room, the television tuned in live to The Caesar Flickerman Show, as was required by law, Caesar bounced to life on screen, his blue hair now a violent shade of purple.

"Welcome, welcome... Last year, the 74th annual hunger games brought us the greatest love story of our time. Two brave young people chose to die rather than to live without each other. As a nation, we shared their agony, but we had so little time to revel in their joy.

Well today, that patience will be rewarded. So let's go to District Twelve and find our star crossed lovers."

"That's our cue," said Portia. "Are you ready?"

"Ready," I smiled, and she opened the door, letting an icy blast of snowy air into the warm house. I looked over the path to Cora's house, where she was stood with Effie - and Effie's bright orange hair - and she looked simply breath taking.

"There she is, Cora Hawthorne, the girl on fire!" Caesar's voice made me jump slightly, and I looked around for the source. Looking down towards the snow, I saw two remote controlled cameras. "And there he is, Peeta Mellark, the baker's boy!" Effie and Portia nodded to the pair of us and we walked forwards, smiling. She fell into my arms and as I leaned in to kiss her, my metal leg slipped on some ice and I fell under her. She was a vision of beauty, on top of me, her hair falling down over our faces. It reminded me of the other day. She bent her head down and pressed her lips against mine, my entire body tingled.

"Ahem," Caesar's voice came just above our heads.
"Sorry, Caesar," I smiled, helping Cora up.
"So how are things in Twelve?"
"They're good."
"Is that all we're going to get? Come on, don't tease us," Caesar grinned.
"Thank you to the kind generosity of the Capitol, we've never been closer," said Cora, her arms around me.
"25 yards to be exact," I smiled, looking into her eyes, as she stared into mine, engrossed in each other. We barely registered when Caesar said goodbye, and ten minutes later we were on the train, starting our long journey, visiting every district on the Victory Tour.
Chapter 3

~ Cora's POV ~

Once we were back on the train, I headed straight for my old room, but before I could open my door, Haymitch grabbed my shoulder.

"Glad to see things are back on track," he smiled. "You two deserve some happiness, though I guess I'm glad I didn't walk in five minutes earlier."

"Believe me, Haymitch, so am I," I grinned, then winced as I tried to move my arm away.

"What's up?" he frowned.

"Oh nothing," I lied, "I just twisted it a bit playing with Posy." Before he could ask me anything else, I closed my bedroom door behind me, and heaved against it, sighing. What was I going to do? I needed to tell someone about Snow, but I didn't want to endanger anyone else. I changed into something more comfortable - a light pink blouse, with light brown, wide legged trousers, and dark brown flats - then sat down with Effie, Haymitch, Portia, Cinna, and Peeta at the dining table. I took my seat next to Peeta, and was secretly surprised when he stood up to pull my chair out for me. I didn't realise he was such a romantic. After a delicious supper of blue melon, then roast lamb, and topped off with the most luxurious strawberry chocolate cake I had ever seen, I bade my goodnights and headed back to my room. Once again, Haymitch caught up with me in the corridor outside my door.

"In here, now," he said, pushing me into my room and closing the door.

"What the hell, Haymitch?" I cried.

"Shush, we don't have much time. Now I know you were lying to me earlier. I might be drunk a lot of the time, but I know you Cora. Tell me what really happened to your arm." I hesitated, unsure whether to tell him or not, but I sighed and let it all out. About how Snow had come to visit me, about how he had taken me to see the rack in the Peacekeepers headquarters. That he had told me it was in honour of two lovers who thought their happiness was above that of Panem's. Haymitch visibly sucked in his breath at this point and muttered something unrepeatable. How I had tried to turn away to throw up, but Snow had gripped my arm tight, forcing me to look at it as he continued to explain the torture it produced. I then explained how I was supposed to prove to Snow that Peeta and I were in love, because he didn't believe it, the districts didn't believe it, which was the reason for the imminent uprisings.

"Bullshit," spat Haymitch. "Anyone who spends five minutes with the two of you can see that you love each other. It was obvious to see before you even realised it." I blushed. "I mean it Cora. He has something else up his sleeve, I just don't know what it is yet. And as for the districts uprising? That has been a long time coming, they just needed the push, and your defiance with the berries seemed to have done the trick."

"So what do I do?" I sighed, leaning back against the wall. "He threatened to use it on Peeta. Haymitch, I can't let him do that. I can't lose him."

"Don't tell him. At least not yet anyway," he soothed, wiping away the tear that was threatening to roll down my cheek. "I think he's coming anyway. We will be in District Eleven tomorrow, let's see how that goes and we can make a decision then, yeah?" I nodded in agreement, then he left. Moments later, Peeta knocked and walked in.

"Did I just see Haymitch leave your room?" he asked.

"Yeah, I wasn't feeling too great," I lied. "I have to see Rue's family tomorrow."

"Oh god, I forgot." He pulled me in close to him and wrapped me tight in his strong arms, stroking my hair. I relaxed into him, taking in everything I could about him; his scent, his touch, the sound of his beating heart. He spent that night in my room. Nothing happened, we just curled up together, grateful we had each other.

The next morning I woke to see Peeta just laying there, watching me.
"Did you know you snore?" he grinned.
"Oi, cheeky git," I gasped, feigning offence, but he just smiled and kissed me on my head.
"I better get back to my room, Portia will be pulling her hair out. We need to get ready for this afternoon." After he left, I stretched out in bed for the remaining few moments I had left before my day started. I guess I must have dozed off, because I jolted awake to the sound of Effie banging on my door, reminding me that this was now the third time she had come to get me and if I didn't get up now, she wouldn't let me have dessert tonight. Sighing I crawled out of bed. Today was not something I wanted to do, but I was a victor now, I had to do it.

"Haymitch," I hissed, as I saw our mentor walk past my door. "I need to talk to you." Pulling him into my room, he sighed.
"Look, I've already told you we will get thro-" he began.
"No, it's not about that. Look, I need you to help me - help me get through through this trip."
"You still haven't got it yet, have you sweetheart?" Haymitch was evidently not a morning person.
"This trip doesn't end when you get off the train. You never get off this train, Cora. You and Peeta are mentors now, every year from here on out. The Capitol is going to drag every part of your life, your romance, out for the public every year for the rest of your lives. You don't have privacy anymore, this train is your life." The shocked look on my face didn't seem to register with him as he left my room, and left me to get dressed.

Breakfast was a quiet event, except for the usual bustling of Effie, which we were all used to by now. The train had stopped, and it was unscheduled. The Capitol attendant looking after us said some part had malfunctioned and that we would be waiting for about an hour until it was fixed. Effie went on a rant about how we would be behind, that the impact would affect every event for what seemed like the rest of our lives. Though what after Haymitch said, I figured that was about right. After a while though, the thought that I would never get off this train finally got to me, and I scraped my chair back as I stood up.

"No-one cares, Effie," I shouted, storming out and attempting to slam the door behind me, forgetting that these were automatic doors. I jumped out of the train doors, landing in the soft snow below. Feeling the snow soak through my soft shoes, I instantly regretted doing so, but my temper meant I would carry on as I had meant to go on. I found a patch of ground to sit on and just sat there, playing with my trousers, not caring that I was cold and now wet. Hearing footsteps behind me, I sighed.
"I'll apologise to Effie later," I said.
"You don't need to apologise to anyone," the voice replied. I turned round to see Peeta, crouched down behind me.
"Sorry, I thought you were Haymitch."
"Nope, sorry, just little old me," he winked, poking me in the arm softly, and I couldn't help but start smiling. Peeta always knew how to make me smile. I leaned back and rested my head against his shoulder, just enjoying the breeze floating past us, his arms wrapped around my waist as he sat behind me. "So hows your talent coming along?" he murmured.
"Well that wasn't quite what I was expecting you to say," I smiled, turning around.
"Come on, humour me," he chuckled. I half sighed, half smiled, shaking my head.
"Ok. Well I think I will have enough recipes, tried and tested of course, to release my own cookbook soon. Cinna says the Capitol will just eat it up. Yes, pun intended," I grinned, as Peeta raised an eyebrow. I had to be careful about some of the recipes I put in the book though, because though I was able to use some of the ingredients I had hunted, or rather Gale had hunted, I didn't want the authorities knowing we hunted illegally. Alot of it though, was the fresh herbs, the edible plants and flowers, the fruit and veg we could grow. All things that the Capitol would consider 'quaint' in Cinna's words. But I was also able to import some ingredients from the Capitol to practise with.

Baking with Posy was my favourite Saturday afternoon hobby.
"There you two are," cried Haymitch, as he staggered along the side of the track. "I've been looking all over for you, the train is leaving in ten minutes."
"Sorry Haymitch, I just needed some fresh air," I said. "How is Effie?"
"She'll live, don't worry," he grinned. "Come on, let's get you two sorted. We'll be in Eleven soon."
Back on the train, I stopped at the dining compartment door. "I'm going to apologise to Effie first. I shouldn't have snapped like that." Haymitch nodded and left Peeta and I to it. Presumably to drink some more before we arrived in Eleven. Effie was sat in her favourite chair when we walked in, going over our itinerary and what looked like speech cards, so I sat on the chair opposite. "Effie, I'm sorry," I said, bowing my head. "I shouldn't have yelled at you, I know you are only looking after our best interests." I lifted my head and looked at her. "If it weren't for you, no-one would know what was going on. You hold us together and you should know that we all truly appreciate it."

"Thankyou," she sniffed, patting my hand, and trying to hold back a sob. "I often forget how hard this is for you victors. But it's all forgotten." I threw my arms round her and gave a hug, but pulled away when the Capitol attendant came to let us know we were about to move. "Go on, you had better get ready, Cinna will be waiting for you," she smiled, and then turned back to her speech cards. Back in my room, I was surprised to see Cinna holding an outfit that looked rather chilly for this time of the year. "Don't worry, it's alot warmer in Eleven that it is in Twelve," he smiled, seeing the confusion on my face. By the time he was done, I looked like a breath of fresh air. I could only hope that it would work in keeping the districts calm for President Snow. I stood up and allowed Cinna to slip my shoes on, and I was completed. My long hair was tied back loosely, and hung over my shoulders gently. Flavius brushed my eyelids with his favourite gold eye shadow, and I was set. We made out way to the back of the train, where the glass windows extended to the roof, and we had a full panoramic view of the countryside. Curling up on the sofa at the back, I nuzzled my head into Peeta's shoulder and looked out of the window, smiling as his arms wrapped securely around me. As the train sped through the large tunnel separating District Eleven from the rest of Panem, a large mockingjay in red paint shot past the window. "Did you see that?" I asked Peeta, sitting up so fast I managed to knock my shoulder into his chin. "Urgh, no, see what?" he grunted, holding his jaw. "That, that, I don't know. It was big and red. I can't be sure, but, quite possibly. I don't know."

"Well that cleared that up," he said, staring at me with wide eyed confusion. Before we could worry any more about it, Haymitch came in. "Effie wants us. We're here." Before we could move however, the sight of Eleven stopped us in our tracks, and surprisingly even Haymitch. There were barbed wire fences everywhere, peacekeeper trucks at every interval, cameras, and worryingly, more armed peacekeepers than I had ever seen outside of the Capitol. The train station, when we arrived, was filled with yet more armed peacekeepers, which didn't impress Effie. "Well this is very festive," she snapped as the six of us were herded into an armoured truck, and then herded like cattle into the back of the Justice Building. "Really, you would think we were all criminals." I was glad Cinna had dressed us in something light, as the heat was much more than we had ever seen outside of the Capitol. The train station, when we arrived, was filled with yet more armed peacekeepers, which didn't impress Effie. "Well this is very festive," she snapped as the six of us were herded into an armoured truck, and then herded like cattle into the back of the Justice Building. "Really, you would think we were all criminals." I was glad Cinna had dressed us in something light, as the heat was much more than we had ever had in Twelve. Sitting in the room they had set aside for us, I began to wish for air conditioning, then immediately felt guilty. This was the districts, they weren't able to have the luxuries I had become accustomed to over the last few months. The anthem began to blare outside, and as I stood up, someone clipped a tiny microphone to my blouse. Haymitch, Effie, Cinna, and Portia all stayed behind to watch live on the television screens, as a now microphoned Peeta and I were ushered out to the front of the building, where hundreds, if not thousands of people were waiting to see us. Despite the clapping, we were greeting with a sombre feeling, a dark, dank, hollow, unsettled feeling that floated around. At the back of the crowd were two large screens, one with Thresh's face on and the other Rue. A lump caught in my throat as I saw her again, so Peeta squeezed my hand. I squeezed back, grateful to have him here. The Mayor introduced us, and we stepped up to the two large microphones in front of us. "Thankyou for having us here in District Eleven," Peeta started. He looked down at the cards in his hand again, and then did something unprecedented - he put them back in his jacket pocket. I swear I could hear Effie in my head, gasping, and muttering why she even bothered writing the speeches if
they are only going to be ignored. "We want to than the fallen tributes of your district. They fought with honor and dignity until the end. Both Thresh and Rue were so young. But our lives aren't just measured in years. The measure in our lives are the people we touch around us. For myself, for Katniss. We know that without Thresh and Rue, we wouldn't be standing here today." Without thinking I couldn't help but lean over and kiss his cheek. "So in recognition of that, we would like donate one month of our wages to each of the families of the fallen tributes every year. It can never bring them back, but I hope it will help." We started to move back towards the doors, but the sight of Rue's family stopped me. Her frail mother, her five younger siblings who all looked like her, with her luminous brown eyes. They looked like a flock of little birds. I couldn't stop myself, as I ran forwards to the microphone at the front of the stage again.

"I just wanted to say that I didn't know Thresh, I only spoke to him once. He could have killed me, but instead he showed me mercy. That's a debt I'll never be able to repay. I did know Rue. She wasn't just my ally, she was my friend. I see her in the flowers that grow in the meadow by my house. I hear her in the Mockingjay song. I see her in my sister Posy. She was too young, too gentle and I couldn't save her. I'm sorry." Rue's mum pressed her fingers to her lips to stop herself from crying and nodded in approval. A hand in the middle of the crown pressed to it's owners lips, and very slowly, three fingers were raised, in the greeting of District Twelve. Those same lips whistled Rue's mockingjay four note tune. The one we had used as a signal in the arena to tell each other we were okay. One by one, the rest of the crowd did the same, until they were all holding their three fingers up to us. The peacekeepers moved forwards as one, and two of them pulled the elderly man who had started it forwards, up to the steps, then a third kicked the back of his legs so he was kneeling.

"No!" I screamed. "NO! NO DON'T. LEAVE HIM ALONE." I ran forwards, the cold terror filling my heart like ice, the nausea hitting my stomach like a sack of bricks. I tried to stop them, but two peacekeepers held me back and dragged me back into the building. The doors shut just a fraction of a second too late as Peeta and I watched them put a bullet in the back of his head and his body slumped to the floor. Peeta looked horrified. He hadn't seen what had happened, he had already come back inside.

"What's happened?" screamed Effie, as she ran from the back room.
"They cut your speech seconds after your speech about Rue, Cora. What happened?" Cinna asked. I couldn't answer. I was hysterical.
"They can't do that, they can't. It wasn't his fault. He has to know I didn't mean it," I cried. Haymitch grabbed both Peeta and I at that point, and dragged us out of the lobby and through a maze of corridors and rooms. He must have been in here enough times to remember this route. I worried that we would be followed, but the peacekeepers left us alone. We were inside now, we were safe, they didn't need to worry about us. Pulling our microphones off us and shoving them under a pillow in a room filled with squishy sofas, he led us down yet more corridors and into a room that looked as though it hadn't been opened since the building had been constructed.
Chapter 4

There was a two inch layer of dust on everything in there. We seemed to be in the attic now, as the roof was arched and there was a circular window, albeit covered in decades of dust and grime, that I remember seeing at the top of the building when I was outside in Twelve. All of these buildings were built the same. The piles of discarded books and broken furniture, the rusty weapons, all helped make the feel of the room grim.

"What happened?" Haymitch demanded, turning on the pair of us once the door had clicked shut.

"I - I don't know," I stammered, still in shock. Peeta looked up, then told Haymitch about how I had made a beautiful speech, how he had offered the money to Rue's and Thresh's families, then the elderly man had whistled Rue's tune and held his three fingers up, in the greeting of Twelve.

"And then they dragged him out of the crowd," I said, taking over. "Haymitch, they forced him to kneel down in front f the crowd, then they shot him in the head and point blank range." I shuddered as I recalled this memory, and tried to hold back a sob. "He has to know I didn't mean for it to happen."

"Who has to know" asked Peeta. Haymitch glanced over at me.

"Go on, tell him." I took a deep breath and began to tell Peeta everything I had been trying to hide for the last week.

"Snow came to see me -"

"I know, I saw him leave your house," Peeta interrupted.

"Did you?" I asked, surprised.

"Yeah, I was getting ready for my bath and I saw him leave with a man in a suit. They looked very odd being in Twelve," he chuckled.

"Yeah tell me about it, it was a shock to see him sat there in my study. Ok, I need to tell you this, and I understand if you get angry at me." I rested against one of the armchairs, and a cloud of dust billowed out around us. Once we had stopped coughing and the cloud had gone, I started. "He took me for a walk to the Peacekeepers headquarters. We went into this room and -" I had to stop because the tears were starting to fall down my face and splash on to my, now very dusty, lap.

"Sweetheart, what happened?" Peeta wrapped his arms round me as I tried to continue. I took deep breaths, trying to control my sobbing.

"He took me into this room where there was a torture rack and he forced me to look at it while he - while he explained in detail how it worked. I felt so sick, but he gripped my arm and made me look at it. That was then he -" I stopped to hold back a sob. "When he told me if I didn't do as he said, he would use it on you." Peeta looked from me to Haymitch, and when Haymitch didn't contradict me, Peeta let out a few choice swear words.

"Okay, so what exactly did you have to agree to?"

"Snow says that he doesn't believe we are in love. He says it's all an act. That the people in the districts don't believe it either, so they will end up revolting, because as he said 'If a girl from District Twelve of all places can defy the Capitol, why can't I?'"

"But we are in love," he said.

"I know we are, but he doesn't seem convinced."

"So what did you agree to?" he asked, for a second time.

"We have to convince him."

"Convince him?"

"Convince him we are in love. That it wasn't all an act to try and defy the Capitol, that we are genuine about each other."

"And you couldn't have told me this before?" he cried. "You couldn't have mentioned something before I went and made things worse by giving those families our money."

"I wanted to, I really did," I yelled back, "but I had to think of you, and my family."

"And you don't think I have people to protect?" he roared. "You don't think I might want to try and
save my family from being tortured?"
"Peeta, I'm sorry," I cried. "I-"
"It's the same as always, you two having your own secrets. You two ganging up behind my back." I tried to tell him that we weren't, that we hadn't done that, but he continued to rant and rave. "I never got any parachutes in the arena until you came along Cora. You were the one who got them. Haymitch favoured YOU, and now here we are again, I'm being kept out of the loop. Don't you think I deserve to know the truth? Haven't I proved myself by now?"
"You're right, Peeta," Haymitch said quietly. I had forgotten he was there. "You should know the truth, and I can promise you, we won't do that again."
"You're damn right you won't," Peeta snapped, and flung the door open, leaving the two of us alone, gobsmacked.

Later that night, back on the train, as we made our way to District Four, there was a knock on my bedroom door.
"Hang on, let me just get some clothes on," I called out, before realising where I was and cursed myself under my breath. I had no idea who was out there. I opened the door to a mildly amused Peeta.
"You need to put clothes on around me now?" he grinned.
"Shut it," I teased, dragging him in through the door.
"Look, Cora, I wanted to come and say -"
"If you are about to say sorry, I'll pin you down and kiss you right now," I grinned. "I've already told you before the banquet tonight, it's ok. I understand why you yelled. I would have probably done alot more than that."
"Oh well if you're going to be like that then, I'm sorry." He looked at me and winked as I stayed true to my word and pinned him down to my bed and kissed him. We fell asleep in each others arms again and we were woken by Effie banging on the door in the morning.

After we left Four, we went to Three, then One, and finally, on our fifth day into the Victory Tour, we arrived in Seven. The temperature has slowly gotten colder the further into the tour we had gone, and today was going to be a very cold one. The icicles on the windows outside my bedroom window had proven that one. Last night I had had my first nightmare since the arena, and Peeta had come in to see if I was alright.
"Peeta, stay with me?" I had asked him, as he turned to go back into his own room. He crawled into bed with me, and wrapped his arms round me, as I lay my head on his chest.
"Always," he whispered into the top of my head, as he kissed it.

Cinna helped me into my outfit, and as a final touch, brushed my cheeks with a little bronzer, to finish off my made up face. The last three days had been a strain. We had been following Effie's speech cards to the letter, and tried to show how in love we were, without going over the top and pushing it in people's faces, causing an uprising. It was the little things that did it. Holding hands, his finger tips stroking the inside of my palms, the small kisses I plant on his cheeks, looking into his eyes and feeling tingles down throughout my entire body. Leaving the train, I inwardly groaned again. I knew that today would be the same. Smiles, speeches, kisses, dinner, dancing. For some reason, Haymitch seemed more sober today than he had been for a while. I couldn't work it out until I remembered his friend Willow was here. Maybe he had a crush on her, but was too scared to do anything about it. The guy needed a good woman in his life!

"Panem today. Panem tomorrow. Panem forever." I looked up from my speech card to see a woman glaring daggers at me. This was getting harder by the day, I don't know what else Snow expected us to do. Only two people were shot this time. A young couple were dragged to the back of the crowd as Haymitch encouraged me to continue with the speech as normal. Afterwards, we went back into the Justice Building as usual, and made our way to the suites where we would be getting ready for yet another dinner, another banquet.
"Cordeli- I'm sorry, I mean Cora, it's so good to see you again. You look really well." I looked
around for the source of the voice and came face to face with a red haired woman, with delicate porcelain skin, and green, gold-flecked eyes.

"Willow! How are you?" I asked, as she enveloped me in a hug.

"I'm good, yeah," I said, avoiding her eyes a little. "I'm just a bit drained," I admitted. "This tour is really taking it out of me."

"Yeah I remember," she replied, sighing. "Acacia's was worse because... well, it was just worse."

"How is she? Will she be here tonight?"

"Yeah, she is just sorting a few things out and then we will both be here to escort you and Peeta to the banquet." Curling up on the sofa, we chatted away like old friends. Despite the age gap, Willow was so easy to talk to, she was so friendly. No wonder Haymitch liked her. I couldn't be certain until I asked him, but they had to be about the same age, I reckoned they had won their Games around the same time. Picking at the rock mountain oysters that District Seven were so good at, and engrossed in conversation, I barely noticed a young woman enter the room.

"Sorry I'm late, momma," she smiled, taking a seat next to Willow and curling her legs up underneath her, a small plate of asparagus cheese twists in her hand. Her eyes were dark, as was her hair, but they were filled with love and happiness. She had one of those faces that looked so familiar, yet I couldn't place it. Her slender frame looked so beautiful, with her fair skin, and her long dark hair flowed down over her shoulders. She looked every inch the Capitol beauty, with a distinct aura of the districts.

"Acacia, you remember Cora?" her mum said.

"Of course, how could anyone forget. I watched your Games with such intense, I thought I was going to end up with no nails," Acacia joked.

"Yeah it was certainly different this year," I grinned.

"Cay, did you bring the dresses?" Her daughter nodded.

"Yeah, they are in the other room. Cora, I've seen yours. Cinna has outdone himself again tonight, I'm so jealous," Cay grinned.

"Speak of the devil." A smooth, male voice came from the doorway.

"Cinna, it's that time again I take it?" I sighed, smiling.

"I'm afraid so." Willow and Cay followed me into the dressing rooms, and Cinna helped the three of us get ready. Even without the foreknowledge of the mother and daughter being victors, you could tell there was certainly Capitol, or Games about them. They had no problems with Cinna being there. Cay even walked out from behind her curtain in just her bra and knickers at one point, to check her make up in the mirror. Cinna didn't even blush!!

"Cinna, could you just zip me up please?" Willow asked the stylist as he was putting the finishing touches to my dress. As she turned round and moved her long red hair to the side, she revealed her back, covered in long thin scars. Turning round, she saw me gaping, and I immediately started stammering an apology. "Oh it's fine," she said, with a wave of her hand, as Cinna closed the zip on the back of her dress. "It was a long time ago." Sweeping my hair over my shoulder, I looked at myself in the full length mirror. Cay was right, Cinna had outdone himself again. I gasped in amazement.

"Oh Cinna, it's gorgeous." Cinna simply smiled.

"Are you ready?" asked Willow, as she and Acacia emerged from behind their respective curtains. I nodded.

"Yeah, let's do this. Again." Peeta was already waiting outside the door to the ballroom when we arrived.

"Cora, you look amazing," he breathed as I kissed him on the cheek.

"You scrub up pretty well yourself," I grinned, winking at him, as he slipped his hand into mine. Willow and Acacia exchanged glances, I noticed, out of the corner of my eye, but I didn't give it much thought. I had a banquet to attend.

"-troducing Cordelia Hawthorne and Peeta Mellark, Victors of the Seventy Fourth Hunger Games!"

The doors opened and we were greeted by a five hundred strong crowd, clapping and cheering. We walked in first, with Willow and Acacia behind us. They were just two of the District Seven
mentors. The third was unable to attend tonight, so I was told. After yet another small speech from the Mayor, those who were lucky enough to be able to afford to attend turned their attention from the victors to the food. Of course we were still going to be stopped throughout the night, asked to pose for photographs with various people, listen to stories about where people were when they heard we had become joint victors, or whenever something else important in our Games had happened. Once the chattering started up again, Peeta took my hand and we made our way around the tables, trying different foods, drinking more of the sparkling peach drink I had discovered back in the suite earlier this afternoon.
"Care to dance?" he asked, bowing slightly.
"Of course," I smiled, following him to the dance floor and wrapping my right arm around him, while he took my left, then together we fell into pace with the music. Our faces just inches apart. The cameras were panning around as usual, and I just hoped that Snow would be watching, that he would see how much we love each other. The way Peeta looked into my eyes made my knees weak. Though I doubted it would give President Snow the same feeling. As we danced, something caught my eye, and I tried to get a look, without it looking like I was watching. Haymitch and Willow were in the corner and they seemed to be arguing about something. No, not arguing, disagreeing perhaps? Maybe he had finally asked her out and she had turned him down. I made a mental note to ask him later.
We made it back to the train just before our one o'clock in the morning deadline. Effie was pleased that we were three minutes ahead of schedule for once, and the rest of us were just pleased to be able to fall into our own beds and sleep for the next few hours, until it all started again tomorrow in Five.

Sitting in the back train compartment, enjoying the view before breakfast, I was in my own world, when Haymitch and Peeta startled me.
"Cora, can we talk?"
"That doesn't sound good." They sat either side of me.
"We have been thinking. Snow. He still doesn't believe you two. Or if he does, he is hiding it very well," said Haymitch.
"Cora, we were trying to think of what else we could do to try and prove it to him, and then it came to me. Marriage."
"Excuse me?"
"Why don't we get engaged," he explained.
"Yeah sure, why not. Sounds like a great idea," I said. "Excuse me." I stood up and walked off before either Peeta or Haymitch could say another word. Marriage. I wanted it, I wanted to marry Peeta, but not now, not like this. I wanted to do it properly. Now Snow would even be taking this away from me too.
"Mum, are you sure my lipstick isn't wonky?"
"No dear it's fi- No, put that down, your sister does not want it in her dress." The older woman ran off to deal with two of her younger children, while the younger one sat in front of the mirror and sighed. It wasn't a sad sigh, it was more a frustrated one, because she couldn't get her make up just the way she wanted it.
"Mum someone's at the door," a young voice called from the kitchen.
"Then answer it, I'm trying to separate your brother and sister from the cat again." Sounds of scuffling, miaowing and screeching came from downstairs and the younger woman put down the eye shadow in her hands and gave up. Opening her bedroom door, she came face to face with Orchid, District Twelve's resident hairdresser.
"Cora! Are you ready?" she cried, flinging her arms in the air and wrapping them around Cora's shoulders. Orchid was born and bred in District Twelve, but she just bubbled despite everything, and Cora often wondered if she had a few roots in the Capitol that she didn't know about. Orchid came from a merchant family, but was dark, not blonde, as though she were from the Seam. Her slender frame set off her high cheekbones just right, and her blue eyes contrasted nicely with her brown hair. Hair that had hints of copper in it when the sun shone down on it. Her older sister, Azalea, could not have been more different. She was tall and slender, but that's where the similarities ended. Azalea had bright blonde hair, hair that she had cut to just above her shoulders all the time. Orchid liked her hair to be long and straight. It was halfway down her back the last time Cora had seen her. Now, six months later, Cora was shocked to see it cut short.
"Ah, yeah, it was getting too hard to look after," Orchid admitted, when she saw Cora staring at it. Sitting in front of the mirror, Cora sat patiently while Orchid snipped a little here and there, pinning bits up here, plaiting bits there. Cora was glad she was living in Victor's Village; she didn't know how she would have coped if she were still living in her old house in the Seam, which still belonged to her family, and if she were to die, at any moment, her mum and her siblings would have to return there immediately. An hour later, and Cora was ready. She just had to slip into her dress and she would be perfect. Orchid waited in the family room with Cora's mum Hazelle, and her two brothers and sister; Vick, Rory, and Posy. When Cora finally emerged, Hazelle tried, and failed, to hold back a sob. Her daughter looked more beautiful than she had ever seen her. Her ivory tulle dress was elegant, yet modest. The short sleeves finished just below her shoulders, and the neckline was curved, but not low. Tied loosely around her waist was a brown silk sash, the end of which hung half way down her skirt, drawing the eye downwards, to where the bottom of the dress flowed out gently and sat just on the floor, leaving Cora with a little train. Normally, she would have rented a plain white dress, which would have been worn countless times before her. Instead, being a Victor, she was able to order one from the Capitol, though she had kept it simple, compared to Capitol standards.
Walking to the Justice Building - she could have hired a car, but she wanted to try and keep to Twelve's traditions as much as she could - Cora felt butterflies inside her.
"Sweetheart, what's the matter?" Orchid asked as she stopped in the middle of the path.
"I - I don't know if I can do this," Cora stuttered, her voice cracking a little. Orchid took the young bride by her shoulders and turned her to face her.
"Cordelia, do you love him?"
"With every inch on my being."
"Then get in there, tell him that, and get married."
"Okay, okay, I'm going," Cora laughed. Orchid always knew how to make her laugh. Inside, Gale was waiting for her, dressed up in a suit.
"Hey, be thankful I didn't leave my miner's clothes on," he grinned as Cora raised her eyebrows at him.
"I didn't say a word. I've just never seen you looking so smart."
"Well, it IS my little sister's wedding day after all. Are you ready?" Cora nodded and took her brother's proffered arm, then took a deep breath as the doors opened. Fifty smiling faces gazed over at the two of them, as Gale walked his sister into the room. Giving her away, was what they called it in the old days. Peeta had a tear in the corner of his eye as his bride walked towards him.
"You look beautiful," he murmured.
"I love you."

Half an hour later, they were declared man and wife, and the Mayor tried to assign them a house, but Cora insisted that she would move in with Peeta, in the Victor's Village. Technically as she was still alive, her mum and younger siblings got to stay in their house, instead of going back to the Seam, where Gale was living. Gathered around the hearth in the main room of their new home together, family and close friends with them, they held a slice of bread, in tongs, over the fire and toasted their new marriage. Out of the corner of her eye, Cora saw Willow and Acacia stood with Haymitch, all three grinning like wild cats.

I woke up, my face wet from the salty tears that were falling down my face. It had been such a vivid dream, it felt so real. When he kissed me, I felt the tingling, the rush of pure love flow through my body. But that's all it was; a dream. I crawled out of bed and made my way to my en-suite bathroom, where I washed my face to try and hide the fact I had been crying. I didn't realise I had fallen asleep, but it didn't matter now, as Effie was knocking on my door. We were almost at Five and Cinna needed to get me ready.
"Cora listen," Peeta started, as we waited inside the Justice Building, ready to give our speeches. "No Peeta, don't, it's ok. I agree, we need to do something," I whispered, "and this is the right thing to do." Stepping out to the waiting crowd - who, like most of the other districts, didn't seem overly welcoming - I saw the large banner with Foxface's face on it. Jade. That was her name. It was pretty, like her. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and then began.

It was six months since I had last been here and yet it felt like yesterday. Stepping onto the platform, I stopped. The sight of the brightly coloured people milling about with ease had made my chest tighten. Peeta and I had taken to sharing a bed each night. Effie had taken me to one side in Eight a couple of days ago, and warned me that people were beginning to gossip about the two of us. Well, it's not as if they weren't anyway, was it? Let's face it, we were currently the most talked about couple in Panem. Good or bad, people were talking about us. I told her we would try to be a bit more discreet, but I secretly hoped it would get back to President Snow. It was easier to sleep when Peeta was there with me anyway. We just curled up like we had done in the cave and comforted each other by just being there. Peeta's arms wrapped around me as I drifted off to sleep was currently the only thing keeping me vaguely sane and rested.

“Come on Cora, I’m here. I’ve got you,” Peeta murmured in my ear, and he slipped his hand into mine. We wove our way through the crowd, ignoring the excited whispers and the pointing fingers as we passed. My heart was hammering so hard against my rig cage that I was sure everyone else could hear the ‘thump, thump, thumping’ it was making. Slipping into the sleek, black car waiting for us at the entrance, I was inwardly thankful the windows had been darkened, so no-one could see inside. Portia smiled at me from across the seat, so I smiled back, weakly.

“Drop me off here,” Haymitch called out to the driver, who obeyed silently. I wondered if he was an avox, I hadn't heard him talk, only nod to questions and instructions. If I was concentrating on my surroundings, I would have found it strange that Effie didn’t question the fact he was doing something off schedule. Instead I was trying not to have a panic attack. Being back here was more stressful than I thought it would be. Once Haymitch was out of the car, we slipped off back to our original route.

The Training Centre came into view as we rounded the final corner and I gripped Peeta’s hand. “I can do this,” I smiled, taking deep breaths.
“I know you can.” Peeta smiled and kissed me on the cheek. Normally on the Victory Tour, we
would be sleeping on the train as we had been, but Effie said that because we would be announcing our engagement, she had sorted it out so that we would be staying in the Capitol overnight.

Haymitch arrived back at the Centre mid-morning and informed us we had an hour to get ready; we were going to be interviewed. This time, however, it wouldn’t be in front of an audience like the regular one tonight, this was going to be a private one; just us and Caesar Flickerman.

Effie had gotten us the interview under the guise that we were unique, we were two victors from the same arena, and so everyone wanted a piece of us. Caesar was apparently over the moon when he was offered the chance to see us in private, and Cinna got straight to work on an outfit for us. We needed a separate one for each interview, and I had probably worn more clothes on this tour, than I had owned before my Games. Everything we needed was at our disposal, so after a hot shower under the powerful jets of water, and the wild cherry scented, thick, luscious foam. I was given a body polish and an all over bronzing, before slipping into my dress that would be forever known as the one that I was proposed to in. Not that anyone except the six of us knew that of course.

Caesar was already in the room when we arrived, and he greeted us with enthusiasm.

"Cora, Peeta, it's so lovely to see you again. It was such a lovely surprise when Miss Trinket got hold of me to say you wanted a private meeting before tonight's show," he gushed. Even for someone who was a celebrity, it was still exciting meeting the two of us together. "So how are you both?"

"We're really well," I smiled, taking a seat. This was beginning to feel like home now, a thought that scared me a little.

"That's good too hear," he replied, giving us a flash of those dazzling teeth. "So we're just going finish setting up, and then the cameras will be rolling." We waited for a few moments, just making small talk and then Carenza, the cameraman - or rather, camerawoman - indicated we had 30 seconds until she was rolling. Venetia, Caesar's personal stylist stepped over to coif his hair once more, and then we were ready. This year, he had gone for a lavender colour, which got progressively darker as the layers went down. He pulled out a long, thin, silver case from his pocket and opened it up. I couldn't see what he was doing as he had his back to me, but I tried to hide my surprise when he turned back to reveal a pair of reading glasses sat on his face, looking as though they had been there all this time. Caesar raised a purple eyebrow at the look and said, without an ounce of embarrassment, "Loathe as I am to admit it, I'm not as young as I used to be." And then he peered over at Haymitch and asked, "How is she?" Haymitch shot the two young victors a sideways glance, and replied,

"She's okay, I think, aside from the dreams." I wondered who he was talking about, and shot a sideways glance at Peeta, who seemed to have a similar expression.

"Twenty seconds guys," the warning came from behind the camera. Caesar reverted back to professional mode, as he slipped his black framed spectacles off again and cleared his throat.

"Three, two, one," mouthed Carenza, then pointed to indicate the camera was rolling.

"Peeta, Cora, welcome," Caesar smiled, turning to the two of us.

"Thankyou for having us here," Peeta replied smoothly. He still knew how to play the cameras, how to work the audiences.

"I hear you've had a busy couple of weeks, touring. How was it?"

"It was hard, seeing the families of those who were in the arena with us," admitted Peeta, "but we had each other to help us through the nightmares."

"We want to thank all the Districts for laying on such spectacular banquets for us each night aswell," I said. "We really enjoyed tasting the different things each of them had to offer. Something we wouldn't normally have the chance to, thankyou."

"So what ki-"

"Caesar, I hope don't mind, but, I want to ask a question." Caesar started to ask us a question himself, but Peeta had interrupted him, his voice shaking a little. I could see the glances between Carenza and the Master of Ceremonies.

"No, go right ahead." He always had time for his tributes. Peeta stood up, and I could see the mild confusion splattered across Caesar and Carenza's faces. I tried to hold back a smile, but I know I was
failing terribly, because my insides felt like a herd of wild horses were galloping through my stomach and it was moving up to my face. Staged or not, Peeta was about to propose to me and I felt like the luckiest girl in the world.

"Cora, I've been thinking for a while now, and I've realised that I want nothing more from the future, than to spend it with you." He got down on to one knee, and held on to my hand. "Will you marry me?"

"Yes, yes of course I will," I cried, nodding and trying to wipe away the happy tears that were threatening to fall down my cheeks. He stood up and scooped me up, twirling me around as the Master of Ceremonies stood with his mouth agape, looking more excited than a kid in a never ending sweet shop!
Normally we would be in our rooms, resting, or beginning to get ready for tonight's ball at President Snow's mansion. Instead, Effie had made sure there was time to go ring shopping. Two hours, that's how long she had managed to wriggle everything about to give us time. Caesar had made sure his favourite jewellers would be expecting us, as well. Sure enough, half an hour later and flanked by three Peacekeepers, we were on our way to Davenport & Bellamy; the jewellers favoured by Caesar Flickerman.

"Congratulations, Miss Hawthorne," the Head Peacekeeper said as he walked us to the car. I looked up to see any sign of sarcasm, and was surprised to see there was none.

"Thankyou, sir," I replied, my smile still trying to burst through.

"Please, Head Peacekeeper Casanova." I looked up at the man, at the winter sun glinting off of his round, bald head. His beard, while wasn't long, it was clearly past the point of being stubble, and was peppered black and white, and his amber eyes didn't seem anywhere near as hard as I imagined they would be. "I have personally chosen these three men to escort you and Mr Mellark to the city centre. Hathaway; Callington; O'Rourke," he barked, and three men in identical uniforms marched over. "These men will take care of you both, you have my assurance," Head Peacekeeper Casanova said, turning back to us again.

"Thankyou," Peeta replied, shaking his hand.

"Miss Trinket has given you two hours at Davenport & Bellamy. That should be sufficient time to make your choice?" Head Peacekeeper Casanova asked.

"It should be," I grinned delirious at the pending jewels at my disposal. Money wasn't a factor. We could afford anything we wanted. Peeta had said that he wanted to do this properly even if it was just for show. He still wanted something real just for the two of us. I didn't normally get all giddy at pretty, shiny things, but this was different. The ride through to the centre of the City didn't take too long. It was a smooth ride and I was grateful for the darkened windows again. We would be getting enough attention in the store as it was - hence the escorts - so for the few moments I could get some peace I relished it; resting my head on Peeta's shoulder, not caring what our escorts thought.

"So he is Head Peacekeeper for the Capitol?" I asked Peeta.

"No, the whole of Panem. I over heard him talking to Caesar as we were leaving. Looks like they know each other pretty well." I began to raise my eyebrows, until I realised that not only did both men live and work in the Capitol in high powered jobs for the President it was entirely feasible that they knew each other through work due to the type of work each man did.

Davenport & Bellamy was probably the sparkliest building I had ever stepped foot in. The outside of the building looked quite unimpressive, slightly imposing. There was a large, bronze clock high above the entrance to the store which showed it was half past one now. The busy street behind us was full of colour, buzzing with activity. More so because we were stood in it. Stepping through the glass doors, however, was like entering a whole new world entirely. It could only be described as a place from the old days, before Panem. A place called Narnia. There isn't very much information about Narnia, only that it was spectacular, vast, mythical.

Two hours later, we were back at the Training Centre, having chosen a ring. The right ring. Tonight, at the ball I knew everyone would want to see it, but before then, it would be introduced to Panem on the Caesar Flickerman show. The nation didn't know we were engaged yet; that was going to be the main topic of conversation tonight.

I nervously twiddled my thumbs backstage. Wrapping his arms round my waist from behind, Peeta brushed his nose softly against my earlobe.
"That tickles," I giggled softly.
"I know, but it's nice and soft," he murmured. "Plus, it has the very nice added bonus if smelling like you."
"You're a suck up," I said, pushing him away gently, but grinning at the same time.
"Are you ready?" One of the backstage crew members, Mendel, came to get us. We had gotten to know him quite well over the last six months, so he was able to be a little more relaxed with the two of us, compared to how he would normally be with guests of the Flickerman show.
"Yeah," I nodded. I turned to Peeta and took a deep breath. His eyes sparkled back at me as he took my hand and together, we followed Mendel to the wings, ready to enter the stage when Caesar called our names.
"...elcome to the stage the Girl On Fire and the Boy With The Bread - Cora Hawthorne and Peeta Mellark!" cried Caesar, with all the enthusiasm and gusto which made him so famous, lovable, and perfect for this job. The audience were clapping and cheering with all their might. We had been greeted like this by the one thousand strong crowd before, but nothing this intense before. The lights were bright, the air was alive, and Caesar was shaking our hands, flashing those spectacular white teeth of his. His hair was just as purple as it was this morning, although his suit was different. Of course it was, I thought, mentally slapping myself. Tonight he was in a lilac shirt, with a glittering black suit, which shone like those disco balls I had seen in some of the Capitol shops. We took our seats next to the Master of Ceremonies, as I tucked the back of my dress to the side of me.
"Welcome back, it's so lovely to see you both again," smiled Caesar, genuinely.
"It's great to be back," I replied, feeling more relaxed about this than I had before. Turning to the audience, he said,
"We are doing things a little different this year folks. I met up with Cora and Peeta this morning, and this is what happened." He gestured towards the big screen behind him, the one which was normally reserved for the Victor when they came out of the arena. Our faces filled the screens, and Caesar's voice seemed loud and booming. I looked so nervous, giddy in fact. There were laughs, a few tears, and even a couple of "awws". Then came the moment. The moment that would change things forever. I gripped Peeta's hand a little tighter as he asked Caesar on screen if he could ask something. Getting down on one knee, he proposed and I had to admit, it did look pretty real. Hopefully Snow would realise that we do love each other and this isn't just some act I concocted to lure Peeta into my game against the Capitol. When the crowd finally calmed down after ten minutes of cheering, Peeta let go of my hand. He dropped to one knee in front of me and opened up the little box containing my engagement ring.
"Will you marry me, Cora?"
"Yes," I gasped, "yes, a thousand times over, yes." Even though he had already asked me, seeing him on his knee, holding out a ring, hit close to home. I had dreamed of this moment for such a long time, although I would have preferred it to be a private moment. However, on stage in front of the entire nation would just have to do! The ring was nothing like I had ever seen. The silver band was embedded with diamonds, but instead of being joined as a whole circle, it curled round like a ribbon and was held together by a silver piece, embedded with pink diamonds. It looked like a 'P' I thought, as I watched the diamonds glitter in the stage lights. 'P' for Peeta. In the centre of all of this, this was yet one more diamond, much bigger than the rest. Beautiful didn't come close. He stood up and swung me around, then putting me back down, he bent his head down and pressed his lips hard against mine. I didn't care we were in front of millions of people, I kissed him back.
"Ahem." We pulled apart, grinning and red yet again.

Back in our rooms in the Training Centre, Portia and Cinna were working once more on getting us into yet another outfit each for the final banquet of the tour - the Presidential Mansion.
"Cinna are you sure this looks ok?"
"Cora, you look beautiful; and I'm not just saying that because you're in my creation," he grinned.
"Okay, I believe you!" I turned to the full length mirror behind me and looked at my reflection once more. The strapless, floor-length dress was stunning. The corset, blue and green chiffon made to look
like peacock feathers, lifted my breasts up just enough without taking away the elegance of my look. From there it flowed down to the floor at the back, but the front was what made it. The chiffon / feathers stopped at the top of my hips, and split open. Underneath was the most spectacular gold and violet shimmering material, which again, flowed out and split open just above my knees, showing off my shins and my emerald green, three inch, peep toe court shoes. Cinna had painted my toenails the same blue as my dress - cornflower blue. On top of those, as the chiffon slipped down my body, Cinna had placed actual peacock feathers, the eyes of which sat on the opening of the split. Looking at my reflection from behind me, I saw that the dress looked as though I had a little train at the back, cinching in my waist. It was backless, hugging around my ribs and down to a couple of inches above the small of my back. I looked amazing. My hair had been placed into, what looked like a messy bun, but had actually taken nearly an hour to get just right, and then blue feathers hung from the side. My favourite part of the whole look though, had to be my make up. Slipping my engagement ring back onto my finger - I had taken it off for my shower - I was finally complete.

As we entered the Presidential gardens, we were overwhelmed by the sheer volume of faces who wanted to see us, greet us, hold our hands, congratulate us, have their photographs taken with us, and so on. As we were in the Capitol, Flavius, Octavia, and Venia, along with Calypso, Atlas, and Athena, were all invited to celebrate with us at the mansion.

"Welcome," said a firm, but soft voice. I looked round, knowing exactly who it had come from, but not wanting to believe that person could speak so softly. We all looked up towards the balcony above us and there he was, President Snow, ready to greet us for the grand finale of the 74th Hunger Games Victor's Tour. "I'd like this time to welcome this year's Victors back to the Capitol, and to congratulate them, personally, on the announcement of their engagement." He held a glass of clear liquid up to the sky, and everyone followed suit. "To Cora and Peeta." Whizzing and banging came from behind us, and turning, we all stood watching in awe of the fireworks. The reds, the greens, the purples. Some that spun around in the air, others that spelled out our names, and then others that turned into dragons. The finale was the dragon exploding and bursting from it's depths was a mockingjay, in sparkling gold. I glanced up towards Snow and I swear he was smirking at me as he held his glass of red liquid next to his face. When the fireworks had finished, we were given permission to wander around the garden before entering the banquet hall. It was the most stunning garden I had ever seen. There was a rose bush as big as one of the armoured trucks we rode in with the Peacekeepers in Eleven, covered from top to bottom with the most glorious white roses I had ever seen or smelled. I bent my head down to take in the scent and couldn't help but smile at the velvety softness of the petals, the way they folded one over the other, yet were opened out like a circular fan. The white of the flower was crisp, sharp, which was in contrast the flower itself. The sharpness flowed down towards the stem, where the vicious thorns were hidden below the outer petals, the green leaves. Unless you know they were there, they would be sure to draw blood. Beyond that, through an archway made from pink cherry blossom trees, was a small petting zoo.

"His grandchildren, I guess," Peeta shrugged when I looked at him quizzically. Wandering around, we came across animals we had never heard of, and saw colours we didn't think existed. There was a small family of capybaras by a pond covered in waterlilies. There were alpacas, woolly pigs, three toad lizards, eastern bongos, okapi (the sign said they were also known as forest giraffes, but I didn't think I had ever heard of a giraffe either), a saiga antelope was galloping around, and there were two proboscis monkeys sat on the lower branches of their tree, their noses hanging down low, like two little old men watching the world go by. The butterfly house was stunning, but the best of all, was seeing the albino peacocks strutting about, their white feathers as bright as the roses on the bushes. All too soon however, it was time to go inside. Effie led us through to the banquet hall and I gasped as we entered. The room was, at a guess, 25 feet high, and the ceiling had been transformed to look like the night sky. About halfway up in the air, an orchestra of 100 musicians were sitting on what looked like thick, fluffy clouds, playing the most beautiful music I'd ever heard. There were tables lining each and every wall, filled with all kinds of food.

"I want to try everything," I smiled, pulling Peeta towards the first set of tables. There were whole
roasted pigs, stuffed with apples. Huge platters of fowl scattered with fruits and nuts. Goats and cows
turning on humongous spits. Food that you expected to have one taste, but was actually something
else. I picked up an icecream cone, covered in green sprinkles with a stick of chocolate poking out of
it. Biting into it, however, I discovered it was actually sausage, mashed potatoes and peas. Next to
that was a platter filled with something I had never seen before, but tasted just like oranges and
peaches. The grilled octopus was a little chewy, but the texture could be closer to pasta. By the time I
had tried the pumpkin soup, dotted with sliced almonds and scattered with a spinach puree, I was so
full up that I reckoned it would be a week before I even thought about food again.
"Cora!"
"Octavia!" I cried, flinging my arms round one third of my prep team. "Athena, how are you?"
"I'm great," the other woman smiled. "What about you two? Congratulations, we always knew it
would happen, didn't we Tavia?" The two women chattered and giggled amongst themselves for a
moment, then suddenly realised we were still stood there, looking mildly bemused.
"Have you tried the different chocolate fountains yet?" Octavia smiled, in that way only they could
in the Capitol.
"No, honestly, I think I may burst if I eat anything else," said Peeta, stroking his fingers up and down
my palm, sending shivers tingling down my spine.
"Drink this." Athena offered him a champagne flute filled with a fuchsia pink liquid.
"What's this?" he asked, putting it to his lips.
"NO," squealed Octavia.
"Not here," Athena told him. "In the bathroom.
"I don't understand," I said, confused.
"It's for when you're too full. It makes you sick, so you can go on eating." They both looked really
pleased with themselves, but I couldn't help feel disgusted. Peeta obviously felt the same.
"I think it's time to dance. Cora, care to join me?" He placed his empty plate and the glass of
vomiting liquid back into a mildly startled Athena's hands, then offered me his arm which I took.

~ Peeta's POV ~
As Cora took my arm, I led her onto the dance floor.
"People are starving in the Districts, and here they're throwing up so they can continue to stuff
themselves more," I sighed into her ear, careful not to say it too loudly. Thankfully the music would
drown out anything I said to anyone except Cora. She had her arm snaked around my waist, with her
fingers gently playing with my lower back, and her other hand was entwined with mine. I didn't
know many dances, there wasn't much of a chance to do so in Twelve, but this one was pretty easy.
Hold Cora, move in a circle. Easy. The camera crew focused in on us as we danced past, but I wasn't
paying attention at this point.
"Do you mind if I cut in?" A jolly voice interrupted us as we twirled around in our own little world.
"Peeta, Cora,"Effie breathed, as though she was meeting her idol. "This is Plutarch Heavensbee,
Head Gamemaker. Successor to Seneca Crane."
"That's a tough act to follow," I replied. Even as I said it, I knew there could be potential
repercussions. Even a newly-crowned victor wasn't immune to punishment if they said the wrong
thing to the wrong person, but it was a risk I was prepared to take.
"Peeta," Effie scolded me like a child, but Plutarch just watched me for a moment then his face broke
into a grin and he started to chuckle. Effie followed suit and I let out a nervous laugh, just thankful I
wasn't going to be turned into an Avox. Cora squeezed my hand and grinned at me.
"May I?" he asked, indicating towards Cora.
"Please." I smiled as he took her in his arms, then left them to dance. I had noticed a large table filled
with all kinds of different cakes and I wanted to admire the craftsmanship of them. I was just
admiring a four-tiered cake with pale green icing, covered in purple and orange flowers, when a flash
of purple hair caught my eye. Caesar Flickerman. I should have known he'd be invited to the party of
the year! The Master of Ceremonies wasn't alone, however. He was holding the hand of Willow
Monroe, the District 7 mentor we'd met a few times, leading her out onto the marble floor. They
They stood close, his arm around her waist, their fingers clasped together, and Willow's cheek rested on the shimmering lapel of his jacket. She was gazing up at him, and the way he was looking down at her was just so... I don't even know how to explain it. Desperate, perhaps? Then she lifted her hand, her fingers stroked his face gently, swiftly, so quickly no one else could have noticed it. They were on intimate terms, obviously, but it really did look like something more, something special, and I wondered why something so beautiful was not public - surely the Capitol would adore such a thing? They looked so lovely, dancing there, like there was nobody else in the world, really. Her dress was the same colour as his hair, his suit was dark, complimenting her perfectly. It was almost as though they'd planned it. They spoke intently whilst they danced, and Willow pulled away a little at one point, gesticulating earnestly with a slender hand, and Caesar's face dropped in a way that I'd never seen it do before. He looked... scared? Maybe a little angry, too. It was odd, seeing him like that, he'd always seemed so bright and amenable when I'd met him in the past. Who knew, though.

"Mr Mellark!" I was pulled back to the present and I spun round to find myself face to face with the head chef for the banquet. "Reuben tells me you have been admiring our work." My mind whirred as I tried to remember what I had been doing just moments before. Ah yes, the cakes. "Yes, that's right," I smiled, taking his proffered hand and shaking it. A young man with curly, rust-coloured hair, I presumed to be Reuben, stood beside him. He must have only been my age. "They are stunning, I'd love to be able to create something like this back home in Twelve." Reuben's face lit up. "You like my cakes?" "I think they're stunning." Before I could say anything else, the head chef, whose name I learned was Otis, hand rounded up three of his serving staff, and was being told there would be some boxes waiting for me when I arrived back at my train later tonight.

Chapter End Notes

The link to the website for Davenport and Bellamy can be found here:
http://davenportandbellamy.weebly.com/

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