The Ivory Maiden

by titania522

Summary

Summary: Cyprian artist Peeta Mellark has sworn off women forever and dedicates himself instead to the arts. A chance encounter with a beautiful, independent girl in the forests of Paphos leads to an obsession with an ivory statue and teaches Peeta a lesson about love. A reworking of the Greek myth of Pygmalion and Galatea. Written for Fandom4LLS, 2014.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Art hid with art, so well perform'd the cheat,
It caught the carver with his own deceit:
He knows 'tis madness, yet he must adore,
And still the more he knows it, loves the more:
The flesh, or what so seems, he touches oft,
Which feels so smooth, that he believes it soft.

[...]

Pygmalion off'ring, first approach'd the shrine,
And then with pray'rs implor'd the Pow'rs divine:
Almighty Gods, if all we mortals want,
If all we can require, be yours to grant;
Make this fair statue mine, he wou'd have said,
But chang'd his words for shame; and only pray'd,
Give me the likeness of my iv'ry maid.

- from The Story of Pygmalion and the Statue from Ovid’s Metamorphosis

The temple of Aphrodite overflowed with admirers of the statues exhibited by the great Cyprian masters. Peeta Mellark felt especially crowded by those who wished to offer their praise for his latest addition to the temple - an exquisite rendition of his patron goddess surrounded by the birds and small creatures of the woods he knew she cherished most. Though clearly sculpted of the same materials as his fellow sculptors, the statue was carved with such attention to every attribute of the Goddess Aphrodite’s immortal face, the observer did not have to imagine the quivering of movement or the flutter of her exhaled breath. His was an uncanny gift for rendition that made even the best works fade before his skill.

He spoke to each enthusiast in turn in that gentle manner he possessed, with precise kindness and good breeding. Though he was the son of a baker, Peeta had risen to fame on the strength of his natural talent. The kingdom of Cyprus was filled with the splendor of his statues, frescoes, and paintings. He was particularly devoted to Aphrodite and honored her repeatedly with the fruit of his extraordinary labors. It had brought him wealth, satisfaction, and fame - all things he received with grace and humility of spirit.

However, though Peeta was a success, he was not always pleased with the inordinate attention his talents brought him. So in the middle of that throng of well-heeled socialites amongst whom he had circulated for the better part of the afternoon, it was with great relief that he felt the presence of his dearest friend and confidante, Finnick Odair, at his side.

Finnick, the son of noble Senator Gaius Odair and a devotee of Poseidon himself, was gifted with the aspect of one who not only lived upon the sea but personified it also. His eyes were the very green of the sea plants that grew along the rocky ocean floor of the Aegean. He was bronze and well-formed, of such idealized male beauty that Peeta had often availed himself of his friend’s figure as a model for his own male statues. Always of a jovial nature, Finnick overflowed with boundless enthusiasm but today, he could barely contain his euphoria, a condition that revived Peeta’s lagging energies and made him smile through his exhaustion.
“Your depiction of the female form is nothing short of genius. This is, of course, an irony from one who has sworn off the entire sex,” said Finnick by way of greeting.

“This is no ordinary woman, but the great Goddess herself.” Peeta made his way out into the afternoon’s warm sunlight, escaping the dim light and oppressive jostle of people moving among the exhibits. “I need not be yoked to a woman to appreciate and reproduce the splendor of her beauty. I have never objected to the gifts Nature so generously endows womankind,” he responded, moving to the gardens adjacent to the temple to find a bench and rest his tired legs.

“But you object to everything else?” responded Finnick, engaging Peeta in an old argument. He pitied his friend and feared that, in his obstinate refusal of the company of women, Peeta would rob himself of one of the greatest riches life had to offer.

“I do not object to anything. I offer my celibacy as a gift to Aphrodite, in gratitude for the joy of executing my art for her glory,” he responded.

“Nonsense,” scoffed Finnick with a mischievous smile. “Your celibacy is not required, least of all in the house of the Goddess of Love herself, who expects as tribute for her approval the exercise of those amorous arts that bring her the greatest exaltation. No, you choose to offer a gift contrary to all the tenants of the house under which you worship.”

Peeta stared off into the lane created by the parallel lines of laurel trees, ending in a cliff that overlooked the sea. On the slope below the gardens grew olive trees in their rugged, luscious abundance, the heavy meat of their unripened fruit weighing down the boughs of the grey-green branches.

“Does it not satisfy you that there are those in the world for whom physical love may not be their destiny? That perhaps they do not possess the faculty to tolerate the intimacy of a woman, in particular, when women in general are in their very characters cold, cruel and vain?”

“It is not so, Peeta! I have known many women, in various degrees of intercourse and they are not in the way you describe!” Finnick exclaimed in frustration. “You will take offense, my friend, but you have allowed your unfortunate family circumstances to taint you towards all womankind and you will be the poorer in life because of it!”

Peeta’s thoughts flew right away to his mother, darkening his mood with melancholy and anger.
“I have known women also and have found the opposite of what you say,” said Peeta with studied calm that belied his raging emotions. “I cannot trifle with a sex that thinks only to their vanity and cares nothing for anyone beyond themselves.”

“You find what you seek, my friend. If you search the world for the color blue, it is blue that you will find every time. For perfection is not the purview of human beings, either male or female. It is in that uneven exercise of virtue and vice in which we find the joys and disappointments of intimacy. But to rule out all female company apriori will only lead to bitter loneliness.” Finnick’s face hardened momentarily against his friend. “Dare you say that my Annie possesses the same defects of characters as those women you reject.”

“Finnick!” Peeta exclaimed, fearing to offend his friend, “You know very well the esteem with which I hold Annie, your mother, and many other women. But these are exceptions and I have not been as fortunate as you in finding an exceptional woman who would have a moment to spare for me.”

Finnick made a sound of exasperation at Peeta’s words, muttering to himself in clear frustration. Peeta tired of this argument with Finnick and chose silence as his best response. If only Finnick knew that, indeed, he was already afflicted with that disease of bitter loneliness, that his only company were the statues of his studio and the patience and care of his various friends. It was this loneliness that, in growing resentment, made him ever more determined to avoid further romantic entanglements with women. After several minutes, Finnick’s emotions appeared to have cooled. He changed discourse and approached the subject which had caused him to seek out his friend in the first place.

“Peeta,” he said, almost warily, though his entire frame quivered with a barely repressed energy. “I seek your blessing.”

Peeta refocused his attentions on Finnick. “What new undertaking would you have me approve?” he said with humor, for his friend was always filled with a multitude of schemes.

Finnick took in an uneven breath. “I am to be married, friend. I have asked Annie to be wed to me within the fortnight, during the full moon.” He smiled proudly at his confession and awaited his friend’s response.

“By the gods! Well done!” laughed Peeta with wholehearted pleasure and no small amount of guilt for possibly offending his friend. “You are surely marrying the most worthy girl in all of existence. Of that I have no doubt!” He clasped his friend to him and held him with sincere joy. Finnick was a
good man and a solid friend and Peeta desired only his persistent happiness in all things, even those that Peeta felt Fate had denied to him.

“We will celebrate at our residence near the sea and remain for the month of Gamelion (January),” Finnick said excitedly. “Come with us and take your repose in my family’s home. My father is more fond of you than he is of his own son!” Finnick laughed, both knowing that Finnick’s father was, in truth, blindly devoted to his handsome son.

Peeta considered the offer, knowing well the land of his friend’s family on the northeastern bay beyond the forests of Paphos and certain that it would be a happy place wherein to rest after his various commissions. As he considered his friend’s proposition, a figure approached them in the waning sun of the afternoon. Peeta saw her outline and golden hair and recognized her radiant form. Cashmere was known throughout Nicosia for her unrivaled blond beauty, so great, some dared to compare her to the goddess Aphrodite herself. To appease the appetite of that jealous Goddess, Cashmere wisely devoted significant energy in gifts and offerings to that deity to avoid incurring her wrath.

“Peeta, I have studied your statue. Your arts are unrivaled by any in Cyprus. You would be the toast of Athens if they ever saw your works,” she practically sang as she gave Peeta and Finnick a kiss on each cheek in greeting.

“Good evening, lovely Cashmere,” bowed Peeta politely.

Her face was an act of natural symmetry - her cheekbones equal in proportion, the perfect sweep of her chin, the high, almond slant of her blue eyes. Peeta enjoyed looking at her for she was a paradigm of feminine beauty. She had been somewhat infatuated with him for years and for a brief period, he had succumbed to her charms. However, few knew of Cashmere’s deep indifference to anyone other than herself, and after suffering from her disregard for his happiness, Peeta had made himself immune to her allures for the utter shallowness of her character. No one spent more time in baths and spas than she and as for the development of her intellect beyond that which pertained to the arts of vanity, there was little to recommend her.

“My father is hosting a celebration for the artists contributing to the Winter Festival. Please, both of you must join us and bring happiness to our house. Perhaps I can finally entice you into a dance or two?” she smiled seductively at Peeta.

Finnick chuckled as Peeta prepared his upteenth rebuff. “It would be our singular honor, but I have just compromised my leisure on the eastern Aegean coast with this brute in celebration of his upcoming nuptials. Otherwise, it would have been my pleasure to attend your celebration.”
“Is it true, then, Finnick? Will you take Annie as your wife?” she smiled excitedly.

“Yes. We will marry in Paphos and holiday on the coast. You must know our home is always open to your family. We are known for our particular hospitality in that part of the land.”

Cashmere gave a strained laughed, for she was not accustomed to disappointment. “Yes, your family is renowned for the open reception of guests both foreign and familiar.” She turned to Peeta. “I am so very sorry that you will not be in attendance. I had reserved a special place at my table for you.” She kissed Peeta again as she departed, a lingering kiss intended to warm his cheek and perhaps provide a last inducement towards her invitation. But very quickly, Cashmere recognized her enticements were futile, for Peeta’s face remained one of stone, and she turned to go.

“May the gods bless your union and make it a happy and fruitful one,” she said in parting to Finnick. Cashmere made her way down the lane that lead to the steps of the temple, her hips swaying gently beneath the shifting material of her gown.

Their eyes lingered on her receding beauty. Finnick gave Peeta a meaningful look that Peeta chose to ignore. To Peeta, his infatuation and subsequent disappointment with Cashmere had been a confirmation of his long-held beliefs about women. Instead of satisfying Finnick’s curiosity, he continued the discussion.

“I will make my arrangements for departure, but first I must visit my family’s home and leave my greetings with my mother,” said Peeta quietly, any mirth and lightness of the last quarter hour vanishing at the mere mention of her. His father had passed away five years earlier, and it was only from a sense of duty that Peeta attended his mother.

Finnick clapped his friend’s shoulder when he said this, as he knew what it cost Peeta to visit the old witch. Peeta spoke very little of her, but Finnick understood that the old woman’s behavior was directly responsible for Peeta’s refusal to become involved with a woman. It greatly saddened and angered him that this lot should befall his dear friend. Of all the people Finnick had known in his life, Peeta was perhaps the one most deserving of that very happiness that he had forsworn.

Peeta took his leave of Finnick with a heavy step, and his friend could do no more than watch him undertake his journey home. Though Peeta devoted himself to Aphrodite, he was in spirit and appearance more touched by Apollo - with blond hair that seemed to have been plucked from the God’s crown, and eyes the color of the sky across which the horses of the God raced. He was handsome as well as talented by repute, and Finnick could not help but stare in pity after him.
When Peeta had disappeared at the bottom of the hill, Finnick entered the temple of Aphrodite, now emptying of visitors, and contemplated her statue. Though a devotee of Poseidon, he knew that prayers and offerings to all the gods was a favorable habit. He walked to the animal vendor and purchased the most plump bird. Finnick felt in his heart the utmost sincerity of his offering as he kneeled at the feet of the great Goddess herself. The heat from the burning stones radiated into his skin, but this did not deter him from arranging the offering in the most attractive and enticing manner, the smell of the scorching animal fat assaulting his senses.

“May your beauty and sanctity be praised by all men. I lay this offering upon the stones of your hearth to petition on behalf of my friend, Peeta, that he may come upon a woman worthy of his goodness. There is no other more deserving than he.”

Finnick watched his offering burn, repeating his petition twice more before rising and returning to his home to prepare for his marriage. He turned his back as he left and therefore did not have occasion to see the flames vibrate and turn a deep, cerulean blue before leaping up three times from the rocks as if of their own accord.

XXXXX

Finnick’s family vacationed on a large farm situated outside of the forests of Paphos, which was also the ancestral home of the Odairs. It was an advantageous location, for the lands of the northeastern border spilled out directly onto the sea. At the interior were the thick, almost impenetrable forests of Paphos, and in the distance, the Troodos mountains sat in majestic silence, a light dusting of snow gracing their peaks.

Annie and Finnick’s wedding celebration took days to conclude and many senators and important personages were present to offer well-wishes to the bride and groom. The scented altars of the gods burned for 7 days and 7 nights and wine and fine food overflowed the stately tables of the marble dining halls. Despite the merry-making, Peeta preferred to spend most of his time exploring the countryside in contemplative solitude, seeking out inspiration for his paintings and sculptures. Sometimes, he settled into a quiet corner of the woods to paint or sketch or simply to think on matters that belonged entirely to him. He also worked tirelessly on his wedding gift to his dearest friend.

When he did join the events that were the necessary obligation of a respectful guest, he was as polite and full of decorum as ever. As he watched various couples dance in the center of the dining hall or recline together on the exotically decorated gold and maroon settees replete with plush, velvet pillows, he became fixated at the way the men and women behaved together. He observed, in particular, mothers with their sons, bewildered by the loving gentleness so many of the women displayed towards their offspring. He thought of his own mother, harsh and unforgiving, more quick
with a switch or an insult than with affection and felt that yawning melancholy that often drove him

to his stone, chisel gripped fiercely in fist. He perceived himself as unnatural and out of place,

neither father nor child, spouse nor partner. It was this strangeness, more than anything else, that

compelled him to create companions of marble to assuage his solitude.

The wedding festival culminated in Peeta’s gift to the couple - a bas relief mural in the terrace of their

great home, depicting a pastoral scene along the edge of the sea, representing the bride and the

groom respectively.

“Peeta, you’ve given us too great a gift!” exclaimed Annie as she ran her hands along the gently

colored painting. She grasped Peeta’s hand and kissed it. “We are so very honored by you. How

can we show you our gratitude?”

“Really, friend, you have outdone yourself. Come, what can we offer in return?” asked Finnick.

Peeta smiled gently at the lovely, auburn-haired girl, the epitome, in his mind, of feminine humility

and grace. “All that I ask is that you cherish each other and not forget the joy you have shared with

your friends in these days.”

Annie squeezed Peeta’s hand between hers, startling him with her urgency. “My joy will ever be

incomplete if you do not make for yourself a home with another soul who will tend and care for you.

If you must ask what my great desire is on this day that has been blessed by Hera, protector of the

family and patron of marriage - may she ever be glorified - it is that you find a woman who will do

do you the great honor of being your wife and ease what I see is altogether too lonely a life.”

At that very moment, the wind from the sea swept onto the terrace, as cool and refreshing as the stars

of Orion twinkling above the horizon. The sweet tendrils of that salty winter wind, so temperate on

the island where the Gods still walked the land, threaded through Peeta’s hair as if pulling him along

in the direction of the open balcony. He lifted his eyes and saw the forest of Paphos in the distance

and felt a powerful compulsion to escape amongst its trees, as if there might be some secret

knowledge hidden in its depths reserved only for him.

He turned back to Annie to find her similarly transported by the provocative breeze. “If such a

woman exists, then may the gods place her before me. Most of the women I have known have been

cruel, treacherous, or vain. I have met few like you, Annie.” He bowed his head toward her, “Most

care more for the fashion of the hour than they do for creating a true connection with another soul.

Others…” his eyes clouded with a memory that he dispelled quickly, before it pulled him down into

a pool of unhappiness. “Others are born with hearts unable to cherish even the children that bless

their womb and are harsh, punitive, and mean.” Finnick, who was listening to their discussion, cast a

sad look at his friend for he knew too well after whom Peeta had modeled the idea of woman in his
mind. “I would cherish such a woman if she existed for me, and I proved worthy of her also. However, until then, I will live this experience through the marital bliss of my two dearest friends.” Peeta embraced Annie and Finnick in sincere affection until they found their discussion at an end by the appearance of a group of Senators, from which Peeta silently withdrew.

Later in his rooms, Peeta sat near the window, staring into the depths of the moonlit forest, watching the trees sway as if beckoning him to come forth among them. Though his ears were filled with the crashing of the surf below the house, he could still detect the rustling murmur of the woods calling to him. The alluring song soothed and comforted him, filling him with a deep serenity that he only ever felt when he sculpted or painted. He did not think to question the melody or the lilting voice for there was no fear to be had in the cradle of her song. Meanwhile, the words of his friends danced in mockery in his head, and he succumbed to the conviction that no woman existed for him and should therefore turn his attentions to matters more concrete and rewarding.

He stood from his place at the open window and walked towards a large object that was covered in a tarp. Pulling the material gently by the corner, he uncovered an ivory block that was so delicately veined, it seemed to glow with an uncanny light from within its stone interior. Peeta ran his hands over the cool, unyielding material, caressing it gently, seeking out the form that longed to be liberated from its depths. Perhaps it was the wedding or the frequent topic of discussion of late, but he felt the feminine spirit hidden in that slab of rock. He closed his eyes and imagined the small, pinched waist, the indentation of her ribs, her sweet, tender navel and the proud, erect breasts. He suddenly wanted to know this creature and free it from its cool captivity. When he felt this way, he understood that he was ready to work.

However, the siren’s song of the forest became ever more insistent, and he knew he would not have any serenity to work until he answered her call. So he would have to wait until morning before he could bury himself in his newest inspiration.

XXXXX

Peeta found himself at the forest edge just as the first fire-red rays of the glowing sun rose over the sleeping world. The trilling melody of longing that had called to him since yesterday was now a low, insistent humming. He entered the woods, which embraced him like an old friend and breathed the fragrant air, filling his lungs deeply with the scent. He wandered along the edge, reveling in the utter solitude of a sleeping world.

He thought of his conversation with Annie, a subject he wished to bar from his mind because it always lead to other, darker thoughts - visions of screaming and crying, of broken pottery and burns, of his mother’s cunning, snake-like eyes slitted in rage at every turn. However, Peeta was powerless to keep the avalanche of memories from overwhelming his senses.
As often happened with him, he was taken back to a moment in his memory when his mother loomed over him as if he were a child again and suddenly lost all awareness of the place he was in. Heart pounding, his agitation became more acute as he descended into the depths of these harrowing scenes and his breath rattled in his lungs as he relived her alternating cruelty and rejection. He raised his arms in self-protection, receiving the blows as if they fell from the open sky, though his mother was miles away. To escape himself, he broke into a mindless run, dodging fallen branches and outcroppings of stone, sturdy evergreen needles clawing at his face and hair as he hurled by the gnarled, angry trees. Still they crashed down on him - his mother’s insults, his father’s ineffectiveness, his older brothers’ pity. It was not until his chest felt like it would burst from the force of his exertion that the memories were forced from his mind, and he returned to present again.

Peeta finally slowed his pace, gulping the cool air as he leaned against a tree trunk, his face and neck wet with perspiration and stinging with scratches. When he was able to breathe again, he took a glance around him and found himself in an unfamiliar part of the forest. He stood at the edge of a slope, below which lay a freshwater lake, its crystalline surface reflecting the muted light of the diffuse early morning sunshine. Peeta suddenly felt an overwhelming desired for the cleansing that those waters would provide.

Descending cautiously to the water’s edge, he removed his cloak and undid his tunic. It was cold, but he counted on that sharp temperature to revive him before he continued on his way. Sinking into the mirrored water, the wicked spell created by the memories of his mother began to dissipate, and he considered his surroundings. He was disoriented in these woods - he had never wandered so far. He let the waters grip him in their brisk depths before emerging quickly. He stood in the chilly air, shivering as he waited for the water to evaporate before dressing again. Studying his environment, he paced the banks of the lake, trying to get his bearings. There were dense woodlands beyond the lake. At the slope where he stood was the evidence of his barreling through the woods. He decided to follow the damaged vegetation until he reached a place where he perhaps would be able to orient himself again.

As the sun climbed in the sky, warming the humid air of the canopied woods, his concern increased with the rising temperature. When he stumbled again on the lake he had abandoned earlier that morning, he was convinced that he was lost. Kicking angrily at a rock, he knelt and drank his fill before considering his options. Half of his day had disappeared as he wandered through the thickets in an attempt to find his way back. He could stay near the lake and wait - Finnick surely would notice his absence and send men to search for him. But the woods were vast, and though Peeta was not accustomed to life in the forest, he knew enough to understand that this part rarely saw human disturbance.

Peeta decided to venture out again, marking the trees as he went so that he might return to this lake if he was unable to find his way. It would also help guide his steps to avoid walking in circles again, wasting precious daylight hours. Peeta was without weapons or supplies, and he did not relish being caught in the wild forest at night. He silently cursed his mother, for the grip of her memory had caused him to become lost and now he found himself in this predicament. Time passed rapidly and still he was trapped in the midst of the thickets, each the exact duplicate of the ones that came before. His desperation increased as the light in the forest waned, and he made haste to follow his signs.
Taking a long draught of water, he felt his stomach rumble. He hadn’t eaten since that morning, though at the very least, he had water. Foraging was difficult because the forest offered little in the first month of the year and soon the sun would descend, plunging the entire area in winter-like temperatures for which he was quite unprepared. His cloak was adequate for a walk in the temperate clime of day but was nothing but a rag in the grip of a winter’s night. He could not see the Troodos Mountains, but he recalled that snow had just begun to fall on those caps so he knew he could count on an uncomfortable night.

However, nothing prepared him for the absolute blanket of darkness and cold that spread with the dying sun. There was still the faint light of the moon, no longer full but diminishing in its phases. Peeta shivered in hunger and exhaustion, every sound causing him to tense in fear and anticipation. When morning finally did come, he greeted it with the exhaustion of one who had held a tense vigil for the beasts of the forests; terrified, cold, and hungry. He repeated his stratagem the next day, wandering farther in the woods in the hopes that he would meet with something, anything that would remind him of the place he had entered. When he had ranged deeply and risked being caught by the setting sun, he began to feel real fear. He was weakened by cold and hunger, and a terrible dread filled him at the prospect of another night among those nightmarish trees.

Peeta sat despondently on a rock near the lake’s edge, considering his dwindling options, but his thoughts were interrupted by a shifting of leaves just beyond the tree line. He scurried between two large tree trunks, wondering what animal would make such a sound. It made sense that creatures of the forest would descend on this lake to drink, and he suddenly questioned the wisdom of making an encampment in that place.

If a bear or a lion had emerged from that copse of trees and vegetation, Peeta would not have been more surprised. What greeted his eyes instead was a person - a wild, young woman. She wore her dark hair in a braid that fell over her left shoulder and had an olive complexion, typical of the natives of the seaside villages. He also noticed that she was not particularly tall, yet she carried herself with the confidence of one who could survive anything. She was regal in an unaffected way, and it struck a curiously powerful chord within him. The bow she held was almost as long as she was, clearly handmade, and she wore a quiver of arrows slung across her back. At her side was a leather bag that bulged, obviously full of game. Peeta decided that, if he had any chance of escaping death in this forest, he would have to make himself known.

Emerging slowly from the behind the trees, hands raised in an effort to appear less threatening, Peeta showed himself to the young lady. “Lady, if I may…”

No sooner had he uttered the first syllable of his greeting but the bow that the girl carried was cocked and armed with an arrow pointing directly at his chest. Peeta blanched, expecting the arrow to make good on its promise to his body. A rush of fear froze his heart in place. However, all that was
forgotten when he looked into those menacing eyes. They were of a grey color unseen in all his travels - luminous and clear, with a dark border that seemed to accentuate their bottomless quality of the color, flecks of crystal radiating out from the pupil. His artist’s eye, even diminished with fear, nonetheless rejoiced in the discovery of something so rare that his distraction with those eyes together with his weakness made him forget the mortal predicament he was in. So great was his rapture that he did not hear the girl when she spoke.

“Are you ill, sir?” she said again impatiently. “I said, what is your business here?” Her voice shook with nervousness and fear.

“Forgive me. I am a guest of Senator Odair. I left his estate yesterday morning to walk the woods. I have since become lost and do not know the way back.”

The young lady’s eyes narrowed as she considered his explanation. “Senator Gaius Odair’s lands lay far to the east of here. You have wandered quite a long way, if what you say is true,” she said suspiciously.

“Please, my name is Peeta Mellark, and I reside in the city of Nicosia. I am only a guest and am quite unfamiliar with these woods. I admit, I became lost out of complete foolishness. The beauty of the land so seized me that I rushed unthinkingly through the foliage and only too late realized my error,” he lied, unwilling to share the true depth of his idiocy.

She nodded slowly at his explanation. “An unwise choice, sir. These woods are home to mountain lions and bears, for which you would make an easy meal.” She took in his appearance - the haggard face, the dirty but well apportioned cloak, and the clear terror that emanated like a shield from his body. After a long pause in which she appeared to conduct a mental debate, she nodded to herself before lowering her bow and arrow. “Night falls quickly in winter. You will not have time to return to your lands. It would be an honor, sir, to invite you as a guest to our humble home. We have little in the way of luxury, but you will be fed and protected. In the morning, I will accompany you back to your friend’s estate.”

Peeta put a hand over his heart in gratitude. It was the custom on this island to treat guests with great respect and though the honor of her household demanded that she offer shelter to a lost soul, he nonetheless did not underestimate how great his fortune was in being found by this young woman.

“Your hospitality will be well rewarded by my patron, young lady. May the gods ever bless your home and hearth.” He bowed before her in a sign of humility.
The young lady appraised Peeta further and satisfied with her internal assessment, indicated a path he had not seen in the thickets before. “Sir, we must make haste if we do not wish to make our bed in the forest this night.”

“Please, my lady. What is your name?” he asked as he followed behind her.

“Katniss, and my father is Everdeen. Please, hurry. Apollo’s chariot has nearly completed his journey this day.” She turned and walked with a sure foot through the maze of vegetation while Peeta stumbled meekly behind her.
Peeta was not sure what he expected but the home to which she brought him was much smaller and more impoverished than her bearing would have indicated. A simple stone building far from any village, it had nothing to recommend it. There was a small garden, a pen with a goat, and a handful of chickens. But there was no ornamentation of any kind except for a small outdoor altar. Pushing the heavy wooden door open, Katniss stepped aside to allow Peeta entrance.

The inside of the house was as bland as the outside, save for a sprig of evergreen over the hearth and a compact loom for weaving. The small structure consisted of a common area and what appeared to be two adjacent rooms that likely contained the sleeping areas. Peeta was weak from hunger and cold, but this did not keep him from wondering about the family that lived here.

“Prim!” she called out. From the back of the dwelling emerged a young girl of about 15 who resembled Katniss yet was completely the opposite in coloring and bearing. Instead of Katniss’ lean, olive physique, the blush of her skin called to mind ripe peaches. Her hair was of a flaxen blond color, and her eyes were a soft blue, several shades lighter than his own, the same ones who now studied him warily.

“Prim, please heat water. We have been honored with a guest.” Still the girl stared at Peeta with a kind of wonder. “Prim!” hissed Katniss, handing her the empty bucket. “Water, please!”

The girl shook herself from her reverie, bowed, and went to fetch the water, setting it over the open flame of the hearth moments later. Katniss indicated a place before the fire for Peeta to sit while she stoked the flames. Peeta reveled in the heat that spread throughout his body, especially when Katniss draped a thick blanket over his shoulders. He had underestimated how chilled he’d become in the woods and only now noticed it, sitting in his chair as Katniss moved about the small common area. She gathered several bowls and filled them variously with olives, bread, goat cheese, and grain, arranging them in place at the table. Peeta was intent on her movements and did not fail to observe that the girl repeatedly and compulsively placed her hand over the hunting knife that hung from her waist, as if assuring herself of its presence. Though weakened, Katniss clearly did not forget that Peeta was a man alone in a small room with two young women.

Katniss fetched a cloth and basin. She cut a half of lemon and squeezed it into the warmed water before kneeling before Peeta and reaching for his dust-covered feet. The combination of the soothing heat, the smell of food, and the feel of her fingers on his sandal-ties all together brought Peeta to the edge of exhaustion. Katniss placed his feet in the basin and gently washed them with fingers adorned with chipped nails, running the humble cloth up his calf and shins. Peeta stared down at the perfect part of her braid, the strong, solid shoulders and shapely, feminine arms. He smelled the forest on her skin and thought of the siren’s song that had called to him the night he felt
compelled to set out for his fateful journey. The song had also hinted of evergreens and dark moss. In his mind, the mournful melody, the woodland smell, and this young woman became inextricably linked, and he felt a longing grow up in his chest that he did not recognize - a longing to become lost again but in a far different way than he had been lost before.

When she finished cleaning him, she removed the water, washing her own hands before inviting Peeta to sit at the table. Prim, who moved with the timidity of a mouse, opened the wine jug and poured it into a cup.

“Sir, please eat. It is not much but it will take time to prepare the rabbit for supper, and I am sure you are very hungry,” said Katniss.

“Yes, indeed. Thank you,” he said before devouring, with as much grace as his hunger allowed, the portions she provided him. As he ate, she and her sister prepared the rabbits expertly, cleaning the animals and removing the excess parts, then wrapping them in herbs before spearing them and placing them over the open flames. Prim cast surreptitious glances at Peeta while he ate, her curiosity overcoming her good breeding. The smell of the roasting meat filled the small home, remarkably aromatic despite the simple preparations, and he associated this smell, too, with Katniss.

The simple meal of meat and barley cakes was laid before Peeta while Katniss and Prim silently took turns replenishing Peeta’s plate as well as their own. Having eaten from the cheese and olives, Peeta was not as hungry as he had been upon first arriving. Katniss fussied quietly over her sister, ensuring that the young girl ate the lion’s-share of the meat that remained after serving Peeta, leaving Katniss with very little. Peeta protested that he had eaten more than enough, but she would not hear of it, insisting that he eat as much as his stomach could hold. Katniss was polite and asked about his profession, the city of Nicosia, the people, and their customs. Prim, however, showed a more acute curiosity about his art and after she’d overcome her shyness, asked many questions of Peeta.

“Is it true that in the temple of Aphrodite, there is a statue of the goddess as tall as the building itself?” asked Prim excitedly. Katniss cast her a quelling look which the young girl either did not see or worked hard to ignore.

Peeta smiled at her enthusiasm. “Indeed, it is so large, birds perch fearlessly on her crown. There is an opening in the dome to allow light to enter and around the walls are statues representing her in different attitudes and incarnations. I have lately contributed a statue, named Afrodíti apó to dásos (Aphrodite of the Forest). I was inspired to pay homage to the natural spirit of the goddess of Love, free of artifice or elaboration. It is, I believe, the way in which her representation is the loveliest.”

Katniss observed him as he spoke, making him uncomfortable but not entirely in an unpleasant way.

“Do you suggest that the Gods are most benevolent in their natural state? Does there even exist a natural state for them?”
Peeta picked up an olive, rotating it in his fingers. “I think that the Gods are unchanging. When I sculpt, I imagine that I am sculpting the great goddess Aphrodite herself. But what I am really sculpting is a humanization of that divine being. Therefore, Aphrodite comes to represent the ideal woman. The conclusions I draw through my work are ones I draw about women. In the case of my most recent sculpture, I reason that women are best when they are unaffected and simple, without vanity, self-interest, or pride. They are a mirror of nature and possess principles uncorrupted by the decadence of civilization.” Peeta sighed sadly. “Pity, I have never quite met a woman of that sort.”

Katniss stood up to collect the items from the dinner table. “I wonder that you will ever meet her. She sounds too perfect to exist in the flesh and perhaps it is better that this ideal only reside in stone. A more honest and realistic representation of the female would be had your statue shown beauty and temperance but also impatience, anger, suffering, selfishness and yes, even some vanity. Then your “ideal” would have a chance of existing.” She paused and gave him a look so withering, he felt immediate shame. “I wonder, if in your eyes, men must attain these same lofty standards to earn your trust and friendship?”

Peeta was dumbfounded by her reasoning and boldness in expressing her opinion. He opened his mouth to respond but a sound from one of the back rooms caught his attention. He watched as both Katniss and Prim hurried to that part of the house. Listening carefully, he heard a sob, then a shout that brought him quickly to his feet, ready to intervene on behalf of the ladies. At the threshold, he observed an older woman, in appearance similar to Prim, being rocked in Katniss’ arms. Prim held the woman’s hand with an expression of infinite pity. The older woman had the same gold hair, tied back with a piece of leather, and wore an old but clean chiton. She mumbled incomprehensibly to Katniss, to which she responded in a low, soothing voice, stroking the older woman’s hair until she seemed to go still. Apparently satisfied, Katniss followed Peeta, now somewhat embarrassed, back to the common area while Prim remained with the woman.

“Do not concern yourself with my mother. She is ill and has been so for some time,” Katniss said coldly, gathering the remaining bowls from their dinner. Peeta was unbearably curious about the occupants. Until now, he had seen no evidence of a man - no shoes, boots, or other clothing. The hunting accoutrements were those of Katniss. Peeta’s eye for detail had in fact had detected any other inhabitants beyond the three women. All he saw was this capable young woman, her delicate, younger sister and a woman who was in the grip of more than a physical illness. Unable to restrain himself, he asked Katniss, “Are you and your family alone here?”

Katniss froze for a moment from her chores before continuing, looking at Peeta suspiciously out of the corner of her eye, her hand ghosting briefly over the knife on her belt. After an interminable pause, she completed her task and indicated that Peeta should follow her without answering his question.

She stopped before the room opposite her mother’s and pointed at the simple bed. “You will sleep here this evening. Prim and I will sleep...in my parent’s room...with mother.”
“I cannot take your room! Surely, there is a stall or some dependence I can retire to!” Peeta exclaimed.

“This is all that we have, sir,” she stated simply. “You have surely slept poorly on the hard ground of the forest. Please…” her eyes flitted away from his, “It would be an honor for our family if you slept in our bed this night.” She said this with sincerity, her gaze finally settling on him in sudden shyness. Peeta caught a brief flashing of her eyes, as if they held a message meant only for him. It mesmerized him and filled him with a desire to understand that message and every other secret she held tucked away behind her hard exterior. He shook himself. Impossible! She surely could not wait to have him out of her house. As if confirming his reasoning, her eyes became hard again, her face set in a scowl as she bid him good night.

Withdrawing from her, he retired to the bedroom, his mind and spirit a tumult. He thought of the statue he had wrought for the temple of Aphrodite, the qualities he believed he was exalting, and realized now that there were other qualities he had perhaps overlooked, for they had been, until now, the purview of men. Qualities like competence, intelligence, fortitude and strength. His tired mind struggled with the events of late - being lost, then rescued, and finally brought back to this home. He fell under the spell of a vision of Prim and her mother that appeared like a waking dream in his mind, two women entwined in each other’s arms, and Katniss standing like Pallas Athena over their sleeping forms. She was at once ordinary and divine, a combination he had never encountered in his travels.

His mind would not resolve the contradiction. He had indeed slept next to nothing the night before, and now he felt his eyes droop in exhaustion, his thoughts climbing over each other in the drowsy tumult of his mind. He was surrounded by her in the rough-hewn blanket that covered him and the pile of furs, where she lay herself down. As he slipped into unconsciousness, it was Katniss who accompanied him into slumber - brave, strong Katniss of the dark hair and silver eyes - fierce, independent, and, if he allowed it, beautiful, with skin that smelled like the forest, the hearth, and of home.

XXXXX

Peeta woke to the booming sound of thunder, followed by the furious pounding of rain on the roof of the small house. For a moment, he was disoriented, knowing and not knowing exactly where he was, expecting at once the pitch darkness of Katniss' tiny bedroom and the opulent brilliance of his rooms at Villa Odair. In the pitch blackness, he could not be sure if it was morning or night, for there were no windows. Casting a glance towards the door, he observed a dim light glowing beneath and decided to rise and satisfy his curiosity.
In the common room sat Katniss in a long wool chiton seated next to a glowing lamplight, working quietly on the feathers of her arrows. At his appearance, she was startled and looked up at him in expectation.

“Sir, it is still early,” she said almost as an accusation, though her fear was betrayed by the sudden widening of her eyes. Peeta was reminded yet again of the trepidation she must certainly feel at having a man in such close confines, with nothing but a hunting knife and a bow for protection. He was struck by the courage it required for her to overcome her natural hesitation and take him in. He suddenly felt both admiration and compassion for her and chose to sit at the other side of the table, hoping that his distance would put her at ease.

“The thunder woke me. I admit, it is quite dark in your bedroom,” he said sheepishly, studying the feathers that were spread before her as she worked.

Katniss nodded, visibly relaxing. “I could smell the rain yesterday. It will storm for most of the day, by my estimation. I am sorry that you must delay your travels another day.” Katniss’ fingers fluttered nervously over the arrow shaft, her movements busy but inconclusive. “Your people will be very worried, I’m afraid.”

Peeta nodded, glancing at the small window of the common area. It was covered by a square piece of animal skin, but the inky blackness of night was clearly visible along the edges of material. “Indeed, I’m afraid my friend will fret mightily. This rain will do nothing to assuage their fears,” he said sadly, for he could only imagine the agony Finnick and his family were experiencing at his disappearance and was sorry to visit such anguish on such kind people.

Katniss, interpreting his expression, set down her arrows carefully and spoke kindly. “Sir, you must not worry yourself overmuch. They will indeed suffer, for you are certainly a valued guest and perhaps a dear friend, but they will be all the more relieved when you finally return.”

“Thank you,” he replied. “It’s that - my friend is just married. I was in Paphos to celebrate his wedding, and now I believe I may have ruined an important moment in their lives.”

“They will certainly not soon forget your disappearance,” she said truthfully. “But I promise, sir, I will guide you safely back to your lands. No harm will befall you as long as you are with me, she said with sudden feeling, her eyes dropping to her lap in embarrassment.

Peeta flushed with pleasure at the idea of this girl vowing to protect him. This only served to deepen the blossoming admiration he felt for her. The air hung tensely between them for several long moments before Katniss, who appeared unable to bear it, stood up suddenly and fetched water in a
small iron kettle.

“I will boil water for tea. If it pleases you, sir, will you take it with me? Perhaps you can tell me about your friend’s wedding,” she said nervously.

Peeta smiled, grateful for the distraction. “It would please me greatly. Thank you.”

The rain wore on, sending daggers of icy water down onto the land. There was nothing to do but stay indoors and wait out the storm. Prim woke some time later and helped her sister prepare the morning meal - grains and dried fruit with fresh milk that Katniss fetched between one of the interludes in which the frigid downpour relented. Peeta would not hear of allowing her to venture alone to milk the goat and so offered to accompany her to the pen, drenching himself in solidarity with her as he collected the freshly laid eggs.

“There was no need for you to get wet also!” exclaimed a frustrated Katniss as they dried themselves before the fire. Prim took the milk and warmed it in the small pot, adding barley and raisins as it heated.

“Nonsense. I’m no one to be served hand and foot. Tell me what I can do to be of service.”

Katniss studied him with some skepticism, and Peeta read on her face her disbelief that an artist - and a city dweller - could have any skills that could be of utility in the small house in the woods.

“My family are bakers. We have great ovens and sell the breads in the marketplace or in our shop. My brothers now manage the shop, but I have not forgotten the craft.”

Katniss’ eyes widened. Flour for bread was costly in most villages and a luxury for the poor. “I have only ever tasted oven bread a very few times. My father...” her eyes darkened suddenly and Prim, who had joined their preparations by the hearth, lowered her head in response also. “My father bought flour on special occasions and taught us to make bannocks. I am sorry I can offer nothing more than barley cakes.”

Peeta’s curiosity was peaked again and before he stopped himself, he asked, “Where is your father?”
Katniss exchanged a brief look with her sister. It was brief, barely a flicker, but in that moment, he observed a granting of permission, and understanding that came from shared secrets. With a kind of resignation, Katniss began:

“My father passed when I was 11 and Prim was only 8, leaving us alone. My mother fell ill afterwards from grief.” She turned towards him, looking at him with something akin to defiance. “You wonder if there is a brother, cousin, uncle - anyone who may be responsible for us. There is no one. We live a strange life here, sir, cast out from our community, our only society that of the forest. There is no place for ones like us except to become servants or concubines, and I will not condemn my sister to that fate.”

She straightened her back. “I risk my way of life with my sister and my mother to keep you from becoming one of the shadows of the underworld. Our only request is that you not betray us. It is best if you forget us when you return to your people.” She turned again towards the hearth to tend the to the milk and barley. Peeta was rendered speechless by their utter solitude and by the implication that he would somehow interfere with her life. It was true that a woman was always accompanied by a man in all stages of her life. To find one so untethered like Katniss was confounding to the mind and left him with much to think about. Women living alone was virtually unheard of and all the trepidation he sensed upon his arrival made sense to him now and filled him with terror on their behalf.

“Is there really no one who can ensure your safety? Even a distant relative?” he persisted, his mind simply unable to admit the harsh facts of their existence.

Katniss laughed ruefully. “When father died, Mother’s spirit left with his. She lives between our world and the land of the dead. I believe she wished to follow my father but her body would not release her spirit so she is half here, half there,” Katniss explained sadly. “Villagers stay away from us because they think she is possessed and do not wish to be similarly afflicted.”

She brought her eyes up to his and he was struck with the idea she could see all the way through him, through to the very bottom of his worthless philosophies and meaningless fears. It dawned on Peeta that this girl, this huntress with the broken fingernails and worn clothes bore the weight of caring for her younger sister and her ill mother quite alone. He felt a violently strange urge to protect her all of a sudden and marveled that she could carry so much responsibility alone.

Katniss seemed to have misinterpreted the look of anguish that crossed Peeta’s face because her own hardened suddenly. “If you fear contamination, do not fret. I have never known anyone to have been afflicted by this contagion in all the years of our exile.” She said this with vehemence as she returned to her work.
Peeta was aghast at what he thought she had understood and never in his life had he made so much haste to make amends as he did at that moment.

“You misunderstand me!” he said as he stood next to her. “I do not fear contagion. I do not judge your life. I…” he searched for the words that would give meaning to the feeling that was growing up in him, a feeling he could not quite himself understand. “I...admire- no, I am in awe of you!” His feeling exploded from him, unknown to him in all the days he had lived until that moment. Katniss’ head snapped up to look at him, an expression of utter disbelief crossing her features. “I have never encountered anyone, who would take on so much, with such care and obvious determination as you appear to have done. I am mortified that I do not have the means at this moment to show my gratitude for all the aid you have given me and to ease, in some way, the burdens you have been forced to bear. At the very least, let me reward you when we return to the Odair lands on the morrow.”

Katniss expression softened, and Peeta was relieved to see that his words had pleased her. Prim, who had listened to the entire exchange with mute wonder, placed a hand on her sister’s arm, and Katniss pulled her close to her. “You must forgive us for our mistrust. It was a sad time in our life and there were many hungry, lonely nights when we first left the village. It is difficult for us to trust strangers.”

Prim nodded and added, “Yes, but it is your right, as a guest, to be well treated and protected. Our hospitality requires no reward. Isn’t that right, Katniss?”

Katniss cast her eyes onto her sister, and an expression of extreme tenderness and pity flitted across her features. “Indeed, Sir. We only require your understanding.”

Peeta sat quietly in his chair, already looking sadly toward his departure. His “understanding,” as they so called it, would require him to walk away from their lives and forget them. It was for their own good, perhaps, and was meant to protect them from outsiders. He would acquiesce to their demands. But as they sat at the small table, with the wind and rain howling at the door, Peeta could not resolve for himself how he would do this. So, as the day passed, Peeta became more and more convinced that it might be beyond his abilities to do so.

They were underway at first light after a meal of fresh milk, grains, and honey. Katniss offered it to him sheepishly, apologizing for the lack of variety - it was all they had in the morning - they ate what they could hunt or forage or whatever their small garden yielded up to them.
“I won’t hear of it,” replied Peeta warmly. “It is the best thing I’ve ever eaten.” He devoured his food eagerly as if to prove the point. Katniss shook her head and smiled at him. Peeta almost choked on his meal, for it was the first time he had ever seen Katniss smile, and it transformed her face, making her look younger and more innocent. She was so dazzling in that moment, he was sure she had captured starlight and reflected it back to him. He lowered his head so she would not see the naked admiration in his face.

Prim stood at the threshold, watching as they took their leave. She was saddened, for she had hoped to accompany Katniss in escorting Peeta back to Senator Odair’s lands.

“I am so sorry, little duck!” said Katniss with sincere regret. “You know we cannot leave mother alone.”

With eyes downcast, Prim nonetheless obeyed her sister. Peeta bent to catch Prim’s eyes. “When we arrive, I promise I will give Katniss something very special to bring back to you. What do you think of that?”

Prim looked up with bright eyes and gave him a sweet smile not unlike her sister’s. “Tell me what it is!” she laughed happily.

“Prim! Don’t be rude!” admonished Katniss with a scowl.

“No, it’s fine,” said Peeta. “It is a small statue of Aphrodite that I made some time ago. Would you like a statue of the goddess for yourself?”

Prim’s face broke into a sweet smile. “Very much, sir! Thank you!” She hugged him excitedly. Peeta returned her affectionate embrace, the girl having already become dear to his heart. A pain lanced through his chest at the realization that he might not ever see her again.

Soon after, he and Katniss began their trek. Peeta considered himself fit by city-dweller standards, but soon realized he was no match for the swift agility with which Katniss moved through the woods. She walked quickly, for she expressed her desire to be back to her home by that evening. She wore a tunic over a short belted peplos, which eased her movements. Peeta stumbled more than once from studying the lean muscles of her thighs as she maneuvered through the treacherous vegetation. To distract himself from his increasing awareness of her feminine beauty, he engaged her
in conversation. “How did you become an expert of these woods?” he asked.

Katniss glanced over at him. “My father taught me to love the woods. We spent most of my childhood learning to subsist on the abundance of food and sustenance found here. He taught me to hunt with a bow and arrow, set snares, study and learn the difference between poisonous and edible plants and essentially anything else he thought I could need to survive. He had begun to teach Prim, but he never got far with her instruction.” Her face twisted into a mass of agony that she quickly covered with a scowl.

Peeta’s heart was moved by the wise foresight of her father. “I am so sorry. My father has been gone these last five years. I was fortunate, in that he became ill when I was of age and had already gained a measure of independence.” He paused. “What happened to your father?”

Katniss stopped suddenly, as they approached a stream. “We can rest here for a bit. We should reach the border of your lands by early afternoon.” She removed her sandals and sank her feet in the water.

Resuming her conversation, Katniss continued. “My father was a laborer in the quarries east of the forest. That is where we originated. There was an accident, and he was crushed to death. I was told he died quickly, for the boulder that fell on him was very large.” Katniss poked at the ground with a tree branch.

“We would have had a chance, perhaps, of continuing our lives, but my mother became a shadow. The people of my village are very superstitious and were convinced Mother carried an underworld spirit inside of her. We were essentially shunned by everyone we knew until we were forced to either leave or starve.” Katniss smiled bitterly. “It was as if my father had foreseen his death and trained us for the circumstances of life without him.”

Peeta could not imagine such solitude. The community was a sacred blessing from the Gods, and everyone had a place in it. To be so ostracized meant certain death and would have been so were it not for this small, fierce woman’s resourcefulness.

Katniss watched as Peeta considered what she had said. “How do you get your supplies, those that cannot be gleaned from the forest?”

Katniss gave him a wry look. “Sometimes, I wear my father’s clothes and pose as a hunter. That way, I can trade meat unobstructed in exchange for the things I cannot cultivate or scavenge,” she chuckled. “I make a very convincing boy.”
Unthinkingly, Peeta blurted, “I find it hard to believe that any amount of male disguises can hide your beauty.” Katniss blushed furiously, and Peeta bit his lips as if to keep them from compromising him further. After a moment of awkward silence, Katniss stood to indicate they should proceed on their journey.

The hours wore on as they moved ceaselessly through the forest. Clouds began to gather in the western sky, ominous and heavy that caused Katniss to increase her speed. At midday, Katniss declared that they had arrived at the borders of Senator Odair’s lands.

“Do you recognize your surroundings?” Katniss asked.

Peeta studied the area. “I am afraid I do not,” he said as he searched for clues to orient himself.

“They will go further,” she said as they pushed forward. Soon the trees began to thin, and the faint smell of the sea crept into the air. It wasn’t until they saw the stone boundary markers that Peeta understood he was close to his friend’s home.

“These belong to their land. We are very near,” he said.

Katniss scowled at this but said nothing. Not one hundred meters further, they came upon the chariot road as the wind whipped the trees and thunder tore at the air. Katniss stopped.

“If you are sure of your way, Sir, then I ask your leave. I must return to my home before the storm arrives,” she said as she peered up at the sky.

“You will not make it home in time,” Peeta said. “If you leave now, I will not be able to give you your reward.”

“Sir, you cannot appear at the home of your respectable patrons with an unaccompanied woman!” Katniss exclaimed.

“You saved my life! I know my friends. You will be well received and cared for. Then, you may take your leave in the morning. Please.” As if to give credence to his plea, lightning flashed across the sky in the direction they had come. “You are no good to your family if you are harmed in the
woods. And I...I could not bear it,” he stuttered with embarrassment. “Let us make haste now, please. We will resolve all later.”

Katniss pulled up short. “I do not know why, but I believe I can trust you. Is it so? Do I have your confidence?” Katniss asked fearfully.

“Of course! You have all my trust,” he said with feeling.

“Then please, do not tell your friends I am orphaned. My tale was only for your ears. I’ve told those few others I come upon that my father is elderly and that I care for him as would an older son. It keeps me…”

“Independent?” interjected Peeta.

“Yes. And without scrutiny. You fear the vanity and levity of women, but you do not take account of our complete dependence on the whims and structures of a society dominated by men. It makes us weak and base, and we earn our places through every kind of deception and manipulation because we are truly powerless. I have known you one day and look how my fate now depends on your understanding and discretion!” Katniss said in desperation. “Remember, when you are among your people, that I have a sister who is now enchanted by you and a mother who does not have the mind to hold the very cup that would quench her thirst. They would die without me!”

Peeta looked at her in panic. “Please, Katniss!” he exclaimed. She started at the use of her name. “I am not Sir to you any longer but Peeta, your friend, and the keeper of your secrets. I will not expose you.” The rain became heavy as it drenched their hair and clothes. “Trust me,” he implored, searching her grey eyes for understanding.

Without thinking, Peeta reached out and grasped her hand. It was warm and slippery in the now pouring rain. Something in the implacable way the rain fell made him suddenly tremble with fear and premonition, and he was loathe to let her hand go. Katniss responded with a sad smile, as if she wanted nothing more than to trust him and gave a small, imperceptible squeeze of his hand before releasing him. He thought it was surely a trick of his vision, but he wondered if he saw tears intermingled among the raindrops, sliding down her cheeks.

Indicating the road, Katniss said “Hurry, you now know the way.”

The rain was a curtain of water barrelling down on them, and Peeta sprinted up the rocky path. He
was pelted on all sides by, the wind blowing against him as if he were moving in the wrong
direction, and the wind would set him to rights again. As he saw the villa come into view, Peeta’s
heart rejoiced.

“Katniss, there it is!” He stopped and turned to show her his friend’s home, eager that he might
finally repay her for the kindness she had shown. He imagined all the gifts he would give her and
grew excited at the prospect of weighing her down with the evidence of his gratitude. He would
even accompany her home and bring Prim the promised statue himself. But when he turned to
indicate that they were finally safe, the lane was empty. Peeta felt a hollow emptiness yawn open
within him as he frantically called out to her, cursing himself all the while that he had let her hand go.

“Katniss!” he ran down the lane, searching for evidence of her on the road or in the trees.

“Katniss!” he called again, but she did not answer. His voice boomed over the rain, the tenor of his
cries bordering on desperation. He became hoarse from calling her name, but the thunder was
unforgiving. He had no choice but to give up and walk dejectedly to Villa Odair, no longer caring if
he caught his death of a chill from the storm.
The joy with which Peeta was received was such that no one in the Odair household observed his misery. A quick summary of what had happened to him and how he had been saved was sufficient to satisfy everyone who had thought Peeta injured or worse. He was attended like royalty - fragrant bathes drawn and clothes laid out that were far cleaner and warmer than the rain-drenched ones he’d appeared in. A healer was called right away to examine his physical condition for illness or injuries, but Peeta knew there was no earthly intervention for his affliction - that he longed for Katniss with a force he had not foreseen. His heart wrenched with the pain of her absence.

“Peeta, we thought you were dead!” exclaimed Finnick with real tears in his eyes as Peeta dressed.

“I thought so too. I was never in such mortal terror in my life,” Peeta said. “But then Katniss appeared...” he trailed off.

“She was in the woods with her family?” inquired Finnick with real curiosity.

Peeta debated on whether to tell the truth to his friend but opted to keep his vow to Katniss. “No. Her parents are elderly and infirm. She was hunting alone when she found me.”

“A huntress! Perhaps a devotee of Diana?” said Finnick, intrigued.

“Not formally, but certainly she carries her spirit.” Peeta stared off into space, as if watching his memories unfold in the air before him. “She hunts and cares for her family. She also has a younger sister named Prim, who worships her. She is quick and intelligent, like Katniss, though of a sweeter disposition, for she does not carry the burdens her older sister bears.” Peeta dropped his head sadly. “She accompanied me to the road but quickly made off so I was unable to thank her for her generosity.”

Finnick stared at Peeta for a moment. “Do I detect a note of...admiration...towards these ladies? How is this? Are they not vain and shallow as you would have predicted them to be?”

Peeta shook his head in absent. “They are exceptions to the rule, like your Annie.”
“And how many ‘exceptions’ should there be before the rule is no longer the rule? I say, Peeta, that the experience of near-death may have been just what you needed to bring a correction to your obstinate opinions where reason did not succeed before.”

Peeta smiled sadly at his friend. “She is more than an exception to a rule. She not only exceeds the measure and valor of women but of men and demigods as well. She is heroic, I tell you, and she returns to her struggle alone!” He suppressed the sudden urge for tears, fearing it would create panic in his friend. “I would not even be able to find her place in the forest again, for it is remote and well hidden.”

He glanced at his friend and did not try to disguise his misery. “I was wrong, Finnick. Pitifully, childishly wrong! I judged women by the wrong measure until I found one that exceeded every measure known to men and proved, incontrovertibly, the pathetic fallacy of my logic. I’ve been a fool and now I will pay.” Peeta sank down onto a nearby settee in misery and emotional exhaustion.

Finnick looked with pity on his friend. “You are of an entirely different mind, now. I can see that. Perhaps the gods have handed you a lesson, friend. It is painful, but it means the gods favor you enough to instruct you.” He stood to wait for Peeta at the chamber door. “Come and eat now. You will think more clearly after a full belly.”

Peeta had to admit that more than a shift in his thinking had taken place. It was no longer possible for him to be as dogmatic as he had been just three days ago. He had lost his indifference, for Katniss had penetrated into his heart as surely as if she had shot him with one of her arrows, and it occurred to him that he would have to live with the pain of not seeing her again all the days of his life.

XXXXXXXX

Peeta accepted the well-wishes of his friends, dining on the abundance of food placed before him. Though he was grateful and polite, the food felt like pebbles in his mouth. Every morsel that passed his lips brought to mind Katniss, and he wondered how she would have liked this piece of stuffed pheasant, that fig, those olives, and perhaps the cheese. He would have put everything before her and made her taste it all until she had become drowsy from eating. When he walked in the rain-cooled gardens, he imagined the tended groves of olive trees, the trimmed grape vines still withered from winter’s abuses through her lovely eyes. He would have explained that soon they would blossom and grow heavy with grapes that would, in their own time, grace their tables and perhaps promise that in the summer, if the fates were kind, they would sample the vintage together.

She would surely have enjoyed the stone statues that adorned the terrace of Senator Odair’s home.
Annie would have delighted her with her simplicity and kindness; Finnick would have made her laugh at his antics with his gift of finding humor in the most common things. Senator Odair and his wife would have treated her with gentility and perhaps, she would have been so well cared for, she would have decided to venture with him to Nicosia together with Prim so he could finally show them the giant statue of Aphrodite. He could have given the young blond girl the statue he had set aside for her and many such ones like it to adorn their plain home.

Peeta could not control his mind as it wandered, alternately comforting and torturing him with ever more elaborate fantasies, but when he retired to his rooms, nothing brought him satisfaction. The forest no longer sang as it did that night but moaned with a low dirge of loss. The sea air and evergreen boughs reminded him of her so acutely, he almost felt compelled to close the window and shut out the memory, though he knew the dark thing was already inside.

In the worst of his melancholy, he cast a glance at the giant slab of marble. He ran his hands over the cold stone as he had that first day he received it, feeling the feminine spirit pulse strongly in the veins embedded within. He felt the soul of the inanimate thing speak to him, quickening his blood. He was, for once, without preconception or notion of what he intended with this object. Grasping his chisel, hammer and file, he positioned the sharp object on the spot where the legs struggled to become free and struck with the precision and determination of one who would free more than stone from stone.

XXXXX

Peeta worked like a man possessed until Finnick came to visit him and forced him to pause to eat and bathe. His friend was accustomed to Peeta’s artistic frenzies, collapsing within himself when he was in the throes of a creative endeavor. However, he had never seen his friend like this - a madman, one who ate and slept very little. He worked with the windows facing the forest wide open, even when it stormed, which it did with uncanny frequency in that period, as if the tempest Peeta carried within his chest was released with his attack on the stone, inciting the very clouds and winds themselves into furious chaos. Those winter storms struck without warning, drenching the land in their sorrow.

When it came time to return to the city more than a month later, Peeta guarded the statue personally. He sat in the carriage bed with his precious creation, despite the discomforts of the ride. Finnick could not persuade Peeta to ride in the closed chariot with him and Annie. Finding that his friend was stubborn in his determination, Finnick eventually agreed to sit together with Peeta, and the statue on the long journey to Nicosia. Peeta was silent and indeed, had not spoken for days, and so the journey home was a silent one.

XXXXX
Peeta finally spoke as they entered the pillars of the city. “Thank you for your hospitality and kindness, my friend,” he said mechanically as they entered the quarter where they both kept their homes.

Taking the opportunity to finally speak to Peeta, Finnick responded, “I have worried about you these past weeks. Ever since you returned from the forest, you seem afflicted in spirit. You can share your burdens with me.”

Peeta shook his haggard head. “I have nothing to speak of. I am inspired by my statue, that is all.”

“I know you too well. You are a man in the grip of a great passion. It is that young woman, Katniss. She has cast her net over your heart.”

“Finnick, it is merely my interest in the statue…”

“No!” exclaimed Finnick. “This is not your usual fixation on your art. You are heartsick, my friend. And attaching yourself to this statue will not cure it!”

Peeta took a deep breath, not willing to listen to what his friend had to say. “The Festival of Aphrodite takes place very soon. I am considering offering this statue in tribute. Because it is near, I am working as quickly as possible to have it ready. Nothing more!” At that moment, the chariot stopped and Peeta leapt off, as much to assist with the transport of his artwork as to escape further discussion with Finnick, for it filled him with a terrible anguish.

But Finnick would not be deterred. As Peeta directed the laborers and moved around his studio, preparing to continue his work on the sculpture, Finnick followed him about until, in frustration, he planted himself in front of him. “I may not be an artist, but I know something about love. You love this girl, and it is consuming you body and soul.”

“Finnick, please!”

“No, Peeta! Your experiment has failed. You cannot continue the folly of your solitude when you pine after this girl day and night! You must care for yourself now, and separate yourself from your obsession with this statue or it will destroy you.”

“What would you have me do?” Peeta shouted, abandoning his calm and giving vent to a small part
of the torment in his soul. “I will never find her again, even if I raised an army and searched the entire forest for her! And even if it were possible, she does not want to be found. She requested, in the most uncertain terms, to be forgotten. I gave her my word and now I must live with it.” Peeta spread his hands beseechingly before his friend. “What alternative do I have?”

Finnick grasped his friend in a powerful embrace. “It grieves me to see you in this way. I have no cure for what ails you. I only beg you not to shut yourself up in your studio.” He pulled back to study his friend. “While I am here, I will not allow it.” Finnick cast a dark glance toward the covered statue. “I have not seen your latest creation but I, for one, will be overjoyed when you finally complete it and release it from your care. It...persecutes you, taunting you with what you cannot have, and I fear for you and for your sanity.”

“Very well,” Peeta said tiredly. “I will complete it and consider what to do next.”

Finnick nodded, unconvinced but with no other recourse than to wish his friend farewell and join his wife at his own home.

After Finnick’s departure, Peeta bolted the door of his studio. He tore the tarp off of his creation, and as he often did in these last days, stared at it with something beyond mere admiration. He followed the fine lines from the top of the lovely woman’s crown, down the thick rope of hair that flowed over her naked shoulders and rested lightly above her bare left breast. He had fashioned her fine, powerful arms from his memory of her washing his feet. He imagined her pinched waist and flat stomach, over which sat the small vortex of her naval. Her hips and waist were his own pure invention, a fantasy that brought fire to his blood as his eyes slid lower. His only experience with a woman had been with Cashmere, but he had sculpted something else altogether when he worked over his Ivory Maiden - as she came to be known in his mind - something so intimate and gentle he did not believe it could really exist.

He shivered as he studied her legs. They, too, were a replica of Katniss’ as she walked in the forest with him. He circled behind the statue to study the dimples at the small of her back just above the perfect swell of her buttocks, the smooth line of her spine and back. It overwhelmed him in its resemblance to that wild and noble girl. He stood before his masterpiece, his hands caressing the skin that would not yield to him, searching for the warmth that did not exist and crumpled under the deception. He put his arms around the statute, always careful not to apply excessive pressure, and let his tears slide over its shoulder.

Peeta did not tell Finnick this, but he had poured every drop of desire and longing he had felt since his return from the woods into this object. Perhaps, he believed it would empty him of the unhappiness he carried within him. And yet, though his statue was largely complete, his misery appeared inexhaustible. Unable to free himself from the spell of his anguish, Peeta abandoned himself to it, letting his tears run in salty rivulets over the stone arm, unwittingly leaving a moist scar behind in the perfect marble.
As the city prepared for the Aphrodisia, Peeta labored over his statue in a fit of perfectionism. When visitors came to his studio, he covered her with a silk drape acquired for that purpose. He did not acknowledge the fact that he kept her so obscured because he could not bear the eyes of strangers looking on her form, that she was for him only and covered her in consequence of his jealousy. However, the reason he used to deceive others was that he simply did not want them to see his work in progress.

But the nights mercilessly exposed his lie, when he pined hopelessly for the grey-eyed girl, and the music of her woods. In his studio, her ivory image was always before him and she was an apparition that accompanied him during his daily journeys. Her absence, instead of causing him less pain with the passage of time, became more acute until the day came when he thought he could not endure the endless lonely days without her. He cursed his obstinacy, his unwillingness to see her virtues right away. He wished he would have had more time with her and perhaps if he had, he would have arrived at this truth much sooner, that he loved this girl and perhaps could have persuaded her to love him in return. But the moment of his surrender found him alone before the Ivory Maiden, with no further recourse for the frustrated desires of his heart.

The Festival of Aphrodite began as it always did - with much dancing and a procession with a statue of the Goddess being carried through the town to the river. Peeta was expected to attend but deferred all festivities, claiming illness as his excuse. Revelers danced in the streets near the temple and drums and tambourines inspired visions of the hypnotic rhythms of the world beyond the human realm. Peeta found himself in the twilight hour at the temple of Aphrodite, immune to the levity of dancers and debauchers as he made his way up those familiar stone steps. The hall was dark, save for the light of the waning moon that streamed in through the opening over the statue. The feet of the goddess Aphrodite were aflame with the perpetual fires of the altar, illuminating the apple blossoms, myrtle branches, and fresh roses that were strewn about in offering.

Peeta could not contain his breathless misery any longer, this night of love and revelry particularly assaulting his soul. Being without Katniss, without the minimal idea of where she was, if she had even made it through that harrowing storm, had wrecked him until he was so desperate, on this day of Aphrodite, he placed himself in the Goddess’ hands.

And yet he did not dare to utter the desire of his heart, for fear that the Goddess would deny him for his arrogance. Instead, on bent knee, Peeta whispered quietly, “I am not worthy. I have been too cruel, too indifferent to all who bore the name woman, and now my punishment is to die from want of one. I do not deserve Katniss. I do not deserve the Ivory Maiden. But my Goddess, if I have
pleased you in my arts, the fruit of my labors, than please, one like her. One to cure your servant’s loneliness. It is my only wish.” With that, he brought the sacred blade up to his hand and sliced until the deep red drops fell on the fragrant burning rocks of Aphrodite’s altar. When the blood had burned to white ash, he rose up and stepped away just as the fires of the altar flared three times in quick succession without obvious reason. Startled and somewhat frightened, Peeta left the temple.

XXXXX

Peeta made his way back to his studio, his throbbing hand and withered heart his only company. Closing the heavy door, he lit several candles. The dancing flames flirted with the darkness before pushing it to the edges of the round circles of light until they overlapped, bathing the room in an otherworldly glow.

As was his habit, he went to take his fill of his Ivory Maiden. She was shrouded in shadow and adorned in a tunic of fine white cloth embroidered with gold thread. He envisioned Katniss, how luminous her skin would appear against the color of the fabric. Peeta touched the sleeve of the shift as if it lay against her skin.

He stroked the arm of his stone lady, projecting the sensation of Katniss’ soft skin beneath his fingers. He did not anticipate the trick his mind played on him when the skin appeared warm to the touch. Peeta was startled, pulling his hand back as if burned. The wind outside the studio became turbulent, pushing the candles to the limits of their brightness until they were suddenly snuffed out.

Peeta moved quickly to close the windows and light the spent candles. When he turned towards his lovely creation, the edges of the statue appeared to blur. Peeta was sure he was feeling the effects of exhaustion and rubbed his eyes in consequence but when he opened them again, the illusion persisted. As he reasoned through what he saw, the statue smouldered as if alight, the radiance so bright he had no choice but to shield his eyes.

And when Peeta was able to bear the brightness emanating from within the ivory, he found, to his amazement, that he was no longer alone. His Ivory Maiden glowed with the slowly waning light but stood like a sentinel over the panicked girl who had materialized in the room.

“Katniss?” Peeta asked in disbelief, sure he was feverish and delusional.

“Peeta?” Katniss gasped, looking around her in terror. She was barefoot, wearing only a thin chiton, which meant she had likely been roused from her bed. The fear was so naked on her face, he could not doubt her corporeality even if the means of her appearance remained beyond his comprehension.
“How am I here?” she asked, trembling in fear. “I was in my home and then...Prim!” she cried out suddenly. “Prim!”

“Katniss, you’re not in the forest. You’re in Nicosia,” he uttered the words even as he doubted their veracity. Please, Prim is surely safe in your home,” Peeta said, trying to calm her as he approached, unable to believe his eyes.

“What sorcery is this? Is it really you or am I dreaming? Tell me what you know!” she demanded angrily.

“If you will be calm, I will explain what I think has happened. This is all my fault,” he said dejectedly as he took her hand and sat her down in a chair. It was clear to him that she did not wish to be here in his studio. He had loved her with such desperation, and though she knew he wished for him to forget her, her indifference still wounded him. When he had asked for one like the Ivory Maiden, he had not expected Katniss to be snatched from the safety of her home and brought to him.

Kneeling before her, he explained, “I have spent these long months in a state of misery. When you left me on the road, I had no way to get back to your home. I am embarrassed to say this now but I...missed you terribly. So I made a wish to Aphrodite and when I returned home, here you were. I am sorry! I never thought my desire would be granted!” He stood up. “On my honor, I will return you to your house at first light.”

Katniss stared at him dumbly, as if she did not understand his words. So long was her silence that Peeta feared the shock might have overwhelmed her senses. At long last, she whispered, “You missed me?”

Peeta blushed, still embarrassed by his outburst, simply nodded in response.

Katniss considered this as she looked around the darkened studio. Her eyes widened at the sight of the statue. Taking a candle from the table, she walked slowly towards it, her breath quickening as the light brought it into clarity. Each feature of the beautiful sculpture lit up as the candle came closer, the precise, life-like detail of each lineament, each hair startling in its perfect imitation. Peeta felt ill, for surely she would think him mad and act in desperation to get away from him.

She ran her hands over the face, tracing the braid, following almost exactly the trajectory Peeta’s hands often took when he caressed the ivory statue. She let her fingers alight gently on the marred shoulder of her marble twin. Her movements loosened the silk material, and it fell away from the
statue. Katniss’ sharp intake of breath exploded through the silent air as Peeta’s dream of her lay exposed. At that moment, Peeta was sure that she would never trust him again.

He made a move to apologize to her, to say anything that would make her forgive him for taking the liberty of depicting her body, exquisite though it was. However, her voice stilled his movements.

“In the rain, when you ran towards your friend’s house, I watched you leave and followed you to ensure that you would not become lost again,” she said in a strangled voice. “I was well hidden by the trees and the rain. When you realized I was gone, you called to me with such desperation and sorrow…” Katniss turned to him, and he could see she had begun to cry. “I could not understand! Why would he still want to find me?” She looked down, unable to hold his deep blue gaze. “There is nothing that I could offer that you could not obtain of more quality and grace.”

Peeta shook his head, not quite believing her words.

“Why did you leave?” he asked softly.

“I had to think of my mother and sister and protect them from discovery!” Katniss exploded. “But I’ve thought of you each day since I left you on that road. These last months have been agony. I was sure I would never see you again. Even if you did somehow find me, why would you consider an outcast orphan such as me?” She turned back to the statue, the enormity of its meaning descending upon both of them. “I do not deserve you,” she whispered.

Peeta stood next to her as she studied the sculpture. “Surely, you understand that I made this statue because of you? You are all that I want in this world. No one else makes me happy.” Katniss stared up into his deep blue eyes, her pupils dilated from the lack of light. “I will take you home but say the word and I will bind myself to you for all eternity. The Gods have taught me a stern lesson, and I have gone from a man who doubted the good of all women to one who would live for your every whim, for you are the most valiant and kind creature I have ever known. It is I who do not deserve you.”

“Peeta…” Katniss whispered in disbelief. He reached his hand out to caress her face as he had done so many times to his statue, except now the ivory gave way to his fingers, and the warmth reached through her skin to his. She leaned into his hand, and it was all the encouragement he needed. He brought his mouth to hers and brushed her lips lightly. Katniss trembled from the contact and pushed her mouth up to his to prolong the kiss.

Soon they were wrapped around each other, the candle’s flame casting patterns of light and dark against their skin as Peeta held Katniss close to him. He did not dare overwhelm her with his
longing, but she had no such impediments as she kissed him with innocent ferocity, driven by long suppressed need.

When they separated, feverish with hunger and desire, Katniss whispered, “You made this request of Aphrodite, did you not?”

Peeta simply nodded, watching her face change as she spoke.

“We must make an offering to her, in gratitude for her favor.”

“We can go to her altar and offer a dove. This is her most pleasing tribute,” said Peeta.

“Yes, perhaps but there are other offerings, offerings that are more attuned to her nature…” Katniss’ voice trailed off.

Peeta tilted his head to the side in curiosity as Katniss pulled the chiton off over her head, letting the light linen material fall to the ground. She stood before him, without adornment, courageous even in her nudity. Peeta caught his breath to keep from being overwhelmed by her nakedness before him. His eyes swept her figure, and he marveled at how very much the statue had indeed honored her perfect form. Still, he hesitated.

“Is it only an offering?” he asked, his fingers aching to reach out and touch every inch of her flawless skin.

“It would be a poor one, indeed, if it were not given willingly and with joy,” Katniss said, unable to look Peeta in the eye.

He took her hand, caressing her knuckles with his thumb. “For my part, it shall be the most willing offering I have ever given.” With that, he led her to a nearby chaise, one where he often took his rest when he was too worn to retire to his rooms.

He carefully unraveled her braid, running his fingers through the thick curtain of her hair, his hand ghosting over the supple skin of her soft cheek he still could not believe was real. Removing his own tunic, he pulled her to him, this time reveling in the pliant warmth of her skin against him, the heat that the statue could never contain. He thanked the Goddess in his heart a thousand times as his hands roamed the sweet expanse of her body, followed soon after by his fervent lips as he covered
her with hot kisses. Her breasts rose to meet his mouth, and he conquered each peak, before his
tongue danced over her navel. He blew a gentle breath over her taut, flat stomach, and felt her
moans vibrate against his lips, having until now only imagined the way she would writhe beneath
him. Soon he was between her legs, taking in the musky, woody flavor, lapping at the evidence of
her own need and committing her taste to memory. Her folds opened like spring blossoms for his
tongue, which searched within her innocent sex for the key that would undo her.

When he had finally succeeded in making her whimper his name, Katniss offered up her first gift, her
body trembling before falling apart, her cries exploding into the heavy night. The candles flared
around them, a chorus of lights that seemed to rejoice in the girl’s abandon. Even the icy marble
seemed to warm with the heat of her climax. While she panted in wonder, Peeta gathered her in his
arms, kissing her before reaching between them and positioning himself at her entrance.

He felt her body tense instinctively, to which he responded, “I’ll be gentle, I promise. Then after,
each time we are together, you will no longer feel any more pain.” She nodded, her eyes filled with
trust, and she wrapped her arms around him, giving herself up to him.

True to his word, he was gentle and slow, as he promised, attuned to her every reaction. She winced
in discomfort, and he paused, waiting for her. When he was finally inside of her, he was assaulted
by her welcoming warmth and though he valiantly restrained himself for her sake, he wanted nothing
more than to be lost within her. He rocked into her slowly, accustoming her to his length until she
sighed in pleasure, a sound that only disarmed him further. He thrust more forcefully in and out of
her, calling her name as their arms and legs became a tangle of dancing limbs. Soon, Katniss was
flying again, her walls fluttering around him and this time, Peeta came apart with her, filling her with
his joyful and long-denied release, her back arched in surrender.

Out of the corner of his eyes, Peeta caught sight of the flames of his humble candles dancing in
unison, a burst of celestial light fueling the wicks. The flames extended beyond the reach of the
humble wax that melted beneath it, flared and sank with the young couples movements.

“Katniss, look!” he whispered, directing her towards the cavorting fire.

“The Gods are pleased,” she said in a voice laced with exhaustion. They continued to watch as the
fire flared, releasing sparks like the bursting of a star, suspended in the cool night air. After the
divine spectacle, the candles leapt upwards one last time before snuffing themselves out, plunging
them both into darkness, illuminated only by the glowing silver light of the moon.

Coda

Peeta presented Prim with two things when they returned to Katniss’ home. First, he brought a
statue of Aphrodite like he’d promised, a more beautiful one than he had envisioned for her from his
own personal collection. He thought he had never seen a person so overcome with joy as Prim flung herself upon him in gratitude. He knew that he could spend a lifetime bringing happiness to that fair-haired girl who had likely seen so little in the way of gifts in her short life.

The second thing he presented her with was a request for permission to marry Katniss. This was highly irregular, as it was the male head of household who granted the approval for marriage and negotiated the rights of her dowry. However, in the absence of a male or a sane adult with which to confer, Peeta decided that the task should fall to Prim to give her blessing for their union.

“How can I say anything but yes?” she exclaimed, fairly leaping in place. Katniss gathered her little duck in her arms and showered her with kisses while Peeta held them both to him, having acquired in one sweep his most sacred love and a dear sister to spoil. Prim glowed with the excess of attention and happiness that she received.

They stayed in Katniss’ small home that night before all of them returned to Nicosia through the coastal cities. There was another silence altogether in those woods and while the last time he had slept here, it was with the fear of death at his heels, now Peeta found comfort in the soul-baring solitude of the forest. After they made love, this time without the accompaniment of the supernatural (for Aphrodite’s task was done and, unbeknownst to Katniss and Peeta, she was very proud of her work), Peeta told Katniss the story of his youth and revealed all the things that had made him so obstinate in the beginning. She held onto him as he recounted the beatings and harsh punishments of his mother, how she had made him feel unworthy of love.

“She had borne two boys already when she had me and desperately wanted a daughter. After my birth, she was not able to become pregnant again, and I paid for her disappointment all my life. I fled to my art to escape her resentment.” Peeta struggled with the sadness to make everything clear to Katniss.

“And we must meet this woman?” she asked with deep anger.

Peeta nodded. “It is my obligation.”

“I will do so,” she said with flashing grey eyes. “But I promise you this - she will never have occasion to hurt you again, in word or deed. You will be my husband, and I will defer to you in all things but know that I have defended my family for more than ten years.” Her ferocious expression softened as she looked upon him. “I am only a woman, but I will protect you also, all the days of my life.”

Peeta was moved by her every word. “You are not only a woman. You taught me that a woman can
be brave and unrelenting. You taught me that she can sacrifice as well as the greatest heros of our epic poems. No, Katniss, I will never underestimate your sex again.”

Katniss laughed, a deep throaty sound he would never tire of hearing. “No, it is best that you do not,” she said, pulling him into the circle of her strong arms.

Chapter End Notes

Note: An important thing to remember is, during the Golden Age of the Greek City-States, despite the explosion of arts and knowledge, women were treated as property. It was virtually unheard of for a woman like Katniss to live alone without being attached to a male in any way.

I also realized that, outside of a passing reference to Peeta as a Cyprian artist, I did not mention that the story is set on the island of Cypress, which is also the original setting of The Story of Pygmalion and Galatea.

Finally, I took liberties with the original story line to modernize some of themes and out of deference for Katniss and Peeta's characters. I can hardly imagine Katniss waking up from a statue and handing herself over to anyone willingly without very good motivation. That's just not how our girl operates :).

Thank you for reading and be sure to review! I'm always a bit behind but I respond to each and every one.

I do not own anything related to The Hunger Games or Ovid’s writings.
Author’s Note: This story was written for Fandom4LLS. Many thanks to my betas, solasvioletta, bubblegum1425 and peetabreadgirl. Also, a giant thank you to madamemarquise for pre-reading and to all the writers who contributed to a wonderful cause. An extra kudos the organizers of this brilliant fundraiser. Go to fandom4lls.tumblr.com for more information about how to donate money or stories to raise money for leukemia.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!