RENAISSANCE

by SFCBruce

Summary

A little Post-Mockingjay tale that not only focuses on our two Victors finally coming together, but in helping each other recover and find a life together. Uses some characters that I introduced in "A Tale of Two Victors." Mature themes. Eventual Everlark! Drama and angst! Romance!
CHAPTER 1 - HOMECOMING

PART I

I sit in the luxurious car staring out the window at the landscape as my train speeds east. We've left the mountains behind and the train is rolling through a vast flat plain. What district are we in? Three? Five? I sigh heavily. It really doesn't make much of a difference.

An attendant stands nearby, hands clasped in front of him, ready to serve my every need. I glance over at him occasionally. Each time I do, he becomes immediately attentive, leaning forward as though trying to anticipate my wishes. I recognize him, as I've been on this train before. In fact, this is my third trip eastward from the Capitol to District Twelve.

The first time was less than two years ago, returning from the Capitol as a newly-minted Victor, fresh from the 74th Hunger Games. With me was my Mentor, Haymitch Abernathy, my Escort, Effie Trinket...and my Co-Victor and District Partner, Katniss Everdeen.

I feel a shudder pass through my body as her name flows through my thoughts, and I squeeze my eyes shut and clench my fists tightly for a few seconds as the spasm passes. I take a few deep breaths as I fight to clear my head of those shiny false memories that the Capitol interrogators had so skillfully planted inside my head. Not real. Not Real. NOT Real! NOT REAL!

"Sir?" It's the attendant. "Can I bring you anything?" I must have been speaking the words aloud. I open my eyes and look at him blankly. Bring me? Yes, please. Bring me my life. Give me my life back.

"Tea," I croak. Was that my voice? How many hours...how many days since I've spoken?

"Right away, sir," the attendant says eagerly. "Cream? Sugar? Lemon?"

"Black," my rusty voice manages to say, "And hot."

The attendant smiles and leaves. I turn and continue my vacant staring out the window. My fingers idly trace over the tabletop - then freeze as my fingertip dips into a small indentation in the surface. A dent - no, a hole. A hole made by a knife blade. I squeeze my eyes shut again as the memory - a real one this time - bursts into my brain.

The three of us...myself, Haymitch, and Katniss...are finishing breakfast. The Reapings were yesterday and soon we'll be in the Capitol. Haymitch...our Mentor...is already drinking. Katniss is looking at him with disgust written all over her face.

"So, you're supposed to give us advice," Katniss says evenly.

"Here's some advice. Stay alive." Haymitch laughs as if he's said something funny. He seems to have completely forgotten our conversation last night - our conversation where I confessed my love for Katniss to this...this drunkard. Suddenly I'm furious with him. We had a deal and he's not honoring it.

"That's very funny," I snap, "Only not to us!" Suddenly my hand lashes out and smacks the glass from Haymitch's hand. It hits the floor and shatters, spilling red liquid. I see Katniss looking at me in alarm, and...approval? Haymitch sits shocked for a second or two, then the next thing I know
I'm knocked from my chair by Haymitch's fist to my jaw.

Stunned, I lay on the floor for a few moments. I hear something thud into the table as I struggle to get to my feet, and I hear Haymitch say, "Well, what's this? Did I actually get a pair of fighters this year?"

As I rise to my feet I see Katniss leaning across the table, her hand still on the hilt of the knife that she drove into the tabletop between Haymitch and his liquor bottle. As I watch, she jerks the knife free from the table and sits back in her chair, scowling.

"Sir?" I flinch and spin around. The attendant is standing there with a saucer holding a steaming cup.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you, sir," he says apologetically. I dismissively wave my hand at him.

"No apology necessary," I say, my voice sounding less rusty. Suddenly, I ask, "What's your name?"

"Sir?" The attendant says, startled, as he sets the cup and saucer on the table. The saucer covers the scar Katniss made in the mahogany.

"Your name," I say, with what I hope is a reassuring smile. "What's your name?"

"Felix," the attendant finally says, "Felix Bowen."

"I'm Peeta," I say, offering my hand. After a moment's hesitation, he takes my hand in his.

"Yes, sir. I know who you are," Felix says. "I've been working this train for over ten years. It's an honor to meet you."

"Why?" I ask. "Why is it an honor to meet me?"

"Umm...well...you and...the rest...you're all hero's. You, Miss Everdeen, Mister Abernathy, Mister Heavensbee, President Paylor...all of you," he stammers.

"I'm not a hero," I say with a shake of my head.

"Well...sure you are!" Felix says emphatically. "What you did during the Rebellion...with the Star Squad...fighting your way through the Capitol..."

"Doing that doesn't make me a hero," I say, shaking my head. "What I was, was scared...all the time."

"All of Panem owes you, and everyone else in the Rebellion, a debt of gratitude that can never be repaid," Felix says fervently. I sigh. He's been watching too many of Plutarch's propos.

"Thanks for the tea," I say.

"You're quite welcome, sir," Felix says. "Would you like something else?"

"No, thank you," I say, "Listen, you don't need to stand around in here. Go relax somewhere. It's a long ride."

"I'm not supposed to leave -" he starts to say. I put up my hand.

"If anyone asks, I'll tell them I told you to go away," I say with another smile.
Felix looks doubtful, but finally nods and heads for the door. He pauses at the door and looks back at me.

"No one's ever asked my name before," he says quietly.

"Things are different now," I reply. He nods and slips through the door, leaving me to my thoughts.

PART II

I sip my tea slowly as I watch the scenery slip by. I laugh to myself when I think of Felix's words. A hero? No...I'm no hero. I'm a murderer.

I was able to convince myself after my first games that the deaths I had a hand in were out of mercy, in the case of Holland, the District Eight girl that Cato stabbed and left for dead; or accidental, like Finch, the District Five girl that Katniss called Foxface, who had been following me while I gathered edible plants, not knowing that the berries I had gathered were poisonous nightlock; or out of self defense, in the case of Cato during our fight at the Cornucopia.

But Brutus...Brutus was different. That last night in the clock arena, after Katniss (shudder) and I had been Reaped a second time, was a madhouse. Neither Katniss (!) or I had any idea of the planned escape from the arena. All I knew was that we had been separated when all hell broke loose. Chaff, the one armed District Eleven Tribute, and one of Haymitch Abernathy's closest (and only) friends, was viciously killed by Brutus. I was so enraged by this that I tracked Brutus down and deliberately killed him out of anger. Not self defense, not defending any of my alliance. Rage was what fueled me as I hacked at him with my machete. And I stood over his blood spattered corpse, and raised my dripping machete over my head, and screamed out in triumph, in the finest Hunger Games tradition.

I can't help but thing that Cato, Clove, Glimmer, Marvel, and Chelsea would have been oh, so proud of me in that moment...because I became just like them.

Then there's Mitchell. Steady, reliable, totally unremarkable Mitchell. Mitchell, a deadly accurate marksman. Mitchell, who died during one of my "episodes," while Squad 451 was in the Capitol. Killed because he was trying to save...HER...from me.

No doubt about it. There's too much blood on my hands for me to ever be able to clean off.

As the sun begins to set behind the train, throwing out ever lengthening shadows, I reflect that the best decision that I could have made was in asking for a train to take me home, rather than a hoverplane. Haymitch and...HER...flew back to Twelve. Haymitch wanted to get...HER...home as quickly as possible after Doctor Aurelius agreed to release her from his care, with the stipulation that Haymitch look after her and that she calls Aurelius regularly.

That causes a little bitter chuckle to rise up inside me. Haymitch can't even take care of himself, let alone...someone else. He probably crawled into a bottle the instant they left the Capitol. And I bet that SHE hasn't talked one time to Aurelius. In fact, he specifically asked me to make sure that I tell her that he can't treat her if she doesn't answer his calls.

I drain my tea cup and set it down on the saucer with a clatter. Yes, this was the best way to travel. Gives me time to think. Time to...find some strength inside me for what I know is to come. I hear the door open behind me.

"Sir?" Felix's quiet voice says, "It's starting to get late. Are you getting hungry? A little dinner, perhaps?"
I turn and face him. For the first time, I really look at him. Definitely Capitol...facial tattoos, but not too many. Piercings of course. But his hair...sunset orange. Behind him through the windows I can see the real sunset paint a picture in the same colors. Suddenly, I feel calm. Calmer than I have in days.

"Yes, I am getting hungry," I hear myself saying.

"If you like, I can bring you something here, or there's a buffet being prepared in the next car..."

I stand up awkwardly. My Robo-leg was stiffening up. "No...I'll check out the buffet," I say, "I need to walk around a bit anyway." Felix steps aside and gestures with his arm.

"Thanks, Felix. I know the way," I say with a small smile. Of course I know the way. I know every inch of this train. As I pass Felix suddenly I feel a shock of recognition jolt through me. Of course I had seem him before...Tribute Trains had a large staff of Capitol Attendants. But...I had spoken with him before...

I sit in the television room on the Tribute Train, heading back to the Capitol after being Reaped for a second time. Unable to sleep, I've been watching tapes of previous games, now that we know who our competition will be. Studying how these other Victors...the ones we'll be facing in the arena...fight, move, and think...well, it may be what I need to keep Katniss alive.

I've been watching the tape of Brutus's Games. He had won the year before Haymitch. District Two, Career all the way. One of Two's most popular Victors ever. I hear the door open and see Katniss walking into the room. I stop the tape.

"Couldn't sleep?" I ask.

"Not for long," Katniss replies as she pulls her robe closer about her.

"Want to talk about it?" I ask. I've known about her nightmares for months...even before our Victory Tour, when we started sleeping together in an effort to stave off the terrors that visited us both almost every night. Some nights we actually succeeded. It's not much, drawing comfort from each other...but it's a start.

Katniss shakes her head. She never wants to talk about them. I understand. I do the only thing I can do to offer her comfort. For the first time since the Quarter Quell was announced, I hold out my arms to her.

Katniss doesn't hesitate, but walks directly into my arms. Ever since the Quell was announced, I've been pushing her...and Haymitch too...training like Careers. Making her angry with me, I know. But she HAS to win. She has people that need her. No one needs me.

But as her arms wrap around my neck and I feel her press her body tightly against mine, all that fades away. How I've missed this! Holding her, feeling the warmth radiate from her, smelling her hair...like I do now, burying my face in her hair, inhaling deeply, then leaning forward and gently kissing her throat, feeling her trembling slightly. There's no cameras here. No crowds to please. Just us. This is real...so real...

I hear the door open and Katniss sits up suddenly, disengaging herself from me guiltily. In spite of the horror of our situation, I can't help but smile at her reaction...like it was her mother walking in on us in her living room or something. At that moment, she's really a seventeen year old girl, and I'm a seventeen year old boy.

A Capitol Attendant walks in with a tray holding a steaming jug and two mugs. Katniss must have
ordered this before she came in. He sets the tray on a table.

"I brought an extra cup," he says.

"Thanks," Katniss says to him.

"And I added a touch of honey to the milk. For sweetness. And just a pinch of spice." He pauses, seeming like he wants to say more, then I see his head shake slightly and he backs out of the room.

"You brought us milk. After we were reaped for the Quell," I say quietly to Felix.

"Yes," he says with a smile. "You remembered."

"You seemed upset about something then," I say.

Felix hesitates. Talking freely is not something anyone is used to. Finally, he nods.

"We all were," he admits. "None of us were happy that you had to go back to the Games."

"Why?" I ask. "Why did that upset you?"

"Because...well, because you two seemed so...happy together. You earned the right to be left alone...to live your lives. Because...you two were in love. I could tell...when I walked in with the milk. The way you were holding each other."

"Thank you," I say softly.

"You're welcome, sir...but for what?" Felix asks.

"For caring," I say simply.

PART III

In spite of my fears, I spent a relatively restful night on the train. Only a couple of nightmares invaded my sleep. I wake up feeling almost rested.

I get up, shower, and get dressed. I walk into the dining car and see that a breakfast buffet has already been laid out for me. It feels so strange that I'm the sole passenger on this train...that everything here is for me. As I fill up my plate, another attendant appears.

"Sir, I've been asked to tell you that we should be arriving at District Twelve in an hour or so, and that a car will be there to take you to your home." The Attendant says.

"Thank you," I reply. He nods once and leaves me alone to eat. As I eat I gaze out the window at the scenery flowing by. No longer the flat plains, the terrain now looked much more familiar. Mountainous, more rugged...more like home.

I feel dread begin to seep into me the closer we get to the district. I know that Twelve was firebombed on the night of the breakout from the clock arena, and that it was almost entirely destroyed. Only the houses in Victors Village were spared the destruction. I had been told that rebuilding efforts had been ongoing for months now, and that most of the rubble had been cleared away. Still, District Twelve was just a shadow of its former self.

Like me. And...HER.

I don't know how I'm going to be able to face her. Doctor Aurelius has worked miracles with
me...my "episodes" are coming less and less frequently, and he assured me that being around and seeing...HER...would get easier and easier. I hope he's right...and I hope that Haymitch can help me cope.

As I finish my breakfast, my thoughts keep returning to...Katniss. There, I can think her name without shuddering, or spasming, or without my mind being invaded by those shiny false memories. A part of me still wants to kill her...but a much bigger part of me remembers that I love her.

Will she be happy to see me? Sad? Angry? Will she try to hug me...or will she run away? How will she look? Probably as bad as me, I say to myself, chuckling. My burns are still healing, my new scars still red and fresh. But there's only one thing that truly matters to me.

Does she...can she...will she ever...love me?

I've said the words to her often enough. She knows how I feel. And her actions with me...those couldn't all have been fake. I remember moments with her...just the two of us...when she could act naturally with me. And she didn't push me away.

But will I push her away?

I hope not...but I just don't know.

I hear the door to the compartment open, then close. The same Attendant as before stands before my table.

"Sir, we'll be arriving in just a few minutes," he says. As if on cue, I can feel the train begin to slow.

"Do you have any personal belongings that you wish to collect now?" He asks. I shake my head.

"No," I say, "I have nothing."

He nods once. "Would you follow me, then, please?" He leads me to a different car. I recognize it as the one that Katniss...and I...had been in when we arrived back in the district after our first Games...an observation car with large glass windows and a sliding door. I remember standing there with her, still in shock at her revelation that her actions in the arena had been...mostly...an act.

As I feel the train slow even more, and the district finally come into view, I find myself groping blindly with my hand...looking for her hand to hold...but she's not there. I'm glad I had viewed pictures and film of the district before I left the Capitol. It went a long way to lessening the shock of what I see laid out before me.

In spite of the clean up efforts, there are still mounds of rubble and ash. I can see new construction going on everywhere. I had been told that the mines were permanently closed, and that District Twelve now would produce food, and later facilities would be constructed to produce medicines for the rest of Panem.

The train station comes into view. It's new as well. Simple in design, wood construction. I swallow heavily and feel my hands shaking. Would she be here...meeting me? No, of course not...only Haymitch had been informed...and the Capitol representatives, of course. No, only a driver will be here to greet me on my homecoming. I clench my hands into fists to stop the shaking as the train rolls slowly to a stop.

I take a deep breath. The doors slide open. I hesitate for just a brief moment, then step out of the
train onto the platform. No cameras, no cheering crowds, just a solitary figure standing there with his hands clasped behind his back. His eyes make contact with mine and he nods once, slowly. I inhale deeply. The smell of freshly cut wood and paint mixes with the older smell of ash...and death. I feel a slight shudder pass through me as I walk towards the man waiting patiently for me.

Once again...I was home.
REUNION

CHAPTER 2 - REUNION

PART I

I walk towards the man standing there waiting for me. I know he's here for me. There's no one else in the station.

"Mister Mellark? We have a car waiting for you, sir," the man says, "Would you come this way, please?"

I examine him quickly. No piercings, no visible tattoos, hair looks to be a natural color. He doesn't look like he's from the Capitol.

"You're not Capitol," I say. It's a statement, not a question. He shakes his head.

"No, sir," he says, "I'm from District Six originally."

"I didn't think you were from the Capitol," I say.

"That's correct. This way, sir," he says formally, gesturing for me to follow him. I fall in slightly behind him as we walk out of the new station. Once outside, the smell of burnt things assails my nose again. We walk towards a car parked in front of the station. He trots ahead a few steps and opens the passenger door for me. I climb in and he moves to the other side of the car, opens the driver door, and gets in. Wordlessly he starts the car and pulls away from the station.

We drive slowly through District Twelve. I see almost no one. Not surprising, considering that it's still very early in the morning...and considering that ninety percent of the population of the district died during the Capitol's firebombing. We were always the smallest, least populous district. Now there's only about nine hundred of us left...and not everyone that evacuated has returned.

Still, I can see that progress has been made. A lot of the rubble has been cleared away. New buildings are going up. And the people that I do see...there's something about them that I didn't think I would ever see in District Twelve.

They look happy.

As we drive towards the Village, I can now appreciate why a car was sent for me. It's a fairly easy walk from the station to the Village, but I would have had to walk by so many places that simply weren't there any more. The apothecary, the shoe shop, the Mayor's house, the butcher shop...the bakery. I stare straight ahead as we drive. I'll see everything eventually...just not today.

"Do you take morphling?" I ask the driver suddenly.

"Excuse me?" The driver says in surprise.

"Morphling. Do you take morphling?" I ask again.

"No. No...sir. I don't," he says tightly.

"Oh. I heard that was a problem in your district. I knew a couple from Six. They were both addicted," I explain.
"I...see. Well, I'm not," he says. I can tell by his tone that I've offended him.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you," I say quietly.

"It's alright. I know...that you've been through...a lot," the driver replies.

The car turns into the Village entrance. I never thought I would see this place again. I can see that most of the homes here are occupied...by families involved with the rebuilding. It makes sense to use the mansions here. Each one could easily fit two or even three families. I can see kids playing outside some of them. Only four homes look deserted. Kathleen O'Sullivan's, Haymitch's, Katniss's...and mine.

The car stops in front of mine. "Here we are, sir," the driver says. I nod and open the car door. I slowly get out of the car. I turn back to the driver.

"Thanks for the ride," I say.

"You're welcome, sir," he says quietly, "And Mister Mellark? Welcome home."

I nod as he pulls the car away from the curb. I turn back to my house and slowly walk to the front door.

**PART II**

It's been almost nine months since I have been in this house. The last time was the morning of the very last Reaping day, where we were forced to attend that sham of a Reaping. I reach over to the light switch in the foyer, and I'm surprised when the lights blaze to life. I halfway expected them not to work.

I wander aimlessly through my house. Aside from a film of dust, everything is exactly as I left it. I enter the kitchen and open a few cupboards and the refrigerator. The refrigerator was empty, of course...I had given away whatever was left in it the day before the Reaping. Likewise any perishable items that were in my cupboards and pantry. The living room is the same, likewise the dining room, with one exception...I had three portraits hanging in the dining room: one of Haymitch, one of Katniss with Una and Prim, and one of Katniss alone, holding a dandelion in her hands. All three were still there, but defaced - slashed with knives and splattered with paint. A final calling card from the late President Coriolanus Snow.

I walk upstairs. My studio was as I left it, but every non-Games related portrait in there, including some Games related portraits that were positive depictions of Katniss - were all defaced in some way. I shut the door as I leave the room. It will probably be a while before going back in.

My bedroom looked like I had just walked out five minutes before. Out of habit I step to the window and look across the way towards Katniss's house. Her house, and Haymitch's as well, look totally deserted, but I know that's not the case. Idly I wonder what happened to Prim's goat.

Prim. I hadn't allowed myself to think of her for a long time. Primrose Everdeen, the girl that Katniss volunteered for. My friend. A girl that had become virtually a little sister to me as well. The wisest thirteen year old I ever knew.

Suddenly memories of her - sitting out on my front porch with me while holding her cat, Sunday afternoon baking sessions, taking care of Typhoid victims during the epidemic, walking home from school with Katniss, studying medicine in District Thirteen - the memories flooded over me relentlessly and, without warning, a sob tore out of my chest and I sank to my knees on my bedroom carpeting, bowing my head as tears dripped freely from my eyes.
She had been a child, not even fourteen, forced to grow up way too fast. And she died in an instant, doing what she loved to do - help others in pain. A natural healer.

"You would've made a great doctor, little sister," I whisper.

Suddenly I can't stay in here any more. I lurch to my feet, half fall down the stairs, and stagger outside. It's still fairly early in the morning as I walk up the street towards the Village entrance. I have no particular destination in mind, but soon my feet have taken me to the Meadow.

The Meadow. Where Katniss and Prim harvested dandelions. Where Katniss found a weakness in the fence that held us all prisoner here in Twelve, and allowed her a taste of something that hardly anyone else that lived here could ever hope to have - freedom. Where a large gaping wound in the earth now yawns open - a mass grave for the nameless thousands that died here in that one hellish night. I see large earth moving machines, silent now, waiting to cover the cremated remains of my friends and neighbors.

The fence. Just beyond the hole the fence still stands. No longer solid, with large gaps and holes torn in it...a reminder of our servitude to the Capitol, now a symbol of our new freedom. Beyond the fence, the woods that Katniss so dearly loved. The woods that brought her and her family food for so many years. The woods that, until today, I never dared to enter.

As if my feet had minds of their own, I found myself on the other side of the fence, walking towards the woods. My only prior experience with forests had been in my two Games...not exactly a positive memory. But as I walk deeper into the green, the early morning air cool around me, I come to understand why Katniss loved being out here so much.

I had only just penetrated the first stand of trees beyond the fence when I saw a stand of bushes growing in front of me. I stop and stare at the blossoms, recognizing the delicate flowers, and I suddenly realize that my being here was no accident - chance didn't take me here. These bushes were here in my path for a reason. These flowers were much more than pretty blossoms. They were the bridge that I needed to build between Katniss and I.

The flowers were evening primrose.

I spun around and ran from the forest as fast as my withered muscles and Robo-Leg could carry me. Lungs burning with the effort, muscles trembling from unaccustomed exertion, I found myself quickly back in the Village. Ransacking first my own homes outbuilding, then Haymitch's, I soon found what I was looking for, and immediately retraced my steps.

My breath was coming in trembling gasps, hair plastered to my forehead, sweat stinging my eyes as I pushed the wheelbarrow through the Meadow, past the mass grave, and through the fence into the forest. Soon I was standing in front of the bushes, chest heaving with exertion. I didn't hesitate but grabbed the shovel and started to dig. The bushes were easier to uproot than I thought, and soon I have five plants in my wheelbarrow.

I pushed my prize out of the forest, back through the fence, past the grave, and on into the Village. I encountered a few people along the way. Some I remembered from before, as I saw them do double takes as they walked past, whispering and pointing. I paid them no attention. I had a job to do.

Soon I was standing at the side of Katniss's house. I survey the ground, then the bushes, then I grab the shovel and start to dig. My hands were already blistered from digging the plants up, raw with innumerable tiny cuts and scratches. I felt nothing. No pain, no discomfort. My mind was focused solely on my task. I continued to dig.
Dimly I hear a door slam as if from far away. I don't stop digging. I wipe my face awkwardly on the sleeve of my shirt. I feel a blister pop on the palm of my right hand. I keep digging.

"You're back."

**PART III**

I stiffen at the sound of her voice. I can feel my teeth bite the inside of my cheek until I can taste blood in my mouth. I take a deep breath, straighten up, turn, and face her for the first time in months.

"Doctor Aurelius wouldn't let me leave the Capitol until yesterday," I say in a surprisingly steady voice. "By the way, he said to tell you that he can't keep pretending he's treating you forever. You have to pick up the phone."

Katniss looks awful. She's lost weight that she can't afford to lose. Her hair, once so lustrous, is dull, clumpy, matted, and uneven where it had burned away and is now regrowing. She pushes her hair out of her eyes as she stares at me. I can see healing scars on her thin arms, shoulders and face. Her gray eyes are dull.

She's never looked more beautiful to me.

Gone - at least hidden for now - is the mutt that the Capitol tried so desperately to convince me she was. The monster that I tried so hard to kill in District Thirteen has been replaced by this skinny, sickly, scarred apparition that's staring at me with a look that at once seems to combine fear, anger, and happiness.

"What are you doing?" She finally asks.

"I went to the woods this morning and dug these up. For her," I explain. Does she understand that I had come to love her sister as my own sister that I never had? "I thought we could plant them along the side of the house."

I see emotion blaze across her impassive face. First, a flash of anger, just as quickly followed by grief, then...something else. Katniss just nods once, then turns and runs back into her house. I hear her door slam shut. I turn back to my work. I want to get these bushes planted as quickly as possible.

"That went rather well, don't you think?" A familiar voice asks in a mocking tone. I straighten back up.

"Hello, Haymitch," I say evenly. "You're up early."

Haymitch regards me with his watery, bloodshot eyes. "Getting harder and harder to sleep, what with all our...new neighbors." He indicates the other homes with a sweep of his hand. I see a liquor bottle clenched in his fist.

"I thought you were supposed to be watching after her," I say accusingly. Haymitch just shrugs.

"I am, kid," he says reasonably. "Greasy Sae comes over every day and makes sure she eats. She's quiet, doesn't cause any trouble. I check on her personally every day. How much mischief can she get into sitting in a rocking chair all day long staring at a wall?"

"Dammit, that's not what I mean and you know it!" I shout. "Have you SEEN her? She's...she's..."
"Hey, take it easy," Haymitch says. "I know what she looks like. But she's made it very clear that she wants none of my armchair psychiatry. I'm keeping her alive, and giving her exactly what she wants...which is to be left alone."

I ponder this for a moment. Does she resent me planting these bushes for Prim? Suddenly I feel that the bridge I'm trying to build is never going to reach the other side of the chasm between us.

"Peeta," Haymitch says gently, "She's - changed. A lot. She's not the same Katniss you knew...and loved. She...she may never be. And if you try to push it..."

"I'm not the same, either," I say bitterly. "Thanks to Snow. And the Games."

"None of us are, kid," Haymitch says softly. My mind is a jumble of confusing thoughts.

"I love her...real or not real?" I ask Haymitch suddenly.

"Real," he says firmly. "Very, very real." I nod my head slowly.

"I'm just...it's sometimes...I can't tell anymore," I say weakly.

I'm laying naked on a stainless steel table, my head, arms, hands, legs and feet securely strapped down. A single, intensely bright light burns over my head. Even when I shut my eyes tightly, its light penetrates my eyelids. I can't remember the last time I slept. Every time I feel myself start to drift off, the sensors taped to my face and head send some kind of alert, and water is sprayed into my face. I'm tired...so tired. I have no idea what time it is...or what day it is. Day and night have lost all meaning for me.

I hear the door behind me open, then close. Footsteps. Then...a voice that chills me.

"Hello again, Peeta," the female voice purrs. My Interrogator. I don't know her name. A Capitol woman with her ears almost obscured by piercings. Unnatural scarlet hair. Skin the color of fresh snow. Yellow, feral cat's eyes. Ever present white lab coat.

"Hel...hello," I croak. I don't want to speak but learned very early in my confinement to pick my battles carefully. I can now see her looming over me. Her assistant, some nameless Peacekeeper, stands silently behind her.

I jerk suddenly when I hear agonized screams coming from the cell next to mine. I recognize them immediately. Johanna.

"Ahh, it must be time for Miss Mason's morning...bath," the Interrogator says with a smile. "Well, let's not waste time. Where shall we begin?"

"Can't...tell you...anything," I say painfully. "Neither...can...Johanna."

The Interrogator laughs. "Oh, Peeta! She's part of the Rebellion! Of COURSE she can tell us...things! And she will...eventually. Like why she helped Katniss Everdeen escape. And why Katniss Everdeen abandoned you in the arena when she could have easily saved you as well."

I try to shake my head against the strap. "No...she didn't...abandon," I gasp out.

I feel the Interrogators cool hand on my forehead. "Oh, you poor naive boy," she says gently. "I'm so sorry...but she did. Because, you see, she felt that you were expendable from the very start. Just
a piece to be used and discarded. And, here you are."

"No!" I say. "Katniss...would never..."

"Oh, but she did...and I'm here to help you 'understand' that," she says in the same gentle tone. She stand up and gestures to the Peacekeeper. He steps forward and I feel a sharp pinch on my right nipple as he clamps something to it. Next, I grit my teeth in shame and embarrassment as I feel him clamping something sharply to...my privates. I strain to look down and see what they've done. I can barely make out wires attached to my body.

"We're going to try something different, today, Peeta...since you insist on living this fantasy that Katniss Everdeen actually cares for you. It's a very old technique called 'operant conditioning'. It's a fancy way of saying that we reward success...and punish failure." She gestures to the Peacekeeper and he holds up a device. A telephone with a crank on the side.

"You sound very thirsty, Peeta. Would you like something to drink?" I don't answer...but in truth I'm so thirsty, I can barely talk. I feel a straw brush my lips and, hating myself, I open my mouth and suck on the straw greedily, gulping the cool water. The straw is suddenly removed.

"That's an example of 'reward,' Peeta. As for punishment -" She makes a gesture and suddenly agony shoots through my body. I feel myself arch up against the straps so violently that the edges cuts my skin. Just as suddenly the agony stops and I slump against the table.

"Alright. Lesson's over. Time to get started." I hear a scraping noise as the Interrogator brings a stool closer to the table.

"An easy question for you to start with. Does Katniss Everdeen care for you?"

"Yes." Searing pain shoots through me. I can feel blood dripping down my arms, hands and feet from the straps. It stops. I let out a sob and hate myself for it.

"One more time, Peeta. Does Katniss care what happens to you?"

"Y-Yes." I clamp my mouth shut to stifle my scream. I'm not successful. I never knew something could hurt this bad. Relief once again. I feel tears rolling down the sides of my face.

"Peeta, you know she could care less about you, right?"

"Please...please," I gasp. "Oh, wrong answer AGAIN, Peeta!" Oh please, make it stop, make it stop, make it stop! I hear screaming and realize it's me. Then...sudden, blessed relief.

I'm sobbing openly now. The Interrogator's face appears above me. "Oh, poor Peeta," she says sympathetically. I'm gasping through my clenched teeth.

"You can make this stop, you know," she says gently. "Does Katniss care for you?"

I squeeze my eyes shut. Maybe if I just don't answer - NO! I'm on fire! Please! No more! IT'S TOO MUCH!

"No..." I gasp and hate myself even more. The fire's gone.

"What did you say, Peeta?" The Interrogator asks. "I'm not sure I heard you correctly, though. Does Katniss care for you? Does she care what happens to you?"
“No,” I whisper as fresh tears roll down the sides of my face. Suddenly the straw is back. I suck the water eagerly into my mouth. This time it’s sweetened with something.

“Was that good?” She asks. I nod weakly against the strap. It’s quiet next door now.

“Miss Mason must be clean now,” My Interrogator says with a chuckle. “Okay, next question. Do you love Katniss Everdeen?”

“Yes.” Oh NO! PLEASE! I can feel my hands clenching spasmodically, my nails digging into my palms. I feel my bladder suddenly empty onto the table. My screams echo in the small room. Then - blissful relief.

“Oh, Peeta - such a hard lesson the first time. Let’s not go through that again, shall we?”

“Now...let’s try this again,” she says brightly. “Do you love Katniss Everdeen?”

I’m so sorry, Katniss. I’m sorry I wasn’t stronger for you. I’m openly crying and I don’t care.

“No,” I say, choking on the word. More sweet water passes my lips. I want to spit it in her face. Instead, I swallow.

“Unhook him,” the Interrogator orders. The painful clamps are immediately removed.

“That’s enough of that for one day, don’t you think?”

“Yes,” I whisper.

She turns to the Peacekeeper. “Clean him up. I’ll be right back.” I hear the door open, then slam shut. Wordlessly, the Peacekeeper sponges me down, then towels me dry. By the time he’s done, the Interrogator has returned.

“We’re almost done for today, Peeta,” she explains. I see a syringe in her hand.

“What’s that?” I ask dully.

“Oh, just a little...something...that will help reinforce our lesson today,” she says with a smile. She quickly swabs the base of my neck then she pushes the needle in and pushes the plunger down.

I grunt at the burning sensation, but it’s not anything like...before. Still, there’s something familiar about this feeling...like I’ve felt this...stuff...before. My vision gets blurry and tunneled and it’s suddenly hard to focus.

I feel the table being tilted up until I’m almost vertical. I hear a switch being flicked behind me...then a Holo-TV projector is projecting images on the wall in front of me. I frown in confusion. She wants me to watch television?

The burning in my neck eases but never quite goes away. Still, I can live with it. I start to recognize the images in front of me. Katniss...during the Games.

“Just a little entertainment for you, Peeta,” the Interrogator explains, ”The video is two hours long. Make sure you watch it, then afterwards we’ll feed you and let you sleep tonight.”

Sleep! I can’t remember the last time I slept. I find myself nodding against the strap.

“Good boy,” she purrs. “Enjoy the movie!” I hear the door slam behind me as they leave. I keep focused on the screen...but things don’t seem right. I just saw...I just saw Katniss...kill Rue! No,
"That's not right," I whisper, "That's not right." But on the wall, the hologram shows Katniss standing over Rue's corpse, head thrown back, screaming out in victory.

"It's just so hard, Haymitch," I say, shuddering as my memory...oh too real...lingers in my head.

Haymitch puts his hand on my shoulder. "I know," he says gently, "Welcome home, anyway, kid."

With that, Haymitch turns to leave. He doesn't say goodbye. Neither do I.

I sigh and turn back to my work. I'm planting the first bush when I see Greasy Sae out of the corner of my eye walking up to Katniss's house. Coming to make her some breakfast, no doubt. I turn back to my work.

Later, I'm aware of Katniss's front door opening, then closing again. I think it's Sae at first, but Katniss appears, walking briskly towards the entrance to the Village. I can see that she's cleaned herself up and done her hair in its signature braid...or attempted to, anyway. She's wearing her father's old leather jacket and carrying...a bow and a quiver of arrows. She doesn't even so much as glance in my direction. I smile.

Finally, all five bushes are planted. I step back to admire my handiwork. Both hands are masses of blisters, popped and unpopped. I'm a sweaty, trembling mess. Wearily I gather up the shovel and dump it in the wheelbarrow to take back to Haymitch's.

"Looks nice," a voice from behind me says. I whirl around in alarm. It's Greasy Sae.

"Thanks," I mumble, embarrassed at being so startled.

"Relax, Peeta," Sae says with a laugh. "You're among friends here, you know."

"Am I?" I ask, indicating Katniss's house with a sweep of my hand.

"Especially her...her most of all," Sae says quietly. I snort in derision.

"Peeta...did you know that today is the first day in WEEKS that she's taken a decent shower? Did her hair? Changed her clothes? Decided to go hunting? I don't think she did all that on a whim," Sae says firmly. "She did that ONLY after seeing you."

I say nothing. I don't dare hope for anything. Hope is a dangerous thing. And I don't entirely trust myself.

"Peeta, she needs you...whether she realizes it or not right now," Sae says gently. "And you need her. Of all the people in this world, you are the only two that can understand each other."

"I don't know her anymore," I say flatly. "And I don't even know myself."

"Tell me how you feel about her," Sae says. I shudder briefly. No, she's not the Interrogator. I can answer. But I don't.

"You love her, don't you?" she asks.

"Real," I whisper.
"What?" Sae asks, confused. I remember. She doesn't know how to play this game. I give her an answer that she can understand.

"Yes," I admit, "Yes, I love her. I love Katniss Everdeen."

"That's a start," she says, "Now why don't you go home and clean up." I nod.

Sae turns to go back to the house. I push Haymitch's wheelbarrow back to his house and carefully put his shovel and the barrow back where I got them. Wearily I trudge back to my house.

I strip off my filthy clothes and leave them in a pile in the middle of my bedroom. I stumble into the bathroom and turn on the shower. I stand under the steaming water for a long time, washing all the dirt off, feeling the soap stinging my blistered hands.

I towel myself off and dress in shorts and a t shirt, grateful that my clothes, at least, were left alone. Wearily, I lay across my bed. How different things were the last time I slept here. I firmly believed I would never see this bed again then.

Tomorrow, I say to myself, tomorrow I'll bake something. But for now...I just need sleep. Even though it's mid afternoon, I feel my eyes closing with exhaustion. One last thought crosses my mind before sleep takes me.

*Welcome home, Peeta.*
THE VILLAGE

CHAPTER 3 - THE VILLAGE

PART I

I awaken sometime during the night. My old friend, the nightmare, has interrupted my sleep once again. My sheets are tangled around me, body drenched in sweat, heart pounding. All those old familiar feelings.

I kick myself free from my sheets and get out of bed. I stumble into the bathroom and answer my call of nature. As I leave the bathroom I automatically step to my window. I peer out at the rest of the Village.

As I expected, there was a single light burning in Katniss's house. Her bedroom window. I felt a pang in my chest when I thought about how lonely it must be for her over there. I had a moments urge to cross the street, go into her house, and comfort her. That would be disastrous, though...for both of us.

Yesterdays brief meeting was, in a word, tense. We were treating each other almost as strangers. I am still feeling the effects of the hijacking although yesterday I was able to control the worst of it.

Damn Snow. Damn Capitol.

I look at the house next to Katniss's. There's a light on at Haymitch's place also, on the first floor. Not surprising there. Haymitch doesn't sleep much at night. What is surprising is the other houses in the Village. Every other house that I can see is brightly lit. Through my open window I can hear sounds that I've never heard in the Village before - laughter, animated conversation, and music...the sounds of fiddles, guitars, and harmonicas mixed with the other sounds.

Curiosity finally gets the best of me. I slip on a pair of pants and shove my feet into a pair of shoes, thankful that my clothes were not disturbed. I had arrived from the Capitol this morning with nothing but the clothes on my back. After getting dressed I walked downstairs and out my front door.

I walked slowly down the street towards a group of brightly lighted homes. I can see people outside now, standing in front of some of the mansions or walking from one house to another. Laughter was everywhere. Animated conversations, the smell of cooking, and music playing filled the air.

I stopped. I suddenly feel like an outsider - an interloper. Someone that doesn't belong here. I should just turn around and go home. It just doesn't feel right that I -

As I turn to go home I accidentally bump someone half running up the street.

"Excuse me," I mumble.

"Oh no! I'm sorry! I wasn't watching...Peeta?" It was a girl about my age...and she obviously knew me. "Peeta Mellark?"

I squint at her, trying to see who it is in the darkness. "Uhh...yes," I stammer.

The girl laughs. "It's Leevy, Peeta! Remember? I was Katniss's neighbor in the Seam!"
"Leevy? Oh, wow! How are you?" Relief washes over me. I remember seeing Leevy in District Thirteen. Not quite a friend of Katniss's, as one of the few firebombing survivors she was a welcome sight. Leevy was slightly built, with that typical Seam look - dark hair, olive skin, and grayish eyes.

"I'm fine! When did you get in?" She asks as she hugs me enthusiastically. I awkwardly return her hug, feeling self conscious.

"Uhh...this morning. First thing," I answer.

Leevy hooks her arm through mine and shouts, "Everyone! Looks who's back! It's Peeta Mellark!"

The last thing I wanted was to be the center of attention, but, thanks to Leevy's well meant announcement, I can see that's gonna be impossible. People come streaming from the various houses, slapping me on the back, shaking my hand, hugging me. I hardly know any by name although all look familiar to me...all except one.

"About time you came back, slacker!" Blake Carrow, my old wrestling teammate, is hugging me tightly. I didn't even know that he had made it out the night of the firebombing. I had never seen him in Thirteen.

I hug him back with enthusiasm. "Good to see you too, Blake!" We pound each other on the back as Leevy looks on with a smile.

"I swear, I'll never understand boys and this need they have for beating each other up when they haven't seen each other in a while," she says with a grin.

"It's a guy thing, Leevy," says Blake with a wink.

"So what is this? A party?" I ask.

Both Blake and Leevy laugh. "Oh, no...this is our nightly steam blowing session," says Blake, somewhat grimly.

"I don't understand," I admit.

"Peeta, we're all working cleanup in town," Leevy explains gently. "We are going to each...well, what used to be each building, and going through the ash before the demolition crews get there...looking for...well..." Her voice trails off.

"Bodies...or parts of bodies...or bones," Blake finishes for her. "Mostly bones if anything now. Animals got in right after the fires went out and...dragged a lot of the...bodies and body parts...away. Wild dogs, mostly, is our guess."

"And when we're done going through the ash...we mark the site so the demolition crews can remove everything else," Leevy explains.

There's an awkward silence for a few moments, then some other people walk up to us to greet me. Another round of handshakes and hugs. Someone presses a glass into my hand. I take a cautious sip, only to discover that it's lemonade. Idly I wonder where they got the lemons from.

"So Peeta...have you seen Katniss yet?" Leevy asks.

"Yes," I said, feeling myself tense at her name. I clench my jaw and breath slowly and deeply. Now would NOT be a good time for a hijacking attack.
"And?" Leevy presses.

"And...nothing," I reply. "I need to sit down," I say suddenly.

"Are you okay?" Leevy asks anxiously, as Blake goes searching for a chair or stool. He comes back quickly with a small stool.

"I'll be okay. Just give me a moment," I reply. I sink down onto the stool gratefully. I quickly down the lemonade and carefully set the glass down.

"So...how's Katniss, Peeta?" Leevy asks. I sigh heavily. This girl can't take a hint.

"I don't really know, Leevy," I say evenly. "We basically just said hi to each other. She looks awful, if you want to know the truth. She looks how I feel. Now, please...I don't want to talk about her anymore.

"I understand, Peeta," Leevy says softly.

"I was at her house planting bushes," I suddenly blurt.

"What? Bushes?" Blake says.

"Yeah. I went into the forest and dug them up. Then I used a wheelbarrow to bring them all back inside the fence. She came out while I was planting them by her house," I explain.

"What kind of bushes, Peeta?" Leevy asks softly.

I clench my eyes tightly shut. No use. "Primrose," I manage to gasp out before my dam bursts and my tears flow freely down my face.

**PART II**

After my minor breakdown, Leevy gently gathers me up and helps me back to my house. Understandably, Blake was a little uncomfortable in seeing his old wrestling teammate sobbing like a baby, so he gladly deferred to Leevy to get me home.

"Peeta, don't worry about what happened back there," Leevy says to me on our walk back to my house, "One of the reasons that you hear so much laughter coming from us back there is because, for us, we either laugh, or we scream. Laughing is much easier."

"Have they...gotten to the bakery yet?" I ask hesitantly. Leevy pauses for a moment, then nods her head.

"Yes," she says gently. "They - found everyone in your home...your old home. Plus one more. They think the extra person was Beth O'Sullivan. They couldn't account for her at the tavern, and she wasn't in the...our group...that Gale led out."

I sigh heavily. Beth. The girl that had a crush on me forever - much like my unrequited love for Katniss. The girl whose mother was from the Out-Districts. The girl that blamed herself for causing the Typhoid epidemic. The girl that finally found a little happiness with my brother Alec.

I hope she didn't suffer. I hope none of them suffered.

I would cry for her, too, except emotionally I'm exhausted. I'm sure that I will, someday. Just not tonight. Leevy guides me into my house.
"You should get some sleep," she says. I shake my head.

"I have to get tired again first," I say, then, "Is there a grocer in town?"

"Not a regular grocer, yet," Leevy replies, "But there's a temporary grocer set up near the Square. They only have staples, though, nothing fancy."

"I don't need anything fancy," I say, "Primarily milk, eggs, and butter."

Leevy grins at me. "Sounds like you'll be doing some baking," she says.

"Yes," I say with a small smile of my own. "It's been way too long."

"They won't be open till tomorrow," Leevy says, "But I can get you what you need tonight. It'll just take a few minutes." Before I can tell her not to worry about it, she's gone. I sigh and start to brew some tea.

True to her word, she's back in less than ten minutes, with two other girls that I don't know. They are all loaded down with everything I said I needed.

"You really didn't have to do this," I start to protest, but Leevy cuts me off.

"It's really no problem," she says, "And besides, this way we all get fresh bread!"

I have to smile at that. Leevy strikes a shrewd deal. "Okay. Fresh bread it is. Now let me get to work!"

PART III

Fortunately all of my dry goods - flour, yeast, sugar, salt, rice, among other items - I always sealed in airtight containers. And I had plenty of everything left. Perishables was what I needed the most, and, thanks to Leevy and her friends, I now had enough of those to make a good start.

Baking, for me, had always been therapeutic. I had even worked in the kitchens at District Thirteen. Once, I even managed to squander precious resources in making a wedding cake for Finnick and Annie Odair.

Finnick. He saved my life in the clock arena more than once. The youngest ever Hunger Games Victor, Finnick for years had been the Capitols pretty boy. Like many who had been forced to watch the Games year after year, I had always thought of him to be a shallow, vain person...always preening for the cameras. The real Finnick came out during the Quarter Quell, and later in Thirteen. A kind, brave man...totally devoted to Annie Cresta, another Victor from Finnick's District Four. And fiercely loyal to his friends - especially Katniss. Forced to whore himself out by President Snow, Finnick had eagerly jumped at the chance for revenge during the Rebellion.

Finnick Odair, who would never know his son - who met his end at the claws and teeth of a lizard mutt during the Battle for the Capitol. I hope you didn't suffer, my friend.

I know that Annie had returned to District Four recently. Just as Beetee had returned to Three, Johanna to Seven, and Enobaria to Two. Life goes on.

I stayed up for most of the remainder of that night, baking. Nothing too difficult, just loaf after loaf of wheat bread. As I work, I make a mental list of what I'll need, not only for baking, but for day to day living as well. Idly, I wonder if my computer is still linked to the Capitol, and if I can still order goods through it.
Around dawn, as I was catching a few fitful minutes of sleep on my couch, I find myself awakened to a new sound. I strain my ears to try to identify what was making all that noise outside. It sounded like...honking geese.

At about that time I can hear the faint sounds of a man's voice swearing fluently, mixed in with the sound of frantic honking. I get up from the couch and open my front door. Out in the street was a sight that I honestly never thought I would see.

Haymitch is stumbling up the street, willow switch in hand, frantically trying to steer a gaggle of geese in the direction he wanted. From the nature of his cursing, it doesn't sound like he's having much luck. Red faced and sweating even in the cool of early morning, he finally throws his switch in the general direction of the geese. I can hear others now - my new neighbors, shouting advice at him. Haymitch good naturedly trades insults for a minute or two.

While watching this early morning show, I find myself smiling broadly at the antics of my old Mentor. Then, as he gets more and more frantic, something happens to me inside that I haven't felt in...forever.

I start to laugh.

The more frustrated Haymitch becomes, the louder I laugh. I laugh so hard my sides start to hurt. Tears come to my eyes as I almost double over. I seriously can't remember the last time I laughed at all.

Haymitch finally gives up and sits down in the middle of the street. Still laughing, I retreat into my kitchen and grab a fresh loaf of bread. I walk out of the house and see him still sitting in the same spot. He looks at me sourly as I approach him with the bread, still chuckling.

"Enjoy the show?" He asks sarcastically.

"Immensely," I reply, still grinning as I offer my hand to help him up. He grasps my hand as I pull him to his feet.

"So...geese?" I ask.

Haymitch grunts. "Oh yes. My little contribution to the rebuilding of District Twelve. I keep geese, the geese get fat, we eat the geese and their eggs, new eggs hatch, new geese are born...you know, that whole cycle of life thing."

I say nothing, just raise my eyebrows at him. "Why so surprised? I lost my old job last summer...and there's no more Rebellions to plan. Even though Paylor has assured us remaining Victors that the new government would continue to pay us...well, a man's gotta do something...and I'm too old to learn how to bake!"

"Speaking of baking," I say as I hand him the warm loaf of bread. He takes it wordlessly at first.

Haymitch slowly brings the loaf to his nose and inhales deeply. "I missed this smell," he says simply. "Maybe...things will be alright after all."

"There'll be more," I promise. Haymitch grins at me.

"Welcome back, kid," he says warmly, then surprises me by embracing me.

"Thanks," I say, startled. Haymitch turns to go back to his house, clutching the bread. Hands in my pockets, I turn to go back to my place.
"Peeta," Haymitch says softly. I stop and turn around. Haymitch holds up the loaf. "Thanks."

I smile and nod. "Anytime."

**PART IV**

After returning to my house, I quickly clean up the kitchen, then go upstairs to my room. I make up my bed, pick up my dirty clothes, then brush my teeth, shower, and shave. My beard is still very light but I felt the fuzz earlier. Time to do something about it.

After I get cleaned up I dress quickly, then go downstairs. I gather up all but two of my freshly baked loaves of bread and head outside.

My new neighbors are starting to head to work...combing through burnt wreckage, looking for the remains of their friends, neighbors, and relatives. Each has a filter mask, now hanging loosely under their chins, and each is carrying a heavy pair of gloves.

As groups pass me, I hand each a fresh loaf of bread. Their mood, considerably more somber than last night, brightens noticeably with the bread. I make sure to hand a loaf to Leevy personally. She smiles her thanks.

Finally I have just one loaf left. A crew is approaching, and the guy leading it looks strangely familiar. A couple years older than me, tall, definitely Seam. He makes eye contact with me and his face cracks a big smile.

"Peeta! I heard you were back!" He steps forward and shakes my hand enthusiastically.

"Yeah...I got here yesterday," I say lamely, frantically trying to place him.

"And bread! You sure didn't waste any time!" He says with a smile.

I suddenly recognize this tall man with the easy smile. He was one of Gale Hawthorne's crewmates while they worked in the mines. I remember exactly the first time I met him. His name is Thom.

*Gale Hawthorne is slumped against the whipping post, unconscious, his back a raw bloody mess from the vicious whipping that he just endured at the hands of our new Head Peacekeeper, Romulus Thread.*

"Gale." Katniss utters the single word as her fingers fumble at the knots that bind him to the post. The left side of her face is already starting to swell from where Thread hit her with his whip. The Peacekeepers are marching off and the crowd that had gathered is quickly dispersing.

I step forward to help Katniss. Someone hands me a knife and I saw at the ropes until I cut through them. Gale collapses to the ground.

"Better get him to your mother," Haymitch says.

Katniss looks around frantically, then spots the old woman that sells clothing. Katniss goes over to her and I see her talking frantically to the woman. She hands the woman a handful of coins and I hear the clothing seller say, "Just don't tell where you got it." Katniss nods as the woman indicates the board that she was using as her counter top. Katniss picks up the board and carries it back to where Gale is laying as the woman packs up the rest of her inventory and quickly leaves.

Gently we roll Gale face down on the board. He groans slightly but never opens his eyes. The only ones that are left in the Square now are Haymitch, Katniss, myself, and two of Gales crew.
Together, Haymitch, myself, and Gales crewmates, Bristel and Thom, lift up the board holding Gale, trying not to jostle him too badly. As we start to walk towards the Village I see Katniss frantically talking to Leevy, then scooping up Gales jacket and running to catch up with us.

"Peeta?" Thom's voice penetrates the place my mind had just gone to...the remembrance of Gales whipping. I smile apologetically.

"Sorry," I say sheepishly. Thom slaps me on the shoulder, and says with a smile and a wink, "No worries...and we'll be expecting bread every morning from now on!"

I laugh and wave at the workers as they leave the Village to go about their grim task. I'm about to go inside the house when I hear someone else call my name. I look up and see Greasy Sae walking from the Village entrance.

"Good morning," I say.

"Hello, Peeta," Sae says warmly. "I'm heading over to fix Katniss some breakfast."

"Oh, great. I have something for her. Wait right here." I dash back into my house and grab a still warm loaf of bread, then hurry back outside to where Sae was waiting.

"Can you take this over to her?" I ask. Sae smiles and shakes her head.

"No, Peeta. I can't. But you can. Have you eaten?"

"Not yet," I say, feeling my stomach tighten at the thought of seeing Katniss again so soon.

"Well, come along then. There's more than enough for everyone. And no arguments!"

There's no way out of it. I sigh and fall in behind Sae as we cross the street to Katniss's house.

Sae doesn't bother to knock, but pushes the front door open. "Katniss? Breakfast time, dear!" She calls out. I reluctantly follow behind her.

Katniss appears from the kitchen. She's cleaned up, and her hair has been brushed, and she's wearing clean clothes. She looks much better than she did the day before. Her eyes widen slightly as she sees me, then narrow...in disapproval? I just want to leave right then and there...

"And look who I found!" Sae says cheerfully.

"Hello, Katniss," I say softly, my voice barely trembling. I hand her the loaf of bread.

"Peeta," Katniss says coolly as she takes the bread from me. I see a ghost of a smile cross her face. As I examine her more closely I can see that she's been crying.

"Thanks," she says simply. I just nod my head.

"You two sit while I get breakfast ready," Sae says. Katniss waves her hand towards the living room. There's a cheery fire blazing in the fireplace. We walk in and sit down, occasionally stealing glances at each other, but in an awkward silence.

Her living room table is covered with letters from all over Panem. I can see that they are all unopened. Some look like they've been there for a while. I suddenly feel something at my feet and look down to see Buttercup slinking between my feet, rubbing his back against my legs and purring contentedly. Like us, he looks awful. Skinny and wounded.
"Oh my gosh...Buttercup!" I reach down and scratch behind his ears. "Did you bring him from Thirteen?" I ask Katniss.

"No," Katniss says quietly. "He just showed up...last night."

"He walked all the way from Thirteen? That's incredible!" I say.

"He was disappointed, though. He was looking for...someone...that's not here," Katniss says, her voice trembling.

"Oh...yeah, I'm sure," I say awkwardly, feeling my own heart ache for Prim. Buttercup jumps up onto my lap.

"He always did like you," Katniss says, "So anyway, he showed up, so this morning I cleaned him up, and took a thorn out of his paw, which made him cry, which made me cry, and then I read the letter from my mother - she's in District Four now - and I cried some more, so I finally called her on the phone and we talked about Prim and we both cried some more, and I don't know why I'm crying now, I feel so stupid!" Katniss is sitting in her chair, sobbing, shoulders shaking...and I'm frozen to my chair.

I want so much to go over to her, to take her in my arms, to let her cry on me - but I can't move. There's no hijacking memories holding me back from her. Just the fact that I don't deserve to comfort her...hold her...keep her safe. Buttercup jumps off my lap, and, to my surprise, jumps on to Katniss's lap. To my even bigger surprise, Katniss gently cradles the cat in her arms as her tears finally subside.

Katniss idly strokes Buttercup as we sit in awkward silence for a few minutes before Katniss speaks.

"I was in town yesterday," she says suddenly.

"I thought you...well, I saw you when...you left. You had your bow with you," I reply.

"I was...I mean, I did go into the woods," she stammers, "But I went in town first."

"Oh," is all I can think of saying.

"I ran into Thom. Do you remember him?" Katniss asks.

"Yes," I nod. "I saw him this morning. Gave him some bread."

"Oh," Katniss says, "Well, he was working at the Mayor's house. Everyone was home...that night."

I felt my stomach tighten at the news. That meant that Madge was home. Beautiful, talented, smart, lonely Madge. The girl that had come to comfort me here one night, and we ended up comforting each other.

"She was...a good friend," I say quietly.

"To me too," Katniss says.

"Yes," I say quietly.

"I know about you and her," she blurts suddenly. I look at her, startled, but she doesn't seem angry. Just a little amused and maybe...sad.
There's no sense in denying it. "She told you?" I ask.

"No," Katniss says, "SHE never said a word. But Delly told me...and...Prim too...when we were in Thirteen. Well, Delly didn't exactly TELL me...not until I asked her about it anyway."

I could feel myself reddening. "Katniss, I -"

"Peeta," she says softly, "Don't apologize. You only went to her because of me. If I hadn't been treating you so badly..."

"So Prim told you?" I ask.

"Yes." She nods. "When you were...while you were still...in the Capitol. I don't even remember why...and I was so worried about you then that getting mad at you was the last thing on my mind."

"I'm sorry," I say quietly.

"For what?" Katniss asks sharply. "For kissing Madge or for being captured by the Capitol?"

"Both," I answer simply, then she suddenly says, "You loved Madge. Real or not real?"

"Not real," I answer immediately.

That ghost of a smile flickers across her face again.

"You're angry at me for kissing Madge...real or not real?" I shoot back at her.

"Not real, Peeta," says Katniss with a mysterious smile, "After all, no one's perfect."

I never got a chance to ask her what that meant, because at that moment Greasy Sae announced that breakfast was ready.

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**PART V**

Katniss and I both ate with good appetites. I did have to laugh at her, though, when I saw that she was feeding her bacon to Buttercup. Afterwards, I help Sae clean up the kitchen while Katniss takes Buttercup outside.

"I may be wrong, Peeta, but I think the best thing for that girl is you coming home," Sae says quietly. "Before yesterday, she was completely inside herself. Just sleepwalking from day to day. But you...you've brought her to life."

"Maybe she was just ready to come out," I say, somewhat lamely.

Sae shakes her head. "I don't think so," she says. "I even see her smiling. She NEVER did that until you showed up."

"I don't know if that's me -" I protest, but then Katniss walks in.

"If what's you?" She asks.

All I can do is stand there and blush, but fortunately Sae has no qualms about saying what's on her mind.

"Dear, I was just telling Peeta that his being back is really helping you!" Oh, no. You can't think of anything better than that?
Katniss stands there, regarding both of us coolly. Finally she says quietly, "Maybe it is."

Sae smiles broadly. I'm shocked that Katniss would ever admit that something or someone was helping her.

Katniss turns to me with the same expression on her face. "Peeta, what are you doing today?" She asks.

The question catches me a little off guard. Fortunately I already had an idea of what I wanted to do.

"Umm...I need to visit the temporary grocer and get a few things..." I begin.

"Good. I'll go with you. I have a call to make first. Will you be ready in an hour?"

"Yes...an hour's fine, Katniss," I reply.

"See you then," she says, with her ghost smile returning briefly. "Excuse me, please...Peeta, Sae." We both nod as she leaves the kitchen. I hear her study door close.

I look at Sae and shrug my shoulders. Sae smiles and gives me a thumbs up. Shaking my head, I thank Sae for breakfast and go home to finalize my shopping list.

**PART VI**

An hour later, there's a sharp knock at my door. I answer it. Katniss is waiting patiently.

"Ready?" She asks. I nod.

Together we walk down the walkway toward the street, then turn up towards the Village entrance.

"Aren't you curious about who I called?" She asks peevishly.

"Umm...of course," I stammer, "But, it's really none of my business who -"

"I called Aurelius," Katniss says. "I thought about what you said, and you're right. About calling him, I mean."

"And?" I say.

"And...we talked. About the district, about me, about you, about...Prim...and Mom...basically the same shit we talked about in the Capitol when they had me locked up for being 'Mentally Confused.'" She says the last part bitterly.

"He cares, Katniss," I say.

"Of course he 'cares,' Peeta!" She snaps. "I'm some kinda friggin' 'National Treasure!' Oh, Plutarch is having so much fun with this whole 'Mockingjay' thing! And Aurelius has orders to keep me sane no matter what!"

"Are you?" I ask quietly.

"Am I what?" Katniss snaps. "Sane? Who knows! I sure as hell don't!" She suddenly stops in the middle of the road.

"Peeta - look at me," she commands. I look at her. "What do you see?" She asks.
"I see...Katniss Everdeen," I say slowly.

"Oh, so you don't see "The Mockingjay'? 'Cause everyone else sure does! 'The Symbol of the Rebellion!' I don't want to be that! I just want to be me! I just want..." she says as her voice trails off.

"...Your life back," I finish for her. She looks at me like she's seeing me for the first time.

"Yes," she whispers, "I want my life back. Mine...and...others. Everyone's."

"Me too," I say sadly, "But Snow took me from myself. I don't know if I'll ever...be me again."

Katniss is blinking back tears. She takes a tentative step forward. My hijacked brain makes me take a step back. She stares at me with a stricken expression.

"Even now?" She asks. Suddenly it's too bright outside. I squint, then squeeze my eyes shut at the invading light. My heart is pounding in my chest. I feel my hands clenching into fists. Images, too shiny, flood my brain. False truths, I know...all with the same theme...Katniss as a monster. I feel my breath coming raggedly. I can hear a voice speaking to me as if from far away...

"...okay, Peeta, it's not real...it's not real...deep breaths, okay?" I hear Katniss repeating over and over. Finally I open my eyes. She's standing there in front of me...not a monster...just a scared seventeen year old girl. I blink a few times as the light becomes less and less painful. I take a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Sorry," I say to her sheepishly. She's still staring at me with wide eyes, then suddenly she steps forward and her arms go around me and mine go around her and it feels oh, so good!

Her face presses against my chest. "I missed you," I hear her muffled voice say.

I kiss the top of her head and say, "I missed you, too."

She looks up at me. "Was it...bad?" She asks softly.

I smile. "Well, it's never good...but some are much worse." She nods thoughtfully.

"So you really only see...me, when you look at me?" She asks tentatively.

"Only you," I say gently. "Katniss Everdeen, seventeen year old girl from District Twelve."

She thinks about that for a moment, then says suddenly, "You still love me. Real or not real?"

"Real," I reply immediately. Another ghost smile flicker and she says, "Good. You're still Peeta Mellark."

We stand like that for a few more moments, then she turns, takes my hand, and we continue walking into what's left of District Twelve.
Within the first few days following my return to District Twelve, life seemed to settle into a predictable routine. Most of the district residents that had already returned lived in Victors Village (Greasy Sae being one of the few exceptions, having taken up residence in one of the first newly constructed buildings in town). I quickly found myself looking forward to the nightly get-togethers. Even Haymitch started attending and was soon making himself at home, drifting from house to house along with everyone else.

Katniss is the last holdout. In spite of coaxing by myself, Haymitch, Thom, and Leevy, she still preferred to stay in her house at night, sipping tea, with only Buttercup to keep her company. Still, both Sae and Haymitch both confirmed more than once that my return to Twelve did have a positive effect on her. She was still withdrawn and emotional, but more and more flashes of the old Katniss...the fiery girl that I had fallen in love with those many years ago...would peek through.

Katniss has taken up hunting again. Every morning she rises early, grabs her bow (her original hand made bow, not the militarized weapon that Beetee made for her) and a quiver of arrow, and heads out into the forest. More often than not, she comes home with something...rabbits, squirrels, raccoon, even beaver. While she hunts, I busy myself with baking. I had found that my computer was indeed still connected to the Capitol web and that I was still able to purchase items for delivery by train. And a good thing, too, as the temporary grocer did indeed carry just the bare essentials. At least in this case the lack of supplies was due to the new government trying to sort out distribution, and not a deliberate attempt at subjugation.

Haymitch dutifully tends to his flock of geese, and, of course, drinks far too much. He talks to Effie regularly - Plutarch Heavensbee hired her as his personal assistant - and continually grousers about her constant nagging about his drinking. He usually joins Greasy Sae and myself for breakfast every morning (Katniss is usually already gone by then), and again at dinner, with all four of us present. Sae brings whatever vegetables are available at the grocers, I bring bread, and Katniss contributes whatever she managed to kill that day. On some days it's fish rather than the usual squirrel or rabbit.

A few days after Katniss had started hunting again, I asked her one night during dinner if I could join her on one of her hunts. I wanted to see her favorite places - the rock, the ruined house, and the pond.

"Oh, Peeta...no offense, but you're so loud the game in the next district over would be able to hear you coming," she said with a smile, "But I appreciate your offer anyway."

I just smile in return...but I still hope that she will take me to these places...someday.

And so it went. Doctor Aurelius calls me regularly, and confirms that Katniss has been talking to him two or three times a week. Our conversations normally revolve around the lingering effects of the hijacking. At one point he mentioned a new treatment that he would like to try with me...but it would involve returning to the Capitol for daily treatments.

"Peeta, I know that leaving Twelve is not something that you want to do, but, the nature of these treatments requires that you be under medical supervision," he explained.
"No. I'm not leaving. I...can't. Not with Katniss finally coming out of her shell," I say stubbornly, "Whether she knows it or not, she needs me. I'm sorry, Doctor. I have to stay here."

After a pause, Doctor Aurelius says, "Maybe there's another way. Let me work on this from my end. Peeta, I think these treatments will really do the trick for you, almost eliminating the after effects of the hijacking! If you don't have to leave Twelve, will you agree to the treatments?"

Of course I readily agreed. Anything to be able to stay here...where I belong.

PART II

A couple of days later, as I was working on re-doing one of the portraits that the Capitol had defaced during their occupation here, I was interrupted by a frantic pounding on my front door.

Puzzled and more than a bit annoyed, I went downstairs to answer the insistent knocking, only to find Katniss standing at my front door, looking haggard and splattered with blood.

"Katniss! What happened?" I cried as I reached to pull her in my house. She was panting and almost out of breath, but to my surprise, she jerked her arm out of my grip.

"Peeta! I'm okay! It's not my blood!" I stood gaping at her. "But I do need your help. Please! Come on!" She grabbed my hand and pulled my from my house. I was still wearing the apron that I wore when painting, but when I moved to take it off she said, "No...leave it. You'll need it!"

She had never let go of my hand and was pulling me insistently down the street. Half walking, half trotting, I was finally able to gasp out, "Would...you mind...telling me...exactly...what's...going on?"

"Shot...a deer," she panted. "Too big...for me...to carry...alone."

My Robo-leg caught on something as we ran, causing me to trip and almost go down, but, with surprising strength Katniss kept me on my feet somehow.

"So what's...the...rush?" I managed to gasp out. "Deer's...dead. Right?"

"Predators," Katniss gasped out. We reached the Meadow, both of us trying steadfastly to ignore the gaping hole in the earth there. We slipped through the fence and continued on into the woods. The ground was more broken here, forcing us to slow down, and allowing me to finally catch my breath.

What she said made sense. Wild dogs were common in the forest, as were bobcats and fox. Katniss had even encountered bears before. But still I couldn't resist the urge to tease her a little bit.

"And after all the times I asked you to PLEASE take me in the woods with you, and you refusing, and now you're practically DRAGGING me out here..."

"Oh, shut up, Peeta!" Katniss replied sternly, but before she turned her head away I glimpsed a smile on her face.

That made me laugh, and, after a moment, I heard Katniss laugh too. Not the bitter laugh that I had heard on occasion since returning home, not a sarcastic laugh, not a forced laugh through tears...a genuine laugh just because I said something that she found funny!

As we moved through the forest, her laugh made me think. This was a different Katniss then I had ever known.
The "old" Katniss, the one before the Hunger Games, was a girl determined to provide for her family. Serious, with few friends, intent only on her families survival.

The "Games" Katniss, the girl I got to know from our Reaping and after, was different still...living in constant fear of the Capitol, forced into pretending that she loved me in order to protect her family, and constantly worried about saying or doing something wrong.

Then came "War" Katniss...The Mockingjay...angry and full of hate, and willing to kill the person she held responsible for her sisters death without so much as batting an eye. But this Katniss was different.

This "New" Katniss was born the second she put that arrow in Alma Coin's heart. Living under incredible strain for almost a year and a half had bent her mentally almost to the breaking point. I'm still haunted by the image of her, locked up in her old room in the Training Center, singing one song after another during every waking moment, not eating, wasting away. That's when I was the most afraid. Afraid that the body would live but that the girl that was Katniss was already dead.

But "New" Katniss was a lot stronger than anyone had given her credit for. She bent...but she didn't break. And maybe, just maybe, my being here IS doing her good. Every day, this "new" girl comes out further and further. She's not Katniss the hunter, even though she hunts. She's not Katniss the Tribute, or Katniss the Victor, or Katniss the Mockingjay. She's Katniss Everdeen, the girl that I've loved for almost thirteen years now, just a couple of weeks shy of her 18th birthday. A girl that is finally discovering, one small step at a time, how to be - herself.

We finally reach the deer. It's covered with blood. Katniss had tied it and hauled it up a tree. But the smell of death was already bringing out predators. I notice with alarm that Katniss had, very uncharacteristically, left her bow and arrows here. She immediately snatched them up and quickly killed a wild dog and a buzzard that were the closest to the deer.

I examine the deer. It has to weigh well over one hundred pounds. I can see why she needed help.

"What did you hang it with?" I ask.

"Snare wire," Katniss replies, "Didn't have any rope or twine."

"Okay," I say, "I'll grab it and take the weight off the wire. You need to shimmy up the tree and untie it from here."

Katniss nods and scampers up the tree, then shimmies out on the branch.

"Okay, ready," she says. I nod and grab the bloody carcass. With a grunt I lift the deer up, taking the weight off the wire.

"Okay," I grunt. Katniss quickly undoes the wire. "That's it," she says. I awkwardly lower the deer to the ground.

Katniss drops out of the tree and we both stare stupidly at the deer. She reaches down and pulls two arrows from the carcass.

I look at her with raised eyebrows. "It took TWO?" I ask incredulously.

"Shut up," she says sharply, trying, and failing, to suppress her smile again. "I only lamed it with the first one. Second one took it down."

"And that's why you showered in its blood?" I say with a smile.
"Peeta!" She reaches over and smacks me in the arm. "It wasn't dead when I caught up to it. I had to cut its throat." She pulls a knife from her belt - her fathers old hunting knife - then slides it back into her belt.

"Okay, makes sense," I say. "So, how do we get it back?"

"You're asking me?" Katniss asks. "I've only shot one other deer...and I had...Gale to help then."

Gale. Gale Hawthorne. Gale and I had come to an...understanding...while in District Thirteen, and later in the Capitol. We both loved Katniss, but I had always admired him. And, by his own admission to me, he found me "hard to hate." I know that Katniss still, even indirectly, blames him for Prim's death.

"Well, I doubt if I can carry it all the way back myself," I say. "Too awkward. Not like carrying hundred pound flour bags." I give her a wink and a grin, and am rewarded with a small smile.

"I knew I should have stuck with rabbits and turkeys," Katniss says dejectedly. I'm looking around, trying to think of a solution - yes! I think I found our answer.

"Let me see your knife," I say. Katniss wordlessly passes it over. I walk over to a sapling and bend it sharply over, back and forth, until the base of the truck cracks with a loud pop. In the meantime, Katniss is retrieving her arrows from the wild dog and buzzard and is cleaning them off.

Using the knife, I awkwardly hack away at the base of the sapling until it comes free, then trim its trunk free of leaves and branches.

"Keep the back legs tied, then tie the front legs with some more of that wire," I say. "We'll stick the sapling between the back and front legs, then lift and carry it that way."

"Good idea," Katniss says, looking at me in surprise. "I thought you said you didn't know anything about the woods?"

"I don't, Katniss," I say teasingly, "But I do know how to use my brain!"

Katniss, busy with tying off the front legs, turns and shoots me a look. I see her mouth open, but before she can say anything, I say, "I know, I know - 'shut up, Peeta!'"

She just shakes her head and laughs. Soon the deer is tied and we use our sapling to lift it up. We balance the pole on our shoulders, and, with Katniss leading, start to make our way back to the fence.

It's slow going, but the load is manageable. Slowly we walk back to the fence.

"So, you shot a deer once before with Gale?" I ask as we walk.

"Yeah," Katniss replies, "A long time ago. We took it to Rooba's that time." Rooba had been the District Twelve butcher. She and her family were killed in the firebombing.

"Well, that's not an option this time," I say lightly.

"I know," Katniss says tightly.

"Have you heard from him? Gale, I mean," I ask.

"No," Katniss almost snaps the word. "He's in Two now. With his whole family. He's some big shot with the new military that Paylor's putting together."
"Oh," is all I can think to say, but I can tell that I've touched a nerve with Katniss.

"Oh, yeah," she says bitterly, "He's making a new life for himself in Two - running away from me when things got tough - and Mom, she decides to go live in Four, leaving me to deal with everything by myself. And Finnick had to get himself killed, and Haymitch is drunk all the time, and Prim, she...she..." Katniss suddenly drops her pole, the deer crashing to the ground, and presses her bloody hands to her face. I set my end of the pole down. She spins and glares at me. "So, when are YOU planning on running away, like everyone else?" Her chest is heaving with her breathing and she's almost shouting, tears making twin paths down her blood streaked face. Seeing her face, bloodied, almost - ALMOST - threw me into a hijacking seizure. NO! Not now! I clench my jaw as the brightness starts taking over my vision. Not real. Not Real! NOT REAL!

Katniss is still shouting - about everyone leaving her, about Prim leaving her...I feel her hands on my chest as she shoves me backwards. I stumble and fall, catching myself with my hands, feeling twigs and small rocks dig into my palms. The sharp pain allows just enough of a distraction to jerk myself out of the seizure, much the same way that digging my handcuff bracelets into my wrists did when we were in the Capitol.

"Katniss," I manage to spit out between my clenched teeth. "Katniss!" I struggle to my feet as she's pacing back and forth, almost incoherent. I grab her by her shoulders and spin her around to face me. "Katniss!"

"Let GO of me!" She screams, beating at my chest with her fists. I just hang on tighter to her, drawing her in closer to me until her face is buried in my shirt.

"Katniss," I say softly, as her screams die away and the only sound is soft sobbing. Her hands are no longer beating me, but are now clutching my arms tightly. I fold her into my arms and rub her back gently.

"You won't leave me?" She asks in a small voice, muffled against my chest.

"No, I won't," I say firmly.

"Promise?" She asks in the same voice.

"Promise," I say gently. She pulls her face away from my chest and looks up at me with her bloody, mottled face. "Oh, Peeta," she sighs, "I'm so damn broken."

"That makes two of us," I say, stroking her cheek. She gives me a small smile and grabs my hand, holding it against her face for a moment.

I hold her for a moment more, then say, "What do you say we get this deer back? And then you and I can work on fixing each other."

"Good idea," she says, then raises up on tiptoe and kisses my cheek. "That was to say thank you," she says almost shyly.

"You're welcome," I say, smiling as I once again pick my end of the pole up.

PART III
We finally maneuver the deer through the fence into the Meadow. We run into Thom and his crew there, dumping another load into the mass grave.

"Oh ho!" Thom says as he spies our load. "Looks like someone's been busy today!" He trots over to examine the deer.

"Hello, Thom," Katniss says. Thom grins at her.

"And is this the reclusive Miss Everdeen that everyone insists lives in our neighborhood?" He asks with a wink and a smile.

"The one and only," I say, smiling.

"Okay, okay," Katniss throws up her hands in mock surrender. "Enough, you two. I promise I'll start getting out more."

"Well, that was too easy," jokes Thom. "So...either of you ever clean a deer before?"

We both shake our heads. Thom examines the carcass. "Hmm...looks to be in pretty good shape...well, you're in luck. Just so happens that Rooba was my mother's second cousin. I worked in her shop when I was younger...and I think I can find my way around this animal...but it'll cost you," he warns.

"What?" Katniss says, suddenly wary. Her old Seam value system of favor and debt has kicked in.

"Well, you know the big tree next to Haymitch's place?" We both nod. "When you get back to the Village, hang this fine specimen up in the tree so it's about at eye level. When I get off tonight, I'll clean it up for you. Now, today is Saturday - which means, tomorrow is Sunday. So, I figure we can roast this sucker all day Sunday and have a real feast for the whole Village on Sunday! What do you say?"

I look at Katniss. Suddenly, a smile creases her face. She sticks out her hand. "Deal!"

Thom shakes her hand solemnly, then breaks a grin of his own. "Okay, you two take care of the deer. I and my crew still have some more - work to do."

**PART IV**

Katniss and I manhandle her kill back to Victors Village. We deposit the deer under the big tree that Thom had indicated. Katniss dashes back to her house and returns moments later with a coil of rope.

As we are hanging the deer carcass from the tree, Haymitch appears with his geese. They shy away from the smell of blood, as Haymitch walks up to us and examines the deer with interest.

"Well, I've seen my share of bloodbaths," he says, referencing the opening melee that used to happen every year at the Hunger Games, in which many of the weaker Tributes were killed off immediately, "But I have to say I've never seen anyone actually bathe in blood."

"Shut up, Haymitch," Katniss and I say together. We look at each other and laugh at our synchronized retort. Haymitch just raises an eyebrow as he looks at us.

"Fresh venison will certainly be welcome," he says. "Do either of you know how to clean this animal?"
"No, but we ran into Thom. He said he did," Katniss says.

Haymitch nods thoughtfully. "Good man, that Thom," he says. "So when do we eat?"


"Good job, Sweetheart," Haymitch says to Katniss. I see Katniss redden in response.

"Thanks," she says softly.

"Well, I've got geese to tend to. You two should really get cleaned up before the sight of you starts scaring the kids that live around here." With that, Haymitch wanders off in search of his scattered flock.

"He's right," Katniss says. "We're both a mess." I nod in agreement.

"Guess I'll see you later, then?" I ask.

"Yeah," Katniss says, "Dinner anyway. No fresh game tonight though."

"This will more than make up for it," I say with a smile.

"I'm gonna see how Thom cleans this, too," she says, "So I know how next time."

"Good idea," I tell her as I turn to go. "See you later, then."

"Peeta," Katniss says softly. I turn back to her and she's suddenly in my arms, clutching me tightly. I gently fold her in my arms.

"Thank you," she says, "For...well...everything."

I kiss the top of her head. "Thank you, Katniss," I say.

She looks up at me with a quizzical frown. "For what?" she asks.

"For...not giving up. For...well...for being you," I stammer.

She touches my face gently with her fingertips. "Peeta, you're a mess," she says with a smile. "Go get cleaned up!"

I gently disengage myself from her. "You too!" I say as I walk back to my house.

I go upstairs and quickly strip out of my bloody clothes, then step into the shower. I scrub myself thoroughly, washing away the dried blood. Watching the pinkish blood swirling down the shower drain, I'm suddenly hit by a powerful hijack seizure. My body stiffens as the room suddenly becomes too bright. I fight for breath as the image seizes my mind.

"There, all done," the Interrogator purrs as she deftly removes the needle from my neck. Already I can feel the serum burning its way into my body. I gasp in pain as it flows from my neck to my shoulders, then down my chest, back and arms. Already the room seems brighter and I try to close my eyes, but the clamps on my eyelids keep my eyes forced open.

"Ah ah ah...none of that, Peeta," the woman says in a teasing tone. We have more...entertainment for you to watch."

"Please," I hear myself beg, "Please...no more blood...no more killing...I can't -"
"Oh, no, Peeta," the Interrogator says almost gently, "This entertainment is of a more...romantic...nature." She turns to the silent Peacekeeper that has been her ever-present assistant through all of our "sessions."

"Clamp him," she barks, "And dim these lights!"

Once again I feel a clamp pinching down on my right nipple as its twin bites painfully into my scrotum. In spite of myself, I whimper in anticipation of what is to come next.

"Let's see if anyone's home, shall we?" My Interrogator says in a silky voice. "Ring him up!" she snaps.

Instant agony courses through my body as I arch against the restraints holding me to the table. In spite of myself I scream.

"Be strong, Peeta!" From the next room I hear Johanna's voice shout out, followed by a meaty sound of fist striking flesh several times. I hear a few moans and cries, then she's silent.

"Well, now that we know that everything works...and that we have 'convinced' Miss Mason to be silent, let's get started, shall we?" The Interrogator and her assistant swing the table up so I'm facing the far wall as the Holo-TV projector comes to life.

Another image of Katniss projects in front of me. Oh, please, no...I can't watch her murdering more kids. I see my Interrogators face hover briefly above mine, as she examines me intently. "Pupils at full dilation. Serum is functioning." Her face suddenly disappears. Katniss is standing...someplace familiar...yes, the Meadow, in District Twelve. And there's someone else there...I recognize Gale Hawthorne, walking slowly towards Katniss. And Katniss is smiling at him, extending her arms toward him, and he's smiling back at her as he closes the distance between them...then they're embracing, arms around each other, and...NO! He's kissing her...no, wait...SHE'S kissing HIM! Hunggrily their mouths devour each others lips as Katniss strains her body against his, their hands now caressing each other, plucking at clothing...now Katniss pulls Gales shirt off over his head, as he frantically unbuttons her shirt, finally ripping the garment open and stripping it off her.

"No," I find myself whispering. "NO!" I feel tears forming and dripping from my forced open eyes. Part of my brain is struggling against...whatever they injected me with...rejecting the images in front of me. This is fake, I say to myself, it's fake, it's -

"Poor, poor, Peeta," the woman next to me says sympathetically as we watch the couple on the Holo writhing against each other, now totally naked, as whimpers of pain rise up from my throat. Still, I try to fight it.

"Not...not real," I gasp. "NO! She wouldn't...do...this. She -" Sudden, agonizing pain courses through my body and my hoarse voice screams in agony.

"Oh, Peeta," the Interrogator says gently, "How can you deny the evidence? Look at her...look at him! Can't you see what they're doing? How much SHE is loving everything HE does to her?"

"No," I whimper, "NO! It's...not...real -" Another blast of pain jolts through me. Another hoarse scream, this one tasting of blood from my raw throat.

"Peeta," the woman says in a soft tone, "Please don't deny it. The proof is in front of you. Katniss Everdeen doesn't love you, Peeta. She doesn't even like you. In fact, she hates you, Peeta. She used you. Used you for her own personal gain. Then tossed you aside when you were of no use to her
It's getting harder and harder to deny the proof right in front of me. Katniss...used me. Discarded me. Hates me! I watched her murder helpless children and smile as she killed them. And now, I'm watching her...her...deep wracking sobs tear from my chest as the impact of what she's doing with Gale finally hit me and I finally manage to speak.

"BITCH!" I scream at the image in front of me, "FILTHY SLUT!"

My Interrogator pats me gently on the arm. "Very good, Peeta. Don't deny the truth any more."

I'm vaguely aware of her and the Peacekeeper quietly leaving the room. The Holo projection plays on for my...entertainment...the only sounds now are my sobbing and cursing at the couple displayed in front of me.

I finally manage to shake off the hallucination. I'm sitting on the floor of my shower. Water, long gone cold, splashes down on me from the shower head. I blink several times as I try to clear my head.


Or was it?

PART V

Numbly, I get dressed. That last seizure was so powerful that I'm still trembling. On shaky legs I go downstairs. Just as I hit the base of the stairs I hear my phone ringing in the study. As I answer the phone the display tells me who it is.

"Hello, Doctor Aurelius," I say woodenly.

"Peeta, is everything alright?" he asks with concern in his voice.

"No," I say after a long pause. "I - had a seizure a little while ago. A bad one."

"Well, that's one of the reasons why I called. A colleague of mine is coming out on the next train with the hijacking agent that we discussed. He'll be there Sunday. Do you think that you can find room for him in your house?"

"Of course, Doctor. I have plenty of room here," I reply.

"Splendid! Now, for the other reason why I called...I spoke with Katniss a short while ago. In spite of myself I feel my whole body tense at the sound of her name.

"Yes?" I say, trying hard to sound neutral.

"Yes, and...will you be seeing her tonight?. he asks.

I take a deep breath. I probably shouldn't see her tonight, after that last "episode," but what I say is, "Yes, probably."

"Good!" Aurelius says. "She will want to...discuss something with you tonight. I won't say any more."

"Okay," is all I say in response.
"Well, I won't keep you, Peeta. But please do call me on Sunday when...my colleague arrives."

"I will, Doctor Aurelius. Bye."

**PART VI**

By the time I walk out of the house, Thom is well into butchering the deer. A small crowd has gathered to watch. Katniss, I see, is front and center, watching every move he makes. I stick my hands in my pockets as I slowly make my way towards the crowd.

"Bad one?" The voice comes from behind me, startling me. I jump and spin around.

"Whoa, easy," Haymitch says, holding his hands out in front of him. I relax.

"You okay, kid?" Haymitch asks, concern in his voice.

I shrug. "Sure. Why do you ask?"

Haymitch shakes his head. "Tell that to someone that'll believe it." he says with a laugh.

"Haymitch, I really don't know what you're -" I start to say, before Haymitch holds his hand up.

"Sell that to someone that'll buy it, kid," he says with a smirk. "I'll ask again. Bad one?"

I sigh and stare intently at a pebble at my feet. Idly I kick at it. "Yeah," I say.

"Want to talk about it?" he asks gently.

"No!" I say, sharper than I intended.

"Okay," Haymitch says reasonably.

"Haymitch, how am I...how are we...ever gonna grow closer if this hijacking keeps popping up?" I ask plaintively.

"I thought you said you didn't want to talk about it," Haymitch says with a grin.

"I...don't. Not specifically. I just want to get better...get over it." I say miserably.

"Kid, you ARE better," Haymitch says gently. "Do you remember the very first time that you saw her after they busted you out?"

I nod, shuddering at the memory. "I tried to kill her," I say in a small voice.

"And how about the next time?" he asks gently.

"I...well, I didn't try to kill her," I say lamely.

"No...you just spent that visit insulting her," Haymitch says grimly.

"What's your point, Haymitch?" I snap.

"Just this," he says calmly. "Every day - EVERY day - you two are a little better than the day before. I see it because I'm not you...or her. Are you changed? Hell, yes, you are...both of you are. I am, too, for that matter. But you two...you two heal each other. I see that. And once your medicine gets here, things will get even better."
I look at him sharply. "How did you know about that?" I ask.

"Aurelius - who else?" he says with a laugh. "He keeps me up to date...don't worry, he doesn't get personal." He claps his hand on my shoulder. "Come on. Let's go watch them get that deer ready for tomorrow."

**PART VII**

Katniss and I finish up our dinner. Haymitch begged off, citing a headache. So Katniss and I quietly put together a stew with leftover rabbit and some vegetables that Sae had brought. Sae hadn't stayed either, claiming that her granddaughter was ill.

After dinner, we sit in my living room, sipping tea. Katniss is curled up on my couch, her feet tucked under her. Just like she sat during our interview with Caesar Flickerman after our Victory, I say to myself.

"Do you remember my book?" Katniss asks suddenly.


"Yes. My plant book. Remember?"

"Yes," I say, finally remembering. "I helped you update it. It was the first normal thing we ever did together."

Katniss smiled, remembering the hours we spent adding to her book. "Yes, that's the one."

"What about it, Katniss?" I ask gently.

"I want to do a new book," she says softly

"A new plant book? But don't you still have the old one?" I ask.

"No...not a plant book. A...people book. About...about people that I...we...had in our lives. People that are...not here anymore. So that we don't forget...so we always remember" she says, her voice quavering ever so slightly.

"And you want my help? With the drawings?" I ask. She nods.

"I'd love to," I say with a smile.

"I was hoping you'd say yes," she says, returning my smile with one of her own.

"When do we start?" I ask.

"The next train is bringing some special paper for me. It arrives the day after tomorrow. Once we get the paper we can start," she explains.

"Good," I say. "I'm looking forward to it."

"Me too," she says. "I - I've missed you..." Her voice falters.

"Katniss...you and I - we've been through hell together." I stand up. "And...we're healing together. And there's no one on this earth that I would rather be with during all this than you."

Katniss stands up slowly, then, without a word, steps into my arms. My arms close willingly
around her.

"I...I've never said this to you...but I'm so glad you came back," she whispers.

And so am I.
Preparations for the deer roast are well underway. While Thom was dressing the deer, others dug a pit in the Village green. Sae rummaged through every house in the Village (except one - Kathleen O'Sullivan's place, still vacant) looking for herbs, spices, and vegetables that she could use to add flavor to the meat and accompany the meal we were all to have.

Early the next morning, a fire was started in the pit. When it burned down to coals the deer was skewered on a pole and suspended over the pit. Everyone in the Village took turns slowly turning the spitted carcass as it cooked over the coals.

Word quickly spread to the rest of the district, and people started showing up from town. Everybody contributed some food item to our feast. Fortunately, the population here was still very low - there were hundreds of District Twelve residents still in District Thirteen, and others, such as Gale Hawthorne and Una Everdeen, had moved to other districts. Running out of food was not going to be a problem.

I stayed up late the night before and rose early the next day, baking. Not just bread, but pies and a large cake as well. Plus, one special treat for Katniss.

I placed my special treat for Katniss in a basket, covered it with a cloth, and headed over to her house. Normally at this time of day she would be hunting but Haymitch and I had convinced her to take the day off.

I walked across the street, noticing the activity in the Village as my neighbors started to prepare for the feast later on in the day. I knock briskly on her door, and, not waiting for a response, push it open.

"Katniss!" I call out as I enter her house.

"In here, Peeta!" I hear her call from the living room. I follow the sound of her voice and see her sitting on her couch. In front of her, spread out on her low living room table, were hundreds of envelopes from all the mail that she had been receiving since her return to Twelve from the Capitol.

"Finally going through your mail?" I ask with a smile.

Katniss sighs heavily. "Yes," she says, "Doctor Aurelius convinced me that I should at least try to answer some of them. But there's so many!"

I pick up one of the envelopes at random. It was addressed simply to "Mockingjay, District Twelve, Republic of Panem." Well, there's only one Mockingjay, I say to myself.

"How about this one?" I ask as I put the basket on an empty chair.

Katniss shrugs. "I guess that's as good as - wait! Peeta, what's that smell?!"

I smile. "Just a little something I whipped up for you," I reply.

Katniss jumps off the couch and picks up the basket. She pulls the cloth off the top, sees the
contents, smiles, and brings the basket to her face and inhales deeply.

"Cheese buns," she says almost dreamily.

"Have you already eaten?" I ask.

"No. Be right back," she says as she disappears into the kitchen. She comes back in a minute with two plates, each bearing cheese buns.

"I figured if you were so nice to make these for me, the least I could do is share," she says, smiling as she hands me a plate.

I take the plate as she settles on the couch next to me. "Katniss, I made these for you," I say with a smile.

"I know. And I chose to share! Now, that letter?" Katniss takes a bite of her bun and I see her roll her eyes, relishing the taste.

"Okay," I say. I open the envelope up. "Dear Katniss, I'm twelve years old and I live in District Four. I met you during your Victory Tour. I was the girl that handed you your flowers. I remember telling you that when I was old enough I was going to volunteer just like you did. I remember that you looked really sad when I said that, but you didn't say anything except to smile and thank me for the flowers. I didn't understand then but I do now. The war was awful, and my father and brother both died fighting the Capitol. I know now that you and they were both fighting to make Panem a better and safe place to live in. I just want you to know that when I get older I still want to be like you. Brave, strong, and not afraid of doing what's right. You and Peeta are both my heroes. Your Friend, Lilly Donegal."

I could feel myself getting choked up while reading Lilly's letter. When I finished, I looked up at Katniss. She was sitting quietly, twin tear tracks trailing from her eyes down her face.

"I remember her," she whispers. "Peeta, I remember her! Do you?"

"Yes," I nod, "I thought you were gonna say something to her right then and there!"

"I almost did," Katniss admitted. "But, that would have just caused more problems. But I can say something now!" Katniss jumps up and dashes into the study, then returns with paper, pen, and envelope.

"You're gonna answer her now?" I ask incredulously.

"Yes. Right now." Katniss says stubbornly.

"Okay, but if you insist on answering each one of these letters, it will take you forever to get through all of them," I warn.

"Peeta, we have nothing but time now," Katniss says, as she begins to write. As she writes, I clear away her plate and mine, and put the rest of the cheese buns away. By the time I'm done, Katniss is holding out the letter that she wrote.

"Read it," she says insistently.

I take the letter. "Dear Lilly, Of course I remember you and I am so happy to hear that you are okay - but sad to hear about your father and brother. Yes, the war was very terrible. But, like many awful things, it needed to be fought. Everyone in Panem that is alive today has lost someone in the
war. I hope and pray that this is the last war that will ever be fought. Peeta and I are both okay. I just want you to know that I am no hero. Your father and brother are heros for doing what needed to be done. Thanks to them, and others like them, no child will ever have to be afraid of their name being pulled from a glass ball ever again. You are my hero, Lilly. If I am ever in District Four, or if you ever get to Twelve, I hope to see you again. Please take care. Your Friends, Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark."


"You didn't mind that I included you?" she asks.

"No, not at all," I reply. Katniss quickly addresses the envelope, and stuffs the letter inside. As she seals it I see her frown suddenly.

"I don't know where I'm supposed to take this," she says.

"The Justice Building, I think," I say to her. "We'll mail it tomorrow."

Katniss reaches for another letter. "Another one?" I ask. This one was addressed the same as the first, except her name was used instead of "Mockingjay."

"This one's from District Ten," she says, reading the envelope. "Dear Katniss, My brother was Reaped in the Second Quarter Quell -" Katniss stops reading and looks at me.

"Haymitch's games," she says softly.

"Go on, Katniss," I urge her gently.

Katniss hesitates, then looks down at the letter again. "- and he didn't make it. My daughter was Reaped a few years ago. She's gone too. You understand better than anyone what it's like to be Reaped. Thank you, and Peeta too, for putting a stop once and for all to the -"

And so it went for the next hour or so. And Katniss sat down and personally answered every letter she opened.

**PART II**

The deer roast is just what everyone needs. After weeks of toiling in the scorched ruins of District Twelve, pulling human remains out of destroyed buildings, everyone was ready to, as Haymitch put it, "Let their hair down."

Everyone that attended brought something to contribute, either to eat or drink. For the first time since our Victory Celebration here that accompanied our first Parcel Day, there was more food than people could eat at a District Twelve party.

Katniss was the biggest surprise of the day. After weeks of allowing her mail to pile up, now it was a chore to drag her away from it. Reading letter after letter from people from every district in Panem, every letter telling her what an inspiration she had been to them. But, in typical Katniss fashion, her responses to the letters were unfailingly humble, telling each letter writer how much inspiration SHE had gotten from their letter.

But her biggest surprise came after we had both gone to our respective homes to get cleaned up and changed for the party. I was running a little behind as I took the time to deliver the bread, pies, and cake before getting cleaned up. I was upstairs still getting dressed when there was a knock on my door.
"Door's open!" I called down from upstairs. I could hear the door open, then close.

"It's just me, Peeta!" Katniss called from downstairs.

"Be down in a minute!" I call back.

I quickly finished getting dressed and ran a brush through my hair, then went downstairs. Katniss was seated in the living room, waiting for me. As I walked into the room, she stands up.

"Oh! Wow!" Is all I can think of saying. I hadn't given much thought to what Katniss would be wearing that day - if anything I had figured it would be her usual pants and a comfortable top.

But today - Katniss actually put on a dress for the party today. Sleeveless, forest green in color, with sandals. And she did something else. She was wearing light makeup as well.

"You don't like it," Katniss says, more as a statement than as a question.

"No, no! It looks...really nice...I'm just surprised, that's all. I mean, you usually don't wear dresses," I stammer.

"Well, it's going to get warm today," she says, somewhat defensively. "I just thought that this would be cooler."

"Oh, well...that makes sense," I say. "Katniss, I'm sorry if you thought I didn't like it. I do. I was just surprised, that's all...especially with you wearing makeup, too."

"Is it too much?" she asks anxiously. "I mean, when I saw my face in the mirror, well, I looked so, I don't know, washed out or something. If it's too much I can go wash." She turns as if to go do just that, so I take her hand gently, but firmly, in mine.

"Katniss," I say softly, "It looks fine. You look - well, beautiful." At this, Katniss blushes slightly.

"Thank you," she says with a small smile.

"Are you going to run into town with me?" I ask. "Your papers should be here today, and the doctor that Aurelius told me about should be here with that medicine he wants to try on me also."

"Will we have time?" Katniss asks. I nod.

"I can call the terminal and ask them to send a car. I'm sure they already have a car laid on to pick up this doctor and his supplies anyway. It should be no problem." I reply.

"Okay, then," Katniss says. "I'll go with you." With that, I go into my study and dial the terminal's number. The call is brief. I rejoin Katniss in the living room a couple of minutes later.

"All set," I say. "The car will be here in fifteen to twenty minutes. What do you say we take a walk and meet it on the way?"

Katniss smiles and stands up. "Sounds good. Let's go."

**PART III**

Katniss and I slowly stroll up towards the entrance to Victors Village. It's a beautiful Sunday morning in District Twelve. Spring has always been a favorite time of year for me - trees and flowers starting to bloom, warm days, cool nights. I know Katniss loves this time of year also.
We walk side by side for a few minutes, but as we pass the entrance to the village and turn down the road to town, her hand accidentally brushes mine. To my surprise, rather than pull her hand away, I feel her fingers open and naturally twine with mine. This simple act for some reason makes my heart pound. Hand in hand we walk slowly towards town.

Katniss is talking excitedly about the book that we will be working on. A book about all of the people that have touched both our lives. I'm excited about the book project, too - because it means being able to spend more time with Katniss. And, I know how important it is to her.

Soon we see a car approaching. Cars have never been a common sight here in Twelve - usually reserved for Capitol Liaison staff or those that worked in Mine Management. Now, with the district only a pale shadow of what it once was, cars and trucks are even more uncommon. So, we know that this car is for us.

I raise my hand as the car approaches, then stops. The driver quickly gets out to open our doors for us. I see it's the same driver that had originally picked me up from the station the morning that I arrived back here.

"Good morning, Mister Mellark - and Miss Everdeen," says the driver.

"Good morning," Katniss and I both say as we climb into the car. The driver closes our doors, then climbs back behind the wheel. Soon we are heading towards the train station.

"Do you remember the first time you and I rode in a car together?" I ask Katniss. I see her slender shoulders shudder in response.

"How could I forget?" she said. "It was right after the Reaping - after we visited with our families. We were going to the station then, too."

I feel her hand reach for mine again. It's amazing the amount of comfort that I was able to draw with that simple contact.

"Sir, if you don't mind my saying so, you are looking much - healthier - than the last time I saw you," the driver says to me.

"Thank you," I reply, smiling at Katniss. "I feel much better than last time also." Katniss returns my smile and squeezes my hand.

Shortly afterward we arrive at the station. As I look around I'm amazed at how much progress has been made in this part of town in the last few weeks. The rubble and ruins from the firebombing are almost completely cleared and new construction is booming. Katniss is looking all around with a look of wonderment on her face.

"That's right, you didn't see any of this when you first came back," I say to her.

Katniss shakes her head. "No, Haymitch and I flew in on a hoverplane. We landed in the Meadow. I've hardly seen anything here until today."

The driver opens our doors and we exit the car. "I'll be right out here, sir, when you are ready to go." I nod at the driver and thank him as Katniss and I walk into the station. The train is arriving just as we enter the building.

"Something's different," Katniss says.

"Well, it's a new building," I reply. Katniss shakes her head.
"No, that's not it," she says, then snaps her fingers. "I know what it is! No cameras!"

That's it. Every other time Katniss and I have ever been in the station together, there were always camera crews present to document our every move. From Reaping Day, to the day of our return, to the first Parcel Day, the Victory Tour, and our Second Reaping - cameras, and usually crowds, were always here. Now, the station was almost completely empty, and no one was giving us a second look.

Katniss is smiling. "Maybe now we can get back to being normal," she says softly. I squeeze her hand as I give her a smile.

We can see people moving about the train as we wait in the station. I suddenly realize that I don't even know who it is we are supposed to be picking up here. Well, there can't be that many people arriving here - this train is primarily freight - but still, I -

"Peeta!" I hear a man's voice calling my name. I look around the station in an attempt to locate the owner.

"Peeta Mellark!" I see a figure approaching us - a balding, bearded, portly man in his 60's. And I know who it is instantly. Katniss and I walk quickly to the approaching man, then, as we reach him, I let go of Katniss's hand and embrace the man enthusiastically.

Doctor Galen Wellgood has returned to District Twelve.

PART IV

Galen gently disengages himself from me. "It's wonderful to see you again, Peeta," he says with a smile, "And you too, Miss Everdeen."

"Hello, Doctor," Katniss says softly, taking his extended hand. She shakes his hand quickly and then averts her eyes. She hadn't treated him very well when he was here. From her reddening face I could tell that she was more than a little embarrassed.

"Oh, before I forget. A package for you, Miss Everdeen - courtesy of Doctor Aurelius." He hands Katniss a bound box. Katniss finally smiles at him and thanks him as she takes the box.

"Aurelius mentioned the project that you are working on," Galen says, "And he was quite enthusiastic about it! He and I both think that it's a wonderful idea." At this time station employees walk up with Galen's luggage and two locked boxes.

"Galen, we have a car out front," I say. Galen nods and motions the porters to follow us as we walk to the station entrance. As we walk he comments on the new construction and laments on the changes to District Twelve since he was here last.

The driver sees us coming and quickly opens doors and the car trunk for Galen's luggage and the boxes.

"Careful with those boxes, gentlemen," he says with a smile. "Inside are what we hope is the key to giving Mister Mellark his life back!"

"I hope it works," I say with a sigh. "I don't get 'episodes' very frequently now, but when I do they are still brutal."

"Aurelius and I both have high hopes for this serum," Galen explains, "It's more along the lines of an anti-toxin. We may not be able to completely eliminate your seizures, but we hope that this
makes them more manageable."

We climb into the car and the driver slowly makes his way through the district back to Victors Village. Our conversation ceases as Galen takes in the extent of the destruction, now mostly cleaned up.

"I knew it was bad...but nothing in my imagination could have come close to what it's really like," Galen says quietly.

"It was worse when I first returned," Katniss says rather sharply. "The work crews have really done a good job clearing away the rubble and dead bodies." I glance at Katniss, wondering about this sudden outburst of hostility. Surely she knew that Galen did not at any time support President Snow or his government.

"Katniss, what are you doing?" I whisper to her. She answers me with a glare and whispers back, "Do you really think he had no idea how bad it was here?"

"In fact, I didn't, Miss Everdeen," Galen says from the front seat. "News in the Capitol was heavily censored. Surely you knew that." He twists around in his seat until he is facing Katniss. "And I do want to extend my deepest condolences to you, Miss Everdeen, and you as well, Peeta - for the losses that you both have suffered."


Galen sighs heavily. "This terrible war touched all of us. No one in Panem was immune. My entire family in District Two is either dead or missing - 'displaced' is the term the new government is using. So, yes, Miss Everdeen - I can feel the same pain that you feel. Having said that, I want you to know that I was extremely fond of Primrose."

As he talked, Katniss slowly lowered her eyes until she was looking at the floor of the car. I could tell that his words affected her but she still said nothing by way of apology or acknowledgement. Thankfully, we soon pulled into the Village and could see people bustling about in preparation for our upcoming feast.

"What's this?" Galen jokes. "Peeta, a party for me?"

I laugh. "Oh no, just a little Village celebration. Katniss killed a deer yesterday and it's roasting as we speak."

"Here we are," the driver says as he pulls up to my house. I thank him again as we all exit the car. Katniss immediately excuses herself from us and runs across the street to her house, slamming the door behind her.

Galen looks at me questioningly. "I'll deal with her in a few minutes. Let's get you settled first." He nods and together we carry his luggage and the boxes into my house. I set him up in a spare bedroom upstairs as he explains the treatments to me. A single injection a day, starting with a light dosage at first and the gradually increasing the amount of serum with each injection.

"You should feel no effects from any of the injections," Galen explains to me. "I would like to start tonight, after we are settled in for the evening."

"Sounds good," I say, nodding. "Galen, would you excuse me for a bit? You should know where everything is."

"Of course, Peeta," Galen says. "Take your time. Maybe I'll run over to Haymitch's and surprise
him with this." Galen smiles and holds up a large bottle that he took from his bag.

"I'm sure he will appreciate that," I say with a smile, "If he's not in his house, he may be out tending his geese."

"Geese? Now that's something that I HAVE to see," Galen replies. I say a quick goodbye then head across the street to Katniss's house.

I knock on the door firmly. No answer. I knock again. No answer. I try the door. Locked. I sigh and move around to the back and knock again. Still no answer. I try the back door. Locked. On a whim I try the outside entrance to her basement. It's unlocked.

Quickly I move down the stairs to her basement. Unlike mine, which I converted to weight room shortly after moving in, Katniss's is remarkably uncluttered. The largest item is a large wardrobe. I open it, already knowing what's inside. Wedding dresses. Two dozen of them. All designed by Cinna for the sham marriage between Katniss and I that never took place, because President Snow decided it would be easier to kill us both outright in that rigged Quarter Quell.

Staring at the dresses, I find myself simmering with long suppressed rage at Coriolanus Snow, now dead for almost six months. The man's evil knew no boundaries. Just then I heard the upstairs basement door open and the room is flooded with light.

"Peeta?" I hear Katniss's voice calling from the top of the stairs.

"How did you know it was me?" I ask.

Katniss walks down the stairs and makes a little half-laugh noise. "Who else would pound on my doors, then lurk around in my basement?"

I feel myself reddening. "Well, maybe you should answer when I knock!" I say, trying to muster indignation. Katniss joins me at the wardrobe. I can tell that she's been crying but say nothing.

"They're beautiful, aren't they?" she asks quietly.

"Yes," I say, "Just like the girl they were designed for."

Now it was Katniss's turn to blush. But, instead of her usual "I'm not beautiful" protest, she says, "So I suppose you came over to yell at me."

"If needed, yes...but I really came over to see if you were alright," I reply.

"Let's go upstairs," Katniss says. I nod and follow her upstairs, the the into the living room. There, we take seats on the couch.

"I really don't know why I acted that way to Doctor Wellgood earlier," Katniss begins.

"I think I do," I say. Katniss looks at me with arched eyebrows. "It's about Prim, isn't it, Katniss?"

She sighs heavily and nods slowly. "I'll be fine for a day, maybe two. Then I see something, or someone says something...and it starts all over again," she says miserably.

"Then she should be the first subject for our book," I say. "Here, I want to show you something." I reach into my shirt pocket and pull out a pocket size sketch book. I open it to the first page as I sit closer to her on the couch.

Katniss examines the small sketch closely. Prim, with her goat, Lady...and Lady is licking Prim's laughing face. Katniss's fingers trace over the paper and I see tears quivering on her eyelashes - but her lips are creased in a smile.

"Oh, Peeta," she breathes, "It's beautiful! When was this?"

"A few weeks after we got back, I think," I reply. "We were talking while she was milking her goat one afternoon, and the goat just started licking her face, and Prim was giggling. It was like my brain took a picture of that moment. When you mentioned the book that was the first one I drew."

Katniss says nothing, but continues to stare at the picture. "Katniss - there's nothing in the world that I can say or do to take your hurt away when it comes to Prim. All I can do is help you with the book, and help keep her memory alive in your heart."

Katniss suddenly throws her arms around my neck and squeezes hard. "Thank you, Peeta - it's perfect," she says as she wipes her face with her hand. "I think I owe the Doctor an apology - and we have a deer roast to go to."

"Uhh - before we go - maybe you should take a look in the mirror first," I say tactfully. Katniss frowns and disengages herself from me to run into the downstairs bathroom.

"Dammit," I hear her say in disgust. "Now I know why I hate makeup!"

"Take your time, Katniss," I say from the couch.

**PART V**

Our first stop was Haymitch's house, so Katniss could apologize to Galen. Fortunately, we found both Galen and Haymitch working on the bottle of fine liquor that Galen had brought for Haymitch from the Capitol. Katniss apologized awkwardly to Galen, who, to his credit, accepted it like a gentleman.

"Remember, Miss Everdeen, that I'm not only here for Peeta," Galen says. "I'm here for you, Haymitch - well, everyone."

"Making new friends already, sweetheart?" Haymitch asks Katniss with a smirk. Katniss just fixes him with a scowl.

"I know, I know - 'Shut up, Haymitch,'" he says with a laugh.

The rest of the day was by far the most pleasant day that I have had in District Twelve since my return. As Katniss had not made many appearances during the nightly get togethers her presence during the deer roast was a big hit. Never comfortable with being the center of attention, I had to restrain Katniss several times from bolting for her house.

"Katniss, these people are all neighbors of yours and have been for your entire life," I say in an effort to calm her. "And none of these people is looking at you as the Mockingjay - to them, you're Katniss Everdeen, deer hunter!"

So, in spite of herself, Katniss found herself relaxing, and I even saw her cracking a smile on a few occasions. Of course, she received raves from everyone for her hunting prowess. But will all that, I could tell the day was taking a toll on her - and me as well. This was the first time that either of us had been in anything remotely resembling the public eye together since the interviews before the Quarter Quell.
By the time evening had rolled around and the sun was setting, Katniss and I were both pretty well exhausted. I went around to our neighbors with Katniss, saying our goodnights to everyone, and spending a little extra time with Thom and Leevy, as they had both worked so hard to make this event a success. I let Galen know I was heading home - I knew he wanted to give me the first treatment that night.

Katniss and I pause in the middle of the street, halfway between our homes. I suddenly realize that this is the exact spot where our Victory Tour started almost a year and a half ago - where we collided in our well-acted haste to be in each others arms. I look at Katniss intently and, from the expression on her face, I can tell she is thinking the same thing.

"Bring back memories?" I ask.

"Yes," Katniss says. "This is the spot where we started the Victory Tour." I nod solemnly. I want to take her in my arms and kiss her so badly it hurt...but at the same time the rational corner of my brain holds me back. It's too soon to do anything like that.

"Guess I should head in," I say softly. I give her hand a final squeeze, then turn to walk into my house.

"Peeta," her soft voice call my name. I stop and turn around. "You will be over later, right? To work on the book?"

I smile. "I'll be there later. I promise." I see her turning back towards my house. As I walk slowly to my front door I hear Katniss's front door close firmly. I walk the last few steps into my house.

Galen and Haymitch were both sitting in the living room, the bottle of expensive liquor that Galen had brought for Haymitch sitting on the table in front of them. I can see that the level in the bottle has dropped considerably.

"Peeta!" Galen's voice booms out. Oh, boy. He's definitely been drinking. "Come in, my boy! Come in!"

I see Haymitch sitting back on the couch with that little irritating smirk that he so often wears. He's obviously enjoying my discomfort at having two drunks in my house at the same time.

"Enjoying yourselves?" I ask sarcastically.

"Immensely," Haymitch says, exaggerating each syllable. "Doc, I take back every bad thing I ever said about you. This," he says, picking up the bottle, "is pure bottled class."

With difficulty, Galen stands up, swaying slightly. He walks to a side table where one of the boxes that he brought with him was sitting. With care, he opens it and extracts a syringe and alcohol wipe.

"Time for your first treatment, Peeta," Galen says, indicating a straight backed chair for me to sit in.

"Galen, no offense, but are you in any condition to -" I begin, only to be waved into the chair by Galen, who says, "Nonsense! I'm perfectly - fine! Now sit!"

I sigh and sink into the chair. Galen fumbles with the alcohol wipe for a moment, then I feel the cool pad wiping a spot at the base of my neck. I see Galen then hold up the already loaded syringe and I silently pray that he doesn't break the needle off in me.
"Alright, Peeta, hold still - just a little stick," I barely feel the poke of the needle, "And...there! All done!" Galen smoothly extracts the needle, caps it, and drops it into a red plastic box.

"That's it?" I say, rubbing the injection site.

"That's it!" Galen says. "Tonight, if you dream, I want you to write down whatever you dream. We'll talk about your dreams tomorrow."

I stand up. "Well, I'll leave you two to...catch up," I say with a smile, indicating the bottle. "I'm going to shower and change. Katniss and I are starting the book tonight."

I hear Haymitch snort, but Galen says, "Ahh, yes - the book. Very therapeutic! I'm looking forward to seeing your progress there!"

"Eventually," I say as I climb the stairs.

PART VI

After showering and changing, I grab a small box of pencils and paints, my sketch book, and I head across the street to Katniss's. I can see the party still going on down the street.

I knock briskly on her door, then let myself in. "Katniss? It's just me," I call.

"In the kitchen," Katniss calls back. I walk into the kitchen, where she has her box of parchments sitting on the table, along with another box containing photographs. She has a note pad next to her. I can see that she's scribbled some notes already.

Wordlessly, I sit next to her. She's already changed into her favorite lounge wear - loose pajama bottoms and a sleeveless top. Her hair, no longer quite as clumpy and ragged as it was when I first arrived, is freshly brushed and hanging loose. Her face has been scrubbed clean of makeup. Even with her fading burns and other scars, she's still beautiful.

She's holding a picture. It's a duplicate to the picture of Prim that I had placed in the locket that I gave her - that last terrible night during the Quarter Quell. The night where I did my best to convince her that she needed to live - for Prim, for her mother, and for Gale. The night where Katniss told me that she needed me.

"I need you." It's not "I love you," but it's the closest that Katniss had ever come to admitting any kind of feelings for me that went deeper than friendship. I've replayed her words from that night - as well as the kiss that she gave me right after she said those words - countless times in my head. We're starting over, I say to myself. But we're becoming closer than we ever have before.

"Do you want to use that picture?" I ask.

Katniss nods. "I want to use your sketch, too. With Prim and Lady."

"Okay," I say, "I have others too." Katniss arches her eyebrows as I show her my sketch book. I see a smile slowly spread across her face as she examines what my pencil has captured - Prim holding Buttercup, Prim and Katniss looking at each other and smiling, Prim with her mother.

"These are all wonderful," she says softly, then, "Oh - what's that one?"

"Oh - it's nothing. Just one I made a long time ago. It probably wouldn't work for your book," I stammer as I try to shove the paper under my paint box.
"Peeta - let me see it. Come on," Katniss says insistently, as she reaches for the paper. Finally, blushing, I hand it to her.

Katniss takes the paper from me, giving me an exasperated look. I watch her anxiously as she examines the drawing - first frowning, then I see her mouth open slightly and her eyes widen, then her hand go slowly to her mouth as her eyes suddenly fill with tears.

She drops the sketch to the table and makes a clumsy attempt to wipe her tears away. I grab the sketch up and start to stuff it back in the folder.

"I'm sorry," I stammer, "I never meant for you to see that. I should have known it would upset you."

"It's perfect," Katniss says through her tears. She reaches for the drawing again. "This, more than anything, says exactly how I felt about Prim."

Katniss is smiling as she examines the drawing once again. "Is this how you saw it from where you were?" she asks.

"Yes," I reply softly. "Exactly how I saw it."

The sketch shows what I could see from a crowd of people. A stage with an extravagantly dressed woman, a little girl, seen from behind, with twin blonde braids approaching the stage, nervously tucking her blouse into the back of her skirt, and an older girl, also seen from behind, wearing a simple dress, a single black braid down her back, standing with hands at her sides, fists clenched, legs slightly apart, flanked by Peacekeepers on each side of her.

I captured the moment that Katniss volunteered for Prim during the Reaping for the 74th Hunger Games.

Katniss writes on the parchment, using her notes as a reference. Her handwriting, normally a little sloppy and careless, is neat and careful. She writes about her sister, the only person that she is sure she ever loved, and the only trace of emotion she ever betrays is the occasional trembling of her chin or a momentary tightening of her lips. We carefully place the photograph of Prim at the top of the page, and I very carefully and laboriously copy the sketches that I had roughed out in the spaces remaining on the large parchment sheet. We work for hours, only realizing out exhaustion when we were done and the parchment has been sealed.

The memory book, like the plant book before it, is the first normal thing that Katniss and I have done together since my return to District Twelve.

And it feels so right.
"Peeta."

The woman's voice penetrates my consciousness like a spotlight through fog. I frown as I try to identify the voice. It sounds familiar, so familiar. I keep my eyes tightly shut against the blinding light shining down on my face.

"Peeta!"

The voice again, more insistent, more demanding. But who? Mother? No, her voice is harsh, grating. This woman is younger, much younger. The Interrogator? No, her voice is always silky, and soft - at least when she talks to me. That would leave only -

No! It can't be! Not...HER! Not...Katniss! I feel myself shudder involuntarily at the mere thought of that hated name. Oh, how she played me! How she lied to me! How she USED me! That murdering bitch! A whimper escapes my lips and I hate myself for showing any weakness to her. I struggle against the restraints holding me against the table.

"Peeta! Come on, open your eyes! Hey! You! Can you please dim the lights? The lights are hurting his eyes!"

The voice again. No, it's not - HER. Someone else. The blinding light shining on my face shows red through my clenched eyelids, but now I see that it's starting to fade to a cool, dark brown. I feel a hand on my face, gently stroking my forehead. I flinch at the contact.

"Hey, easy now. Calm down, peg-leg," I hear the woman say in a soothing tone. What did she call me? Peg-leg? Only one person has ever called me that. I wrack my brain trying to remember. Yes, she's here. I know she's here. Because every day I can hear her screaming - screaming and cursing. It's -

"Johanna?" I croak. Cautiously I open my eyes, blinking rapidly at the still too-bright light shining on my face.

"Finally! Thought I was gonna have to kiss you or something to get you to wake up," I hear the Johanna-voice say. Her hand is still on my forehead.

"Can you tilt his table up? And take off his restraints? I doubt if he's gonna make a run for it!" I feel my table suddenly tilt from horizontal to vertical, then new hands work at my restraints. With the light out of my eyes now, I can see more clearly. Two men, one on either side of me, in the white shirt and pants of orderlies, are working on my restraints. I feel an unpleasant tingling in my hands, arms, and my one real leg as the circulation is suddenly returned. As soon as the restraints are gone I feel my rubbery legs giving out beneath me, and both orderlies quickly grab me by my arms to steady me and keep me upright.

"See? He can't even stand on his own! Now can you wait outside?" I hear the Johanna-voice snap at someone - not the orderlies - but someone behind me. I hear a whispered conversation but can't make out the words.
“Fine. But we’ll be right outside. Try anything funny and you get another bath!” A man’s voice, deep, strange accent - my mind connects the accent to someone else I know. The District Twelve Head Peacekeeper, Romulus Thread.

I hear a door behind me open, then close, followed by the sound of a lock being turned.

The two orderlies are helping me into a hospital gown. Painfully I allow them to manipulate my arms into the sleeves. As they silently work on me my eyes finally are able to focus on them. Both young men, but with curiously sunken lower faces. There’s only one way a person’s face can look like that.

They’re both Avox.

After putting the gown on me they gently help me to a chair. As they ease me into the chair I finally see the other person in the room, dressed identically to me, sitting in a chair next to mine.

Johanna Mason.

I lick my dry, swollen lips and try to form a word, a question, but all I can manage is to croak her name again.

"Johanna."

Johanna regards me intently for a moment, then her head turns to the two Avox orderlies. "Thank you," she says softly. "Can you please wait out in the hall?"

They both nod once and I see them walk to the door. One knocks in a funny pattern - knock, pause, knock knock knock, pause, knock knock. Immediately the door opens and the two Avox leave.

I turn back to Johanna and try to speak, but my dry throat won’t allow a single sound. Johanna picks up a plastic glass from the table, and, moving her chair in front of mine, holds the glass to my lips. Carefully she helps me drink, but in my haste, water spills down my front. Johanna pulls the empty glass from my mouth and tenderly wipes my face with a cloth.

I look at her intently. She’s way too thin, her cheekbones prominent. Her skin on her face has an unhealthy pallor to it. And her hair...is gone. Her head roughly shaved, scabbed over nicks and cuts all over her scalp. But her eyes - her eyes burned brightly with anger - and hate.

"You look awful," I blurt out, my voice rusty from lack of use - and from screaming.

Johanna looks startled, then laughs. "You don’t look so hot yourself, peg-leg," she replies.

"Johanna - what’s going on?" I ask. She looks at me intently for a moment before responding.

"What’s going on is, I made a deal with the devil. I promised to be a good girl and not give them any shit, and in return they said that I could see you for a few minutes. But, only on the condition that I feed you," she says, holding up a bowl. I know what’s in it. The same mushy cereal that they always feed me. Still, I’m starving.

Johanna starts to spoon the cereal into my mouth. I’m glad she’s doing this and not me. I can barely lift my swollen hands off my lap. As she feeds me, she talks rapidly.

"You know we’re in the Capitol, right?" I nod. "Okay, good. I’m not sure exactly where in the Capitol we are, though. Lot of Peacekeepers and - other people. And they have Annie Cresta too."
My face must have registered puzzlement, because Johanna says, "Annie Cresta. Finnick's girl. From Four."

"Oh. The one Mags volunteered for," I say. Johanna shovels another spoonful into my mouth and nods.

"Yeah. They went and got her out of Four. Anyway, here's my theory, for what it's worth. They want us alive. They want to use us. We're no good to them dead. So stay strong, Peeta!" Johanna finishes feeding me and wipes my face and mouth with the same cloth as before.

"I can hear you screaming," I say, "When they - do things - to you."

"I can hear you too," Johanna says. She leans in close and whispers, "But whatever they do - stay strong. Stay strong for Katniss. Although I still have no idea what you see -"

I jerk violently at the mention of HER name. "No!" I hear myself yell.

Johanna looks at me, alarm all over her face. "Peeta - what -"

"She's a killer, Johanna! A MURDERER! I saw it! I saw how she killed Rue! She's a liar! She USED me! Don't trust her! She killed Wiress, and she tried to kill me during the Quell!"

Johanna puts her hand on my arm. "Peeta, calm down. No, it's not true. I don't know what they're doing to you, but -"

I'm struggling, trying to stand up, but my legs are weak from lack of use. I hear the door suddenly open, and look to see two Peacekeepers charge into the room. They grab Johanna roughly and pull her away from me.

"Visiting hours are over, Mason," I hear one say roughly. I collapse back in my chair as my brain is suddenly flooded with images of Katniss - that evil BITCH! - and I can't catch my breath and I hear Johanna say, "Peeta - your eyes! What's wrong with your eyes?" As the light suddenly blinds me and I feel my whole body jerk and go rigid.

The Peacekeepers are dragging Johanna out of the room, as the two Avox orderlies hurry back in and quickly strip the gown off of me and strap me back to the table. I feel the restraints cutting into my arms and legs as I moan in pain and fear. Fear - of that evil monster that everyone calls Katniss Everdeen.

The table is suddenly tilted back to horizontal, and I shut my eyes tightly against the blinding light. I feel a needle prick in the side of my neck and almost instantly everything around me goes fuzzy. The last thing I'm aware of is Johanna yelling my name.

"Stay strong, Peeta! STAY STRONG!"

PART II

"Peeta? Are you okay?" Galen Wellgoods voice cuts through the fog closing in on my brain.


"So...that's what your dream was last night?" he asked.

"Yeah. I've had plenty of dreams about - that place. But never with Johanna. And that dream - it was real. I'm sure of it."
"Is that important?" Galen asks gently.

"Yes," I say firmly. "They put so many...false memories...in my head that it's important for me to be able to tell the difference."

"I understand," Galen says. "Hijacking is a particularly - insidious - brainwashing method. And you are, to the best of my knowledge, the only person to ever have been hijacked and then successfully treated."

"I think that I'm the only one treated - ever," I say.

Galen chuckled. "Well, there is that," he says with a smile, then he turns serious again.

"Peeta, you do understand what President Snow's objective was when he had you hijacked, don't you?" he asks.

"Of course - to kill Katniss," I say softly. Inwardly I shudder as I think of just how close I came to doing just that.

"Partly," Galen says. "It was to kill you both. President Snow assumed that Katniss would either be a member of the rescue team, or that your reunion would take place in private. He didn't anticipate the - practicality - of the District Thirteen medical staff, where you had several people present at the time you were reunited with her."

"But how - how would he be able to kill us...both?" I ask in confusion.

"By either District Thirteen soldiers killing you as soon as you killed Katniss, or by you - committing suicide - as soon as you realized what you had done," Galen says gently.

_I would have, too_, I say to myself. There wouldn't have been any way that I could live with myself if I had succeeded.

"All in all, though, I would say your first treatment was successful. Your dream, although negative, was of a subject that was not overtly traumatic to you. I'm going to report this as cautiously optimistic," Galen says with a smile.

I take a sip of my tea. "I hope this works," I say with a sigh.

"Peeta," Galen says, "I know Doctor Aurelius quite well. He is able to work wonders. But even he said that you will probably suffer with these - 'episodes' - for the rest of your life. What we're trying to do is make them manageable."

"I can already tell when one's coming on," I say. "Everything is suddenly too bright."

Galen nods. "Yes - sudden pupil dilation. Tracker jacker venom has that effect. Eventually, though, we hope to eliminate most, if not all, violent tendencies. We'll do the next treatment tonight."

There's a knock on my front door, followed by the sound of the door opening.

"Peeta?" It's Greasy Sae.

"In the kitchen, Sae," I answer.

Sae walks in and sees me sitting at the table with Galen. "Oh - if I'm interrupting I can come back," she says.
"Not at all," Galen says, "Please." He indicates a chair at the table. Sae sits down.

"Peeta, I spoke with Una Everdeen a couple of days ago," Sae says. "Katniss doesn't know it but I speak with her once a week. And the last time we talked she told me that something important is coming up."

Puzzled, I look at Sae, then Galen. Something important?

"Her birthday," Sae says. "Katniss's birthday is coming up. Her eighteenth."

That's right! Katniss is about three weeks older than me. Apparently she was even there when I was born. According to my father, Una Everdeen was called on to midwife my mother's delivery of me, and she had to bring her newborn daughter along with her as she had no one to watch the baby.

"We should do something for her," I say. "I'll make a cake, of course."

"I thought you might," Sae says with a grin. Birthdays in Twelve had always been pretty low key affairs - simply because, in the past, most people couldn't afford to throw large parties. I remember many times when the miners would save a coin here, a coin there, then come into the bakery to buy a small cake for their child or sibling. On the other hand, Capitol birthdays were huge, overblown affairs - like everything else in the Capitol.

I realize with a pang that neither Katniss and I had celebrated our seventeenth birthdays last year. We were too busy training for the Quarter Quell. Well, this year would be different. I rise from my seat.

"Excuse me," I say, "But I need to go see Haymitch."

**PART III**

I open the door to Haymitch's house without knocking. Being as it's still fairly early in the morning, I find him exactly where I expected - sitting at his kitchen table, passed out, clutching a knife in one hand and a bottle in the other.

Moving carefully, I ease the knife from his hand before tapping him sharply on the shoulder. As I expected, he wakes with an unintelligible roar, swinging his now-empty knife hand wildly in front of him, then collapsing wearily in his chair when his eyes finally focus on me.

"To what do I owe this pleasure?" Haymitch asks snidely. He leans back in his chair and peers at me before putting the bottle to his mouth and drinking deeply.

"I want to do something for Katniss," I say simply.

Haymitch stares at me blankly for a moment, then laughter explodes out of him. "Kid, that's hardly a revelation. You 'do' for her all the time."

"I want to do something for Katniss," I say simply. I pull up at chair. "No, no...something special. Her birthday's coming up. Sae reminded me this morning. Haymitch, I don't think she's ever celebrated her birthday. For that matter, neither have I."

"Hmmm...birthday, eh?" Haymitch says thoughtfully. "You know, she probably won't want a big fuss made."

"I know," I say. "I was thinking a nice dinner, a cake...with just the people closest to her."

"Well, that narrows it down considerably," Haymitch says wryly. "Other than you and I, who did
"I don't know," I say miserably, "Thom, Leevy, Blake, maybe...her mother...and maybe Annie if Una comes..."

"Whoa, hold it right there. You know Annie is about ready to pop, don't you? Little Finnick is gonna make his debut any day now. I doubt if she'll be in any condition to travel."

"Well, maybe not Annie...but how about Johanna and Beetee? Katniss is really fond of them and -"

Haymitch holds up his hand. "Peeta - don't get me wrong. I know what you're trying to do, and I think it's great. But you gotta remember something. Everybody that you're mentioning has only been home for a short while. Just a few months at most. Do you really think they're gonna want to hit the road so soon?"

I slump down in my chair. Haymitch is right. No one will want to travel. I put my head in my hands. Haymitch leans over and pats my shoulder sympathetically.

"I have an idea. Something that she would like. You and I both know that crowds aren't her thing - it was all we could do to get her to mingle at the deer roast. So this is what you do - dinner for just the two of you, followed by your cake - and an evening of working on your memory book,"

Haymitch says triumphantly.

"THAT'S your idea? Haymitch, that just sounds like a regular evening! I want it to be special for her!" I'm shaking my head in disbelief.

"Kid - take it from me. She's nowhere near ready for big crowds and people making a fuss over her. Next year - maybe. But it's too soon this year."

I mull over what Haymitch said. What he said made a lot of sense. She would probably hate something big. But this - this just might work.

"Okay," I say. "I'll talk to Sae - see if she can make something special."

Haymitch unsteadily gets to his feet. "Well, now that THAT'S settled, if you'll excuse me, I have some geese to tend to," he says with an exaggerated bow. Chuckling, I tell him goodbye and walk back to my place. I have some work to do.

PART IV

A few nights later, Katniss and I are putting the finishing touches on another memory book entry. Finnick Odairs cocky smile grinned up at me from the page. Unlike other entries, I didn't have to paint this image - we literally had hundreds of photos to choose from.

"I'm a better person from having known him," Katniss says suddenly.

"I was thinking the same thing," I say solemnly.

"You were?" Katniss asked in surprise.

"Yes - you ARE a better person from having known him!" I say with a smirk.

"Peeta! Oh, you're awful sometimes!" Katniss says in exasperation, but I see the hint of a smile.

"I'm sorry. That was a really bad joke. But Finnick had a great sense of humor. I can hear him laughing at that right now," I say, remembering how uncomfortable he made Katniss the first time
they met, right before the Tribute Parade.

Katniss must be thinking the same thing - Finnick offering her sugar cubes in exchange for her secrets. Only Finnick could make her smile and blush like that at the same time.

Remember what we originally thought of him?” I ask softly. Katniss nods, her smile disappearing.

"Yes - and we were so wrong! I felt so terrible when I found out why he...did the things he did," Katniss says.

"I owe him so much," I say, no longer joking. "He saved my life."

We both sit in silence for a moment or two before Katniss says, "So what is this big secret you've been working on?"

"You'll find out - soon enough. It is, after all, a surprise," I say mysteriously.

"Ugh...I hate surprises," Katniss says in frustration.

"Trust me, you'll like this one," I say confidently.

"Hmmpf!" is all Katniss would say about it.

I gather up my pencils and other art supplies in preparation for leaving. I catch Katniss looking at me - rather wistfully, I think is the word.

"How's your treatments going?" she asks suddenly.

"Good," I say, "A little better every day. Of course, it's only been a few days. But Galen seems pleased."

"You really like him, don't you?" Katniss asks.

"Yeah - I do. I just wish you did also," I reply.

"But I do!" Katniss says, not very convincingly.

"Katniss - look. I know he's Capitol...well, not really, he was born in District Two but he's spent so much time in the Capitol, and he was granted Capitol citizenship years ago...anyway, he's really a great guy," I finish lamely.

"It's just the whole - Capitol - thing," Katniss says.

"Yes, I understand, but - well, we've met a lot of truly good Capitol people. Cinna, Portia, even Caesar - and don't forget Effie," I say.

Katniss laughs. "Oh, I don't think I'll ever forget Effie," she says with a smile.

"See? Galen's no different. Well, a little louder maybe -"

Katniss holds up her hand, laughing. Truly laughing. It's been a lifetime since I've heard that.

"Okay! I give up! He's a GREAT guy!" she says. "I only wish he could do something for me," she finishes quietly.

"Nightmares?" I ask. I know she still has them. But, I had to ask. Katniss nods slowly.
"You?" she asks.

"Since I started these...treatments...my night terrors have become - different," I say. "More about things that happened. Not scary, just - unsettling."

"Not mine. I wake up screaming," Katniss says softly.

"I know. I sleep with the window open, remember? And every time I hear you, it's all I can do to not rush right over here and...I don't know...comfort you. Like when we were on the Tour," I finish clumsily, feeling myself flushing.

Katniss, I notice, is a little flushed herself. "Really?" she asks. "Then why didn't you?"

"I -" How do I respond to that? That I was afraid...of myself? Of what I might do to her, even after months of therapy and rehabilitation? Or was I afraid of something else? Was I afraid of...Katniss?

"I...just don't know," I finally say, suddenly unable to look her in the eye.

"Peeta," Katniss says gently, "I know you're afraid. So am I. I've spent the last two years being afraid. But now - since you've come back - I...well, I'm trying hard...not to be afraid. And to stop wishing for...things that I can't change. That's why the memory book is so important to me. When we work on it, it's like I'm finally letting out what I truly felt about each person that we enter. Prim, your father, Madge, Rue...Finnick. In the book, I can tell them what I truly feel...deep inside. And your drawings do the same thing. I guess what I'm trying to say is...maybe we can help each other...to not be afraid any more."

I stare in amazement at Katniss. I can't ever remember her ever saying so much at one time. Maybe, I say to myself, maybe we are both changing...and growing...for the better.

"If I hear you screaming in the night, and I come over...will you let me in?" I ask. Let me in, not just to your home...but into your heart as well.

"I'll be able to answer that better - when the time comes. Just like you will," she says quietly. I'm able to look her in the eye again. She meets my gaze steadily.

"It's...getting late. I guess I should be going," I say. Katniss nods.

"Thanks," she says. "For helping with the book and - thanks." Suddenly she grabs my shoulders and, raising up on tiptoe, kisses my cheek. That simple gesture makes me blush furiously.

"Goodnight, Peeta," Katniss says as she walks me to the door.

"Night, Katniss," I manage to mumble as I stumble through the door. I take a few steps down her walkway when I hear the door shut behind me. Hands in pockets, I walk the remaining short distance to my house.

Galen greets me as I walk in. I mutter some sort of response back to him. He reminds me that I need another treatment, so wordlessly I sit while he administers the latest dose of medication. Afterwards, I head upstairs to bed, but not before assuring him that everything was fine.

Once in bed, I find that sleep is elusive. I replay the evening with Katniss over and over in my head. Was it wishful thinking on my part or were we finally starting to grow closer? No matter what she said, I'm still afraid...of what I might do to her if I have a seizure when with her. I can't even say for sure what the triggers are for these "episodes." Twice tonight I felt the first stirrings of seizures, and twice, using the relaxation and breathing techniques that Galen showed me, I was
able to push them back down. I don't think Katniss was even aware of what was happening. Maybe, I'm finally starting to get control. Maybe I -

The sound of a scream cuts through the fog in my brain as I'm jolted from sleep. A quick glance at the clock tells me only about two hours have passed since dozing off. I shake my head, trying to clear it, as another scream rips through the night.

Awake now, I leave my comfortable bed and, grabbing a robe, slip it on as I cram my feet into slippers. Without a second thought I head down the stairs and out my front door. I hear another scream as I quickly cross the street. I knock firmly at her door, then try the latch. It's not locked. I let myself in, hearing whimpers coming from upstairs. Closing the door, I climb the stairs and promptly freeze outside her door, indecision gripping me.

Another throaty scream makes my mind up for me. Resolutely I grasp the door handle and open the door. In the dim light I can see Katniss thrashing around in bed, then sit bolt upright. Her head swivels in my direction.

Her eyes meet mine, the only illumination coming from the moonlight streaming through the window. Wordlessly, she pulls the comforter down next to her, then looks back at me and extends her arms.

Suddenly gripped with fear, I force myself to move towards her. I climb onto the bed and settle in next to her. It's been almost a year since the last time we slept together. I stiffly lay back as Katniss snuggles in close to me. I can feel myself trembling. This is not a good idea, I say to myself. I feel myself gripped suddenly by the beginnings of an oncoming seizure, and try to pull away to climb out of bed...to get away from her before I do something unthinkable. But her surprisingly strong arms hold me next to her, and that's when I feel her trembling too. For the first time, she speaks.

"No," she whispers. "You're here...with me...whatever you see, it's NOT real. Do you hear me? NOT real. THIS is real, Peeta."

She softly repeats this to me over and over as, gradually, I relax, and slip my own arm clumsily around her slender shoulders. She cuddles even closer and I can feel her warmth radiating from her as she settles her head on my chest. Still, I don't dare move, even when her regular breathing tells me that she's gone back to sleep. After a long while, I finally doze off.

When I wake up with the early morning light coming through the window, Katniss is already gone. Where she had lain on the bed was cool to the touch. Sleepily I crawl out of bed, intending to go back to my house to finish sleeping, when I see it.

Sitting on the night stand closest to where I had been sleeping was a small plate, bearing a single cheese bun, and next to it, a glass of orange juice. Next to the plate and glass is a handwritten note.

"Gone hunting. Sorry no tea or hot chocolate, would have gotten cold. Tonight? K"

I silently eat the cheese bun, drink the juice, and write a response on her note.

"Tonight. P"

PART V

It's May 8th, and I've convinced Katniss that tonight, we will have a nice quiet dinner, followed by more memory book work.

Sae prepared tonight's dinner at my house. All I have to do is carry it over to Katniss's at the right
time. We had agreed to dinner at six, and that I would start bringing things over about fifteen
minutes before. Katniss knew I was doing this for her birthday, but was humoring me and allowing
me to treat her to a little pampering.

I told her to remain upstairs until I called her down. Quickly Sae and I moved the serving bowls
over to her table, and I displayed the cake I made for her on the sideboard. In the corner sat her
present, covered with a sheet.

At six I called her downstairs. Her first floor was illuminated by candles. As she came downstairs I
could see that she was pleased at my efforts. I was pleased to see that she was wearing a dress
similar to the one she wore at the deer roast, only this one was in my favorite shade - sunset orange.

I take her arm and guide her to the table. Her delight at the menu was evident when she saw what
Sae had so laboriously prepared - Capitol lamb stew. After seating her and serving her a portion of
the stew, I took the seat opposite her and filled my own plate. There was even a bottle of wine -
Haymitch's contribution. Even though neither of us were drinkers, we both had a glass and found it
to go well with the lamb stew.

Once we were done eating, Katniss sat back in her chair, regarding me with a small smile.

"When I was little, my Dad would always make sure to bring me something for my birthday -
something we normally didn't see a lot of in Twelve. Like an orange, or a banana. On my eleventh
birthday, he went to your families bakery, and bought me a small cake. He must have saved all
week for it. It was decorated with little dandelions."

Katniss is wistful, remembering her past birthdays.

"That was me," I said.

"What was you?" she asked.

"The dandelions. I put those on the cake your Dad bought for you. My Dad told me that the cake
was for your birthday, and it was a plain white cake, so I asked him if it was okay for me to
decorate it for you."

"You did that? For me?" Katniss says in amazement.

"I didn't have anything else to give you," I quietly reply. "Your Dad - he wanted to pay more for
the cake when he saw it. But my Dad explained that I had done the decorating for you. I was in the
back room and I heard them talking, and your Dad said 'Liam, make sure you tell Peeta thank you
for me.'"

"I've never had a special dinner for my birthday - until tonight," Katniss says, her eyes moist.

"I wanted to, last year, until -" I say. Katniss nods.

"I understand. It - wouldn't have worked very well," she says.

"No - it wouldn't," I say softly, then, "I have something else for you."

"Oh, Peeta," Katniss laughs, "The cake looks wonderful, but I'm so full right now!"

"Not the cake," I say with a grin. I walk to the corner where her present sits, covered in a sheet.
Katniss had been looking at it curiously the entire evening, but, to her credit, had managed to
control her curiosity.
"I hope you like it," I say simply as I pull the sheet down.

Katniss sits in her chair, her smile frozen on her face as she stares at what I just uncovered. Slowly, she brings her hands to her mouth as a single tear escapes each eye, to slowly track down her face.

"Oh - oh," is all she can manage as she stares at the portrait. In the portrait, Katniss is standing with Prim. They are both wearing their Reaping dresses, with Prim's hair done in two blonde braids, with Katniss's hair done exactly as it was on that horrible, wonderful day almost two years earlier.

They are both smiling out from the portrait. Between them, both of their hands hold a bouquet of flowers. Katniss rises slowly from her chair and walks to the portrait. With trembling fingers she reaches out and traces her fingertips over Prims face. Her eyes drop to the bouquet.

"Oh, Peeta," she breathes as she examines the bouquet. She looks back at me, wonderment in her eyes. "So this...this is my...surprise?"

I nod. She turns back to the portrait. "I love it," she whispers. I step up next to her. She looks up at me, then back to the bouquet.

"Dandelions," she says with a smile, "And...another flower too." Her brow wrinkles in concentration, then relaxes as she recognizes the other flower in the bouquet.

"Peeta...wild onion?" she asks. I nod, smiling.

"Remember?" I ask.

"Yes," she says in a choked voice. "On our last stop when we were heading home - after the Games."

"I had to look them up," I explain. "I always wondered when you reacted - like you did. Because you always thought of them as food."

"Not anymore," she says. "This - this is...perfect. Thank you so much!"

I gaze down at her, seeing her smile as she examined her gift. "Happy Birthday," I say.

Katniss looks up at me, then slowly, deliberately, turns to face me. Slowly her arms come up to wrap around my neck. Smiling, her eyes shining, she raises up on tiptoe and kisses first one cheek, then the other. Tentatively, my arms go around her and I pull her close, almost fearfully. I can feel her trembling slightly.

We stand like that for a minute or so, then I feel her hand come around to my face, and gently but firmly turn my face to hers. Her other hand presses warmly against my neck as she arches her face up to mine, then, for the first time in - forever, Katniss Everdeen presses her lips hungrily against mine. We stand like that for a long while, each of us savoring the kiss that we shared - a kiss that I haven't felt from her since that last night in the Quarter Quell, sitting on the beach.

She finally breaks our kiss and looks up at me. I gaze into her silvery gray eyes for a moment, then ask, "Last year you said that you needed me. Do you still need me?"

Katniss smiles up at me. "Always," she whispers, before her lips find mine again.
I leave Katniss's house a short while later, the heat from her lips on mine still fresh in my memory. Over the last couple of years, we have kissed many times, both for the cameras and occasionally for each other, but none of those kisses even came close to the few that we shared tonight.

Tonight's were - special - no doubt about it. With no cameras to record our every move, with no Mentors, Escorts, Stylists, and Interviewers to remind us to be in love, with no pressure from a despotic President and a corrupt government that constantly demanded more and more proof of our devotion to each other, with no specter of what our lives as Victors, and eventual Mentors, would be like - our kisses tonight were about as real and as natural as they come. So why did I leave so suddenly?

Katniss and I were holding each other, clinging tightly, my hands on her back, hers cupping my face and caressing the back of my head. She was kissing me like she had never kissed me before - hungrily, her soft lips and warm mouth hungrily pressed against my own, and something that she had never done before - her tongue tip tracing my lips, gliding over my own tongue, gently probing, exploring, causing me to gasp with surprise - and pleasure.

I could feel her body trembling under my hands and I know I was shaking also. My hands were sliding up and down on her back, caressing, squeezing - wanting to touch, to explore more - but terrified at the same time. Because, in a deep recess of my mind, that ember that was planted as a result of the hijacking is slowly starting to glow.

This latest round of treatments have really worked wonders. Now, I can feel when an "episode" is building, and do something before I no longer have control over myself. I can do something - but I can't stop it once it starts.

Katniss had just pulled her mouth from mine and was gazing up at me intently - like she was trying to see what was going on inside my head. Oh, please - that's the LAST thing I want her to see right now.

"I - I should go," I stammer. I see Katniss frown at this. This moment, this REAL moment that I have been dreaming of for the last thirteen years is here...and my reaction is to run away.

"Peeta?" she asks, a look of concern in her eyes joining her frown. "Is - are you alright?"

"Yes - no, no I'm not," I say as I feel the hijacking ember glowing brighter. I gently, but firmly, disengage myself from her arms. "It's...you know. It's starting."

"Damn Snow to hell," Katniss snaps angrily. "Damn him forever for doing this to you!" Her face was contorting in rage, and suddenly I didn't know if what I was seeing was real or not.

I take a deep breath, then another. "Katniss, I...I'm sorry. I just need to get home. Maybe Galen can help."

Katniss says nothing, but guides me to the door. Before I go, she quickly kisses me on the lips.

"Will you be back - later?" she asks hopefully.
I don't even dare turn back to look at her. "I...I don't know," I choke out. "Katniss...lock your door tonight."

I walk slowly back to my house, flinching slightly when I hear a small, barely audible sob escape Katniss's throat, and again when I hear her door slam and the sound of the dead bolt being thrown.

I stop walking briefly when an almost overwhelming urge surges through me to turn, charge back to her house, and batter down her door to get to her. To - hurt her. To - NO! I close my eyes, take a couple of deep breaths, and force myself to finish the short walk to my house.

I'm surprised that Galen is still up, until I remember that it's still well before Nine PM. He's sitting in the living room, watching some Capitol programming - what Haymitch calls a "soap opera." He looks up in surprise when he sees me come in.

"Peeta! Home so soon?" Galen asks, then I see a look of concern cross his face when he finally sees my face. Without another word he jumps up from his chair and quickly crosses the short distance to where I stand. He wraps an arm around my shoulders and guides me to a chair.

I'm still struggling with the urge I felt on the street - feeling my hands clench and unclench as my mind flashes picture after picture in my brain of my fingers wrapping around Katniss's throat. I feel Galen's hands on my face, and his thumb on my eyelid as he pushes the lid up to intently examine my eye.

"Dammit," I hear him mutter, then he turns quickly and grabs his bag off a nearby table. I squeeze my eyes shut as the dim light in the room is suddenly too bright. I can hear someone muttering over and over again, "Not real, not real, not real...," and with shock I realize it's me.

"Relax, Peeta," Galen says softly, as I feel something cold on my arm, then a sudden sting of a needle.

"What...what's that?" I gasp.

"Sedative," Galen replies. "Calm you down a bit." As the drug takes hold I can feel my muscles slowly relax as the tension drains from my body. I take deep, measured breaths and slowly open my eyes. The light in the room is much more bearable now.

Galen takes a seat across from me. He waits patiently for the sedative to do its job. He looks relaxed, but his eyes never leave my face.

Finally, he speaks. "So...what happened?" he asks gently. Slowly, haltingly, the sedative causing me to slur my words, I recount the events of the evening. Galen listens without interruption, only speaking when he needed to clarify something that I had said.

"So, you two kissed each other," he finally says.

"Yes," I say, "But it wasn't like any other kiss we've ever shared. It was more - intense. Hungry, almost." Galen nods slowly while I speak.

"More...real?" he asks. When I nod he asks, "So what were you feeling while she was kissing you?"

"Surprised at first, but then - I started feeling -" my voice trails off as the memory of Katniss's lips once again rises up in my mind.

"Excited?" Galen asks, gently. "Even - aroused?" I nod, blushing at the revelation.
"Peeta, I'm sure you had 'the talk' with your father at some point - you know, the one that all young men have as they mature," Galen says, "So I'm going to spare you what you already know. But from what you've told me, this - reaction - that you had sounds like another manifestation of your original hijacking. Tell me, can you remember any times when your - captors - ever used sex as part of your hijacking?"

Even with the sedative working its calming effect on me, a memory, long suppressed, came rising to the surface.

PART II

"Oh, my," the silky voice of the Interrogator purrs into my ear, "Look what they're doing NOW, Peeta."

I feel hot tears course down my cheeks as I'm forced to watch the couple on the Holo-TV. Katniss and Gale, naked, sweating, straining against each other. Their hands are caressing each other, mouths glued together in one passionate kiss after another...his groans and her moans of passion loud in the small room. This scene is played out with a constantly changing backdrop - sometimes the Meadow, sometimes our cave in the arena, sometimes it's the Cornucopia, other times it's in her bedroom in the Village.

And with every new scene, with every new act performed, I find myself hating her more and more.

"Soon, you will be reunited with her, Peeta," my Interrogator says softly, "And when that happens, what are you going to do?"

"Strangle her with my bare hands," I spit out from between clenched teeth. "I'm going to kill her! Filthy, lying BITCH!"

"Good boy," the Interrogator says with a smile.

"You know none of that was real, don't you?" Galen asks.

"Yeah," I say, "But that doesn't make the memory any less painful."

"Peeta, I'm going to call Doctor Aurelius tomorrow morning. I'm sure that this is a facet of your hijacking that we are just now finding out about. And I'm sure that the therapy that we have you on now will help with this - new development - as well. But, I think you may want to consider not seeing anything of Katniss - at least for the time being."

I sit bolt upright. Not see Katniss? We've spent the last six or seven weeks growing closer together, comforting each other, finally getting to know each other without the specter of the Games constantly hanging over our head - and now Galen wants me to take a step back?

"I - I can't do that, Galen," I say. "When I first came back, it was like we were...two strangers. We've really gotten to know each other, finally get more comfortable around each other - and now you want me to take a step back?"

"Peeta, I know you love her. But remember this - 30 minutes ago you wanted to kill her. Now, I'm not going to force you to stay away from her. I'm just saying it may be the wisest course of action for you." Galen sits back in his chair and regards me steadily. In spite of myself, I feel drowsy - the sedative has really kicked in.

Wearily I get to my feet. "I'm going to bed," I say simply. "Goodnight." Galen asks if I need help upstairs and I decline his offer sharply. Once upstairs I stumble into my room and pull my clothes
off before collapsing onto the bed.

Still, sleep eludes me. Even with the sedative coursing through my body, and still totally relaxed, my brain has kicked into high gear. Stop seeing Katniss? How could I do that? Although, a part of me admits that it's probably not a bad idea, at least temporarily - but it's something that my heart simply won't allow.

I lay there for what feels like an eternity, my brain refusing to shut off, when I hear a soft knock on my front door. I lay quietly, listening to see who it is...and knowing before I even hear her voice.

I hear Galen's deliberate footsteps, then the sound of the front door opening.

"Kat - Miss Everdeen," I hear Galen say in surprise.

"How is he?" I hear Katniss ask. "Is he alright?"

"He'll be fine," Galen says. "He's upstairs - asleep. I gave him a sedative. The question is - are YOU alright?"

"You mean...did he hurt me? No," Katniss replies. "I think he knew - he could feel it coming on. That's why he left so quickly. But, he was in control the whole time."

"I spoke with him - about staying away from you for a while," Galen says.

"And what did he say?" I hear Katniss ask in a soft voice.

"He's - resistant to the idea," Galen replies.

"So he doesn't like the idea," Katniss says, not as a question - but as a statement of fact.

"No, he doesn't," Galen admits.

"Neither do I," Katniss says stubbornly, which brings a smile to my face.

"I didn't think you would," I hear Galen say with a slight chuckle.

"Doctor, if Peeta chooses to stay away from me - I understand. I won't like it, but I understand. But if he doesn't want to stay away, I'm not going to push him away. Not now. Not after everything that we've been through over the last two years. I need him, Doctor. I need him more than you could ever understand. And I know that he needs me, too. And I know that he would NEVER do anything to hurt me!"

I hear Galen sigh heavily. "How did I know that you would say that? Okay, fair enough - but please be careful. The treatments are working well, but I want you to understand that he may never be free from seizures. But for now, he's sleeping. Let him get some rest and you can see him in the morning, if you like."

"Thank you, Doctor," I hear Katniss say. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Kat - Miss Everdeen," Galen says.

"It's Katniss," she says quietly.

"Goodnight, Katniss...and Happy Birthday."

"Goodnight, Galen...and thank you."
PART III

I awaken sometime later that night. I had gone to sleep with a smile on my face after eavesdropping on the conversation between Katniss and Galen. But now, my house is still and dark. I slip out of bed and go to my window. Katniss's house is darkened as well. I look at the clock. Not quite midnight.

I pull on a pair of pants and slippers and creep as silently as possible downstairs. I can hear Galen snoring loudly in his room. Without hesitation I slip out my front door, closing it silently behind me.

The nighttime spring air is cool but not cold as I walk purposefully to Katniss's house. At the front door I pause, then push down on the latch. The door opens easily.

I slip into Katniss's dark house, feeling my way carefully. I enter the dining room, shut the door, and finally risk turning on a light. I see with a smile that Katniss had cleared away our dishes and cleaned the table. I spot her birthday cake, still sitting on the sideboard. I pick it up carefully and carry it into the kitchen. I slice off a small piece and place the piece on a dessert plate.

 Quickly turning off the kitchen and dining room lights, I make my way back into her darkened home. Feeling my way I find the stairs and slowly, quietly climb them to the second floor.

I pause briefly outside her room, listening intently for any sounds. Nothing but silence. I quietly open her door and slip inside her room. I shut the door behind me. In the dim light trickling in from outside I can barely make her out in bed, laying on her side, curled up tightly, her slow, steady breathing the only sound.

Carefully, I ease myself down onto the side of her bed, sitting facing her. I reach my free hand out to touch her face, gently tracing a fading burn scar near her left eye. I nearly jump out of my skin when her own hand reaches up and gently grabs my wrist.

"Took you long enough," Katniss says quietly. "I've been laying here awake ever since you opened my front door. I was almost ready to come downstairs to see what you were doing."

Finally recovering from my shock at her being awake, I hand her the plate. "I just thought I would bring you something," I say. Katniss leans up on her elbow and takes the plate from me. I can just make out her brow crease in a puzzled frown, then I see her frown turn into a smile.

"My cake," she says.

"We never did get around to it earlier. I thought you might like to try it," I say.

"Peeta? Did you come over to give me cake? Or are you planning on staying for a while?" Katniss asks me hopefully.

"I would like to stay...if you want me to," I reply.

Katniss says nothing, but turns and puts the plate on her nightstand. Turning back to me, she wordlessly pulls the comforter on her bed back and pats the mattress next to her lightly with her hand.

I stand up and kick off my slippers and pants, then climb into bed next to her. She immediately snuggles up next to me, her arm draped across my chest.

I slide my arm under her shoulders as she raises up slightly, then settles back down. Idly my hand
plays with her hair, now falling loosely in waves down her shoulders. We lay like that for a few minutes, not speaking.

"I came over to your house earlier," Katniss says.

"I know," I say. I feel her head shift suddenly and I know she's looking at my face, even though the room is dark. "I was really groggy from the sedative, but I could hear you downstairs - talking to Galen."

"Eavesdropping?" she asks in a teasing voice.

"Not intentionally. I wanted to get up but my muscles were like jelly. But I did hear everything. That's why I came over tonight," I say.

"I'm glad you did," she says softly as she kisses my chest. I shiver slightly at her touch.

"So am I," I say, smiling. "I missed this. From the time when we were on the Victory Tour, and I thought that you were finally - you know, feel the same for me like I did for you, and then when we got home, and things went back to the way they were before..."

"Haymitch is right," Katniss says suddenly.

"Huh? About what?" I ask.

"About not deserving you. He told me that after Snow read the card. When we knew we were going back into the Games," Katniss says quietly.

"And you think that - you don't deserve me?" I ask.

"I think that I've confused you a lot. I know I've hurt you a lot too. I've given you every reason to hate me. But through all that, you bent but never broke," she says in a halting voice.

"Just shows that I really do love you, Katniss," I say softly. I feel her stiffen slightly at the word "love." Why is she so afraid of love?

"You must," she finally says. "I don't understand why, but you do."

"You don't have to understand it. But do you accept it?" I ask.

"Yes," she whispers.

I take a slow, deep breath before I ask her something I've never asked her before...because I don't know if I can handle the answer.

"Do you love me?" I blurt out.

Katniss is silent for several long, agonizing seconds. I know she can hear the pounding of my heart - her ear is on my chest.

"Peeta," she says slowly. Oh no, here it comes. Well, you asked for it. "Can you accept that I...care for you? More than I've ever cared for anyone except - Prim? Can you accept that I need you? And that you are the only person I have ever truly needed? Can you accept these - for now?"

I feel her arm tighten around me as she's talking - like she's afraid that I'm going to bolt out of bed. In response I pull her a little closer to me and kiss her forehead.
"Yes, I can accept you caring and needing me," I say. "I'm sorry for putting you on the spot like that."

"Don't be," she says. "Peeta, I will always give you the most honest answer that I can." She raises up and gives me a quick kiss. Suddenly the room is illuminated by a sudden flash of light, followed seconds later by a thunderclap. We both jerk, startled by the sudden storm.

"Maybe that's a sign," I say with a laugh as the rain starts to patter against the window. Katniss gives a small, nervous laugh in response as her arm tightens around me again.

"Let's get some sleep," she suggests. Good idea, but before I settle back and close my eyes, I lean down and kiss her one last time. She returns it, warmly.

"Goodnight, Katniss," I say gently.

"Goodnight, Peeta," Katniss whispers.

The rest of that night, neither of us had any nightmares.

**PART IV**

I awaken to the gray light of early morning. I feel a brief surge of panic when I realize that Katniss is no longer in bed with me - until I hear the sound of her toilet flushing. I chuckle to myself at my reaction as I see her bathroom door open. She quickly pads back to bed and climbs in next to me.

I turn lazily towards her. Her hair is tousled from sleep and she has that bleary look of someone that just awakened, but isn't quite awake.

"Good morning," I say with a smile.

"Good morning," she smiles back. I reach for her and she nestles back into my arms.

Outside rain continues to pour down. Spring showers aren't uncommon in District Twelve. In fact, the night I threw Katniss the bread it was raining much as it is now - or was it? I feel my brow furrow into a frown.

"Peeta?" Katniss says in a concerned tone.

"When we were eleven, I deliberately burned two loaves of bread to give to you - real or not real?" I ask.

"Real," she whispers, her hand going to my face, tracing my own fading burn scars. "That was the first time you saved me."

"The first time?" I ask.

"Yes," she says. "The other times were in our two arenas. More than once." She giggled suddenly.

"What's so funny?" I ask.

"When we were on the Victory Tour Train - before we got to Eleven. We - weren't getting along very well. I even yelled at Effie about her stupid schedule." I nod, remembering the incident. I know it's real.

"Anyway, you came back and talked to me and we agreed to try being friends. We were laughing because we realized that we had both risked our lives to save each other more than once in the
arena, but we didn't even know what our favorite colors were. That's what made me laugh," Katniss explained with a smile.

"Forest green," I say to her.

"Yes," she says, "And yours is sunset orange."

"Yes," I say, "So, I take it no hunting today?"

"Not with this rain," Katniss says. "Maybe we can work on the memory book some more today."

"I'd like that," I say, "But for now, how about if we work on just a little more sleep?"

"Good idea," Katniss says with a smile as she snuggles close to me. "This is better than sleeping together on the train. Then you always had to jump up before everyone else awoke and go back to your compartment."

I kiss the top of her head. "Much better," I agree.

We doze like that for a while longer. This is the most relaxed I've felt since coming back to Twelve. I feel almost - normal.

Neither of us stirs until we hear Katniss's front door open and close, followed by the sounds of someone fussing around in her kitchen.

"Sae," Katniss says as she jumps out of bed. She starts to pull her t shirt off, then stops suddenly when she remembers that I'm there. She shoots me an embarrassed look as she grabs some clean clothes from her dresser and disappears into her bathroom.

I chuckle as I climb out of bed and pull on the clothes I wore over the night before - shirt, pants and slippers. I can hear the sound of water running in the bathroom, so I decide to head downstairs.

I walk into the kitchen to find Sae busy with preparing breakfast. As usual, she has entirely too much food. She also doesn't seem to be the least bit surprised at me still being there.

"Good morning, Peeta," she says cheerily, handing me a steaming cup of tea.

"Good morning, Sae," I reply with a smile. I take a seat at the kitchen table. "Katniss is getting dressed. She'll be down in a minute." I think of something and say, "Would you excuse me for a moment?"

"Of course," Sae says as I exit the kitchen and go into Katniss's study. I pick up her phone and dial my number.

"Peeta?" Galen answers on the second ring.

"Good morning, Galen," I say cheerily.

"I thought we agreed that you should keep your distance from her for a while," Galen says evenly.

"No - you suggested it," I reply. "Now, the reason I'm calling is to invite you for breakfast. Sae, as usual, has enough to feed the entire district."

"I accept, only because I'm a terrible cook, and I do need to keep an eye on you," Galen says. "I'll be over in two minutes."
"Just come on in when you get here," I say, and hang up before he has a chance to say anything else.

I walk back into the kitchen. Katniss is seated at the table. She looks at me quizzically.

"I invited Galen over for breakfast," I explain.

"Doctor Wellgood is coming?" Sae asks. "Oh, good - I know he'll have an appetite."

Just then we hear the door open, then close. Galen soon appears in the kitchen, wet from the rain. Sae hands him a cup of tea that he takes gratefully. He sits at the table with us.

"Good morning, Katniss...Peeta," he says evenly.

"Good morning, Galen," Katniss and I say in unison. We both giggle slightly like the school children that we just sounded like.

Galen stares at us in exasperation. His eyes widen a bit as he looks at Katniss - or rather, what she's eating.

"Cake for breakfast?" he says in surprise. I look over at Katniss. Sure enough, she's eating the piece of cake I brought up to her the night before.

Katniss shrugs. "Why not?" she asks with a smile.

"How is it?" I ask her.

"Delicious," she says. "Would anybody like some? There's plenty."

"Later, perhaps," Galen says. I just smile at her and shake my head.

"I need to talk to you both about last night. No, let me have my say then both of you can have yours," Galen says. Katniss and I both nod.

"Okay - I'm calling Doctor Aurelius today to give him a progress report on you both. In summary, I'm going to tell him that his latest anti-hijacking therapy seems to be helping you a great deal, Peeta. And, even though I am not a trained psychiatrist, I have noticed an improvement in you as well, Katniss."

Sae brings plates of food over and sets them in front of the three of us. We all start to eat, and I notice with amusement that Katniss is once again feeding her bacon to Buttercup.

"Delicious, Miss Sae," Galen says between bites.

"It's just Sae, Doctor," Sae says with a smile, "And thank you."

"Of course! Where was I? Oh, yes," Galen continues. "Now, Katniss - I think that the memory book project is wonderful therapy for you. I'm going to tell Aurelius as such. You aren't hunting today?"

Katniss shakes her head. "Not with this rain," she says.

"Good. Then today, you WILL call Doctor Aurelius as you agreed. No excuses," Galen says firmly. To my surprise, Katniss meekly agrees. Galen then turns to me.

"Peeta - I know we discussed you keeping your distance from Katniss - and no, I'm not suggesting
any more that you do that. You have become quite good at recognizing the signs of an impending seizure. What does concern me is the two of you - spending the night together. Nightmares can be triggers for seizures. My concern is that you will find yourself in the throes of a seizure some night and do serious harm to Katniss before you realize it."

I take a deep breath. "Galen - Katniss and I both appreciate your concern." I look over at Katniss. She smiles and nods at me. "But - you have to understand that by us - sleeping together - that in itself is therapeutic. We rarely have nightmares when we're together, and if we do, we're there to help each other awaken from these dreams and to comfort each other. I made a decision last night - that I will never allow Katniss to sleep alone ever again. No matter what."

I turn to Katniss, and see her looking at me in a way that I've never seen her look at me before. I'm afraid that I may have gone too far with my little speech about us sleeping together until I see her smile reassuringly at me. I take her hand in mine.

"Katniss, you know how I feel. But the decision is yours. Do you want me to sleep with you - every night?"

Katniss smiles at me and squeezes my hand gently before she replies. She says one word.

"Always."
I awaken to a darkened room and the pitiful sounds of moans coming from the restless figure laying next to me. I reach over to the nightstand next to my side of the bed and gently tap the night-light control on the table top. A dim, soft, gentle glow illuminates the bed. I turn back to Katniss, moaning in the grip of another nightmare.

"Prim," Katniss moans as I reach for her. I feel a lump in my throat as I hear the name that Katniss is muttering. "Prim!" Katniss barks out, flinching away from my touch. I make small, nonsensical soothing noises in an attempt to break through her dream. In the dim light I can see a sheen of sweat coat her face as her arms and legs thrash even more violently.

"Prim! PRIM! NO! PLEASE, NO!" Katniss is screaming now as I grab her flailing arms and draw her close to me. Of all the myriad nightmares that Katniss has to bear, the ones of her sister are the worst.

At the foot of the bed Buttercup's ears are perked up at the sound of Prim's name. The ugly little cat stares balefully at Katniss and gives a series of small, kitten-like mews. Katniss's thrashing is more violent as I hang on tightly to her, her moans and cries inarticulate now as the nightmare takes full hold of her.

"Katniss, shhhh, it's okay, shhhh, I'm right here, it's alright, Katniss," I murmur over and over, stroking her hair and never stopping the reassuring noises I'm making to her. She'll come out of it suddenly, like she always does.

Suddenly, Katniss's whole body stiffens and her hands clench at my arms almost spasmodically. I hear one, two, then three sharp gasps as I watch her face intently. Her eyes snap open, unfocused, as I continue to murmur to her reassuringly. She blinks rapidly as her eyes slowly focus and her hands relax their death grip from my arms.

"Peeta?" Katniss says my name plaintively. She takes a deep, shuddering breath. She stares into my eyes briefly, then her eyes shut tightly as her body wracks with sobs.

I hold her gently as Katniss cries for several minutes, not saying anything, just rubbing her back slowly as her sobs slow to a series of spastic hiccups.

My own eyes are moist - moist with the tears of grief that I still feel over the death of Primrose Everdeen. Sweet, gentle Prim, who became in the space of a few short months one of my closest - and unlikeliest - friends. A girl that showed surprising strength when tending to Gale Hawthorne after Gales brutal flogging at the hands of Head Peacekeeper Romulus Thread.

But now, I have to be strong...strong for Katniss. That's become my role on the nights that her terrors invade her sleep. For as vocal and as violent Katniss is during her nightmares, I'm just the opposite. Katniss never knows when I have a nightmare. And tonight she'll need my strength, so I blink rapidly to try to clear my eyes of the -

"Peeta?" Katniss says gently, as I feel her fingers trace over my cheekbones. She pulls her hand away and her fingertips come back wet.
"Hey - not you, too," she says. "One of us is enough, don't you think?" She tries, and fails, to make her voice light.

"Sorry," I whisper huskily. "Comforting is my job, not yours."

"When you need it, it BECOMES my job," Katniss says gently. "I just hate that I'm always the one waking you up."

"I'm not complaining," I say with a smile.

"You never do," she says, giving me a quick kiss. She looks at me intently, as if making up her mind about something.

"It was Prim," she says quietly.

"I know," I admit.

"Is that why?" Katniss asks, touching my face. I nod silently.

"Thank you," she says with a sad smile. I frown a little, puzzled. What is she thanking me for?

"Thank you for loving her," she explains. I understand now.

"It's easy to love her," I say. "Almost as easy as..." I let my voice trail off.

"As what?" Katniss asks.

"As...loving you," I whisper. Katniss responds by wrapping her arms tightly around my neck. I hear her sigh deeply and feel her breath tickling my neck. My own arms envelope her small frame as we hold each other close.

Gradually I hear Katniss's breathing become deep and even. I gently disentangle myself from her arms. Before turning the night light off, I take one last look at her face, now relaxed in sleep. At times like this she looks so young - so vulnerable. I kiss her forehead gently then turn the light out and settle back next to her. Soon, I join her in sleep.

**PART II**

"I'm worried about Katniss," I say to Galen. He looks at me quizzically over the rim of his tea cup, then makes a "go on" motion with his hands.

"For the first couple of weeks after we started to...sleep together...every night, she was fine. Hardly any nightmares, and I was always able to calm her down quickly. But the last four nights she's had awful, screaming dreams."

"Does she talk to you about them?" Galen asks.

"Not usually...but I know what she's dreaming about. Prim," I reply.

"Her sister," Galen says, nodding.

"Yes, but why now?" I ask.

"Peeta, everyone grieves in their own way. And different events can act as triggers for grief. Can you think of anything that may have triggered her recent nightmares?"
I wrack my brain, trying to think of what would have caused her recent spate of Prim-related nightmares. Slowly, a year old memory starts to surface.

Ever since the reading of the card by President Snow a few weeks ago - the twist in this years' Quarter Quell being that the tributes were to be reaped from the existing pool of Victors, guaranteeing that Katniss and most likely myself would be going back into the arena - I've taken on the thankless task of drill master, forcing both Katniss and Haymitch into training every day for the upcoming games. Even with his enforced sobriety, Haymitch is a poor student, and we know he would not stand much of a chance.

Katniss has thrown herself grimly into the training, as have I. We share skills - she works on me with archery fundamentals, while I teach her basic wrestling moves, holds, and throws. Gale works with us both, teaching us different traps and snares. I have to grit my teeth at how he and Katniss are almost casually flirting with each other, but the skills he is teaching us are invaluable.

Today, though, Katniss has been distracted. Her mind has obviously not been on training. We're practicing knife throwing, a skill that I know she already possesses, but today her knives are either bouncing harmlessly off the target, or missing entirely. Worse, it seems that she doesn't much care. I try to keep my temper in check but finally a series of misses forces me to take action.

"Can I have a word?" I ask her. She stares at me defiantly for a moment, then nods her head once, brusquely as she spins on her heel and stalks away, not waiting for me.

Haymitch is watching the whole exchange with an amused expression as he says, "Nice job on those last throws, Sweetheart! I think you actually managed to scare the target to death!"

"Shut up, Haymitch!" both Katniss and I snap. Katniss suddenly spins around and faces me, her eyes blazing.

"This far enough?" she snaps.

"Yes," I huff, finally catching up with her. "Okay, what's going on?" I ask.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she sniffs.

"Bullshit. Yesterday, you buried blade after blade in that target. Today, like Haymitch said, you're just scaring it to death. Now, talk!" I snap.

Katniss just stands there, chewing her thumbnail and looking stubborn. I try a different approach.

"Look, Katniss," I say, much quieter, "I know none of this is easy. And I know you're scared...because, so am I. Which is why we have to remain focused. So, how can I help?"

"You can't. No one can. The Reaping is in a couple of weeks and I'll never see her again after that," Katniss says miserably.

"Don't talk like that. You ARE coming home!" I say sternly.

"But I might not," she says stubbornly, "And that's why today is so important."

"What's today?" I ask softly.

"Prim's birthday. Her thirteenth. I wanted to walk her home from school like I used to do and have dinner with her, and spend her special day with her, and -" she gets no further as she finally dissolves into tears.
Wordlessly, I pull her into my arms. She collapses against my chest, sobbing. I hold her close until she stops crying.

"Go on," I say. "Go get Prim. I wish you would have said something. Knife throwing can wait until tomorrow."

"Thank you, Peeta," Katniss whispers, then gives me a quick kiss on my cheek. She turns to leave. She can still meet her sister after school if she hurries. Suddenly she turns back to me.

"Would you - would you like to come to dinner tonight? For Prim's birthday dinner?" she asks.

"Aren't birthdays usually just for family?" I ask. She smiles.

"Yes," she says. "That's why I asked you."

"Six o'clock?" I ask. Katniss nods, smiles again, and, like that, is gone.

"Her birthday," I say suddenly. "Prim's birthday, I mean. It's...oh, wow. It's tomorrow."

"That makes sense as to why she's having these nightmares," Galen says. "Peeta, it's not uncommon for grieving people to find it very hard to deal with special events - birthdays, for example - especially the first time after someone passes on. It usually gets easier with time, but Katniss was unusually close with her sister. With her, it may never pass."

"So what do I do to help?" I ask.

"Exactly what you've been doing," Galen says. "But don't make a big deal of it. Let her know that you know why she's having a hard time - then give her space. Be there for her if she wants you there - but be prepared to step back if you have to."

"I feel so bad for Katniss," I say miserably.

"I know you do, Peeta," Galen says. "Just remember, sometimes doing the best thing is doing nothing at all."

PART III

After talking with Galen, I head over to Haymitch's. He needs to know what's going on with Katniss and her latest struggle with her grief over Prim's death. Thankfully, Katniss is out hunting today, so I have a little time before she returns.

I see Haymitch's geese wandering around his front yard, pecking at the feed he has strewn there recently. I'm not the only one surprised at how well he has taken to keeping geese. As always, I wonder if I will find him passed out on his kitchen table, or awake and lucid.

That question is answered as I approach his front door. I can hear him having an animated conversation with someone, and after a few seconds of hearing just his voice I realize that he's talking to someone on the phone. I knock briskly and open the door, not waiting for an invitation. Haymitch appears at the door to his study and waves me in, never taking the phone from his ear.

"Look, all I'm saying is that maybe it's not the best idea right now...yeah, yeah, I know it's been over two months...listen...no, Plutarch, damn it! Yeah...okay...look, Peeta's here...yes, I'll talk to him...yeah, yeah, you too. Bye." Haymitch angrily slams the phone down in its cradle as he sinks into the chair behind the desk and wearily rubs his hands over his face.
I sit down in the chair facing the desk. "So?" I ask. "What did Plutarch want?"

"Another brilliant idea from our new Secretary of Communications," Haymitch says dryly. "He wants to commemorate the first anniversary of no Hunger Games by having a ceremony in each district, featuring, of course, all surviving Victors, Escorts, Stylists, and Prep Teams."

"What kind of ceremony?" I ask. Haymitch shrugs.

"Plutarch was predictably...vague...on that subject. I pointed out that only Districts Two, Three, Four, Seven and Twelve have surviving Victors, and that the Escorts, Stylists and Prep Teams fared even worse, thanks to Coins Purge."

In the immediate aftermath of the defeat of the Capitol, Alma Coin had sent out special teams whose only job was to arrest anyone and everyone that had anything to do with the Games. Some - like Portia, my Stylist, and my Prep Team as well as Katniss's Stylist, Cinna - had been arrested and executed by President Snow. But many had been dragged in front of a sham tribunal headed by Coin herself, tried, found guilty, and publicly executed. Escorts, Stylists, Prep Teams, Gamemakers - only a small handful had survived.

Plutarch's real motive for this ceremony suddenly hits me. "Haymitch, Plutarch really only cares about one district's participation in this - and that's Twelve."

Haymitch looks at me over his steepled fingers. "Go on," he says thoughtfully.

"It's easy," I say. "There are seven districts with no surviving Victors. And, other than us, the other four districts with Victors only have one each. Plus, we have one of the last surviving Escorts - Effie - and Katniss's Prep Team - Flavius, Octavia, and Venia. And we have the Mockingjay." I pause and look at Haymitch for a reaction.

"That makes sense," he says slowly. "And it's exactly the sort of thing that manipulative son of a bitch would do. Include all the districts, sure - but the focus is on us. I should have known!"

"There's a problem with this," I say and quickly bring Haymitch up to speed with Katniss's latest struggle with her grief over Prim. "And then there's me. Even thinking about this has me tied up in knots inside. I can't guarantee that I won't have a hijacking seizure right in the middle of Plutarch's show."

"I know, kid. I've been trying to convince Plutarch that this is a really bad idea. The problem is, he has Paylor's backing on this. They both feel that it will help 'Panem heal even further.' And, you'll like this even less - they want to do it on Reaping Day. Broadcast it all over Panem. Viewing 'encouraged' but not 'mandatory,'" Haymitch says disgustedly.

"Reaping Day?!" I say in amazement. "That's in less than two weeks!"

"Exactly. And neither of you looks to be in any sort of emotional shape to participate. I can guarantee you this, though - they don't want me representing the district. Paylor doesn't want to force either you or Katniss to participate - but she will, if it's for the 'greater good of Panem,'" Haymitch says, looking resigned.

Suddenly, I get the germ of an idea. This just may work - and Katniss would go along willingly - but I just had an idea that would benefit both the new government and our district.

Quickly I outline my idea to Haymitch. For the first time today, I see a grin crease his face.

"Kid, there's no way they can refuse that kind of deal," he says gleefully. He picks up the phone
and punches in a number, then leans over and presses the speaker button.

"Secretary Heavensbee's office, Fulvia Cardew speaking," says the voice coming over the speaker.


"One moment, Haymitch," Fulvia's clipped Capitol accent betrays her irritation at Haymitch's abrupt attitude.

"That was quick," Plutarch's voice says. "Did he agree?"

"Not yet," I say with a smile. I can imagine Plutarch squirming uncomfortably when he realizes that I can hear every word he says. Still, he recovers nicely.

"Peeta!" he says jovially. "How are you doing? Better, I trust? Well good taking good care of you?"

"I'm fine," I say evenly, "I doubt if you will be in a few minutes, though."

"What? Now wait just a -" Haymitch quickly cuts him off.

"I ran your little proposal past Peeta, Plutarch," Haymitch says, "And he's rightly concerned about not only his mental state, but Katniss's also. So, he has a counter proposal for you."

"I thought they were both doing much better - but, go on - I'm listening," Plutarch says.

"First of all," I say, "We are both doing much better. That doesn't mean we are both one hundred percent mentally. And I feel that this little show that you want to put on will come at a very high price for both Katniss and I."

"What is it you want?" Plutarch snaps. Haymitch grins and gives me a thumbs up.

"First, understand that I have not spoken to Katniss about this yet. She has to agree to it. If she doesn't then we have no deal - and you have no show," I say.

"Again, Peeta - what is it you want?" Plutarch asks again.

"In exchange for this little Reaping Day propo that you want us to do, I - we - want the rebuilding of District Twelve to be the new government's number one priority," I say.

"We have been rebuilding Twelve," Plutarch says evenly.

"Yes," I say. "The train station, the Justice Building, and the new Peacekeeper headquarters and barracks. But almost no housing, and none of the local shops or stores have been rebuilt. The only district residents that have returned are those few that live here in the Village, carting what's left of bodies they find in burned out buildings to a mass grave in the Meadow. People can't come back here if there's no place for them to come back to!"

"Peeta, you have to understand that Twelve was not the only district damaged during the Rebellion. Districts Two, Four and Eight also suffered heavy damage, as did Thirteen. I haven't even mentioned the Capitol. Our resources are already stretched very thin," Plutarch says reasonably.

"Well, if you can name one other district that was firebombed and burned to the ground, I'll be happy to listen," I say. "No? No others? Okay then. That's my proposal. Top priority for rebuilding goes to Twelve. Contingent on Katniss agreeing of course. Oh, and our priority for rebuilding begins immediately."
"You understand that President Paylor has to agree to this?" Plutarch asks.

"Yes," I say, "Just like Katniss has to agree. Oh, and I won't be able to give you an answer for at least two days." I quickly explain Prim's upcoming birthday and how it's affecting Katniss.

"When will you know?" Plutarch asks.

"Day after tomorrow at the earliest," I say. "I'm not even gonna mention it to her until then."

"Fair enough," Plutarch says, "And Peeta - be persuasive." He hangs up before I can say anything else.

I stand up. "I need to head home before Katniss comes back," I say.

"Okay, kid," Haymitch says, pulling a flask from an inside vest pocket. He unscrews it and drinks deeply.

"See you later," I say simply. Haymitch doesn't respond, but lifts his flask in salute as I leave.

PART IV

When Katniss returns home I'm in the living room, going through her seemingly never ending stack of mail. The flood that she had when she first returned to Twelve had slowed to a trickle. Still, Katniss normally spends an hour or so each evening going through the letters and writing responses to them. I don't bother to read the letters thoroughly - I'm looking for one specific type of letter.

Hate mail.

About one letter in every hundred is filled with hate. These letters are most likely written by disgruntled Capitol citizens - people who probably made a pretty lucrative living off the Games, most likely through betting on the various Tributes. Gambling during the Games had always resulted in some pretty big paydays for certain citizens.

These letters I set aside for delivery to Haymitch. Somehow Haymitch got them to Plutarch, who in turn made sure that the new governments security service received them. There they would be analyzed in every way possible - fingerprints, DNA analysis, even examination of the ink, handwriting, and paper. So far Haymitch has been informed that the security service had achieved some positive results, and arrests had even been made.

But today, everything is positive. Lilly Donegal, the girl from District Four, and Katniss regularly write each other. Haymitch calls them "pen pals." Where he gets these old expressions is anyone's guess, but in this case it seems to fit well. Katniss has even talked to Lilly on the phone a couple of times. Galen mentioned the friendship to Dr. Aurelius, and Aurelius calls their friendship "transference." He feels that Lilly is filling a void in Katniss's life that was made when Prim died.

All I know is, Katniss is always in a good mood when she hears from Lilly, and that's all I really care about.

Katniss says nothing when she enters the house today. I hear her go directly to the kitchen and I soon hear familiar sounds of her cleaning whatever she bagged today. I give her a few minutes and then get up to join her.

Sure enough, she's plucking a wild turkey. She glances up and flashes me a small smile as I walk in.
"Hey," I say casually, leaning up against the counter while I watch her.

"Hi," she says quietly, concentrating on her task. A mound of feathers continues to grow next to her as she works.

"Need any help?" I ask with a smile.

Katniss stops plucking the bird to look up at me in amused exasperation. "Peeta - no offense. You are a fantastic baker. As a butcher, though..." she lets her voice trail off.

"Just thought I'd offer," I say as I move a little closer to her. Even dirty from her hunt, sweaty from exertion, her hair disheveled and plastered to her scalp in places...she's still the most beautiful girl I've ever seen.

"It's appreciated, but...make some cheese buns or something," she says.

"Already made this morning. Along with wheat bread, nut bread, and sesame seed."

"Okay then - your work in here is done. Now get out and let me finish gutting this bird," she says with just a hint of irritation in her voice.

"Just a minute," I say and turn away from her, opening up a bread box on the counter. I remove something and turn back around. "Open," I say.

Katniss rolls her eyes but dutifully opens her mouth. I raise the fresh cheese bun to her lips and she takes a greedy bite, chewing slowly and savoring the taste. I put the rest of the bun on a small plate and turn to leave, when two surprisingly strong hands grab my shoulders and spin me around. Her arms twine around my neck as she raises up on tiptoe for a quick kiss.

"Thanks," she says with a smile. "Now - out!"

Sheepishly I leave the kitchen. I walk outside, feeling the afternoon sun warm on my face. Haymitch is herding his geese through the Village and spots me. He makes his way over to where I'm standing in front of Katniss's house.

"Talked with Plutarch a little while ago. Paylor's given her okay to your terms," he says without preamble.

"That was fast," I say in surprise.

"Yeah," he says. "You're talking to Katniss day after tomorrow?"

I nod. "Yeah. Once she gets past tomorrow."

"I saw her earlier. She doing okay?" Haymitch asks. He is sincerely concerned about her. Whether he wanted to or not he has become genuinely fond of Katniss.

"She seems to be," I reply, "But I think she's holding a lot in." Just then we both see the cleanup crews returning to the Village. Their work is almost completed, and soon, the mass grave in the Meadow will be filled in. I spot Thom and wave him over. He says something to the group that he's walking with, the both he and Leevy trot over.

"Hey, Peeta - Haymitch," Thom greets us with a smile. Leevy greets us both with quick hugs and smiles.

"Where's Katniss?" she asks. I jerk my thumb back over my shoulder.
"Inside, wrestling with a fresh turkey," I say.

"I'm gonna go say hello. Thom, are you alright out here?" she asks.

"Uhh...yeah, fine, Leevy," he says, reddening. Haymitch and I are both looking a little confused at the exchange, until Leevy raises up and kisses Thom quickly.

"Okay, be right back, sweetie," she says cheerily as she skips into the house.

Haymitch and I turn back to a now thoroughly embarrassed Thom. "So, when did all this come about, 'sweetie'?" asks an amused Haymitch.

"Come on, guys," Thom stammers, "Look - everyone's lost someone here. And, well...it just happened. She's been...well...my girlfriend for a couple of weeks now."

"Congratulations!" I say with a grin and shake his hand.

"So...cleanup is just about done?" Haymitch asks.

"Yeah," Thom nods. "We're basically done today. After that, we can start rebuilding for real."

"We're working on getting some help in that area," Haymitch says. I shoot him a look but he continues on coolly, "And hopefully get some more district residents to return."

"In the meantime, I've started putting a lot of my crews to work in the Seam, planting vegetable gardens. Doubt if there's gonna be any new building there any time in the near future, and we'll need the food come winter. I just wish more of us knew how to hunt," Thom says thoughtfully.

"Thom, how would you like a job?" Haymitch asks suddenly.

Thom looks at Haymitch with a hint of suspicion. "Depends. What kind of job?"

"Mayor of District Twelve," Haymitch says casually. I look at Haymitch in amazement.

"Say that again. I could have sworn you said Mayor," Thom says.

"How would you like to be Mayor?" Haymitch asks again.

"I'm not qualified. I was mining coal a year ago!" Thom protests.

"And less than a year ago, you and Gale Hawthorne led 900 people to safety the night of the firebombing. You fought bravely in the Rebellion - Squad Leader, if memory serves. And since your return, you've pretty much been the leader of the cleanup effort. People follow you and do what you say because they respect you, not because they have to," Haymitch says reasonably.

"What about Gale?" Thom asks with a hint of desperation in his voice.

"Gale's in Two - and won't be returning to Twelve any time soon," Haymitch explains.

"What about you, Haymitch? Or you, Peeta?"

Haymitch laughs. "Oh no, son...I'm retiring from public life. I just want to raise my geese now."

"Don't look at me," I say. "I just want to get the bakery back up and running again." I surprise myself - that's the first time I ever mentioned starting up the bakery again to anyone, although I had thought about it from time to time.
"I just don't know," Thom says.

Haymitch puts his arm around Thom's shoulders. "You'll do fine. You already have the mark of a good leader. You don't want the job."

Just then Leevy comes out of the house, followed by Katniss. Leevy goes straight to Thom and kisses him, much to his embarrassment. Katniss - well, she doesn't kiss me, but slides familiarly under my arm.

"So, what have you 'men' been talking about?" Leevy asks cheerily.

"Leevy, you won't believe this," Thom begins.

"Try me," Leevy says with a smile.

PART V

Katniss had decided on having the turkey tomorrow night. On Prim's birthday. She mentioned it casually when we went back in the house. She thinks Thom becoming the Mayor is a great idea, by the way.

Together we scrape up a quick meal of leftovers. During dinner we talk about what to have with the turkey tomorrow. I'm a little concerned about the meal - Sae's granddaughter has been ill for the last couple of days, so Katniss and I have been fending for ourselves. I'm not a bad cook but Katniss leaves a lot to be desired.

As we clean up from dinner, Katniss casually mentions that she's invited Leevy and Thom for dinner. I look at her in surprise as she continues on that we should ask Haymitch and Blake as well - and Galen, of course.

"Something wrong?" she asks.

"Uhh...no...nothing's wrong," I stutter. "I'm just a little surprised that...well, that you -"

"Would want people over for dinner on Prim's birthday?" Katniss finishes for me gently.

"Yes," I say quietly.

Katniss turns and steps easily into my arms. "Peeta - you know this last week has been hard on me," she says.

"I know, and I'm sorry. I -" I begin, but she cuts me off.

"No, you've been great," she says. "And truthfully, this morning when I went out I was planning on spending tomorrow alone - all day. But today, out in the woods, something happened."

"What happened?" I ask.

"I talked with Prim," Katniss says. I look at her in surprise and alarm. She gives a quick laugh at my expression. "No, no...nothing like that. I wasn't hallucinating, or going crazy. It was more a talk inside my mind. Kind of a 'what would Prim do, or want me to do' kind of thing."

Visibly relieved, I ask, "So what did she tell you?"

"We agreed that we love each other and will forever. But she said that, for her sake, I need to move on and live my life - and that she knows I will never forget her. So I decided that she's right, and
that I need to live each day as it comes, and not relive those awful moments constantly. That's when
the idea came to have everyone for dinner - because everyone that I mentioned is a part of my
family - my new family."

She glances up at me, eyes shining with unshed tears - but she's smiling.

"Are you sure?" I ask. "I mean, if you want we can cancel everything."

"No! I mean, I'm sure," she says in a quieter tone.

"I'll ask Haymitch, Galen and Blake tomorrow," I say as I hold her close to me.

"I love Prim, Peeta. I always will, more than words can say. But tomorrow I not only want to
mourn, but celebrate her life. I guess I've done a little growing here since I've been back," she says
quietly.

As I continue to hold her, I say to myself, I couldn't agree more.
MEMORIES

CHAPTER 9- MEMORIES

PART I

A nightmare seizes me in the middle of the night. As usual, I awaken quietly - as much screaming
and thrashing around that Katniss does during her nightmares, I'm just the opposite. I awaken
tense, heart pounding, sweating - but I rarely, if ever, wake Katniss.

I become aware that Katniss is not in bed with me. I roll over and glance at the bathroom door,
looking for the telltale strip of light leaking out from the bottom of the door, but it's dark. Now I
begin to feel a little concerned - it's really not like Katniss to be able to slip out of bed without me
noticing.

I roll out of bed, debate on whether or not to turn on a light, then head for the bedroom door. In the
upstairs hallway, I glance around, looking for any signs of lights being on anywhere in the big
house. I see nothing, not even coming from downstairs. Sometimes after a really bad nightmare, I
will go downstairs with Katniss and we will have tea or hot chocolate together. But there's no sign
of her.

The light from the full moon shines through the windows, giving me enough light to be able to
make my way carefully down the hallway. For some reason that I can't entirely explain I don't turn
on any lights. Now I'm playing a sudden hunch that popped into my head. One bedroom door in the
hall is slightly ajar, where the others are all closed.

Prims old room.

I carefully push the door open. In the dim moonlight I can just make out a form curled up on Prims
bed. Katniss is laying on her side, curled up in a tight ball. I can just make out that she has
something clutched in her hands tightly. As quietly as possible I creep a little closer to the bed until
I can make out that Katniss is holding a hooded sweater that I knew was a favorite of Prims. Her
face is buried in the fabric and I can just make out tear tracks on her face.

I retreat from the room and return to Katniss's bedroom. I quickly snatch a light blanket off the
back of a chair and carry it back to Prims bedroom. As carefully and as gently as possible I pull the
blanket over Katniss's sleeping form, then back out of the room and go back to bed.

I can almost hear Galen telling me to "Let Katniss grieve in her own way." And that's exactly what
I intend to do. I roll over to go back to sleep and instinctively reach out for her, grabbing one of her
pillows instead. I pull the pillow close to me and bury my face in it, inhaling Katniss's familiar
scent. At that moment I realize that's what Katniss was doing with Prims sweater - inhaling her
sisters unique scent, trying to find some part of her that still lives, that she can call up and bury
herself in.

Holding her pillow, I understand completely now what she's doing.

"Goodnight, Katniss," I murmur into her pillow, as I slowly drift back to sleep.

PART II

I awaken the next morning, still alone in bed. The rest of my night was uninterrupted by any
dreams - good or bad. Katniss's side of the bed is as it was last night when I first discovered her gone, so I know she didn't come back to bed at any time during the night.

I slip out of bed and head down the hallway to Prims old room. The door is closed once more. Carefully I push down on the latch and open the door, only to find Prims bed as undisturbed as it usually is. The only evidence of Katniss's presence there last night is the blanket that I covered her with, now folded neatly at the foot of the bed, and the sweater that Katniss was so desperately clutching last night draped over a chair.

Leaving the room, I close the door carefully and search the rest of the house quickly, although I already knew what I'd find. Nothing. Katniss is gone. Her fathers old leather jacket is gone as well, and when I check the coat closet downstairs her bow and arrows are missing as well.

So, she's gone hunting. And, from her spending the night in Prims room, clutching Prims favorite sweater to her, it seems that she's not handling her grief quite as well as she let on last night. Sighing deeply, I go upstairs to get dressed. I have to talk to Haymitch and Galen before it gets too much later in the day.

Heading outside, I turn to go to Haymitch's place first. I'm surprised to see him up and outside already, sitting morosely on his front steps staring blankly at his small flock of geese pecking at some feed that he had scattered on his front lawn for them. I stroll over to his house and sit down next to him on the steps.

"Up early," I say cheerily, belying the dark feeling welling up inside me.

"Hmmf," Haymitch grunts, not even glancing in my direction.

"Dinner tonight at six," I say. "Roasting the turkey Katniss shot yesterday."

"We'll see," Haymitch says dryly, reaching into an inner vest pocket and pulling out a small flask. He unscrews it and drinks deeply.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I snap, irritated.

"Oh, just that I saw Miss Sunshine storming out of her earlier this morning, black cloud hanging over her head, with bow in hand," Haymitch replies. "Seems like maybe she's not handling things as well as you thought."

"Today is her sisters birthday, after all," I say.

"I know," Haymitch says. "Believe it or not, kid, but I really do feel bad for her. Everyone loved that little girl." He reaches over and pats me awkwardly on the shoulder. For Haymitch this qualifies as a tremendous outpouring of compassion.

Quickly I bring him up to speed on what had happened the night before, with me finding Katniss sleeping in Prims room. As I'm telling him what was going on the previous night, Galen walks over and joins us. Grateful that he's here, I fill him in on what's been happening with Katniss as well. Galen pulls up a lawn chair and sits in front of us, unmindful of the geese busy feeding around and under his chair.

"Boys, do you know what the absolute strongest sense is when it comes to triggering memory?" Galen asks us.

"Uhhh...sight I guess," I answer tentatively. Haymitch nods, "Yep, sight. That's what I was gonna
say also."

"While sight is a very powerful sense, it's not the sense that triggers the strongest memories. Smell is," Galen explains. "Think about it. Peeta, when you smell baking bread, what's the first thing that usually pops into your head?"

"The bakery," I say automatically. "And when I smell cinnamon, I always think of...my Dad."

"Yet, you can look at a loaf of bread, or a container of cinnamon, and it doesn't trigger the same, intense memories," Galen explains. "Katniss is using her sisters sweater to try to capture and hold a memory of her that she fears is fading. By holding it close to her and inhaling Prims scent she keeps that memory fresh."

"But, eventually, that scent will be gone," I say.

"Yes...but there's other ways. Video footage of Prim during your first Games, when you were down to the Final Eight - when she was interviewed. Interviews with her before and during your Victory Tour. It's not the same and the scent, but hearing her voice and seeing her move will help hold those memories immensely. Katniss was very close to her sister...her grief will most likely last a lifetime," Galen says somberly.

"Katniss was telling me yesterday that she 'talked' with Prim - in her mind," I say.

"Peeta, she's doing her best to come to grips with her loss. In time, these occurrences will be less and less frequent. In fact, considering all that you both have been through, you've both made remarkable progress," Galen says.

"They've helped each other, Doc," Haymitch says. I had almost forgotten that he was here. "I really had my doubts about Katniss when she and I first came back. She wasn't eating, wasn't interested in doing anything, just sat and stared at the wall all day. When Peeta showed up, she started coming out of her shell that same day - starting when you planted those bushes by the side of her house."

"Bushes?" Galen asks.

"The day I got back - for some reason, I wandered a bit into the forest. Through the old district fence - the one they used to keep electrified," I explain. "I found the bushes growing right at the edge of the forest. Evening Primrose bushes. So I came back, found a shovel and wheelbarrow, and dug them up. I transplanted them at the side of Katniss's house. She came out while I was working."

"And it wasn't exactly a joyful reunion, either," Haymitch interjects. "More like two stray dogs circling around each other, neither one sure of what the other is gonna do."

"And why did you plant those bushes?" Galen asks me.

"I - I don't know. For Katniss. For Prim. For both of them," I stammer.

"And for you, too," Galen says gently. "Look, I'm not a trained psychiatrist - but I had years of on the job training here during my posting as the mine company physician. I never had any way to adequately treat the people that came to me for help...at least until the Typhoid epidemic...so I turned to treating their minds. Aurelius calls me the best unlicensed psychiatrist he's ever met." Galen chuckles a bit at this revelation.

"So here's my analysis, for what it's worth. Katniss comes home to the district, both physically and mentally scarred. She spent years taking care of her family. Forced to grow up at the age of eleven.
Losing her father - a man she loved deeply - to a mining accident. Survives not one, but two, back to back Hunger Games. Becomes the reluctant symbol of the Rebellion. Sees you, Peeta, mentally broken and brainwashed by the Capitol. Fights a brutal, bloody war. Watches her sister die and is unable to do anything to stop it. Assassinates the new President of Panem when she finds out that Coin was directly responsible for Prims death. Blames her best friend, in part, for designing the instrument of Prims death. Comes back to the district after being found not guilty of murder, having, in her mind, lost EVERYONE that she's ever cared about." Galen pauses for a moment before continuing.

"Everyone. Her father, her sister, her mother - when she decided to go to Four instead of coming back here - her friend Madge, killed in the firebombing - her best friend Gale - and most of all, Peeta - you. She felt she had lost you forever - not to death, but to something that she couldn't understand - she felt she lost the person that you were. So when you showed up here - well, she wouldn't admit it, but she suddenly had a glimmer of hope. No offense to you, Haymitch - but Peeta was what she really needed."

"None taken," Haymitch says dryly. "I was just here to keep an eye on her until this guy -" he jerks a thumb at me "- came back anyway."

I sit, stunned and confused by everything that Galen has just said. I know my return had sparked a change in Katniss - it sparked a change in me too. And I know that, in spite of literally starting over with each other, we have both become very close - the closest we have ever been. But I never thought of myself as someone that she truly needed - despite what she's told me to the contrary.

Galen stands up. "Well, boys, I'm heading into town. The new Liaison wants my opinion on where to locate the new district medical and dental clinic. Oh, that's right - before much longer we'll have a fully staffed clinic here," Galen says with a smile.

"See you at dinner?" I ask.

Galen winks. "Six sharp. I'll be there."

"You too, Haymitch," I say firmly.

Haymitch throws up his hands in mock surrender. "Who am I to turn down a turkey dinner?"

**PART III**

Katniss returns while I'm busying myself in the kitchen. The turkey is roasting in the oven. I'm working on bread and a cake when she comes in. I notice her game bag doesn't seem as full as normal. She tosses the bag on the table.

"Hey," she says softly.

"Hi," I answer, turning from the counter. We both stand there awkwardly for a few seconds then Katniss turns to her game bag, emptying the contents on the table.

"So, I went to the pond and got some wild katniss, and picked some wild onion as well. I got some strawberries too, even though I figured that you would be making a cake - we can eat them for breakfast or something. There's some dandelion for salad also. I didn't really hunt but there were a couple of rabbits in the snares I set, so I dropped them off with Sae, I figured she could stew them up, and -"

I come up behind her and gently put my hands on her shoulders. I feel her flinch slightly at the contact. She draws in her breath sharply and I feel her whole body stiffen and shudder.
"Katniss," I say gently. She spins around and looks up at me. For a brief second I see a flash of fire in her eyes - anger, maybe - and then her expression immediately softens. I can see every freckle on her face, dusting across her nose. Her chin trembles slightly as she collapses against my chest and finally a huge sob tears from her throat.

"I miss her so, so, much!" is all she says, gripping my arms tightly in her hands. I wrap my arms around her, hands gently rubbing her back, making soft little comforting sounds as she cries. We stand like that for endless minutes until she finally takes a few gulping breaths and wipes the heel of her hand against her eyes.

"I was afraid you'd be mad," she finally says.

"Mad for what?" I ask, still holding her.

"For - sleeping with Prim. For - running out of the house this morning. For...for lying to you," she says haltingly.

"When did you lie?" I ask.

"Yesterday," she says quietly. "When I told you that...things were better with me...about Prim. They're not. And I can't stop thinking about her. And it hurts SO MUCH!" Another loud sob. More tears - from both of us. Both of us holding tightly to each other.

"Look at me," she says with a tearful laugh. "Look at you! We're both such a mess!"

"Yes, we are," I agree. "But maybe - just maybe - between the two of us, we can put each other back together again."

"Maybe," Katniss whispers. "But what if we -" I cut off whatever she was going to say with a kiss. A gentle, loving kiss. Not hungry - a kiss that says I'm here for you. One she returns with enthusiasm. I break the kiss and look down at her.

"And no, I'm not mad," I say with a smile. After a moment, she smiles back.

"Thanks for covering me up last night. I was cold," Katniss finally says.

"Anytime," I say as I feel her arms tighten around me once again.

PART IV

Dinner that evening was relaxed and pleasant. Thom was probably the most uncomfortable person there, given our good natured joking with him about his new relationship with Leevy, and about agreeing to becoming the new Mayor. In fact, he was still trying to convince Haymitch that he was not the right person for the job.

"But Haymitch, I'm only twenty! And what do I know about being a mayor?" Thom protested again.

"Karl Undersee was twenty-two when he was appointed mayor," Haymitch points out. "Age has nothing to do with it. People respect you and you've already proven yourself a good leader."

"Yes, but - well, aren't they supposed to choose mayors differently? Doesn't everybody pick the person they want and the person with the most picks wins?" Thom asked.

"It's called an 'election' Thom, and yes, we will eventually have open elections here in Twelve - just
like we did when Paylor was elected President," Haymitch explains patiently. "In fact, I understand that the new government will soon reinstate the District Congress and we will be having elections for people to represent Twelve in the Capitol."

I had heard of the District Congress before, during one of my conversations with Haymitch. He knows an amazing amount of Panem history and even some history of what things were like before the Catastrophes. Haymitch had told me that the Capitol dissolved the District Congress during the Dark Days and the First Rebellion, and never reinstated the Congress once the Treaty of Treason was signed. It was a heady thought that soon each district would have an equal voice in the affairs of Panem.

"I still don't that I'm qualified. I mean, I used to be nothing but a coal miner," Thom says.

"Karl was a handyman and gardener before he was chosen. Sorry, Thom, but your arguments aren't valid," Haymitch says with a grin.

"Fine. I'll do it! But only until we can have one of those elections and choose a qualified mayor," Thom says stubbornly.

"But what happens, Thom, if we have this election and you are chosen?" Katniss says. I look at her in surprise. I wasn't even aware that she was following the conversation.

"You mean - if I get enough picks?" Thom asks in surprise. It's obvious he never thought of this angle before.

"Votes, Thom - they're called votes. And yes, you could get the most. What then?" Haymitch says.

"Umm - Well, in that case...I guess I'll continue being mayor," Thom says sheepishly.

"Atta boy," Haymitch says.

The rest of the evening went much like that. Easy, relaxed conversation, the meal got raves from everyone, and district gossip was traded back and forth. There was one bit of news that surprised me - the next train coming into town would be bringing two more residents back - Delly Cartwright and Rory Hawthorne. I watched Katniss carefully when she heard the news about Rory. Not only is he Gales brother, but he and Prim and become exceptionally close. But Katniss seemed to be genuinely excited to have him coming home.

When dinner was over, before we brought the cake out, I take Katniss aside.

"Are you sure that you're up to this?" I say with concern.

"Peeta...yes. It's something that I have to do - and need to do. Everyone has been so good about not mentioning why we're all here tonight. I can't promise that I won't cry, but I want to do this," she says.

I give her a quick hug in response.

We assemble everyone in the living room for the cake. I carry the cake into the room, followed by Katniss carrying plates, forks, and a serving knife. After I place the cake on the table, and after Katniss places the plates and silverware down, she steps forward and takes a deep breath.

"I want to thank all of you for coming tonight," she begins shakily. Speaking to a group of any size is not her strong point. "As you probably all know, I've been a bit...emotional...these last few days, because of today. Today, my sister Prim," at this point I hear a slight hitch in her breath, and
glance at her quickly, but she gamely continues on, "My sister Prim would have been fourteen years old. When she was little she would beg me to stop at the bakery to look at the decorated cakes in the window." At this she stops and gives me a little smile that I immediately return.

"Prim will always be the most important person in my life," she continues, "Someone that I loved more than anything. And when I lost her," another hitch in her voice, "Well, it was like a part of me died. I've spent a lot of time lately thinking about her. And I know what she would want me to do. She would want me to live my life and be happy. So that's what I'm going to try to do. When I told Peeta that I wanted to have this dinner, and I named all of you, I told him that I considered you all my new family. So thank you all for being here, and I hope that you all enjoy the cake."

As she finishes with her speech, she suddenly turns to me and buries her face in my chest. As I hold her, everyone else comes up to speak a few words to her. She doesn't cry very hard, or very long, but I knew how emotional it was for her to tell everyone her feelings.

The rest of the evening was more somber, but still pleasant as everyone enjoyed the cake - the first birthday cake Prim ever had - and even laughed a bit at some stories we told about our experiences with Prim. Finally, though, everyone left, and Katniss and I quickly finished cleaning up and putting everything away.

As we were getting ready for bed, I reminded myself that tomorrow I need to speak to Katniss about Plutarch's idea to have a ceremony on Reaping Day. I sigh. Convincing her won't be easy, but I did promise both Haymitch and Plutarch that I would speak to her as soon as Prims birthday was over. And tomorrow is that day.

I hear water running in the bathroom as I lay back in bed, my fingers laced together, my arms behind my head. I wince a little as I shift in the bed - lately my Robo-leg has been bothering me. I make a mental note to talk to Galen about it tomorrow. For now, I'm hoping that the deal I struck with Plutarch, and already approved by President Paylor, to give Twelve rebuilding priority would help sway her opinion.

The bathroom is quiet now, then the door opens and Katniss comes out, ready for bed. She gives me a quick smile as she climbs into bed next to me, then snuggles next to me.

"You've really been wonderful these past couple of weeks, you know that?" she asks me.

I shrug. "I know how hard it's been for you. I was just trying to give you whatever you need," I say with a smile.

Katniss turns her face up to me and gives me a quick kiss. "You did just that, Peeta. Thank you," she says.

I reach over and turn out the light. In the darkness, I say, "Anything you need me to do, I'll do, Katniss. You know that."

"It's nice to hear, though," she says as she snuggles even closer to me. I'm not sure which of us fell asleep first. All I know is that both of us slept the night through, with no nightmares.

**PART V**

I wake up the next morning before Katniss. I look over at her, and see how relaxed and peaceful her face looks. I gently kiss her forehead, making her smile a bit, and slip carefully out of bed. I pull on a shirt and shorts and go downstairs.

As I get to the downstairs landing I hear the sound of the front door opening. I glance at the door in
alarm until I realize that it's only Greasy Sae. She's been away for a few days taking care of her sick granddaughter.

"Peeta!" Sae says in surprise. "I wasn't expecting you up this early."

"Good morning, Sae. I just woke up. Katniss is still sleeping, though," I say.

Sae looks at me in surprise. "She's not sick, is she?" Sae asks.

"No, no," I laugh. I quickly explain the rough time Katniss had been having the last week or so, and the dinner that we had last night. "She needs the sleep. I was just coming downstairs to fix her breakfast."

"Sounds like you two don't need me coming around any more," Sae says with a smile.

"Sae, you know you mean the world to both of us," I say. "But I enjoy taking care of Katniss. No one can cook like you, though! I do know of someone that can use you, however."

"Haymitch?" Sae asks with a grin.

"Haymitch," I say. "Hazelle Hawthorne was keeping house for him last year, before - well, before the Quell. He really does need the help."

"I'll talk to him this morning," she says, "In the meantime, let me make you one last breakfast."

"Be my guest," I say with a smile. Soon Sae is bustling around the kitchen, putting breakfast together for us. As usual, she has enough food to feed ten people. That gives me an idea. I excuse myself and head over to Haymitch's house.

Haymitch, as usual, is passed out on his kitchen table. After carefully waking him up, and earning a few curses as well, I invite him to breakfast.

"Haymitch, I think I have a solution to your - housekeeping - problem," I say. I explain that Katniss no longer needs Sae to cook for her, and that he may be able to use her help around his place. To my amazement, I see Haymitch nodding thoughtfully.

"Okay, I'll go have some breakfast with you," he says. "By the way, have you talked to Katniss yet?"

"Not yet," I admit, to Haymitch's knowing smirk. "She was still asleep when I came over to get you."

"So, kill two birds with one stone, huh?" he says. "I get a housekeeper and you get moral support from me when you talk to Miss Sunshine."

"Well, it would help, you being there," I say.

Haymitch stands up with a grunt. "Okay, let's get this over with," he sighs. I try not to let him see my relief as we walk back to Katniss's house. When we get there, I see that Katniss is up, sitting in the kitchen, chatting with Sae over a cup of tea. She smiles warmly when I enter the room, then stands up to give me a quick hug and kiss before giving Haymitch a hug of his own, much to his - and my - surprise.

"Sae was just telling me about this new arrangement," Katniss says. "I think I can trust you enough to keep me fed now."
"As long as Haymitch agrees to it," Sae says with a smile.

"We'll talk business after breakfast," Haymitch says.

Breakfast, as usual, was delicious. We all ate with good appetite and soon we're all leaning back in our chairs, sipping tea contentedly.

"Sweetheart, could I borrow your study while Sae and I talk business?" Haymitch asks.

"Of course," Katniss says. "Sae, make sure you get a good deal from him!"

"Oh, I will, dear," she says as she and Haymitch disappear into the study. I stand up and begin to clear dishes away, and soon Katniss joins me. Together we quickly clean up the breakfast dishes and I pour us both another cup of tea. I take a deep breath. It's now or never.

I sit down at the kitchen table with Katniss. Handing her the cup of tea, I say, "I need to talk to you about something."

She looks at me over the rim of her cup and arches her eyebrows inquisitively. Taking another deep breath, I quickly launch into the conversation that Haymitch had with Plutarch a few days before about the one year commemoration of the ending of the Games, including when they wanted the ceremonies to take place. I assured her that I've made no commitment without her and mentioned the deal I had made regarding the rebuilding of the district being the Capitols top priority. When I finish, I sit back in my chair and wait for her reaction.

"So, they want to have some sort of 'closure' ceremony and parade us out in front of everyone again," Katniss says in a remarkably even tone.

"Yes," I say.

"And, you managed to get them to promise to rebuild the district quickly if we both agree to participate," she adds.

"Yes," I say again.

Katniss ponders all this for a few seconds, then says, "Okay. But I have conditions also. They'll have to agree to mine also or no deal."

I find that I've literally been holding my breath. I slowly let it all out. "I'll talk to Haymitch as soon as he's done with Sae."

"I'm done," I hear Haymitch say from behind me. "Sae starts tomorrow. Well?"

I glance at Katniss. "Would you like to give him the news?" I ask.

She nods and looks at Haymitch. "I'm in. I agree. With conditions."

Haymitch, at first looking relieved, suddenly looks wary. "What conditions?" he asks.

Katniss stands up. "You'll find out when we talk to President Paylor," she says as she walks towards her study.

"What? Paylor? Listen, Sweetheart, I don't exactly have her number, you know!" Haymitch says sharply as we follow her into the study. I notice Sae coming along with us. I share a look with Haymitch and he just shrugs. I smile. If Sae wants to be a witness, then she can for all I care.
Katniss sits behind her desk. "Then call Plutarch and get it from him," Katniss says sweetly. It's all I can do to not laugh. Katniss has Haymitch in an awkward position and she's enjoying it.

Haymitch grumbles and picks up the phone. He dials a number from memory. In a few seconds, he's talking.

"Fulvia? No? Oh. hello, Effie," he says as he pushes the speaker button. Effie's voice is soon heard by everyone in the room.

"- to hear from you, Haymitch!" Effie trills.

"You too, Effie," he says. "Listen, I need to speak to Plutarch. It's urgent, so we'll have to talk later."

"Oh, I understand completely...and I will be seeing you soon! I'll connect you now," she says. We hear a brief burst of music, then the sound of a phone being picked up.

"Did she agree?" we hear Plutarch ask.

"Not entirely," Katniss says. "But I'm not negotiating with anyone other than Paylor."

"Katniss!" Plutarch says with false enthusiasm. "I can speak on the Presidents behalf."

"Plutarch, all I need you to do is connect me with President Paylor," she says.

"Katniss, you know I speak for her. My word carries -"

"No weight with me, Plutarch. I deal with the President or with no one."

There's a brief pause then Plutarch comes back on the line. "Fine," he snaps. "I don't have her number, so I'll have her call you."

"Fair enough," Katniss says. "Goodbye, Plutarch." She stabs the "End Call" button with her finger and sits back.

In less than five minutes the phone is ringing. Katniss answers it and presses the speaker phone button again.

"Miss Everdeen, please stand by for President Paylor." A voice says over the speaker, then -

"How may I help you, Katniss?" President Paylor's voice says.

"Hello, President Paylor," Katniss says. "I've been told about the one year commemoration of the Games and the deal that was struck with Peeta, about rebuilding the district."

"I will dispatch work crews and building supplies just as soon as you give me your commitment to participate," Paylor says.

"I have two conditions of my own," Katniss says with a grin.

Paylor pauses for a moment, then says, "Go on."

"I would like Cressida and Pollux to do the filming and the live feed from District Twelve. I know and trust them." Katniss says. I smile when she says that. Cressida and Pollux are part of our team.

"Done. Anything else?" Paylor asks.
"Just one more thing," Katniss says, and proceeds to outline her other condition. When she's done, she asks, "Did you get that, ma'am?"

Paylor hesitates for a moment, then says, "Yes. Yes I did. Agreed."

Katniss smiles. "Thank you, President Paylor."

"I've already given the order for a special cargo train to head to Twelve, loaded with building supplies. It will be there tomorrow morning, along with construction crews," Paylor says evenly.

"Thank you, again, ma'am. I promise that Peeta and I will give our full cooperation to the ceremonies," Katniss says.

"Goodbye, Katniss...and thank you," President Paylor says as the line goes dead.

We're all looking at Katniss in amazement at her revelation on what her other condition was. Haymitch is shaking his head in admiration.

"Sweetheart, that has to be the best thing I've seen you do since you shot that apple out of the pigs mouth," Haymitch says.

"Well, spending years at the Hob taught me how to negotiate," Katniss says with a smile.

I can't wait to see Katniss's other "condition" come to life - all I know is, I am so very proud of her!
CHAPTER 10 - THE SQUARE

PART I

The change in Katniss is subtle. So subtle that someone not living with her, or seeing her every day, would probably not even notice. But it's there. Ever since she agreed to participate in the Reaping Day ceremonies, commemorating the one year anniversary of the last Hunger Games ever to be held, she has been...different.

Katniss is doing probably the worst thing that she could do - hold everything in. She's been keeping to herself more than usual. Every day she goes into the forest - to hunt, to fish, to check her trap lines - but mostly just to be alone. Galen tells me that the best thing I can do for her at this time is to do absolutely nothing...but at the same time to be available for her if she ever wants to talk or open up.

Easier said than done. The upcoming ceremony has taken its toll on me as well. After making steady progress with my hijacking rehabilitation, I suffered the worst attack that I've ever had outside District Thirteen. It struck suddenly and it's just a matter of chance that Haymitch, Galen, and Thom were all there to restrain me. Once I was "me" again Thom explained that he saw my eyes change - that awful hyper dilation of my pupils that seems to turn my eyes into what Thom called "Black pools."

I remember nothing about the attack. When I finally started to become aware of where I was, Galen informed me of the attack and was quick to mention that Katniss was perfectly fine. As usual following a seizure I was confused, and my shoulders were sore. Galen tells me that I probably pulled muscles struggling to free myself to get at Katniss.

"She's fine, Peeta. Scared, yes - well, we all were. But you didn't hurt her," Galen had said. I know better, though - Katniss is far from "fine."

Galen suggested that I spend the night in my house, just to make sure everything was okay. It was less a suggestion and more an order. All I wanted to do at that point was to see Katniss, see for my own eyes that she was unharmed. Galen was firm, though. Just one night, and in the morning we will see how things are then.

The worst was sitting in my old room that evening, staring out the window, and seeing Katniss come to her window. I had seen her many times from across the way, but it was usually incidental - I happened to be glancing out and I would catch a glimpse of her, or of her silhouette, in her room. Tonight, though - she came to her window and looked me right in the eye. We locked eyes for what seemed like forever, neither of us willing to turn away. I mouth the words "I am so sorry" to her, and see her smile for the first time and mouth back, "I am okay."

I'm the first to turn away, not wanting her to see my tears. I avert my face for a few seconds, but when I risk a glimpse she's gone. Her drapes are drawn and her light is out. I sigh heavily and get ready for bed myself. It's still fairly early but I can't see the point in staying up any longer. I slip under my covers, angry at myself, angry at Snow for doing this to me - and hoping that there's some way, any way, that I can make it up to her.

I sleep fitfully and at one point even consider asking Galen for something to help me sleep. My dreams, although not nightmares, are unsettling. All in all it was making for a very long night. My
dreams seem to center around past Reapings here in Twelve. As far back as I can remember, watching girl after girl and boy after boy slowly shuffle up to the stage after Effie calls their name. Suddenly, I'm filled with fear when I hear my name. "Peeta." Oh no, not again - I can't be reaped again!

The voice calls my name again. "Peeta." That's funny, it's not Effie's voice and why is she whispering? "Peeta!" The voice, more insistent now - but I don't want to go up to the stage - not again. Not again!

"Peeta!" I jerk awake, my eyes snapping open. I feel the side of the bed shift as if someone else is on it. Still only half awake I recoil in fear as I can now make out a small figure sitting on the side of my bed.

"Hey, easy!" The figure on the bed hisses. "Peeta, it's me!"

"Katniss?" I say in confusion.

"Yes," she whispers. "Now keep it down!"

"What are you doing here?" I whisper urgently. I strain my ears for any sign of Galen awakening, and I'm rewarded by hearing his familiar, rhythmic snoring.

"I'm glad to see you, too," she says sarcastically, pulling away from me slightly.

"No, wait! I didn't - that came out wrong," I stammer. "I just thought you'd be afraid to see me, so soon after..."

"Oh, Peeta," Katniss says softly. "After seeing you in the window tonight, I knew that you'd come back from...whatever place you go when - that - happens to you. And I know that you'd never hurt me."

Just try to kill you, I say to myself bitterly. I reach my hand up to her shoulder and gently pull her down next to me. She slides into bed next to me with an easy familiarity.

"I'll be glad when all this is over and done with," I say softly.

"Me too," Katniss admits. I feel her arm tighten across my chest.

"Galen told me that I need to give you your space, and I've been trying my hardest to do just that," I tell her.

"I know, Peeta - and thank you," Katniss says, rising up to kiss the side of my mouth softly. I shiver a little at her touch - and not out of tracker jacker induced revulsion, either. I crave her touch now - more than ever.

I take a deep breath. "I'll only ask this one time - do you want to talk?"

"No," she says quietly. "Not yet, anyway. And before you say anything else - I know you're worried, and that you think it's bad to hold everything in. Trust me with this, Peeta...when the time is right, I'll let you know, okay?"

"Fair enough," I say sleepily, kissing the top of her head. "Just don't wait too long."

"I won't - promise," she says. "By the way, I got a letter today - from Annie Odair."

"Annie?" I say, now wide awake. "How is she? How's she doing? Did she have the baby?"
"Both she and Finnick, Jr. are fine," Katniss says quietly. "She sent a picture of the baby. It's like looking at Finnick."

"I can't wait to see it," I say. "We should work on the book tomorrow."

"I'd like that," Katniss says. "We need to get Haymitch to contribute also."

I nod. "Easier said than - hey! I just thought of something! My doors were locked...Galen saw to that. How did you get in?"

"Oh - that," Katniss murmurs. "Sorry - you'll need a new cellar window. I know I shouldn't have - but I just missed you too much!"

In response, I pull her closer and kiss her gently on the lips. She responds warmly. "Break all the windows you want," I say to her softly. She responds by cuddling closer to me. I don't know which of us fell asleep first.

PART II

The picture of Finnick Odair, Jr., was as beautiful as I imagined it would be. I had never been what you would call a "baby" person - being the youngest of three boys meant that I had never been around babies growing up, but I had to admit that Little Finnick was a good looking baby! The picture showed Annie holding the baby in her arms and smiling widely for the camera. Even though the baby was only a few days old at the time it was amazing at how much he already looked like Finnick.

We affixed the photo to a fresh parchment page, and Katniss carefully lettered her thoughts under the picture. I watch her as she intently writes her caption under the photo, her face a study in concentration.

Galen comes into the room as we work. When he awoke to find Katniss and I sleeping together he at first chastised us both for taking such a huge risk. All during his tirade at us Katniss simply stood there, regarding him with those gray eyes of hers, and her gaze never once wavered. When Galen finally finished Katniss spoke for both of us.

"I have nothing to fear. Peeta would NEVER hurt me," she said softly, but with a confidence that I only wish I felt.

"I should have known better than to tell either of you to stay away from the other - even for one day," is all Galen would say. Katniss and I simply looked at each other and shared a quick smile.

Now, though, Galen wordlessly examines our memory book. Some pages are of those people that have been incredibly important to us - people like Prim, and Rue, and Finnick - while others were people that touched us, but that we never had the chance to know well - people like the Leeg sisters, and Castor, and Thresh. Galen carefully sets the pages down and stands up.

"Be right back," he says and abruptly leaves the house. Katniss and I look at each other, shrug, and continue to work. We talk very little as we work on the book. Occasionally Katniss will ask me to read something that she wrote, or I may ask Katniss to examine a drawing, but mostly we work in a comfortable silence. I straighten my Robo-leg and wince a little - Galen had told me that the pain was caused by late growth in my bones and that an adjustment to the prosthetic would most likely be necessary. He assured me that the procedure was simple and could be done without me leaving the district, as long as we can get a specialist to come out from the Capitol. But for now, I have to live with discomfort.
I stand up. "I'm going to make some tea. Would you like a cup?" I ask Katniss.

"Yes, thank you," she says with a smile. I return her smile and walk painfully into the kitchen and put water on to boil. While waiting for the water I stare idly out the window. It's a beautiful late spring day in the district. Through the open window I can hear faint sounds coming from the direction of town - the whine of power tools, the low growl of construction equipment, and the rhythmic sounds of hammers driving nails. Trains arrive daily, loaded with construction supplies. The new government is living up to their end of the bargain that we made - they rebuild Twelve, and, in return, Katniss and I star in Plutarch's latest propo.

I sigh heavily as I finish brewing the tea. To say that I am not looking forward to this show is an understatement. All Katniss and I want now is to be left alone. Left to live our lives in peace. After all that we have been through, is that really too much to ask? I pour the tea into two cups and fervently wish that it was all over and done with. I sigh again and carry the cups into the living room. Time to put on a different face for Katniss - the last thing she needs right now is to see how this upcoming ceremony is affecting me.

Katniss smiles and gratefully accepts the cup from me, but before either of us can take a first, cautious sip, we're interrupted by a commotion at the front door. The door opens with a bang and we both watch with amusement as Galen and Haymitch come in, struggling with a large chest.

"Where do you want this?" Haymitch huffs impatiently.

"That depends...what is it?" I ask.

"My little - contribution - to your project there," Haymitch says, nodding at the memory book on the table.

"Next to the table, please," Katniss says. The two older men clumsily carry the chest into the room and set it down next to the table with a bang. Galen looks pleased with himself, while Haymitch just looks irritated.

"Enjoy," Haymitch says grumpily. "And now, if you'll excuse me, I have a date with a bottle." He lurches out of the room and out of the house without another word.

Katniss and I look at the chest warily. "What is it?" I finally ask.

"What you two have been haranguing Haymitch about for weeks," Galen replies. "His personal reminisces on all the Tributes that he's Mentored from District Twelve."

Katniss and I exchange looks. We had asked Haymitch several times for his contribution to the memory book, and each time he had rebuffed us.

"So what made him change his mind?" I ask.

"Let's just say that I can be persuasive when I have to be," Galen says with a smile. "I'll leave you two to your work." With that, Galen leaves as well.

I warily approach the chest. Yes, we had asked for this very thing - but now that it's here, we are almost afraid to even look. Twenty three years of dead Tributes is in here. Not just facts and figures, but Haymitch's personal notes. Finally, taking a deep breath, I pop the latches and open the lid.

Stacked neatly inside the chest were twenty-five leather volumes. I realize with a shock that the last two were the Seventy-Fourth and Seventy-Fifth Hunger Games - the Games that Katniss and I
were Reaped for. As I stare at the volumes Katniss comes up beside me. I hear her sharp intake of breath when she sees the covers of the last two volumes, with the numbers "74" and "75" embossed in gold.

"Do you want to look?" I ask. Katniss shakes her head emphatically.

"No. I don't want to start with ours," she replies as she reaches for the volume marked "51."

She pulls it out and together we sit next to each other on the couch. We knew the names already. The old District Twelve Schools Hall of Tributes had photos of every Tribute ever Reaped for the Games, along with their names and what Games they died in. There had been 148 pictures on the wall. All now lost to the firebombing. A smaller display, labeled the "Hall of Victors," had just four photos on the wall - Kathleen O'Sullivan, Haymitch Abernathy, myself, and Katniss Everdeen.

Katniss opens the volume. The first two pages were pictures of the two Tributes for District Twelve from that year - Josiah Pride and Antonia Morrow. We both knew a little about them - both had been Seam kids. It was Josiah's last Reaping - he was eighteen at the time, and had been a friend of Haymitch's before Haymitch had been Reaped for the Second Quarter Quell. Antonia had been sixteen. They had both come from large families and I'm sure the tesserae that they had both taken out didn't exactly put the odds in their favor.

Katniss turns the page. Haymitch's notes start after the pictures and official bios of the two Tributes. She reads a few lines then hands the volume to me.

"I - can't. You read it, Peeta. Read it to me," Katniss says plaintively.

I start reading. "Josiah almost begging me to save him...Pretty obvious Antonia hates me...Asking about skills - Josiah has none. Antonia ditto. Sponsors? I don't see how."

I pause in my reading. Katniss is sitting on the edge of the couch, hands pressed together with her fingertips touching her lips. "Go on," she says gently.

I clear my throat. "Our Escort is of no help...stylists as usual are idiots. Coal Miners AGAIN? Talked to both before parade, reminded them to SMILE, but Josiah is too scared and Antonia is too full of hate. Not looking good." I stop again and glance at Katniss.

"Seems like Haymitch had a problem with always getting angry female Tributes," I say lightly. Katniss just stares at balefully and makes a "keep going" gesture with her hands.

I clear my throat. "Our Escort is of no help...stylists as usual are idiots. Coal Miners AGAIN? Talked to both before parade, reminded them to SMILE, but Josiah is too scared and Antonia is too full of hate. Not looking good." I stop again and glance at Katniss.

"Seems like Haymitch had a problem with always getting angry female Tributes," I say lightly. Katniss just stares at balefully and makes a "keep going" gesture with her hands.

"Told them to try to find allies...both are close mouthed about training. Corner Plutarch outside Mentors lounge, of course he can't say anything but his face told me everything I need to know...Chaff and Seeder very helpful with learning the ropes about sponsors. Met more Mentors today. Brutus - total asshole. Beetee - very nice, helpful, but in his own world half the time. Mags - half the Mentors call her 'Mom' and soon I was too, even though I miss my real Mom something awful. Blight is a nice guy too, but quiet."

I pause again. Seeing Haymitch's first impressions of people that Katniss and I had first met last year at the Quarter Quell - people that, with the exception of Beetee, are all now dead - was sobering.

"Launch day. Josiah killed," I pause for a moment, "Killed during bloodbath. Didn't even try to save himself. Thought Brutus and I were gonna have our own bloodbath in the Mentors lounge - him crowing about his Tributes first kill - Josiah and me telling him how honorable it was for his
guy to cut down a kid too scared to move. Think I really made him mad when I told him to shove his honor up his ass."

At this I hear a giggle bust from Katniss. I glance over at her and she is giggling. "I can almost hear Haymitch saying that to Brutus," she says between giggles. I smile wanly. I just can't bring myself to laugh about anything that has to do with Brutus - my only direct kill in two Hunger Games.

I continue reading. "Called Josiah's family. Blight helped with the call - coached me in what to say. Spent ten minutes getting yelled at by Josiah's dad. Got off the phone just in time to see Antonia die. Another call. Antonia's mother blaming me for her death. Afterwards Chaff took me out to get drunk. His Tribute is dead too."

I put the volume down. "I can't read any more," I say. Katniss stands up, walks over to me, and hugs me.

"That would have been us," she says quietly. "Mentoring Tributes, making those calls." I feel her shudder in my arms.

"But it wasn't," I say quietly. "And it never will be."

**PART III**

Reaping Day.

This day used to grip every twelve to eighteen year olds heart with fear. But today is special. Today, for the first time in seventy-six years, no child will be torn from their family by the Capitol to die for supposed crimes committed by their ancestors. There will be no reading of the Treaty of Treason, no glass balls filled with slips of paper.

There is literally no one living that can remember a time without a Hunger Games. And now, we are participants in an event to remind everyone that those obscene Games will never occur again.

Katniss and I have been busy since yesterday. The District Twelve Tribute Train arrived yesterday afternoon, bearing Effie Trinket, Katniss's Prep Team of Octavia, Flavius and Venia, and our personal camera crew - Cressida and Pollux. There were also two additional passengers on the train - Delly Cartwright and Rory Hawthorne, both coming home to live in Twelve. Everything was so confusing at the train station that it was impossible to catch up with either Delly or Rory. All we managed to understand was that Delly's younger brother and grandparents were still District Thirteen, and that Delly would send for them once she got her feet on the ground, and that the rest of Rory's family was still in District Two, and would most likely stay there. Rory was very closed mouthed about why he decided to come back to Twelve, but I have a feeling that Gale had a lot to do with it.

I was confused at first by Delly and Rory being on this train, as it had come from the Capitol, until Haymitch explained that Plutarch had flown Delly out from Thirteen and Rory out from Two to put them both on the train - additional footage of old friends meeting up in the train station.

Plutarch never ceases to amaze me. Here he went to incredible expense to fly two people to the Capitol, put them on a luxurious train, and all for the sake of a minute of reunion footage.

Katniss and I had vehemently disagreed when it came to housing arrangements. The most logical arrangement would be to house Effie, Octavia, Venia, Cressida and Delly at Katniss's house, with me taking on Flavius, Pollux and Rory. But Katniss absolutely refused to allow Prims old room to be used as a guest room - plus, this arrangement would mean that I would have to stay in my own
house for a few days. I admit that the prospect of being away from Katniss at night was not pleasant, but I was surprised at how much Katniss objected to the whole plan.

"No! Absolutely not!" Katniss said firmly. "I'll not spend a single night away from you!"

The Katniss plan was put into place instead. Effie would go to Haymitch's - a move that I could tell made him distinctly uncomfortable - with Rory going to Haymitch also. The Prep Team would stay at Katniss's, the Camera Crew and Delly at my place.

Dinner that night was chaotic. Katniss and I conferred with Effie on the schedule for the next day. Effie was thriving as Plutarch's personal assistant and she seemed to be recovering nicely from her own ordeal of imprisonment during the Rebellion. Now it was as if she was coordinating the Victory Tour all over again, talking about schedules, viewing, and speeches. She had an idea that was sheer brilliance...dress Katniss and I in the exact same clothes we wore when we were Reaped for the very first time.

To my surprise, not only did Katniss agree, she still had that same blue dress that she wore that horrible, wonderful day two years ago. I was a different story, however - but, as I wore a simple white shirt and dark pants it would be easy enough to recreate.

"Here's the image - you two looking the same as you did two years ago! People remember that Reaping all over Panem! I can't think of a better way to send our message of closure! And the speeches that I've prepared will be sure to -"

"No," Katniss says flatly.

"No? No what, Katniss?" Effie says in irritation.

"I know what I want to say. No prepared speeches," Katniss says firmly. "And is my - other condition - ready?"

Effie sighs in frustration. "Yes, Katniss, Everything is as you wanted. But won't you at least take a look at what's on the card?"

Katniss reluctantly takes the card from Effie, but barely glances at it before setting it down. Effie sniffs and turns to me, handing me an identical card.

"Effie, I have to side with Katniss. I know what I'm going to say also. But thank you for the time and effort that you put into this," I say, smiling, trying to mollify her as I hold up the card.

Effie, clearly distressed at our refusal to read her speeches, stands up abruptly and hurries off, mumbling something about having to coordinate with the Mayor - Thom - and with Haymitch as well. No sooner does she leave than Octavia, Flavius, and Venia swoop in, chattering about what they plan on doing with both Katniss and I to prepare us for the cameras the next day. Although none of them like the idea of the clothing that we will be wearing the next day, they console themselves with the different ideas that they throw out about how they want us to look, and again, Katniss has to put her foot down.

"Although both Poeta and I appreciate what you are trying to do, we really just want to look like...ourselves. No waxing, minimal plucking, and we don't want a single one of our scars covered up. We aren't trying to win sponsors - we want Panem to see us as we really are," Katniss says to them in a gentle, but firm, tone.

We are saved from further attempts at manipulating our appearance by Effie's calling our shared Prep Team away to discuss preparing Thom and Haymitch for the next day. When they leave both
Katniss and I sigh heavily. I turn to her, take her hand, and give her what I hope is a reassuring smile.

"It'll all be over and done with this time tomorrow," I say.

"I'm really nervous," Katniss admits to me, "About - my other condition. I just hope I can make it through the ceremony without breaking down."

"If you do, I'll be there for you to lean on," I say, kissing the top of her head. Katniss responds by snuggling in close to me.

"I don't know what I would do without you," she says quietly.

"My thoughts exactly," I say to Katniss.

PART IV

Hand in hand, Katniss and I stroll slowly from the Village to the town square. We both marvel at how much rebuilding has been done in such a short time. Not only public buildings such as the Justice Building, train station, Peacekeepers headquarters, and school - but hotel like structures that Haymitch and Effie identified as "apartment" buildings, and buildings set aside for commerce. One of those will be mine. I plan on reopening the bakery as soon as possible.

We walk by what used to be the Seam, now completely devoid of buildings. Instead, we see neat plots laid out and all manner of vegetable gardens are in various stages of growth. This was Thom's brainchild - putting his cleanup crews to work growing our own food for the coming winter. Although we knew that the new government would continue to take care of us until District Twelve's new industry - manufacturing medicine for the rest of Panem - is up and running.

Katniss and I arrive in the square, and, even though we're early, people are already starting to gather. The temporary stage used for so many Reapings in the past has been erected once again. Effie, Thom, and Haymitch are conferring on the stage, along with a young man in a Peacekeepers uniform. Although I don't know his name, I recognize him as the new Head Peacekeeper. Unlike pre-Rebellion Peacekeepers, these men and women are totally devoid of the calculated cruelty and frightfulness of men like Romulus Thread, or even of old Cray. Instead, they've been instilled with a new purpose - to help, to serve their community, and to protect their district.

We spot Cressida interviewing a small group of residents that I recognize as some of my neighbors from the Village, while Pollux dutifully captures the event for broadcast. As she wraps up her interview she spots us and hurries over to greet Katniss and I. We greet her and Pollux warmly. She asks us if we are up for a brief live interview before the ceremonies start. Both Katniss and I trust this woman implicitly so we readily agree.

Cressida quickly arranges us with Katniss and I standing together with the stage as a backdrop, then looks to Pollux for her cue. He counts down with his fingers - 4, 3, 2, 1 - and points sharply at Cressida.

"I'm live here in the town square of District Twelve with two of my favorite people, Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark, here to take part in the first anniversary of the end of the Hunger Games. Peeta, your feelings and thoughts."

"Cressida, both Katniss and I are honored to be taking part in this. For seventy five years, this day filled every district resident with dread. Now, everyone here is filled with hope," I say.

Cressida nods, then turns to Katniss. "How about you, Katniss? Anything to add?"
Katniss flashes a beautiful smile for the camera and says, "Oh, Cressida, you know that Peeta's the one that always manages to express himself so wonderfully, so I'll just say that I agree completely with what he said." She then turns, slides her arms around me, and plants a quick, firm kiss on my mouth.

Cressida laughs and says, "Well, I guess our favorite star crossed lovers aren't star crossed any longer! This is Cressida Pierce, reporting live from District Twelve." She watches Pollux intently, smile frozen on her face, until he makes a chopping motion with his hand. At that she relaxes instantly. She turns to us and smiles.

"Perfect, you two. Short and simple," she says as she quickly hugs us both. "I'll talk to you both after the ceremony. Gotta go get set up now." She walks away with Pollux, talking intently to him. Katniss and I see Effie hurrying toward us.

"Come, come, you two! We're ready to get started!" She beckons us onto the stage and directs us to sit. Thom and Haymitch are already seated, so Katniss sits next to Haymitch and I take the chair next to Katniss. Effie quickly sits next to me on the side opposite Katniss.

I scan the small crowd that's assembled. There's still only a couple hundred district residents that have returned, but I can also see that the entire construction crew that's been busy with the rebuilding is here as well. Compared to past Reaping Days, the square looks almost empty - but every face out there is there because they wanted to be here today - and that makes a huge difference.

Cressida flashes a signal towards the stage and Thom stands up and walks nervously to the microphone. He grips the microphone stand and is rewarded by a brief feedback squeal. He jumps a little at the noise, drawing laughter from the crowd. I can see the back of his neck redden in embarrassment. He glances down at the card in his hand.

"Uh...sorry," he stammers. "Umm...well, I think everyone knows why we're here - no more Hunger Games!" At this the crowd erupts in cheers. Next to me I hear Effie mutter, "Introduce yourself and read the damn card!" Thom continues with his remarks and it's obvious that nothing of what he's saying was written by Effie. I hear an exchange next to me between Katniss and Haymitch that draws my attention.

"- much did you drink today?" Katniss snaps to Haymitch.

"Not enough," Haymitch drawls softly. Katniss shakes her head in disgust, but then turns to me and gives me a quick grin and a wink. It's all I can do to not start laughing. Katniss turns back to Haymitch.

"At least you could have shaved, Haymitch!"

"Not a chance, Sweetheart. I have an image to uphold, after all," he says with a smirk.

Katniss shakes her head. "You are impossible!" she hisses under her breath.

"Always have been," Haymitch says. My attention goes back to Thom, now introducing Effie. Effie stands and walks to the microphone, and as she gives Thom a quick hug I can barely hear her say, "We're working on your public speaking, young man!"

Thom, embarrassed but grinning, slinks back to Effie's chair. Effie clears her throat and begins to speak.

"For over fifteen years, every year on this day I would stand here and open the Reaping the same
way by saying, 'Happy Hunger Games - and may the odds be ever in your favor.' For years I truly thought that it was an honor to be Reaped. Not until I met and got to know these two -" she indicates Katniss and I seated behind her "- that I realized just how very wrong I had been." Effie pauses here and takes a deep breath before continuing.

"And so, I stand before you, asking for you to forgive the unforgivable. I, in no way, deserve your forgiveness - but I had to apologize to you all for the unimaginable grief that I had caused you for all those years, every time I read a name on a slip of paper. I am so very, very, sorry." Effie's voice cracks a bit on the word "sorry" and she pauses once again, dabbing at her eyes.

The crowd is dead silent. There's a stirring next to me and I look over to see Katniss stand up, walk to Effie, and embrace her warmly - then stand off to one side and slowly start to applaud - clapping her hands slowly, rhythmically, together. As I stand to offer Effie my own hug I can hear the applause rippling through the crowd and I add my own hands to the din.

As we stand there clapping for a weeping Effie, Katniss and I both watch in amazement as Haymitch steps forward slowly and gently pulls Effie into an tender embrace. Effie clings to Haymitch and I can see him murmuring something into her ear as she cries into his shoulder. I glance at Katniss and see her own eyes tearing up and I feel mine doing the same thing. Haymitch gently leads Effie back to the chairs and Katniss and I look at each other, unsure of what to do now.

Finally shrugging, I step to the microphone. Katniss smiles gratefully and quickly sits back down. The applause dies down slowly.

"I think everyone here knows me already," I begin, as the crowd erupts in cheers and applause again that dies down quickly, "So I'll keep it brief. Katniss and I are both deeply honored to be a part of this today. We've stood here on many beautiful late spring days like this and listened as two names were read - read to go die for the amusement of a few, under the guise of 'atonning for treason.' Those days are gone!" More applause and I wait until the crowd is quiet again.

"We now live as free men and women. Each and every person here had a part in making that happen. And I would like to turn the microphone over to one of these people that helped bring about the change that all of us so desperately wanted for years - Katniss Everdeen!"

No sooner did her name leave my lips then the crowd erupts with absolutely thunderous applause and cheers. Katniss, looking a little dazed, slowly walks to the podium and surveys the crowd. I give her a quick hug and kiss, drawing even more cheers, but when I turn to go back to my seat her arms tighten around me and she whispers, "Don't you DARE leave me up here alone!"

I smile and grasp her hand, feeling her fingers lace naturally with mine. Waiting for the applause to die down, she nudges me and inclines her head towards an object placed at the side of the stage, covered in a dark cloth. I shrug noncommittally, indicating that I have no idea what it is - but I do.

The applause and cheers die down, Katniss surveys the crowd one last time. For a moment it seems like she's too nervous to say anything - then finally she starts to speak in a low, clear voice.

"Many people have called me a hero for what I've done. I'm no hero. A hero is someone like my father, who illegally hunted in order to keep his family from starving, knowing that he would have been executed if he had ever been caught with his bow. A hero is someone like Peeta Mellark -" at this she turns and smiles at me as the crowd again erupts in applause "- who selflessly placed his own life in danger time and time again to save the life of someone that he loves." More cheers and applause.

"A hero is someone that does what's right, no matter what the cost is. Today, we celebrate the first
anniversary of the ending of the Hunger Games. Many people died so that we could be here to celebrate this day - people both from the districts and from the Capitol. People like my stylist, Cinna, who created rebellion not with guns and bombs, but with needle and thread. And people like Finnick Odair, who endured years of humiliation just so he could have a chance at making his district, and Panem, a better place to live. And people like my - " I can feel her fingers tighten around mine and I cold hear the hitch in her voice " - sister, Prim. Prim always wanted to help people. Everyone that ever met her fell in love with her. I literally would have died to keep her safe."

Katniss pauses for a moment and I see that every face in the crowd looking at us shows some sign of grief. Prim was indeed loved by everyone in the district and had become a celebrity herself after our Games. Even the people here today not from our district felt a sense of loss.

"Prim was only thirteen when she died. She died doing what she loved doing the most - helping people that were sick or injured. I will love her forever and I hope that her name lives forever." Katniss suddenly turns to me and buries her face in my chest, unable to continue. Out of the corner of my eye I see Thom step forward.

"Katniss, your sister touched us all. So that her memory lives forever in District Twelve, from this day forward our town square that we are now standing in shall be known as Primrose Square." At this Thom nods to two men on the far side of the square. They hoist up a large sign and affix it to posts already set in the ground.

The sign reads "Primrose Square."

Another round of cheers and applause from the small but noisy crowd. Effie and Haymitch step forward and Effie embraces us both. I can hear her murmuring to Katniss, "That was better than anything I could ever write!"

Haymitch puts his hands on Katniss's shoulders and looks into her face solemnly, then grins and says, "Nice job, Sweetheart!" Through her tears Katniss smiles at him and throws her arms around him, hugging him tightly to her.

I step forward to the microphone. "We're not quite done here," I say. Katniss looks at me questioningly. The crowd quiets once more.

"This is very emotional for all of us," I say, wiping my own eyes to a ripple of laughter. "But when we learned that the new government agreed to allow the renaming of the square, I realized that future generations would have no idea who the 'Primrose' was of 'Primrose Square.' So I decided on my own contribution." I nod at Galen Wellgood, who was standing by the mysterious cloth covered object. He smiles and pulls the cloth away and I hear Katniss half gasp, half cry out.

Revealed to all was a life size bronze statue of Prim. Dressed similarly to the way she was on her Reaping Day, twin braids hanging down her back, with her cat Buttercup cradled in her arms, and her goat Lady tethered by her side. A plaque affixed to the base of the statue included her biography - who she was, what she did, the mark she left on the world, and how she died.

As if in a trance, Katniss steps off the stage and walks to the statue, still clinging to my hand. Her trembling fingers run over the cold bronze, feeling the outline of her face, running down her arms. Katniss steps all around the statue and I see her eyes widen when she gets around to the back.

"Peeta...her blouse is coming untucked in the back," Katniss whispers. "How did you do this?"

"I just embellished a painting I already had of her and added detail for the back, then contacted an
artist in the Capitol that I had met briefly during our Victory Tour. He gave this top priority to make sure it made the train in time for the ceremony," I say.

"Little duck," I hear Katniss whisper once, then she turns back to me and throws herself into my arms. Holding me tightly, she whispers into my ear. "You're wonderful."

**PART V**

Later that night, Katniss and I are back home in the Village. The ceremonies were concluded shortly after the unveiling of Prims statue in the square that now bears her name. There was a Capitol supplied feast for everyone, and while Katniss and I managed to get a few moments to finally get something to eat, Cressida approached us and told us that her live video feed of the naming of the square and unveiling of the statue were the talk of Panem right now, and both she and Effie told us that both Plutarch and President Paylor were immensely pleased at how everything went.

Earlier in the evening, Katniss's Prep Team, along with Effie, Cressida, and Pollux, left the district by train, headed back to the Capitol. Tomorrow, work would resume on rebuilding the district, but for now, the tools and construction machinery were quiet.

Following the emotional toll of the ceremony and unveiling, Katniss had recovered quite nicely and I have to say she was the happiest I had seen her since my return to the district. She even got me to take a turn or two dancing, once some of our local musicians brought out their instruments and started playing. All that dancing took a toll on my leg. Galen promised to look at it first thing in the morning. We are still awaiting the arrival of the specialist but some medications had been sent out to help ease the discomfort until adjustments could be made.

Now, I'm laying in bed, fingers laced behind my head, waiting for Katniss to join me. Both of us are pleasantly exhausted from the day's activities. I'm hoping that both of us have sleep free from nightmares. I glance over at the bedroom window. Even though the window itself was open, Katniss had closed the drapes before disappearing into the bathroom.

Katniss finally comes out of the bathroom, wearing an extra long t shirt that she favors when sleeping in warmer weather. She closes the bathroom door and gives me a smile as she walks to her side of the bed. I return her smile as she sits on the side of the bed, hesitating for a moment, then reaching over and turning off the light.

Strange. Why didn't she turn out the light after she got under the covers with me? I hear rustling and feel the bed shift as she slides under the covers next to me. I turn and face her and give her a gentle kiss as my arm reaches for her, as I do every night since we began sleeping together again. But this night was different.

My hand encounters her side and I feel nothing but her warm skin. A little embarrassed, I slide my hand up looking for the hem of her t shirt to tug it down, but I feel nothing but more bare flesh. I can feel my heartbeat quicken slightly as Katniss moves a little closer to me and my hand slides down her side, over her hip, and down her bare leg. Trembling, my other hand reaches out and I feel her bare shoulder, and it's then that the realization hits me.

Katniss is in bed with me - naked.
Katniss is in bed with me - naked.

The reality hits me like a runaway train. This moment that I confess I had been dreaming of for at least five years is finally here. So I have the only natural reaction that I could possibly have.

I panic.

A dozen thoughts ripped through my head in the space of a second or two. Uppermost is *Oh, no...what do I do first? What do I do next? What do I do?* When it comes to anything past kissing I have exactly zero experience. Even the few touches of places more - intimate - than Katniss’s shoulders, arms or back were purely by accident. But now...now I'm expected to touch...places...on purpose.

*What if I hurt her? What if it's painful? What if she doesn't like it? What if I don't like it?* Like most boys, I had heard stories from my peers, bragging about their conquests. A popular spot to take a willing girl was near one of the two slag heaps near the mine entrances. I'm sure that almost all the bragging I had ever heard was just that - bragging. *What does she expect? How can I tell her that I don't really know what to do?*

While all these thoughts race through my mind I become aware of something else. Katniss is trembling. I can feel the tremors wrack her entire body as she lays next to me, stiff and unmoving - except for the shivering. And it's warm in the room.

*She's scared to death,* I say to myself. *As scared as I am.* No sooner did those thoughts burst into my brain then another quickly followed. *If she's scared, then why? Why is she doing this? Why here and now?*

Katniss and I had grown immeasurably closer in the last few weeks - and I could feel the changes in her - the way she spoke to me, the way she smiled at me, her laughter coming more and more frequently. But this - this was a huge step. For both of us.

"Peeta?" Katniss's tremulous voice cuts through my frantic thoughts. And there's something else. The trembling that I feel is not all fear - she's crying softly as well.

"I'm right here," I say softly, trying to still my own trembling hands. I pull her closer and gently kiss the side of her neck.

"I'm sorry," she says suddenly, as a sob escapes her throat.

"You've got nothing to be sorry for," I say as reassuringly as I can.

In response she pulls herself into a tight ball. Gently I hold her, murmuring to her, reassuring her. Gradually her sobs grow quieter, but her trembling never quite stops.

"I love you, Katniss," I say softly.
In the darkness I feel her turn her head to face me. "All I've done is hurt and confuse you. Like now."

"I'm not hurt," I say.

"Confused?" she asks in a timid voice.

"A little," I admit.

"Are you scared?" she asks.

"Yes," I whisper.

I feel her relax a tiny bit. "Really?" she asks in that same timid voice.

"Really," I say, gently kissing her.

"Why?" she asks.

"Because," I say, my own voice quivering a bit, "You mean everything to me. Because I've never...you know. Because I love you and I want everything to be perfect."

I feel her shift as she turns towards me fully. Her fingers gently touch my face. I smile as they brush my lips.

"You're smiling," she says.

In response I touch her face with my fingers. I feel her mouth twitch but not in a real smile. I brush her cheek with the back of my hand.

"Can I ask you something?" I say.

"You want to know...why," Katniss replies.

"I - yes," I say.

I hear her take a deep, deliberate breath. "Ever since I came back, I've thought about you. Even in the darkest of my days. And when you came back too - it was like seeing the sun after a storm. Even though both of us were so broken. And you've been so patient, and understanding, and caring, and considerate, and selfless. And then one day I saw a dandelion - and I knew that it was you."

"I'm a dandelion?" I ask.

"Yes - like that dandelion I found the day after you gave me - the bread. I thought then that it meant that my family and I would be okay. I was half right - but it took me six more years to see the other half. And that's you." Katniss pauses and I'm overwhelmed with emotion and love for this wonderful girl.

"Peeta - this has been building inside me for - a while. And it wasn't until today that I was sure. When I saw what you did for Prim and her memory, I knew I was sure. But I didn't know how to tell you with words what I wanted."

In response I draw her closer to me. "Tell me what you want, Katniss," I say quietly.

"Peeta - just you. I want - you. Please - love me." Her voice is shaking.
"I do love you, Katniss," I say. "Do you really want this?"

"Yes," she whispers. "Do you want this, Peeta?"

"Oh yes," I say, kissing her gently. "Very much, Katniss."

"I know you'll be gentle," she sighs, trembling again.

In response, I gently press my lips to hers in a deep, searching kiss. I feel her gasp a little in surprise but her arms immediately tighten around me as her lips flower open under mine and her tongue tip shyly traces my upper lip.

I groan a little as I return each caress with my own. My hands freely roam up and down her bare back, reveling in the smoothness of her skin. Occasionally my fingers encounter small dips and dents in their travels - the scars that Katniss carries from two Hunger Games and a war. But rather than cool my ardor they fuel my determination to make this as perfect for her as I can.

Katniss presses herself even closer to me and I feel my body warming from her nearness. Gasping, we mutually break off our kiss - the most passionate that we have ever shared - and cling tightly to each other for a moment.

I feel Katniss's hands slide further down my back as her lips nibble at my neck. I shiver and feel goosebumps rising at the unfamiliar - yet oh so pleasant - sensation. Shyly her fingers caress my back and shoulders. My own fingers tentatively explore her body, feeling her trembling, hearing little gasps from her as I brush against sensitive areas.

"Oh, Peeta," I hear her gasp out against my neck. Her breath is warm against my skin. I rest my hand lightly against her chest and I can feel her heart pounding. One of Katniss's hands slides down my back and over the waist of my shorts.

"Should I -" I begin to ask but she cuts me off with an urgent, "Yes!" Turning away, I quickly slide my only item of clothing down my legs and off.

I realize with embarrassment that now there's absolutely no way for me to hide my excitement from her. I turn back towards her, kissing her lovingly as I can feel new trembling. Katniss pulls her mouth away from mine, takes a deep breath, then presses up against me.

Tentatively, clumsily, we touch and caress each other. I revel in the taste of her lips, the smell of her hair. I murmur "I love you" to her over and over again, hearing her sigh in response. Our desire now is mutual and growing with each passing second.

Abruptly she breaks off our kiss. "Stay with me - forever," she says in a trembling voice.

"Always," I say to her, my voice thick with the absolute love that I feel for this incredibly strong, yet incredibly vulnerable girl.

Katniss settles against me and I feel her lips nibbling at the side of my mouth again. I turn my head so we can kiss fully, and I feel her hands sliding down my side, touching, exploring, and caressing. I return each of her caresses with my own fumbling fingers.

Sensation overwhelms me and I hear myself moan in pleasure. Slowly Katniss and I lose our shyness and, with moans, sighs, and kisses, guide each others caresses.

Suddenly Katniss lets out a half gasp, half moan as her caresses become more urgent, causing me to echo her moan with one of my own. Her head is arched back, exposing her neck to my searching
"Peeta," she moans breathily, "It's okay. I'm not fragile. I won't break. Please - love me!"

Emboldened by her words, my hands slide down her back. She flinches ever so slightly at my touch as her head tilts down and she presses her warm lips to mine once again.

Katniss arches against me, gasping into my mouth as I feel the golden swirl of her tongue around my own. With trembling fingers, I continue to touch and caress gently, her moans and sighs acting as my guide.

Neither of us speak as we edge closer and closer to each other, our legs now intertwining. I kiss her lips, her nose, her eyes, her cheeks, her ears - burying my face in her hair, inhaling her clean, fresh fragrance.

Our movements are more urgent now, more demanding. Katniss's body continues to tremble, as does mine - but now her fear and my nervousness are being quickly replaced by an overwhelming desire to do nothing more than make the other feel - wonderful.

I'm dimly aware of us moving against each other, her legs clutching me, her arms around my neck, our lips glued together, joined together in a way that neither of us has ever felt before this magical, wonderful night. The warmth of the room is tempered by the cool breeze coming through the open window, gently rustling the curtains.

The movement of the curtains allow brief fingers of moonlight to stab into our darkened room, casting a fleeting illumination over Katniss and I. I catch tantalizing glimpses of her face, her silvery eyes closed one time, open the next.

Suddenly the moonlight catches us both staring into each others eyes. Katniss captures my face in her hands. Again and again we kiss each other, our ardor increasing.

"Katniss...I...love you...so much!" I manage to gasp out. She peppers my face with kisses and I feel her hands slide down my back.

"Peeta, oh Peeta, I...need you...so badly! I...want you...so much!" she moans out. And even in the total grip of my passion and desire, I feel a stab of...what? Disappointment? Sadness? Need. Want. Words that I love hearing from her. But there's one word...one word that I have to hear her say to me. A word that I need from her as badly as a drowning man needs air.

Love. Even as her initial fear and nervousness leaves her...even as we are closer at this moment in time than we have ever been...even though I know that I am her first, and only, lover, that she's ever had in her eighteen years...I so need to hear her tell me that she loves me that for a split second my ardor almost deserts me.

Almost - but then her sweet lips fan the embers of my passion into full flame once again. Frantically we clutch at each other, neither of us leaving any part of the others face untouched by our lips.

Waves of pleasure wash over us both as we lovingly clutch and hold each other closely. The sensation of holding this beautiful girl in my arms is almost unbearable as I feel the absolute, unconditional love I feel for Katniss well up inside me.

I squeeze my eyes shut in an effort to dam the flow of tears - tears of joy, tears of love for this absolutely amazing girl - this girl that was so aptly christened "The Girl On Fire."
I'm only partially successful and I know that my tears are falling on her face.

Gradually, my breathing slows and I finally gain control over my tears. I tenderly gather Katniss in my arms. In spite of the warmth of the room she nestles into my arms willingly.

I lay my head on the pillow next to Katniss's head. We lay snuggled together for several minutes, not moving, not talking, just incredibly content. Finally I can feel her cheek rise against my chest and I know she's smiling.

"Your heart is still pounding," she says quietly. I run my hand down her back, feeling her shiver and press closer. She raises up and presses and a gentle, loving kiss to my lips.

"You're so wonderful," she whispers, settling herself on my chest.

Wonderful. Before the Victory Tour I would have been ecstatic to hear her say that to me. I make a decision. I need to know one way or another. She's been avoiding it and I haven't asked again - until now.

I reach my hand above my head and tap the nightlight pad. The soft glow is barely enough to illuminate her face - but it's all I need.

Startled, she looks up, a puzzled frown on her face. Her eyes - so beautiful - search my face intently.

I smile down at her. "I wanted to see your eyes," I whisper. Tentatively she smiles back at me. I've only told her half the truth. Now comes the other half. I take a deep breath and cup her chin in my hand, looking into her gray eyes.

"You love me. Real or not real?" There it was, I said it - and suddenly I'm not sure I want to know the answer.

Katniss regards me for three long seconds before answering, her gray eyes suddenly shining in the dim light. Oh no - tears. This can't be good, she's going to say not -

"Real."

PART II

I stare dumbly at her, now seeing a solitary tear escape first one eye, then the other, and slowly track down her face. I see her lips, trembling in a smile. Her hand sliding up and around the back of my neck.

"What?" I ask. I'm sure I didn't hear her correctly.

"Real," Katniss says softly, gently...lovingly.

Once again my eyes water. I squeeze them shut as my mouth suddenly goes dry, my heart once again drumming madly in my chest.

"Katniss," I whisper. Her name is all I'm able to say.

"Peeta," she answers. She's said my name countless times over the last two years...but never like that. That one word was a verbal caress.

"Say it," I suddenly implore her. She looks at me quizzically.
"Say the words. Please, Katniss," I hear myself saying.

In response, Katniss leans forward and brushes her lips against mine once more, quickly. She takes a deep breath.

"I love you, Peeta," Katniss whispers to me.

Thirteen years. Thirteen years of longing, of wishing, of trying to work up enough courage to say hello. Thirteen years of watching her walk home from school - every day. Of gentle teasing by Delly and Madge, and not so gentle teasing from my brothers Alec and Quinn. Feeling my own heart break at the death of her father. Happily taking a beating from my mother, knowing that I prevented Katniss from starving. Of always looking away quickly so she wouldn't catch me staring. Feeling that familiar sinking feeling deep down inside whenever I saw her with Gale.

Watching helplessly while Prim got Reaped, and feeling my heart sink when she volunteered for her. Hatching my plan to keep her alive, even at the cost of my own life, with Haymitch. Almost dying, and being nursed back to health by her. Being kissed by her for the first time in that dank, stinking cave by the river.

Both of us being declared Victors - a first for the Hunger Games. Her confession on the train trip home, and six months of growing despair as she pulled further and further away from me. Finally forging a friendship during the Victory Tour, and sharing a bond through our nightmares that no one else could ever understand. The reading of the card for the Third Quarter Quell. Training to go back to the arena. Both of us making deals with Haymitch that the other MUST come out alive. That wonderful moment on the beach in the clock arena, when she told me that she needed me.

Her rescue, my capture, and weeks of the Capitol working tirelessly to turn me against her. Trying to kill her the second I laid eyes on her. Struggling to recover from the hijacking - a burden that I will have for the rest of my life. The Rebellion. Katniss as the Mockingjay. District Eight. District Two and Katniss being shot. My gradual recovery. Nights in the hospital in District Thirteen, crying with loneliness and missing her.

Prims death - and me thinking that I have lost her for good. Katniss killing Coin - vengeance for Prim's murder. Her trial. Her mental collapse. Both of us burned and wounded - both physically and mentally.

Finally, Dr. Aurelius allowing me to return home. Seeing Katniss for the first time - both of us acting like the other was a stranger. Weeks and weeks of gradual recovery, getting to know each other again, feeling comfortable, leaning on each other, needing each other. A hug here, a kiss on the head there, smiles and tears, joy and sadness, laughter and anger. Hijacking seizures and angry outbursts. Katniss yelling at me one moment, then hugging me the next. Day by day, growing stronger, inside and out. Her hair growing back, our scars, both inside and out, slowly fading - but never forgotten.

I find myself examining her closely. Her olive skin gleams softly in the dim light. With my thumb I wipe away the two tears from her cheeks. Her eyes never leave mine. I can see the faint dusting of freckles across the bridge of her nose. She looks very young and very, very vulnerable.

"You love me?" I ask, my voice slightly shaking.

"Yes. With all my heart." She replies huskily.

"When did you know?" I ask. Katniss caresses my face gently. I pull her close to me.
"I knew for sure when I thought you died," Katniss says quietly.

"From the force field?" I ask. Katniss nods, biting her lip as tears well up in her eyes.

"On the beach, when you gave me the locket, I almost told you then," she says.

I smile. "Why didn't you?"

"It wasn't the right time," she whispers.

"I never thought I would hear you say those words to me," I confess to her.

"I'm so sorry, Peeta - for all the hurt I've given you -" I cut her off with another kiss.

"Tell me again," I say.

"I love you, Peeta," Katniss whispers.

"I love you, Katniss," I whisper back.

"I never thought I would ever feel this way about anybody," she says, caressing my face with her hand.

"Are you happy?" I ask.

"I have no right to be," she says in a small voice.

"Look at me," I say sternly. Katniss tilts her head up, searching my face with her eyes.

I take a deep breath. "Katniss, you and I have been through hell together not once, not twice, but three times. We have both lost everything - and we've both gained so much. We have each other. You have my love and I - I have your love. All I want is to make you happy."

"Do I make you happy, Peeta?" Katniss asks plaintively.

"More than anything," I say as I give her a tender kiss.

"I want to make you happy, Peeta. I want that more than anything!"

"Do you love me, Katniss?" I ask quietly.

"Oh yes, Peeta. I love you so much it hurts deep inside. And I'm afraid," she says softly.

"Your love makes me happy - and you don't have to be afraid," I say.

"But I am," she says in a trembling voice. "Every time I love someone I lose them. My Dad, my Mom...and Prim. They're all gone."

"I'm here. I've always been here. I fought back from a terrible place to be here with you. You won't ever lose me. Not now. Not ever. I swear it."

Katniss looks at me with shining eyes. "Promise?" she asks me in a small voice.

"Always," I say with a smile. For the first time tonight, Katniss gives me one of her rare, genuine, full smiles - her cheeks dimpling as she draws my face down to hers.

Katniss kisses me. "Haymitch is right. I don't deserve someone as wonderful as you," she says.
"Tonight is the first night of our new life, Katniss," I say, returning her kisses. Katniss snuggles up to me.

"Our new life," she whispers. "I'm so glad I told you. I don't think I could have held it in for a single day more."

"I love you, Katniss," I whisper.

"I love you, too, Peeta." We lay there quietly, comfortable in each other's arms. Before long I hear the regular rhythms of Katniss's breathing. I glance down at her, eyes closed, mouth slightly open, a little smile on her relaxed face. Carefully I lean down and kiss her forehead, then reach behind me and turn out the light.

As I start to drift off into an exhausted slumber, the last thing I remember is hearing Prim's voice, as if in a waking dream:

"I told you that she loved you, Peeta! I told you!"

*And I love you too, little sister,* is my last thought before falling into sleep's embrace.
I’m in the arena, running towards Katniss and the Cornucopia. She’s going for the bow! She’ll never make it! I scream at her to stop, to run away, but she either doesn't hear me or she's ignoring me. I try to run faster, if I can just get to her I can -

Katniss is almost all the way to the bow when I see her lurch to the side, hands clawing at her throat. She stops, spins, and sinks to her knees. It’s then I see the handle of a knife, the blade buried in her throat, bright red blood spurting from the wound. I scream her name, trying to reach her, but then I see Clove reach her ahead of me, knife in hand, a wicked smile on her face as she looks me in the eye and slashes viciously at Katniss’s exposed throat.

A bright red mouth flowers open on Katniss's throat as Clove jerks the other knife free, placing her foot against Katniss's side and pushing. Katniss topples over, the spurts from her throat slowing, then stopping. I'm screaming incoherently as the cannon booms, signaling her death. Clove bends over casually and wipes the knife blades clean on Katniss's jacket.

Helplessly I sink to my knees, no longer caring what happens to me, as I moan her name over and over and -

"Peeta? Peeta! Wake up!"

With a jerk and a start my eyes fly open. I strain to see something, anything, in the darkened room. I can feel my heart pounding and become vaguely aware of someone in bed next to me. Blindly my hands grope out, encountering warm skin. Katniss! With a sob I slide my hands around her back, holding her close to me.

I feel her cool fingers on my forehead. "Shhhh, it was a bad dream, it's okay," she murmurs gently.

I take a shuddering breath as I feel my racing heart start to slow down. "How - how did you know?" I stammer out breathlessly.

I feel her lips fleetingly touch my forehead. "You were screaming - and yelling my name. You usually don't do that," she says gently.

"I- I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you. I -" Katniss cuts me off with a tender kiss.

"After all the nights that I've woken you up? Don't be silly," she says with a small laugh.

"Come here," I say huskily, drawing her into my arms. With a sigh she settles next to me, and I feel her tilt her face up, searching for my mouth with her lips. As our lips press together I feel her shiver slightly in my arms.

I break the kiss, pulling away from her slightly.

"Are you cold?" I ask.

"A little," she answers quietly. Even as warm as this night is, Katniss still chills easily. She is not the unhealthily thin girl that she was when I first returned to Twelve, but she is still very spare. I
draw her closer to me.

"Will you keep me warm, Peeta?" she asks plaintively.

"Always," I answer softly as her lips find mine once more.

PART II

I awaken naturally, no nightmares, hours later. The cool gray light of dawn is starting to seep into the room. I can feel Katniss's arm wrapped around me from behind possessively, and I turn very slowly and carefully so as not to disturb her.

Gently I move a few strands of hair away from her face, now completely relaxed in sleep. Gone is the scowl that she so often wears, most of the time without realizing it. Her brow is smooth and her lips are curled into a tiny smile. I prop myself up on my elbow and just stare at her while she continues to sleep.

She loves me.

The thought causes a thrill to run up and down my spine. Katniss told me last night that she loves me. I waited for so long to hear those words. I can't really describe just how happy I am right at this moment.

At this time, one year ago, we were on the Tribute Train, almost to the Capitol. At this time, two years ago, we were on the same train, me pumping Haymitch for advice, Katniss scowling. Now - now we are both at peace. We have lost so much over the past two years. We've earned the right to some happiness.

I continue to watch her sleep for quite a while, feeling incredibly content, when she finally stirs, scowls a bit in her sleep - which makes me smile - then her incredible silvery eyes open to find me gazing adoringly at her.

Her eyes regard me for a second or two, then she says, "Hi."


"Peeta - what are you looking at?" she asks in bewilderment.

"The most beautiful girl I've ever known," I answer with a smile, causing her to blush.

"Stop it," she says quietly, embarrassed.

"No," I say playfully, grinning.

"Oh! You are impossible," she says in mock frustration.

"When it comes to you, always," I say softly. She looks at me and smiles.

"I love you," she whispers. I feel that shiver down my back again. I touch her face and she kisses my fingers.

"I love you, too," I whisper back. She presses forward and kisses me gently, lovingly. I notice her eyes shining with moisture. I gently wipe at the corners of her eyes with the back of my hand.

"Why are you crying?" I ask gently.
"Because - for the first time in a long time - I'm happy," she replies, smiling at me.

"Me too," I say, returning her smile. "I'm sorry for waking you up last night. I usually don't thrash around like that."

"Oh, Peeta - how many times have you comforted me after a nightmare? I will always be here for you, Dandelion," she says lovingly.

"I hope - wait, what did you call me?" I ask.

"Dandelion - is that okay?" she asks anxiously. "I mean, I'm not really good at these, what do you call them, 'terms of endearment.' It's just that - well, that's how I think of you. My Dandelion in Spring. My hope that everything will be alright."

"It's perfect, my love," I say, kissing her fingers and feeling her shiver.

"I like that - what you just called me," she whispers. "Call me that again, Dandelion."

"I love you, my love," I say again, kissing her. After our kiss she sighs contentedly and holds me close. We lay like that for a while, her head resting on my chest. We both doze lightly for a few minutes at a time, then I feel Katniss stir and reluctantly roll away from me.

I roll over towards her and see her sitting on the side of the bed, her back to me. In the brightening room I can make out a faint pattern of scarring on her slender back. A lifetime of hardship and struggle, two Hunger Games, and a war were written on her body. Her head swivels around and I blush a bit when she catches me staring at her.

"Not a very pretty sight for you," Katniss says sadly. I raise up and kiss her shoulder and the back of her neck, moving her hair to one side.

Katniss shivers a bit at my touch, then shakes her head firmly. "Huh uh...I have things to do this morning, Peeta - don't try to sidetrack me." she says lightly, finally rising from the bed and stepping into the bathroom. After a moment I hear the shower running. Even though I have a sudden urge to join her, I refrain - I know what she wants to do this morning. She needs to check her trap lines and maybe even do some hunting.

I sigh, groan, and swing my legs out of bed. Grabbing my shorts, I slip them on and head downstairs to make us breakfast before Katniss heads out for the forest. I see Buttercup meowing plaintively by the door so I pause to let him out. As I open the door I can once again hear the faint sounds of construction coming from the direction of town.

We will be a town again, I say to myself. A new town with a new industry. Already work is getting started on the factory that will be used to manufacture medicines for the rest of Panem. The coal mines are shut down, the entrances sealed. All across Panem, in all the other districts, similar scenes are playing out. Rebuilding, working towards a country where everyone will have an equal say. No more fear, no more Reapings, no more Hunger Games.

I examine our larder and find that it's becoming quite thin. I will need to re-supply today. I will make a run to the small grocery while Katniss is out. But for now, there's enough to make pancakes and bacon. I put on a pot of water to boil for tea, and soon the aromas of cooking fill the air in the kitchen.

I'm busy at the stove when Katniss comes into the kitchen, wearing what I've come to think of as her "forest clothes" - soft boots, pants, long sleeved shirt, and her fathers leather jacket. Her hair, although still shorter than she normally wears it, is still done up in its signature braid. Her eyes are
bright and shining. She pauses by the stove and inhales deeply, then pops open the bread box and scowls as she removes a solitary cheese bun.

Katniss takes a bite out of the stale cheese bun and scowls again. "I guess I need to do some baking," I say with a laugh. "Maybe I'll enlist Rory and Delly to help me."

"Good idea," Katniss says with a smile. "We should have them over for dinner - maybe tomorrow."

"Delly would love that," I say. "She's always idolized you, you know."

Katniss blushes a bit when I tell her of Delly's long held admiration for her. "I don't know why," she says softly.

"Maybe you two can figure that out when she's here," I say with a grin, as I fill two plates with our breakfast. Together we sit at the table and eat. Katniss outlines her plan for the day.

"It's too late to hunt today, but I need to check the trap and snare lines. Maybe gather some edible plants also. I shouldn't be gone long," she says.

"And I need to pick up some groceries," I say. "I should place an order for my baking needs, too. I need to talk to Galen today also."

"About your treatments?" Katniss asks.

"That, and my leg. And - something else," I add, feeling my face redden.

"Something - oh!" Katniss blushes a bit when she realizes what I'm talking about. It's a talk she should have with him also - which means she won't, so I have to. Katniss has always stated that she doesn't want any children, even now, with the threat of the Games removed. But now that our relationship has - matured - I want to make sure that there aren't any surprises in store for us.

Katniss and I clean up the kitchen, then she grabs her game bag and prepares to leave. At the door she pauses to raise up on her tip toes to kiss me. She smiles and nuzzles her face against mine.

"Love you," she murmurs.

"Love you," I answer.

"I'll be home soon, Dandelion," she calls out as she practically skips down the walkway to the street, heading for the Village entrance. I watch her until she disappears from view. I feel warm all over.

"Dandelion? Well, well...this is a new development. And did my ears deceive me or did I hear Miss Sunshine use the "L" word to you?" Haymitch is standing near the border between his house and Katniss's...his geese busy pecking up choice bits from the ground around him.

I sigh. "Hello, Haymitch," I say resignedly. "You must have incredible hearing. She practically whispered it."

"I can read lips. It's a skill that, shall we say, comes in handy from time to time...Dandelion," he says with a smirk.

"Haymitch, when she says it, it sounds sweet," I say angrily. "When you say it, it sounds cheap!"

"Whoa, whoa, there, boy. I didn't mean to ruffle your feathers. Truth be told, I'm really happy - for you both! When did she finally tell you?" He asks, draping an arm around my shoulders.
I relax slightly, still angry with Haymitch. "Last night," I reply curtly.

Haymitch smiles widely at me. Not his usual sarcastic smirk but a genuine happy smile. His arms suddenly fold me into a bear hug and he pounds me enthusiastically on my back.

"About time!" Haymitch says with a laugh. "So, when's the wedding?"

"Haymitch, come on. She just admitted it last night. We need to - get used to the idea of being in love before we do anything else!" We have some more healing to do, I add silently. Still, I can't help but smile.

A movement out of the corner of my eye catches my attention. I see Rory walking over from Haymitch's house. I raise my hand in greeting and smile over at him. I had first met Rory shortly after returning from my first Games. A close friend of Prim's, Rory had started to come by on Sundays when Prim and I would bake. At first he was cool towards me - no doubt Gale's influence - but quickly warmed up and soon both he and Prim were spending a lot of time at my house.

"Hey, Peeta!" Rory greets me.

"Hi, Rory!" I say affectionately.

"Good timing, kid," Haymitch says, "We were just discussing the latest - turn of events."

Puzzled, Rory looks at Haymitch. "Huh? What 'turn of events?'"

I'm about to explain everything to Rory when I hear a feminine voice calling my name. "Peeta!" I look across the way to see Delly standing outside my house, Galen behind her.

"Looks like the whole neighborhood wants in on your news," Haymitch says in an amused voice. At first I think he's talking about Delly and Galen but he inclines his head up the street. I look in the direction he's looking and see Thom and Leevy walking hand in hand towards us. At the same time Delly and Galen are hurrying across the way. Sighing, I turn to Rory.

"Is Sae over at Haymitch's?" I ask. Rory nods. "Could you go get her, Rory?"

"Sure thing!" Rory says and dashes off to Haymitch's house. Delly and Galen reach us about that time and Delly pulls me into a hug that could match Haymitch's for ferocity.

"Peeta Mellark! I've hardly seen you since I've been back!" Delly exclaims in mock anger.

"I know, Delly - Katniss and I...well, we've been a little busy the last couple of days," I explain.

"Oh, I know, Peeta - don't you think I know that?" Delly says with a laugh. By this time both Thom and Leevy have joined us and a puffing Rory is returning with Sae - who's walking somewhat slower than the energetic fourteen year old boy. I exchange greetings with Thom and Leevy and playfully ask him why he isn't in town, hard at work rebuilding District Twelve.

"Gave myself the morning off," Thom answers with a wink. "I'm the Mayor - I can do that!"

Standing next to him, Leevy squeezes his arm affectionately as he bends to quickly kiss her.

"So - Peeta. What's this 'turn of events' that Haymitch was talking about?" Rory asks impatiently. I suddenly feel seven pairs of eyes looking at me.

"Huh? What's he -" "Turn of events? Nothing could top yesterday's -" "Peeta, what's going -" The buzz of everyone asking questions - everyone, that is, but Haymitch, who's once again found his
signature smirk - rises in volume until I blurt out -

"Katniss told me that she loves me!" Sudden, shocked silence - quickly broken by Delly's delighted squeal as she throws her arms around my neck. I feel another pair of arms and see Leevy pressing in from the side, and feel hands thumping my back enthusiastically. I disengage myself and see Sae standing patiently, a little smile on her worn, lined face.

"So," Sae begins quietly. "The girl finally came to her senses, did she?" Sae then grins hugely and gives me a hug of her own.

"So where is she, Peeta?" Delly asks.

"She's out, checking her snares and traps," I explain. "She'll be back in a few hours. Listen, are you and Rory available this morning?" Both Delly and Rory nod assent. "Good. I need to run into town for groceries, and was wondering if you wouldn't mind helping."

Both Delly and Rory quickly agree and I ask them both to meet me back here in thirty minutes, explaining that I had something to discuss with Doctor Wellgood. Thom and Leevy both say their goodbyes - notwithstanding Thom's comment about taking the morning off, they were both headed into town to go to work on the rebuilding after all - with Leevy telling me that she would stop in that evening to say hello to Katniss. Sae, Rory and Haymitch return to Haymitch's house and Delly goes back across the way to my place to get ready to go into town. Galen points to Katniss's front door and together we go into the house.

PART III

"So, what's on your mind, Peeta?" Galen asks.

"A few things," I say. "Number one - my hijacking treatments."

"Both Doctor Aurelius and I are very happy with your progress in that regard," Galen says. "Even though you'll never be entirely free from the seizures, you'll have advance notice when one is coming on. Aurelius and I have developed something to help when that happens." He holds up something that looks like a pen. "This is called an auto injector. You can administer a pre-measured dose of the hijacking medication to yourself. It doesn't require refrigeration and it's very easy to use." Galen demonstrates how to use it, popping the cover off and jamming it against his thigh.

I hear a snapping noise that Galen explains is the needle - or would be the needle, since this device is for training - shooting out by way of a spring. Once the needle penetrates flesh the medication injects automatically. The needle retracts once the medication is delivered.

"The medication is pre-measured. Just remove the cover and press it firmly against your thigh. The needle retracts into the body once the medication is delivered. Replace the cover and discard the whole unit. Use it only when you feel a seizure coming on - you know the signs."

He hands me a long, slender box. I open it up and see six of the auto injectors nestled inside.

"Those are all 'live' and ready to go," Galen explains. I nod and slip the box in my pocket.

"Thanks, Galen. Number two - my leg."

"The adjustments that need to be made are fairly simple. Everything that's needed came in on the last train. It is a fairly lengthy process, though - so you'll have to pick a day that you want me to do the procedure. You will be fairly immobile for the rest of the day after I finish," Galen explains.
"How about the day after tomorrow?" I ask.

"Done. We'll get an early start. And don't worry, it's not painful. Just a little inconvenient," Galen says with a smile.

"Okay," I say, taking a deep breath. "Number three. Katniss and I - that is to say, we - well, you heard me when I told everyone that she told me she loves me, and - well -" I stammer out.

Galen rummages through the sideboard that he's taken over for medical storage, then emerges with a small rectangular box.

"Congratulations," he says, handing me the box with a smile. "I'll have to contact the Capitol for some proper time release contraceptives. These are all I have here. The time release implant will last Katniss for a year. What I just gave you are single use prophylactics. There's a dozen in that box. If you - run out - before the next train comes, I do have more."

I find myself blushing. "Thanks again, Galen," I say.

"My pleasure, Peeta," he says with a grin. "You still need your hijacking injections, remember - so we'll resume those tonight."

"Okay. I'll come see you after dinner," I promise. "I need to get ready now - going into town for some groceries. Want to come along?"

"Oh, no, thank you, Peeta. Haymitch and I will keep each other company today," Galen says.

I nod and see him to the door, then head upstairs for a quick shower and to get dressed. I have just enough time before I meet with Delly and Rory.

PART IV

It's a beautiful late Spring morning as the three of us set off for town. I enlist Rory's help right off, asking him to pull a small cart that we will use to carry my purchases back to Katniss's house as well as my own. Galen Wellgood has turned my home into the temporary District Twelve Clinic, but he and Delly are both still living there and need to eat like the rest of us.

Delly, of course, is talking almost non-stop. How dreary life was in District Thirteen (even after the war and Coin's death, not much had changed for the residents there in their day-to-day lives), how exciting the Capitol had been for her, and how glad she was to be back home. Like everyone else from our district, Delly had lost pretty much everything during the bombing - her home, her parents shoe shop, and both her mother and father. Her little brother and grandparents were still in Thirteen, waiting for word from her to come home.

"What will you do, Delly? Open the shoe shop again?" I ask.

"Oh, I'm not sure," she replies, "My grandparents talked about it, but they're both getting up in years - and I have no idea what my brother wants. I was actually thinking of maybe staying on and helping Doctor Wellgood - I really enjoyed helping out in the District Thirteen hospital. I so loved working there with Prim and -"

Delly suddenly stops talking at the little noise we heard behind us. I turn my head and see Rory stoically plodding along, trying gamely to erase from his face the reaction he had at hearing Prim's name. I drop back to walk along side him. Delly drops back a bit too and soon we are flanking him.

"It's okay, Rory," I murmur. "We all miss her. Nothing wrong with crying -"
"I'm not crying!" Rory snaps angrily.

"I didn't say you were," I tell him gently. "But it would be okay - if you were, anyway."

"Well, I'm not," Rory says firmly. "Crying is unmanly."

"Who fed you THAT line?" Delly says incredulously. "Oh wait - never mind. I have a pretty good idea!"

"Well, he's right!" Rory says, even as his chin starts to tremble.

"No - he's not." I stop walking and grab Rory's shoulder to get him to stop too. Delly turns to watch us.

"Rory - I know Prim was your friend - maybe even your best friend - and I think even more than that. And all of us are really sad that she's - gone. But she was special and I know that's why Katniss fought to get the square named after her - she didn't want anyone to forget her. And I understand if you feel you have to keep everything inside - I'm just telling you it's okay if you can't." All the while Rory was staring at me, almost defiantly, his eyes glistening with tears that he fought to hold in - until finally his resolve crumbled and he lets out a huge, choking sob.

Delly immediately steps in and gathers up Rory in her arms, holding him and murmuring to him gently as he finally allows his grief for Prim's death to come to the surface. Delly seems like such a natural for something like this - sympathetic, nurturing, and compassionate. After a few minutes Rory's sobs subside into sniffles and finally he pulls away from Delly, sheepishly wiping his eyes and nose on his shirt sleeve.

I gently put my hand on his shoulder. "Feel better?" I ask.

"Yes," he nods. "I've held that in for so long. But Gale kept telling me that men don't cry. 'Look at me,' he would say. 'I lost Katniss - do you see me crying over it?"

"Rory, I know that you look up to Gale, but on this he's wrong," I say softly. To my surprise Rory agrees with me.

"Peeta, you don't know how hard it's been living with him since we all moved to Two. He blows up at every little thing. Mom's miserable, Vick begged me to take him with me, and poor Posy is still too young to really understand. Gale was so mad when I told him I was leaving. And I wouldn't have been able to leave if I hadn't found a sponsor." He glances at Delly and smiles for the first time this morning.

I look at Delly in surprise. I had no idea that she sponsored him. I had heard that it had become pretty commonplace in Panem since the end of the war for sponsors to take in displaced kids - but Rory was hardly displaced. Then again, maybe he was. The move to Two had been, after all, Gale's idea. As we gather ourselves and continue our walk into town I have another, disquieting, thought.

From what Rory has told us, Gale is angry - and it seems that his anger is directed towards his perceived failed love of Katniss. I make a note to talk this over with Galen. He understands these things so much better than I do. But I understand enough to realize that if Gale is angry, he may eventually take his anger out on someone other than his family.

One thing seems certain- we were going to have to deal with Gale sooner or later.

PART V
Delly, Rory and I return from our shopping trip to find Katniss already home, busy cleaning her catch in the kitchen. She quickly greets Delly and Rory, and gives me a longer, somewhat more personal, greeting, much to the amusement of the two friends that helped me with the groceries. Both Delly and Rory quickly leave, but not before Katniss and I had extended our invitation to dinner the following night, which both eagerly accept.

Katniss’s morning had been productive. Three large rabbits, a half dozen squirrels, and a good haul of edible plants. We both agree that the rabbits would be perfect for dinner the next night and decide to fry up the squirrels for our dinner that night.

"I'm still going to go hunting tomorrow," Katniss informs me. "I saw turkey signs. If I can bag a turkey then we can save the rabbit for another time."

"Sounds like a good idea," I say with a smile, as I finish organizing what I'll be using to bake. We - and everyone else that still lives in the Village - are pretty much out of everything, so I know I'll be baking for more than just Katniss and I.

"Did you talk to Galen?" Katniss asks.

"Yes," I nod. I show her the slender box with the auto injectors. "He still wants me to keep up the regular treatments, but he gave me these in case of a seizure." I quickly explain to Katniss how they worked. Katniss picks up one of the injectors and examines it.

"So I could give you a shot if I needed to?" she asks.

"Katniss - if I'm so out of it that you are the one that has to give me the shot - then being around me won't be the safest thing for you," I say softly, taking the injector from her and replacing it in the box.

"Peeta - I trust you. You would never hurt me. You -" Katniss starts to argue but I cut her off. I have to.

"Katniss. Please. Don't argue. If I can't give myself the shot - then you get away from me and get help. Galen, Haymitch, Thom, Delly - anyone but you. We've been really lucky so far...but you know how hard it is for me to tell what's real or not real when I have a seizure." I touch her face gently.

"I just want to help," she says sadly.

"You do help, my love," I say softly, seeing her smile when she hears the words "my love." She wraps her arms tightly around my neck. I can feel her warm breath on my neck.

"You love me. Real or not real?" I whisper in her ear.

"So very, very, real," she whispers back immediately, then pulls her head back to kiss me. By the time our kiss is ended I can feel my heart racing, and, from her flushed face, I'm sure hers is too. With a smile she disentangles herself from me, then goes back to cleaning the rabbits.

"So what else did Galen have to say?" Katniss asks lightly.

"He will be fixing my leg the day after tomorrow," I reply. "He said that the procedure is fairly quick, simple and painless, but that I can expect to be laid up for the rest of the day."

I see a small frown crease Katniss's forehead at this news. "The day after tomorrow? I was thinking about taking Rory out that day - show him how to check the traps and snares and let him work with
the bow a little. But, we can do it another time -"

"Katniss - go. I'll be fine. Haymitch is right next door, Galen and Delly are across the street, and I'll have the phone with me. I'm sure Rory would enjoy learning the bow and working the traps - besides, it'll be nice to have him to back you up," I say with a smile.

"Are you sure?" Katniss asks, still unconvinced.

"Positive." I reply.

"We'll see," Katniss says. "I won't say anything to Rory just yet - in case you change your mind."

"Fine," I laugh. "But you'll end up going with Rory that day anyway."

"Anything else you spoke to Galen about?" Katniss asks, sounding a little miffed that I was so confident that I wouldn't need her help after Galen fixes my leg.

"One more thing," I say. I disappear into the living room and return to the kitchen holding the box Galen had given me earlier. Wordlessly I hand it to Katniss.

Wiping her hands on a towel, Katniss, puzzled, takes the box from me and examines it - then begins to blush when she realizes what's inside.

"So these are - I mean, you take one and - do you know how to -" Katniss stammers.

"I think we will be able to figure it out together," I say quietly, smiling, taking the box from her. I also tell her about the morning - and how I ended up telling many of our neighbors and closest friends about the evolution in our relationship.

"So everyone knows that you told me you love me," I say.

"Well, it does save me from having to climb onto the roof and shouting it to the world," Katniss says with a smile.

I take her in my arms. "So you aren't mad or upset that I told them?" I ask.

"Not at all," she murmurs quietly. Katniss kisses me, gently at first, then with more and more hunger. Katniss breaks our kiss and looks down at the box still clutched in my hand.

"Peeta - maybe we should - you know - figure out how to use these - now," she says with a blush. In response, I take her by her hand and lead her upstairs.

The rabbits, squirrels, and baking will just have to wait a while longer.
"Okay, Peeta, that's it." Galen Wellgood says as locks my Robo-leg back into place. Laying on the couch in Katniss's house, Galen had spent about an hour adjusting the cap that fit over the stump of what's left of my leg. Fitting the new components in the cap and in the leg itself took the most time, with Galen grumbling that he felt more like a mechanic than a doctor as he worked. It was totally painless, as he had said it would be.

"Now remember, today you need to use the walker," he indicates the contraption with small wheels standing at the end of the couch, "if you need to get around anywhere. You won't be moving fast, so if you need to use the bathroom - don't wait until the last minute. Tomorrow you'll be able to use a cane, and you should be able to get around normally the day after that."

"Okay, I got it," I say cheerily. I wasn't concerned, even without Katniss there that morning. Delly was across the street, Haymitch, Rory and Sae next door. I had the phone, water, and a small plate of cheese buns in case I got hungry. Katniss would be home in a few hours. I had to admit - life was getting better.

I didn't want to say life was good - not quite yet. But, Katniss loves me, peace and prosperity were slowly spreading across Panem, and the Games were a thing of the past. Sure, I still had hijacking seizures, and Katniss and I both had recurring nightmares - but the medication was helping control the seizures, and Katniss and I both found that sleeping together had an effect of lessening the frequency and intensity of our nightmares.

For the first time in my life, I was able to seriously think about the future.

My thoughts returned to the night before. Katniss had indeed been able to bag a turkey yesterday morning, so the rabbits from the day before were cleaned and now rested, wrapped in paper, in her freezer. We roasted the turkey, serving it with wild vegetables and fresh baked bread. Delly Cartwright and Rory Hawthorne had been our guests for dinner.

I spoke with Rory at length about my plans to re-open the bakery, and his enthusiasm was a delight to behold. Before the evening was out I found myself promising him a job once I re-opened the bakery. But the truly poignant moment of the evening was the exchange between Katniss and Delly.

Before our first Games, Katniss and Delly were nodding acquaintances. Delly was from the merchant class, the same as me, while Katniss was born and grew up in the Seam, the poorest area in District Twelve. As an unwritten rule, Merchant and Seam didn't mix. But Katniss knew of Delly, and Delly of Katniss. But it wasn't until we were all refugees in District Thirteen that Delly admitted a deep seated admiration for Katniss. And it wasn't until last night that Katniss admitted her long time admiration for Delly.

During a lull in the conversation between Rory and I, I couldn't help but overhear Katniss and Delly talking. What they said made me smile.

"Katniss, I - I have to tell you something," Delly said haltingly.
"What's that, Delly?" Katniss asked.

"I - Well, that is - when we were growing up - I really - wanted to be like you. More than anything," Delly stammered.

"What? Why?" Katniss asked in surprise.

"You were so - self reliant, and - brave. Hunting, going to the Hob. I wasn't the only one that admired you. Every girl I knew - Merchant and Seam alike - admired you."

"I - I don't know what to say," Katniss stammers. "Delly - I wasn't brave. I was scared - every day. I did what I had to do for - my family."

"No - you were brave. Volunteering proved that."

"Oh Delly, that wasn't bravery. That was love. Love for Prim. Believe me, I had never been so afraid in my whole life. Do you want to know something?"

"What?" Delly asked.

"I admired you. You, Delly Cartwright. You thought I didn't know who you were and that I never noticed you. You were always able to make friends so easily. You had Merchant friends, Seam friends - even the Capitol Liaison kids liked you. Everyone thought that I didn't have friends because I didn't need them aside from Gale and Madge, but in truth, I didn't have friends because I didn't know how to make friends. You had that confidence that I never had."

"Really?" Delly asks incredulously.

"Really." Katniss says. "I would have - loved - to have been your friend."

"It's never too late to make a friend," Delly says softly.

"Thank you, Delly," Katniss says, her voice thick with emotion.

"Thank you, Katniss," Delly says with just as much emotion.

I smile as I listen. Katniss may not know it, but Delly is probably the best friend she could ever have.

PART II

I sit at the end of the couch, leg propped up, and show Delly the memory book that Katniss and I had been working on. Delly looks in awe at my careful illustrations, and more than once I see her eyes moisten as she reads some of Katniss's carefully written passages. Reading about people that she knew, like Prim, Madge, and Gale - or about other Tributes, like Rue and Thresh. Reading about other Victors, like Johanna, Beetee, and Finnick. Reading about those that helped us - Cinna, Portia, Boggs, and others.

Delly reads in silence for the most part, occasionally asking questions, then finally puts the book down.

"Peeta, that was - amazing - incredible. Your drawings - they captured so much! And Katniss - I never dreamed she could write like that," she says.

"This book helped us so much, Delly. Helped us heal, in a way, and to grow together," I say.
"What's in this chest?" Delly asks, putting the memory book down and pointing to Haymitch's locked chest.

"Haymitch's contribution," I say. "Twenty-five years of memories as a Mentor in the Hunger Games. He said that each Mentor received a portfolio of the Tribute or Tributes they were mentoring. He made a lot of notes on each one - skills they may have had, what kind of personality they had, how well they listened, how they - died." I unlock the chest and open the lid, revealing the twenty-five neatly packed volumes.

Delly had started to take one leather bound volume out at random but quickly slid it back into place at the word "died." "Have you - have you looked at many?" she asked.

"A couple," I reply. "I can better understand now why Haymitch is...the way he is."

Delly runs her fingers over the last volume on the far right of the chest. "This is the last one," she says in awe, "from the Quarter Quell. The very last Games - ever."

I shudder slightly in remembrance. One year ago at this time Katniss and I were in the Capitol - training for these very Games. The Games that, as it turned out, became the first battle in the Rebellion. Some Capitol News programs had taken to calling our last war "The Mockingjay Rebellion." Just one more reason why Katniss and I rarely watch the Holo-TV.

Delly slides out the first volume and reads aloud the embossed cover. "Fifty-First Annual Hunger Games - District Twelve - Josiah Pride and Antonia Morrow."

"They didn't do very well," I say. "Haymitch knew them both pretty well, as it turned out."

"That must have been awful for him," she says softly. "And for you and Katniss - if Victors hadn't been Reaped for the Quarter Quell - you would have had to..." her voice trails off as she gently sets the volume down.

"Haymitch said he would have given us all the help we needed...but still, it would've been awful," I say.

"Thankfully, those days are over," Delly points out.

"True - but there's the matter of seventy-five arenas. Plutarch Heavensbee wants to turn them into shrines. Capitolites used to travel to the old arenas. They were tourist attractions, complete with holographic projections of Tribute deaths. But now, Plutarch has this idea of all of the surviving Victors traveling to each arena and dedicating each one to the Tributes that died there."

"When's that gonna happen?" Delly asks. I shrug my shoulders.

"I'm not sure. Soon, probably. It'll take a long time to convert all of those arenas the way they're talking about. I've also heard talk about doing something in the Capitol - there's a lot of buildings that were used just for the Games - the Remake Center, the Training Center, Gamemaker Headquarters - that they want to turn into something like memorials. That'll take a long time to do, what with all the rebuilding that has to be done in the Capitol and all the districts. So for Katniss, Haymitch and I - the Games continue, only now with no deaths and no blood. Just constant reminders. I really wish I could just forget all of it!" I say in frustration.

"I know you do," Delly says gently. "But maybe that's the whole idea. They don't want anyone to forget. They want everyone to remember the horror that Panem had to endure for seventy-five years. Because, if we remember, we won't allow it to happen again."
"Maybe you're right," I sigh. "But that doesn't make it any easier on me - or on Katniss."

"Where is Katniss, by the way?" Delly asks.

"Out in the forest. With Rory. Teaching him about snares and traps - and giving him bow lessons too," I say with a smile.

"She goes out every day?"

"Just about. She loves the woods. And she still feels the need to provide."

At that moment there's a sharp rapping on the front door, then the door opens without waiting for either Delly or myself to answer it. I look up to see Galen walking into the house.

"Peeta, if you don't mind, I'd like to steal Delly for a while. I'm meeting Thom in a little while in town regarding the clinic, and I'd like Delly in on the meeting also," Galen says.

"Of course," I say. "Stop by later on, Delly?"

"Sure thing!" Delly says, leaning over and kissing my cheek quickly. "See you later, Peeta!"

"Bye, Delly! Bye, Galen!" I watch them both disappear out the door, then look around the living room and sigh. I'm already going stir crazy and noon is still quite a ways off. I pick up the remote and turn on the Holo-TV, but a quick search through the programming doesn't reveal anything that interests me. Turning the TV off, I toss the remote onto the end table.

The chest containing Haymitch's history as District Twelve Mentor catches my eye. Leaning over, I open the lid. Curiosity has finally gotten the better of me. With a hand trembling with a mixture of fear and anticipation, I slide one of the volumes out and examine the gold embossed cover.

**SEVENTY-FOURTH ANNUAL HUNGER GAMES**

**DISTRICT TWELVE**

**PEETA MELLARK AND KATNISS EVERDEEN**

I take a deep breath and open the front cover. The first page contained some fairly dry statistics - Date and time of the Reaping, total number of Tribute Candidates present - 668, total number of children given temporary exemption due to severe illness or injury - 0, total number unaccounted for at Reaping - 0. Total number of Reaping Entries - 14,056. Total Entries for girls - 7,111. Total Entries for boys - 6,945. Escort - Effie Trinket. Mentor(s) - Haymitch Abernathy (V50). Mayor - Karl Undersee. Head Peacekeeper - Commander Augustus Cray (D2). Capitol Liaison - Hadrian Clark.

I turn the page, and find the Reaping photos of Katniss and I, taken as we stood on stage together. Katniss looks beautifully defiant, and I - I just look - defeated. Scared. Well, I was scared - terrified, in fact. I notice, next to Katniss's name on the picture, two small, hand inked question marks (?). Idly I wonder what they mean.

The next page shows two more photos - these taken inside the Justice Building, after our visitation period was over but before they hustled us into the car for the ride to the station. My picture showed a slightly younger version of me, eyes red rimmed from recent crying. Katniss was wearing an almost bored, detached look in her picture - and there's something else. She's wearing the Mockingjay pin that Madge had given her, and someone had circled it with red ink.
I glance through pages of notes that Haymitch had jotted down. There was nothing really surprising - it was pretty obvious that he liked me better than Katniss, but I had already known that. It was also obvious that he thought Katniss stood a much better chance than I at winning. There were a lot of references to various sponsor gifts that he had considered sending her, including a bow and a dozen arrows.

I was amazed at the cost of one bow and twelve arrows. It was on par with Finnick Odair's infamous trident! I knew that District Twelve Tributes never got enough sponsors to fund something so extravagant. I shifted the volume on my lap a bit as one corner of the leather bound cover on the back of the volume caught against the joint where my Robo-leg connected to the cap. I pull the cover away from the joint and see a small bit of leather pull away from the binding.

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Dammit! The last thing I wanted to do was to rip the leather cover. Carefully I set the volume down and lean over it to examine how much damage I had done to the cover when something behind the cover caught my eye.

The corner of a slip of paper was protruding out of the spot where the leather cover had begun to pull away from the binding of the volume. Frowning, I pull at the slip of paper, finding something eerily familiar about it, but I'm unable to free it - the tear in the leather isn't large enough.

Taking a deep breath, I grasp the leather cover firmly at the spot of the tear and peel it back slowly. The cover peels back surprisingly easily and neatly, exposing twenty or so small slips of paper.

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The slips are rectangular in shape, a couple of inches long by about half that wide, and sealed at one end. I examine one closer under the light of the lamp sitting beside the couch. I notice for the first time that the slip has a very faint light blue cast to the paper. I'm beginning to realize just what this slip of paper is. With trembling fingers I grasp the sealed end and peel it open. When I open it I look inside and gasp.

Carefully I dump all the slips of paper onto the small table in front of me. I start working at the leather cover on the front of the volume. Again, with surprisingly little effort, it gives way. Carefully I peel it back, exposing another twenty or so slips of paper. I select one at random and examine it under the lamp. Identical to the slips from the back of the volume, but these sport a very faint pinkish cast to the paper.

I'm already sure of what I'll find as I peel open the sealed end. I look inside and nod, my suspicions confirmed.

I spend the next few minutes carefully opening ten slips from the front of the volume and ten slips from the back. I notice for the first time that slips of both colors appear to be slightly crumpled, as though clenched tightly in a hand before being smoothed out and hidden underneath the leather cover of the volume. The ten slips that I opened from the back of the volume all have the same two words printed on them in the inside:

**PEETA MELLARK**

Likewise, the ten slips from the front of the volume all have identical printing on them as well:

**PRIMROSE EVERDEEN**

Even though I've never seen them up close, I know exactly what these slips of paper are.

Reaping Slips.
PART III

I sit, my heart pounding in my chest as I stare at the open Reaping Slips arrayed on the table in front of me. My mind is whirling in confusion.

*I was only supposed to have a total of five slips in the Reaping Bowl,* I say to myself, *But here's ten unopened Reaping Slips with my name on them! And Prim...Prim was supposed to be in there only once!*

I don't bother to open the other slips - I'm quite sure I will find more of the same. For some reason, Haymitch has twenty Reaping Slips each with my name and twenty with Prim's name. I put my head in my hands in confusion.

I had heard rumors of "Punitive Reapings" before. As rumor had it, if a district resident fell out of favor with the Capitol, say, by engaging in activities that the Capitol deemed "rebellious" or "subversive," and if that district resident had children of Reaping age, then it wasn't uncommon to have one or more of that resident's children Reaped to die in the Hunger Games. That way, a clear message would be sent from the Capitol: "We know what you're doing, and if you don't stop, next time it'll be your family - or you."

Also, Victor's children seemed to not have the odds in their favor as well, as it was very common to see the child of a Victor be Reaped to die in the Games as well. Many Victors had chosen not to have children for that very reason.

But this - this made no sense. Why Prim and I? Prim had only been twelve at the time, loved by everyone in Twelve, and definitely not subversive OR rebellious. Una Everdeen was about as far from being subversive as a person could get. That left Katniss...but it would have been easier for the Capitol to Reap her directly if they felt she was a threat. Reap her and send her into the arena to die. And then there was me. No one in my family was remotely rebellious or subversive.

I begin to wonder if this is all some kind of sick joke. Someone had those printed up. No, that didn't make any sense either. If it was a joke, then why did Haymitch go to such lengths to conceal them? They were all carefully hidden in that leather bound volume between the leather cover and the original binding, and the leather had been carefully re-stitched. And how would Haymitch even get his hands on Reaping Slips anyway?

I need answers. I reach over and pick up the phone and punch up the memory, select a number, and hit "Send." I put the phone to my ear and listen to it ring - once, twice, three times, four -

"Come on, come on," I mutter. "Answer!"

Fifth ring - and the ring cuts off abruptly. I hear fumbling sounds and I wince at the sharp noise as the phone on the other end was dropped. I chuckle at hearing muffled curses in the background.

"What?!" the voice on the other end snaps.

"Good to hear you too, Jo," I say, still chuckling.

"Huh? Who is - Mellark? Is that you, Stumpy?" She sounds bleary and for a moment I wonder if I called too early. Where she lives in District Seven is on Capitol Time - two hours behind us.

"Yeah, Jo. I didn't wake you, did I?"

"It's okay - late night last night," she mumbles. "By the way, nice job you and Brainless did with that whole Reaping anniversary propo dog and pony show. How did she get them to name your
town square after her sister?"

"Told Heavensbee that if he wanted her participation, he would have to do something for her. That was it." I explain.

Johanna barks out a short laugh. "Oh, that's great! Guess she does have a brain after all! And was the statue her idea too?"

"No," I say, smiling. "That was my idea."

"Nice touch," Johanna says admiringly. "And I hear congratulations are in order - she finally admitted that she loves you, from what I hear!"

I shake my head in amazement. That was just days ago. "Word sure does travel fast," I say dryly. "But thanks...it - feels - well, indescribable! By the way, Katniss and I watched the anniversary propo for District Seven. Nice speech. Very moving."

"Yeah, well - I didn't write it. So, what's on your mind, Peg Leg? I'm sure you didn't call just to catch up." Typical Johanna. Direct and to the point.

"Jo - before I get to that, I - well, I do want to be able to catch up with you. Things here have been a little...well, confusing...these last few months. But, just now, talking to you, I've really realized that I do miss you - a lot. Beetee and Annie, too. Even Enobaria, in a funny way." It's true. I hadn't given a lot of thought to my fellow surviving Victors, but we all share a bond that no one else could understand.

Johanna is silent for long seconds. Finally, I say, "Jo? Are you still there?"

"Yes," she says quickly. "Damn you, Mellark, getting all sentimental on me." I hear her sniff loudly and I smile. Tough as nails Johanna Mason - crying? Maybe there's a girl under that shell after all.

"Listen, Jo, I meant what I said. I really want to catch up. Will you be home later on? I'm sure Katniss would want to talk to you also."


"Something like that," I say with a grin. "So later on?"

"Yeah," she says. "I've got no plans until tonight, anyway. So, any time. Now, you called me for a reason."

"I just had some questions...about Mentoring," I say carefully.

"Mentoring? I've got a news flash for you - the Games are done. Besides, wouldn't it be easier to ask Haymitch? I mean, he's right there - unless he's shit-faced drunk, anyway."

"No, I can't ask him because - well, let's just say I have my reasons. My questions were more about Reapings, anyway. About what part Mentors played in Reapings. I mean, you went through a few as a Mentor," I could feel my mouth go dry and my heart start to pound.

"Part? Well, Blight and I would sit on the stage, applaud politely when our Escort read off the names of the kids that would be dead soon, then afterwards we'd go into the Justice Building and 'be available' for the families of the new Tributes, if they wanted to talk to us or ask us anything. Oh, and we had to certify the Reaping."
"Certify?" I ask.

"Yeah. A Peacekeeper would bring us a document for each new Tribute that Blight, myself, and our Escort had to sign, certifying that the Reaping was done in accordance with the Treaty of Treason, and that unused Reaping Slips were destroyed by incineration immediately following the Reaping. The Peacekeeper had to sign it also, as the one responsible for burning the unused Slips. Then the Peacekeeper would make copies of each document for the Escort and the Mentors, and give the Mentors the portfolio for each new Tribute."

"So a Peacekeeper would burn all the unused Slips?" I ask.

"Yeah. So, are you gonna keep me in suspense or tell me what the hell this is all about?" Johanna asks testily.

"Jo - I can't say anything yet - sorry. Suffice to say that I...found something...that's really bothering me and I'm trying to sort it out. I promise that once I figure everything out I'll tell you everything. Okay?"

"You don't trust me?" Johanna asks softly, the hurt evident in her voice.

"I trust you with my life, Jo! I just don't want to say anything until I get all the facts straight. I promise, you'll know everything!" I say sincerely.

"Peeta - you're a decent person. One of the few truly good people I've ever met. The suspense is gonna kill me, but - okay. But you spill everything to me when you can!"

"It's a deal," I promise. "Oh, one more thing - the leather volumes that you got for each Games - the ones with the Tributes names on the cover - where did they come from?"

"Our Escort gave us the volume when we got on the train for the Capitol, already embossed with the Tributes name." Johanna replies.

"Thanks, Jo - you've been a huge help!" I say. "Katniss and I will call later on - and please don't say anything to Katniss about this!"

"I won't," she promises, "But you owe me big time! Talk to you later, Stumpy."

"Bye, Johanna," I say and break the connection. I grab up the volume and start leafing through the papers inside until I find what I'm looking for. A document entitled "Certification of Reaping." There were two - one for me, and one for Prim and Katniss.

I glance at the one for Prim and Katniss. It stated that "Primrose Everdeen, age 12, duly Reaped by Capitol Escort Effie Trinket for the 74th Annual Hunger Games, in accordance with the Laws of Panem and the Treaty of Treason, to be the Female Tribute for District Twelve, has been released from her obligation to serve as Tribute by virtue of the act of a qualified Volunteer coming forth in her place, to wit: Katniss Everdeen, age 16."

More flowery verbiage followed, and at the bottom of the certificate there were three signatures. Effie Trinket, Escort. Haymitch Abernathy, Mentor. I notice that Haymitch's signature was quite shaky - no doubt he was still shaken up by the fall he had taken off of the stage during the Reaping, or by the amount of alcohol he had so obviously consumed beforehand. I'm impressed that he was able to sign at all.

*Someone must have sobered him up pretty quickly,* I say to myself. I turn my attention to the last signature on the certificate. The Peacekeeper, certifying that all unused Reaping Slips have been
incinerated - and I freeze in shock when I see the name.

Darius Potter, Peacekeeper First Class.

Darius - the friendliest Peacekeeper to serve under old Cray. Darius, with his shock of bright red hair, always with a smile on his face. Darius, who would flirt unabashedly with Katniss whenever he ran into her in the Hob.

Darius - struck down by Romulus Thread when he tried to stop Gale Hawthorne's brutal whipping that awful day in the square. Who was promptly arrested, stripped of his title as Peacekeeper, and sentenced to serve the remainder of his life as a mute Avox, his tongue removed as punishment for his insubordination.

Darius - who was assigned to Katniss and I as a servant after we were Reaped for the Quarter Quell, in an obvious attempt to shake us up. And who was repeatedly tortured before my eyes when I was held by the Capitol for those endless weeks following the break out from the arena.

Darius - who finally died while looking me straight in the eye, his eyes filled with defiance and courage.

I shake my head violently and look at the clock. Katniss is due back at any time. I quickly scoop up the Reaping Slips, place them back under their respective leather coverings, and clumsily try to seal the leather shut. I slide the volume back into the chest and shut the lid, locking it securely. I'm certain Katniss won't go in there - she's avoided that box like the plague. I sit back on the couch and turn on the Holo-TV and watch a recap of the singing competition program that Plutarch created - the one he wanted Katniss to participate in.

A short while later, Katniss does come home. She greets me cheerily and tells me how great Rory did with learning how to set traps and snares, and how much trouble he's had in learning the bow. "I didn't hunt today, and I gave Rory the squirrels and rabbit that the snares caught. I'm going to get with him in a little bit and show him how to clean his game," Katniss says.

"Sounds good," I say, hoping that my voice sounds normal. "Oh, and I talked to Johanna earlier. I was bored so I called her," I lie," and she asked me to call back when you were home so she could talk to you too."

"I'd like that," Katniss says with a smile. "We'll call her after Rory and I are done cleaning his game."

"Good idea," I say, taking her by the hand and pulling her down on the couch with me. She examines my Robo-leg closely.

"It looks the same," she says.

"But it feels sooo much better," I say. "No pain or discomfort. It just doesn't work very well yet."

"I'm so glad," Katniss says softly, snaking her arms around my neck. "I love you, Dandelion."

"I love you, my love," I say huskily, before kissing her deeply.

We kiss for a long time, then Katniss finally pulls back and sighs. "Those squirrels aren't gonna clean themselves. I'll be back in a bit, then we'll call Johanna. Leftover turkey tonight?"

"Sounds great," I say with a smile. Bending down and giving me a quick kiss, she whispers, "Love
you,” then bounds out the door. I slowly let my breath out, as my gaze falls to the large chest sitting near the couch.

I'll be able to walk more or less normally in a couple of days. When I can walk again, Haymitch will have a lot of explaining to do.
Katniss wordlessly collapses on top of me, making a sound that is a passion bred hybrid of a gasp, a moan, and a sigh of utter contentment. The day ended up hot and humid, as many late spring/early summer days do here in District Twelve. Both of us are liberally coated with a sheen of sweat. I can feel our bare skin sticking together in all of the numerous places where our bodies touch. It feels at once clammy, tacky, and much too warm for such close contact - and I, for one, would not have it any other way.

I feel Katniss shift slightly as she puts her lips to my ear. She wetly kisses my ear for a moment, sending delicious shivers down my spine. I can hear every breath she takes as I lightly run my fingers up and down her back.

"Tell me," she whispers.

Moving her thickening hair to one side, I place my own lips against her ear. "I love you, Katniss Everdeen," I whisper back.

I feel her cheek rise in a smile against my cheek. "I love you, Peeta Mellark," is her reply.

My arms tighten around her as I roll to one side. A small giggle - a sound I never grow tired of hearing from her - escapes her throat as we end up now side by side. I slide my arm out that was under her and, using my fingers, brush damp strands of her hair off of her forehead, even as I feel her own gentle fingers doing the same to my hair. My free hand slides down her side and my fingers find a long, puckered line - her souvenir from that day in District Two when she was shot by an unnamed Peacekeeper. Gently I trace the outline of her healed wound. The few times I've glimpsed it I could see it was still an angry pinkish red. Suddenly I feel her hand close over mine and gently, but firmly, move my fingers away from the scar.

"Peeta...don't...please," Katniss pleads.

"Katniss...it's okay, really," I murmur to her, but I honor her wish and instead intertwine my fingers with hers.

"It's ugly," she whispers. If she had been treated in a Capitol hospital the doctors there would have taken great pains to make the scar invisible. District Thirteen hospitals, however, were known for their efficiency and excellent care - not for aesthetics. Still, Katniss simply wouldn't be Katniss without the myriad scars she carried on her body.

"What did you do with her?" I suddenly ask her teasingly.

"What? Do with who?" Katniss asks in confusion.

"Don't play dumb with me, girl," I say sternly. It's a good thing it's dark in here - otherwise Katniss would be able to see I wasn't able to keep a straight face. "Oh, sure, you may look like Katniss Everdeen, and you may sound like Katniss Everdeen, but my Katniss Everdeen would never be self conscious about a little scar."

"Oh, stop!" She says, smacking me in the shoulder. I can hear the laugh in her voice, though.
"There's my Katniss!" I say emphatically, drawing her close to me for a kiss.

"How can I?" Katniss breathes as our lips part.

"How can you what, my love?" I ask softly.

"Be so lucky," she finishes. "So incredibly lucky - my Dandelion."

In response, I kiss each of the fingers that are still twined with mine. She then draws my hand to her lips and repeats the gesture, kissing each my fingers. Wordlessly, we lay there for a few more minutes, then, with a groan, I reluctantly roll out of bed to stumble to the bathroom. Along the way my foot encounters something warm and furry that hisses indignantly at me.

"Sorry, Buttercup," I mutter, lurching clumsily to the bathroom. Tomorrow will be cane day, and hopefully the day after that will be my "back to normal" day. But for now, I either use the walker or have a wall or piece of convenient furniture to help steady me as I try to walk. I close the bathroom door and, squinting against the light, flick the light switch on. Blearily I examine my face in the bathroom mirror as I run water in the sink. Soaking a washcloth in the cool water, I quickly sponge myself off, pausing to divest myself of what Galen calls "my new best friend." I briefly consider a cool shower or full bath but decide to wait until morning. Grabbing a fresh washcloth and soaking it in the cool water, I allow my thoughts to stray back to those mysterious Reaping Slips that I had found earlier in the day.

*Haymitch definitely has some serious explaining to do,* I say to myself as I wring the washcloth out. Turning off the light, I open the bathroom door and cautiously make my way back into the bedroom.

I sit on the edge of the bed, running the cool cloth along Katniss's arms and shoulders. With a contented groan, she takes the cloth from my hand after a moment and sponges herself off, then rolls out of bed and into the bathroom. Still self conscious, she waits until the bathroom door is closed before turning the light on. I get out of bed to open the windows wider in the hope of catching an errant breeze, but the moist air flowing through the window is still tepid. Sighing, I return to the bed and roll over on my back as I see the light go off under the bathroom door and then hear the door swing open. I feel the bed give slightly as Katniss joins me.

"I thought about running a nice, cool bath while I was in there," she says softly.

"Why didn't you?" I ask. "I would have joined you," I say teasingly.

Katniss is quiet for long seconds; the only sound in the bedroom is our slow, even breathing. In spite of the oppressive heat in the room, I can feel myself begin to slowly slip into sleep, so it barely registers with me when I feel the bed move as Katniss rolls onto her side.

"I'm sorry," she says in almost a whisper.

"Hmmm? What? Why?" My slumber-bound brain struggles to process her apology - trying to determine just what it is she's sorry for.

"For being so - well - shy with you," she says haltingly. "It's not just that scar from being shot. It's the places where my skin looks funny from being burned, and all the scars on my hands, arms and legs from years of hunting, and - from being so - skinny..." her voice trails off as I turn toward her.

"Katniss," I say in a soft voice. "It's you I love. Every mark on you - every scar - is just another sign of a struggle that you won. And as for being skinny - I remember seeing you on some of the worst hollow days when we were younger - when even on the hottest days you would wear long..."
pants and long sleeved shirts to hide your arms and legs...but you couldn't hide your hands from me." I take both her hands in mine and gently caress her fingers.

"I could see how thin your hands were - how brittle your nails were from not eating well. I could see, when you turned your head and the collar of your shirt would open a bit, how much your collar bones stood out. I could see how sharply your cheek bones had become, how dry your lips looked, how big your eyes looked. How sometimes you would wear a scarf over your hair because you'd lost clumps of it." I pause to kiss her fingers, feeling her hands trembling slightly in mine.

I take a deep, tremulous breath before continuing. "And I was so afraid for you, and I tried so hard to think of ways to sneak food out of the bakery - but after the night with the bread, mother watched me so closely, and every time I thought I could take just a little, there she was, watching me - and at night...at night I would curl up in bed and wait for my brothers to go to sleep so I could finally cry from the fear and frustration I felt."

Even now, in remembering, I can feel tears forming in my eyes. Suddenly Katniss lets go of my hands and then I feel her fingers on my face, brushing over my eyes, and I know she can feel the wetness and I let out a small, choking sob, and I hear her make a little sound in her throat too, and my own fingers explore her face and feel her tears also...

"And, that whole time I loved you. I never stopped loving you. So don't think that me seeing a few ribs, some scars, and a sharp hip bone or two will make me feel any differently about you than I have in the past - or do right this minute." I lean forward to kiss her and the kiss she gives me in return is almost indescribable in what it makes me feel.

"I really don't deserve you - and I'm so incredibly happy that you think otherwise," she says between kisses. "I love you so much!"

"I love you, too, my love," I whisper.

**PART II**

I'm dimly aware of some soft sounds in the bedroom as I roll over in bed, still half-asleep. Opening one eye, then the other, I see Katniss getting dressed, moving quickly and quietly about the room. Suddenly she spies me watching her and favors me with a quick smile. I return her smile, loving the way her cheeks dimple when she smiles.

She sits on the edge of the bed, smoothing my hair away from my eyes. "Sorry for waking you," she says softly.

"I was already awake," I lie, examining her clothing. It wasn't what I've come to think of as her "hunting clothes."

"No hunting today?" I ask.

"Rory and I are gonna check the trap and snare lines - then I'm taking him to the pond to start teaching him how to fish," Katniss says, still stroking my hair.

"Ahh, the famous pond - and when are you taking me there, my love?" I ask teasingly.

"Peeta, you know you make too much noise in the forest!" Katniss exclaims.

"I'm not talking about a hunting trip - just a nice day in the woods...you know, just you and I. A picnic, maybe," I say.
A flicker of confusion - and conflict - sweeps across her face. For as long as she can remember, Katniss has always looked at the forest as a place to harvest sustenance. The forest was also her sanctuary - a calming place for her to retreat to when she needed to get away. And she's right - I make way too much noise to be a successful hunter. The few times I was allowed to accompany her I was constantly amazed at how swiftly and quietly she was able to move.

I grasp her hand gently. "Katniss - we don't have to picnic in the forest. We can do something else. We -"

"No, you're right," she says suddenly, in a confident voice. "I mean, I do love you, Peeta - and I want to share things with you - important things in my life. Yes. We'll picnic by the pond. Soon," she adds with a smile, then leans down to kiss me.

She straightens up quickly. "I need to get moving," she says. "I'm surprised Rory isn't already -" Katniss never finishes her thought as we both hear an impatient knocking at the door.

"That's gotta be Rory. I won't be back until the afternoon - we're getting a late start as it is and the pond is a bit of a hike." Katniss gives me a quick kiss and bounds out of the room. "Love you, Dandelion!"

"Katniss, wait!" I gasp, rolling clumsily out of bed and pulling on a pair of shorts. I scan around the room until I spot my cane. Grabbing it, I cautiously make my way out of the room and slowly descend the stairs.

Katniss is tearing around the kitchen, grabbing her game bag and filling her water bottle, as Rory stands by, watching her with a bemused expression on his face.

"Morning, Rory," I greet him.

"Morning, Peeta. Is she always like this in the morning?" Rory asks with a grin. Katniss overhears him and shoots us both a baleful glance.

I chuckle as I enter the kitchen. Grabbing two paper bags, I busy myself with filling them with a variety of breads for the two of them. I hand both bags to Katniss, who shoves them in her game bag with a grateful expression. She gives me a quick kiss, murmurs, "Love you," and turns to leave.

I toss Rory a cheese bun. Katniss catches the movement out of the corner of her eye and whirls around. I know cheese buns are her absolute favorite and I'm sure she's wondering why Rory and not her, so when she opens her mouth to protest I immediately fill it with a cheese bun of her own.

Katniss's expression turns immediately beatific as she bites into the bread, then turns for a last time as she and Rory walk out the door, still munching their breakfast. As the door closes I chuckle as I turn to heat up some water for tea.

The quiet of the house brings yesterday's mysterious discovery back to the forefront of my mind. Those mysterious Reaping Slips, and the cryptic notes and Mockingjay pin drawings - all of which were in the leather bound volume from the Games that Katniss and I were Victors in - raised more questions in my mind.

I carry my tea and then a plate with a couple of warm cheese buns into the living room, as always walking deliberately with my cane. I settle in on the couch and open up Haymitch's chest, then pull out the 74th Games volume again.

I leaf through several pages of notes that Haymitch had taken, starting with the train trip from the
district to the Capitol. I find notes that he took after our first conversation - when I insisted on cleaning him up alone after he literally vomited on himself - that he must have written after I left him in his sleeping berth that night.

I read: "Had a talk with PM after he cleaned me up. Good kid. Starry eyed in love with KE. Made me promise to do everything I could to make sure she wins. Crazy kid."

What made me look closer at these notes were not the words, but the small, surprisingly neat doodles he made. After the letters "KE" was another small doodle of the Mockingjay pin - and after the letters "PM" was a doodle of a hand, palm forward and fingers pointing up, with the thumb and little finger folded across the palm so just three fingers remained straight.

The same sign that all of us assembled in the square that day - Primrose Square now - the same sign we made to Katniss when she volunteered from Prim. The old gesture of respect, love, and goodbye to someone you cherish.

I sigh heavily and take a sip of tea. So, he had already written me off. I guess I shouldn't be too surprised - after all, I had come to him and stated that my goal was to die so that Katniss would live. I leaf through some more pages, finding one more notation - "FIGHTERS!" I recognize that one - after I smacked the glass from his hand and he decked me in return, Katniss had shown him her skill with a knife, and he was more impressed when he saw how adept she was at throwing knives as well. It was then that he pledged to remain sober enough to help us both in the Games - which, to me, meant he would help Katniss, and help me help Katniss as well.

I close the volume with a thump. I decide that I can't wait any longer. Tomorrow is too far away. Leg or no leg, I need to talk to Haymitch - today.

Going into the study, I pick up the phone and punch in Haymitch's code. I hear it ring once, twice, three times, and finally it's answered halfway through the fourth ring.

"Abernathy residence," a woman's rich voice answers.


"Peeta? Why are you calling? You're right next - oh, your leg! Do you need something? I can -"

"No, no! I'm fine, really! I just need to talk to Haymitch - he's there, right?" I say quickly.

"At his usual perch," Sae says, "Passed out as usual. Hang on, let me get him."

In the background I hear shouting, then some other noises I can't identify, then a sound like the phone was dropped on the floor. Finally, after much fumbling around, I hear a familiar voice.

"What?" Haymitch growls.

"It's Peeta. I need to talk to you," I say quickly.

"I know who it is, kid. So talk. I'm awake now, you know."

"Not on the phone," I say. "Can you come over?"

"Why the hell can't you come - oh, never mind. Galen fix your leg?" Haymitch asks.

"Yes, but I still need a cane at least through to tomorrow," I reply. "Can you come over?" I say again, impatiently.
I hear Haymitch mutter some obscenities under his breath. "This can't wait?"

"No," I say firmly, "it can't. Haymitch, please - it's important."

"Shit. Okay, fine. Be there in a few." He breaks the connection without another word. Now I sit and wait - and, for the first time, begin to wonder if I really want to know the truth.

PART III

Haymitch arrives ten minutes later, barging through the front door without knocking, as usual. I'm in the living room, but when I hear him enter I haul myself to my feet and limp into the entryway.

"This way," I say, inclining my head towards the study. Haymitch arches his eyebrows but remains silent as he follows me into the study.

In the study, I take a seat behind the desk. The very desk, and the very chair, that President Coriolanus Snow sat in the morning of the start of our Victory Tour, over a year and a half ago. The same place where he sat and, in his polite, refined manner, threatened Katniss's family, as well as the Hawthorne family, with death if Katniss failed to cooperate with him in quelling the burgeoning uprisings springing up all over Panem.

I had thought that the ghosts of the previous government, and the Games that they so enthusiastically supported, were gone - until my discovery yesterday. My eyes fall to the volume on the desk, and to Haymitch, now sitting expectantly on the chair in front of the desk, eyeing the volume with suspicion.

Haymitch finally breaks the silence. "You have some questions - about this?" He asks, pointing to the volume.

"Yes," I manage to croak out, my throat suddenly tight. "I do." My voice sounds utterly formal. I remind myself that I'm speaking to a friend. I just hope he's still a friend after we're done.


"Haymitch, I - that is to say, there's some...I mean, I found -" I struggle to find the right words. Words rarely fail me - but today they do. So, with trembling hands, I reach forward, opening the volume cover, and carefully peel back the leather to reveal the Reaping Slips. Removing the Slips, I close the volume and repeat the process with the back cover. I glance at Haymitch. His face is impassive.

I sit back, waiting for a response from him. His face is a mask - perhaps slightly paler than before - but that just could be a trick of the light. But still, he remains stonily silent.

Finally, I ask the question. "Are these," I begin, indicating the Slips on the desk, "what I think they are?"

Haymitch's head nods up and down, slowly, once. "Yes," he says quietly.

"And even the unopened ones - they all say the same thing?" I ask, already knowing the answer.

"They do," he replies. "To be honest, Peeta - I never expected you to start ripping my books apart."

"It was - an accident," I explain, as I tell him what had happened the day before. As I talk, Haymitch nods his head thoughtfully.
"I almost didn't give you this one," he admits. "But I figured it would look pretty funny if you had all my books except yours. Truthfully, I figured you'd never even look at it."

"I almost didn't," I say. "But I got curious."

"And now you want answers," Haymitch says. I nod.

"Yes. I do." I say tightly.

"I owe that to you, at least," he says sadly.

"So?" I ask, indicating the book and the Slips.

Haymitch leans back in his chair and stares at the slips for a moment before replying. "Peeta - you and Prim were set up. Every Slip in the Boy's Bowl had your name on it. Every Slip in the Girl's Bowl had Prim's name on it."

Suddenly, there's a roaring in my ears and the light in the room is suddenly too bright. My chest constricts and I suddenly can't catch my breath. As if from far away I hear Haymitch's voice call my name as I desperately fumble at the box in my shirt pocket. With shaking fingers I manage to snap the box open. I catch a glimpse of Haymitch, now looking very far away, as I pop the cap off the end of the auto injector and stab it into my thigh. Almost immediately I'm aware of a cool blackness descending on me as the drug floods my system and fights off my seizure. I collapse back in the chair and allow myself to slip into darkness.

PART IV

I slowly slip back into consciousness. I first become aware of birds - Mockingjays, actually - singing outside the window, followed by the feathery brush of a breeze against my face. My eyes flutter open and I blink a few times, trying to focus on - Haymitch. We're still in the study, and I'm still in the same chair I was before. He's standing near my chair, watching me intently.

"Haymitch?" I manage to croak.

"You okay, kid?" He asks as he moves a little closer to me.

I run a shaking hand through my hair. Haymitch bends down and picks something up off the floor next to my chair, and sets the item on the desk. I glance down at it. The auto injector.

"How...how long was I out?" I ask.

"Five minutes, maybe. You okay?" he asks again.

I hesitate for a moment before answering. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm okay now."

Haymitch inclines his head towards the spent auto injector. "Nice to know that those things actually work. Didn't know it would put you out, though," he says.

"Neither did I," I reply, wracking my brain, trying to remember if Galen said anything about the medication actually putting me out. I make a note to ask him about it the first chance I get.

"Kid, maybe now isn't the best time to do this," Haymitch says.

I shake my head. "No. I'm fine now. I need some answers. And, like it or not, you're gonna give them to me. Now, not later. You set us up, Haymitch. You owe me."
"Whoa, wait a minute. I never said that I set you up. I said that you were set up. I was not happy with the idea at all!" Haymitch says in protest.

I feel anger welling up inside me. Anger and - betrayal. I knew that feeling betrayed didn't make any sense - after all, Haymitch didn't really know either Prim or myself before the Reaping. My only dealings with him were helping him at the bakery every so often when he would buy bread. But still - dammit, he should have said something!

I sigh. Well, I say to myself, this isn't the first time he's kept something from me. Idly I pick up one of the opened Slips with my name printed neatly on the inside, then toss it back on the desk.

"Haymitch, I need to know. I have a right to know! Someone decided that Prim and I needed to die! And for what?" I shout.

Haymitch leans back in his chair. "It's a long story," he says.

"Katniss won't be back until late this afternoon," I say. "We have time."

"Are you...are you - gonna tell her?" Haymitch asks.

I hesitate for a moment. Am I going to tell her? I mentioned nothing to her the day before about finding the Reaping Slips. Katniss and I have both kept things from each other in the past - but things between us have changed - for the better. We're growing closer with each passing day. She loves me. It wouldn't be right to keep anything from her - not now. But still -

"I don't know," I reply. "It depends on what you have to say."

Haymitch lets out a sigh. "Fair enough. But I guarantee you won't like what you're about to hear."

"I figured that," I snap. "Start talking."

Haymitch hesitates for a moment before he starts to talk. "It all began with my first games as a Mentor -"
"It all began with my first Games as a Mentor," I say, eying Peeta warily. I can tell that the kid is really angry with my revelation about he and Prim being deliberately Reaped.

I guess I should be thankful that whatever he had to inject himself with during his hijacking seizure must also have some sort of sedative in it as well - otherwise I have the feeling that I'd be spitting out teeth right about now.

"Go on," Peeta says coldly. I desperately want a drink right about now - but I'm gonna need a clear head for this. How could I be so stupid as to leave those damn Slips in the leather binding? I take a deep breath before continuing.

"I was seventeen. I had no one to help me with what was expected of me as a Mentor. The Escort for District Twelve at the time - well, she was all but useless. Chomping at the bit to get assigned to a better district. Not helpful like Effie was. And when Josiah and Antonia were Reaped, I knew it was gonna be bad. I knew both of them - went to school with them. Here they were expecting me to help them - and I didn't know what I was doing!" I pause for a moment. Even after twenty five years it's still painful to think about.

"I read a little about them," Peeta says. "They were both killed early on."

"Yeah, well, that comes later," I say. "I spend the entire train trip trying to learn as much as I can about what I'm expected to do. I'd been sent what they laughingly call a 'Mentor's Guide' about a month before the Reaping, but it seemed mostly devoted to advertising space on the best places for Mentors to spend their money. It was only after I got on the train and the Escort handed me the Games Volume that I started getting some useful info."

"Still, that barely scratched the surface," I continue, "So when we got to the Capitol, and the Prep Teams whisked Josiah and Antonia away, I'm standing there wondering what to do next, when this young Capitolite kid, maybe my age, maybe a little older, comes up to me and tells me he's a Trainee Gamemaker and has been assigned by the Head Gamemaker to help me out and make sure I got to everywhere I needed to be. You know him - his name is Plutarch Heavensbee."

At the sound of Plutarch's name I see Peeta's eyes narrow a bit. I know that there's no love lost between Peeta and Plutarch.

"Anyway, Plutarch must have done some research on me. He knew about my love for reading, and my fondness for history. So he hinted around that he would try to get me access to the Capitol Main Library while I was there. He took me to my first official function as a Mentor - the Remake Center Mentor's Meeting. It wasn't so much an official meeting as it was a place to stash the Mentors while their Tributes were being worked on in the Remake Center. But Plutarch introduced me to several of the other Mentors that were there - Beetee from Three, Mags from Four, Blight from Seven, Woof from Eight, and of course Seeder and Chaff from Eleven. I didn't realize it at the time but he made it a point to not introduce me to anyone from Districts One, Two, or Five. You recognize all those names, kid. Any significance to them?" I watch Peeta closely. I can almost see the light go on over his head as what I just told him sinks in.
"They were all involved in the Rebellion," he says in almost a whisper.

I nod. "Every one of them. Plutarch too, of course, although I didn't know it until much later on. He knew about my own troubles, of course - what with my mother, brother, and girl being killed by the Capitol. Remember how I told you that they were killed in retaliation for me using the force field around the arena as a weapon?" Peeta nods in response.

"Well - that was part of it. Snow was furious with my little trick - he really hated it when Tributes from outer districts won the Games - but what really did it for me was my attitude. I was arrogant...defiant. Coriolanus Snow wanted his Victors to be completely and utterly subservient to him. I wouldn't play along - I figured that, as a Victor, I was untouchable. I was right - to an extent. Snow had everyone that I love killed instead. Plutarch knew all about that - and he knew about my run ins that I had with our Peacekeepers as well. Plutarch thought that I was a good recruit for the Rebellion, but he had to make sure." I glance at Peeta and see a look of confusion on his face.

"Wait a minute," he says, "Plutarch was what, seventeen - maybe eighteen - at this time? And he was already in charge of the Rebellion?"

I shake my head. "I never said that," I explain. "He was part of the Rebellion. He knew a lot. But there were others above him that were in charge. Plutarch was smart - even then. Over the years he moved up the ladder until he was the highest ranking Capitolite involved in the Rebellion."

"Anyway," I continue, "Mags, Seeder and Chaff took me under their wing and helped me learn my duties as Mentor - and Chaff took me out after I lost both Josiah and Antonia and helped me get totally shitfaced drunk. Along the way, one or more of the Rebel Mentors must have told Plutarch that I was a good candidate. He took me to the Library and for a few days I spent as much time as possible in there. I didn't realize it until much later that he was steering me towards the histories and biographies of some very specific people: George Washington, Simon Bolivar, Mohandas Gandhi, Vladimir Lenin, and Ho Chi Minh, among others."

Peeta is looking at me with a blank stare. The names mean nothing to him.

"Have you ever heard of any of these people?" I ask.

"That George guy sounds familiar," Peeta says hesitantly.

"Before the Catastrophes, they were all, at different times in history, Rebels. Plutarch was sending me a message with these people. But it was years before I really understood how deeply he - and all the other Rebel Mentors - were involved in the new Rebellion."

"So what does all this have to do with me - or with Prim?" Peeta asks sharply.

"I'm getting to that," I reply. "The Rebellion was mostly made up of regular district residents. People associated with either the Games or Capitol citizens were rare. So, I wasn't the only one here in Twelve that was active in the Rebellion. And no, before you even ask the question, no one in your family was involved. Neither was anyone in the Everdeen family."

"I'm even more confused," Peeta says. "If no one in either family was involved - why deliberately Reap either Prim or me?"

"With each passing year, the Rebellion was able to add more and more recruits to its ranks. Some were high profile, like Finnick Odair and Johanna Mason. But most were just regular folks, sick to death of the Capitol's iron fist crushing Panem. By the 73rd Games, we were as ready as we would ever be with regards to both manpower and weapons. But still we waited." I pause for a moment to
catch my breath.

"What were you waiting for?" Peeta asks.

"Kid, do you know why the First Rebellion failed, back during the Dark Days?" I ask.

"Because - well, the Rebels attacked the Capitol but were stopped in the mountain passes, and -"

"Yeah, that's where they lost the last battle," I say impatiently, "But they lost the war because the districts weren't unified! Districts One and Two were fighting on the side of the Capitol! Hell, District Twelve was hardly even involved, other than moral support. District Thirteen was the only district that was fully committed to the fight, and you see what happened to them. Oh, sure, now we know about the 'negotiated cease fire' between the Capitol and Thirteen - but they still took a worse beating than every other district in Panem combined! Districts Three and Seven also took a beating because the assaults on the Capitol were launched from those districts. But every district had their own plan, their own troops, and their own generals - and no one bothered to coordinate anything with anyone outside their own district! That's why they failed!"

"That's all very fascinating," Peeta says sarcastically, "But once again - how do Prim and I play into this?"

"At the 73rd Games, Plutarch spoke with each of the Rebel Mentors in private," I explain, "And told us that everything was in place - except that this time, we needed a unifying rallying symbol - something that each district could recognize and rally behind. The Rebellion had started using the Mockingjay as their symbol for over twenty years by then - but they needed a real Mockingjay as a rallying point."

"Wait a minute," Peeta says suddenly. "Didn't your ally - wasn't she the original owner of the Mockingjay pin?"

"Maysilee Donner," I say, nodding. "Her family owned the sweet shop. She was Una Everdeen's best friend back then. A Merchant girl with only five Slips in the Reaping Bowl - and somehow she gets Reaped."

"Haymitch, do you think that they -" Peeta begins, but I finish for him.

"- Reaped her deliberately? Absolutely. I hardly knew Maysilee before our Reaping Day, but I did know that she was somewhat - outspoken - in her criticism of the Capitol. So somewhere, someone decided that a little Punitive Reaping was in order - both to shut her up and to send a message."

"But - are you sure? I mean, that was the Quarter Quell - they took two female and male Tributes that year from each district, instead of one. How could they make sure to Reap her and then pull another name out at random?" Peeta asks.

"Watch the video sometime, kid. Maysilee was the first one Reaped. Our esteemed Escort took a Reaping Slip right off the top of the pile. Then, for number two, she shoved her hand in the bowl to the very bottom. You can bet that every slip on top had Maysilee's name on it. Plus, I double checked with Plutarch much later on - he confirmed it. She was Punitively Reaped. And her district token was the famous Mockingjay pin." I suddenly feel very, very tired...dredging up old memories that I've gone to great lengths to bury was taking its toll on me.

"But still - she could've won," Peeta says. "She did make it to fifth place, after all."

"Kid, there's no way they were gonna let her win," I say tiredly. "Yeah, fifth place - and not five minutes after she and I split up the Gamemakers sent mutt birds to kill her."
Peeta sits quietly, shaking his head in disbelief. Well, he wanted the truth and the whole story. I just wonder if he can really handle the whole, unvarnished, ugly truth.

"So, you want to know the story behind your Reaping - here it is," I say, and begin to tell the tale.

**DISTRICT TWELVE - 73RD HUNGER GAMES VICTORY TOUR**

The man walks along the dimly lit streets of District Twelve, wincing at the sound of each footfall crunching the snow under his feet. To his heightened senses, it seemed as though every Peacekeeper in the district was listening to him walk, chuckling to themselves as they wait for just the right moment to reveal themselves to him. His gait, though swift, was slightly unsteady. His breath hangs in white clouds around his head as he walks through the building snowstorm. His destination is straight ahead.

Taking a deep breath, the man steels himself as he closes the gap between himself and the building straight ahead. As he reaches the near corner he quickly veers to the side, following the side of the building until he reaches its rear, then turns again, following the wall to a small door set into the back wall. The door is labeled "Staff Entrance."

At the door the man pauses for a moment, his fist clenched and raised to knock. It's still not too late to turn around and go home. Even though it's after curfew, and he definitely was not invited to the festivities even now taking place inside the very building that he now stood outside, he did, after all, enjoy a unique status not shared by any other resident of the district. So, if a Peacekeeper happened to stumble on him out at this time of night, chances are he would simply be escorted home and warned about breaking curfew, rather then end up in lockup.

The man thinks back to the visitor he had earlier that day. His visitor - a man roughly his own age, of nondescript features, and somewhat heavy set - had not stayed long. They had exchanged wary pleasantries and chatted for a few minutes about the upcoming 74th Annual Hunger Games, before the visitor, citing another engagement, quickly took his leave. But as they shook hands the visitor pressed a small slip of paper into the man's hand. Once the man was alone again, he opened up the paper to find a one line note:

**8 P.M. - JB Staff Entrance - P.**

Muttering curses under his breath, the man taps quietly on the door with his clenched fist. The knocking has a definite pattern to it, and as soon as his hand falls to his side, the door opens a crack.

"Who is it?" queries a female voice.

"President Coriolanus Snow - who the hell do you think it is? Let me in, Fulvia - I'm freezing my ass off out here!" the man snaps - albeit quietly.

"I didn't think alcohol froze," the woman says sarcastically. The door opens wider, allowing the man entrance. Quickly he steps inside, stomping his feet to free them of the accumulated snow and vigorously brushing his dark, shaggy hair - already starting to go gray, making the man look older than his forty years - with his fingers, sending a mini blizzard of snowflakes toward the floor. Quickly he removes his coat and looks inquiringly at the woman.

"This way," she says and, without waiting to see if the man is following her, walks from the darkened foyer to a short hallway. She turns down the hallway and stops at a door at the very end. She opens the door without knocking and gestures for the man to enter.
The man walks into what is obviously a small conference room. A table sits in the middle of the room, surrounded by chairs. In one of the chairs, the man's visitor sits, examining a document in front of him.

"Where's the other one?" the man at the table asks, never looking up from the paper in his hand.

"Not here yet," the woman - Fulvia - answers. She's a plain, businesslike woman of about the same age as the two men in the room.

"Go back and wait for our other guest, please, Fulvia - and bring our guest back the second our guest arrives," the man at the table orders. Fulvia nods once, turns, and is gone, closing the door behind her.

The man at the table indicates a chair. "Sit," he says quietly. The man remains standing.

"What 'other one,' Plutarch?" the standing man asks, glaring at the seated man.

"Haymitch, please sit down," the seated man - Plutarch - says again. The other man - Haymitch - hesitates briefly, then pulls out a chair. He sits warily, never taking his eyes off of Plutarch.

Plutarch chuckles softly. "Relax, Haymitch. I'm beginning to think that you don't trust me or something."

"I don't," Haymitch says bluntly. He looks all around the room, then back at Plutarch.

"It's clean," Plutarch assures him. "Fulvia swept it not fifteen minutes before you arrived."

"In that case, talk. What the hell's this all about?" Haymitch asks.

Plutarch raises his hand, palm out. "I'll explain after we're all here." he says.

Haymitch opens his mouth to reply, but the words remain unspoken. The door opens again and Fulvia wordlessly ushers 'the other guest' inside. Haymitch turns and his eyes widen in surprise, but he says nothing. Plutarch rises from his chair, followed somewhat tardily by Haymitch.

"You're late. Please sit," Plutarch says, indicating a vacant chair, as he and Haymitch both returned to their seats. The new arrival takes the chair next to Haymitch and sits. Haymitch notices that Fulvia has once again left the room, closing the door behind her.

"I'm sorry," the newcomer says, nodding towards Haymitch. "I was unavoidable detained. My father needed a little help."

"No matter," Plutarch says with a dismissive wave of his hand. "We don't have much time. Let's get started."

"Everything's in place," Plutarch begins without preamble. "Every district - including One and Two this time - has a solid Rebel cadre, with weapons, leadership, and the ability to recruit new members. We're just lacking in one key area. Our symbol."

"Your 'Mockingjay?'" Haymitch asks sarcastically. The newcomer looks at him sharply.

Plutarch ignores the interruption. "The Dark Days Rebellion failed because there was no unity among the districts. Thirteen is strong, and can match the Capitol in weapons technology, but their numbers are limited. We had all agreed that we needed a symbol - a living Mockingjay, if you will - for the other Rebel districts to rally behind. It's fortunate for me that Seneca Crane doesn't care for
travel, otherwise he may have gone on this Victory Tour instead of his Deputy Head Gamemaker - me."

"So why aren't you enjoying the festivities?" Haymitch asks.

"I made my appearance, performed my official duties, and excused myself to attend to 'pressing Games business.'" Plutarch replies with a smile. "Just as I'll do in each of the Rebel districts. That's the whole purpose of this meeting - each district needs to provide us with a Mockingjay candidate - if one such exists in that district, of course."

"You're wasting your time here," Haymitch growls. "You're talking about District Twelve! Two Victors - TWO - in the last seventy three years! Assuming, of course, that you want your 'Mockingjay' to be a Games Victor?"

"That would be desirable, yes," Plutarch says thoughtfully, "But a Tribute at the very least. This Rebellion is, after all, as much about the injustice of the Games as it's about overthrowing Snow's tyranny."

"Again, Plutarch, you're spinning your wheels here. I don't know if you noticed or not, but my Tributes have been anything but 'inspirational!'" Haymitch says in disgust.

"That's where I come in," the newcomer says quietly.

Haymitch snorts. "You? And what're you gonna do come next Reaping, Maysilee? Volunteer?"

"It's Madge, Mister Abernathy. Madge Undersee. Maysilee Donner is - was - my aunt." Madge replies firmly, glaring at Haymitch. "And yes, I'll volunteer if it comes to that -" at this Haymitch snorts again - "but I don't think it will. I have an idea."

"Little girl, this ain't no game we're playing here. This - this is HIGH TREASON! If we're caught, we'd be lucky to face hanging or a firing squad - at least they're quick! We're not playing around here - and neither is the Capitol!" Haymitch says angrily.

Madge looks at Haymitch for a long minute before replying. "No. No, I know we're not playing around here - and I know that the Capitol is not, either. Mister Abernathy, believe it or not, my mother - when she's lucid, anyway - speaks very highly of you. She talks about how you and my Aunt Maysilee were allies during the Games - and how you held her hand and stayed with her until she died. My mother knew that my aunt was active in the Rebellion, and I'm sure she suspects the same of me. Mister Abernathy, my aunt wanted what I want - what we all want - a free and just Panem. I think it's worth fighting - and even dying - for. Do you?"

Haymitch looks at Madge thoughtfully before replying. "Yes. Yes I do. Okay, Sweetheart. It's your funeral."

"Miss Undersee, let's hear your idea," Plutarch urges quietly.

"Mister Heavensbee, I assume that you want your Mockingjay to come from the ranks of the Tributes?" Madge asks.

Plutarch nods. "Yes, of course."

Madge continues, "And you're planning on 'fixing' the Reaping to insure that your Mockingjay candidate is Reaped?"

Plutarch shoots a look at Haymitch before replying. "Yes. If need be."
Haymitch snorts loudly in disgust. Madge ignores him and continues on. From a pocket she pulls out a small photograph and lays it on the table.

"Here's your female Tribute." she says simply.

Haymitch stares in disbelief at the photo. Plutarch picks it up, examines it, then deliberately lays it back on the table.

"Miss Undersee, we're being serious. Is this some kind of a joke?" he asks angrily.

"Believe me, Mister Heavensbee - it's no joke. If you want your Mockingjay, you need to Reap this girl." Madge replies.

Plutarch shakes his head. "What's her name?" he asks wearily.


73RD ANNUAL HUNGER GAMES VICTORY TOUR - DISTRICT TWELVE - JUSTICE BUILDING - CONFERENCE ROOM "C"

Haymitch slams his hand on the table. "Are you serious? She's what, twelve? And she's supposed to be the 'Mockingjay'?"

"Not her. And she's eleven. The next Reaping will be her first. This is the girl that we want," Madge says, as she places another picture on the table. "Katniss Everdeen. Her sister."

"Okay, you lost me," Haymitch says. "We want the older Everdeen girl - so we Reap her little sister? Why not just Reap - what's her name again? Katniss? Reap her directly?"

"I think I know where Miss Undersee is going with this," Plutarch says. "Please continue."

Madge is silent for a moment and both men see that she's fighting back tears. She makes a visible effort to maintain her composure before she speaks again.

"I - I'm sorry," she stammers. "It's just that - Katniss - she's the closest thing I have to a best friend."

With friends like you, who needs enemies? Haymitch says to himself, but keeps his face impassive.

"Do you need a moment, Miss Undersee?" Plutarch asks gently.

"No," Madge says firmly. "And to answer your question, Mister Abernathy - we Reap Primrose - 'Prim' to her friends and family - because then Katniss will volunteer for her."

"And that's your grand plan? Sweetheart, here's a news flash for you - District Twelve has never had a volunteer. EVER. How are you so sure that she'll be the first?" Haymitch exclaims.

"I know Katniss as well as anyone could know her," Madge says quietly. "She loves Primrose - more than life itself. I know she'll volunteer for her!"

"Miss Undersee," Plutarch says, "Reapings are stressful for everyone. People have been known to faint when they hear a loved one's name called. How will she volunteer if she faints?"

Madge takes a deep breath. "If that happens - I'll volunteer," she says in a firm voice.
"Oh, this just keeps getting better and better," Haymitch says with a humorless laugh. "You? Sweetheart, you'd be lucky to survive the bloodbath!"

"Mister Abernathy, you've no idea what I can or can't do - but it's moot, anyway - there's no way Katniss won't volunteer," Madge says confidently.

"Miss Undersee - I can see where her volunteering out of love for her sister would make an impression, considering that the last Non-Career volunteer was some twenty-eight years ago. But how will she do in the arena? I mean, she looks pretty small," Plutarch says.

"Katniss Everdeen will be Victor," Madge says with conviction.

"She's Seam, right?" Haymitch asks. Madge nods. "I thought so. If she makes it a day it'll be a freakin' miracle!"

"She hunts," Madge says quietly.

"Come again?" Plutarch asks.

"She hunts. In the forest. With Gale - with another Seam boy." Madge explains.

"How does that -" Plutarch begins, but Haymitch interrupts, snapping his fingers.

"The Hob," he says suddenly, then, "It's kind of an unofficial marketplace for the 'less affluent' here in Twelve."

"A black market, then," Plutarch says. "What's that got to do with this?"

"The Everdeen girl sells her kills - some of them, anyway - in the Hob. Squirrel, rabbit, beaver, even wild turkey. I hear she can shoot," Haymitch says.

"If you get Katniss a bow, she'll be unstoppable," Madge says. "She brings down squirrels with a shot to the eye at twenty meters, and hits rabbits at full run from the same distance. Plus, she can live off the land for days with no problem. If she has a bow, she will be Victor!"

"And therein lies the problem. Getting her the bow." Haymitch grumbles.

"Miss Undersee, I'm afraid I share Haymitch's - Mister Abernathy's - skepticism regarding this young lady being able to fight her way through the bloodbath to get to a bow. I can make sure that there is a bow - but the launch positions are drawn at random once the Tributes arrive at the arena. She could be five meters from the bow - or fifty." Plutarch leans back in his chair and rubs his chin thoughtfully.

"I've thought of that. She'll need an ally right from the start. Someone that will look out for her no matter what." Madge produces a third picture and lays it on the table. "Peeta Mellark. You Reap him and he will do everything in his power to make sure she wins."

Haymitch squints at the picture. "I've seen her with a boy at times in the Hob - but this is a Merchant boy. Her friend is definitely from the Seam."

Madge nods. "Gale Hawthorne. He hunts and traps with Katniss. He's almost as good with a bow as she is."

"Then why do you want to take this kid - Peety? Sounds like the Hawthorne kid would be a much better fit for her." Haymitch exclaims.
“It’s Pee-TA. I thought of Gale. He’s strong, smart, and knows the woods as well as Katniss. But he supports his mother, sister, and two brothers. In the end he’ll look out for himself, not Katniss.” Madge says.

“So - he wins instead of her. HE can be the ’Mockingjay.” Haymitch reasons.

Plutarch shakes his head. "No - if she's the one, and I'm beginning to think she is, she will be the Mockingjay - either as a live Victor or as a martyred Tribute. Either way, her story will be incredibly compelling. A poor outer district girl is the first from her district to volunteer as Tribute - out of love for her sister, no less. Every eye in Panem will be on her! However, Miss Undersee, why do you think this Mellark boy will help her?"

"Gentlemen, I have three friends in this entire district. Delly Cartwright - who's friends with everyone - Katniss Everdeen, and Peeta Mellark." Madge pauses for a moment and quickly dabs at her eyes before continuing in a trembling voice. "The fact that I'm willing to offer up my two best friends for Reaping should tell you just how important this is to me. And to answer your question, Mr. Heavensbee, Peeta Mellark will do anything, including die, to keep Katniss safe. He's been in love with her since they were five years old."

"So, we're hinging the success or failure of the ENTIRE rebellion on a schoolboy crush," Haymitch says in disgust.

"Mister Abernathy, it goes a lot deeper than that. This boy has taken beatings because of his feelings for her. He's the only ally that she could have that will be loyal to her to the very end!" The tears were running freely down Madge's face as she spoke.

"Do you think that his feelings truly run deep enough to help the Everdeen girl, no matter what?" Plutarch asks gently.

Madge wipes at her eyes furiously with the sleeve of her coat, and hesitates before giving her answer. "I'm positive."

"He's Liam Mellark's boy! He works in a bakery! How is that supposed to give him any skills that he'll need in the arena?" Haymitch asks.

"Have you ever seen him work, Mister Abernathy?" Madge asks. "In the square? Lugging huge sacks of flour? He's strong, Mister Abernathy! Plus, he placed second in wrestling at the school. That has to count for something!"

"Physical strength and fighting ability are valuable assets, Haymitch," Plutarch says thoughtfully. Haymitch simply grunts in response.

"And if on the chance that the Everdeen girl can't, or won't, volunteer?" Plutarch asks Madge.

"Then I will," Madge says firmly. "You'll have your Mockingjay, Mister Heavensbee - either as a live Victor or as a dead Tribute."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to your volunteering, Miss Undersee," Plutarch says grimly. "Because, if you do, we will have just Reaped this Peeta Mellark for nothing." Plutarch scoops up the photographs of Primrose, Katniss, and Peeta off the table. "May I keep these?"

"Certainly," Madge says. "I'm afraid I have to leave. My father will start to wonder if I'm gone too long."

"Of course," Plutarch says. "Just one more thing. The pin?"
“I'll wear it on Reaping Day. If you decide that Katniss is the one, I'll see her during Visiting Hour - I am her...friend...after all - and give the pin to her, and ask her to wear it as her District Token.” Madge says.

"Oh, great!” Haymitch sputters. "Why not just have her wear a "I'm the Mockingjay" sign? Snow's not stupid - he may be insane but he's as smart as they come! If she - or you, for that matter, Sweetheart - show up at the Remake Center wearing that beacon he'll know right away what it means! I'm sure Capitol Intelligence is aware of the Rebellion's use of the Mockingjay symbol!"

"Haymitch, calm down," Plutarch says tiredly. "That pin will not do anything more than raise an eyebrow or two. Stop worrying."

Haymitch grumbles but says nothing else. "Goodnight, Miss Undersee," Plutarch says, extending his hand, "And thank you."

"It's Madge," she says, taking his hand.

"Plutarch," he says, releasing her hand.

"Goodnight, Plutarch," Madge says, then turns to Haymitch. "I'll see you around - Haymitch." Madge turns and leaves the room quickly, shutting the door firmly behind her. Both men stand for a moment until her footsteps fade, then Haymitch turns to Plutarch.

"Please, please tell me you're not seriously considering her idea!" Haymitch pleads.

"On the contrary, I'm about ninety percent sure right now that I'm going to follow her suggestions," Plutarch says. "I just can't see us getting any better candidates from the other Rebel districts. But, I'll take a look at the others if there are any, and I'll send you a message once I return to the Capitol."

"This whole thing reeks, Plutarch. I want to go on record as stating that I oppose this whole scheme. It's bad enough to have to watch two kids chosen at random die every year - but this! This makes me wanna puke!" Haymitch spits.

"Your objection is noted, Haymitch," Plutarch says softly. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got some more work to do - and the Victors banquet should be winding down soon. Goodnight, Haymitch." Plutarch indicates the door. Haymitch exits first, followed by Plutarch. Fulvia falls in with them as they walk down the corridor, firmly taking Haymitch's arm and guiding him toward the same door he came through earlier. Wordlessly, she waits as he puts on his coat and gloves, then holds the door open for him.

The door slams shut as soon as Haymitch is through. Shivering against the cold, he starts his long, lonely walk back to Victor's Village. He's earned that drink - and many more.

I wonder if I can stay drunk for the next, oh, six months or so? he asks himself as his footsteps crunch through the newly fallen snow.

O'SULLIVAN'S PUB - DISTRICT TWELVE - THE NIGHT BEFORE REAPING DAY
FOR THE 74TH ANNUAL HUNGER GAMES

Haymitch Abernathy steps through the familiar doors of O'Sullivan's and scans the sparse crowd. Usually the pub would be doing a much brisker business on a Saturday night, but, with tomorrow being the Reaping, even the most dedicated drinkers usually opted to stay home with their families. Tomorrow night would be different, as the pub would be packed with fathers - and some mothers
too - celebrating another year of their children being allowed to live.

Haymitch chuckles humorlessly. If they only knew that their children were perfectly safe this year, he says to himself. He finally spots the person that he's looking for, a young, red-headed man in a Peacekeepers uniform, sitting alone at a table in back, nursing a glass of dark, smoky liquid.

Haymitch steps to the bar and exchanges pleasantries with Patrick O'Sullivan, the owner, before buying a full bottle of the same liquor that the young red-head was drinking, then carries the bottle and a glass back to the young man's table.

"Want another?" Haymitch asks as he reaches the table. The young man looks up at his visitor, then nods slowly and pushes the glass towards Haymitch. Haymitch fills the glass, then his own, and sits down.

"How you doing, Darius?" Haymitch asks, tasting his drink.

"Probably better than you, Mister Abernathy," the young man - Darius - answers, taking a swallow of his own drink.

"That's the truth," Haymitch agrees.

Darius leans closer. "Are you crazy?" he hisses. "Us being seen together is not a good idea, Haymitch!"


"Make it quick, then. What do you want?" Darius says quietly.

"You've got Burn duty tomorrow after the Reaping?" Haymitch asks.

"Yeah, I - hey, wait a minute! How do you know? The duty roster's in Cray's office!"

"I know. I was in there earlier in the afternoon. Brought him a nice bottle to help him celebrate the Reaping - and caught a glimpse of the roster." Haymitch explains.

"Okay, so I have Burn duty. So what?" Darius asks grumpily.

Haymitch reaches into a jacket pocket and extracts a drawstring bag. He sets the bag in front of Darius. Both men could hear the jingle of coins in the bag.

"I need you to bring me some Slips from each Reaping Ball," Haymitch explains. "This little - gift - is for you. For going above and beyond what's expected of you."

"Reaping Slips? Do you have any idea how much trouble I'd be in if I were caught?" Darius says, while eyeing the bag.

"A lot, obviously," Haymitch says dryly. "Thus, my little - gift."

"How many?" Darius asks reluctantly.

"A handful of each, Boys and Girls," Haymitch replies. "I know you can do it. The Burn barrel is behind the Justice Building hidden by a fence. No one else will go back there."

Suddenly, Darius pockets the bag. "Okay. As long as it's helping the cause."
"It is," Haymitch lies. He stands up.

"See you tomorrow, Darius. Keep the bottle." Haymitch turns to go.


"Why?" Darius asks. Haymitch hesitates for a moment before answering.


"See you, Haymitch," he says simply, as he pours himself another drink.

JUSTICE BUILDING - DISTRICT TWELVE - REAPING DAY - 74TH ANNUAL HUNGER GAMES

"He's in there, Officer Potter," Effie Trinket says, indicating a door. "It's anyone's guess if he's lucid enough to sign the Reaping Certification, though."

"Thank you, ma'am," Darius says. "And the law says he has to sign." Darius pushes down on the door latch and steps into the small room. There, sprawled on the couch, lay Haymitch Abernathy, an ice pack pressed to his head.

"Sir?" Darius calls out in a low voice. "Are you awake? I have the Certification for you to sign." Darius closes the door behind him, wondering if his pounding heart could be heard outside this room.

Haymitch groans loudly as he sits up. "Yeah, yeah - I'm awake. Gimme the form." Taking the clipboard from Darius, he gives the younger man a knowing glance as he scribbles his signature.

Darius quickly digs in his pockets and hastily deposits a double handful of crumpled paper slips into two piles. Sweating profusely, he snatches up his clipboard and beats a quick exit from the room, mumbling something about giving his copy of the Certification to the Escort.

Haymitch mumbles his thanks as the door closes, then he quickly scoops up the two handfuls of paper and stuffs them both into inside pockets of his suit jacket, then straightens his jacket and walks with exaggerated dignity out of the room.

"Haymitch? Are you quite alright? That was a nasty fall you took!" Effie says, fussing around Haymitch. He impatiently brushes her off.

"I'll see you on the train, Effie," Haymitch says as her turns to go.

"Wait! The - our Tributes aren't done with their Goodbyes yet! Aren't you going to wait and ride with us?" Effie asks.

"Effie, Escorting is your job," Haymitch says with a belch, causing Effie to look at him in disgust. "Mentoring is mine - and I need to get settled in before I get slammed with a thousand and one questions." Not to mention being unable to look either Tribute in the eye - yet, Haymitch says to himself.

Effie opens her mouth to speak, but Haymitch quickly puts his hand up. "I'll see you on the train, Effie." He turns and walks away with exaggerated dignity, leaving Effie to tend to their new Tributes - Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark.
Slipping unnoticed by taking back streets, Haymitch quickly arrives at the train station, then boards the train once he's cleared by the Peacekeeper on duty there. Once on the train, he heads directly to his berth, shutting and locking the door.

Haymitch quickly empties his pockets and lays the Reaping Slips out on the small table in his berth. He selects the best twenty out of each batch, and selects two large books from the shelf over his bed. He carefully arranges each batch of slips inside the jacket of each book, then closes the covers of both carefully. He'll transfer them to the leather bound volume later, once he receives it from Effie.

Opening a small window in the bathroom, he puts the remainder of the slips in a small metal trashcan, and adds one more small piece of paper to the pile. The note that Plutarch had sent him after he had returned to the Capitol following the Victory Tour. On it were written two words:

TWELVE WINS

Striking a match, Haymitch drops the match into the mass of paper and watches it flare up quickly. He holds the trash can close to the window to allow the smoke to vent, hoping that no one will notice smoke coming from his bathroom window. No one does. After the small fire dies out, Haymitch carefully pours the ash into the toilet and flushes, then wipes the trash can clean with a hand towel. Soon the evidence of the small fire is gone.

Opening a silver flask, he takes a deep pull, then wipes his mouth as he swallows. From the sounds outside his berth Effie and the Tributes must have arrived. Looking at the two books on the desk, he says one word.

"Insurance."

PEETA

I sit for a moment, dumbfounded by the story that Haymitch just told me. My brain had been still a little fuzzy from the auto injection I had given myself - but the cobwebs were completely gone now. One inescapable fact penetrates my mind.

We were set up - completely, deliberately, set up.

Haymitch is sitting back in his chair, looking at me, waiting for me to say something. I can feel my anger rising up from deep inside, yet somehow I remain outwardly calm.

"You son of a bitch," I say quietly. "You bastard. You let them - you let them almost kill us! And Madge! I thought - I thought she was my friend!" Unbidden, my thoughts drift back to a time over a year and a half ago - to a night when Madge, coming to me to comfort me in my darkest days since becoming a Victor with Katniss, instead found herself being comforted by me - in an extraordinarily intimate way. I had always thought that what we shared strengthened our friendship - until now.

"She was your friend, Peeta," Haymitch says in a soft voice.

"Bullshit," I say in a flat tone. "I don't even know this Madge - this 'Rebellion' Madge!" I can feel tears rising up from deep inside...tears of rage, and of betrayal.

"It wasn't easy for her, kid," Haymitch says. "And I hope you understand that I hated the idea. But it had to be done - I know that now. The Rebellion was stagnant - it needed a spark. Without Katniss - and you - well, the Seventy-Sixth Annual Hunger Games would be going on right about
now - with no end in sight."

"You should have -" I begin to say, before Haymitch cuts me off.

"Should have what? Told you? 'Hey listen, you two - nothing personal, but your Reaping was set up. Why? Well, you're the face of the Rebellion, whether you want to be or not!'" Haymitch snaps.

I say nothing. What's there to say now? I just feel - betrayed. By Haymitch, by that unmitigated bastard Plutarch Heavensbee, but most of all by Madge Undersee.

I reach forward deliberately, carefully picking up and replacing the Reaping Slips back in the binding of the volume. Once I smooth out the leather cover, I carefully close the volume.

"You should go," I say in a toneless voice. "Katniss will be home soon."

Haymitch slowly stands up. "Peeta - for what little it's worth - I am deeply sorry about - well, everything." I stare at him, not trusting myself to speak.

Haymitch turns to go, then asks, "Are you gonna tell her?"

I hesitate for just a moment before answering.

"I don't know. I haven't decided."

Haymitch walks to the door. Before he leaves, he says, "I just want you to know - whatever you decide - I understand. I also want you to know that I - I love you both."

And with that, Haymitch is gone. I stare at the door for long minutes after he leaves, then, carefully standing up, I pick up the volume and slowly make my way back into the living room. I open the chest, sliding the volume back into its space, then close and lock the chest.

Then, and only then, do I sit on the couch and allow myself to cry.
I toss and turn for hours, trying in vain to catch at least a little sleep. I'm just too keyed up. Fear, excitement, adrenaline pumping through me, fear - mostly fear. Tomorrow, Katniss and I enter the arena, along with twenty two other Tributes - all of whom will be doing their absolute level best to kill us both.

Katniss. Tonight I did something that's been building up inside me for eleven long years. Tonight, Katniss finally discovered that I love her. The problem is, so did the entire nation of Panem.

I sigh, rolling over angrily in my soft, luxurious bed. Maybe, I say to myself, Maybe letting her know during my interview with Caesar Flickerman wasn't such a hot idea after all, but almost instantly that thought is replaced by Yes! It was absolutely the right thing to do! She needs sponsors and that will guarantee that she gets help in the arena. These thoughts have been racing through my head ever since the show ended. Everyone - Haymitch, Effie, Cinna, Portia - thought it was brilliant. Everyone, of course - except the only one that counts. Katniss.

I gingerly flex my fingers, grimacing at the lingering soreness in my hands. The Capitol medics worked wonders on my hands - cut after stumbling into a vase, then falling into the broken shards after Katniss shoved me - but they still hurt. Or was it my pride that was hurt? All I know is that Katniss was furious with my declaration - and, as far as I know, still is.

I flip back over onto my other side, sighing heavily. What am I doing? I say to myself again, I'm going into the arena in a matter of hours, and I'm worried whether or not Katniss is mad at me? I fling the covers back angrily and roll out of bed. I slip my feet into a pair of sandals and open my bedroom door, glancing quickly at Katniss's door. I don't see any light coming from under the door and turn away glumly.

I move quietly through what Effie calls the "penthouse," heading towards the door to the roof. I need some fresh air. Maybe that will help me sleep. The door to the roof is closed but not locked. I open it and slip through, leaving it ajar behind me in case it locks from the other side. I chuckle a little, thinking about how frantic Effie would be in the morning if I turned up missing.

I walk quietly across the tiled roof to the edge. Below me, I can hear sounds - shouting, music, car horns, singing - and I realize that all these parties taking place fourteen floors below me are for us. The Tributes. The Capitol is celebrating yet another Hunger Games. I sit near the edge and look down at the revelry, shaking my head in disgust. Everywhere else in Panem the Hunger Games are dreaded. Here, they're celebrated. I find myself lost in thought and don't hear Katniss approach until she speaks.

"You should be getting some sleep," she says quietly. In spite of myself, I jump a little, startled at her sudden appearance, but I recover quickly. Without turning to face her, I just shake my head a little.

"I didn't want to miss the party. It's for us, after all," I reply. Katniss glides up next to me and I see her leaning over the railing, looking down at the busy street below.
"Are they in costume?" Katniss asks, referring to the tiny dancing figures on the street far below. I shrug my shoulders.

"Who could tell?" I reply. "With all the crazy clothes they wear here. Couldn't sleep, either?"

"Couldn't turn my mind off," Katniss replies softly. I feel a slight pang for her.

"Thinking about your family?" I ask.

"No." Katniss replies. "All I can do is wonder about tomorrow. Which is pointless, of course." She turns to face me and I see her eyes flicker down to my throbbing, bandaged hands. "I really am sorry about your hands," she says.

"It doesn't matter, Katniss," I say with a small smile. "I've never been a contender in these Games, anyway."

"That's no way to be thinking," Katniss says.

"Why not?" I say, trying to keep the bitterness out of my voice. "It's true. My best hope is to not disgrace myself and..." what I want to say is something like "die protecting you" but I know that would just upset her all over again.

"And what?" She asks.

"I don't know how to say it exactly." I can't tell her what I'm really thinking. "Only...I want to die as myself. Does that make any sense?" Inwardly I groan at just how completely lame that sounded. Katniss shakes her head, obviously puzzled.

"I don't want them to change me in there," I explain. "Turn me into some kind of monster that I'm not." Okay, that part is true enough.

Katniss drops her eyes from mine as she asks, "Does that mean you won't kill anyone?"

"No, when the time comes, I'm sure I'll kill just like everybody else," I say. "I can't go down without a fight. Only I keep wishing that I could think of a way to...to show the Capitol they don't own me. That I'm more than just a piece in their Games."

"But you're not," Katniss says gently. "None of us are. That's how the Games work."

"Okay, but within that framework, there's still you, there's still me," I reply insistently. "Don't you see?" Please, Katniss, please understand what I'm trying to tell you here!

"A little," she replies. "Only...no offense, but who cares, Peeta?"

"I do," I say angrily. "I mean, what else am I allowed to care about at this point?" I look her straight in the eye. It's about you, Katniss...and getting you home alive! Try to see that!

Instead, Katniss steps back, breaking our eye contact. "Care about what Haymitch said. About staying alive."

She didn't get it. "Okay," I say with a humorless smile. "Thanks for the tip, sweetheart."

I see anger flash in her eyes and I know that I crossed some invisible line with that last remark. "Look," she snaps, "If you want to spend the last hours of your life planning some noble death in the arena, that's your choice. I want to spend mine in District Twelve."
"Wouldn't surprise me if you do," I say with a touch of sadness in my voice. "Give my mother my best when you make it back, will you?"

"Count on it," she says, spinning on her heel and quickly leaving the roof.

PART I

That I'm more than just a piece in their Games.

That phrase turns over and over in my head. I had spent the last two years thinking that my being Reaped was just a matter of random chance, when, in fact, I had no chance. None. Or, as the saying goes, "The odds were never in my favor."

I sit on the couch, staring at the big locked chest on the floor. Katniss will be home soon. I've already decided that I'm telling her everything. She has as much right to know the truth as I did. Even now, I'm still trying to process everything that Haymitch told me. Even now, just thinking about it makes me furious! The only problem is - who, or what, exactly am I angry at?

Am I angry at Haymitch Abernathy, our Mentor? He certainly is guilty of keeping the truth from both Katniss and I - what some would call "a lie of omission," but, by his own admission, he was dead set against the idea of us being deliberately Reaped in the first place. And, let's face it, he didn't even know anything about us until that meeting between him, Madge and Plutarch. All he knew of us was some vague recollection of me in the bakery and Katniss in the Hob. In effect, we were total strangers to him up until that night.

Then there's Plutarch. Capitol citizen and Gamemaker extraordinaire. A chess master who prided himself on his canny moves and counter moves. If there was any one person that could be accused of using us as "a piece in their Games," it was Plutarch Heavensbee. To him, that's exactly what we were. He was ready to use Katniss as his Mockingjay, dead or alive. As a dead Tribute her face would be held up as a martyr for the Rebellion - alive she would serve as the face of the Rebellion. Oh, but how he was ready to spin her in any way he needed to for his own end. But, his symbol could have come from any number of other Districts. There certainly was no malice in his decision.

And lastly - Madge Undersee. A girl that had been my friend for as far back as I could remember, and whose earthly remains now reside in a massive pit in the Meadow, covered over with a mound of fresh earth. It was a huge shock to me that she was as deeply involved in the Rebellion as she turned out to be. And, to listen to Haymitch's version of events, she was quite upset by her own decision to offer up both Katniss and I as Tributes, all so that Katniss would become the face of the Rebellion - even going so far as to claim that if Katniss didn't volunteer for Prim, she would, and go in Prim's place. By rights, she's the only one that "betrayed" us - and it tore her up to do it.

There were others involved: Darius the Peacekeeper - who, I was shocked to learn, was part of the Rebellion also. Effie almost certainly, although Haymitch never admitted as much. Fulvia Cardew, Plutarch's loyal assistant. But was I angry at any of them? Really?

I'm still trying to make up my mind at exactly who I'm angry at when Katniss comes home.

PART II

"Peeta?" Katniss calls out.

"In here," I answer. I clumsily haul myself to my feet. Katniss walks into the living room. I can see that she's already taken off her boots and there's flecks of dried mud on her clothes.
Smiling, she walks straight into my arms for a hug and a kiss. I gladly provide both to her.

Glancing down, she asks, "How's your leg?"

"Still a little unsteady," I reply. "But Galen said that by tomorrow all of the upgrades should be 'settled in' and that I can put away the cane. How was your fishing lesson with Rory?"

Katniss waves her hand at her muddied clothing. "See for yourself. That boy has a talent for finding every muddy spot on the bank! But, we had a good catch. I showed him how to clean them - that's what he should be doing right now, over at Haymitch's. I thought we could have them for dinner tonight. I got some nice edible plants to go along with them."

Katniss is looking at me quizzically and I realize that I must have given something away in my face when she mentioned Haymitch's name. *She's not the only one who would lose her last coin at cards*, I say to myself.

"Something wrong?" she asks. I sigh inwardly. No use in trying to hide anything, still -

"There's something that I need to talk to you about," I say. There. It's out.

"Okay," Katniss says with a smile, pulling me down to sit next to her on the couch.

"Listen, I - there's some things I need to show you, also. Things that Haymitch gave us. Why don't you get cleaned up and change first - give me a chance to get everything out," I stammer.

"What is it, Peeta?" Katniss asks. Her smile has disappeared.

"It's - well, it's easier if I show you. And I need to get things - well, organized first. Okay?" I'm almost pleading with her. She sits, staring at me, unconvinced.

I take both her hands in mine. "Katniss - I promise that this has nothing at all to do with how you and I feel about each other. I love you so much! Just trust me - besides, you do kinda smell like fish." I give her a smile when I mention the fishy odor and it seems to make her relax just a bit. Tentatively, she returns my smile, then leans in and kisses me.

"Okay. You know I trust you, Peeta. As much as I love you." She puts her hand on my cheek briefly then stands up. "I'll be right back - then we'll talk."

"Promise," I say as she leaves the room. I go over to the chest and unlock it, pulling out the 74th Hunger Games volume and setting it on the low table. I open the volume and carefully peel back the leather binding, revealing the Reaping Slips. I remove several from both the front and the back of the volume, setting them on the table. Hauling myself to my feet, I make my way into the kitchen and start water on the stove for tea. Upstairs I can hear the sound of water running in the shower.

As I wait for the water to boil, Buttercup jumps up onto the countertop and meows plaintively. I scratch the ugly little cat behind one bedraggled ear, hearing the contented purr in response.

"You better not let Katniss catch you up on the counter, Buttercup," I say softly. "You know how she is about you on kitchen counters." Buttercup's ears flatten back against his head at the sound of Katniss's name, but his purring never stops. I hear the teapot start to whistle and turn to take it off the heat and pour the water into the two cups. I cast one last glance at Buttercup and the cat obediently jumps off the counter. I carefully carry the cups, one at a time, into the living room. I settle myself back on the couch and wait anxiously for Katniss.
A few moments later I hear her light tread skipping down the stairs. She appears in the living room a few moments later, changed into shorts and a light top, her hair neatly braided. I try to give her a reassuring smile but I can see that the look on her face is - uncertain. I pat the couch next to me and she walks over and sits down.

"I made some tea," I say, pointing at her cup, but her attention is on the volume and the Reaping Slips.

"Is this it?" Katniss asks. "The Volume from our Games?" She shoots me an accusing look. We had never talked about our volume but we had what can best be described as an unspoken agreement to leave it alone.

"The other day," I begin, "The day Galen installed the upgrades in my leg, I - well, I was going stir crazy. I got curious, so I pulled our volume out. I guess I just wanted to see what Haymitch wrote about us. If you're mad, I'm sorry," I finish contritely.

"I'm not mad," Katniss says tightly - and just a shade too quickly. I glance at her face - her eyes were flashing and her lips were set in a tight line. I recognize the look - she was angry, all right. Well, it's only gonna get worse, I say to myself.

"What's this?" she asks, picking up one of the Reaping Slips - mine, I see - then another from the other pile. She opens it and gasps.

"Are these - these - what I think -?" she stammers. I nod and explain what happened.

"When I was looking at the book, the leather binding caught on the joint on my Robo-leg - here," I say, indicating the spot where the binding caught. "It popped the stitching out and the binding peeled back. That's when I saw - these." I point at the Slips.

Katniss is staring at the Slip in her hand. I glance at her face and see tears welling up in her eyes.

"Prim," she whispers softly, clutching the Slip. "And - you, Peeta. But - there's so many!" She turns and looks at me, anger clouding her face again.

"You knew about this two days ago - and said nothing to me?" she snaps.

"I wanted to talk to Haymitch first and find out why he had these," I say quickly. "I wanted an explanation for - all this - before I said anything to you." Thankfully, I see her face soften a bit and see her relax.

"So, I'm assuming you talked to him?" she asks, her voice softer now.

"I did," I say. "It took one of these - I tap my box of auto injectors - to get through it, but I got an explanation out of him."

The anger drains from Katniss's face, replaced immediately by concern. "Oh no, Peeta! You - you needed one? Have you spoken with Galen? Did it - did it work?"

I take Katniss's hand in mine. "Yes, I needed one," I say gently, "And no, I haven't spoken with Galen - yet. And yes, it worked just fine."

"And here I was, getting mad at you, when all you were trying to do was get the whole story before telling me," Katniss says quietly, fresh tears forming in her eyes. "Here you are, still trying to protect me after two years."
I touch her face with my free hand, wiping her tears away with my thumb. "Two years, or two hundred two years, it makes no difference. I'll always try to protect you, Katniss. I love you."

Katniss suddenly leans forward, kissing me gently and whispering, "I love you, too." She pulls back away from me and looks at the Slips again. Taking a deep breath, she says, "Okay, tell me what Haymitch told you. I'm sure I won't like it - so let's get it over with."

I take a sip of my tea and notice that Katniss does the same. Taking a deep breath of my own, I begin to talk.

PART III

I finish the story that Haymitch told me earlier. Katniss had been remarkably calm and composed while I spoke, only interrupting a few times to ask a question or to clarify something. Her face, though, was drained of color as I relayed to her how the both of us had been set up by the Rebellion.

I look down at her hands, now tightly clenched. Gently I pry her fingers open and remove the crumpled remains of the Reaping Slips that she had been clutching. The touch of my hand seems to break the little trance that she seemed to have settled into. She blinks her eyes rapidly, stares down at her lap for a moment, then reaches for her tea cup. She picks up the cup with trembling hands and quickly drains the cooled tea, then carefully sets the cup down.

I sit quietly, waiting for her to speak. Finally, she turns to me and says, "You did the right thing by not saying anything until you knew the whole story. I'm sorry for getting angry."

"No need to apologize, Katniss," I say gently, taking her hand in mine once again. She grips my hand almost desperately, as a small, almost inaudible whimper escapes her throat.

"Bastards," she whispers. "Filthy, lying bastards." Suddenly she drops my hand and springs to her feet. Turning, she strides toward the front door.

Struggling to my feet, I call after her. "Katniss! Where are you going?"

Stopping at the front door, she whirls around to face me. "One guess!" she snaps, stepping through the door and slamming it shut behind her.

"Shit!" I mutter, grabbing my cane and hobbling as fast as I could after her. Exiting the house, I make my way down the walk, and as I turn towards Haymitch's house I can hear the sounds of shouting coming from our Mentor's home. I move as quickly as I can but feel like I'm walking through molasses as I reach Haymitch's wide open front door.

I enter the house and follow the sounds of shouting to the kitchen. I take in the tableau before me in a single glance. Haymitch, sitting in his usual spot at the table, sprawled back in his chair, the shattered remains of a liquor bottle at his feet. Rory, standing at the kitchen counter, a knife in his hand, several gutted fish laid out before him. Sae, standing in front of Haymitch - and Katniss, being restrained by Sae's hands on her slim shoulders, shouting accusations at our Mentor, who, I can now see, has a well defined red palm imprint on his face.

"Katniss!" I bark loudly. From the way everyone jumps, it's apparent that no one noticed me enter. "Katniss! No!"

Katniss whirls around, her face a mask of pent up rage. "No? No, Peeta? After what they did? After what he allowed them to do? And you're what - protecting him?" Her chest was heaving and her eyes flashing. Sae was still holding on to her. I look past her at Haymitch, who looked -
"No," I say firmly. "I'm not protecting him, or taking his side. But did you listen to me? Haymitch was against using you - using us - to further the Rebellion's cause."

"He says that now!" Katniss snaps. "And there's no one around to contradict him!"

"Am I allowed to talk? Or are you gonna condemn me without a trial?" Haymitch asks. Katniss and I both turn to look at him. He sits up in his chair, then slowly gets to his feet. "Let's go in the living room," he says quietly. "Peeta, did you bring the volume of your Games with you?" I shake my head. "We'll need that. Rory, can you run over to Katniss's house and get something for me?" I quickly explain to Rory what Haymitch needs. He nods and runs out of the room. An angry Katniss and I follow Haymitch into his living room. He points to chairs and we sit. He settles heavily into a third chair.

"How far did you get in reading my notes, Peeta?" Haymitch asks.

"Not very far," I admit. "I stopped pretty much after I found - the Slips." Haymitch nods.

"You two never had the - honor - of serving as Mentors. Otherwise, you would have discovered, as I did, that a Mentors Games Volume with the Tribute Portfolios was pretty much the only item in Panem not subject to inspection or search by the Peacekeepers. Something in the fine print in one of the Articles of the Treaty of Treason about the sanctity of the Games, and confidentiality between Mentors and Tributes...keeping strategies secret, and all that." Haymitch pauses as Rory returns, clutching the leather bound volume. Haymitch takes it from him and thanks him, then firmly asks him to leave and to shut the door behind him.

Once the door is shut, Haymitch opens the volume, then hands it to me. "I want you both to go through my notes - the ones I took on you two."

"And just what are we supposed to be looking for?" Katniss asks sharply, glaring at Haymitch.

"You'll know when you read it," is all Haymitch would say. Shaking her head, Katniss starts leafing through the pages of notes with me. We quickly skip over the few that I had already read and had shared with Katniss. Some pages appeared to be nothing more than random doodles. Katniss angrily turns page after page of gibberish and is about to quickly turn another page when I stop her.

"Mtg w/Cinna & Portia - told them their chosen ones in Remake. Cinna promised a spectacle."

We both skim down the page to another entry:

"Tribute parade. Unforgettable as promised. Damn PH to hell."

"PH," Katniss whispers. "Plutarch Heavensbee?"

"Unless you know another PH," Haymitch replies. "Read on."

Together we turn to the next page and another entry:

"Parade recap. K almost looks pleased. P the same. Hope PH and M are happy."

"Madge," Katniss whispers again. Haymitch nods and gestures with his hand. Another entry: "Kids in tng. Mtg w/PH. Tried to get a promise of no mutts for either one. Best he
could do was no mutts on his shift. AH."


More entries: "Tng scores. Holy shit an 8 and an 11! Maybe M right after all."

"Interview prep. P easy to work with. K surly. Worried about her. I like them both, especially P. Gonna be my hardest Games ever."

"Interviews. K- better than I hoped. P - incredible. K pissed at P now. They're in bed. Really hate myself right now."

"Launch day. Hope they both listened to me. M are you watching? You better be."

Katniss straightens up and slowly closes the book. "I've seen enough," she says.

"Were you planning on ever telling us?" Katniss asks Haymitch.

"I don't know," he replies. "Do you believe me?"

"You've held things from us before - but you've never lied outright. Yes, I believe you." Katniss admits.

"If you're gonna be mad, there's a whole lot of other people involved in this mess to be mad at. Darius, our esteemed Peacekeeper - remember him? And both Cinna and Portia were neck deep in it, too." Haymitch says. Katniss looks at him in surprise.

"Oh yes, Sweetheart. I know how fond you were of Cinna. But think about it - he was a rising star of the world of Capitol fashion. Being a Games Stylist is a feather in any designer's cap. And this rising star asks for District Twelve? And then proceeds to completely dazzle everyone with that whole "Girl on Fire" costume? He knew months before the Reaping that you were coming to him!"

"But - what if it wasn't me? What if - Madge - what if she ended up having to volunteer like you said she said she would? Or - what if Prim had to - had to go anyway?" Katniss asks.

"Then Madge would have been the Girl on Fire. And if Prim had ended up going, Cinna had a whole different look planned for her and Prim - something more District Twelve 'traditional.' The Girl on Fire costume was a signal - to all the other districts that were in Rebellion. That this girl was the Mockingjay. It was that simple," Haymitch says.

"For months, I had to live with this," Haymitch murmurs, almost to himself. "Hating the idea the whole time. Hoping Plutarch would find someone else. Do you remember how drunk I was on Reaping Day?"

Katniss and I both nod and say, "Yes."

"I've never been that drunk at a Reaping before. Falling off the stage, knocking myself out. And all because of what they were doing to you two." Haymitch says bitterly.

"You really didn't want this to happen to us, did you?" Katniss asks quietly.

Haymitch lets out a barking, humorless laugh. "Oh, finally she gets it! No, Sweetheart, I didn't. It's one thing to draw someone's name at random - that's chance. But this - like it or not, Plutarch made both of you a part of the Rebellion - against your will! You wanna know why I kept those Reaping Slips? Huh? Because Plutarch is a master at covering his own tracks, that's why! If something had
gone wrong - and there were about a thousand things that could go wrong - I wanted...no, needed...something to hold over him. There was no guarantee - none - that he was gonna successfully spin you into the Mockingjay martyr if you didn't make it. And I was not gonna let your death get swept aside. Oh no - I was gonna make him pay!"

"How?" Katniss and I both ask skeptically.

"Reparations to your families," Haymitch says. Katniss and I glance at each other. Reparations? All families of dead Tributes ever got was a coffin and a burial. No families ever got reparations.

"There was a special non-discretionary fund available to Gamemakers that the other Mentors called 'The Career Fund.'" Haymitch explained. "Gamemakers would pay families of dead Careers a reparation if both Careers from that district died during that particular Games. It was their way of 'encouraging' continued volunteering from the Career districts. And I was planning on tapping into that for both your families."

"So, the families of Cato and Clove, Marvel and Glimmer - all got paid?" Katniss asks.

"The money probably went back to their districts with their bodies," Haymitch replies.


Katniss stands up. "I'm sorry I hit you," she tells Haymitch.

"I deserved it," Haymitch says simply. Katniss walks out of the room. Haymitch and I exchange looks, wondering where she went, but she reappears less than a minute later.

"I was just telling Rory to wrap and freeze those fish. We'll have them another night. I'm not particularly hungry - and I don't feel much like company tonight," she says to me, then turns to Haymitch. Haymitch stands up slowly.

"Thank you - for being honest with me - with us," Katniss says to Haymitch.

"I said this to Peeta earlier - and I'll say it again for you. I really do love you both," Haymitch says quietly.

Katniss turns one last time and looks at Haymitch. "I know," she says simply, before turning and walking out of Haymitch's house.

I say my goodbyes to Haymitch and hurry after Katniss, but by the time I get back to the house, she's upstairs, in our room, with the door closed. I don't check to see if the door is locked. I make my way downstairs and, after a while, put together a simple meal. I prepare a plate and carry it upstairs.

I open the bedroom door. "Katniss, are you hungry?" I ask.

"No," is her only reply. I shut the door and carry the plate downstairs, where I cover it with a towel and place it in the oven, just in case.

After a while, I eat without her. Then, when it's dark, I climb the stairs and quickly get undressed in our dark room, then slip into bed beside her. I don't move to hold her or take her in my arms. I lay quietly on my back, staring at the ceiling.

After a few minutes, I feel the bed shake slightly as Katniss shifts around. I feel her arm snake across my chest as she snuggles close to me. She lays her head lightly on my chest and I can feel
her breathing.

Still, I lay there quietly - until I can feel her shoulders shaking slightly and I feel a moist warmth on my chest. I slip my arm around Katniss's shoulders, and, without a word, hold her close to me as she very quietly cries.
I lay awake for the seventh straight night, my eyes straining into the darkness. Beside me, Peeta stirs restlessly and moans softly, muttering something unintelligible, tossing abruptly onto his side. I can tell he's having a nightmare, but, for a change, he's the one that's vocal and restless, while my nightmares have taken on his usual quality of my being awakened by terror so paralyzing that I can't move or make a sound.

For seven consecutive nights my nightmares have followed the same theme - I'm at the Reaping, and Prim's name is called, and I dutifully volunteer. But instead of Effie drawing the names, sometimes it's Haymitch, sometimes Plutarch, sometimes Madge - and once it was even Darius Potter, the Peacekeeper. But no matter who it is, when I volunteer, I always see Madge standing on the stage, grinning and nudging Haymitch and Plutarch in the ribs with her elbow, whispering, "See? I told you this bitch would be stupid enough to volunteer for her brat sister!"

And that's when I wake up - heart ready to burst from my chest, clammy in a cold sweat, my t-shirt and shorts sticking to me. Oh yes, I've stopped sleeping naked, because, you see, that glorious place that Peeta and I had discovered together - well, it vanished a week ago - as soon as our betrayal was revealed to me. It vanished as if it never existed, and we've regressed weeks - no, months. And I feel horrible about it.

Peeta. How my heart absolutely is breaking for this incredibly sweet, loving boy - no, man - that I truly, sincerely love with all my heart and soul. Peeta senses the change that's come over me - that's come between us - and hasn't pushed things even one time. He holds me every night when I cry, and I go into his arms willingly, gladly, and we drift off to sleep like that - but when I awaken, we are as far apart in bed as we can possibly be without one of us actually falling out - backs turned to each other - total strangers so deeply, incredibly in love with each other.

Peeta tries, he really does, every single day. He tells me he loves me, but the best I can manage is, "I know. Me too." And I see the pain and disappointment in his eyes when, once again, I can't say the words that he is so desperate to hear - the words that I'm so desperate to say...but can't.

Damn Haymitch. Damn Plutarch. And damn that lying bitch, Madge - may she rot in hell!

Peeta has tried, every day, to gently point out, from us reading Haymitch's notes, to re-hashing our conversation with him, that Haymitch was as much a victim in this as Peeta and I were. I want to scream that I know this! In my head, at least - but it's my heart that needs convincing.

Sighing in frustration, I kick the covers off of me and roll out of bed. I can hear Peeta's breathing change suddenly at my movement - and I know that he, too, is wide awake. But he says nothing.

Silently, I pad to the bedroom door, open it, and make my way in the darkness down the stairs. Only when I reach the kitchen do I turn on a light. I squint a little at the sudden brightness, then fumble in the refrigerator for a bottle of cold milk. I pour some milk into a pan and set it on the stove over low heat. While the milk starts to heat I find some honey in the cupboard, along with a little cinnamon and nutmeg. I remove the milk from the stove top and pour it carefully into a ceramic mug, adding the honey, cinnamon, and nutmeg. I carefully carry my drink into the living room and curl up on the couch, sitting in the darkness sipping the warm milk, and thinking back to
the first time I had milk this way.

It was after our second Reaping - the one where both of us knew that we had been set up - and Peeta and I were on the Tribute Train, headed to the Capitol and our second turn in the Games. Peeta had been up late watching videos of the Tributes that we knew we would have to face. I had been unable to sleep and the Capitol attendant had offered to bring me warm milk to help me sleep. Peeta and I were sharing a real, unscripted embrace when the attendant brought the pitcher of milk and two mugs for us to share.

I had told Peeta that I was sure that I loved him after he ran into that force field in the clock arena and his heart had stopped. Only Finnick Odair, using a life saving technique that he had learned in District Four, had been able to revive him. But for a few moments I was sure that I had lost him - sure that Peeta was dead - and my joy when he opened his eyes was real. So yes, I told him that's when I knew that I really loved him. And I had lied.

My epiphany had come, not in that hot, humid arena, with death all around us - but on a train, in the middle of the night, wrapped in his warm embrace. The words "I love you" were in my throat and a second from passing through my lips when the attendant interrupted us with the milk. The same milk that I was drinking tonight. And it took me one solid year for me to be able to say those words to him - and now, I can't even do that for him anymore.

I suddenly feel my eyes stinging with tears once again at the thought. Shit, I say to myself while trying - unsuccessfully - to sniffle back my tears, I cry so much that I should be used to it. But I'm not. I'm so lost in thought that I fail to hear Peeta come in to the room.

"Katniss?" he says tentatively. I jump a little, startled at his quiet approach. He's walking completely normally now and hasn't needed the cane in days.

I frantically try to quietly sniffle back my tears as I choke out, "Couldn't sleep." Peeta offers a small smile at that revelation and takes a seat - in the chair across from the couch.

He reaches forward and picks up the mug off of the low table, curiously sniffing the concoction, then tasting it. I see his eyes light up briefly as the memory hits him and another, larger smile crosses his face - not remembering the Games, but the tender moment we had shared - before a mask descends across his features and he deliberately sets the mug back down on the table.

"Would you like to talk?" he asks, almost pleading.

"No," I reply, much too abruptly. "There's nothing to talk about."

"There's plenty to talk about, Katniss," Peeta says stubbornly. I glance at him and see the hurt in his eyes and I want to scream, Oh, Peeta, it's not you! It's them! They did this to you - to us! But nothing comes out.

Peeta stands up and walks over to sit next to me on the couch. He reaches out and takes my hand in his, and I can feel myself stiffen at his touch in spite of myself. I dare a glance at his eyes and see the hurt look intensify - but he doesn't let go of my hand. I can feel his thumb rubbing over the back of my hand, and the gentle pressure of his fingers. He leans forward to kiss me and involuntarily I lean back, away from him. He suddenly lets go of my hand and straightens up.

"Katniss," he says softly. "Let me help."

"You can't, Peeta," I say in a flat voice.

"You never know unless you let me try," he says. "I love you, Katniss."
My mind screams I love you, Peeta! But my face is an impassive mask. So I say the only thing that I can say to him at this point.

"I know. Me too."

Peeta's face is a frozen mask - him, but not him. He manages to bury his feelings well - in every place but one. Or two. His eyes. One glance at his eyes and I can see the utter depth of pain that he's feeling...feeling because of me. Because of what we learned about our Reaping.

"You love me. Real or Not Real?" he asks suddenly.

Why can't I say it? Three little words. But I already know the answer. I know why I can't force the words out of my mouth - even though I think them all the time. I can't say the words because everyone that I've ever loved - everyone that I've ever cared about - they all have left me.

Dad left me when I was eleven. I loved him more than anyone else, except Prim. Mom left me after Dad died. Not physically - that I could almost understand - but emotionally. She eventually came back - but things were never, ever the same between us again. Rue left me - my biggest ally in my first Games, the girl that reminded me so much of Prim...gone in an instant, Marvel's spear buried deep in her chest. Cinna - gone. Gale - my best friend - is gone from my heart forever for what he allowed to happen to Prim. Prim - I feel my eyes burning with tears just thinking her name - Prim left me in a fiery instant. Haymitch, who claims to love me - love us - betrayed us for the sake of the Rebellion. And Madge - my only friend in school - the only girl I was ever close to - Madge gave us willingly to the Rebellion.

It's only a matter of time before Peeta leaves me, also. I allowed him into my heart when I knew that letting him in was the kiss of death. I won't - I can't - let him hurt me the way everyone else has.

"Katniss," Peeta says in a voice so low it's almost a whisper. "Say the words."

I look at the Boy with the Bread - at his impassive face and pleading eyes - and say the only thing that I can say.

"I - I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Peeta."

For long seconds, Peeta and I sit there. Not moving, not speaking. Finally, he stands up very deliberately and walks out of the room. I can hear his heavy tread climbing the stairs, and I know from the creak of the floorboards above me that he's in my - our - bedroom. I hear him move around for a minute or two, then I hear the same familiar tread descending the stairs.

I feel his presence and I slowly look up. He's clutching a small overnight bag.

"I'll get the rest of my things later on today - when you're out. You need space - time to work this out - if you can." he says in a flat voice, then turns and, without a single backward glance, walks out the front door. I hear his deliberate footsteps fade slightly, then, from across the way, I hear a door - his door - open, then close.

And deep inside me, a Dandelion withered and died.

I awaken to sunlight streaming through the window and an insistent knocking at the front door. I sit straight up, wincing from the stiffness in my neck from sleeping in the chair, and glance excitedly at the door. Peeta! a little voice inside me says, immediately followed by Don't be stupid. It's not Peeta. He left you, just like you knew he would! Still, who else could it be? Rory had
stopped by at sunrise asking about checking the snare line and I had sent him off to tend to the traps alone. He knew how to do it, anyway. Certainly not Haymitch! I haven't even seen him for the last seven days. Delly's been busy helping get the new medical clinic in order, Thom and Leevy are working from sunup to sundown putting District Twelve back together again. I walk to the door, my heart pounding, knowing that it'll be him, and I was wrong after all, and -

"May I come in?" Doctor Galen Wellgood says as I open the door.

My disappointment must have been etched on my face. Still, I open the door wider and wordlessly gesture for him to come in. I pad into the kitchen, not knowing or really caring if he's following me. He does.

I glance over my shoulder at him. "Tea?" I ask, rummaging around, pulling out two clean teacups. I'm suddenly assailed by the scent of cinnamon and vanilla and I clench my eyes shut to stop the tears from bursting forth.

"I took the liberty," Galen says, and I turn to see what he means. He holds up a sealed carafe. "Nice and hot."

I carry the teacups to the kitchen table, and for a few moments we busy ourselves with the familiar ritual of pouring tea, adding sugar, honey, or milk, and stirring. We're seated across from each other. I open my mouth to speak but he beats me to it.

"Before you ask - he didn't say a word to me. He didn't have to. And he doesn't know that I'm here. He finally fell back asleep a half hour ago." He looks at me questioningly.

"What do you expect me to say?" I ask.

"Whatever you like." he says with a smile.

"I don't feel much like talking," I mutter, taking a cautious sip of tea.

"And therein lies the problem, Katniss. Yours and his. You haven't wanted to talk ever since the revelation about your Reaping. So you keep everything bottled up inside, and you convince yourself that Peeta is just like everyone else, and will leave you. So instead of talking, you push him away until you have a nice little self-fulfilling prophecy on your hands." Galen speaks softly, but each word hits me like a hammer.

"A self-what?" I say, more harshly than I intended.

"A self-fulfilling prophecy. In your mind, you see everyone that you let yourself get close to leave you in some way - whether physically, through death - or emotionally. So when you and Peeta learn this HUGE secret about how the two of you really ended up in the Games, instead of the revelation bringing you closer together - you let it drive a wedge between yourself and Peeta. Your sub-conscious mind was just looking for a reason, any reason, to tell your conscious mind 'Aha! See? He's doing it too!' So, without realizing it, you built a wall between you and him and rebuffed every attempt that he made to get you to open up - until, after one solid week, he couldn't handle it any more and left. And do you know why he left so abruptly?" Galen asks.

"I - he was - upset, and - a little angry, and - " I stammer, until Galen slams his hand down on the table with such force that the teacups bounced, sloshing tea onto the table.

"No. NO! He left because he was - is - deathly afraid of hurting you! He could feel a seizure coming on and went upstairs and gave himself a shot. But even that was almost not enough. I had to give him even more medication at his house. Katniss, he left because he loves you!" The whole
time he talks, Galen's voice rises until he's almost shouting.

*He loves me - so he walks out on me? He has a funny way of showing that he loves me!* I say to myself, but keep stubbornly silent, glaring at Galen across the table.

Galen, however, wasn't silent. "I spoke to Aurelius just a little bit ago. It was all I could do to talk him out of ordering the both of you back to the Capitol!"

I sit bolt upright at this news. "He - you - I mean, he couldn't really do -" I stammer.

"He could, and he would, *if* he thought it was best for you both. Young lady, whether or not you realize it, you and Peeta both are considered almost national treasures. Aurelius has given you a lot of leeway here in Twelve. But I guarantee that if I weren't here, he would be marching into Paylor's office right about now, and both of you would be on a hoverplane before nightfall. And I know what you're thinking, 'How would Paylor know if kindly Doctor Wellgood wasn't here?' Believe me, Katniss, our good President Paylor has many ways to keep tabs on people that are important to her. And, trust me, both of you are *very* important to her!" Galen says with conviction. "Now, I want the absolute truth from you. Do you love Peeta?"

The question startled me so much that at first I sat frozen under Galen's intense gaze. Finally averting his eyes, I nod my head miserably. "Yes. Yes I do," I whisper.

"Then why can't you say it to him?" he asks.

"I don't *know!*" I almost shout. "Don't you think I *want* to?"

"Do you?" Galen asks calmly.

"Of *course* I do! Peeta's - well - he's *everything* to me!" I am shouting by this point, but Galen seems unfazed by my outburst.

"And yet, you can't seem to bring yourself to actually tell him that you love him, ever since this awful secret was revealed to you." Galen takes a sip of his tea and sits back in his chair, regarding me with calm eyes.

"I thought - I thought you said you didn't talk to him," I stammer.

"I didn't. I didn't have to. I'm a doctor, remember, Katniss? A huge part of being a doctor is just listening - both to what's said, and, just as importantly, what's not said. Katniss, try not to take offense, but emotionally, you are a child - and it's not your fault. Life in the Seam was never easy, even in the best of times. You've suffered multiple trauma in your life - losing your father, seeing your mother paralyzed by depression, almost starving to death numerous times, watching your sister get Reaped, volunteering for her, surviving the Games twice, surviving a war - and losing your sister and best friend virtually at the same time. And, just when things seem to be settling down, along comes this HUGE revelation that you were virtually hand picked, months before your Games, to be the Mockingjay, and the face of the Rebellion." Galen pauses and takes a sip of his tea.

"I'm not a child," I protest lamely.

"Katniss, I'm an outsider here. There's a very old saying that goes something like, 'I have no skin in this game.' It basically means that I'm not taking sides, and I'm not. That being said, I am extraordinarily fond of all of you. And yes, you are a child - emotionally, anyway. You had to learn at a very young age how to protect yourself from hurt, so you have this barrier around your heart. And you let it down for Peeta, and then your world comes crashing down around you again, and
BAM! The wall's up again. And this time, Peeta's on the wrong side of it. Can I tell you what I see here?" he asks.

I nod slowly, unsure if I want to hear what he sees.

"I see Haymitch, who's been quietly trying to drink himself to death over the last seven days. I see Peeta, who's struggling, just as you are, with trying to come to grips with what he's learned. And I see you - a girl who's lived a lifetime in eighteen years - who's very good and building walls to protect herself - but now has to learn how to take them down. Who can't be afraid to let others help. That's what I see. Galen pauses, then says, "You need to talk to someone. If not me, then Delly, or Leevy. Anyone. But you have to admit to yourself that asking for help is not a sign of weakness."

"I'll...think about it," I say simply.

"Remember what I said, Katniss," Galen says as he walks out the door. As the door closes, I turn and go back into the kitchen. The carafe is sitting on the table, still almost full. I replace the lid carefully to keep the tea hot, then rinse out the cups.

Galen's right about one thing. I do want to talk. The only catch is, the person that I want to talk to can't answer me. I go upstairs to shower - seeing the spent auto injector laying on the floor - Oh, my Peeta! - and put on shorts, sandals and a tank top - it's going to be a hot day - and I head out the door.

To the Meadow.

I squat at the edge of the mass grave, idly staring at the mound of earth looming up before me. I don't know how long I've been here - minutes, perhaps as long as a half hour - waiting for...something. I pick up a dirt clod and break pieces off and toss them, one by one, onto the mound.

Under this massive pile of dirt is the final resting place for most of District Twelve. The remains of over nine thousand people are buried here. Some were almost whole, or at least they were before the animals from the other side of the fence got to them, along with the vultures - those people on the fringe of the firebombing that were overcome by smoke rather than flame. Others had been reduced to piles of ash in vaguely human form.

I've come to talk to one of these faceless piles of ash, who used to be called Madge Undersee.

In time, the mound of dirt that covers the grave will slowly settle, and grasses and flowers will sprout from the rich earth. In a few years, the scar in the ground will have all but disappeared, leaving little or no trace of what lies just a couple of meters down.

I angrily fling the last of the dirt clod at the mound, watching the mini avalanche of dirt that its impact created, and take a deep breath.

"Why, Madge?" I ask. "Why me? According to Haymitch, Reaping Prim to get to me was your idea. So was Reaping Peeta to help and protect me. Well, I guess you were right. Too right. Somehow Peeta and I both survived something where only one is supposed to come out alive. But I guess what I really want to know, is how you could sit with me at lunch, day after day, for months afterward and pretend like you didn't just sentence your only two friends to death? Huh? Answer me that!" I could hear my voice getting louder and louder as I talked to the grave.

I scoop up a handful of loose dirt and fling it at the mound in anger and frustration. Of course Madge can't answer me. She's dead. She and her family - her father and mother, along with their
household staff - were cremated in the firebombing and subsequent firestorm. The only way they knew that everyone was home that night was by matching the number of skulls to how many people should have been in the house that night.

"I always thought you were my friend - one of my only friends. Well," I sigh, "Gale betrayed me - I bet you didn't know that it was his invention that killed Prim - you sold me out to the Rebellion, and Peeta -" I feel my voice catch in my throat "- Peeta, he walked out on me only this morning. And look at you. You got your Rebellion. But you didn't live to see it."

I hear a small sound behind me and spin around. I spy Peeta, frozen in place, a shocked look etched on his face. For long seconds our eyes lock, neither of us barely breathing. Peeta is the first to finally move.

"Sorry." I barely hear him mumble as he finally tears his eyes away from my face. Abruptly he turns to go.

"Peeta," I manage to croak out. His back to me, he's striding away quickly. "Peeta!" I bound to my feet and start to run after him. What the hell is he doing here? Spying on me?

I see him barely hesitate when I call his name a second time but then he resumes his determined stride.

"Peeta! Wait!" I call after him, even as I catch up to him fairly easily. I grab him firmly by one well-muscled arm and try to spin him around, but he's much too strong for me to man-handle. I change tactics and leap in front of him, causing him to stop suddenly.

"Just what the hell do you think you're doing out here?" I spit, my eyes blazing with anger. "Did you follow me? Are you spying on me?!"

A look of shock crosses Peeta's face as my words sink in. "No, I - I mean, I didn't - I'm not -" he stammers. "I - I'm sorry. I just came out here to talk -"

"There's nothing to talk about!" I snap. Why, oh why was I so angry with him? But what he said next took me completely by surprise.

"Not to you," he says quietly. "To - to my father."

"What?" I ask, not sure if I heard him right.

"I - that is to say, I come here sometimes - to, you know - talk with my Dad." Peeta says unhappily.

"Oh," is all I can say as I feel my anger hissing out of me like a deflating balloon.

Peeta stares at the ground in front of him. "Yeah, so - I wanted to talk to him, but - I'm sorry for interrupting. I'll go now," he says and starts to turn away.

I grab his arm again. "Peeta, please don't." I find myself saying in a pleading voice. It works. He stops and faces me again.

"So, what do you talk to your - father - about?" I ask gently.

He shrugs his broad shoulders. "Just - stuff. Sometimes I just come here to tell him how much I miss him...him and my brothers. I even miss my mother sometimes. Other times it's to tell him something important." Peeta hesitates after he says this last.

"Like what?" I prod, barely breathing even as I ask the question.
Peeta takes a deep, shuddering breath before continuing. "Like - I came here two days after the - after the Reaping Day ceremony - when we dedicated Primrose Square." I feel fresh tears spring into my eyes as he tells me this. That was two days after I had answered his question of "You love me? Real or not real?" by telling him "Real." I feel the icy hand of fear grip my heart as I ask my next question.

"And today?" I ask. "What are you gonna talk to him about today?"

Peeta regards me sadly. "You. Me. Us. What they did to us. And if it can be...fixed."

I feel tears quietly rolling down my cheeks as I look into Peeta's face. And I know the answer to his question of whether or not it can be fixed.

*It's up to me to fix things. I broke it, I need to fix it,* I say to myself.

"I overheard you talking. You were talking to Madge, right?" Peeta asks suddenly.


"Are you still angry?" he asks gently.

"Aren't you?" I ask him in surprise.

He nods once. "Yes. I'll always be angry. But I understand. My Dad helped me to understand."

"Don't tell me you actually heard him?" I say incredulously.

"No," Peeta says. "But I asked questions. And I could remember some things my Dad had said to me and taught to me over the years."

I pause to wipe my tears from my face. "What kind of things?" I ask.

"If we hadn't been 'chosen,' what would have happened two years ago?" he asks.

"Some other kids would have been Reaped," I reply. Easy answer.

"Right. And unless one of those kids was you - or Gale - they would have died - quickly."

"Or you," I find myself blurting, but Peeta lets out a short, bitter laugh as he shakes his head.

"Katniss, come on. I'm alive today because of you. My only skills in that Games were to lie convincingly to Cato, get stung by Tracker Jackers, and get cut by Cato's sword and almost die. Don't think I haven't heard the talk about how you 'carried' me." I open my mouth to protest but Peeta quickly puts out his hand, quelling any objection that I may have had.

"So what are you getting at, Peeta?" I ask impatiently.

"Last year, at the Quell, what would have happened if we hadn't been 'chosen?'" he asks.

"That whole thing about Reaping Victors was another set up," I say angrily. "I guess there would have been a different card."

Peeta nods. "Exactly. So two more District Twelve kids go off to die. And this year?"

"Probably the same," I admit.
"And probably no Rebellion. You would have started working in the coal mines. I would be working in the bakery. And every Reaping Day for the next four years you would have been terrified for Prim." Peeta says with conviction.

I felt my heart rise in my throat at Prim's name. "So, you're saying that us being betrayed and set up was a good thing?"

Peeta shakes his head. "No. Not a good thing. At least not for us. But it was the right thing."

I'm still trying to blink back tears from the mention of Prim's name. "The right thing?!! I can't believe I heard him right. "How was it right? You almost died! We both could have died!"

"And, it sparked the Rebellion." Peeta says gently, even sadly. "And Panem is truly free for the first time in history. Katniss, I'm angry - just as angry as you. But I understand why it had to be done. And I can forgive."

"How?" I ask in a choked voice. "How can you forgive?"

"Are we gonna hate Plutarch because of this? Katniss, I don't like him, but not because of this. He didn't even know who we were! How could he 'betray' us? And Madge? What's left of her is in there!" Peeta gestures at the earthen mound. "Like I heard you say, Katniss - she got her Rebellion but didn't get to live to see it! And Haymitch? He barely knew we existed before Madge offered us up! So be angry - we both have a right to that anger - but we both need to admit that they all made the right decision - and we both need to find forgiveness in our hearts."

I digest what Peeta has just said. He always was one to think things through. Still...

"I - I don't know if I can forgive," I say softly.

"You have to, Katniss." Peeta says gently. "For your sake. For us."

I look up at Peeta, with his tousled blonde hair, and his sad eyes - and I know that everything he's done, even when angry, was out of his love for me. Still -

"Peeta, you love me. Real or not real?" I ask suddenly.

"Real." He replies instantly. "I love you, Katniss."

And in that instant I knew that, even if he came here to talk to his father, he ended up talking to him through me - just as I knew that I talked to Madge through Peeta. And we both got the answers we were seeking.

I'm sure Peeta can see how wet my eyes are, and I don't much care right at that moment. I have something important to tell him.

"I love you, Peeta." I snake my arms around his neck and raise up on tiptoe to give him a gentle, loving kiss. He returns my kiss with a loving one of his own.

After a moment, he pulls his mouth away from mine and looks down at me. "I sometimes thought I'd never hear you say those words to me ever again."

"I never stopped loving you, Peeta. I just - couldn't get the words out." I say quietly. He smiles at me lovingly. I feel the corners of my own mouth twitch upwards in response.

"Now we can work on forgiving," he says, but I shake my head.
"No. That will wait, Peeta. Right now, we - I - have to work on fixing what I broke," I say, turning and slipping my arm around his waist. He slides his arm around my shoulders and together we start walking out of the Meadow.

I kiss him once more and say, "Let's go home."
Katniss and I walk back to the Village from the Meadow, her arm comfortably around my waist, my arm protectively around her shoulders. Neither of us talked much during the short walk. Words were not necessary or needed just now. The pressure of her arm around my waist, the way her fingers splayed out over my side, her hip pressed warmly against mine, the way she leaned into me...it all spoke its own language. Every now and then I would feel her arm tighten almost imperceptibly around me and she would lean her head slightly against my side.

We walked slowly, enjoying the warmth of the early summer sun, reveling in the smells of the gentle breeze. Every now and then a movement of her head would send the end of her ever-lengthening braid brushing against my hand or arm. Whenever I felt her hair brush against my hand my fingers would almost involuntarily curl up to capture her braid for just an instant, before letting it go.

As we neared the Village we encountered more and more people - every train brought more district residents back to Twelve - and we would greet them with smiles, nods, and quiet murmurs. In the background, towards the town center, we could hear sounds of construction as homes, shops, offices, and storehouses were built. Most of the newcomers moved right in to the new housing available just off of Primrose Square. In fact, many of our old neighbors in the Village were moving out and into town as new housing becomes more and more available.

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We stroll through the main entrance to the Village, and I steer us toward my house. Katniss glances up at me, a questioning look on her face, as we walk to my home.

"I have to pick something up here," I explain, turning up the walkway to the front door. Out of the corner of my eye I see her face relax a bit at my explanation. I try the front and find to my surprise that it's locked. I reluctantly pull my arm from around Katniss's waist and dig in my pocket for my key, relieved to find it as I can't remember the last time I locked my door for any reason. I fumble a bit with the key as I insert it in the keyhole and turn it.

The lock works smoothly, and I push the door open as Katniss and I step through. The house is quiet.

"Hello?" I call out. "Galen? Delly?" I receive no answer. Probably in town - something with the new clinic, I say to myself. I turn to Katniss to tell her that I'll just be a minute - I have to grab the overnight bag that I had brought over earlier - and I see her looking at me with large, almost frightened eyes.

"Katniss? What -" I start to say, but never finish as her arms fly around my neck and she presses her lips hungrily against mine. I close my eyes as I wrap my arms around her slender body, pulling her tightly against me. She breaks the kiss, gasping as her hands capture my face between them.

"I thought I lost you today," she says in a whisper, her silvery gray eyes searching mine.

"I thought I lost you, too, Katniss," I whisper in reply, one hand going to her face, gently pushing
back a stray strand of hair that had fallen across her forehead. I can just make out - barely - the almost invisible scar on her forehead from Clove's knife. On impulse I kiss the scar gently, feeling her forehead relax as her eyes close. I feel her fingers brush against my cheeks, my jaw line, my chin, and I smile. She can feel my smile with her fingers and, eyes still closed, smiles back at me.

We hold each other tightly for a few minutes, not talking, just reveling in the closeness. Katniss is the first to speak.

"I suppose at some point I'll have to talk to Haymitch," she says resignedly.

"There's no rush," I say. "Whenever you feel ready."

I feel her nod against my chest. "I know. It's just gonna be so...awkward."

I say nothing, but I agree with her. It will be awkward. *Maybe I should talk to Galen first, I say to myself, See what he has to say. Maybe he'll have some advice on how to deal with Haymitch, or maybe he can talk to him before.*

"- here for something?" Katniss asks.

"Huh? I'm sorry - what were you saying, Katniss?" I stammer, feeling my face redden slightly.

"I said, 'Weren't you stopping here for something?'" Katniss repeats rather irritably.

"I'm sorry - yeah, it's in the living room," I say quickly. "Hang on for just a moment." I duck into the living room and emerge with my overnight bag. I see Katniss's eyes narrow just a bit at the sight of the bag and something almost imperceptible flickers across her face.

"I have to ask," Katniss says quietly. "What did you pack?"

I set the bag down and unzip the top. Almost fearfully, Katniss steps forward and peers into the bag, then removes the contents one by one: a box of auto injectors, a small sketch pad, a box of pencils, and two feathers. Katniss examines the feathers closely, then looks up at me.

"Mockingjay feathers?" She asks.

"From a very special Mockingjay," I reply. "Those came off of your Mockingjay gown that you wore the night before we went into the arena last year. I'm sure Cinna would have been pissed if he knew I plucked them from your gown." I smile sheepishly at Katniss.

"But why?" Katniss whispers.

"I - well - I wanted...wanted to have something of yours. It's stupid, I know - but I - I mean, if you - I just wanted something," I finished lamely.

"You kept these all that time," Katniss says. I nod.

"When I finally got my bag back - after we captured the Capitol - I was shocked to see them still in there. And after you left to come back here - sometimes...when I was still in the hospital - I would take these out and just hold them for hours. It was my only connection to you," I say softly.

"There's no clothes in here," she says, almost accusingly.

"I knew I couldn't stay away from you for very long," I admit.

Wordlessly, Katniss carefully replaces everything in the bag and zips it shut, then turns to me.
"Thank you," she says simply.

"You're welcome," I say. "But for what?

In response, Katniss curls her arms around my neck again and stands up on tiptoe, looking me in the eye.

"You just reminded me once again how come I love you so much," she whispers, right before our lips meet again.

**PART II**

Katniss and I settle into a routine over the next few days. She's turned over most of the trapping and hunting duties to Rory, only going out with him to work on a new skill with him or to help him with something that he is having difficulty with. She describes Rory as competent with his hunting, trapping, and fishing skills - but not enthusiastic. More like a chore that needs to be done.

This attitude must be foreign to Katniss, who finds her greatest peace while in the forest. The few times that I've been out with her, I've noticed a subtle change take place with her each and every time. A serenity comes over her - even when stalking and shooting game. She won't come out and admit it - but she misses her regular forays into the forest.

I occupy my time lately with starting preliminary plans for my bakery. Businesses are starting to take shape in town, one at a time. Galen and Delly are fully involved with getting the clinic - a first for District Twelve - off the ground. Galen mentioned that a dentist - a doctor that specialized in teeth and the mouth, of all places - and another doctor will soon be joining Galen here in the district. He still runs what he calls "The District Twelve and Victor's Village Free Clinic" out of my home, but I know he can't wait for a real clinic. Nevertheless, he still continues my daily treatments and is always available to see anyone for anything.

In fact, he even had something for Katniss one day. It was the day after our trip to the Meadow, when Galen came bursting into the house. We had uncharacteristically slept late that morning - an oppressive heat wave combined with Katniss and I trying to stay cool by sleeping naked, not to mention a week of enforced celibacy, had combined to keep us quite - active - for the better part of the night, and we had not actually gone to sleep until quite early in the morning. We had only been out of bed for perhaps twenty minutes when Galen appeared, holding a small plastic case.

"Oh, good! Katniss, you're here!" Galen practically gushed. "It's finally come and I didn't want to waste a second!"

"Yes, I'm here, Galen," Katniss replies with a small smile. "And what's finally come?"

Galen sets the case down and opens it with a flourish. "Why, this, my dear!" He holds up a large syringe.

For some reason, the sight of the syringe makes me uneasy. I glance at Katniss, and see that she's turned pale and is holding one hand in front of her mouth, staring wide-eyed at the syringe in Galen's hand.

"No," she croaks out. "Get that damned thing away from me!" I hear her voice rise with each word until she's all but screaming the last word.

Galen blanches at Katniss's reaction, and he glances over at me. I must not have looked all that great myself, as he drops the syringe back in the box and slams the lid shut. At that moment it hits me - the reason for Katniss's reaction and my uneasiness.
The syringe Galen was holding was virtually identical to the ones that Games staff used to use to inject Trackers into Tributes, right before boarding the hoverplane for the arena.

Galen is staring at us in confusion as I grab Katniss's hand. She jerks violently at the contact but doesn't pull her trembling hand away. Quickly I begin talking to her in a soothing voice.

"Katniss, it's not what you think," I say in a low voice. "Not real, what you think it is, it's not real. Galen would never hurt you or I - you know this, right?" Katniss nods her head up and down once, almost imperceptibly. Her eyes are still wide and she's still trembling, her breathing coming in labored gasps as she fights her way through a panic attack.

Galen leans forward slightly. "Katniss - you know I wouldn't hurt you. The syringe doesn't have anything bad in it. It's the time release contraceptive we talked about, remember? It lasts for one solid year. Here -" he pauses to slide the box over to her "- see for yourself. Go ahead - open it."

For several minutes Katniss sits and stares at the box, before reaching out a trembling hand to work the latches holding the box closed. She flips the lid open and I feel her hand grip mine even tighter as she reaches into the box, gritting her teeth as her fingers make contact with the syringe.

I talk reassuringly to her the entire time. Katniss grabs the syringe and takes it from the case, then hands it to Galen. She takes a deep, shaky breath.

"I - I'm sorry," she whispers. "It's just that - that -"

Galen pats her hand. "I'm the one that should be apologizing," he says. "I should have realized how similar in appearance this was to - something unpleasant in your memory."

I feel Katniss relax the death grip she has on my hand. "How - how does it work?" she asks in a small voice. I glance at her face and can see that she's embarrassed by her outburst.

"It's really very simple. One injection and a time release capsule is implanted. It releases a synthetic hormone that basically fools your body into thinking that it's pregnant. However, it's a smart drug and is able to detect and time itself to your monthly cycles. So, you won't notice anything amiss in your day to day routine. The capsule lasts for one year, and is one hundred percent safe and foolproof." Galen explains patiently.

Katniss glances at me, gives me a small smile, and looks back at Galen. She takes a deep breath.

"Okay. I'm ready. Let's do this. In my arm?" she asks, extending her left arm.

Galen hesitates just a bit before replying. "Umm, actually - no. In your - gluteus maximus."

Katniss frowns at the unfamiliar term. "My - what?" she asks. I find myself grinning in spite of myself, and see Galen shoot me a dirty look, causing me to smile even wider.

"It's your - rear, Katniss," Galen stammers. For a doctor he sure seems uncomfortable talking to a patient about a procedure - but then again, Katniss is not an ordinary patient.

"My rear what?" Katniss persists. Finally I can't stand it any longer.

"Katniss - your butt. He needs to inject it into your butt." I explain.

At this revelation Katniss turns beet red and the only word that escapes her mouth is a somewhat choked "Oh."
"Katniss, if you would prefer to have another woman present, I can go get Delly, or perhaps you'd like to wait for Leevy?" Galen asks anxiously, but Katniss shakes her head firmly and stands up.

"No," she says with a resigned sigh. "I don't want to wait. But Peeta, would you mind?" Katniss inclines her head in the general direction of the living room, and I grasp her meaning immediately.

"Sure," I say with a grin, brushing past Galen as he quickly explains the procedure to Katniss. I glance back once over my shoulder before leaving the kitchen, just in time to see Katniss start to lower her pants, and earning me a dirty look in return.

The procedure takes almost no time - I'm barely in the living room when Katniss calls me back in. When I re-enter the kitchen she's gingerly rubbing a spot near her right hip. Galen looks up at me and smiles.

"All done," he says, replacing the spent syringe in its case. "Now - the capsule is already hard at work, but we still like to advise waiting a minimum of twelve hours after implantation to, ahh, engage in intimacy. Alright?"

"Sure, Galen," I say. "And - thanks." Galen quickly says his goodbyes to Katniss and I, and seconds later we hear the front door open, then close.

No sooner does the sound of the door closing reach us, than Katniss turns to me with a baleful expression.

"What?" I say, holding my hands up in mock surrender.

"What? He says! I think you enjoyed that just a little too much!" Katniss is desperately trying to sound angry, and failing miserably. I'm failing miserably at one thing right now as well - and that's holding in laughter. Soon my laughter bubbles up, and Katniss's stern look is replaced - first by a widening smile, then by laughter of her own. During our bout with uncontrollable laughter I catch her glancing at the clock once. Seeing this, I incline my head towards the clock and raise my eyebrows questioningly.

"Just checking to see when twelve hours will be up," Katniss says with a mischievous grin. "I plan to make you pay for laughing at me!"

In response, I gather her up in my arms and kiss her soundly. That's one debt I am looking forward to repay in full.

PART III

A couple more days pass until Katniss announces, "I think I'm ready to talk to Haymitch."

We had been in the kitchen again. I was busy frosting a batch of cupcakes I had made, while Katniss had been sitting at the table, fletching a new batch of arrows with Rory. She had been working with him, teaching him how to make a bow and arrows if the need ever arose. Rory and I both look at Katniss in surprise at her announcement.

"Is he home?" I ask Rory.

"He was two hours ago!" Rory replied. For some time now, Rory had been dropping not-so-subtle hints about Haymitch's mental state - how his drinking had increased, how he was more morose than usual, and how he was withdrawing from everyone. I had even gone to see him a few times but it was painfully obvious who he really wanted to see.
Katniss.

Finnick had told me once, back in District Thirteen, that Katniss had attacked Haymitch pretty viciously after her rescue, blaming Haymitch for the failure to rescue me as well. But, she had resumed speaking to him within a matter of days. This - this was different. A year ago, Katniss had felt that Haymitch had failed her, and perhaps even lied to her. This time, she feels betrayed.

I had spoken with Galen a couple of times about Katniss and Haymitch, and, as usual, his advice was spot on.

"Peeta," he had said, "Just remember you are dealing with two of the most stubborn people on the face of the Earth. Neither one will budge until they are good and ready to. Leave them be. Eventually, one or the other will make the first move."

Well, it seems that Katniss had decided to make that first move. I send Rory back to Haymitch's to make sure that he is home. Rory dashes out of the house as if it caught fire. As soon as he leaves I turn to Katniss.

"Before you ask, no, I'm not sure I want to do this. But I have to do it. Do you understand, Peeta?" Katniss says in a small voice.

I pull her against me and kiss her forehead. "No matter what your reason, I'm glad you are." I say.

"Just make sure you're with me the whole time," she says softly.

"Count on it," I say firmly, holding her close.

A moment later Rory bursts back into the house, breathless, to tell us that Haymitch was indeed home, and awake. I look at Katniss and she simply nods, then turns to Rory.

"Rory, would you mind very much staying here? I - we - need to talk to Haymitch in private," she says. Rory looks disappointed but readily agrees.

"I'll keep working on the arrows while you're gone, Katniss," he says. Katniss smiles at him, thanks him, then together we walk out of her house for Haymitch's place. As we stroll, hand in hand, to the house next door, I ask Katniss the question that's been on my mind all morning.

"Why bother teaching Rory how to make a bow and arrows? Hunting's no longer illegal, and you could buy him a bow and arrows through the Capitol shopping network."

"Old habits die hard, Peeta. Besides, he will get a lot more satisfaction bringing down game with a bow he made himself. And really, there's no need to even hunt any more - now that we all the food that we need. It's just - I don't know - comforting to know that the skills still exist." I nod at Katniss's words, but it's what she didn't say that spoke the loudest. Katniss doesn't fully trust the new government and, in the back of her mind, halfway expects things to revert to the way they were.

Neither of us has time to reflect on what she just said, however. We are standing in front of Haymitch's front door. Katniss hesitates for a moment, then knocks firmly. The door opens almost immediately by Sae, who smiles warmly at Katniss and I and ushers us into the house.

"He's in the living room for a change," Sae announces. I can feel Katniss gripping my hand even tighter as we follow Sae into the living room. As we enter the dimly lit room we can see Haymitch sitting in an easy chair, slouched back, a bottle sitting on the end table next to the chair. His chin is resting on his chest, a shock of dark hair obscuring his face. He makes no move or sound as we
walk into the room and take seats opposite him. Katniss and I glance at each other. Was he passed out again?

"So," Haymitch grumbles, causing us both to jump a little. He sits up a little and brushes the hair from his eyes. He peers at us through bloodshot orbs that are remarkably similar to Katniss's own eyes. For long moments he stares at us both.

"Haymitch," Katniss says, her voice catching in her throat. She clears her throat and in a stronger voice says, "Haymitch. We - that is to say, I - I just needed to - to -"

"Save it," he says gruffly. "Came to apologize, did you?"

I glance quickly at Katniss, and see her face reddening - whether from anger or embarrassment I couldn't tell. I feel her hand grip mine even tighter as she responds.

"I - what I did - it was -" she stammers out, but stops as Haymitch holds up one hand, palm out.

"I don't want your apology," Haymitch growls, "Because you don't owe me an apology. I'm the one that owes you - both of you - an apology, for allowing you to be dragged into this mess in the first place. I'm glad you both know, though - you deserved to know." Haymitch pauses and takes a pull from his bottle.

"And I meant what I said, too," Haymitch continues, carefully setting the bottle back on the end table.

"About what?" Katniss asks quietly.

"About loving you both," Haymitch replies simply. "Not very 'Mentor-like' of me, is it?"

"Mags loved Finnick," I say. "And she was his Mentor."

"That's different. Mags and Finnick knew each other long before the Games. You want to know something funny? After you two became Tributes, half the time I was scared sick that you were both gonna die in the arena - and the other half I was scared sick that the plan just might work, and that Katniss was gonna live - but that the rebellion would fail - and that you, Sweetheart, would be condemned to live your life as a Mentor, just like me." Haymitch concluded bitterly.

"But it didn't work out that way," Katniss says gently.

"No...no, it sure as hell didn't," Haymitch says bitterly. "It didn't because everyone - everyone - underestimated me. Haymitch Abernathy, District Twelve's drunken Victor! What an embarrassment! Well, they forgot that I had twenty-three years of Mentoring experience behind me - twenty-three years of knowing how to work the system. Getting sponsors, stroking the Gamemakers - except Plutarch of course, but even he could only do so much - and pushing the 'young love' angle for all it was worth."

"And you managed to save both of us," I point out.

At that, Haymitch laughs humorlessly, and takes another drink from his bottle. "Oh, yeah, the 'star crossed lovers' was a big hit in the Capitol! Remember when I said that I got selfish when I realized that I had a shot at bringing you both home?" Katniss and I both nod.

"We remember," Katniss says.

"Well, I think you two can guess at the rest of the story now. Yeah, I was selfish - but I wanted to
badly to bring you both home because *neither of you deserved to be there in the first place!" Even Haymitch seemed surprised at the passion in his voice.

"No one deserved to be there," Katniss says in a flat, hard voice.

"No, no - you're right, Sweetheart, no one did," Haymitch says quickly. "What I was trying to say was - there was no element of chance with you two. No 'may the odds be ever in you favor!' Not when I knew *months* before that you two were going! And when I saw my chance, I took it. I wasn't thinking about the Rebellion, I wasn't thinking about anything other than to try to make right something that I had a hand in making wrong in the first place."

"We're still here, Haymitch," I say. "And there was one good thing that came out of the Games. It brought Katniss and I together." I glance at Katniss and give her a smile that she returns immediately.

"If you say so," Haymitch says sourly. "From where I sit, the only good thing about the Games is that they're done. Finished. No more. I keep telling myself that I should be proud of my contribution to the Rebellion - but all I can think about is the pain that I helped cause in you two."

An awkward silence descends on the room. It's obvious to me that Haymitch carries a lot of guilt over how Katniss and I ended up in the Games.

"Haymitch," Katniss finally breaks the silence. "Peeta is so much better than I am at looking at something from every angle. Even though he was just as shocked - and just as upset - as I was, he could see how much you were against the whole idea from the start. Me - I just lash out at whatever happens to be closest - and that was you. I didn't think everything through, and I hurt you, and I'm sorry."

There's no immediate reaction from Haymitch. He's slouched once again in his chair, his head fallen forward, that shock of hair once again fallen to cover the upper half of his face. For long seconds I thought he had passed out from the liquor, until I noticed something on his face. Twin tracks of moisture tracing down each stubbled cheek. With a shock, I realize what's happening. Haymitch is crying.

I steal a glance at Katniss and see that she, too, noticed Haymitch's tears. For a moment, both of us sit, transfixed by the sight of this gruff, bad tempered man quietly weeping. Haymitch Abernathy, Victor of District Twelve, Leader of the Second Rebellion, was crying - and neither Katniss nor I knew quite what to do.

"Maybe we should go," I whisper to Katniss and see her nod immediately.

Katniss clears her throat. "Haymitch, I think we -"

"Don't," Haymitch chokes out. "Please. I -" he raises one shaking hand to his face and angrily brushes his tears away, and pushes the shock of hair back and away from his face.

"I - there's something you need to know before you go. Something else about - about Madge," he says in a stronger voice.

Katniss glances at me quickly, then back at Haymitch. "What about Madge?" she asks quietly.

*I wonder if Haymitch knows about Katniss's trip to the Meadow?* I say to myself. No, that can't be - Katniss and I are the only people that knew what happened there that day, and I know that neither of us has spoken to anyone other than ourselves about it.
"Did you ever wonder about how she got involved in the Rebellion? I mean, she was the Mayor's daughter - she lived in a big house, never went hungry, had servants, dressed well, always had money - why screw that up?" Haymitch asks.

"Well, I just thought it had something to do with her aunt dying in the Games," I say.

Haymitch shakes his head. "No, no! That's part of it, certainly...but she really didn't know the whole story about Maysilee until after she became an active member of the Rebellion. Her parents certainly didn't talk about it!" 

"Then what was it?" Katniss asks, almost irritably.

"Madge was always a thoughtful girl," Haymitch says. "She knew - as most of the Merchants did - how wrong the old system was. But, she needed a spark to ignite that flame inside of her. Hell, all of us in the Rebellion needed a spark. For me, it was my mother, brother, and girl being killed by the Capitol. Same with Johanna. But with Madge, it was something a little more subtle. And something that had nothing to do with her at all." Haymitch pauses again, picks up his bottle, looks at it, and very deliberately sets it back down.

"Haymitch, please!" Katniss says pleadingly.

"Madge had a catalyst," Haymitch continues, "Her 'spark.' The one thing that would drive a privileged girl to join a Rebellion, where, if she was ever caught, her best hope would be a quick form of execution." Haymitch pauses and looks directly at Katniss.

"Her 'spark' was you, Katniss."
MADGE'S STORY

CHAPTER 19 - MADGE’S STORY

PART I

For long seconds Katniss and I stare at Haymitch. As much as a shock it was that Madge had been active in the Rebellion, it was that much more of a shock to find out her primary motivation to join the Rebellion had been Katniss!

"Haymitch? What -" Katniss stammers out. I can't even manage that much.

"Surprised?" Haymitch asks, unsmiling.

"Shocked is more like it," Katniss admits. "How do you know all this?"

"Easy," Haymitch replies. "She told me, Sweetheart."

"Just like that?" Katniss asks, skeptically.

"No, not 'just like that,'" Haymitch replies, somewhat acidly. "Do you want me to tell you the story, or are you gonna keep interrupting?"

"Sorry," Katniss says, not really sounding sorry at all.

Haymitch ignores her tone. "A little background first. You probably figured out that Plutarch recruited me." Katniss and I both nod. If it was possible for someone to nod angrily, Katniss just did it. I can't that I blame her - I get the same reaction every time I hear the name "Plutarch Heavensbee."

"Well, it didn't happen overnight," Haymitch continues. "He had to be one hundred percent sure. Any slip ups on his part would guarantee him a very unpleasant death. He kept dropping little hints here and there, and he worked with Chaff - Chaff was the one that vouched for me. It took him years, but I finally earned his trust - and he earned mine."

"Haymitch, that's all very interesting, but what's it got to do with Madge?" I ask.

"Everything, kid. Everything. Before the Rebellion, there were lots of pissed off people in Panem - but you don't just walk up to someone that's just been flogged for, say, hunting turkeys -" at this he gives Katniss a pointed look "- and say, 'Hey! I bet that hurt like a sonofabitch! Listen, we're planning to overthrow the Capitol. Are you in?'"

"I get that, Haymitch!" Katniss snaps.

"I knew you would, Sweetheart," Haymitch says calmly. "And that's exactly why someone like Gale Hawthorne would have been poison to the Rebellion. He was too angry. Too hotheaded. The Rebellion needed people whose anger was set on simmer, not on high boil. Plutarch knew that Snow had my family and my girl killed - but he needed to wait until my anger was simmering. The Rebellion needed people with patience, above all else." Haymitch pauses, ignoring the impatient sigh from Katniss.

"And that brings me to Madge. Somehow - I'm still not clear exactly how - she came to Plutarch's attention. Plutarch was skeptical of bringing a thirteen year old girl into the inner circle, but in the
end he couldn't resist having District Twelve's Mayor's daughter working for the Rebellion." I nod at this. In hindsight it made perfect sense. With her mother's poor health, she had been helping out her father at official functions since the age of eleven. As the Mayor's daughter, it wouldn't be unusual for her to be seen around the Justice Building - plus, she had a lot more leeway than most when it came to enforcing the curfew."

"Anyway," Haymitch went on, "I was still skeptical. But Plutarch was convinced so I started working on her. Talking to her in the Bank, or running into her at the Market. One day I went to the stationery store pretending that I was gonna have some personalized stationery made, and I just happened run into Madge sweeping the sidewalk outside the Sweet Shop next door, so I showed her the logo I was gonna use."

"It was a Mockingjay."

"Later that day, there was a note in my mailbox. It was in an envelope addressed to me and just said "Meadow. Ten A.M. Sunday." So I showed up in the Meadow at five minutes till ten and promptly at ten she shows up. We talked for a few minutes - and that's how she got started in the Rebellion."

"What did she say to convince you?" I ask.

"It's not so much what she said, it's how she said it," Haymitch replies. "Of course, she just didn't come right out and blurt 'I want to join the Rebellion' - we talked about the Games, and her Aunt Maysilee, and how much she wanted to make a difference. I asked her what she would be willing to do in order to make a difference and she said, without missing a beat, 'Anything.' So I started her out with simple things - delivering messages to District Six couriers at the train station, or picking up messages at the same place. Passing messages like that was illegal, of course, but they were disguised as simple letters to friends. The worst that would have happened if we had been caught was a fine and ten lashes in the Square."

I hear Katniss's sharp intake of breath when Haymitch mentions flogging. I knew in her mind she was back to that cold day eighteen months ago, watching Gale Hawthorne being brutally whipped by the new Head Peacekeeper, Romulus Thread, for poaching a turkey. Haymitch's words were sinking in to her. Madge may have been a child of privilege, but she was willingly risking a public flogging on a regular basis and never batted an eye.

"Gradually Madge was given more responsibility - she was the one that actually recruited Darius Potter to the Rebellion," Haymitch continues.

"I never thought a Peacekeeper would ever be a part of any Rebellion," Katniss says quietly.

"Darius was a Capitol citizen, Sweetheart," Haymitch says. "He became a Peacekeeper in order to pay off a family debt. He was able to see first hand how unfair the system was."

I remember the inhuman sounding screams as Darius, condemned as an Avox for defying Romulus Thread, was tortured for my "benefit." I also remember the spark of defiance in his eyes whenever we made eye contact. The Peacekeepers ended up mutilating him so badly that in the end his death was a blessing.

"So how did I become Madge's inspiration for joining the Rebellion?" Katniss asks.

Haymitch picks up his bottle and takes a long swallow before continuing. "For her, it all started - "

THE SQUARE, DISTRICT TWELVE - LATE JANUARY, THE YEAR OF THE 70TH
"...here today to honor the courage, the selflessness, and the sacrifice of two men, both fine citizens of District Twelve and the Nation of Panem. Angus Hawthorne and Drew Everdeen truly embodied the spirit that makes District Twelve -"

The blonde girl tuned out the words being spoken by the man at the podium and glanced around the Square. It was a bitterly cold day in District Twelve and snow had been falling in flurries off and on since early morning.

From her chair on the makeshift stage the girl could see two groups of people standing off to one side. No adults were present with either group. The larger of the two groups, all boys, was headed by a large boy with olive skin and black hair. He was perhaps thirteen or fourteen years old. He had one arm around each of the two smaller boys with him - the older was perhaps seven and the younger was four or five. The three boys were similar in appearance and dress, marking them as either brothers or close relatives. Their clothing, obviously old and worn, was nevertheless clean and the coats looked like they kept the boys warm.

As the girl watched, the oldest boy glanced in her direction, caught her eye, and sneers nastily at her. Flushing with embarrassment, she turned away from the boy's gaze - she remembers his name as Gale - Gale Hawthorne. Gale never had anything nice to say to any of the Merchant kids in school and actively caused trouble with them. She remembers seeing him fight on more than one occasion with one or the other of the two older Mellark brothers. Feeling her cheeks still flushed, the girl turns her attention to the other group on the stage.

Two girls, one about eleven years of age - the same age as the blonde girl - and the other about seven - stood huddled close together. A quick glance would make a casual observer think that these two were totally unrelated - the older girl had the same olive skin, black hair, and silvery gray eyes as the group of boys standing near them - in fact, she looked like she could be related to them in some way. The younger girl, on the other hand, had blonde hair, blue eyes, and a fair complexion. Both girls were dressed similarly as the boys - in worn, but serviceable clothing and warm coats. The older girl glanced briefly at the blonde girl, her face expressionless - except for the barely visible twin tracks of dried tears on her face. The younger girl glanced over also and the blonde girl flashes a small smile at the younger girl, who returned the smile with one of her own.

The two girls were, in fact, the Everdeen sisters. The elder - Katniss, the blonde girl remembers - was in the same grade at school as the blonde girl. The younger girl - Primrose, the blonde girl finally remembers - is quite a bit younger. The blonde girl remembers that the mother - Missus Everdeen - was originally from the Merchant class - her family still owned and ran the apothecary shop - while Mister Everdeen had been born and raised in the Seam, and was a coal miner.

Had been a coal miner, the blonde girl thought. He, along with Mr Hawthorne, had been killed in the horrific explosion and cave-in just a few days before. Not just killed - they both had an opportunity to get out and instead chose to stay and help others escape - at the cost of their lives. Many were killed that day - but only these two men were being publicly honored. The blonde girl feels a sudden chill at the memory and shifts around on her chair.

"Don't fidget, Madge," says a well dressed lady sitting next to her. "Your father is just about through with his speech."

"Yes, Mother," the girl - Madge - replies. Indeed, the man speaking at the podium - her father - had stopped talking and was beckoning Gale Hawthorne and Katniss Everdeen forward, presenting each with a medal and a draw string purse, saying a few words to each. In turn, both Gale and Katniss nod, murmur something, and shake her father's hand, then return to their place.
"Thank you all for coming today," her father - the Mayor of District Twelve - says. "Both families will be home if you wish to pay your respects later on." Madge knew what this means. It was an invitation for people to bring some small food item to the homes of the deceased men, say a few words of condolence, and quickly leave. In District Twelve, the gift of food meant so much more than empty words ever could.

Madge stands up at her mother's urging, and they both join the Mayor for the short walk home. Her father dutifully offers his wife his arm, and as she takes it, he reaches out to Madge with his free hand. Madge slips her gloved hand into her father's, and together, the three walk home.

As they walk, Madge turns to her father. "Dad?" she asks.

"Yes, Muffin?" her father replies.

"What did you give to Gale and Katniss?" Madge really hates it when her father calls her "Muffin," but she doesn't have the heart to tell him so.

"They each got a medal honoring their fathers' bravery, and they each got a coin purse equivalent to one month's wages for their fathers." her father replies.

"Why weren't their mothers there today?" Madge asks. "I mean, shouldn't those things go to their mothers?"

"Katniss's mother is - has taken ill," Madge's mother replies. "And Missus Hawthorne went into labor this morning. Otherwise, I'm sure they would both have been there."

Madge had one more question to ask, but it would have to wait, as the trio reaches home. They stamp the snow off their shoes before entering the house. A servant meets them at the door, taking their coats.

"Mister Undersee, Mister Clark is waiting for you in the study," the servant says.

"Thank you," Mister Undersee says, then turns to his wife and daughter. "Dear, why don't you lie down? And Muffin, go practice your piano while I talk to Mister Clark, okay?"

Wordlessly, Missus Undersee goes upstairs to her bedroom. Madge hears two sets of doors close almost simultaneously from her parents' bedroom and her father's study. She sighs heavily and walks into the parlor, sits at her piano, and begins to play. At first her fingers mindlessly play scale after scale, then she shuffles through her sheet music to work on a particularly difficult concerto her mother wants her to learn how to play.

But as she plays, Madge's mind is not on the music. Instead, it's on a girl she barely even knows, in spite of being school mates for the last six years. A girl who will never again see her father. She remembers seeing Katniss with her father in town sometimes, and how both were always smiling, laughing, and singing.

I doubt if she'll have much to smile about anymore, Madge says to herself. Suddenly Madge remembers something - something about her mother and Missus Everdeen being friends when they were younger. Then why isn't Mother with her right now? Madge asks silently. She should be with her friend, not upstairs injecting morphling into her arm! It's not right. None of this is right.

Without thinking, Madge's fingers lightly press down on certain piano keys, as a song that she was told never to play begins to emanate quietly from the piano. As Madge plays, she softly begins to sing the lyrics to the forbidden song:
Are you, Are you
Coming to the tree
Where they strung up a man they say murdered three
Strange things did happen here
No stranger would it be
If we met up at midnight in the Hanging Tree

Later that evening, after the dinner dishes are cleared, homework finished, and her mother has been put to bed, Madge approaches her father. Dad was, per his custom, sitting in his favorite chair in the living room, reading the latest edition of the Capitol newspaper.

"Dad?" Madge says.

"Hmmm? What is it, Muffin?" Mister Undersee peers over the top of his paper at his only child.

"What happens after a month?" Madge asks.

"What do you mean, Madge?"

"When the money runs out. What happens to the Everdeens and the Hawthornes?" Madge asks.

Mister Undersee carefully sets his paper down. "Missus Hawthorne and Missus Everdeen are expected to get jobs and provide for their families," he replies.

"But Mother said that Missus Hawthorne was in labor today, and that Missus Everdeen was sick. What if they can't get jobs?"

"The Capitol is very generous in giving the families one months' wages -" Mr. Undersee begins...

"Generous! One month? How is that generous? How -"

"Madge!" Mister Undersee says sharply, shaking his head. This girl is more like Maysilee than her mother, he says to himself.

"As I was saying, Madge - the Capitol is very generous with the one months' wages. Missus Hawthorne and Missus Everdeen are both very capable women. They'll do just fine." Mister Undersee shoots his daughter a warning look and places his finger to his lips. Madge nods solemnly.

"Did we give the Hawthornes and Everdeens any food?" she asks. Her father sighs heavily. At least that's a safe topic.

"Yes, we sent a nice ham to the Everdeens and a roast groosling to the Hawthornes. You're still a little young to understand, Muffin, but a death in the family is about the only time that people from the Seam will readily accept charity."

"Why?" Madge asks, perplexed.

"Muffin, people from the Seam may be dirt poor, but they are all hard working and very proud. They won't accept anything that they can't repay later on."
"I guess I don't understand," Madge sighs in frustration.

Mister Undersee kisses his daughter on her forehead. "You will - someday. Time for bed, now."

Madge kisses her father on his cheek. "Night, Dad. Love you."

"Goodnight, Muffin."

Madge lays awake for most of the night.

**DISTRICT TWELVE SCHOOL - LUNCH HOUR - TEN WEEKS LATER**

For the past several weeks, Madge has tried hard to get to know her enigmatic schoolmate, Katniss Everdeen - but every day she sees Katniss withdrawing into herself more and more. It's been weeks since she's seen Katniss smile. Katniss barely participates in class, only speaking when called upon, which the teachers rarely do.

At first, Madge was upset by Katniss's rebuffing her overtures. Honestly, I have no idea why Peeta Mellark is so head over heels in love with this girl! She says to herself, then feels ashamed at forgetting what Katniss must still be going through. To Katniss's credit, however, both she and her little sister Prim are always neatly turned out for school - clean uniforms, hair braided nicely, freshly bathed - but in Madge's close observation of Katniss, she notices a slow but subtle change in her school mate.

Neither Katniss nor her sister are getting enough to eat.

The first few weeks, things seemed to be alright. Both girls looked reasonably well fed. But lately - well, there were whispers about Missus Everdeen going crazy, doing nothing all day but sitting in a rocking chair, staring at the wall. Rumors of the Capitol Liaison stepping in and ordering a child welfare investigation were popping up with more and more frequency. If that happened, Madge knew exactly what would happen to both Katniss and her sister.

They would both be put in the Community Home.

True, from what Madge could see, Katniss was making a heroic effort to take care of herself and her sister - but it was becoming more and more obvious. Katniss and Primrose Everdeen were slowly starving to death.

Not if I can help it, Madge says to herself as she enters the cafeteria. She scans the room until she spies who she's looking for. Steeling herself, she marches up to a table next to a window at the far wall. A lone occupant of the table sits, slowly sipping on a bottle of water and nibbling on a handful of small crackers.

"Mind if I sit?" Madge asks.

The girl at the table glances up, sighs and nods her head slightly, and waves her hand in the general direction of the other chair.

"Thanks," Madge says wearily. She pulls out her lunch bag and sets it on the table. The bag is heavy with a thick ham sandwich, carrot sticks, a small bottle of milk, an orange, and a small bag of cookies from Mellark's Bakery.

Madge sighs heavily, then pulls a solitary carrot stick from the bag and listlessly nibbles on it. Out of the corner of her eye she sees Katniss watching her every move.
After eating half a carrot stick, Madge lets out a small groan and clutches at her stomach. "Sorry," she says. "I'm getting over some stomach bug and my appetite still hasn't returned. I wish they wouldn't pack so much - I told them that I can't eat it all."

Katniss shrugs as she continues to take tiny bites from the cracker in her hand. Madge notices that Katniss takes a swallow of water after each bite. Trying to make herself feel full, Madge realizes.

"I told them that I just needed something to settle my stomach a little, and - say, would you be willing to trade?" Madge asks.

"What?" Katniss asks incredulously. "You want to trade? For these?" Katniss waves her thin hand at the small pile of crackers.

"Of course," Madge replies. "Those are just the thing for a queasy stomach."

Katniss remembers her mother feeding her the same type of cracker when she had a sick stomach. Now, the box of stale crackers was just about all they had left in the house to eat.

"What - what would you trade?" Katniss asks. Madge peers inside her bag.

"Let's see - I have a ham sandwich, carrot sticks, an orange, some Mellark Bakery cookies, and milk. I can't eat any of it - I know I'll throw it all up if I try. I don't have much of an appetite anyway. What do you say - my bag for yours?" Madge asks. She sees Katniss's eyes narrow in suspicion just a bit at the proposal.

Maybe I should have just offered the sandwich, Madge says to herself.

Katniss sits, eying the bag. In the back of her mind, she realizes that it's nowhere near an equitable trade. Still, this blonde Merchant girl did say she didn't feel very good. Katniss's hunger was getting the better of her judgment.

"Okay. Deal." Katniss sticks her hand out and the two girls shake solemnly. Madge passes her bag over as Katniss carefully scoops up the few remaining crackers and hands them to Madge.

"Thanks," Madge says, smiling. "These are just the thing." Madge picks up a cracker and takes a bite. No wonder she's drinking so much water when she eats these, Madge says to herself, these are beyond stale! Madge suddenly feels a rush of shame at the thought. She knows that even before Katniss's father was killed that she didn't eat all that well, and now - well, Madge couldn't imagine what life must be like for the Everdeen girls now.

Katniss is removing each item from the bag almost reverently. She carefully unwraps the sandwich, looks at it, then carefully re-wraps it.

"Your family sent us a ham," Katniss says quietly.

"I know," Madge replies simply. "Was it good?"

"Yes," Katniss whispered. "Hazelle Hawthorne made soup from the bone after the meat was all gone."

Not her mother, Madge says to herself. Maybe the rumors are true.

Katniss takes the carrot sticks out next and removes one, nibbling on it thoughtfully. She carefully re-wraps the rest. She does the same thing with the cookies - allowing herself a solitary cookie that she eats with very small bites as she wraps the rest. As Madge munches on the stale crackers,
Katniss removes the orange, holds it to her nose, and inhales deeply.

"I had an orange once," Katniss says. "For my birthday. My Dad...Dad got it for me."

And here I am upset if I don't get the dress I want for my birthday, Madge says to herself. Katniss was happy with an orange. An orange!

Katniss takes out the bottle of milk, examines it, then carefully puts it back in the bag along with the rest of the food.

"You're not gonna eat it?" Madge says.

"Later," Katniss says. "I - I need to get ready for my next class."

"Oh. Okay. I guess I do too." Madge shoves the last stale cracker in her mouth, and sticks out her hand.

"I'm Madge," she says. After a moments hesitation, Katniss reaches over a briefly squeezes Madge’s hand.

"I know. Katniss." Katniss's hand is dry and bony.

"I know. See you later, Katniss," Madge says with a smile. "And thanks. That was just the thing for my stomach."

Katniss grabs up Madge's lunch bag, mumbles, "See you later," and disappears quickly from the cafeteria.

Madge barely makes it to the bathroom. Locking herself in a stall, she sobs quietly for a few minutes before being finally able to compose herself. Taking a deep breath, she quickly examines herself in the mirror, wipes her eyes, and exits the bathroom.

Madge takes a deep, shaky breath, and, ignoring her own hunger (Katniss, her sister, and mother are going through a lot worse right now, she reminds herself), she stops briefly at her locker to collect her books for her next class, steadfastly ignoring the thinly veiled insults hurled in her direction by Gale Hawthorne and his friends.

Madge is smiling to herself as she walks toward her next class, but the smile disappears as she rounds the corner of the school building. There, she spies Katniss sitting on a low bench, Madge's lunch spread out in front of her - but she's not eating it. Instead, with a small knife, she carefully slices the sandwich into three equal parts and re-wraps it, then divides the cookies and carrots into three equal piles. Katniss picks up the orange, hesitates, smells it one last time, then puts it aside next to the milk. This time, Madge doesn’t even try to make it to the bathroom, but instead sags against the wall of the school building as her tears come again.

Madge knows exactly what Katniss was doing. She was dividing Madge's lunch into three equal parts to take home to her mother and sister.

**DISTRICT TWELVE SCHOOL - LUNCH HOUR - TWO WEEKS LATER**

Today, Madge sits and eats her lunch with her friend Delly Cartwright. She had originally made plans to sit at Katniss's table and fake another stomach ache, but her walk to school today with Delly and her other friend Peeta Mellark had caused her to change her mind.

Peeta had shown up this morning for their walk to school with his face and neck bruised and his...
lip split. Both Madge and Delly knew about the ugly temper that Peeta's mother had, and it wasn't the first time that he had gone to school bruised and battered. But today was different - Peeta really looked bad, and Madge had a feeling that Katniss was somehow involved.

By this time, Katniss had grown to tolerate Madge sitting with her during lunch. Ever since that first day, Madge had feigned stomach pains or some other gastro-intestinal malady three more times as a pretense for trading her lunch away. And each time, Katniss had agreed to the trade and had taken the lunch bag home. Still, she was visibly growing thinner with each passing day. Nonetheless, the fire still burned in Katniss's eyes - although it was a trifle dimmer with each passing day.

At first, Madge would see Katniss's eyes narrow at Madge's proclamation of illness and subsequent offer of a trade. Madge could almost hear what Katniss was thinking: Does she really think I'm falling for that "my stomach hurts" routine every time? Still, Katniss always agreed to a trade. Her ingrained Seam values would allow for a trade of goods - however inequitable it seemed to Katniss at the time - with no guilt. After all, a trade was hardly charity - and there was no future payback involved.

Today, though, Madge was more worried about Peeta Mellark than she was about Katniss Everdeen. And Peeta's cryptic remarks on the way to school further fueled Madge's feeling that Katniss was somehow involved. Peeta had never been able to work up the courage to talk to Katniss - Not that she would say much, Madge says to herself. She barely says a word once we finish our "trade" - but today, he had seemed almost convinced that Katniss was going to talk to him, reinforcing Madge's suspicions.

Peeta was sitting by himself, morosely eating a sandwich and once smiling wanly at Delly and Madge when they looked over at him. Madge notices that he keeps furtively glancing at Katniss. But, Katniss was being Katniss - ignoring pretty much everyone in the cafeteria. Sighing to herself, Madge follows Peeta's adoring gaze to Katniss - and promptly does a double take.

Did Katniss have bread?

Trying not to be obvious, Madge confirms what she saw. Definitely bread - and several slices - bakery bread, too, from the look of it. And - cheese? A few small pieces, but cheese nonetheless. And part of the bread crust looks dark, almost blackened, almost like it -

Like it fell into the oven flame.

Madge thought back to the day before. It had rained all day - as wet and gloomy a day as she's ever seen for a Spring day in District Twelve. Katniss - now looking painfully thin - had avoided her at lunch. She had nothing to trade. After school, Peeta would have worked for a few hours in the family bakery. Somehow, he had burned the bread, and had managed to get it to Katniss.

Madge remembered seeing Katniss, bundled pitifully against the rain, after school yesterday. She was carrying what looked to be a bundle of rags and had been going door to door to the different businesses in the Square. Madge had wondered if Katniss was perhaps offering to clean something and had already decided that she would ask her father to hire her for whatever she was offering to do, but she had never made it as far as the Mayor's home.

She must have made it to the Bakery, Madge says to herself. And something happened there. Peeta was so mysterious this morning, but seemed sure that Katniss would talk to him today.

But, as Madge watched, Katniss finishes her lunch, gathers up the bit of paper she had wrapped her bread in, and walks out of the cafeteria. Madge saw that she would pass close to Peeta's table
and noticed Peeta looking up expectantly - then saw his face fall as Katniss walked by, barely glancing at him. Madge followed Katniss with her eyes as she walked from the cafeteria, then glanced quickly back at a crestfallen Peeta.

Madge sighs and turns back to her own lunch. Delly was still prattling on about who-knows-what, completely oblivious to the rest of the world. Madge smiles occasionally at something Delly says, but her mind is somewhere else entirely.

Peeta gave Katniss bread.

JUSTICE BUILDING - DISTRICT TWELVE - EARLY MAY

Since seeing Katniss with the bread that day in the cafeteria, Madge notices a subtle change in her new friend. Katniss was still painfully thin, but the fire was returning in her eyes.

The girls have pretty much abandoned the "lunch trade" pretense - Katniss now is showing up with a variety of vegetables on a regular basis. It's still not much - certainly nothing like Madge's lunches - but a far cry from the small handful of stale crackers that she had been bringing. Still, Madge would always offer to share, and Katniss would politely decline.

Today, Madge sees something different. She had gone to her father's office after school to help out - she enjoyed being around her father and it was infinitely preferable to being home with her mother, who was usually lost in a morphling haze by mid afternoon anyway. So Madge was given little things to do around the office - empty trash, clean windows, dust furniture. And it was while she was cleaning windows that she noticed Katniss walking up the street, pulling a battered toy wagon behind her.

Madge watched as Katniss entered the Justice Building, then emerged a few minutes later, carrying some small sacks and metal cans. She loads these into the wagon and Madge watches as Katniss walks off towards the Seam, dragging the wagon behind her. With a chill, Madge realizes what Katniss had just done.

Tesserae.

That's what Katniss was doing at the Justice Building. Signing up for Tesserae. The ration of grain and oil that children between the ages of twelve and eighteen were allowed to sign up for, for themselves as well as all immediate family members, in exchange for more entries in the Reaping Ball come Reaping Day. It wasn't much - the grain was of poor quality and had to be milled by hand, and the oil was smoky and stank when burned - but for many Seam families it could literally be the difference between life and death.

Katniss must be twelve now. And that Tesserae was for more than one person. She must have signed up for her mother and sister, too. These thoughts raced through Madge's brain. Her own twelfth birthday was a couple of weeks away, but there was no need for her to sign up for Tesserae. The same was true of Peeta Mellark. None of the Merchant kids she knew signed up for Tesserae.

Madge’s first Hunger Games Reaping, along with Katniss, Delly, and Peeta, would take place next month. But whereas she, Delly and Peeta would have their names entered only once, Katniss's name would be in the Reaping Ball four times. Four times as many chances for the Capitol Escort, Effie Trinket, to draw Katniss's name. Four times as many chances for Katniss to die.

"It's not right," Madge mutters as she savagely washes the windows. "It's just not right!"

The next day at school, during the lunch period, Madge seeks out Katniss as usual. Madge notices
that Katniss's lunch today includes Tesserae bread. She sits and wordlessly digs through her own lunch bag, pulling out her sandwich and begins eating, but with no appetite. It's not unusual for the two girls to go through an entire lunch period, sitting together, and not saying anything - but today, Katniss senses something.

"What?" Katniss finally asks Madge. Madge leans forward.

"I saw you. Yesterday." Madge says in a low voice.

Katniss shrugs her thin shoulders. "So? And?"

"You went to the Justice Building," Madge continues.

"Are you spying on me, Undersee?" Katniss asks, a hint of anger in her voice.

"No! No, I just - I was helping out in my Dad's office and saw you through the window," Madge replies quickly, feeling her face flush.

At this, Katniss relaxes a bit. "Okay, so you saw me. What about it?"

"Katniss, you took out Tesserae!" Madge replies sharply.

"So? Is that why you're so upset?" Confused, Katniss eyes her friend.

"Yes! Doesn't it bother you?" Madge couldn't understand Katniss's attitude. The other girl seemed to care less about taking out Tesserae!

"It's the way things are, Madge," Katniss says calmly.

"Yes, but - it's not right!" Madge protests.

"What's not right is watching your little sister starve to death. That's not right." Katniss replies. "And before you say anything else - I won't - can't - take charity."

That didn't stop you from taking Peeta's bread, Madge says to herself sarcastically. Did you ever thank him for it? Instead, she just says, "I know."

Katniss finishes her small lunch and stands up. "Want to take a walk?" she asks.

Madge looks up, startled. Katniss had never offered to do anything with her other than have lunch with her. Quickly finishing her own lunch, she nods and stands up. Together the two girls walk out the cafeteria and into the bright sunshine of the school yard.

The two girls walk in silence for a moment, then Katniss turns to Madge. "Are we friends?" Katniss asks.

The question takes Madge by surprise. "Uhh - yeah, I think we are," she finally stammers out.

Katniss studies Madge's face for a moment, then says, "Why? You're Merchant - I'm Seam. We have nothing in common. We've gone to school together for years and never even talked until a couple of months ago."

Madge thought for a moment before replying. "I guess - I guess I thought you might need a friend. Remember the ceremony after the - accident? I saw you then with your sister. And no one else."

"What about Gale Hawthorne?" Katniss asks. "He was there too, with just his brothers. Didn't you
"think he needed a 'friend' also?"

Madge shudders a bit. "Gale has never been very - nice - to me. In fact, he's really mean sometimes! You - you were never like that with me."

Katniss nods thoughtfully. "Yeah, I've seen him act like that too. Don't feel bad - he does that to all the Merchant kids."

"Katniss, I - well, I - I like you. You let me sit with you at lunch and you didn't ever judge me like Gale does. And I truly do want to be your friend." Madge stammers.

"It's funny. I like you too, Madge. Maybe because you know when to shut up. And you don't talk about stupid things like clothes, and fashion, and boys." Madge steals a glance at Katniss and sees the other girl actually smiling. She returns the smile with one of her own.

"Friends?" Madge says, sticking out her hand.

"Friends." Katniss confirms, shaking Madge's hand. Together the girls walk back toward the school building.

"I'm glad you're feeling better," Katniss says. "All those stomach aches. I was gonna suggest you talk to my mother - she's a healer - but they seem to have cleared up. Kind of a shame, though - I miss our trades." Madge glances over at Katniss and sees Katniss looking at her with a sly smile.

"Thanks," Madge says. "I'm feeling much better." And I didn't fool you one bit with my "upset stomach," did I? She says to herself.

"And Madge?" Katniss says as they arrive at the school building. "Don't worry about Tesseract. It's just the way things are. Nothing you can do to change it, anyway."

Maybe not now, Madge says to herself. But I will, someday. I promise!

**MAYOR'S RESIDENCE - 70TH HUNGER GAMES VICTORY TOUR**

"And may I present my daughter, Madge? Madge, this is Annie Cresta, the 70th Games Victor." The Mayor lays a hand on his daughter's shoulder and smiles at the beautiful young woman standing before them.

Madge inclines her head slightly and holds out her hand. "It's an honor, Miss Cresta. And congratulations."

Annie Cresta takes Madge's hand and squeezes gently, then smiles strangely and says, "Thank you. I hope that they don't cut your head off when you go to the Games, too!"

Startled, Madge looks up at her father, only to see him look as confused as she feels. Suddenly, she's aware of another figure, chuckling softly as he takes Annie Cresta gently by her shoulders.

"Come on, Annie," the young man says with a smile, guiding her away from the crowd quickly. Suddenly, Madge realizes that she recognizes the handsome young man.

"Dad, wasn't that -" Madge turns to speak to her father, only to see him standing behind her still, talking quietly to another man.

"Finnick Odair," the other man says. Madge examines him - about her father's age, somewhat portly and full in the face - obviously Capitol, but dressed conservatively. The man grins at Madge
“My apologies, Miss Undersee. I’m Senior Gamemaker Plutarch Heavensbee. And yes, that was the one and only Finnick Odair. He was Annie’s Mentor.” Madge grips Heavensbee’s hand lightly and returns his smile, even though she’s slightly repulsed by the man’s revelation that he is a Gamemaker.

“My pleasure, Mister Heavensbee. Is Miss Cresta all right?” Madge asks.

“Annie is - still having some - issues, shall we say?” Heavensbee replies. You mean she’s still crazy, Madge says to herself. I watched the Games, too - mandatory viewing, remember? That poor girl is just this side of insane!

“Madge, perhaps you could play the piano for our guests?” her father suggests urgently. Feeling her anger rise, the last thing that Madge wants to do is play the piano, but her father’s pleading eyes were too much to resist. Reluctantly, she walks into the parlor and sits down at the piano.

“Play the Gershwin, Muffin,” her father says softly.

Madge cracks her knuckles and begins to play. Soon the strains of an incredibly old song called “Rhapsody in Blue” fill the room. As she plays, she sees the small group listening attentively - Plutarch Heavensbee, the District Four Escort (whose name Madge has already forgotten), her father (mother is already in bed, courtesy of her last morphling shot of the day), and Finnick Odair, who has rejoined them. Annie Cresta is noticeably absent.

Madge feels her anger continue to rise - that poor girl is probably crazy for the rest of her life and everyone stands around, smiling, like there's nothing wrong! Madge finishes the song to polite applause and whoops of appreciation from Finnick Odair, which causes Madge to blush furiously. As the applause dies down, Madge turns on the piano bench and says, ”Here’s another one for you. I hope you don't mind my singing.” Then she begins to play as she sings the first verse:

Are you, Are you
Coming to the tree
Where they strung up a man they say murdered three
Strange things did happen here
No stranger would it be
If we met up at midnight in the Hanging Tree

"Thank you, Madge,” her father says icily, putting his hand on top of hers. Madge glances up at her father and is taken aback slightly at the anger and fear in his face. Madge can vaguely hear Finnick Odair clapping wildly and saying, ”Oho! Girl, you've got some fire inside you!"

“What do you think you're doing?” her father hissed.

“Entertaining our guests, like you asked me to, Dad,” Madge replies sweetly. Briefly, Madge feels badly for her father - but her anger was enough to push aside the love she felt for Dad just long enough to play a forbidden song.

“Off to bed, now,” her father says. ”Say goodnight to our guests, Madge.”
Madge quickly curtsies to the Escort, who is eying her icily. Finnick Odair, on the other hand, kisses her hand (causing another round of blushing) while saying, "And here I always thought these Mayoral receptions were boring! Madge, thank you for an unforgettable evening! Sleep well, beautiful!" Finnick gives her one last smile and wink before she turns to Plutarch Heavensbee.

Heavensbee is regarding her with amusement, not anger, as he says while gently shaking her hand, "Truly memorable, Miss Undersee. And a very bold song selection! I truly hope that our paths will cross again."

Madge can only mumble her thanks as her father virtually pushes her upstairs, whispering, "We'll talk about this in the morning!" Madge can only nod as her father firmly closes her bedroom door.

Madge can hear sounds of the reception from downstairs as she crosses her room to her dresser. She opens a jewelry box on top of the dresser and reaches in, removing a pin from the box.

Sitting on her bed, Madge examines the gold Mockingjay pin closely. She knew the story of how it once belonged to her Aunt Maysilee, killed in the 50th Games. She had also heard rumors that the Mockingjay was being used as another sort of symbol - a symbol of Rebellion.

Madge clutches the pin tightly in her hand and whispers, "I'm in, Aunt Maysilee. I will make a difference!"

THE DISTRICT TWELVE STATIONERY SHOP - RIGHT AFTER THE 71ST HUNGER GAMES

Madge was sweeping the sidewalk in front of the Sweet Shop - still owned by her family - when she spotted Haymitch Abernathy lurching down the street. She worked weekends at the shop, doing odd jobs, mostly just to help out - although she was paid a small amount for her labors.

Haymitch ignores her as he walks past and to the front doors of the business next door. He shakes the handle and rattles the door, grunting in annoyance. He then turns back to the girl sweeping the sidewalk next door.

"Girl! Where the hell are they?" he barks.

Madge shrugs her shoulders. At thirteen, she's grown considerably since the previous year. "I think they had to run down to the train station. They said they'd be back soon."

Haymitch squints at the blonde girl more closely. "Maysilee?" he finally croaks out.


"Hmmph. You sure as hell look like Maysilee Donner," Haymitch says.

"She was my aunt," Madge replies quietly.

The news seems to startle Haymitch. "Oh. Well. I need to have some personalized stationery made. With this on it." He reaches into an envelope that he had clutched in his hand and withdraws a single piece of paper, then hands it to Madge. Madge looks at the page and can't contain a gasp as she does.

On top of the page and centered is a duplicate to her Mockingjay pin.

Wordlessly she hands the paper back to Haymitch and mumbles something about having an errand to run, the disappears into the Sweet Shop. Haymitch watches her disappear into the shop,
carefully replaces the paper back in the envelope, and, grinning, continues on down the street.

A few minutes later Madge emerges from the Sweet Shop, an envelope in her hand. She glances around, seemingly surprised that Haymitch is no longer standing outside, then shrugs her shoulders and heads off at a trot - towards Victors Village.

**THE MEADOW - DISTRICT TWELVE - TEN A.M. THE NEXT DAY**

Haymitch watches the young girl nervously approaching as he checks his pocket watch. 10 A.M. - right on time. She glances around furtively as she approaches the older man. Finally, she's standing in front of him. She glances up at him shyly. Haymitch speaks first.

"I take it you approve of my stationery design," he says dryly.

"Yes," Madge says quietly. "I have a pin that looks just like that."

"I know," Haymitch says, then, "Maysilee was my ally in the Games."

Madge gasped. "You mean - you and my Aunt Maysilee - her Games were the Second Quarter Quell?"

"I take it you didn't know," Haymitch says dryly. Madge shakes her head emphatically.

"No. Mom and Dad - they don't talk about it much." Madge replies.

"Figures," Haymitch says. "We have a mutual friend that was quite impressed with your musical ability."

"Oh?" Madge says.

"Yes," Haymitch says. "He suggested that I talk to you about perhaps putting your talents to good use."

"I have a question first," Madge says.

"Shoot," says Haymitch.

"Are the Games - are they as terrible as they look on TV?" Madge blurts.

"No," Haymitch replies instantly. "They're ten - no, a hundred times worse."

"And you were allies with Aunt Maysilee?" Madge asks.

"Yes," Haymitch says, a slight hitch in his voice. "I was with her when she died. I held her hand so she wouldn't have to die alone."

Madge nods, not trusting herself to speak. Haymitch regards the girl thoughtfully.

"Why are you here?" Haymitch asks.

"To make a difference." Madge replies in a steady voice.

"I want you to understand something. This is no game. This is real. You have to have patience. And if you're every caught, you'll wish you were in the Games instead. Now, that being said, are you in, and what are you willing to do?" Haymitch says.
Madge takes a deep breath before replying. "Yes, I'm in. And I'm willing to do anything."

"I have just one final question for now, then we both need to leave and not be seen together for a while. I'll contact you with jobs that I'll have for you later. For now, I want to know - why are you doing this?" Haymitch asks.

Madge smiles. "I'm doing this - for a friend."

PART II

As Haymitch finishes the story, I sit dumbfounded. I had never realized the secret life that someone I had regarded as a friend, someone I had known for literally all my life, had been able to live.

I steal a glance at Katniss. She's sitting, perfectly silent, with twin tear tracks running down her face. Her hands are clenched in her lap. Finally, I hear her soft whisper.

"I'm so sorry, Madge."

"Satisfied, Sweetheart?" Haymitch asks.

"Yes - thank you, Haymitch," Katniss replies, standing up, then quickly stepping to Haymitch's chair, bending down, and wrapping her arms tightly around his neck.

"And I owe you an apology too," I hear her muffled voice say.

Haymitch gently disentangles himself. "Not necessary," he says gruffly. "As long as you promise not to sucker punch me again!"

I see Katniss smile through her tears. "Deal," she says as Haymitch stands up unsteadily.

"You two run along, now. I have geese to tend to. I'll see you later." Haymitch stands, swaying slightly, arm indicating the door.

"Okay, Haymitch - and thanks," I say, hugging him briefly. He grins at me crookedly.

"No problem, kid," he says. Katniss turns to go, then spins back around and once again wraps her arms around Haymitch's neck. Haymitch awkwardly returns her hug as I gently pull her away from him. Katniss and I walk to the door. Before we leave, we both turn one more time.

Haymitch is standing there watching us, a bemused expression on his face. Katniss looks at him for a moment.

"I - we love you, too, Haymitch," she chokes out, then turns and plunges through the door. As I turn to follow, I glance back one more time at our Mentor.

Haymitch has collapsed back into his chair, one hand over his face - and he's crying.
A few days later, Katniss and I took a walk into town. As we strolled, hand in hand, we discussed Haymitch. Our relationship with Haymitch had evolved into something much more than Mentor and Tribute. With both my parents dead, Katniss's father long dead also, and her mother living in District Four, Haymitch was starting to fill a void in our lives.

Haymitch, without us realizing it, had become a surrogate parent to us.

Oh, not in the nurturing sense. Haymitch was as cynical, sarcastic, and generally unpleasant as always. But, ever since the discovery of those cursed Reaping Slips, and the incredible story behind them, Haymitch had undergone a subtle transformation in our eyes. He had come to love us and we had grown to love him as well.

Of course, we weren't the first Victors to form an emotional attachment to their Mentor. Finnick Odair, for example, had been deeply attached to his Mentor, Mags - and later he himself had entered into a romantic relationship with Annie Cresta, another District Four Victor, whom he eventually married and now was the mother to his son.

However, there were differences. Finnick had known Mags for years before his Reaping. Katniss and I only knew Haymitch by his unsavory reputation. Admittedly, it had taken us awhile to warm up to him - and he to us, especially considering the guilt that he had carried regarding our Reaping.

And so now, we discussed Haymitch, and various ideas to get him to stop drinking. Galen had said that Haymitch was an excellent candidate for liver disease due to his years of alcoholism. Katniss and I both agreed that we wanted him around for a while, but each idea that we had come up with we eventually discarded. Maybe we could get him to cut back on his drinking, at least.

Katniss and I enjoyed our walks to town. Some days, like today, we talked. Other days we might not say a word, but rather just enjoy the company of the other as we felt the bright summer sun warm our skin.

Today, though, we have a purpose in mind. We are meeting with Thom to discuss my plans to re-open the bakery. The bakery had been an on-again, off-again project in my mind for weeks now - but I sorely needed to do something with my days. And Katniss needed something as well. Rory had assumed most of the hunting, trapping, and fishing duties - Katniss would only go out with him once or twice a week now. We both needed something to occupy our time and make us feel like we were contributing something to District Twelve.

Of course, I still baked all the time, and gave away almost everything that I made. I needed bigger ovens to bake the way I wanted to. We didn't need the money - President Paylor had signed something called an "Executive Order" that guaranteed all surviving Victors would be paid the Victor's stipend that the old government paid us, for the remainder of our lives. I wanted to bake to give something back to the district.

I had offered on more than one occasion to teach Katniss how to bake. Disaster was too kind a word for her efforts, although, to my credit, I was nothing but patient and supportive of her.
"Peeta, I'm sorry, but my culinary skills end at boiling water for tea and roasting a fresh kill over an open flame," she had said, resignation in her voice.

And so today, as we approach town, the sounds of ongoing construction ringing in our ears, Katniss turns and looks at me.

"What are you gonna call it?" She asks.

"Well, it's always been Mellark's Bakery. No reason to change, don't you think?" I reply with a smile.

"That's perfect," Katniss says with a smile.

"I want you to work there too," I say.

"Peeta! Are you crazy? You know I'm a disaster in the kitchen!" Katniss protests.

"Not in the kitchen, my love." I say, feeling her squeeze my hand when I call her "my love." I give her a quick kiss as we walk and I say, "But someone needs to be out front. Ringing up sales. And there's nothing better for that than a beautiful girl!"

Out of the corner of my eye I see a blush spread across her cheeks. "Oh, stop," she says softly. "I'm not beautiful."

"Oh, yes you are," I reply with a smile. "You are the most beautiful girl in the world!"

Katniss says nothing, so I steal a quick glance at her and see the blush is still there - but this time she's smiling. I feel her hand squeeze mine gently.

"Peeta -" she began, the blush still on her face. Here it comes, I say to myself, I've heard it all before - Don't say that. I'm not beautiful. I'm not even pretty. I'm -

"Thank you," she says softly.

"You're welcome - but for what?" I ask.

"For - for making me - feel beautiful," she stammers.

I stop walking suddenly, causing Katniss to stop as well. I turn toward her and gently put my hands on her bare shoulders, feeling the warmth of the sun radiating up from her olive skin. I turn her to face me, cupping her chin in one hand.

"You are beautiful, Katniss," I say, kissing her gently, feeling her mouth press against mine. I break our kiss, pulling away slightly and looking into her incredible silvery-gray eyes. Her lips slightly parted, I see the corners of her mouth curve upward in a smile. I feel one of her hands come up, trembling fingers gently caressing my face.

"Before our - before we actually met," she begins, her voice wavering slightly, "My whole life was centered around Prim. When Dad - died, and Mom got - sick, it was like I had to grow up overnight. I was only eleven, Peeta! And I had to be a mother and a sister to Prim - and for years, that's all I ever thought about! Even after I was able to hunt, and Gale and I were able to feed our families, the only thing that mattered to me was Prim!" I can see moisture forming in Katniss's eyes and I gently brush the back of my hand against each eye in turn.

"Katniss -" I begin.
"Peeta, no - let me finish," she stammers. "I wish I was good with words like you. I know what I want to say - but sometimes the words just don't come out." She pauses to wipe her hands over her eyes. "I lived like that for years - hunting, trapping, fishing, gathering wild plants, trading in the Hob - then along comes - that awful day. And you...you entered my life." Katniss looks straight into my eyes as she talks. I feel like she's looking straight into my soul.

"You entered my life - and nothing was the same after that. I never had time for boys before then - and when, during your interview with Caesar, you told everyone in Panem that you loved me, I was so confused - and afraid. And then we were put in the arena, and you got hurt, and somehow we both make it out alive - and I was confused again. Confused and scared. No boy had ever paid any attention to me before you - " Except Gale, I say to myself, and I'm immediately ashamed at the thought. Even now he haunts me. "- and when we got home, all of a sudden just living was no longer a struggle, and there you were - making me feel - different - like a girl, for the first time in my life. And I didn't know what to do!" Katniss lowers her eyes and I feel her shudder once and hear a choked sob.

"I didn't know what to do - so I did what I did best. Protect myself. I built a wall around me and spent months hurting you - and I watched you bend, but never break. And it made me wonder, 'Is this what true love does to someone? Does it really make them just keep taking hurt after hurt?' And this strange feeling started building inside me - through the Victory Tour, after we got home, and the Reading of the Card, and us going back to - that awful place - and somewhere in there, Peeta Mellark, I realized that I was completely, totally, in love with you. And my only regret is that I took so long to tell you." Katniss clutches desperately at me as I envelope her in my arms.

"And so, when you tell me now that I am beautiful, it makes me feel beautiful - and that's enough for me," she says, laying her head against my chest.

"I love you, Katniss," I whisper. Katniss tilts her head up and looks at me with shining eyes.

"I love you, Peeta," she replies, drawing my face down to hers for a kiss. Her lips were moist, warm, and oh so soft. Her arms were just beginning to snake around my neck when we both heard applause and whistles. Startled, we pulled back from each other and looked around - only to see the source of the noise. A work crew that had been constructing a building had watched our entire scene.

Katniss and I both flushed with embarrassment, and I could see anger flash in her eyes at being the butt of someone's amusement. I admit that I could feel anger rise in me as well.

"Alright, knock it off!" A deep voice rang out from behind the building. "You ain't gettin' paid to sit on your dead asses all day! Break's over, back to work!"

Katniss and I spied the owner of the voice at the same time. A large, deeply tanned man of about thirty was striding towards us. We could see that he was much taller than Katniss and I, wearing a construction helmet with a sleeveless flannel shirt (mostly unbuttoned), well-worn denim workpants, and sturdy boots. A leather tool belt was fastened around his waist. As he got closer we could see that his arms and chest were heavily tattooed, but not in the Capitol style. We could also see that he walked with a slight, but noticeable, limp.

"Folks, I just wanna apologize on behalf of my crew," he said as he reached us. His callused hands reached up and pulled the helmet off, revealing a closely cropped head of hair so blonde it was almost white. When his face was fully revealed to us I heard Katniss give a little gasp. I couldn't say that I blamed her. The man was incredibly handsome. Tanned face, eyes bluer than mine, square, firm jaw. Even the presence of scarring on his face seemed to enhance his rugged good looks.
The man stuck a hand out towards me. "These shitheads should know better," he says. I notice he has an odd accent and I struggle to place it. "I'm sorry folks - it won't happen again."

I stick my hand firmly into his and feel his powerful grip. I return the firm handshake with my own not-insignificant grip. I see his eyes narrow and then he grins with approval.

"Don't worry about it." I say. "I'm sure they meant no harm. Right, Katniss?"

"I'm sure," Katniss says coolly. She may have been surprised at the man's good looks but I could tell that she was still miffed about the whistles and clapping. No wonder - Katniss has always been a very private person.

"I'm Lars," the man says suddenly. "Lars Broadax."

"Pleased to meet you," I say. "I'm -"

"Peeta Mellark. And Katniss Everdeen," Lars says with a grin. "Truth be told, I've been hopin' to meet you both. Not every day I run into famous people!"

"Very nice meeting you, Mister Broadax," I say. I glance at Katniss, standing slightly off to one side, arms crossed in front of her chest. I recognize the body language - she feels defensive around this man - and I've come to trust her instincts.

"Oh, believe me, this is a special day," Lars says, smiling. "Wait'll the folks back home hear I met Peeta Mellark and Katniss Everdeen!"

"I wasn't aware that we were all that popular - back home, Mister Broadax," Katniss says coldly.

"It's Lars. Oh, you two are very popular, believe me!"

"Oh?" Katniss says archly. "So, what was it? You bet on us and made a killing? Maybe even tossed in a little into the sponsor pot?" It suddenly dawns on me why Katniss is so defensive - she assumes that Lars is from the Capitol.

"I - what? Bet?" Lars stammers, then steps back and lets out a laugh. "Ma'am, do you think I'm Capitol?"

"Katniss, have you ever met a Capitol citizen with a name like his?" I ask.

Katniss, clearly confused now, glances first at me, then back at Lars. "I don't - I mean, you have tattoos, and - I thought -"

"Miss Everdeen, lots of loggers have tattoos," Lars says with amusement. I'm relieved to see that he's not upset or offended.

"Loggers? Than you're from -" Katniss begins.

"District Seven - that's right, Miss Everdeen. Although I haven't logged in almost twelve years." He pulls up one pants leg to reveal a prosthetic leg - but where my Robo-leg was of the latest technology, the one that Lars is displaying to us is complete simplicity. It was wooden, and although it appeared to be hand carved and nicely finished, it was still artificial. I marveled at how well he walked with something so low tech.

"Loggin' accident twelve years ago," Lars says with a grin. "The one day I don't wear chaps is the one day my chainsaw hits a knot and bucks right back at me. Next thing I knew I got a chainsaw
bar buried in my leg. Truth be told, I'm lucky I didn't bleed out right then and there."

I pull up my own pant leg to show him my prosthesis. Lars lets out a long, low whistle at the best leg Capitol (not to mention District Three) technology could make.

"Somethin' like that and I wouldn't 'a had to quit loggin'," Lars says appreciatively. "As it was, it took me over a year just to be able to limp around."

"Nothing but the best for a Victor," Katniss says, bitterness in her voice. I glance at her and see that she's still tense and guarded.

"Considerin' the hell they put you two through, it ain't enough. Ain't nearly enough!" Lars snaps, his grin disappearing in an instant. There was genuine anger in his eyes. To him the Games are personal, I say to myself, I wonder if he lost someone to the Games - a family member, a friend - or maybe a girlfriend. I make a mental note to check the Games archives to see if anyone named Broadax had any connection with any District Seven Tributes.

"No, you certainly aren't Capitol," Katniss says. "Mister Broadax - I'm sorry if I offended you."

"No offense taken, ma'am - and no apology necessary," Lars says, his easy grin returning to his face. I see Katniss reddening again - embarrassment at jumping to the conclusion that this man was Capitol - or something else?

Katniss suddenly sticks out her hand. "Very nice meeting you, Mister Broadax." Lars takes her hand in his and shakes it with considerably less vigor than he did mine.

"It's Lars," he says again with that same grin.

"Katniss." Katniss barely mumbles her name, flustered once again.

"And I'm Peeta," I say quickly, sliding my arm around Katniss's waist. "Katniss - we should be going - Thom's waiting in town, remember?"

"Oh! Yeah, of course - we need to be - umm, going," Katniss stammers out.

I grasp Lars' hand once again. "Very nice meeting you, Lars - maybe we'll run into you again!"

Lars shakes my hand again, just firmly this time. "Probably will, Peeta," he says. "Got lots of work around here!" He turns to go back to work as Katniss and I turn to continue our walk to town. We exchange a final wave and resume our walk.

When we were out of earshot, I say, "Nice guy. Interesting. And nice looking, too, don't you think, Katniss?"

"I - I hadn't noticed," Katniss mumbles. I glance at her and see that the blush is back.

Sure you didn't, I say to myself, ashamed - and surprised - at the little twinge of jealousy that tugs at me.

**PART II**

Our meeting with Thom went well. Katniss and I had selected a new site for the Bakery - the old site was already being built over by a new business, which was just as well - it would have been too painful to build on what I secretly considered my families grave. We made arrangements for transfers of funds from our Victor's accounts to cover costs of construction, and Thom promised
that building would begin "soon."

I didn't push him for a more specific date - I could tell he was under enough pressure as it was - besides, I wanted to investigate our new acquaintance Lars Broadax a bit further. Now I was the one feeling uneasy about this charismatic man. Katniss, to her credit, had quickly returned to her old self - or should I say, her "new" old self - once the construction site was well behind us. However, on the walk home, we did catch a glimpse of him working on the roof. We exchanged waves but nothing more, and Katniss was making a positively heroic effort to not even look in his direction.

She failed.

It was a relief to get back home that day. Katniss had spotted Delly over at my place (which I had begun to think more and more as "Galen's place," as I had all but abandoned the house to him and Delly), and went over to talk with her - which was fine with me. Quickly I entered Katniss's study and found "The Book" - The Hunger Games reference that every Victor had been required to own.

I was a bit surprised that Katniss still had the book, now that the old government was gone - but then again, Katniss rarely goes into this room. Too many memories.

I decide to limit my search to the period between the Fifty-Seventh Games - when Lars would have been about twelve - to the Seventy-Fourth Games - the last true Games before they ended. No sense in even looking at the Third Quarter Quell, I say to myself.

I quickly skim through several Games' worth of data on District Seven but nothing jumped out at me. No one named Broadax, and the few Final Eight interviews that occurred during those times when a District Seven Tribute went that far into the Games didn't help me either.

I sigh and stare at the telephone. There's only one person that could possibly help me. Reluctantly, I reach across the desk, push the "Speaker" button, and quickly code in a number when I hear the buzzing of the dial tone.

The phone is answered on the fourth ring. "What?" snaps an irritated voice.

"Jo? It's Peeta." I say.

"Peeta? Peeta? I seem to recall a 'friend' I had named Peeta Mellark - but that can't be him - he never calls!" Johanna says sarcastically. I can't help but grin.

"And I have a 'friend' named Johanna Mason that seems to have forgotten that phones work both ways!" I bark back. There's a lengthy pause, then I hear Johanna laughing.

"Okay, okay - ya got me! What's new, Peg-leg? Brainless knocked up yet?" Johanna asks crudely.

"Uh, no, Jo - you know how she feels about having kids," I reply tersely.

"I was just joking, Peg-leg. Don't get your undies in a bunch!" Johanna says with another laugh. I can't help but smile. Johanna and I do share a special bond - one that even Katniss and I will never have. The bond that was forged in a dank, smelly underground room somewhere in the Capitol. A bond forged from screams and pain.

"It's just a - touchy subject, Jo," I say, my irritation with her gone.

"Okay - I understand - Peeta," Johanna replies. I'm a little surprised at the contriteness in her voice.
"Anyway, Jo - I need to ask you something," I say, getting back to the subject at hand.

"Shoot," she says.

"Does the name Broadax mean anything to you?" I ask. There's a long pause before Johanna answers.

"Why are you asking, Peeta?" she asks quietly. I quickly relay the story to her about our meeting with Lars Broadax earlier that day.

"Broadax - they're a well-known family up here in Seven," Johanna says after I finish. "And Lars is a fairly common name up here also. I'm even distantly related to some of the Broadax clan as well. What does he look like?"

"About thirty, tall, light blonde hair, very muscular, lots of tattoos." I reply.

"Congratulations - you've just described about half the loggers in Seven," Johanna says dryly.

"He walks with a limp," I add.

There's another long pause. "Do you know why?" Johanna asks.

"Yes," I reply. "He has an artificial leg. Looks to be hand carved out of wood."

"Do you have your Book handy?" she asks.

"Yes, right here," I reply.

"Open it and go to the Sixty-Third Games. Is the female District Seven Tribute named Birgitta Cross?" Johanna asks.

"Yes," I reply, reading her entry. "Made an alliance with the District Ten pair, and they betrayed her. Killed her in her sleep on day six." The picture shows a blonde, blue eyed, smiling girl of about seventeen or eighteen. I realize that her smile reminds me of Delly Cartwright's.

"Birgitta was the girlfriend of a boy named Lars Broadax," Johanna says quietly. "They were gonna get married until she was Reaped. They were both eighteen at the time."

"Jo - do you know this guy?" I ask.

"He's a - distant relative. Third or fourth cousin. What did he tell you about how he lost his leg?" Johanna asks.

"Some kind of accident with something he called a 'chainsaw.'" I reply.

"Chainsaws are power saws that cut very quickly," Johanna says. "Most logging work is done by hand - axes, two hand crosscut saws, that sort of thing. Chainsaws are pretty uncommon, but every logging camp has a few. So he told you it was an accident?"

"Yeah. He said he almost bled to death." I say.

"I was pretty young then, so I don't remember much," Johanna says thoughtfully. "But I do remember the talk afterwards. He's right - he did almost bleed to death. But he's lying, too."

"Jo, you aren't making any sense!" I say. "He's telling the truth - and he's lying?"
"I'm trying to tell you that what happened was no accident!" Johanna says sharply.

"Then what was it?" I ask.

"Peeta," Johanna says after a pause, "This 'accident' happened just days after Birgitta was killed in the Games. Lars tried to kill himself."

I sit in stunned silence for a few moments while Johanna patiently waits for me to digest this latest bit of information.

"Jo - are you sure? I mean -" I stammer. This man seemed full of life - I can't imagine him trying to end that life. But then again, you were willing to eat a handful of nightlock, I say to myself.

"Yeah - I'm sure," Johanna says tiredly. "My father knew his father pretty well. And Blight - remember him? The other Victor from Seven?"

"Yes," I say softly. "Your district partner in the Quell." I remembered all too well. He was killed when he stumbled into the force field surrounding the clock arena after he was blinded by the blood rain.

"That's him," Johanna says. "Anyway, he knew Lars' family also. It was a big cover-up back when it happened. The Capitol lumber company would have refused him treatment if they knew it was deliberate, so everyone agreed that it was a logging accident. Still, they had to fight to get him any sort of decent medical care. Blight was pretty much responsible for getting him taken care of."

"Katniss thought he was Capitol," I say. "Because of all the tattoos."

Johanna lets out a short, humorless laugh. "Brainless thinks everyone that doesn't look what she considers 'normal' is Capitol!"

"There's another thing, too, Jo," I say. "About Katniss. She - I mean - when we met Lars, she was -" I stammer, suddenly embarrassed to be admitting that Katniss had definitely noticed Lars' good looks.

"Peg-leg, you have nothing to worry about," Johanna says with another laugh. "Brainless is certainly not his type. Neither am I, for that matter. But I know he can have that effect on women."

She has no idea, I had said once, the effect she has. Now, it seems that we've met a man that can have an "effect" on women - and, his type or not, I can't shake that jealous feeling that I have.

"If you're sure -" I say doubtfully.

"Peeta - trust me. As far as I know, Lars hasn't even looked at a woman since Birgitta. It's like that part of him died with her." Johanna says reassuringly.

"If you say so, Jo," I say - but I am far from being convinced.

**PART III**

Two days later, Katniss surprises me when we wake up. Lately, our nights have been thankfully uninterrupted by nightmares, although neither of us knew how long that would last. But for now, it's enough that Katniss and I wake up well rested and happy - but even so, her announcement that morning still takes me by surprise.
"We're going on a picnic today," she announces as we sip our morning tea. It had rained hard the day before and on into the night, but today the sun was shining brightly and there was hardly a cloud in the sky.

"A picnic?" I ask. "Who else is going?"

"Just us, Peeta," Katniss says with a smile.

"Okay, sounds fun!" I say, returning her smile. "When do we leave?"

"Just as soon as we finish our tea and get dressed." Katniss replies. "So hurry up!"

I quickly gulp my tea and follow Katniss upstairs. We both get dressed ("Wear sturdy shoes," Katniss advised me) and Katniss steadfastly refuses to answer any questions about our destination.

"You'll see," is all she'll say.

Once dressed, we head downstairs and Katniss pulls two backpacks out of the pantry and hands one to me.

"I know I'm supposed to have a cute little wicker basket, but that's not really practical for where we are going," she says. Together we help each other with the backpacks, and once we have them adjusted and riding comfortably, we walk out the door.

We walk out of the Village towards the Meadow. Neither of us had been back to the Meadow since that day - the day that Katniss had gone to talk to Madge - and I had gone to talk to my father.

We walk in silence, both of us lost in our own thoughts. Every day that Katniss and I are together, we grow stronger, both physically and mentally. True, nightmares still plague our sleep - even though lately both of us have been sleeping much better - and I still have hijacking seizures - but the seizures are becoming less and less frequent, thanks to Galen's continued treatments and my auto injectors.

I allow myself a small smile as we walk. In spite of the recent revelations surrounding my discovery of the Reaping Slips, Katniss and I are on the verge of something neither of us would have dared even think about less than four months ago.

Happiness.

The morning sun is warm on our faces as we reach the Meadow. Neither one of us had been back to the Meadow since that day - the day that Katniss had gone to talk to Madge - and I had gone to talk to my father.

We walk in silence, both of us lost in our own thoughts. Every day that Katniss and I are together, we grow stronger, both physically and mentally. True, nightmares still plague our sleep - even though lately both of us have been sleeping much better - and I still have hijacking seizures - but the seizures are becoming less and less frequent, thanks to Galen's continued treatments and my auto injectors.

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Happiness.

The morning sun is warm on our faces as we reach the Meadow. Neither one of us breaks our silence as we skirt around the massive mound of earth that marks the mass grave of so many of our family, friends, and neighbors. I can see now that Katniss is taking me towards the fence - or rather, what's left of the fence.

I had been outside the fence only on rare occasions. I was too slow and too noisy to hunt effectively, and I had never felt entirely comfortable in the forest anyway. _But that's exactly where she's taking me_, I say to myself.

Once Katniss and I were through the fence and into the forest her demeanor immediately changed. As we walked into the shade that the densely packed trees provided, she turned to me, smiled, and took my hand.

"Isn't this just so relaxing?" she asks joyfully.

"Uhh - yes. It's so peaceful in here." I reply, while trying to keep an eye out for marauding bears.
Katniss turns to me and grins again. "Oh, relax, Dandelion," she says, slipping in a quick kiss. "I promise that you'll like what I have planned for us."

I return her kiss before saying, "I trust you, love. I'm not worried." Not much, anyway. Katniss just lets out a little laugh as we continue to walk.

Soon the fence - and District Twelve - have disappeared from sight. Well, technically, we were still in the district - the actual land that had been designated as District Twelve was quite extensive. But this part had been declared off limits many years before - even before the Dark Days. Katniss points out landmarks as we walk - the various trees that she would hide her bow and arrows in, the place she made her first hunting kill (a rabbit that she downed on the run, she added with obvious pride in her voice - "You have to remember, Peeta, I was only twelve at the time!"), another place that was good for wild onion, the wild strawberry patch - and the rock outcropping that she and Gale would sit on for a few precious moments of relaxation before heading back to the fence.

Still, we continue on. I can feel sweat beading on my forehead and my shirt start to stick to various parts of me. At one point Katniss stops and has me open one of the side pouches on her backpack and take out a large water bottle. We take a short break in the shade of a large tree, passing the water bottle back and forth between us, before moving on.

We walk on - past the tree that Katniss says is the one that the bear chased her up into. She keeps up a running commentary, once remarking that this is the loudest that she has ever been in what she considers "her" forest.

"It feels funny, talking this loudly, and walking instead of stalking," she says.

"Speaking of walking - how much further?" I ask, panting just a bit.

Katniss looks up at me and smiles. "We're almost there," she replies, giving me another kiss.

Not more than two minutes later, we break into a clearing and I stop short in surprise. Katniss has taken me to her lake.

The lake where she and Gale would fish. The lake where she taught Rory to fish. The lake where she learned how to swim. There's hardly a ripple on the still water. A deep croaking sound startles me and I jump a little.

"It's only a bullfrog, Peeta," Katniss says, laughing, then takes my hand again. "Come on."

She leads me to the edge of the lake, then we follow the edge around for a minute or two until we come to a clearing.

"Here we are," she says, and drops her pack. I quickly do the same. Katniss busies herself with her pack, opening side pockets and unfastening the main flap. I do the same with mine. Soon, we have a blanket laid out, with various bottles and food containers laid out. She was thorough - packing cheese buns, a loaf of wheat bread, several cheeses, some sliced meats, and different kinds of fruit. The bottles contained water, cold tea and even chocolate milk - a mutual favorite of ours.

"You thought of everything," I say admiringly. To my surprise, Katniss actually blushes.

"It's okay?" she asks anxiously. "I - I've never been on a picnic. I had to ask a couple of people."

I stop what I'm doing and gather her into my arms. "It's perfect, my love," I say as I kiss her. Her arms wind around my neck as she kisses me back fervently.
"I'm glad," she whispers as we finish our kiss. Gently she disengages herself from me and finishes laying out our feast.

"It's so peaceful here," I say as I slice up the bread.

"My father used to take me here - before." Katniss says quietly. There was no need to ask her before what. I just nod quietly.

We eat slowly, Katniss pointing out various animals - a pair of dragonflies skimming the surface of the lake, a bullfrog swimming by ("That's what made that noise?" I ask incredulously, as Katniss laughed and nodded her head), and even the occasional fish breaking water in search of a tasty fly to eat. It was incredibly peaceful here, and I start to get an idea brewing in my head.

"Thank you," I say softly.

"You're welcome - but for what?" Katniss replies.

"For sharing this - for bringing me here. I love you," I say. Katniss cups my face in her hands and looks into my eyes. "I love you, too," she says, kissing me. She breaks our kiss and stands up suddenly. She rummages around in her backpack and pulls out two towels.

I look at her, frowning in confusion as she sets the towels down, then quickly gathers up the remains of our picnic and packs everything away, smiling at my confusion.

"You didn't think that I dragged you all the way out here just to eat, did you?" she asks with a smile, then kicks off her boots.

"Katniss, what -" I start to say, but then she does something unexpected. She turns her back on my and tugs her shirt over her head.

I must have gasped or made some kind of noise as Katniss stands in front of me, just wearing her well-worn denim pants. I see her glance over her shoulder at me, and I catch just a brief glimpse of uncertainty in her eye before she says, "Well, come on, hurry up! We're going swimming!"

Never taking my eyes off her, I reach down and pull off my boots. Katniss still has her back to me.

I quickly pull the rest of my clothing off and stand up somewhat awkwardly. Katniss looks back at me last time, uncertainty in her eyes again, and gives me a shy smile, then turns her back towards the lake - as her pants fall down around her ankles.

I know I must have gasped then. This is the same girl that has taken enormous pains to not let me see her naked? The same girl that made me leave the room before Galen could give her a shot in her butt? Katniss kicks her legs out of her pants, then bends over, picks them up, and sets them with the rest of her clothes.

Katniss looks back at me one last time, uncertainty in her eyes again, and gives me a shy smile, then turns and walks into the lake. I gulp as I watch her hips sway ever so slightly as she walks, her slender body barely causing a ripple in the water as it quickly comes to her knees, then her hips, and finally her shoulders.

I quickly pull the rest of my clothing off and stand up somewhat awkwardly. Katniss still has her back to me.

"Here I come," I say, stepping into the cool water, feeling the soft bottom squish up between the toes of my one real foot. I wade out, making considerably more noise than Katniss did, and I see
her hand go to her mouth and he shoulders shake a bit as she tries in vain to suppress a giggle.

I feel the water closing over me quickly until I'm submerged up to my chest. I'm standing right behind Katniss now and I know she can feel my presence. Slowly she turns around and looks at me.

I place my hands on her shoulders. "So - you're gonna teach me how to swim?" I say with a smile.

"Uhh - yeah, I -" Katniss stammers, her silvery eyes staring straight into mine. I edge a little closer to her until I feel our bodies touching under the water. This time it's her turn to gasp. She winds her arms around my neck and arches her face up to mine.

"Enough swimming for today," she whispers right before our lips meet hungrily.

Afterwards, we're both laying on the blanket, the sun warm on our bodies, legs intertwined, her head resting comfortably on my chest, my arm protectively around her bare shoulders.

Katniss lets out a long, contented sigh. Any residual shyness that she may have had about me seeing her naked had vanished entirely over the last twenty minutes.

"Good thing we aren't hunting today," she murmurs. "We were so loud we scared off any game from here all the way back to the fence."

"Yes, good thing," I agree, pulling her closer to me, reveling in feeling her snuggle up close.

"I am curious about one thing, though," I say. I feel Katniss's cheek rise on my chest as she smiles.

"You want to know why," she says.

"Well - yes," I admit. "I mean, you've been so shy about - this sort of thing, and I was -"

"I talked to Johanna," Katniss says quietly. "The other day. After you called her, asking about Lars."

"Oh," is all I can think to say.

"Peeta, I'm not angry with you for calling her. In fact, I'm glad you did. But, it would have been okay for you to tell me," she says, chiding me gently.

"I - well - being jealous is kind of stupid," I stammer.

"I agree, it is." Katniss says. "Because I know how it feels. I felt it with you and Beth, and I felt it when I found out about you and Madge."

"I'm not jealous any more," I say, somewhat defensively.

"Neither am I," Katniss says. "But when Jo and I were talking, she told me about your worries - and I told her about making you leave the room when Galen gave me that shot."

"Oh?" I ask.

"Yes," Katniss says, embarrassed. "She had called back looking for you, and of course we hadn't talked in a while, and I ended up admitting to her that you had basically never seen me naked before."
"I can imagine she had plenty to say about that," I say with a chuckle.

"Peeta!" Katniss says, lightly slapping my hand. "It's not funny! Especially when Jo started getting graphic about it. But in the end I had to agree with her - it was stupid for me to be so shy with you about that when I certainly wasn't shy with you about other things."

"I know you were afraid of letting me see you - all of you - and that I wouldn't like it." I say. "I think you can be assured that I most certainly do like what I see!"

Katniss glances up at me, and I catch a quick glimpse of a spreading blush on her face. "I'm so glad," she says quietly. "I was afraid you wouldn't."

I kiss her gently. "Trust me, I love what I see," I say, seeing her smile at my words.

"So after we talked, I planned this day," Katniss says. "Because of - what we just talked about - and because I wanted to show you that you have nothing to be jealous for."

"I love you, Katniss," I whisper, moving to kiss her.

"I love you, Peeta," Katniss breathes into my mouth as our lips meet. We kiss hungrily for a few seconds then Katniss suddenly jerks and pushes away from me.

"Katniss - what -" I begin, but Katniss claps her hand firmly over my mouth.

"Shhh!" I lay stock still, only hearing the noises associated with the lake. Katniss's eyes shift from side to side as she slowly moves her head, then, after a minute or so, turns and looks at me, fear in her eyes.

"Peeta," she whispers urgently. "Don't say anything, and no sudden movements - but we're being watched."
CHAPTER 21 - THE ARROWS

PART I

"What?" I sit bolt upright, twisting my head frantically from side to side, straining my eyes and ears to see or hear what alarmed Katniss. I suddenly remember that I - we're - stark naked and I suddenly feel very vulnerable. I can feel my heart pounding in my chest as I grope for the edge of the blanket to pull over me, over us, only to realize that Katniss is no longer laying next to me, but is in a crouch a couple of meters away.

"Katniss, what's -" I never finish my question as her hand firmly clamps over my mouth and I hear her hiss, "Peeta, shut up!"

I comply (I really have no choice with her hand over my mouth), and for the first time realize just how wild and dangerous she looks, in her hunter's crouch, still naked, her hair tousled and hanging around her tanned shoulders. She looks like she's meant to be out here. I gaze at my own pinkish-white skin and realize that, no matter how hard I try, I will always be a town boy.

I finally notice that Katniss has a weapon clenched in her right hand - my bread knife, held in a knife fighters grip - clutching the hilt in such a way that the blade is parallel with her forearm, the dull part of the blade resting lightly against her skin. Perfect for slashing and difficult, if not impossible, to indirectly knock out of her hand.

Absently I wonder where she learned that little trick - training for one of our Games, perhaps - but more likely when she underwent military training in District Thirteen. I knew that she was adept with knives - she had demonstrated her skill at knife throwing on the Tribute train before our first Games - but this move was more than that. It was almost instinctual.

As I watch Katniss, I see her straighten up slowly, removing her hand from my mouth, but before I could say anything she looks at me, her finger over her lips. I nod and quietly reach for my pants as I see swiveling her head from side to side slowly, then see her visibly relax as she drops back down to the blanket next to me and reaches for her own clothes.

"Whoever it was, they're gone now," Katniss says quietly. "But we need to get the hell outta here. No telling if they'll be back."

"'They?'' I ask. "How do you know it was people, Katniss? Maybe it was wild dogs, or a wolf, even."

Katniss shoots me a look as she pulls her pants up. Her shirt is already on. The look she gives me is a definite I know the woods, you don't type of look, but she's very patient as she replies, "Peeta, forest animals don't walk on two legs. Whatever was out there was walking on two legs."

I shiver in spite of myself, feeling a cold knot of fear in my belly. Fear - and anger, that someone was spying on a very intimate moment between me and this girl that I love so deeply. I finish knotting my boots and pull myself to my feet. Katniss is dressed and is finishing loading up our packs. Wordlessly, she grabs mine and holds it out for me. I wiggle into it, adjust the straps, and help her do the same with her own pack. Once our packs are on we turn to go. I see that Katniss is still clutching the bread knife.
"Ready?" she asks. I nod. Katniss turns to go, then hesitates, looking down at the bread knife. She sighs in disgust then motions for me to turn around. I feel her fumbling with my pack for a moment. When I see her again the knife is gone.

"I should have known better than to come out here without a proper weapon," she says in disgust. Without another word she turns and starts hiking back toward District Twelve.

I fall in beside her. "Could you tell how many there were?" I ask.

"Not many. Two. Three at the most." she replies. "Next time we come out here we come armed."

We skirt around the edge of the lake and quickly pick up the trail leading back to the district. It's what Katniss calls a "game trail." We're on it for no more than fifty meters when Katniss stops short, giving a half gasp, half cry. I was walking slightly behind her and I almost run into her back.

"Katniss, what's wrong?" I ask. I see her staring at something in the trail, a mixture of fear and something else - amazement? - in her eyes. She has one hand clapped to her mouth, her eyes wide as she wordlessly points with her free hand.

At first I don't recognize what she's pointing at. My first glance simply registered a bundle of sticks lying on the trail. I walk slowly forward and, as I do, I realize what this bundle actually is. I reach the bundle and slowly bend down, picking it up and examining it more closely.

It's a neatly tied bundle - of arrows.

I frown, puzzled. Arrows? I turn back to Katniss. She's standing there as if frozen, one hand still pressed to her mouth, staring in shock and horror at the bundle in my hand.

"Katniss?" I ask, walking towards her with the bundle. She's staring at it as if I was holding an armful of venomous snakes.

"It can't be," she says, almost in a whisper. I move to hand her the bundle but she shies away.

"No! Peeta, please. I...can't. Can you - carry it?" I look at Katniss carefully and decide that she's not looking at it like it was snakes after all, but rather - a ghost. *Like she's seen a ghost*, I say to myself.

"Sure, Katniss. No problem." A look of relief washes over her face and, without another word, she continues quickly down the trail - almost at a trot, in fact. I find myself hard pressed to keep up with her as she half walks, half runs toward District Twelve.

Katniss and I keep up this pace seemingly forever, finally slowing as the forest starts to thin and familiar landmarks start to crop up. Finally, Katniss slows, the stops, panting for breath, both of us thoroughly sweat-soaked. She motions for me to turn around, and I feel her fumbling at my pack.

Wordlessly she hands me a water bottle. Both of us drink deeply, and I notice that she seems to have calmed down a little more.

"Almost home," I say between sips from my bottle.

Katniss nods. "The fence is right over there," she says, pointing. "I don't think we were followed."

"Katniss, what's this all about?" I ask.

"Not now, Peeta. Please. This whole thing is just too...crazy. Trust me. Okay?" she says, looking at me pleadingly.
I slip my almost-empty water bottle into a cargo pocket in my pants, put the bundle of arrows down, and place my hands on her shoulders gently - slowly moving them around to her back. Katniss doesn't hesitate - she wraps her arms tightly around my waist.

We hold each other for a few seconds, then I give her a gentle kiss and say, "Of course I trust you. I love you."

Katniss gives me a small smile and says, "I love you too, Peeta." She gently disengages from me and turns back to the trail.

"Come on," she says, then sets off without a backward glance. I just shake my head, and, with a small chuckle, pick up the arrow bundle and set off after her.

A few minutes later we're at, then through, the remains of the fence. The effect on being back on familiar ground has an instant calming effect on Katniss. We proceed back to the house at a much slower pace.

We spy Haymitch out with his geese as we enter Victor's Village. Thankfully he doesn't seem interested in talking, so we just exchange waves and shouted greetings before we disappear into the house.

In the house, we drop our packs in the kitchen. I place the arrows on the kitchen table and move to open my pack and start putting things away, but Katniss stops me.

"Peeta, I'll take care of that in a bit. I just need to sit for a minute first." But Katniss doesn't sit - not right away. As I go into the living room and plop wearily onto the couch, I hear Katniss rummaging around in the dining room. I hear the sound of the sideboard open, then close, followed by the unmistakable sound of a glass bottle clinking against a drinking glass. My eyes widen as I realize what Katniss is doing.

"Oh, hell no!" I say, struggling to my feet. "Oh, this is not happening! Katniss!" I shout, starting to walk out of the living room, only to be met by Katniss in the hall. She's clutching a small glass containing a small amount of a pale amber liquid. Before I can say or do anything, she looks me in the eye, brings the glass to her lips and tosses the drink back. As she swallows she coughs once, twice, her eyes widening, then watering as she clumsily sets the glass down on an end table.

Katniss wordlessly brushes past me and sinks onto the couch. I regard her angrily for a moment before joining her. We sit for a few moments in silence before she speaks.

"That was something called 'brandy,' in case you wanted to know," she says wearily.

"Katniss, you don't drink. Now what the hell is this all about?" I ask, an edge to my voice.

"Peeta, please - no lectures. And you're right - I don't drink. Honestly, I don't see how Haymitch manages to choke that shit down." Katniss replies.

"I don't think Haymitch - or his drinking habits - are the subject of this conversation, Katniss. But you have me worried. What happened today, and the way you reacted -" I left the rest unsaid.

Katniss doesn't reply, but instead leans into me for a moment, her arms going around me and squeezing tightly. She then lets me go and sits up, looking at the bundle of arrows sitting on the table.

With hands that tremble ever so slightly, Katniss reaches for the bundle, untying the piece of string that held it together. She picks up an arrow at random, examining it closely, then sets it down.
I watch her in silence as she carefully inspects each arrow (there's over twenty in all), and placing them into one of four piles. Finally she sits back, and I notice tears quivering on her eyelashes.

I take her hand in mine, and feel her squeeze my hand gently. With my free hand I stroke her cheek gently. She looks over at me, smiles, and says, "I can't believe it - but it's right here in front of me."

"What is?" I ask gently. Katniss leans over and picks up an arrow from one of the piles. I notice that all the arrows in this pile are smaller than the rest.

"Peeta, all these arrows are hand made from birch," she begins. "This one, and the others from that pile, are ones that I've made over the years. Made - and lost. Lost when I missed and couldn't find the arrow. It killed me to lose an arrow - they aren't easy to make."

I take the arrow from her and examine it. The shaft was birch, like she said. One end fletched with wild turkey feathers, the broad head fashioned from a discarded scrap of metal, but with a needle point and edges that are razor sharp. Katniss reaches over and turns the arrow to the nock and points. "There's my mark. Down by the nock."

She picks up one from another pile and says, "I don't recognize this mark," and puts the arrow back down. She takes an arrow from another pile and says, "This was one of Gales." She puts the arrow back onto its pile and turns to the last pile.

Almost reverently, she extracts an arrow from the pile and holds it up. "This," she says, her voice cracking a little, "This was made by - my father."

I take the arrow from her carefully. It was large and well made. "You're sure?" I ask.

Katniss nods, blinking back tears. "Yeah. I'm sure. I helped him make some and watched him make his mark. I remember shooting some of his arrows. When I was eleven - just a few weeks before...he died. We went out one Sunday. It was cold and there was snow on the ground. He was teaching me things - how to tell if the fence was on, the best places to put snares, where to hide bows and arrows. I begged him to teach me how to shoot." Katniss pauses for a moment and squeezes her eyes shut, a solitary tear escaping as her memory of that day floods her mind.

"He - he found a rotten apple and set it on a tree stump. I practiced for what seemed like hours. I was shooting his bow and it was really much too big for me. He knew it and so did I - but he never suggested that we stop. I missed that stupid apple so many times, and when I finally hit it, Peeta, I felt so - accomplished. Afterwards, we wandered around, looking for his arrows, but we ended up losing three." I squeeze her hand again as I see two solitary tear tracks roll down her face.

Katniss looks at me and smiles gratefully, then takes a deep breath before continuing. "I was so upset at losing his arrows, but he just laughed and said that just meant I would have to help him make some more - as well as a bow and arrows for me - so I would know how. Peeta, my Dad hardly ever missed. I'm sure that some of these arrows are from that day."

"If they are, that would be, well - amazing, Katniss," I say. "But that raises other questions."

"Yeah," Katniss says. "Who had these arrows - and why are they returning them to me now?"

**PART II**

Rory stops by later that day, and the first thing Katniss did was show him the arrows. Rory was able to identify the mystery arrows almost immediately.
"That's my Dad's mark," he said with confidence. "I was pretty young then - six or seven - but I remember it. That's Dad's mark for sure."

I can tell that this whole episode has Katniss bothered. For that matter, it has me bothered. Someone had been watching us at the lake today. Watching us being very - intimate - with each other. And that had me angry.

Haymitch stops by, no doubt as a result of Rory telling him about what had happened to us earlier that day. I half expected him to make some crude comment about Katniss and I putting on a show for our unseen observers, but instead he was uncharacteristically thoughtful. He picked up a couple of arrows, examining them carefully, before he says anything.

"How do you know these weren't taken from one of your caches?" He asks finally.

"No," Katniss says emphatically. "I've recovered all of the bows and arrows in the caches...except for your father's bow, Rory. You'd have to ask Gale where his Dad hid his bow. But I've got all of mine, and my fathers, and even Gales. I never noticed any arrows missing at any time. Besides, if they were raiding the caches, why only take the arrows and not the bows?"

"Good point," Haymitch mutters. "So now the mystery is - who? And, more importantly...why?"

The word of our mysterious encounter spreads quickly throughout the district - not a difficult task, given that there are still only a few hundred people living here. Thom sends word with Leevy that he'd like to stop by that evening to discuss what this means for the security of the district, and that he would appreciate the input of both Haymitch and Gale.

After Leevy leaves to return to town, I can see Katniss muttering to herself, then she goes into the kitchen. I hear her rummaging around and follow her into the kitchen, to find her staring at the open refrigerator.

"Looking for something?" I ask in amusement.

Katniss begins removing containers from the refrigerator. "Very funny," she says crossly, "But there's gonna be at least eight of us here tonight, and I need to feed them something!"

I walk up behind her and slip my arms around her waist, feeling her relax and lean back against me. "I'm sure we'll be able to find something to feed everyone with," I say as I nuzzle the back of her neck.

Katniss was just turning her head for a kiss when both of us jumped at the sound of a loud, insistent knocking at the front door. With a frustrated sigh, I let go of Katniss to answer the door, hearing her voice her own frustration as she resumes digging for leftovers.

I open the door to see Delly Cartwright standing on the front porch. "Peeta!" she exclaims. "I just heard! How frightening! Are you okay? And Katniss?" I step aside, ushering Delly into the house as she continues her rapid-fire questions. In spite of the interruption and her impeccable timing, there's no way I could stay upset with Delly. She's my oldest, closest friend - and I love her dearly.

"Where's Katniss?" Delly asks insistently, and I usher her into the kitchen. As Delly continues to talk, Katniss manages to catch my eye and give me a look that seems to say, You're gonna pay for this later! All I do in return is give her a grin.

"Delly, are you doing anything right now?" Katniss suddenly asks.
"Not right at the moment. Galen's busy talking to one of the contractors about the clinic, and I was ordering some furnishings earlier, and he suggested that I -"

"Would you like to take a walk into town with me? I need a few things at the grocers." Katniss says.

"Oh, of course, Katniss! I'd love too!" Delly almost gushes. I smile. Delly still hasn't completely gotten over the hero worship that she feels for Katniss, and I think she's still inwardly thrilled that she and Katniss have become friends.

"Great!" Katniss says, forcing a smile. "Are you ready now?"

"Of course! Anytime!" Delly says enthusiastically.

"Peeta, we'll be back in a bit," Katniss says, giving me a quick kiss. As they walk out the door, I hear Katniss say, "I'll tell you all about what happened to Peeta and I earlier!"

Chuckling, I put away the food containers that Katniss had pulled from the refrigerator, and I'm just heading into the living room when the front door opens. I glance up to see Haymitch - no surprise there, he has a habit of walking in unannounced - and he has Galen with him.

"Galen! I thought you were in town." I say.

"I was, Peeta, but I finished up my business earlier than I expected, and...well, the story of your strange encounter has been spreading like wildfire, so I thought I'd see for myself just what all the fuss was about." Galen says with a smile.

I usher Galen and Haymitch into the living room and show him the arrows. I quickly recount the story to him. For the most part, Galen listens attentively, asking a question every now and then. Finally, as I finish, he nods thoughtfully.

Galen puts the arrow he was examining down carefully and leans back in his chair. "Peeta, Haymitch and I were talking, and we have a theory." Galen pauses for a moment and glances at Haymitch, who nods once.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Out-district people," Galen says solemnly.

PART III

As long as I can remember, there were stories about out-district people - groups that lived in the woods, unconstrained by the heavy hand of the Capitol. Sometimes parents would use tales of out-district people to frighten naughty children into behaving. Some of us that had been brave enough to slip through the fence sometimes would come back with stories of strangely dressed people that they would see. And of course, I saw their effect first-hand - in the fueling stations set up and operated by District Six between the districts and the Capitol. Trains would pull into these fortress-like stations - guarded by heavily armed Peacekeepers - in the middle of nowhere to refuel.

I had grown up half-believing the stories but never expected to ever encounter anyone living in the out districts - until I heard the story of Elizabeth O'Sullivan. Beth was my age - her father owned a popular miner's tavern - but it was obvious that she was different in some way. She didn't have the Merchant look of blonde hair and light colored eyes, and she certainly didn't have the dark haired, olive skinned, gray eyed look of those born in the Seam. That, plus her mysterious mother, gave her the air of someone that just didn't quite belong here. I didn't learn her real story until that terrible
Typhoid epidemic that we had almost two years ago.

It was revealed then that her mother was originally an out-district girl that had been injured somehow. A District Twelve hunting party, consisting of Katniss's father and Beth O'Sullivan's father, had come across the injured, unconscious girl and had carried her back to District Twelve, where Beth's father, the only unmarried man in the group, had nursed the girl back to health. The girl - who came to be called Eve - surprised everyone by electing to stay in District Twelve, and Mister O'Sullivan had managed to obtain (for a forgiven debt) some false identity papers. They were married shortly thereafter and in less than a year their daughter, Elizabeth, was born.

Some years later Eve died during one of the regular flu epidemics to sweep through District Twelve, and the secret may have died with her - if not for the Typhoid outbreak. Beth's father had wanted her to learn of the other part of her heritage, and had been taking her outside the fence for years to meet and get to know her people. After her mother died, Beth continued to meet with her "other" relatives - and that's where Valentine entered the picture.

Valentine was a relative of Mister O'Sullivan - a Hob trader with an unsavory reputation. Like Greasy Sae, she made her living peddling food, and Sae was always the more popular of the two - until she found out what Beth had been doing and realized that the out-district people had access to game that even experienced hunters like Katniss and Gale were hard-pressed to get. Soon, she had convinced Beth to allow her to accompany her to trade with the out-district people. It had proven to be beneficial to both sides - until Valentine had traded for a wild pig - and had been exposed to Typhoid at the same time.

Valentine had died during that epidemic - and Beth, along with her father, had perished when District Twelve was firebombed by the Capitol right at the very start of the Rebellion. There had been no talk of the out-districts or of out-district people - until now.

"Out-district people," I repeat.

"Peeta, Haymitch and I have discussed it. It seems the only logical explanation. No one else lives in the forest. And we think that the arrows are a sign." Galen says.

"A sign?" I ask. "What kind of sign?"

"We think that perhaps they want to make contact with us," Galen replies.

"I can think of better ways to do it than to scare us half to death," I mutter.

"Peeta, the Capitol has been trying, long before he Dark Days even, to subjugate and bring the Out-Districts under control. And they always failed. Out-district people would either fight back savagely, like they did in Districts Ten and Eleven, or they became masters at staying hidden, like here. But, I'm sure they kept an eye on things. For example, they probably know about the district being fire-bombed." Galen pauses for a moment before continuing.

"And, they can probably see that things have changed here - for the better. So they decided that it's time to contact the people on the inside of the fence."

"And the arrows?" I ask.

"They've probably seen Katniss - and Gale - hunting in the forest for years. She's known to them." Haymitch says reasonably. "Hell, they probably identify with her in some way. So, they see you two in the forest today and do something to show that they want contact...by returning something that Katniss has lost over the years."
"So, assuming that was the reason that they left those arrows - what's our next move?" I ask.

"Simple - we give them something. The only question is - what?" Haymitch says.

"Good question," I say. "We should discuss this tonight. Katniss and I would like both of you to come to dinner tonight. Rory and Delly too, of course."

Haymitch and Galen both readily agree, and soon thereafter Katniss and Delly return from the grocers. They both call out greetings as they enter the house, carrying armloads of groceries.

I excuse myself from Galen and Haymitch, leaving them to examine the arrows more closely, and enter the kitchen. Katniss and Delly busy themselves with the food that Katniss had purchased. I was set to gently tease Katniss about buying vegetables at the store - I knew how much she preferred gathering wild edible plants - but the look on Delly's face stopped me.

Delly was wearing the largest smile I had seen on her face in a long time - and for Delly, that's saying something. Delly's trademark was her expressive smile - it genuinely transformed her face - but this - this was different. While making small talk I catch Katniss's eye and shoot her an inquisitive look. Katniss smiles knowingly back at me.

"Delly, would you excuse us for just a moment?" Katniss asks, taking me by the arm and steering me towards the back door.

"Oh! Of course!" Delly says, never losing her smile. Katniss quickly propels me towards the door, and together we step out into the yard behind the house. I can hear Haymitch's geese honking off to one side as Katniss closes the door.

As soon as the door is shut I turn to Katniss. "What's with Delly?" I ask without preamble.

"One word," Katniss says with a grin. "Lars." Suddenly it made sense. Delly and Katniss must have run into Lars on their trip to the grocers. And I remember the picture of his girlfriend, Birgitta Cross - and how she resembled Delly in so many ways.

"I don't think her feet have touched the floor once," I say, looking back at her through the kitchen window.

"I - we - invited him over tonight for dinner," Katniss says, nestling up against me. I slip my arm around her. "Honestly, Peeta, you should have seen it! I didn't think anyone could render Delly speechless!"

I laugh at the picture. "Are you sure having him over for dinner is a good idea?" I ask.

"Peeta, I think Lars was just as smitten with Delly as she was with him," Katniss replies. "Dinner will go just fine. Speaking of which, I'll need your help soon. You know how I am around the kitchen."

I open the back door and usher Katniss through with a flourish. "Always ready to lend a hand, my love!" I say gallantly as Katniss quickly kisses me on her way back into the house. I follow her inside and together (with Delly's help) we finish making preparations for dinner.

**PART IV**

Dinner was delicious, considering that we literally threw it together at the last minute. We avoided talk of the mystery arrows - I could see that Katniss was still disturbed and shaken by them - until after dinner.
Everyone - Galen and Haymitch included - pitched in to help clean up after dinner, and in no time dishes were done, food packaged up and stored, and everything put away. Only then did we all head into the living room to discuss what was on everyone's mind - the arrows...and the theory behind them.

Galen and Haymitch led the discussion, after first laying out their out-district people theory for everyone. I could see that Haymitch had discovered the bottle that Katniss had opened earlier - brandy, she had said it was - and both Haymitch and Galen had poured themselves a generous helping into bulbous, oddly shaped glasses that Galen referred to as "snifters." Haymitch jokingly offered a glass to Katniss, who, to my relief, turned him down politely. I think I'm the only one that noticed her shudder slightly.

Galen swirled his glass around, sticking his nose inside the glass and inhaling appreciatively before taking a sip, then he continues to speak about the out-district theory.

"Technically, these people could be classified as District Twelve residents," he says. "The district itself is much larger than what we are used to. Everyone thinks of Twelve as consisting of The Seam, Town, The Hob, and the mine entrances between The Seam and Town. Oh, and the river. Before trains made it more cost-effective to move coal out of the district, coal was moved by barges on the river. But actually, Twelve extends for many kilometers in every direction once you leave the settled part."

"But what about the signs on the old fence?" Katniss asks. "You know, the ones that said "District Boundary?"

"The Capitol fenced in what they considered the 'useful' part of Twelve," Haymitch says bitterly. "Twelve existed for one reason - the mines. The tunnels of which ran for a good distance outside the fences, by the way. There was simply no need to extend the fencing. The Capitol had everyone right where they wanted them."

"Haymitch is right." Galen says. "Other districts such as Nine, Ten and Eleven actually had boundary fencing along their actual district boundaries. But these were agricultural districts - they needed the space to grow grain or crops - or raise livestock. Twelve didn't."

"So your theory is that these people want contact with us?" Thom asks.

"That's correct," Galen replies.

"I need to know if we should consider them a threat." Thom says. "I have to think about what's best for Twelve."

"I don't think they're a threat, Thom," Galen says reasonably. "If they were looking for trouble, they could have easily killed Katniss and Peeta earlier today. They didn't."

"Easily' killed?" Katniss whispers to me. "Not without a fight!"

"Shhh," I shush Katniss, earning me a look from her that's far from loving.

"Okay. We'll assume that they are not threatening." Thom says. "So, what do we give them to respond to the arrows?"

A lively conversation ensued with everyone shouting out ideas. During the conversation I notice that Lars and Delly are sitting quite close to each other on the couch. I nudge Katniss with my elbow, inclining my head at the two. Katniss smiles warmly.
We finally decide on a large pot containing various kitchen implements and some raw vegetables.

"That should do nicely," Galen says enthusiastically. "Non-threatening. We'll do it first thing tomorrow."

Haymitch contributes the pot. Everyone chips in utensils. Katniss throws in vegetables - ears of corn, potatoes, and the like. Soon, our meager gift is ready.

"We'll place it tomorrow at first light," Haymitch says tiredly. "Goodnight. Peeta, Katniss, Galen - I'll see you first thing tomorrow morning." The remainder of the party breaks up quickly after that, and soon, Katniss and I are alone in the house.

As we get ready for bed, Katniss says, "I'm really curious about these people. I hope that this gift idea works."

"It will," I say, climbing into bed. Katniss soon joins me. She snuggles in next to me as I turn out the light.

"Peeta?" Katniss says quietly.

"Hmmm?" I respond sleepily.

"Tell me the truth. Today, at the lake - did you like seeing me - like that?"

"I didn't just 'like' it," I say, drawing her closer to me. "I loved it!"

"Good," Katniss says, kissing me gently. I feel her shift around on the bed, and when she settles down next to me again I discover that she's now naked. I smile broadly in the darkness.

"I think you're overdressed," she whispers, before running her tongue around my ear. I shiver at the sensation as I quickly get rid of my shorts.

"Better?" I ask, running my hands down her back while kissing her neck.

"Much better," she moans. "Now shut up!" Her mouth on mine effectively seals my lips. I don't fight it - or her.

We awaken at the crack of dawn, our sleep interrupted just once by nightmares. We dress quickly and attend to our morning bathroom rituals, then head downstairs. Katniss puts the last of the vegetables into the pot. I grab it up by the handles and we head outside.

We're met by Galen, Haymitch, Thom and Leevy, Delly, and Rory. Together we set off for the Meadow. We had decided that, if these people had been watching Katniss for that long, they would know where her traditional spot was for crossing the fence and entering the forest. That spot was our destination.

We all head off briskly. Conversation is at a minimum as we walk the short distance to the Meadow. The mound of earth is the first thing that we see - now starting to sprout green. *Even covering death, life takes hold,* I say to myself. Another moment or two and we'll be able to see Katniss's favorite crossing spot.

Katniss is in the lead and suddenly she pulls up and stops abruptly. I almost run into her back. I see everyone else stop and a small sound escapes Katniss as I fumble with the pot, trying not to spill the contents. As I regain control of the clumsy pot I hear Haymitch give a long, low whistle.
"Looks like someone beat us here this morning," Haymitch says dryly. I glance off in the direction that he indicated with a nod of his head and almost drop the heavy pot again when I see what he's looking at.

No, we are definitely not alone in the Meadow this morning.
CHAPTER 22 - THE OTHERS

PART I

There's three of them, standing where the fence used to be. Two men and a woman. At first glance there didn't seem to be anything out of the ordinary with them. It's only when I take everything in that I realize what should have been obvious from the start - these three are not from District Twelve - or any other district, for that matter.

The three are arranged in a loose triangle, with one man front and center, the other man slightly behind the lead man and to his left, the woman slightly behind the lead man and to his right. The first thing that stands out is the woman's hair - a deep reddish-orange color, unlike anyone I've ever met in Twelve. Here, hair was either some shade of blonde - or at best a light brown - for Merchants, and black or dark brown for Seam residents. I find myself fascinated by the woman's hair until I realize why - it's the color of sunset.

The woman has her sunset hair done in two braids - a style that immediately brought Prim to mind. I glance at Katniss and see that she's made the same connection. Words aren't necessary - there's a certain look she gets on her face when she's thinking about her sister - and I'm sure the trigger was the woman's hairstyle.

I glance back at the two men. Both have medium dark brown hair, worn much longer than anyone in Twelve ever would, gathered somehow in back and tied into a pony tail. All three strangers were deeply tanned. Their clothing - well, it was an odd mix of the familiar - all three seemed to be wearing denim pants, and the man in front had on what could only be a dark blue or black t-shirt. The woman had on a dark green sleeveless blouse that immediately reminded me of Katniss and her love of the forest green color. But what really set them apart were their shoes, or rather, their boots.

All three were wearing boots that obviously had been made from animal skins. The fur that made up the boot tops was thick and lustrous. The sides and soles of their boots seemed to made of a heavier leather. The boots looked sturdy and tall, coming halfway up their calves.

Both men had short, well-trimmed beards. The man in front (I've already started to think of him as the "leader") only sported a beard on his chin and around his mouth, while the other man's beard covered his cheeks and extended down his jaw line. Beards were not common in District Twelve although facial hair was common in other districts - Seven, for example. And the Capitol, of course. Galen, for example, wore a beard.

I notice that the three strangers are examining us as intently as we are examining them. But, I see no fear in their faces or actions. They stand relaxed, but alert. What I see in them is caution, wariness - and curiosity.

I glance at my companions, and see the same combination of caution, wariness and curiosity among them. Haymitch has a half grin on his face, Galen is shaking his head slightly and muttering under his breath - I catch a word here and there - "Amazing," "Marvelous," and "Unbelievable" are some of the words I can make out. The others - well, they were as speechless as I am.

Finally, Haymitch steps forward and extends his hands out in front of him, palms up. I see the three strangers tense slightly, but otherwise remain still.
"Uhh...hello," Haymitch says, somewhat uncertainly.

"'Hello?' That's all you can think of?" I whisper out of the side of my mouth.

Haymitch says nothing, but shoots me a quick glare. Katniss, still in the lead, stands frozen in place.

The strangers respond as the "leader" steps forward. His companions do the same. The trio walks toward us slowly, the "leader" repeating Haymitch's gesture. I feel a moment of anxiety when I realize that they aren't walking toward Haymitch - but toward Katniss.

If Katniss was afraid, she's doing an excellent job of hiding her fear. She stands straight, her shoulders back and her head up, coolly eyeing the trio as the approach. As they drew nearer, I notice that they move the way Katniss does through the forest - heel to toe, almost gliding over the ground, making no sound.

The trio stops directly in front of Katniss, the "leader" only a step or two away from her. Up close, I realize just how tall they all are. The men are as tall as Thom, who is several centimeters taller than me - which means that they are significantly taller than Katniss. Even the sunset haired woman is taller than I am. I realize something else - all three are young. The "leader" is, at best, just a few years older than I am. The other man, in spite of his beard, appears to be close to my age, while the woman is somewhere in between.

The "leader" smiles at Katniss and extends his hand. "You're the hunter," he says with a strange accent. Katniss hesitates for just a moment before grasping his hand.

"Yes," she says in a calm, steady voice. "I hunt."

"We've seen you - many times. You're skilled." The "leader" replies, nodding his head.

Katniss seems flustered by the "leader" admitting to seeing her "many times", but recovers quickly. "Thank you," she says evenly.

"My apologies, Hunter," the "leader" says. "I'm Mikel Winter. Of the River Clan. My wife, Nova -" the sunset haired woman smiles and inclines her head slightly "- and my brother, Jahn." The younger man mirrors Nova's gesture.

"I'm Katniss. Katniss Everdeen. Of District Twelve." At her name, Mikel smiles broadly.

"Katniss? The same as the plant?" he asks. I see Katniss's face darken slightly at Mikel's remark. I remember as a child how some of the Merchant kids would tease her - and other Seam kids - about their names. The teasing stopped after Katniss sent a few Merchant kids - girls and boys alike - home with black eyes.

"Yes, like the plant." Katniss replies coldly. I see something flicker across Mikel's face as his wife, Nova, shoots him a stern look.

"No disrespect intended," Mikel says quickly, looking contrite. "My apologies, Katniss, if I've offended you."

Galen steps forward quickly. "I'm sure no offense was taken, Mikel," he says quickly. The three strangers glance over at Galen and their demeanor instantly changes from relaxed and friendly - and contrite, in Mikel's case - to one that's almost worshipful.

"Elder, we meant no disrespect to you either," Mikel says quickly, his eyes turned towards the
"Mikel, there's no disrespect," Galen says gently. "And my name is Galen. Galen Wellgood. And while I might be old, I'm no 'Elder.'"

Mikel frowns, obviously confused by Galen's statement. "Not an Elder?" he says in confusion. "But, your hair - it's -"

"Gray?" Galen says with a laugh. "Indeed it is!"

"But, if you aren't an Elder, then what are you?" Jahn says, speaking for the first time.

"I'm a doctor," Galen replies simply.

Mikel and Jahn glance at each other, frowning. It's obvious to me that they had not expected this sort of response from Galen, and they don't quite know what to make of it.

"Doctor," a female voice says. It's the sunset haired woman - Nova. "Is that the same as Healer?"

"Yes, exactly," Galen says. "A doctor is a healer." The woman grins broadly and turns to face her two companions.

"See? He's a Healer. It all makes sense." Nova turns back to Galen. "I'm a Healer also."

Galen smiles warmly at Nova. I'm sure his reaction was in part due to Nova being a very beautiful woman, but at the same time he's learned a lot of respect for people that carry the title "Healer." People like Una Everdeen, Katniss's mother. And Katniss's sister, Prim. Neither had the kind of training that Galen did, but both had been respected, competent Healers here in District Twelve.

"It's always a pleasure to meet a fellow Healer," Galen says, offering Nova his hand. She takes his hand without hesitation and returns his smile with one of her own.

"Mikel, my name is Haymitch Abernathy," Haymitch says, speaking for the first time. "What exactly is an Elder? A leader of some sort?"

"Hay-mitch Ab-er-nath-y," Mikel says slowly. He grins at Haymitch and offers his hand. "Your names are strange to us. And yes, an Elder is a leader - of sorts."

Haymitch grasps Mikel's outstretched hand firmly. "I - all of us - would like to learn more. Can you come with us? Our homes aren't far and we'd be more comfortable there."

Mikel quickly glances at Jahn and Nova. Jahn seems to hesitate but Nova nods enthusiastically. Mikel turns back to Haymitch.

"We accept," he says with a smile. "Wait for a moment. We need to gather our - belongings." The three then turn and trot quickly back through the remains of the fence towards the tree line. They stop by a large tree and retrieve their "belongings." A bow, very similar to one of Katniss's, a bow-like contraption that I recognize from somewhere as a crossbow - and something unmistakable, but at the same time unbelievable.

A gun.

A rifle, or more accurately, a carbine of some sort. I glance at Haymitch and Galen, trying to keep my face impassive. I hear Katniss gasp in surprise. So much for impassivity.

"I wonder where they got that," I say quietly, as the trio trots back to rejoin us.
"Isn't that the question of the day?" Haymitch mutters.

PART II

Before heading back to Victors Village, we left our "gift" at the spot where we first met the trio - there's no way I wanted to lug that back home with us. Mikel, Nova and Jahn all expressed thanks and appreciation for the gift.

As we walk, Galen and Haymitch try to learn more about our strange visitors, while the trio seemed to be impressed with the construction and rebuilding efforts that were taking place.

"Such fine houses!" Mikel says as we pass a group of small homes under construction. "How many will live in each of these houses?"

"I'll defer that question to our Mayor," Galen replies with a grin. "Thom, you know the most about the rebuilding efforts. Would you care to answer?"

"Happy to, Galen," Thom says, stepping forward to address Mikel. "My name is Thom. Thom McElroy. I'm the District Twelve Mayor. And as for these houses, they're what we call single family homes."

"Mayor," Mikel says, rolling the word around. "What is 'Mayor'?"

"He's our leader, Mikel," Galen explains. Mikel glances sharply at Galen, then back at Thom.

"This is all very strange to us," Mikel says. "Your Elders aren't Elders, and your leaders are quite young."

"Mikel, I couldn't do my job as Mayor without the advice and counsel of either Galen or Haymitch. They're both very smart, very wise men. They're both smart enough to avoid being named Mayor."

Thom says with a grin.

"Different customs," Mikel says, shaking his head slightly. "We knew that your people were strange."

"Mikel, it seems that your people - the River Clan, was it? - that your people know a great deal about us," Galen says.

"We learned long ago to stay far away from you," Mikel says, nodding. "But we were curious about you. So we watched from a distance. We had to be careful though, because of the White-Jackets."

"White-Jackets?" Katniss says to me softly. "Peacekeepers?"

"Probably," I reply quietly.

"What did the White-Jackets do, Mikel?" Galen asks.

"They would come looking for us, with their flyers and guns." Mikel replied. "We knew the forest, though - they didn't. It's been many years since they even tried looking for us."

Mikel hefted the gun he was carrying. "This came from a White-Jacket many years ago. The Clans are peaceful - we don't like fighting. But that doesn't mean that we don't know how."

About this time we come to the bend in the road right before Victors Village. As we walk around the bend, and the Village comes into view, we could hear the gasps of surprise from the trio.
"This is where you live?" Nova asks, her eyes wide.

"Yes," Galen replies. "Some of us, anyway."

"These houses are - incredible!" Mikel exclaims.

We approach the entrance to the Village, and, as we enter, we receive our next surprise.

"Do you see that, Brother?" Mikel asks Jahn, pointing to the sign above the main gate into the Village. "Nova?"

"Yes, Mikel," Jahn replies, looking up. "'Vic-tors Vill-age,'" he reads in a halting voice.

"You can read?" Katniss exclaims in surprise.

"Of course, Hunter," Mikel replies with a laugh. "We all can. Is that a surprise?"

"Let's just say it was - unexpected," Haymitch says dryly.

"These people are full of surprises," I whisper to Katniss.

"No argument there," Katniss agrees.

By unspoken agreement we all headed to Katniss's house (which I have thought of for a while now as "our" house). Katniss and I showed our strange guests where they could put their "belongings," and we all clustered together in the living room. There weren't quite enough chairs for everyone, so Rory, Delly, Katniss and I grabbed some from around the dining room table.

Once everyone was seated and comfortable, Galen suggested that those of us that hadn't yet introduced us to our guests do so. I decided to start things off.

"I'm Peeta Mellark. Katniss and I -" at this point I hesitate. Katniss and I had never really defined our relationship. We weren't married - but at the same time what we had was much stronger than a typical "boyfriend/girlfriend" relationship. And we weren't engaged to be married. I decide to explain what we shared in the simplest terms possible. "- Katniss and I love each other, and we live together in this house." As I speak, I take Katniss by the hand and look over at her, smiling. I feel her squeeze my hand gently and return my smile with her own.

"So you are promised to each other?" Nova asks.

"It's - to tell the truth, Nova, we've never actually discussed it," I admit. "Katniss and I - well, we've been through a lot together, and - well, we've found that each of us loves the other very, very much."

"I couldn't imagine life without Peeta," Katniss says quietly, surprising me - and everyone here that knows her - by her candid revelation. Katniss hardly ever discusses her feelings openly.

"I do love Peeta - very much," she continues. She leans into me slightly. "He completes me." She turns her face toward me and kisses me gently.

"I think we gathered that much from yesterday by the lake," Jahn says with a smirk. I feel myself redden and a glance at Katniss confirms that she's blushing furiously.

"Jahn!" Mikel says sharply, then, "My apologies to you both for my brother's - tactlessness."
"So it was you that was watching us?" Katniss asks, her voice quavering just a bit from a mix of anger and embarrassment.

"It was, Hunter," Mikel admits. "But our intention was to simply return your arrows. We meant no intrusion." I have to admit that Mikel sounds genuinely contrite. Katniss says nothing, so I decide to smooth things over. "Katniss appreciated the return of her arrows," I say quickly. I glance at Katniss and see her sitting tight-lipped. Not good, she's angry. Please don't say anything else! I say to myself.

Thankfully, Delly breaks the tension. She stands up and says, "I'm Delly Cartwright. I work with Doctor Wellgood on getting our new medical clinic up and running. And I can't tell you how exciting it is to have you people actually here! I mean, we always thought you were a myth!"

At this the trio laughs, along with everyone else in the room. "No, we're all real!" Mikel exclaims.

"What I meant was - I mean, I'd always heard stories, legends really, about people live out-district, not under Capitol control." Delly stammered.

"Our way of life is not easy, Delly Cartwright," Mikel says. "We change camps several times a year, both for the hunting and to stay away from the White-Jackets. But we watched you and we knew we had something you didn't. Freedom."

"It's true, we didn't have freedom until recently," Haymitch says. "We fought long and hard for our freedom. And now that we've got it we are still learning how to use it."

"We know of your fight," Mikel says. "We saw the flyers come on the Night of the Fires. We could see the flames from far away. It took a long time for people to return, but when people came back to stay we saw no White-Jackets with them, so we thought that maybe things had changed."


Leevy stands up nervously. "I'm Leevy Alexander. I was neighbors with Katniss here in Twelve. And - well, I might as well let everyone know now - Thom and I are to be married."

"That's wonderful news!" Galen is the first to congratulate Leevy and Thom, as everyone clusters around them. Even Katniss, as reserved as she is, gives both of them hug and a kiss. I had suspected as much, considering the amount of time they spent together, but Leevy's confirmation is still welcome. A few glances are tossed towards Katniss and I as well, making us both suddenly uncomfortable. It's obvious that some feel we should make the same announcement - but, as much as I want this - want to marry Katniss - I know that it's still much too soon.

I take Katniss by the hand and give it a reassuring squeeze, and smile at her when she gives me the same squeeze back. How long have we been there for each other - comforting each other? Holding each other at night when the nightmares visit us? But her profession of her love for me is still just a few weeks old, and it needs time - time to grow, to mature into something that's unshakeable.

Katniss and I have made great strides, both with our own personal recovery as well as our mutual recovery. We've grown together in a way that I used to only be able to dream about. But, we both know that it would be a monumental mistake to rush things. True, Leevy and Thom had only been in their relationship for a few months - but neither had to deal with the demons of two Hunger Games as well as torture and hijacking by the Capitol. I'm very happy with the pace that our relationship is going - and so is Katniss.
I turn my attention back towards the group as Rory reluctantly stands up to introduce himself, then finds himself the object of praise from Mikel, Nova and Jahn over his developing skills as a hunter.

"Mikel, young Hunter Rory looks familiar to me," Jahn says, examining Rory closely.

"To me also, brother," Mikel says.

"My brother Gale used to hunt in the forest. With Katniss. Katniss has been teaching me," Rory explains.

"Ahh. Yes! Hunter, your partner was Rory's brother?" Mikel asks.

"Yes, he was," Katniss replies. "For almost four years. We helped each other."

"And where is your brother now, Hunter Rory?" asks Jahn.

"He didn't - I mean, he did make it out on the Night of the Fires?" Mikel asks.

"Yes, he did. He was the one that led everyone to safety," Rory replies with pride. "But he doesn't live here any more. He chose to go to District Two after the Rebellion was over."

"District Two?" asks Mikel.

"It's another part of Panem - our...that is to say, this - country," Haymitch explains. "It's very far away. A very long journey on foot."

"I see," Mikel says slowly. "And why did he choose this new home? He wasn't happy to come back here to rebuild his old home, like you all are?"

Rory looks decidedly uncomfortable with these questions, so I decide to step in. "Gale Hawthorne found a new calling during our Rebellion. He stayed in District Two to follow this calling."

I can see the trio mulling over this information and hope that it'll be enough for them. The last thing I wanted to try to do was explain that Gale had decided to remain a soldier - and to our new friends, that was synonymous with "White-Jacket."

Finally Mikel says, "We can respect that. It's important that each person find their true calling." I smile and agree with him, even as I notice Galen scribbling furiously in a small notebook and conversing with Haymitch in low tones.

Finally Galen stands and motions me over to him. "Excuse us for just a moment," he says with a smile, taking my arm and guiding me out of the living room.

"Galen, what's going on?" I ask

"Peeta, these people have a reason for contacting us now, and it goes deeper than just 'no more Peacekeepers.'" Galen says softly. "So Haymitch, Thom and I would like to talk to Mikel, Nova and Jahn privately. We've established Thom as our leader, and you've seen the respect the three of them show Haymitch and I as 'Elders.'"

"Probably a good idea," I say, nodding. "I think maybe we should prepare a meal for our guests while you three talk with them."

"My thoughts exactly," Galen says, grinning. At that moment Katniss joins us.

"What's going on?" she asks. Quickly Galen and I fill her in. Katniss says nothing until we're
"Good idea," she says. "I know I'm curious about their motives. I think Sae's over at Haymitch's place. She's the master at the instant meal."

"Let's go talk to our guests," Galen says as the three of us return to the living room.

"Mikel - Nova - Jahn. Haymitch, Thom and I would like to discuss certain matters further. If you follow me, there's a room we can use to talk."

"Of course, Elder Galen," Mikel says, gathering up Nova and Jahn with his eyes. "We're at your disposal."

"Right this way, then," Galen says, gesturing toward the dining room with a flourish.

**PART III**

Haymitch shuts the doors to the dining room once Mikel, Nova, and Jahn have entered and are seated, only emerging once to ask for some tea. Delly and Leevy quickly brew up some tea while I rummage through the pantry, selecting a variety of breads to offer our guests later. Rory runs back to Haymitch's house to fetch Sae, and once she arrives she takes charge of the meal preparations, leaving Katniss, Rory and I relegated to the role of kitchen help.

Seemingly without effort, Sae prepares an absolutely aromatic stew using various wild vegetables and a nice fat rabbit that had wandered into one of Rory's snares the day before. Sae was intensely curious about our guests and we all tell her what we can about these still-mysterious out-district folk.

Finally, after close to two hours, the doors to the dining room open and our guests emerge, accompanied by Galen, Haymitch and Thom. Katniss extends a formal invitation to Mikel, Nova, and Jahn to join us for a meal and to stay the night if they so wished - and both invitations are graciously and gratefully accepted.

Katniss and I show Mikel and Nova to their guest room - Una Everdeen's old bedroom. Next to the master bedroom it was the largest bedroom in the house. Jahn is given what I've always called the "single" bedroom - a smaller room perfectly comfortable for one person.

Prim's old bedroom is, of course, carefully locked.

After demonstrating the use of the shower, bathing, and toilet functions, we leave our guests to relax and clean up before our meal with them, then head downstairs to satisfy our burning curiosity as to what Thom and our "Elders" have learned.

Once downstairs, we discover, much to our amusement, that Haymitch, Galen and Thom have been patiently waiting for us before divulging any information that they may have gleaned from our guests. Once we are all seated in the living room, Galen, assuming the role of spokesman for himself, Thom, and Haymitch, begins to tell us what they've learned.

"First of all, everything that I'm about to divulge here is being done with the consent of Mikel, Nova, and Jahn. I told them, and they understand, that we are all very curious about them - just as they are about us," Galen says, referring to his notepad.

"Okay. You may remember that Mikel referred to the "River Clan" as the group that he and the others belong to?" There are nods and murmurs of assent from all over us, with the exception of Sae, who wasn't present at the initial meeting.
"As it turns out, the River Clan is just one of what Mikel refers to as the "Twelve Clans." Each Clan consists of a dozen or so family units, which they all defined as not just parents and children, but siblings and even grandparents as well. There's one exception to this standard, which I'll get into in a bit." Galen pauses and glances at his notes before continuing.

"The River Clan is the closest clan to the settled part of District Twelve. It's also one of the smallest of the Twelve Clans. As a rule, the Twelve Clans try to stay at least one days march away from what we all know as District Twelve. As these people move quickly through the forest, that's roughly equivalent to about thirty kilometers." Galen takes a sip of water before he continues.

"On a side note, the Twelve Clans all receive a type of formal education when young. They can all read, write, and perform arithmetic. They are familiar with our units of measurement and can easily navigate using the sun and stars. Now where was I? Oh yes - in the past they've tried to maintain distance between us and them. But that wasn't always possible."

"Sometimes, when Gale and I would venture farther out in the forest than we normally would, we'd come across things like butchered deer - or snare lines that someone else had set," Katniss says. "I'm thinking that was this River Clan?"

Galen nods. "Most likely. Sometimes when game was scarce they would be forced into coming closer to us than they wanted to be. Usually all you'd see is signs, like snares or butchered animals. But they took note of those District Twelve residents that came into the forest to hunt. People like Drew Everdeen and Angus Hawthorne - and Patrick O'Sullivan."

"Beth O'Sullivan's father," I say quietly.

"Yes," Galen says. "And his wife, Eve, was originally of the River Clan."

"Wait a minute," I say. "When I heard the story of Beth's mother, she supposedly spoke a strange dialect that was difficult to understand - but Mikel, Nova, and Jahn are perfectly understandable."

"They're using something they call "high speech," Haymitch says. "Each Clan has a unique dialect - a patois - but they all learn "high speech" to communicate with other Clans. When Eve was rescued, she was sick and feverish, and would often lapse into dialect as it was a more natural way of talking for her. Beth learned dialect from her mother and used it when she talked to members of the River Clan - especially when she was the go-between between Valentine and the River Clan during their trading sessions."

"Remember the Typhoid Epidemic from a couple of years ago?" Galen says. "The carrier was from the River Clan. Nova was one of the healers that treated their own sick that this man unknowingly infected. She referred to it as 'nervous fever.' She and another healer were smart enough to isolate this man and the epidemic was held to a minimum, with no deaths."

I glance at Katniss and notice that she's deliberately averting her eyes from me - and her blush tells me that memories of that epidemic are still fresh in her mind. She was one of the first infected and, in her delirium, had said some pretty brutal things to me. I firmly take her hand in mine and squeeze gently, and I'm rewarded by her meeting my gaze and giving me a shy, apologetic smile that I quickly return.

Galen clears his throat. "Anyway, back to the subject at hand," he says firmly. "As I was saying, the River Clan took note of the few district residents that would venture into the forest to hunt. Mikel and Jahn both are quite impressed with your skills with a bow, Katniss. And they were equally impressed with Gale as well. Even Rory got a few kudos from them."
I see Katniss glowering at this news, and I have a pretty good idea what's bothering her - the idea that someone out in the forest that she had come to regard as her sanctuary was spying on her.

"It's creepy, thinking that someone was watching me - and Gale also, not to mention our fathers - while we hunted to try to keep our families from starving!" Katniss exclaims, confirming my suspicions.

"Katniss, Mikel was quick to emphasize that neither he, nor any other River Clan hunter, was spying on you. It's just that they were all aware that some district residents hunted, and made an effort to avoid them." Galen explains.

"What about the collection of arrows?" Katniss asks. "Not only my lost arrows, but arrows from my father, as well as Gale and his father. What about them?"

"The River Clan hunters collected them up whenever they found them," Galen replies. "The arrows were studied by the Clan hunters to see if they were any better than the ones that they were making. It was always their hope that they would someday be able to return them to you. Katniss, they wanted to contact you and Gale - and your fathers as well - but they didn't dare, not with the threat of Peacekeepers. The only reason they allowed trade with Valentine was because Beth - or Elsabata as Mikel calls her - was the go-between. By the way, all three were greatly saddened to learn of her death." 

"And they were very apologetic about their spying," Thom added. "They just wanted to be sure that the time was right to make contact with us."

"Hmmph," was Katniss's only reply.

"Back to the Twelve Clans. In addition to the River Clan, there's...let's see -" Galen consults his notepad "- The Sun, Lake, Moon, Sky, Forest, Wind, Earth, Fire, Water, Rain, and Snow Clans. Each Clan tries to stay about a day's march from two other Clans, so if help is needed it can be obtained fairly quickly. Each Clan has at least one or two Elders - the name speaks for itself, they venerate age and the wisdom that age imparts - and also one Clan Speaker, a kind of representative that speaks for his or her Clan when the Twelve Clans meet...which they just did recently."

"So the Elders are the leaders?" Delly asks.

"Yes and no. The Elders are asked for advice on a wide variety of subjects, but any decisions that affect the entire Clan are decided by the whole Clan. During the Annual Meeting of the Twelve Clans the Elders from each Clan sit on a Council of Elders, while the Speakers sit in their own Council. Matters that affect all the Clans are debated and decided by these Councils. One guess as to what their latest decision was." Haymitch says.

"To contact us," I say.

"Exactly." Haymitch confirms. "Mikel is the Speaker for his Clan so he was chosen to lead the first contact with us. He chose to bring his wife and brother with him."

"I don't understand," Leevy says. "Why do they even want to contact us? It sounds like they were doing fine without us - a good life, peaceful - while we are recovering from a war."

"Mikel was very candid about that subject," Galen says. "In short, the Clans are dying."

"Dying?" I say, shocked. Mikel, Nova and Jahn looked far from death to me.
"Dying." Galen says. "At the Annual Clan Meetings the Clans not only trade information...they also are there to find spouses. And always from a different Clan. Nova, for example, is originally from the Sun Clan - the largest Clan. You might think of it as their equivalent to the Capitol. But the Clans have gotten to the point that, no matter how careful they are, they are all somehow related to every other Clan member. Their Elders realized what that meant - that genetic defects would be passed to future generations due to inbreeding. Once every few years they may get someone from the districts to join with them - but that's been all but impossible until very recently."

"So what does this have to do with us?" Sae asks.

"Simple. The Clans wish to open talks with us about the possibility of them joining District Twelve, now that the threat of the old Government is gone," Haymitch explains.

"How - how many are there?" Rory asks. It's the first that he's spoken this entire meeting.

"Mikel wasn't positive, but he thinks the Twelve Clans have over a thousand members." Haymitch replies.

"Mikel also said that there are other bands of out-district people that he knows of, but the Twelve Clans are the closest." Galen adds. "If the Clans agree to join the district - and if the district, and the Capitol, agree - then possibly other groups may follow suit. He did warn, however, that some groups west of us can be quite aggressive."

"What do you think?" Katniss whispers to me.

"It's - it's a lot to take in," I admit. "But it's exciting, in a way. And think of how quickly we could get the district rebuilt with all that extra help!"

Regardless of my enthusiasm, Katniss still looked doubtful.

"Mikel, Nova, and Jahn will be down soon," Galen says. "There's something else that you all need to know before they join us here." Galen pauses and looks at his notes, then back up at us.

"The Clans know all about the Hunger Games - and they know all about the part that Haymitch, Katniss, and Peeta played in them."
Dinner with our new friends from the River Clan went well, despite the specter hanging over us of their knowledge of the parts that Katniss, Haymitch and I played in the Hunger Games. Fortunately, one of our other guests provided enough of a welcome distraction to pretty much assure that the subject of the Games would not come up.

Lars Broadax.

Mikel, Nova, and Jahn were all quite impressed with our friend from District Seven - Jahn in particular - who found out the hard way that flirting with Delly could be hazardous to his health. Truthfully, I suspect that Delly was enjoying the attention that these two incredibly charismatic men were paying her - I know how lost she had been feeling ever since Twelve had been bombed, and my entire family killed - including my oldest brother Alec. Alec and Delly had been seeing each other and, for her, it had been the first time in her life that any boy had paid real attention to her.

So, when our guests joined us after cleaning up and changing clothes - as it worked out, Mikel borrowed some of Thom's clothing, Jahn some of mine, while Nova was able to use some of the clothes left by Una Everdeen - and everyone was able to relax, after a fashion, it didn't take Jahn Winter very long at all to start turning on his charm to Delly. Well, actually, he tried with Katniss and Leevy as well - but with Katniss he may as well have been flirting with a brick wall, and Leevy just laughed and teased Thom good-naturedly that he may have a little competition, after all.

Mikel, standing near Haymitch and I, chuckled softly while watching his brother ooze charm.

"He's been this way his whole life," Mikel explained with a smile. "Jahn doesn't know how not to be charming with women."

"Real ladies man, huh?" Haymitch grunted.

"Fear not, Elder Haymitch," Mikel says confidently. "My brother is promised to another, and he is fiercely faithful to her."

"In that case, maybe you should talk to him," Katniss says, somewhat coldly. I hadn't even been aware that she had joined us. "You know, before there's trouble."

At this, I glance over to the exchange between Jahn, Leevy, and Thom - and I can see that Thom's eyes are narrowed dangerously, even though he's laughing along with Leevy and Jahn.

"That might not be a bad idea," I say, but before Mikel can make a move, Jahn's attentions are diverted elsewhere - specifically to my lifelong friend, Delly Cartwright.

I can't make out the entire exchange between Jahn and Delly, but I catch snippets of their conversation here and there, mostly in reference to Delly's "hair like spun gold" or her "smile that could thaw even a frozen heart." And Delly is eating it up.

"Katniss, is Lars coming tonight?" I ask quietly.
"Oh, yes," Katniss says with a somewhat wicked grin. "I sent Rory out to his latest job to invite him over. He should be here any time."

"You almost seem eager to see Lars and Jahn together," I say, slipping my arm around her slender waist.

"I think that the 'ladies man' needs to be put in his place," Katniss replies. "Especially if he has a girl back home. That makes his flirting all the worse!"

I laugh softly. "I don't think he means any harm, Katniss," I say. "If anything, he kinda reminds me of Finnick in that way."

"It's not the same, and you know it, Peeta!" Katniss says sharply. "You know why Finnick was the way he was!"

"Yes, love, and we don't know why Jahn is the way he is. Besides, I'm sure he'll stop once he realizes that Lars is somewhat 'protective' of Delly," I say. "By the way, I noticed that you did a good job pouring ice on him when he was trying to charm you." I kiss the top of her head as I say this last.

Katniss snuggled in a little closer to me. "He's not my type, Dandelion," she says softly. "And besides, I'm taken. I didn't notice you being the least little upset by his attentions to me, though."

"Just for reminding me once again why I love you so much," Katniss says, her arm curling around my neck and bringing my lips down to hers.

I don't get a chance to really enjoy the kiss. Galen, who had been engaged in an earnest and animated conversation with Nova, chooses that very moment to interrupt.

"Katniss! Peeta! So sorry to intrude -" Galen slips us a quick wink, making me chuckle. I catch a glimpse of Katniss out of the corner of my eye, and see that she's making the same face that she made right after our second Tribute Parade, when Johanna stripped naked while riding in the elevator with us "- but I've been talking with Nova, and her knowledge of medicinal plants is extraordinary! Katniss, would it be possible for her to take a look at your plant book later?"

"I - well - sure, of course, Galen," Katniss stammers out. Since his return to the district, Katniss has become genuinely fond of the man that she had at one time derisively dismissed as "That Capitol doctor." She knows how hard he's worked with our recovery - not only in my hijacking treatments - but also in his gentle counseling of her as well.

"That would be most wonderful," Nova says in her calm, well modulated voice. "Hunter Katniss, I understand from Elder Galen that your mother was a Healer as well?"

"Yes - she still is," Katniss replies. "She's still alive - she lives in District Four now. Near the sea."

"The sea! How exciting!" Nova says. "I've heard of the sea but I've yet to see it! Water as far as the
eye can see! Have you ever seen the sea, Hunter Katniss?"

"Yes. Once. From far away. Both Peeta and I saw it together. And, Nova - it's just Katniss." I hear something different in Katniss's voice - something distant. I know that she's remembering our Victory Tour and our stop in District Four - and of a certain little girl that we met there that has become a regular correspondent with Katniss. Her letters from Lilly Donegal never fail to bring a smile to her face, and Katniss always responds immediately.

"Of course - Katniss," Nova says with a smile. "Forgive us. In The Clans it's common to show respect for another to address them by their title. It seems that your people are much more informal. We have much to learn."

"We all have much to learn, Nova," Katniss replies, returning Nova's smile. I relax a bit. It seems that Katniss is genuinely starting to warm up to Nova - even if she's still somewhat cool towards Mikel and Jahn.

"Katniss, dinner won't be for a while yet," I say. "Would you like to show Nova the plant book now? It's in the office, I believe."

"That sounds like a good idea," Katniss says. She turns toward the office. "Nova? Would you like to look at my book now?"

"Very much," Nova says, following Katniss into the office. I watch with a smile as Katniss and Nova disappear into the office, already in deep conversation even as the door closes.

"Our women seem to be getting along well," Mikel remarks quietly, slipping up beside me.

"It seems so," I reply, "Although I think Katniss would take exception at being called 'my woman.'"

Mikel laughs. "I think you're right, Peeta," he says. "She's strong, that one. Our people have watched her - and the few others from your District Twelve - that have ventured beyond your fence to hunt - for many years. But I see something in her eyes - and in your eyes as well. You've both known hardship - and pain."

"Yes," I say quietly. "Yes, we have. All of us have. And hopefully those days are behind us."

Mikel says nothing, but places his strong hand on my shoulder and squeezes gently. Before either of us can say anything, there's a knock on the front door.

"Door's open!" Haymitch bellows. I glance over at him, eyebrows raised. Haymitch gives me a bemused glance in return, and says, "What?"

"Nothing, Haymitch," I say, chuckling, as the door opens and Lars Broadax strides into the house.

"Peeta!" Lars booms out. "Rory tells me you have some interesting guests!" He glances at Mikel, still standing next to me. Mikel is regarding Lars with an openly astonished expression on his face. I can't say that I blame him - Lars is definitely larger than life the first time you meet him...his hair so blonde it's almost white, his muscular arms covered with tattoos - and his sheer size - all combine to form a somewhat intimidating appearance. But, Mikel recovers nicely, and immediately offers Lars his hand.

"Mikel Winter, of the River Clan," he says, firmly grasping the hand Lars offers.

"Lars Broadax, formerly of District Seven, now of Twelve," Lars replies, gripping Mikel's hand firmly.
I glance at Lars, surprise on my face. This is the first I've ever heard him say that he's staying in Twelve - but if he's decided to stay, I have a pretty good idea why - and her name is Delly Cartwright.

"Lars!" I hear a female voice squeal with delight as I see a flash of blonde hair hurl across the room and fly into his arms.

"Delly!" Lars roars, enfolding Delly firmly in his brawny arms and kissing her soundly.

"So this is Delly's man?" A voice says from behind Mikel and I. I glance over my shoulder and see Jahn walking up to join us.

"Indeed it is, boy. Indeed it is!" Haymitch says with a grin as he also walks up to join us. Haymitch casually pulls a flask out, uncaps it, and takes a long pull. I just shake my head in disgust as he smiles and winks at me.

"Lars, have you met my new friend Jahn?" Delly asks, her arm twined in with the oak limb that Lars calls his left arm.

"Not yet," Lars says, extending his hand. "Lars Broadax."


"Jahn is really quite charming, Lars," Delly says with a smile. "He knows just what to say to a girl."

Okay Delly, you can shut up any time! I desperately try to catch Delly's eye, but she's gazing at Lars with an absolutely loving look on her face.

"Really." It's amazing how much menace that Lars was able to put in one simple word. And he said it quietly, too.

"Oh yes," Delly continues. "He's really quite poetic."

"I see." Lars gently removes Delly's arm from his own and casually drapes it around Jahn's shoulders. Beside me I can feel Mikel tense, and I grab his arm firmly and give him a slight shake of my head.

"Friend, may I have a private word with you?" Lars asks Jahn. Eyes wide, Jahn can do nothing but nod wordlessly. Lars guides Jahn towards the dining room, pausing only to glance back over his shoulder.

"We'll be right back," Lars says to Delly. "This won't take long." He shuts the dining room door behind them firmly.

"Peeta - my brother -" Mikel stammers.

"Will be fine, Mikel," I say. "I'm sure that Lars just wants to talk to him for a bit." I hope that's all Lars wants, I say to myself.

"Peeta? What's going on? Is it something I said?" Delly says in confusion.

"Blondie, you're sweet, and adorable - and totally clueless!" Haymitch says dryly.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Delly says peevishly.
"It means - Delly, Haymitch will explain it to you," I say, trying to suppress a chuckle while ignoring Haymitch's indignant protests. "Mikel, have you ever had orange juice?"

"Juice that's orange? Never." Mikel says.

"Come with me. You're in for a treat." Mikel and I walk into the kitchen, leaving Haymitch to explain to Delly exactly what she had said to set Lars off.

**PART II**

"Are they ever going to go to sleep tonight?" Katniss moans softly into my ear. My only response is a frustrated sigh. Both Katniss and I can hear very plainly the moans and cries - not to mention the rhythmic thumping of the headboard - coming from the larger of the two occupied guest rooms. It had been going on for hours.

I pull Katniss closer to me and kiss her forehead. "Look at the bright side," I whisper. "At least we aren't sleeping alone tonight - like Jahn. Poor guy has to listen to all that by himself."

"And just what are you trying to say, Peeta?" Katniss whispers back, snuggling even closer to me.

"Well," I whisper, "What I mean is - if we can't sleep anyway - maybe we can find a way to - distract ourselves, and maybe we won't hear them if we're, you know, making our own noise, and - "

"Uh-uh," Katniss says firmly. "It's bad enough we already gave them a show by the lake! The last thing I want is for them to give us those 'I know what you were doing last night' looks at us tomorrow morning at breakfast!"

"You mean, today at breakfast?" I groan, looking at the glowing numbers on the clock.

Katniss just groans in response. "I had no idea it was that late," she says.

"It is. So, as long as we're awake, what did Nova think of your plant book?" I ask.

"She was impressed, although she knew about every medicinal plant in the book - and all the edible ones as well. She never dreamed that we would have to use the same plants and herbs that the Clans use. I told her that we didn't have much access to doctors or modern medicines until recently." Katniss says.

I think back to just a couple of short years ago - when Galen was the Capitol-assigned doctor, told to treat only members of the Capitol Liaison office and miners injured on the job - and given virtually nothing with which to practice medicine. How he really came into his own during the Typhoid Epidemic that swept through the district - finally getting help from the Capitol, after a few phone calls from the only Victor not infected with Typhoid - me. Now, the new clinic is nearing completion, and soon the new government in the Capitol will be sending another doctor to help treat our swelling population - as well as a dentist to treat our teeth.

"Was she surprised by that?" I ask.

"I don't think so," Katniss replies thoughtfully. "It seems that she - as well as Mikel and Jahn - know quite a bit about how things used to be with us, and the other districts, for that matter."

"Speaking of Jahn, he seemed quite - subdued - after his talk with Lars," I say with a grin.

"I wonder what Lars said to him?" Katniss asks with a small chuckle.
"Whatever it was, Jahn was the perfect gentleman with all the girls after Lars got through with him." I reply with a yawn. Suddenly, I sit up.

"Listen!" I say softly.

"What?" Katniss asks as I feel her stiffen beside me.


"About time," Katniss sighs, laying back down and snuggling up close to me again.

"I love you, Katniss," I say as I pull her close to me.

Katniss tilts her head up and presses her lips to mine in a lingering kiss. "I love you, Peeta," she says quietly. "Goodnight, Dandelion."

"Goodnight, my love."

I'm stumbling through the pitch-black jungle, my skin burning wherever the fog touched it. My vision starts to blur and I feel my arms and legs start to twitch uncontrollably as my head twists first one way, then another, trying to get my bearings. I see Finnick stumbling blindly, Mags clinging desperately to his back. I turn my head the other way, frantically trying to spot Katniss, she was right there just a second ago, and -

"Peeta!" I hear Katniss calling my name - but where is she? Back there, behind me - but why is she behind me? That's where the fog is!

"Peeta!" Her voice again, definitely behind me. I turn and face the deadly fog, trying to focus my eyes towards her voice and -

There! Katniss is lying on the matted jungle floor, neck and face distorted with ugly white blisters from the poison fog, arms and legs twitching and jerking uncontrollably. I start towards her, my own arms and legs not cooperating - but I have to reach her.

"Peeta!" Katniss screams again, and I see it - tendrils of the poison fog curling around her feet, her legs, and Katniss screams again as the fire burns her everywhere the fog touches, and screams again and again - inhuman, animal sounds, and she screams my name one last time -

"Peeta! Peeta!" My eyes snap open, and, in the dim light of the bedroom, I see Katniss sitting straight up in bed, screaming - sometimes my name, but mostly just incoherent sounds - and I sit up, shaking off my own nightmare to wrap my arms around her and gently pull her back onto the bed, stroking her hair, murmuring softly to her as her screams turn into low moans, then to quiet sobs as she clings to me and cries.

"Peeta? Katniss?" Mikel's voice comes from the other side of our bedroom door. "Is everything alright?"

"Yes - thanks, Mikel," I call out. "We're fine. It was a - bad dream."

"You're sure?" Mikel asks.

"Yes, Mikel," Katniss says in a shaking voice. "We're fine. Sorry for waking you."

"I will bid you goodnight, then," Mikel says doubtfully. "And I hope your slumbers are peaceful."
"Goodnight, Mikel," I call out. "And thank you."

Mikel doesn't answer, and a moment later I hear his bedroom door close.

"Want to talk about it?" I ask Katniss. It's a formality with us - she never wants to talk about her nightmares, except in the most general of ways. I know she discusses them in more detail with Doctor Aurelius and with Galen - but only because she has to.

"You first," Katniss whispers, surprising me.

"What?" I stammer. "What makes you think - I mean, why do you say -"

"Peeta, you're soaking wet, and it's a cool night, and we haven't been - you know - exerting ourselves." Katniss says quietly. "So you first."

"I can't hide anything from you, can I?" I ask lovingly.

I feel Katniss shake her head. "Not any more. The more time we spend together, the easier it is for me to see inside you."

I take a deep breath. "Okay. The clock arena. The fog. Only you - you were trapped, and I couldn't get to you, and you were screaming my name, and -" I feel Katniss's fingers over my mouth.

"That's enough," she says, shuddering. "I'm so sorry, Dandelion. That was a horrible place, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," I say huskily. "Listen, you don't have to tell me -"


I hold her close, stroking her hair again as the memory of her nightmare floods over her and gradually her sobs quiet and her breathing becomes deep and even.

"I love you," I whisper as I close my eyes and will the nightmares to not return this night.

**PART III**

We're all gathered in Haymitch's office - myself, Katniss, Haymitch, Galen, Thom, and Mikel - on a vid-call to the Capitol. Originally it was Haymitch's idea to call Plutarch Heavensbee with the news of our contact with confirmed out-district dwellers, and that had snowballed, once Plutarch had actually spoken with Mikel, to a conference call with President Paylor herself.

"This is quite extraordinary," Paylor was saying. "We've received spotty reports from other districts, reporting sightings, but yours is the first confirmed out-district contact. Congratulations, Mayor McElroy. Hopefully this will encourage other out-district groups to come forward and be assimilated into the various districts."

"That's exactly what we don't want, Madam President," Haymitch says firmly.

"Mister Abernathy, it was my understanding that these people - the Twelve Clans, you said, Mister Winter? - that the Twelve Clans desired to settle in the built-up section of District Twelve." Paylor says impatiently.
"Yes, Madam President - settle - not assimilate. These people have hundreds of years of their own beliefs and culture behind them - the last thing they want is to be forced to conform to our own beliefs and traditions. If they choose to adopt our way of life, that's one thing - but not at the expense of their own culture!" Haymitch explains.

"Madam President, there's another concern - a health matter." Galen says.

"And what is that, Doctor?" Paylor asks.

"The Clans have been isolated from us, with very few exceptions, for hundreds of years. The same could be said of any of the myriad other out-district groups scattered over Panem. In effect, our two peoples have not been sharing each other's germs. There's bound to be epidemics once our two peoples merge - most should be harmless, but some may prove to be serious. Even now, some minor symptoms of contagion have appeared among the two small groups that have only been in contact with each other for a day. Congestion, elevated fever, headaches, and general malaise have been reported. I, myself, am not feeling very well. Once we've been ill and recovered, our bodies will have built up antibodies necessary for fighting off these illnesses, and appropriate serums can be developed - but the illnesses must run their course first."

"Could these epidemics be life threatening?" Paylor asks in alarm.

"Right now, I'm saying no," Galen says to murmurs of relief. "But I am quarantining everyone that's come in contact - both district and Clan alike - until whatever illnesses we are sharing run their course. Once everyone has recovered, I'll take blood samples and send them off to the Capitol for antibody analysis and serum production."

"And once a serum is produced, I can send camera crews out to document this historic interaction between District Twelve and -" Plutarch begins, before he's cut off by a softly spoken but firm -

"No." Katniss says. "Not a chance. These are people, not freaks for the Capitol's entertainment!"

On the screen, Plutarch actually drew back while Katniss was talking. "Katniss, you misunderstand me. I don't want to exploit anyone. But there should be a record of the contact between the district and the River Clan."

"I agree with Secretary Heavensbee," Paylor says quickly, before Katniss can speak again. I see Katniss open her mouth as if to say something, then shut it just as quickly, her lips compressed in a thin line.

"There needs to be a record of these first meetings," Paylor continues. "And we're looking in to sending a trained team - sociologists, anthropologists, that sort of thing - along with the camera crew."

"I knew it was a bad idea to call the Capitol!" Katniss hisses to me angrily.

"And just how long do you think we could have kept the Clans a secret?" I ask softly. "I'm sure the Capitol would notice a thousand or more new residents suddenly popping up."

"I don't know," Katniss says miserably. "But what Paylor's saying -" she jerks her thumb towards the vid-screen, where Paylor and Heavensbee continue to drone on about their plans for the River Clan "- it's just wrong, Peeta!"

"Katniss, something to add?" Paylor's voice cuts through our conversation and Katniss starts guiltily at the sound of her name. I chuckle to myself, thinking of several occasions in school where one of our teachers would call on Katniss, whose mind was always somewhere far from the school
"Uh...no," Katniss mumbles. "Nothing to add, President Paylor."

"Madam President - Mister Secretary. Perhaps we should ask the person that will be most affected by whatever decision that we are to make today." Galen says. "Mikel Winter is the Speaker for the River Clan - in effect, the River Clan's representative for any business or decisions affecting the Twelve Clans. I think the decision should be his."

"Very reasonable," Paylor says. "Mister Winter, do you understand what we've been discussing here?"

Mikel stares at the vid-screen for a moment, still struggling to grasp the concept of long distance communication. After a moment, he speaks.

"Yes, Eld - sorry. My apologies. President Paylor. I understand. You wish to make a record of the meeting between the Clans and your people - and to study us as well." Mikel says.

"Yes, exactly, Speaker Mikel," Plutarch says. "I'll give him this - Plutarch knows how to read people, and grasped the importance that the Clan places on titles very quickly.

"I think a record would be a good idea," Mikel says slowly. "But why do you want to study us? We're people, the same as you. We just live a little differently."

"We're interested in you, Mister - Speaker Mikel," Paylor says, taking Plutarch's cue. "How you live, your customs, your traditions - your people are new to us and we would like to learn more about you, just as I'm sure you want to learn more about us."

"I see," Mikel says. "May I confer with my wife and brother?"

"Of course," Paylor says. "We'll wait."

"I'll need to watch him closely - and all of you as well." Galen says.

"Katniss, would you object if Cressida heads up the camera crew?" Plutarch asks.

Katniss glances at me. We both know Cressida well - and we both trust her implicitly. I smile and nod at Katniss, who turns back to the vid-screen.

"Cressida is fine." Katniss says curtly. "Will Pollux be part of the crew as well?"

"Absolutely," Plutarch says. "I'll leave the details to Cressida. She takes whomever she wants."

"That's acceptable." Katniss says flatly. At that moment Mikel returns, with Nova and Jahn as well.

"I've consulted with my wife and brother. We agree to people to record our meetings. However, we wish to keep the number of outsiders to a minimum, so your record keepers will be the only ones allowed." Mikel says firmly.

On the vid-screen I see both Paylor and Plutarch look dismayed. But before they could object, Galen speaks up.

"Perhaps we can reach a compromise." Galen says. "I've had training in psychology. Haymitch is very well read and a history buff - I'm sure he's dabbled in anthropology. We can be your eyes and ears and can deliver a detailed report. Fair enough?"
"One moment, Doctor, while I consult with the Secretary of Communications." Paylor says as the sound suddenly goes dead. On the vid-screen we can see the animated conversation between Paylor and Heavensbee. Meanwhile, there was a rather heated conversation going on between Galen and Haymitch as well.

"Wellgood, are you insane?" Haymitch splutters. "I don't know diddly-shit about anthropology! And thanks for asking before volunteering me!"

"Settle down, Abernathy!" Galen replies good-naturedly. "I just saved us a whole lot of grief - or would you rather have an anthropologist show up that has blue-green skin and ears that point? I want to welcome the Clans to Twelve - not scare them half to death!"

"Blue skin? Pointed ears?" Mikel says in confusion.

"Mikel, Galen's exaggerating a bit -" Haymitch says.

"I am not!" Galen retorts.

"- but some of the people from our Capitol are a bit - eccentric." Haymitch finishes, glaring at Galen.

"Blue skin," Mikel mutters, shaking his head.

"Now look what you've done!" Haymitch snaps.

"Me? I didn't -" Galen begins, but never finishes, as the sound is suddenly restored to the vid-screen.

"Secretary Heavensbee and I find your proposal acceptable - conditionally." President Paylor says.

"Conditionally?" Haymitch asks warily.

"Doctor, how long do you estimate for this contagion to run its course?" Paylor asks Galen, ignoring Haymitch.

"Well - it's hard to say, really. Symptoms came on very quickly. I should know more in, say, three to five days." Galen replies.

"And when can you draw blood for use in preparing serums to combat these infections?" Paylor asks.

"A day or two after symptoms subside." Galen says thoughtfully.

"We can fly the blood samples to the Health Ministry by hoverplane. Doctor, you've worked in the Infectious Disease Section of the Health Ministry. How long before a useable serum is developed?" Paylor further inquires.

"Madam President, serum development is not something that we can accurately predict, although Infectious Diseases has been known to work wonders - the Typhoid Epidemic here, for example. But this one should be fairly straightforward - a simple matter of antibody extraction. Less than a week, I'd say." Galen replies.

"Very well. Mayor McElroy, Doctor, Mister Abernathy, Speaker Mikel. Barring unforeseen complications, we'll tentatively plan on sending your expedition to contact the River Clan in two weeks' time, with enough serum for the current District Twelve residents as well as the River Clan."
"Well. Looks like we're in quarantine for the time being." Haymitch says. "Mikel, how would you, Nova, and Jahn like to learn more about the society that you're about to enter?"

"Absolutely, Elder Haymitch!" Mikel says enthusiastically, his sentiments echoed by both Nova and Jahn.

"Come this way, then." Haymitch says, ushering them towards his living room with an exaggerated flourish.

"And just how do you intend on teaching them more about our society, Haymitch?" Katniss asks with a touch of amusement in her voice.

"Simple. Capitol soap operas. They'll learn everything they need to know about the Capitol after a few days of those." Haymitch says with a grin, following the trio into his living room.

"Oh, Haymitch, no -" Katniss says, as Haymitch firmly shuts the living room door behind him. Katniss looks at me, her expression a combination of disgust and pity.

"Those poor people," she says before she's seized with a sneezing fit. I'm suddenly seized with a wave of light-headedness and waver a bit. I take Katniss firmly by the arm and propel her to the door.

"Come on, my love." I say gently. "For us, it's chicken broth and bed."

Katniss doesn't argue.

PART IV

After what seemed like an eternity, our quarantine was finally lifted by Galen. He reports that the development of the serum from our antibodies is progressing much faster than he had anticipated, and we're all eagerly awaiting the arrival of the hoverplane bearing the serum and our camera crew, Cressida and Pollux. Cressida had decided to bring along just the bare minimum, and we were all happy it was Pollux. We are all fond of the big Avox.

Our reprieve from quarantine comes not a moment too soon. It seems that Mikel, Nova, and Jahn are all hopelessly hooked on Capitol TV. \textit{Nero's Retreat}, a popular Capitol soap opera, has them absolutely mesmerized, and soon they were enthusiastically discussing if Octavia's baby was the child of her husband, Casca - or the child of Triton, her handsome young lover from District Four.

Haymitch allows them free rein with his Holo-TV, with one notable exception. Absolutely no programming related in any way to the Hunger Games was allowed. To their credit, our friends from the River Clan only mentioned the Games once after their revelation that they knew of them at all, in a conversation with Galen and Haymitch - and then it was limited to the trio expressing their understanding for the reluctance of their hosts to discuss something so painful.

Admittedly, being cooped up for the better part of two weeks was nerve grating, to say the least. It was hardest on Lars - the big lumberjack-turned-carpenter was used to being outdoors, working in the sun. Although we weren't restricted to the insides of our homes - we could wander at will through Victor's Village - it was still difficult to not be able to simply walk through the Village entrance.
Still, we managed to keep busy. Katniss worked diligently with Rory on his skills with bow and arrow, setting up targets on the Village green of various sizes and shapes for him to practice. Even Mikel, Nova, and Jahn came out and tried their hand with the bow, and Jahn brought out the crossbow for Katniss and Rory to try. Katniss was impressed with the force behind the crossbow bolts as they sunk much deeper into her targets than regular arrows did - although in the end Katniss did continue to state her preference for her trusty bow.

I, of course, kept busy in the kitchen, baking until everyone pretty much had their fill of breads, cakes, pies, and cookies. Thom managed to stay on top of the re-building efforts by telephone and computer, Sae cooked for everyone, and Galen kept tabs on everyone's health.

Everyone at one point experienced what we called the "One Day Crash," a period with everyone's illness where we were bedridden for twenty-four hours. Depending on the person, this came two to four days after the onset of symptoms and once it passed most overt symptoms, such as sneezing, congestion, and coughing went away quickly.

Finally, though, we got the news that we were waiting for - a Capitol hoverplane was on the way with plenty of serum, a medical team to administer to the district residents, and our camera crew of Cressida and Pollux. It was decided that Katniss, myself, Rory, Haymitch, and Galen would accompany Mikel, Nova, and Jahn back to the River Clan camp. Mikel assures us that the camp was "an easy day's walk" from District Twelve, even for our Elders - Haymitch and Galen - and someone with one artificial leg - me.

Our reunion with Cressida and Pollux was a happy one. They had both shared hardship and terror with us during the Rebellion and they were both respected and liked by everyone - even Katniss, who was especially fond of the big Avox. Cressida was almost beside herself with excitement at the prospect of interviewing our River Clan guests and wasted no time in setting up interviews with all three together as well as interviewing Mikel, Nova, and Jahn separately.

We decided to leave first thing the next morning, leaving Delly behind - with Lars to keep her company, of course - to continue work on the medical clinic, and Thom, with Leevy assisting, going back to work running the district.

Everyone was anxious to get going. We all carefully packed backpacks for the hike and Galen admonished us all to get plenty of rest that night. Even Mikel and Nova heeded Galen's advice, as Katniss and I were spared what I had jokingly began to call "Passion's Serenade" from our two lusty friends that night. In the last couple of weeks we only had four or five nights of silence, during first Nova's, then Mikel's, One Day Crash, so the silence tonight was more than welcome.

We were up before dawn the next morning. Sae fixed everyone a huge breakfast and said her goodbyes to Mikel, Nova, and Jahn - who all remarked that they had never eaten so well before Sae had started to cook for them - then we started off. Rory and I took turns carrying our gift to the River Clan, now stocked with fresh vegetables, as we made our way out of Victor's Village, through the Meadow, and past the old fence line into the forest.

Mikel set a very leisurely pace, in deference to our Elders, Haymitch and Galen. Katniss carried her bow, but with the size of our party was not anticipating being able to bring down any game. Instead, she spent most of her time chatting with Nova as we walked. Katniss and Nova had developed an unlikely friendship and had spent a lot of time together over the past couple of weeks. I asked Katniss at one point what it was that she saw in Nova that drew her so intently.

"She's what Prim would have become," Katniss had replied simply.

We walked on, putting kilometers behind us with our easy pace. We would stop for a few minutes
every hour, allowing Haymitch and Galen a welcome respite from the walk and from their packs. Both men were sweating profusely and winded, but neither complained even once, and were always ready to go when break time was over.

Our only lengthy stop was for lunch, where we stretched our usual ten minute break to a half hour. Mikel was pleased with our time, saying that we should reach the River Clan camp well before sunset.

On we walked, deeper into the forest than Katniss had ever gone. Every now and then she would drop back to check on me, giving me a quick kiss and a smile, and remarking on how different the terrain was here compared to what she was familiar with. She was at once fascinated and uneasy by the unfamiliar ground we were covering.

Later in the day, as she was walking with me, she suddenly stopped in her tracks and sniffed the air. Mikel saw her and smiled.

"Smell that?" Mikel asked Katniss. Katniss nods and smiles.

"Wood smoke," she says. Mikel takes a deep breath and nods.

"Yes, Katniss. The smell of home! We're almost there, my friends!"

This news rejuvenated us all and added a new spring in our step. Soon we were all able to smell the smoke, then we saw the source - a thin gray line trailing into the sky. Another few minutes and the River Clan camp finally came into view.

Cressida was beside herself with excitement. She had been delivering commentary periodically during the day, but now she was in full correspondent mode, walking with Mikel, Nova, and Jahn, asking rapid fire questions. We were close enough to make out individual structures - round, tent-like buildings that Jahn identified as "yurts." Mikel explained that they were sturdy, easily transported, and kept out the weather nicely.

I had to admit to a certain excitement myself as we started to see individual people. One boy around Rory's age spotted us and ran back into the camp.

"Mikel's back! With Nova and Jahn - and they brought Others with them!" At this news, people poured from the structures - "yurts," Jahn had called them - and surged forward towards us.

In spite of what Mikel had told us about the River Clan being peaceful, nonetheless I tense a little bit. I glance over at Katniss, who shoots me a returning glance, eyes narrowed just a bit. Rory was grinning, caught up the excitement, while Haymitch and Galen were talking rapidly to each other in low tones.

Suddenly a clear, feminine voice pierces the noise of the approaching crowd. "Jahn! Jahn!" As I watch, a young girl, maybe sixteen or seventeen, breaks from the crowd and runs towards us. I can see that she's got dark hair and very fair skin in contrast to Mikel, Nova, and Jahn - all of whom have skin darkened by the sun.

Jahn grins widely and turns back to us briefly. "My girl!" Jahn says happily as he turns to meet the girl.

Katniss watches the approaching girl with a small frown on her face. "I wonder if she knows what a terrible flirt Jahn is!" she says.

"I'm sure she does," I say. "After all, didn't Mikel say -"
"I don't believe it," Katniss says in a shocked voice as the girl reaches Jahn. I look over at her and see that the color has drained from her face.

"Katniss, what's wrong?" I ask as I see her eyes widen. "You look like you've just seen a ghost!"

"This can't be," Katniss says wonderingly, taking a tentative step towards Jahn and the girl, both of whom are locked in a tight embrace. Jahn sees Katniss out of the corner of his eye and pulls away from the girl slightly, grinning widely. The girl glances up and smiles at Katniss.

"Hello, Katniss. It's wonderful to see you again," she says. I get a good look at her for the first time and notice a strawberry colored birthmark over one dark brown eye, even as I wonder how she knows Katniss. I glance at Katniss, who's standing wide eyed, staring at the girl like she's some sort of apparition rather than the young girl that she appears to be. Katniss's mouth is working as she fights to find her voice. Finally, she's able to croak out a single word.

"Bonnie."
"Katniss?"

Katniss doesn't respond as she continues to stare at the girl - Bonnie is what Katniss called her - with wide eyes and her mouth slackly open in astonishment. The girl gently disengages herself from Jahn Winter and steps towards Katniss. Katniss takes a step back as Bonnie approaches, causing the girl's face to fall slightly, although she never loses her smile.

"You -" Katniss finally manages to speak. "You aren't dead. How -"

"I'm sorry," Bonnie says softly. "I know you must be shocked. But, no, I'm not dead - and neither is Twill."

Twill? Who is she talking about? I step closer to Katniss and place my hand on her shoulder - reassuringly, I hope, feeling her body tense - as Bonnie seems to notice me for the first time.

"Peeta," Bonnie says with a touch of awe in her voice. "Peeta Mellark. Both Star-Crossed Lovers of District Twelve! This - this is incredible!"

"Not 'Star-Crossed' any more," I say with a grin, slipping my hand down Katniss's arm to take her hand in mine. I feel Katniss grip my hand tightly - almost desperately.

"I knew it," Bonnie says. "Watching your Games, I knew it was real between you two. So many of my friends said it was fake, that Katniss was just trying to get sponsors - but I knew!"

"Well, that explains how Mikel and company know so much about the Games," Haymitch says to Galen in a low voice.

"Katniss, I don't remember you ever mentioning Bonnie before. Or - Twill, was it? Twill, for that matter." I say quietly.

My voice seems to snap Katniss out of the shock that she had been in as she turns to look up at me. "Peeta," she says. "I - I'm sorry. This was the last person I expected to see again." Katniss turns back toward Jahn and Bonnie.

"Excuse us - I...we...need a moment," Katniss stammers as she tugs at my hand, inclining her head towards the shade of a large tree nearby. Together we walk into the shade, trailed by Haymitch and Galen.

"Haymitch, what -" Katniss starts to say, before Haymitch holds up his hand.

"Uh-uh, Sweetheart," he says with a grin. "Doc and I gotta hear this too. Now, correct me if I'm wrong, but is this girl one of the runaways from District Eight that you were asking around for in Thirteen?"

"I didn't think you'd remember about all that," Katniss says flatly.

"Sweetheart, enforced sobriety does wonders for the memory," Haymitch says dryly. "Now, is this
girl Bonnie one of those runaways?"

"Will someone please explain to me what's going on?" I snap, irritated. "District Eight? Runaways?"

Katniss turns to me. "Peeta, remember the day not long after we got back from the Victory Tour? After Thread took over as Head Peacekeeper? When he ordered the fences turned back on?"

"How could I forget?" I grumble. "As I recall, we were all worried sick about you. Those Peacekeepers showed up at your house looking for you and spent hours there. That's the day you damn near broke your neck getting back over the fence."

Katniss responds by gently squeezing my hand. "That's the day I met Bonnie and Twill," she says. "At the ruined house by the lake. They were dressed in Peacekeeper Uniforms. When I first saw them I thought that was it. I'm dead. But then they convinced me that they weren't Peacekeepers."

Katniss quickly recounted the whole story for me - meeting up with the two District Eight runaways, the failed Uprising in Eight, sharing her food with them, showing them how to use the gun they stole. How Bonnie and her teacher, Twill - inspired by their belief that District Thirteen was not dead - had left after the factory that they both worked in was destroyed by the Capitol in retaliation for the Uprising, killing Twill's husband and Bonnie's entire family in the process. How they escaped Eight using stolen Peacekeeper uniforms, eventually making their way to the forests of Twelve. How Katniss had assumed that they had died while trying to reach District Thirteen, as no one there had ever heard of them.

"I decided not to say anything to you at the time. I figured we were in enough trouble as it was without me adding to it," Katniss says in a small voice. In response I lean down and kiss her gently.

"There you go again, keeping things from me," I whisper as our lips part.

"Just so you know, I didn't tell anyone for a long time," Katniss says. "I didn't think it would be a good idea for anyone to know that there were two District Eight runaways in District Twelve territory."

"Good thinking, Sweetheart," Haymitch says, admiration in his voice.

"We should get back with the others," Galen says. "I, for one, am very interested in hearing this young lady's story."

"I second that," Haymitch says.

We rejoin the rest of the group to find Cressida and Pollux discreetly filming various parts of the River Clan camp, with Cressida supplying a running commentary in hushed tones. Rory was talking animatedly with a Clan boy and girl that appear to be about his age. Jahn and Bonnie were deep in discussion with Mikel and Nova, as well as with an older man that we hadn't seen before.

Mikel is the first to notice us walking up to rejoin the group. His face wreathed in a smile, he turns toward us, touching the older man on the arm as he does so. The older man turns toward us as well.

"My friends, this is Elder Willem," Mikel says. "My father. Poppa, my new friends from the town." Mikel quickly introduces his father to each of us in turn. I watch as he works his way down to me, and notice that he touches his hand to his chest briefly as he is introduced to each person, before shaking their hand. His build is similar to both Mikel and Jahn, and he wears his hair long and tied
in back as they do, although his hair and beard are both iron gray in color.

Finally, Elder Willem stands before me as Mikel introduces me to him. I find myself unconsciously mimicking his gesture by touching my hand to my chest before shaking his hand, causing his smile to widen even more. He grips my hand warmly as he greets me.

"My house is yours, Peeta Mellark," he says before moving to Katniss. Beside me, Galen nudges me gently with his elbow.

"Nice touch," he says quietly. "Wish I'd thought of it. Unless I miss my guess, the hand to the chest is a gesture of respect."

"I didn't even think about it," I admit. "It - it just seemed like the right thing to do."

"You have a knack for doing or saying 'the right thing.'" Galen says with a smile, then nudges me again and nods in Elder Willem's direction.

"My sons and my son's wife have told me many things of their visit and stay with you," Elder Willem says. "I'm sure you have many questions and are tired from your journey here. Please come into my house. We will eat, drink, and talk." With that, Elder Willem turns and, without glancing back, begins to walk toward a large yurt. I glance at Galen, who shrugs and begins to follow him. Soon we are all following Elder Willem into his yurt.

The inside of the yurt is light and airy. It's simply furnished - mostly with large pillows and cushions on the floor. The floor itself appears to be hard-packed earth covered with woven matting. A couple of places inside the yurt were hidden behind free-standing screens.

Elder Willem takes a seat on one of the cushions and beckons us to do the same. Mikel, Jahn, and Nova all carry extra cushions into the yurt, scattering them over the floor. Katniss and I select a pillow large enough for both of us and settle in next to where Mikel and Nova are sitting. Soon we are all sitting in a rough circle.

"Elder Willem, I think I can speak for everyone when I say thank you for your hospitality," Galen says as he stands up. "I'm sure you understand how curious we are about you - just as your people are about us. In an effort to learn about you, we've brought two people to help those that couldn't be here today see you and hear your words." Galen indicates Cressida and Pollux, sitting quietly off to one side. "With your permission, our friends Cressida and Pollux have brought tools with them that will allow others to see and hear what we can see and hear."

"Cameras and recorders?" Elder Willem asks with a smile. He nods towards Bonnie, who was sitting with Jahn, on Mikel and Nova's side opposite from where Katniss and I are sitting. "Bonnie and Twill have told us much about your culture. Please - feel free to record whatever you like."

Cressida stands up. "Thank you, Elder Willem. You won't even know we're here." She turns to Pollux, who was already setting up his camera.

"I hope not," Elder Willem replies with a smile. "After all, it's not every day that I'm visited by such an - unusually beautiful - young lady."

"Thank - thank you, Elder Willem," Cressida manages to stammer out, as a faint blush spreads over her face. "Now I know where Jahn gets his flirtatious streak from, I say to myself as I glance over at Katniss, who just shakes her head and gives me a small smile.

"Like father, like son," I whisper to Katniss, who elbows me in the ribs good-naturedly.
"Perhaps we should begin by addressing the medical issues that both our people face." Galen says, noticing Cressida's discomfort. She says nothing but flashes him a small smile, as if to say thank you.

Elder Willem nods. "Yes, I was told that Mikel, Nova and Jahn all fell ill for a time after meeting up with you - and that you all were ill as well. Nova tells me that your Healers have developed a medicine for this?"

"Yes," Galen says, opening a box he had brought with him. Neatly packed inside were over one hundred auto injectors. "These contain the medicine. We inject one into the arm and the injected person will not fall ill."

"Elder Galen - please, show me," Elder Willem says, extending his left arm.

Galen removes a single auto injector and an alcohol swab. He quickly swabs an area on Elder Willem's arm, presses the auto injector to the swabbed area, and presses the trigger on top. He holds the auto injector motionless for a second then pulls it away. Elder Willem examines the injection site, then looks up at Galen.

"That's it?" he asks.

"That's it," Galen replies with a smile. "With your permission, I would like to inject the rest of the River Clan as soon as possible."

"Can you start now?" Elder Willem asks.

"Of course," Galen replies. He closes the box and picks it up. "I'll just need a place to work."

"Elder, with your permission, I'd like to assist Elder Galen," Nova says. "He's a very wise Healer and I've learned much from him."

"Of course, Nova," Elder Willem says. "Mikel, could you give our Healers some help in getting the people to come to them?"

"Of course, Poppa," Mikel replies as he and Nova stand up. "And I'll see about the food and drink as well." He turns to Galen. "Elder Galen, this way, please." The three exit the yurt as Elder Willem turns back to us.

"Hunter Katniss, from talking with Mikel, Nova and Jahn, I sense that you have a question," Elder Willem says.

"Yes, sir, I do," Katniss says, glancing over at Bonnie. "My question is for Bonnie."

Bonnie turns to Katniss and smiles. "You want to know what happened?" she asks.

"Yes," Katniss replies. "And what happened to Twill."

Before Bonnie could reply, however, the door to the yurt opens and the boy and girl that I had seen talking to Rory earlier enter, bearing jugs and cups.

"Ahh - it's about time!" Elder Willem says good-naturedly. "Our guests are thirsty! What took so long?"

"We're sorry, Elder - but the Elder Healer made us stop and get his medicine before allowing us to come in!" The boy says emphatically. "And Callisto was afraid - Healer Nova had to show her that
"it was alright before she would take hers!"

"I was not!" The girl squeals in protest. "I was...I was...just -"

"Never mind, you two!" Elder Willem says with a laugh. "Pour!" The girl shoots the boy a dirty look as the boy smirks in response, but they both go about their job of handing out cups to everyone, then pouring a fizzy, amber liquid into each person's cup.

"My apologies," Elder Willem says as the boy and girl work. "These are the Birch twins - Rikkert and Callisto. Their parents are away for a few days - trading with the Lake Clan. They asked me to watch over them until their return."

Out of the corner of my eye I can see the girl - Callisto - smile at Rory as she pours his drink, and I see Rory blush in response as he returns her smile with his own. I nudge Katniss and nod my head in Rory's direction. Katniss squeezes my hand and smiles in response. Rory had been very close to Katniss's sister Prim and had taken her death very hard. I, for one, was happy to see him paying attention to another girl - and, from Katniss's smile, she was also.

"I hope you like our beer," Elder Willem says. "It's brewed by the Rain Clan. We get it from them in trade."

I sniff the contents of my cup cautiously, but, before I can take a sip of the beer, Haymitch rises to his feet.

"We've a custom, Elder Willem, called a 'toast.' It's done with drink, to recognize and honor a person or an event. I would like to make a 'toast' now." Haymitch says, raising his cup and extending it out towards Elder Willem. "To the River Clan, to Elder Willem, and to all the Twelve Clans - it's my hope that our two peoples can live together in peace, harmony and prosperity."

Elder Willem also rises to his feet and extends his cup. "We also have this custom, Elder Haymitch. To peace, prosperity and long life for all our people." Haymitch and Elder Willem touch their cups together and drink deeply. I raise my cup to my lips and take a small sip, wincing a bit as I swallow the bitter liquid. I quickly glance over at Katniss and see that she has the same reaction that I had.

"Drink slowly," I whisper to her.

"No kidding," she whispers back, making a face at the taste.

Haymitch settles back down next to us, taking another drink from his cup. "I think I like these people more and more," he says as a contented belch rises from his stomach.

"Now, Hunter Katniss, please continue," Elder Willem says, gesturing towards Bonnie.

**PART II**

"I've told Peeta, Haymitch, and Galen the story of how we met," Katniss says. "But not Rory, Cressida or Pollux."

While Pollux films, Katniss quickly tells the same story to Rory and Cressida that she had told myself, Haymitch and Galen earlier - but this time with Cressida there to ask questions at the right time, or to clarify a point. *People will really love this when it's aired,* I say to myself.

"And you never told anyone at the time?" Cressida asks.
"No," Katniss says in a quiet voice. "With all that had been happening - I just thought telling anyone would be too dangerous."

"I see," Cressida says. "Well, Katniss, I can understand very well why you wouldn't want to say anything at the time." Cressida turns to Bonnie. "Bonnie, it certainly sounds as though you and your friend Twill had quite an ordeal. Can you tell us what happened after Katniss left you?"

Bonnie glances over at Katniss and I, uncertainty written on her face. I can understand how she feels - a teenage girl that has lived her entire life in anonymity is suddenly faced with sudden celebrity. Exactly like kids reaped for the Games, I say to myself.

"Bonnie?" Cressida says gently. "Take your time. I know this can be a little - intimidating."

"Go ahead, Bonnie," Katniss says encouragingly.

Bonnie shifts her glance from Katniss and I over to Cressida, who gives her a friendly, open smile. Bonnie gives her a shy smile in return, takes a deep breath, and starts talking.

"After Katniss left Twill and I, we continued on toward where we thought District Thirteen was," Bonnie says, with only a slight tremor in her voice betraying her nervousness. "I had hurt my ankle, so we couldn't move very fast. Katniss had left us a little food and tried to show us some survival skills, but neither Twill or I had any prior experience in the woods - there aren't any in District Eight, you know."

"I know," Cressida says with a smile. "I've been to Eight before. Please, go on."

"I'm not sure how long we wandered in the woods," Bonnie says. "I know it was several days. And I know we were walking in circles a couple of times. Both Twill and I were exhausted, and cold, and hungry. Then we got sick."

"That must have been awful," Cressida says gently.

"Yes. It was. It must have been from some bad water that we drank. Both of us had terrible stomach cramps, we were both throwing up constantly, and we -" Bonnie hesitates for a moment, embarrassment creeping over her face "- had terrible diarrhea also. We couldn't control it. I think that's when we both really thought that we were not gonna make it to District Thirteen. Both of us thought that we were going to die."

Bonnie takes a sip of her beer and makes a little face. I can't help but grin. It seems that Katniss and I aren't the only ones that don't care for the Clan beverage.

"Do you need some time, Bonnie?" Cressida asks.

"No, I - I'm fine." Bonnie takes a deep breath. "Twill and I reached a point where we just couldn't go on. We just laid down to die."

"That's how we found them," Elder Willem says. "Myself, Mattias Birch, and my sons. We thought at first that they were White-Jackets from their dress."

"White-Jackets?" Cressida asks.

"That's what the Clan called Peacekeepers," Katniss says.

"Ahh. That makes sense. I'm sorry, Elder - please go on." Cressida says.
"Matti was, at first, for killing them both," Elder Willem says matter-of-factly. Bonnie's expression never changes. I'm sure she's heard this before. "But I pointed out that these two women looked more dead than alive, and that we were bound by honor to try to help them."

"They made litters and carried Twill and I back to their camp," Bonnie says. "We were both pretty delirious at the time. I couldn't tell what was real or not real."

I glance sharply at Bonnie as her words hit home. "Real or not real." It seems that others have had difficulty from time to time being able to tell what was real or not real.

"Jahn and Elder Willem carried me back," Bonnie continues, "While Mattias and Mikel carried Twill." Bonnie pauses to look up at Jahn, giving him a smile and a kiss.

"She was such a mess," Jahn says with a smile, "But I think I knew even then that she was the woman for me."

"So what happened after you arrived at camp?" Cressida asks.

"Healer Nova took over our care. We were sick for several days after our arrival. But gradually we regained our strength and we soon both settled into life with the River Clan." Bonnie pauses, looking pensive.

"We asked about District Thirteen, but no one here had ever heard of it. Twill and I realized that neither of us would be able to make it so we decided not to even try. Neither of us was sure that Thirteen even existed, anyway - and we were safer here than we had ever been in Eight."

"District Thirteen does exist, Bonnie," Katniss says quietly. "You and Twill were right. I spent a lot of time there. We all did, except for Galen."

Bonnie falls silent for a moment, and I can see tears glistening in her eyes when she speaks again.

"You mean - we would have - if we had been able to continue -" Bonnie stammers.

"It's there. The people there were living underground. I've heard talk that they may start to clean up the surface and rebuild, now that the Rebellion was successful." I say.

"I was going to ask about that. Twill and I knew that the Rebellion had started. We heard that District Twelve was bombed. And we figured that it must have been successful, because people came back to Twelve and started to rebuild - and there were no Peacekeepers. I'm so glad that you and Katniss managed to get out, Peeta!" Bonnie says.

I glance at Katniss. Bonnie has no idea that neither of us was in Twelve the night of the bombing. She doesn't know about our Reaping at the Third Quarter Quell, or my capture and hijacking, or about Katniss being the Mockingjay - the symbol and face of the Rebellion. She has no idea that President Snow and the Old Capitol almost succeeded in destroying us both. Suddenly I feel my chest tighten and my heart start to pound. I squeeze my eyes shut at the sudden brightness and gasp for air. Not here! Not now! Not real - not real - not real!

"Peeta?" Katniss's voice penetrates through the hijacking fog. "It's okay, Peeta. It's not real. Do you hear me? Not real!"

"Have to - get out," I manage to gasp out. I force my eyes open and see Katniss's face hovering over mine - but it wasn't right - hers eyes glowed red and I see her teeth lengthening into fangs...NO! It's not Katniss, but the mutt...the mutt is back! Not real! Not Real! NOT REAL!
"What's wrong with him?" I hear a voice say as if from far away as strong hands grab both my arms and haul me to my feet.

"He's - sick, Sweetheart," I hear Haymitch say, even as a murderous rage wells up inside me. "Come on, Peeta."

"No," I hear myself mumble. "No! You're in danger! From the mutt!" I struggle to pull free but the hands just tighten on me as they hustle me out of the yurt and into fresh air. I close my eyes tightly at the sudden brightness outside.

"Where are they?" I can hear Haymitch snap, as I continue to pull away from his grip. *Doesn't he realize the danger that he's in? The danger that we're ALL in?*

"Left breast pocket," another voice - Galen's says. "Should be right - aha! Here they are!"

"Hurry up, Doc!" Haymitch's urgent voice penetrates the thickening fog around my brain.

"Hold him still!" Galen snaps as I feel something press against my arm. I hear a snapping sound and a brief needle-prick of pain before a warm envelope of darkness falls over me and I stop remembering for a while.

**PART III**

I open my eyes slowly, blinking rapidly to bring things into focus. I'm laying on something soft and I can tell that I'm in a yurt, but for some reason I don't think it's Elder Willem's. I'm illuminated by a soft light. I raise my head slightly and I can see the doorway and, beyond that, darkness. Night has fallen. I let my head fall back and groan softly.

"How do you feel?" Galen says, coming into my field of view. I didn't even know he was there.

"I have a headache, and my right shoulder hurts," I reply.

"The headache is from your auto injector," Galen says. "Your shoulder - well, you probably pulled a muscle. You were struggling with Haymitch and I. But it'll be fine."

"Katniss?" I ask anxiously.

"Scared, but unhurt." Galen replies. I let out a sigh of relief at the news.

"What set me off?" I ask. Galen shrugs.

"Who knows? My guess is that listening to Bonnie's story triggered some repressed memories. I'm sure you are beat from the hike out here today also. Good thing you were carrying your auto injectors where we had discussed." Galen says.

"Left breast pocket," I say. Galen nods.


"Hello, Elder Galen. Hello, Peeta." Nova says as she enters the yurt. She's carrying a bowl and a small leather pouch.

"I've brought you some dinner," she says. "It's not as good as what we had earlier, but I think it will settle with you better." Nova squats down next to me and places the bowl on the floor next to where I was laying.
With effort, I sit up, ignoring the throbbing in my head. I notice now that I had been laying on a mattress of animal skins and perfectly recognizable woolen blankets. I pick up the bowl and sniff at it curiously. My mouth begins to water as a wonderful aroma wafts up towards me. I pick up the wooden spoon and begin to eat hungrily.

"Thank you, Nova," I say gratefully, between bites.

"I'm glad you like it," Nova says with a smile.

"It's delicious," I say truthfully, then turn to look at Galen. "Where's Katniss?"

"She's with Haymitch, Jahn, and Bonnie," Galen replies cautiously.

I stop eating and fix Galen with my eyes. "Can I see her?" I ask.

"Peeta, are you sure?" Galen replies.

"Galen, look at me. Look at my eyes. I'm fine. Now please let me see her." I say insistently.

"Okay," Galen says with a smile. "Truthfully, we had to keep her out of here. No mean feat, as you well know. I'll go get her." Galen turns and walks out of the yurt, leaving Nova and I alone.

"What's in the pouch, Nova?" I ask as I pick up my bowl again.

"It's an herb that we use in medicines," Nova replies. "It relieves pain, but it can also be used to even out a persons mood as well. Sometimes people that take it show signs similar to those that drink too much beer or wine."

"Sounds like Haymitch's white liquor to me," I mutter. "Is it for me - because of what happened?"

"Your Elders and Katniss told us all what had happened to you," Nova says gently. "About how people deliberately injected you with Gold Wasp venom to turn you against Katniss. We often use this herb to treat one of the Clan that gets stung by Gold Wasps. It seems to help them. Perhaps it will help you as well."

"What will help him?" Haymitch says as he enters the yurt, along with Galen and Katniss. Katniss approaches me tentatively, smiling but wary.

"Are you okay?" I ask, standing up and holding my arms out to her.

"Yes," Katniss replies softly. "The question is - are you?" She stops a few feet away. I slowly lower my arms.

"Katniss," I say. "Look at me. I'm fine."

"Real or not real. You love me," Katniss says suddenly.

"With all my heart," I say huskily, holding out my arms again. Katniss lets out a choked sob and falls into my arms. I feel her body shaking as I embrace her tightly.

"Oh, please. Not more crying!" Haymitch says disgustingly. Katniss and I both turn to glare at him.

"Shut up, Haymitch!" We say in unison. Nova glances at us in barely concealed shock at the tone we used when talking to what she perceived as one of our "Elders," but she's learned enough about us to know that our customs differ significantly from hers. Still, reverence for Elders runs deep in the Twelve Clans.
"So, once again, what will help him?" Haymitch asks, ignoring Katniss and I.

"This might." Nova opens the pouch and hands it to Haymitch. "I was explaining this herbs uses to Peeta. I think it will help."

Haymitch takes the pouch and digs his fingers into it. He removes his hand and I can see that he has greenish colored, crumbly dried leaves pinched between his fingertips. He puts the leaves to his nose and inhales, then grins widely as he brushes the leaves back into the pouch and hands the pouch to Galen.

"What do you call this herb?" Haymitch says, amusement in his voice as Galen repeats what Haymitch had done.

"We call it *sativa.*" Nova explains. I see Galen grinning also as he hands the pouch back to Nova. "We use it as for pain relief and it seems to even out mood as well. It may help Peeta."

"We're familiar with this, Nova," Haymitch says with a laugh. "We call it *cannabis.*"

"Have you ever seen this before?" I ask Katniss. She shakes her head emphatically.

"Never." She says. "Believe me, if it's as good with relieving pain as Nova says it is, my mother would have had a supply on hand all the time."

"Nova, where I am from, your *sativa* is used as a recreational drug. I remember reading at one time that, long ago, it had medicinal uses as well, but it was discontinued due to advances made with other forms of pain management medication." Galen explains. "But perhaps the mood altering properties will help Peeta with his hijacking seizures."

"I would like to try." Nova says. "If Peeta is willing, that is."

"I am," I say firmly. Anything to help limit my seizures and flashbacks!

"Peeta, are you sure?" Katniss says doubtfully.

"Yes, love," I say quietly. "I don't think it will hurt and it may just help."

"How do you administer it?" Galen asks.

"There are several ways," Nova explains. "It can be steeped in water and made into tea, or added to food and eaten. The best results seem to be from smoking it."

"That's how I did it the few times I tried it in the Capitol," Haymitch says.

"Likewise," says Galen. "How did you like it, Haymitch?"

"Didn't care for it all that much," Haymitch says, patting his flask. "I much prefer this."

"Same here," says Galen.

"Smoke?" I ask. "Like, set it on fire?"

"Not exactly," Nova says with a smile. "Like this." She produces a small object that I recognize from our Victory Tour as a "pipe." Katniss and I had seen people in the agricultural districts - Nine, Ten and Eleven - smoking pipes, although the stems on theirs were longer. Very few people, if any, in Twelve ever smoked a pipe. Too expensive.
Nova quickly packs the bowl of the pipe with crumbled sativa leaves, then holds a twig in the flame of the lamp until it ignites. Putting the pipe to her mouth, she holds the flaming twig over the bowl and puffs on the pipe several times, sending a cloud of sweetish-smelling smoke into the air.

"You try now," Nova says, handing me the pipe. "Make sure you inhale just a small amount. Hold it in for a few heartbeats then let it out slowly."

I gingerly place the pipe to my mouth and inhale - and promptly begin choking and coughing, almost dropping the pipe in the process. Nova thumps my back vigorously, then tells me to try again.

This time, I inhale a smaller amount and resist the urge to cough. I hold it in for a few seconds, then blow it out slowly. I immediately feel a pleasant light-headedness.

"Better?" Nova asks.

Grinning, I nod, and inhale once again. I notice Katniss watching me anxiously. Once again, I exhale the smoke and lean back.

"Can I try it?" Katniss asks suddenly. I glance over at Nova, who shrugs her shoulders.

"You may." Nova says, filling up a second pipe. "It won't hurt you. Some of our people smoke it from time to time to help them relax." Nova goes to light it but Katniss stops her.

"Let me try," she says. She notices Galen and Haymitch watching her with amused smiles on their faces. I inhale another lungful of the sweet smoke, blowing it out slowly.

"What?" Katniss snaps at Galen and Haymitch. "Look, if Peeta needs this kind of medicine, I need to know how to give it to him, right?"

"Oh, right - of course." Galen and Haymitch stammer out, as Katniss clumsily lights her own pipe. Like me, her first inhalation causes spastic coughing, followed by suspiciously coughing/laughing like sounds from both Haymitch and Galen, earning them both a glare from Katniss.

"Are you alright, Katniss?" Nova asks, concern on her face.

"I'm fine!" Katniss snaps, before cautiously inhaling again. This time she was more successful.

I inhale on my own pipe once again as Katniss slowly blows the smoke out. "I knew you could do it, love," I say affectionately, and I'm rewarded by a wide smile from Katniss.

"This isn't that bad." Katniss says, examining her pipe closely.

"Doc, let's go," Haymitch mutters. "I don't think I can stand being in the same yurt with two stoned Victors."

"I second that," Galen says as the two men stand up and stretch. "Peeta, how do you feel?"

"Great," I say with a smile, inhaling on my pipe again.

"Okay, good," Galen says. "Listen - I'm right next door if you need me."

"Next door, got it," I say, watching Katniss inhale her own pipe. Shaking their heads and chuckling, Haymitch and Galen both leave.

"I need to leave for a bit also," Nova says, standing up. "But Mikel and I will both be back later.
"You're sharing our yurt, you know."

"Oh, I didn't know," I say, standing up and swaying just a bit. "Thank you, Nova."

Nova smiles. "You showed us your hospitality - Mikel and I want to repay it. If you get tired just draw the sleeping screen around your bed. I'll see you both later." Nova leaves without waiting for an answer. It's only after she left that I notice she took the *sativa* pouch with her.

I sink down on the mattress next to Katniss. I manage a few more puffs on my pipe, but soon it's empty. Katniss lasts a bit longer before hers runs out. We carefully put our pipes on the floor next to the mattress. I turn and look at Katniss and notice how glassy her eyes look.

"Your eyes are bloodshot," she says suddenly.

"Yours are too," I blurt out. Suddenly both of us erupt in giggles.

"What are we laughing at?" Katniss gasps.

"I don't know!" I reply between giggles.

Katniss spies the bowl of stew that I had been eating earlier. "What's that?" she asks suddenly.

"That? What's left of my dinner." I reply.

Katniss picks up the bowl and sniffs at it, then smiles. "Peeta, do you know what this is?"

I shrug. "Some kind of stew."

She laughs. "Oh, it's stew all right. It's a real Greasy Sae Hob Special. It's *dog*, Peeta!"

Dog? How could it be dog? It was delicious! Suddenly I feel a bit queasy, and find myself wishing for some more *sativa*.

"Are you sure?" I ask Katniss.

"Believe me, I've eaten enough dog to know what it smells like - and tastes like. Was it good?" She asks.

"Yeah," I admit, even though the thought still makes me a little queasy. "It was really good."

"Are you gonna eat the rest? Suddenly I'm really hungry!" Katniss exclaims.

"No, you go right ahead," I say, waving my hand at the bowl. Katniss wastes no time and quickly wolfs down the remainder of the stew. After she's done she stands up unsteadily and takes the bowl to the entrance of the yurt.

"Where are you going?" I ask.

"Gotta clean this up, and I'm thirsty, and - hey! Callisto! Come here," Katniss says from the doorway.

"Yes, Hunter?" Callisto says. I squint over in their direction and see another shadowy figure behind Callisto that I can barely make out as Rory.

"Where can I clean this bowl, and get something to drink?" Katniss asks the young girl.
"I'll take care of both for you, Hunter," Callisto says respectfully. "Is water alright?"

"Yes, thanks," Katniss says, as Callisto takes the bowl from her. As Katniss walks back to our mattress I can hear Rory giving Callisto a good-natured hard time for the deference that the girl shows Katniss.

Katniss flops down onto the mattress next to me. She picks up her pipe and examines it closely.

"It's all gone," she says sadly.

"And Nova took the rest of the *sativa* with her," I add, picking up my own pipe.

With a sigh, Katniss sets the pipe down as Callisto returns with a jug of water and two cups. We thank her and drink gratefully, then settle back against the mattress.

"How do you feel, Peeta?" Katniss asks me quietly.

"Good," I reply. I'm still light-headed from the *sativa* smoke, and I feel strangely calm for having had a hijacking flashback just a few hours before. Katniss snuggles in close to me.

"Me too," she whispers, her arm curling around my neck to bring my lips to hers. Katniss kisses me long and deep, with growing passion. I can feel my heart pounding as she presses every closer to me. Suddenly, Katniss sits up and pulls the sleep screen around the mattress.

I lay back on the soft Clan bed as Katniss fixes my eyes with her own, and, in the soft light of the oil lamp, slowly and deliberately pulls off her clothes until she's kneeling next to me, completely naked. There's no trace of shyness or hesitation in her face at all - just a gentle smile as she watches me watch her.

"Your turn," she whispers. I quickly pull my clothes off, scattering them around the mattress, until I'm as naked as she is. Her eyes travel up and down my body and her smile widens as she drops down next to me, pushing herself up against me and kissing me hungrily.

"Katniss?" I ask as our lips part, and groan as I feel her caressing hand sliding down my chest.

"What, Peeta?" Katniss says, her lips nuzzling my throat.

"This - uhh - don't get me wrong. I love what you're - ohhh, yes - what you're doing, but usually you're so...so reserved, and..." I manage to stammer out.

"What's the matter? Don't you like it?" She breathes into my ear as I feel her fingers gently tease and caress.

"I love it," I whisper as my fingers start their own exploration of her body.

"And I love you," she whispers back before kissing me again.

"I love you, Katniss," I manage to gasp out as our lips part. I hear soft voices from the other side of the sleep screen and stop what I'm doing for a moment as I search Katniss's face for any sign of her ardor cooling, but she just smiles lazily at me.

"I think it's time for Mikel and Nova to listen to our own "Passion Serenade," Katniss says playfully. Her mouth covers mine once more as she eagerly presses her body against mine.

It looks like *sativa* has more uses than just pain relief and hijacking control.
"Peeta."

I stir in my sleep at the sound of my name. Without opening my eyes I let out a half sigh, half moan as I blindly grope for Katniss. I can feel her warmth in the bed next to me and, without opening my eyes, I smile as my hand slips over her side, curling around her body to find and cup one round, firm breast.

"Peeta!" Katniss whispers urgently. I don't answer, but instead nuzzle my lips against the back of her neck. I feel Katniss stiffen, then relax as a soft sigh escapes her lips. I'm dimly aware of other sounds - birds singing outside, the soft murmur of voices - as I feel Katniss responding to my caresses.

"Peeta! Uh-uh! Stop!" Katniss hisses insistently. She takes my exploring hand firmly in both of hers and moves it emphatically off of her body. I groan in frustration and frown, finally prying my eyes open. The first thing I see is Katniss's face staring intently into my own.

"Hey, beautiful," I say huskily, my voice cracking. I work my tongue around inside my mouth. Why is my mouth so dry?

"Peeta. Where are my clothes?" Her clothes? I have no idea. Where's that water bottle? I raise myself up on my elbows and scan around the bed - ahh, there it is! I reach over and grab the bottle and a cup. My mouth feels like someone packed cotton in it.

"Peeta! Help me!" Come to think of it, Katniss sounds a little - "rusty" - herself.

"Wait," I croak, pouring a cup full of water and downing it thirstily. I pour a second cup and offer it to Katniss, who hesitates for just a moment before grabbing the cup and drinking just as deeply as I did.

"Thanks," she says. "My mouth was so dry! Now, are you gonna help me find my clothes, or what?"

I glance around the bed quickly. Various items of clothing, both hers and mine, are scattered haphazardly around the bed. I sit up, the blanket falling away from me as I begin to examine clothing. Nope, that's one of my socks. Nope, my t shirt. I grab something else. Ahh, a bra. I turn toward Katniss, holding out her bra. She promptly snatches it out of my hand and scrunches down under the blanket as she fights to put the bra on.

I'm puzzled. She's acting like I had never seen her naked before. Frowning, I continue my clothing search. Nope, another sock. My t shirt again. I set it aside this time.

"Katniss? Peeta?" We hear Nova's voice from the other side of the sleep screen.

"What?" Katniss snaps in an irritable tone. She softens her voice immediately. "I mean, yes, Nova?"

We hear Nova chuckle from the other side of the screen. "I've brought you some mint tea," she
says. Just then I catch a whiff of the tea. Just what I needed!

"Thanks, Nova," I say gratefully. "You can come around." Next to me, Katniss scoots even further down under the blanket.

"Here you go," Nova says as she steps around the sleep screen, handing both of us a steaming cup.

I inhale the aroma and smile at Nova. "Thanks. You're a life saver!"

She smiles back. "You're welcome. Breakfast is almost ready. Get dressed and join us - we're right outside."

"We'll be right there," I say as Nova turns to leave. I take a cautious sip of the tea and sigh appreciatively, then carefully set the cup down and continue to sort out clothing. In a few minutes I've found and sorted our clothes and we busied ourselves with getting dressed.

"You're awfully quiet," I remark as Katniss pulls on her boots. Katniss reddens but says nothing.

"Katniss? Is everything okay?" I ask softly.

"I'm fine!" Katniss snaps. "Shouldn't you finish getting dressed?"

"It's only us in here right now," I point out. "And for some reason, I don't believe you. No holding back, okay? Tell me what's wrong."

Katniss abruptly stops lacing her boot and wraps her arms around her knees. "It's me," she says miserably.

"You?" I ask. "What about you?" I scoot in next to her and slide my arm around her shoulders. She stiffens at first, then relaxes and almost sags into me.

"It's...what I did - last night," she stammers out. "Because of that stuff...that *sativa*. I was - I was -"

Katniss stops talking and chokes back a sob.

"Hey," I say soothingly. "Hey. Katniss, what you did last night - there's nothing wrong with it. You were - amazing."

"I don't feel amazing," she says quietly. "I feel - I feel - slutty."

"Why?" I ask. "Because you let your inhibitions down with me? Because you were aggressive? Katniss - that doesn't make you bad, or slutty. Last night you made me feel - well, incredible." I pick up her tea cup and hand it to her. She wipes her eyes with the back of her free hand and takes a small sip of her tea.

"I did? Really?" she asks in a small voice.

"Really." I say firmly. "And what you did to me - I know it was out of love for me."

"I -" she begins, then sets her cup down and wraps her arms around my neck. "I - when I realized what I had - what I was doing, I - you didn't say anything and I thought that you - you were - upset or - disgusted, but I - it felt so good, and I - I just wanted to make you feel -" I never found out what she wanted to make me feel. Her quiet sobs prevent her from saying anything else. I gently slip my arms around her and hold her, kissing her forehead lightly as I rub my hands up and down her back.

Katniss gives one final sniff and pulls back, wiping her eyes and nose with the sleeve of her shirt. She glances up at me, her face reddened and mottled from crying. I gently stroke her cheek with
the back of my hand and smile at her.

"I love you, ya know?" I say quietly. Katniss grabs my hand and plants a kiss on it.

"I love you, Peeta," she whispers. She wipes her face one last time and sits up. "We should finish getting dressed. Otherwise they'll come looking for us."

"Good idea," I say, grabbing my boots. I slip one over my artificial foot and start lacing it up. I smile to myself. Katniss really was amazing last night.

I remember how the other Victors went out of their way to provoke a reaction from her when we were at the Training Center for the Quarter Quell. Finnick with the sugar cubes, Johanna stripping in the elevator, Chaff planting a kiss square on her mouth. Katniss had always been looked at as "pure." And, in a way, she still was. We were still figuring things out in our relationship - and we were still both a little shy with each other.

Well, the sativa certainly changed that.

"I just thought of something," Katniss says in a more relaxed tone. "Did you have nightmares last night?"

"Come to think of it, no. Did you?" I ask.

"None. I don't remember dreaming at all." Katniss picks up one of the sativa pipes and sniffs at the bowl. "Peeta - do you think this had anything to do with it?"

I shrug as I finish lacing my boots. "Could be. It certainly has some - interesting - effects."

I see Katniss blush, even though she's partially turned away from me. "That was the sativa's doing."

I stand up and offer Katniss my hand, helping her to stand. I tenderly wrap my arms around her and kiss her softly.

"Katniss, I think that was all you. The sativa just helped to bring it out." I say softly.

"Maybe," she murmurs, blushing again and burying her face against my chest.

"Let's go join the others," I suggest. Katniss smiles, nods and grabs up our teacups. Together we walk out of the yurt into the bright morning sunshine.

Before we join the others we both make a quick stop at what Mikel calls the "latrine." Basically, it was a yurt with a series of screens dividing it down the middle - one side for males, the other for females. A bathroom without water. Katniss referred to it as an "outhouse," and mentioned that plumbing in the Seam was similar to this. I remember from the handful of visits to Katniss's old Seam house that her house, as well as others nearby, had a small shack built to the rear. Even though her house had indoor plumbing - a rarity for the Seam - there were times when pipes would freeze, or the water would simply not flow. Katniss had known nothing but hardship growing up. Compared to her, I had it easy.

After taking care of our morning business, we help each other wash up from the water jug and basin kept outside, then join the others. As we approach the table Haymitch stands up and begins to applaud enthusiastically.
I can feel my face redden and I don't have to look at Katniss to know that she's blushing as well. Still, neither of us says a word. We sit down at the long table, Katniss to Nova's left, and Bonnie to my right.

Elder Willem rises to his feet. "Good morning to our guests," he says. "I trust you all slept well?"

"Very well, Elder Willem, thank you," Galen says as Haymitch mutters, "Some better than others."

"I hope you will enjoy the meal - especially you, Peeta," Elder Willem says. "Being as your illness forced you to miss our meal last night." As he speaks, Rikkert and Callisto arrive with baskets, which they set on the table. The baskets are passed around to each person. In one, I find a yellowish, crumbly bread. I take some out and place it on the plate in front of me. I pass the basket to Katniss. The second basket contains eggs, which Bonnie informs me are boiled hard. Another basket has fresh fruit - apples and a strangely shaped fruit that I remember only seeing in the Capitol called a pear. The final item is a bowl of honey that Bonnie informs me is for the bread, which she identifies as "corn" bread.

As we eat, Elder Willem asks Haymitch a question. "Elder, why did you clap your hands when Katniss and Peeta joined us?"

"I was merely applauding their - performance - last night, Elder Willem," Haymitch says with a smirk. Beside me I can feel Katniss stiffen and when I glance over at her I can see her looking daggers at Haymitch.

"You have to admit, the walls of a yurt are mighty thin," Haymitch continues.

"Performance?" Elder Willem asks, confused.

"Elder Haymitch is talking about sex, Elder Willem," Nova says smoothly. "More specifically, sex between Peeta and Katniss last night."

"Ah. I see." Elder Willem says. "And you think it was applause-worthy, Elder Haymitch?"

I glance at Haymitch and see the smirk frozen on his face - but clearly, his joke was falling apart. Nova and Elder Willem's casual mention of sex was not what Haymitch was expecting, and I could almost see the wheels turning in his head as he tries to come up with a face-saving comeback.

"Well - they were - you have to admit, it was pretty...uhh...loud, and -" Haymitch stammers.

"Poppa, perhaps I can explain," Mikel interjects smoothly. Haymitch shoots him a look of gratitude.

"Please, Son," Elder Willem says.

"In my brief stay with the Others, I noticed many differences between our two people," Mikel says. "And one of the biggest differences is regarding sex. The Clans are much less inhibited about sex. I'm not sure if this is true with all the Others, or just the ones from the place they call District Twelve."

"Perhaps I can help clarify," Galen says, standing up. "Mikel, if I may?" Mikel nods and smiles, gesturing toward his father.

"Thank you, Mikel," Galen says. "Elder Willem, our country - Panem - has thirteen districts, as you probably already know. Each of these districts has its own customs and traditions. No doubt you've learned a great deal from Bonnie, here -" Galen smiles at Bonnie, who grins back at him "- about
her home district, District Eight. But I doubt that she knows much about District Twelve. Twelve is the smallest district, and is very conservative. I've noticed a much more casual attitude about sex from members of the Clans. This may explain why Katniss and Peeta are uncomfortable discussing such things. And why others - "Galen gives Haymitch a pointed glance" - joke about it.

"I see," Elder Willem says thoughtfully. "Thank you, Elder Galen."

"I have to agree with Elder Haymitch, Katniss," Nova murmurs softly leaning over toward Katniss. I'm barely able to hear her. "Mikel and I were impressed by you and Peeta last night."

"Oh," Katniss mutters. "Uhh - thank you, Nova." I drop my hand down to take Katniss's hand in mine and squeeze gently, and I'm rewarded with a smile.

"So do you find the food to your liking?" Jahn asks.

"Very much so," I reply, biting into the corn bread. "I would like to know how this is made. I may try making it myself."

"It's quite simple, Peeta," Nova says. "I'd be happy to show you."

"I'd like that," I say around a mouthful of corn bread.

"Elders, my son tells me that he's told you of our problem," Elder Willem says solemnly.

"Yes, Elder Willem - we did speak of it," Galen says cautiously. "Our government - our 'Elders,' if you will - are quite excited by the meeting of our two people. So much, in fact, that they've sent Cressida and Pollux, here, to document our meeting."

Elder Willem smiles broadly at Cressida when Galen mentions her name, causing Cressida to blush and quickly examine the small voice recorder sitting on the table in front of her. Her reaction makes me wonder just how much is embarrassment - and how much is something else.

"When we return to District Twelve we will give President Paylor - the most important 'Elder' in our government - along with her advisors, a complete report of our meeting, complete with video and audio records. I'm sure President Paylor will be receptive to the idea of a merge between our people, but you must understand one thing - our people recently fought a war against our old leaders, who, for many years, had subjigated us and had all but destroyed one district in an earlier war, and had ruled over the twelve surviving districts with an iron fist." Galen pauses to take a sip of his tea before continuing. "Our government is very new, our leaders are still feeling their way, and our people are still rebuilding. It may take some time for our leaders to agree to all of the details regarding the movement and assimilation of the Twelve Clans into District Twelve."

"I understand, Elder Galen," Elder Willem says after a moment. "But summer is half gone. The Clans were hoping to use the good weather to make the move. There are over a thousand of us - it will take time to move that many people with all of our belongings."

"If I may, Galen," Haymitch says. "Elder Willem, I've given this some thought. I'm sure our leaders would like to meet personally with your Council of Elders as well as your Council of Speakers before they make a final decision regarding the timeline of the move. The only question would be - where to have this meeting?"

Elder Willem looks thoughtful for a moment. "Would it show good faith on our part to meet with your leaders in - what's the word you've used, Bonnie?"

"The 'Capitol,'" Elder Willem continues, nodding his thanks to Bonnie. "I know you have flyers that can travel much faster than people can on foot. Bonnie and Twill have also told us of other vehicles - 'trains' - that are not as fast but can still make the trip much quicker than people walking. Meeting your leaders in this 'Capitol' would show our sincerity."

"I think you're right, Elder Willem," Haymitch says with a grin. "We'll contact our government as soon as we return to the district. I'm sure they will agree to a meeting."

"Perhaps Mikel, Nova, Jahn - and Bonnie - would like to accompany you back to your town. Mikel, Jahn - when would you be able to leave?" Elder Willem asks.


"Good," Elder Willem smiles. "For now, let's enjoy the rest of our breakfast. Elder Haymitch, I would like to speak with you - and you also, Katniss - and Peeta - after breakfast. I have some questions for you all - if you don't mind."

"Not at all," Haymitch says, a puzzled look on his face.

**PART II**

Katniss, Haymitch and I had a private meeting with Elder Willem after breakfast. We were all puzzled by his request, but he soon made his wishes clear. Elder Willem wanted to know about the Hunger Games. He wanted to know everything.

Bonnie and Twill had told them about the world that we used to live in - the Dark Days, the Treaty of Treason, the Capitol, President Snow, and of course - The Hunger Games. Bonnie had told Elder Willem that Haymitch, Katniss and I had been Victors. And so, for the next two hours, we answered his questions. All of them.

After Elder Willem had all of his questions answered to his satisfaction, he hugged each of us in turn, murmuring his thanks in low tones.

Haymitch glanced at us and wordlessly pulled a flask from an inner pocket in his jacket, unscrewed the top, and drinks noisily. He strolls off by himself and sits down in the shade of a large tree, head leaned back, every now and then pulling at his flask.

Katniss and I ducked into the yurt that we were sharing with Mikel and Nova and re-emerged with the sativa pipes, then we went in search of Nova. As it turned out, Nova was close by, with a small jar of sativa at hand.

"I thought that you may need this. I knew what Elder Willem wanted to talk to you about." She hands us the jar with a small, apologetic smile.

"Do you need any help?" Nova asks.

"I think we can do this, Nova. Thanks...for everything." I say. Nova leaves us and rejoins Mikel, who is standing a respectful distance away and talking with Cressida.

Katniss and I walk to the same table that we had eaten breakfast at earlier. We sit side by side, pack our pipes, and I dig into my pocket for matches. I pass the box to Katniss, who takes a match, lights it, and touches the flame to the sativa packed into her pipe. I light my own pipe as Katniss puffs a few times and inhales lightly.

Katniss and I sit in silence, inhaling the calming sativa smoke. We don't speak - we draw comfort
from being close to each other. I watch as members of the Clan go about their business. Nearby, a small group of hunters have a deer trussed up as they busy themselves cleaning and dressing the animal.

Watching the hunters expertly butchering the deer brings my mind back to that cool spring day a few months ago, shortly after my return to District Twelve. Katniss - who, up to that point, had still been somewhat distant and cool towards me - covered in blood, frantically pounding on my door. Asking for my help in hauling a deer that she had shot back to Victor's Village. In my mind, that day marked a turning point in our relationship - the day where we finally started growing closer instead of moving farther apart.

Katniss nudges me gently and inclines her head towards another area of the camp. Rory and Callisto are strolling slowly towards the edge of camp, talking earnestly with each other. As they walk, we see Callisto reach for Rory's hand and intertwine her fingers with his. Katniss glances up at me and smiles. We both knew how much Prim meant to Rory - they had always been friends and very close, but their time together in District Thirteen had seen their relationship start to evolve into something more. Prim's death hit Rory hard. To see him noticing another pretty girl was a step in the right direction.

"Hey." A soft voice cuts through our reverie. Katniss and I both glance over at the other side of the table to see Cressida sitting down opposite us.

"Oh - hey, Cressida," I say, as Katniss murmurs "Cressida" with a slight nod of her head.

"Not interrupting, am I?" Cressida asks as she settles onto the bench.

"Not at all," Katniss says. "We were just relaxing."

"People-watching," Cressida says with a smile. "A common past-time found in the Capitol's parks. May I?" She points to my pipe. I nod and hand it over.

Cressida sniffs at the bowl, then puts the stem in her mouth and inhales. She holds the smoke in for a moment then exhales slowly, then hands the pipe back to me.

"Not bad," she says. "A little rough. Not like the cannabis available in the Capitol. Does it really help you?"

"Yes, definitely." I say. "Especially after our talk with Elder Willem. And with - last night."

"About that," Cressida says. "Last night, I mean. I erased the video of your...attack. Even though Plutarch would have loved that. He's always looking for examples of Snow's depravity to show everyone how awful things used to be - and to keep Paylor's critics silent."

"I - thanks, Cressida," I say softly.

"You're welcome," she replies with a smile. "Just don't tell Plutarch that I ever recorded it to begin with."

"You don't have to worry about that," Katniss says emphatically. "We don't exactly talk with him on a regular basis."

"I didn't think you did," Cressida says with a laugh. "Look, I, of all people, know how hard Plutarch is to take. He uses people - he always has. He used me, he used Haymitch, and he used the both of you." I nod solemnly and glance at Katniss, who says nothing, but instead sits there with a scowl.
"And he continues to use people," Cressida continues. "But I don't know if you realize what kind of risks he took. Both of you know that the Rebellion was planned for years before you became involved."

"Yes, we knew this," Katniss says tightly. I'm sure I know what she is thinking right now - the rigged Reaping. Because that's what I'm thinking about.

"Many people, including you and Haymitch, probably see Plutarch as some sort of grand puppet master, pulling strings and manipulating people and events." Cressida pauses for a moment, then continues.

"But he took a huge risk with his involvement in the Rebellion. He's a Capitol citizen, after all - his family is one of the oldest, most respected families in the entire Capitol. If Haymitch had been caught, the Capitol would have simply executed him...firing squad or hanging. But Plutarch...he's a different story. He would have been tortured - then publicly executed - but not before having to watch his entire family killed in front of him."

I can't help but shudder at Cressida's words. I know all too well the torture methods that had been used by Snow's government. And my dreams are still haunted by the screams of Johanna Mason and Annie Cresta-Odair being abused for my benefit - not to mention the image of the two Avoxes, Lavinia and Darius, being killed while I watched.

"What happened to his family - during the Rebellion, I mean?" I ask.

"They were kidnapped by Capitol Rebels," Cressida says. "His father - his mother died a few years ago - and his younger sister and her family. An uncle and an aunt. Some of his cousins. The plan was to get them out of the Capitol and to Thirteen - but something went wrong. They never left the Capitol. And they didn't manage to get to all of his relatives. His older brother and his family, and one uncle. Some cousins and their families too. They were arrested by Peacekeepers within hours after the arena breakout - none have been seen or heard from since."

I glance at Katniss. Her scowl has been replaced by a solemn, almost sorrowful look. I feel the same way. I guess neither of us ever thought of the price Plutarch would have to pay for his part in the Rebellion.

"Well, I'm sure the family that had been 'kidnapped' by the Rebels were glad that they were safe." Katniss says.

"Plutarch's entire family was fiercely loyal to Snow," Cressida says sadly. "His father has disowned him. His sister has stated that she has no brother. The rest of his family views him as a traitor. You've all lost people in the Rebellion - but never think that Plutarch made it through unscathed. He's lost more than you realize."

I let Cressida's words sink in. Neither Katniss or I liked Plutarch, exactly for the reasons that Cressida had outlined - but now I think I understand him a little better. I glance over at Haymitch, leaning back against the trunk of the tree he was sitting under, his eyes closed, still grasping his flask. I can't tell if he's sleeping, passed out, or just resting his eyes.

"Why did he do it, Cressida?" Katniss asks suddenly. "Why give up his whole life? He's a Capitol citizen - a Gamemaker - hell, at the end he was the Head Gamemaker! He had status, money, and power. He was set for life! Why throw all that away in the Rebellion?"

"He's pretty well set now, don't you think?" Cressida replies. "Secretary of Communications for the new government - he still has status, money, and power."
"But the risks he took - and what he's lost - it doesn't make any sense!" Katniss says stubbornly.

"Katniss, why did you volunteer for your sister?" Cressida asks gently.

"To save her! Everyone knows that! I had to do it - it was the only right thing to do! There was no question in my mind!" Katniss replies indignantly.

"In a way, that's what Plutarch was doing. He volunteered himself to the Rebellion because he felt it was the only right thing to do." Cressida replies.

"But why? That's what I don't understand!" Katniss says stubbornly.

"You'll have to ask Plutarch, Katniss," Cressida replies softly. "I can't answer that. I will tell you this, though - you two have to be careful. You're both heroes almost everywhere in Panem. Almost everywhere. There's a lot of people out there that hate you both - especially you, Katniss."

"I'm not surprised," Katniss says dismissively. "You're talking about District Thirteen, right?"

Cressida nods. "Yes, and Two, and the Capitol as well. Just remember - there's no travel restrictions in Panem any more. And I know that Twelve has a lot of workers from other districts involved in rebuilding. And this whole thing -" she waves her hand around the River Clan camp "- with the out districts starting to integrate with the districts - it's focusing a lot of attention on you both. Look, I know that you both just want to leave the past in the past and get on with your lives - but I just wanted to tell you that may not be possible. Just be careful. I've become rather fond of you both." Cressida says this last with a smile.

"We will, Cressida - and thank you," I say. "Katniss and I - well, we're both pretty fond of you too!"

"Yes...we are," Katniss says softly. She reaches across the table and takes Cressida's hand in one of hers and squeezes gently. I place my hand on top of both of theirs.

"Am I interrupting?" A timid voice says from behind us. I turn and see Bonnie standing there shyly.

"Not at all," Katniss says with a smile. "Come and sit."

"Yes, please do," Cressida says, sliding over on the bench to give Bonnie some room. "I've been meaning to talk to you. I would like to interview both you and your friend Twill sometime soon. Your story is incredible! I'm sure that all of Panem would be as enthralled as I was when you told your story of your escape from Eight."

"Really?" Bonnie asks incredulously. "You - you really want to interview us?"

"Absolutely," Cressida says. "Your whole story - the Uprisings in Eight, your stealing Peacekeeper uniforms, your escape, your encounter with Katniss, your rescue by the River Clan - everything!"

"Having a party without me?" Haymitch grumbles as he walks up to the table.

"Haymitch, I'm glad you're here," Cressida says as Haymitch plops on to the bench to the left of Katniss. "I was just telling Bonnie that I want to interview her and Twill about their adventures."

"Hmmph," Haymitch grunts as he peers at Bonnie. "I gotta say, sweetheart, that it took some pretty big balls on your part to do what you did."
Bonnie laughs nervously. "It wasn't all that brave, Mister Abernathy. If it wasn't for the River Clan Twill and I would have died."

"Still," Cressida says, "I'm looking forward to interviewing you both very soon."

"I'll ask Elder Willem if he can speak to the Sun Clan Elders about sending Twill along with their Capitol delegation," Bonnie says. "At least as far as District Twelve. I'll be going to Twelve tomorrow, so you could interview us both then. I'm sure Elder Willem will be happy to do whatever he can - he's taken quite a liking to you, you know."

"Um...yes, that would be - helpful. Thank you, Bonnie." Cressida stammers as she blushes a bit.

"You could do worse, sweetheart," Haymitch says with a grin. "I mean, I know he's old, but he is a Clan leader, after all."

"He is certainly - charismatic," Cressida says softly. I'm surprised she didn't fire a biting retort back at Haymitch. I glance questioningly at Cressida. Could it be that she was becoming attracted to Elder Willem?

"He certainly is," Haymitch agrees, then reaches over and picks up my pipe. "Are you two still smoking cannabis?"

"It helped after our conversation with Elder Willem this morning," I reply.

"I see. Just don't overdo it, kid," he says.

"You're certainly one to talk," Katniss says sarcastically.

"Maybe it's because I don't want you - either of you - to end up like me," Haymitch says mildly.

Katniss says nothing to this as an awkward silence descends over the table. Finally Cressida stands up.

"Well, if you'll excuse me, I've got to organize some notes while I have the time." Cressida says. "Bonnie, I'll get with you a little later on, okay?"

"Okay, Cressida," Bonnie says with a smile. Cressida beckons to Pollux, who was filming nearby, and together they walk off, Cressida talking to Pollux very animatedly.

"Bonnie! There you are!" Nova approaches our table. "Jahn's been looking for you. He needs some help packing for tomorrow."

"Okay, Nova," Bonnie replies, standing up. "Guess I'll see you two later."

"Jahn won't keep her long," Nova assures us.

"No problem. Take your time," I say as Nova and Bonnie leave us and walk towards Jahn's yurt.

"I'm glad I finally got the chance to talk to you both alone," Haymitch says as Nova and Bonnie disappear into Jahn's yurt.

"What's up, Haymitch?" I ask.

"It's probably nothing," Haymitch says, "But I was talking with a hunter last night after you two - went to bed." At this reference to last night Katniss glares at Haymitch, who pointedly ignores her.
"And?" I ask impatiently.

"Anyway, this hunter - I forget his name, but Mikel and Jahn would know - was camped not far from Twelve the night it was - attacked." Haymitch says.

"So - he saw what happened?" Katniss asks tightly.

"He was actually too far away to see anything specific," Haymitch says carefully. I know what he means - they were too far away to see the flames as District Twelve burned from the Capitol's firebombs. "But he said that he saw the sky over the town turn pink."

We know what that means. The sky was pink from the flames.

"But," Haymitch continues, "The hoverplanes that attacked Twelve flew directly over their camp. This hunter - dammit, I wish I could remember his name - said that he and the others in the hunting party could just barely hear the hoverplanes as they passed over their camp."

"You're not telling us anything we don't already know, Haymitch," I say. "We already knew that some Clan members witnessed the attack."

"This is what bothers me," Haymitch says as he pulls a folded paper from a jacket pocket. He unfolds it and smooths it out on the table top. Katniss and I lean over to examine it and see that it's a map.

Haymitch takes a pencil and draws a circle on the map. "Here's Twelve," he says. A short distance from the circle he makes another, much smaller circle. "And this is the lake and abandoned house that you - that Mikel and company left the arrows for you to find."

"Here's the River Clan's summer camp - where we are now," Haymitch says, making another circle. "And right about here -" he draws a fourth circle "- is the general area where the hoverplanes flew over the hunting camp last year." He glances at both of us expectantly.

"I'm not sure what we're supposed to be seeing, Haymitch," Katniss says.

"I wasn't at first, either," Haymitch says, "But then I started putting the pieces together. Every place that I've circled is North of District Twelve!"

"So?" I ask, shrugging my shoulders.

"No more cannabis for you, kid," Haymitch sighs. "Or you, either, Sweetheart. I'm a drunk and I was able to figure this out!"

"Figure what out, Haymitch?" Katniss asks irritably.

"Okay, I'll spell it out for you," Haymitch says. "The Capitol is West of Twelve, right?" Both Katniss and I nod our heads. "So, if the Capitol is West of Twelve, why were the bombers flying in from the North?"

Slowly the realization of what Haymitch was saying dawned with Katniss and I. We both exchange looks with each other.

The Capitol is West of District Twelve. The hoverplanes that dropped firebombs on Twelve that terrible night flew in from the North. There's only one thing North of District Twelve.

District Thirteen.
The return walk to District Twelve was being made mostly in silence. Haymitch's theory about the District Twelve firebombing had set all three of us on edge, Katniss most of all. Katniss has been walking an emotional tightrope ever since her return to Twelve (under Haymitch's care and supervision), and it seems that every time she seems like she's able to absorb another shock and put yet another new, horrid, revelation behind her, another crops up in its place.

As for me, I was wracking my brain, trying without success to make sense out of Haymitch's theory - and, more importantly, trying to poke holes in it. I desperately wanted him to be wrong about this - mostly for Katniss's sake, but also for mine, the survivors of District Twelve, and yes - for Thirteen and the rest of Panem as well. I have a feeling that this would irreparably damage relations between Twelve and Thirteen if it turns out to be true.

So, as painful as it may be, I force myself to replay conversations that I had while I was a prisoner of the Capitol - conversations with various Peacekeepers (who hardly said anything to me anyway, and certainly didn't engage in idle conversation), with my Interrogator, and even with Caesar Flickerman and President Snow - trying to find at least one statement that would indicate that the Capitol was responsible for the firebombing.

I can't even find one.

Of course, there were references to the bombing, but President Snow never once issued a statement denying any involvement in the bombing, nor did he ever confirm the Capitol's involvement, either. He seemed content to assume responsibility - after all, when the news broke about the bombing many of those districts in uprising actually scaled back their efforts - perhaps fearful that they would be next. But never once could I recall hearing anyone in the Capitol admit responsibility.

There was one positive note. Haymitch, Katniss and I had all agreed to keep this theory to ourselves for the time being. This speculation would prove to be disastrous if it was leaked prematurely. Fortunately, Katniss's silence was attributed to her natural sullenness which, in spite of Katniss's best effort to avoid contact with anyone, Nova was able to penetrate - her growing bond with Katniss transcended even the worst of Katniss's moods. More than once on the walk back to Twelve I could see them conversing and hear them talking in low tones.

Haymitch and I were another story. Several people tried to strike up conversation with us and were firmly, but politely (or for what passes for politeness in Haymitch's world) turned away - especially Cressida.

Cressida had a sense of things being amiss. Her experiences as a resident director and as a correspondent taught her how to read people very accurately. She knew that something was wrong almost from the moment that Haymitch outlined his theory to Katniss and I. And her instincts told her that there was a story here.

"Maybe I should tell her something," Haymitch murmurs to me sometime around mid-morning. "She knows how to be discreet. If I really hammered the point home to not say anything -"
"Do you think that she can be trusted not to say anything?" I ask quietly. "After all, something like this will be huge if it turns out to be true."

Haymitch considers that for a moment, then nods. "Yeah, I think we can trust her," he finally says, casting a quick glance in her direction. He sighs heavily. "Plus, she'll just keep digging until she finds something."

"Do we tell her now?" I ask.

"No. Tonight, when we're back home. In private." Haymitch replies, then calls out. "Cressida!"

Hearing her name, Cressida glances over at Haymitch and I. She had been walking with Jahn and Bonnie, her small recorder in hand. Haymitch beckons her over. Cressida excuses herself from Jahn and Bonnie and trots over to join us.

"What's up?" She asks, eyes shining in anticipation.

"I guess you picked up that something's...not quite right," Haymitch begins awkwardly.

"Yeah," Cressida replies in a flat voice. "But no one's talking."

"Yeah, well, we - as in Peeta and I - we've been talking...and we decided to bring you in on what we've been talking about." Haymitch says, causing Cressida's eyes to light up. She immediately brings her small recorder up as Haymitch goes on. "Tonight. Back in the Village. We'll bring you up to date then. Now is not the time or the place."

Cressida, at first, looked inclined to argue - but Haymitch had "that look" in his eyes - the look that brokered no debate. Cressida instead nodded meekly and simply inquired as to the time for our meeting.

"Eight tonight, unless you hear different from me," Haymitch says as he hooks a thumb at me. "At their house."

"That was easier than I thought it would be," Haymitch says as we watch Cressida rejoin Jahn and Bonnie.

"What was easier than you thought?" Katniss asks, startling both Haymitch and I. Neither of us heard her walk up. Guiltily, we both turn and face her.

Quickly, Haymitch outlines his - our - intent to bring Cressida into the theory of the District Thirteen bombing, citing our concern that she would just keep digging until she found something. Katniss listens silently, then nods slowly.

"I guess you're right," she finally says.

"One other thing," Haymitch says. "When we get back to Twelve, you are not to make any phone calls, nor are you to send any CapitolNet messages on your computer, regarding this theory."

Katniss looks like she was set to protest but Haymitch silences her with a wave of his hand.

"Think about it," Haymitch says reasonably. "The only people you could contact would be Plutarch, or possibly Paylor. And I doubt that either one would know, anyway. When the time is right, I will be the one to contact Plutarch. When the time is right. I know you too well, Sweetheart. Left to your own devices, you wouldn't be home ten minutes before you would be on the phone screaming at Plutarch, who would be sitting in his office, totally befuddled, and not having any clue as to what you're screaming at him about anyway. Clear?"
Haymitch's tone makes it clear that any argument from Katniss would be futile, but I can tell that she didn't like what she was being told. As Haymitch talked, I could see her eyes narrow and her mouth set in a firm line. For a moment, I was sure that Katniss was going to do just what Haymitch was telling her not to do, so it came as a surprise to me when she nodded stiffly in agreement.

"Fine, Haymitch," Katniss says evenly. "No calls or messages." And with that, she turns and stalks off to walk on her own.

"Katniss! Wait up!" I call after her as I rather clumsily trot over and fall in beside her.

"Shouldn't you and Haymitch be making some more decisions on how we're going to deal with this?" Katniss asks archly after I catch up with her.

"Look, first of all, no one was excluding anyone," I reply defensively. "And you were talking with Nova at the time, anyway. And you know just as well as I do that Haymitch is right about bring Cressida in on this - otherwise she would have just poked around until she found what she was looking for anyway."

Katniss says nothing as we walk, so I keep on talking.

"Katniss, I know that this...theory of Haymitch's has you upset. It has me upset, too." I pause for a moment before continuing. "And, to be honest, I'm not sure what good the knowledge will do us if he's proven right - if Thirteen was behind the bombing."

"What do you mean, 'not sure what good the knowledge will do us?'" Katniss asks incredulously. "We need to know, Peeta! If Thirteen was really behind this, we need to -"

"What, Katniss?" I ask sharply, cutting her off. "Punish someone? Hold someone accountable? Who? Coin's dead. Boggs is dead. If it is true, Coin almost certainly gave the order, and there's a good chance that Boggs knew something about it. And they can't be punished!"

"I don't know, Peeta!" Katniss exclaims in frustration. "Someone - the hoverplane pilots, maybe, or the -" Katniss's voice trails off suddenly.

"Or the what?" I ask gently. "The people that designed and built the bombs? The ground crews?"

My mention of the bomb builders had its desired effect on Katniss. She immediately fell silent, and I know full well who she was thinking of.

Gale and Beetee.

It was their bomb design that ended up causing Prim's death. Even though neither of them had a hand in choosing the targets of the bombs, I knew that Katniss still had not completely forgiven Gale - after all, it was his idea. Beetee was merely the technician that translated thought into reality.

"We're back on familiar ground," Katniss says, abruptly changing the subject. "I recognize landmarks."

I pick up on her cue. She doesn't want to discuss the bombing any more - at least not now.

"How do you know?" I ask. "It all pretty much looks the same to me."

Katniss smiles. "I know, Peeta. I've spent years in these forests. I should find Rory...we need to forage on the rest of the trip home if we want fresh vegetables."
"Good idea," I say, returning her smile. I look around for Rory but can't immediately see him as Katniss does the same. Neither of us are overly concerned - Rory was constantly wandering away from the immediate vicinity of the group. But looking ahead, I can see Mikel and Jahn squatting down, intently examining something on the ground.

"What'd you find?" I ask as Katniss and I approach them. Both men straighten up, concern written on their faces.

"Bear scat," Mikel says, pointing to the ground. "Not fresh, maybe a day or two old. But still, we need to keep alert. Bear's probably not very far -"

A horrible squalling noise erupts from the brush some twenty meters to our right before Mikel can finish his sentence. We all spin to face the sound just in time to see Rory emerge from the brush dragging a wiggling, squalling animal behind him.

"Katniss, look!" Rory says triumphantly. I catch a glimpse of Katniss's eyes widening in horror as she, along with the rest of us, sees what Rory is dragging out of the brush.

A bear cub.

"Rory, NO!" Katniss screams. For a moment, time seems to stand still. I stand as if frozen, along with Haymitch, Galen, and Bonnie. The sight has the opposite effect on Katniss, Mikel, Nova and Jahn. All four are galvanized into action.

In one smooth motion, Katniss withdraws an arrow from her quiver and nocks it to her bowstring, even as Nova and Jahn swing their crossbows up. Mikel slides the sling of the captured Peacekeeper rifle down his arm, the weapon falling into his hands. Katniss screams at Rory again.

"Rory! Let it GO!" Rory stares back at Katniss in confusion, his grip just as tight as ever on the bear cub's hind legs. Before he can say or do anything, an ear-splitting roar fills the air, along with the sounds of something very large crashing through the brush.

The bear explodes from the brush, moving incredibly fast for something so huge, and is barreling straight towards Rory and the cub. Rory lets out an inarticulate yell of sheer terror and finally releases the grip on the cub's legs, falling backwards as he does so. He frantically digs his hands and feet into the ground in a vain attempt to push himself backwards. The cub, now free, immediately bolts into the underbrush and disappears.

I stare, horrified, as the bear advances on Rory. Another second or two and the bear will reach him, and I know that I'm about to watch Rory die.

Suddenly, the bear roars in pain and stumbles a bit to the right - just enough for Rory to scramble out of the path of the charging animal. I risk a sideways glance to see Nova and Jahn frantically pulling back on their crossbow strings and hear Mikel curse as he works the bolt of the captured rifle, trying to quickly clear a misfired cartridge. And in the midst of all this confusion I see Katniss calmly nock another arrow to her bow, draw, and fire again.

The bear bellows again and spins around, searching for the source of its pain. I can now clearly see a pair of arrows protruding from its side as well as two crossbow bolts buried deeply behind the beast's shoulder. I can only watch in horror as the animal's gaze fixes on Katniss, now stepping forward as she calmly nocks a third arrow to her bow, as the huge bear lowers its head and charges straight toward the source of its pain.

Katniss.
I fumble for my knife as I lunge forward towards Katniss, all the while realizing how totally futile a knife will be against such a huge, enraged animal. I steal a quick glance at Katniss's face and see a look of total calm as she deliberately draws her bow string back for the third time, taking careful aim at the charging bear. Gripping my knife, Katniss takes a deep breath, exhales slowly, and lets her arrow fly.

The sharp crack of Mikel's rifle echoes through the forest literally at the same instant as Katniss's arrow strikes home, driving through the bear's left eye and deep into the animal's brain. The bear stumbles, its momentum carrying it forward as Mikel's rifle barks twice more. Katniss stands calmly, holding her bow at her side, as the massive animal falls dead, literally at her feet.

I feel my legs trembling and my hand shakes as I return the knife to its sheath. Katniss glances over at me just as I'm sliding the knife back into the sheath.

"You thought you were gonna protect me with that?" Katniss says incredulously as she gestures towards the sheathed blade. I shrug helplessly.

"It's all I had," I say clumsily. Katniss stares at me for a long moment, then glances at the dead bear, then back at me. Suddenly she drops her bow and spins towards me, beating her fists against my chest.

"A knife! Against a bear! Are you crazy?" Katniss is practically screaming as I catch her wrists gently but firmly in my hands. Only then can I feel her trembling violently. She stares up into my face, her eyes brimming with tears.

"That bear would've torn you to pieces! That knife wouldn't have done anything!" Suddenly Katniss clutches at me desperately, kissing me once, hard, then burying her face against my chest.

"That was...that was the bravest thing I've ever seen anybody do," she murmurs. "Don't ever do something like again. I love you, Peeta."

"We protect each other. It's what we do, Katniss. I love you, too, you know." I whisper back. Suddenly Katniss pulls back from me and looks around frantically, then spots Rory, still lying on the ground, his eyes wide and his chest heaving with his frantic gasps.

"Rory!" Katniss shouts, letting go of me and running towards the boy. "What the hell were you thinking? You never mess with any animal's young! Ever! Are you stupid, or crazy, or both?!"

Rory doesn't respond. He stares, wide-eyed, at Katniss as she screams at him. I trot up to Katniss, hoping to calm her down, as Rory's face screws up in anguish and he starts to cry with deep, wracking sobs. He turns onto his side, his shoulders shaking.

The sight of Rory sobbing into the ground changes Katniss instantly. One moment she was shouting at him in anger, the next she's dropping to her knees next to him, at first petting him on the shoulders and back, then wrapping her arms around him and murmuring into his ear.

"Hey," I hear her murmur to Rory. "Hey. It's okay, Rory. Sorry I yelled at you. You scared me, ya know?"

Gradually Rory's sobs subside as he calms down. I help Katniss stand and hand her bow back to her. She smiles her thanks and then helps Rory climb shakily to his feet.

"I'm sorry," Rory whispers. Katniss doesn't reply, but instead hugs the boy close to her. She clings to him tightly for a few moments, then pats him on the shoulder and turns back to me.
"Where's Mikel and Jahn?" She asks. I quickly glance around and realize that the brothers are no where in sight. I see Nova and Bonnie walking up to us at this time.

"Mikel and Jahn are looking for the cub," Nova explains, then turns to Rory. "Are you all right?" She asks gently.

Rory nods wordlessly. Just then the sharp crack of a gunshot causes us all to jump in surprise.

"Mikel must have found the cub," Nova says, a trifle sadly.

"He shot it?" Rory asks in amazement. "Why?"

"The sow," Nova says, pointing at the dead bear, "Was the cubs mother. When she charged at you she was just protecting her young. And the cub is still dependant on its mother - it wouldn't be able to survive in the forest without her."

Rory stares for a long moment at the dead bear, then back towards Nova. Mikel and Jahn emerge from the brush, carrying the dead cub between them. They lay the cub next to its mother, then both men examine the sow carefully. They are soon joined by Galen and Haymitch. Only then do I notice Pollux busy filming, with Cressida standing by his side, a small microphone in her hand, speaking rapidly in low tones.

Katniss and I, along with Nova, Bonnie and Rory, join Mikel and Jahn next to the two dead animals. Jahn carefully pulls the two crossbow bolts from the bear, wipes them clean with handfuls of leaves, and hands one back to Nova. He does the same with Katniss's arrows.

"I've never seen anyone put an arrow into a charging bear's eye," Jahn says in amazement as he hands the arrows back to Katniss.

Katniss blushes at the praise. "It was a shot I had to make," she says simply.

"It was an amazing shot," Mikel says, joining us. "This is a big sow. Probably close to one hundred fifty kilos. I don't remember ever seeing one this large before."

"It's a normal bear, though," Galen says, as he and Haymitch finish their inspection of both bears. "Not a mutt by any means. Just unusually large."

"A mutt?" I say in alarm. "Were you really worried that it was?"

"No, not really," Galen replies. "But there's always a possibility, even though large mutts are pretty rare around Twelve."

"Let's get these two trussed up so we can carry them back to the town with us," Mikel says. I shrug out of my pack and pull the machete from its sheath, then glance around, looking for strong saplings to cut down.

"Nice shooting, Sweetheart," Haymitch says quietly to Katniss as he bends down to help bind the larger of the two bears' legs together.

"Thanks, Haymitch," Katniss replies quietly.

PART II

"I'll look into it, Haymitch," Plutarch's voice comes from the speakers on Katniss's desk computer as his image stares grimly back towards Haymitch. "I can't promise any more than that."
"I expect nothing more, Plutarch," Haymitch says dryly. "Keep me posted." He leans forward and ends the video call, then glances toward Katniss and I.

"Well?" Katniss says insistently.

"Well, what?" Haymitch replies irritably. "You heard him. "He'll 'look into it,' he said."

"Bullshit, Haymitch!" Katniss snaps. "You know as well as I do that he's -"

"Enough!" Haymitch barks. "You heard what he said. And believe me, Plutarch has no love lost for Thirteen. They've been exerting a lot of political pressure on Paylor's administration lately. They want priority for re-building and decontamination, funds for infrastructure construction, you name it - they want it. They keep reminding Paylor that the Rebellion would've failed without Thirteen. Plutarch would love to be able to shove something like this in their face - if it's true."

There's a knock on the study door before Katniss has a chance to respond, then the door opens a bit. Galen pokes his head through the opening.

"Sorry to interrupt," he says. Haymitch waves him into the room gratefully. Galen opens the door wider and steps into the study, along with Delly, who had been standing behind him.

"Come on in, doc," Haymitch says, relief in his voice. "We're done here, anyway." He shoots a pointed look at Katniss, who scowls back at him in return.

"Well, then," Galen begins, "I have some good news. The clinic is complete - thanks in no small part to Miss Cartwright's talented and hard-working boyfriend." Delly blushes at Galen's mention of Lars Broadax as her "boyfriend," although we all knew it to be true.

"That's great news, Galen!" I say, smiling.

"Yes, it is," Galen says, beaming. "And, according to the Ministry of Health, we should be seeing our second doctor, along with a dentist, nurses, dental assistants, and medical supplies and instruments arrive within a week."

"Just in time for our anticipated influx of new residents," Haymitch says, referring to the Twelve Clans.

"Indeed," Galen says. "And it will be more than just a clinic. We have a small surgical suite for simple surgical cases and a dozen beds - almost like a miniature hospital. And Delly has agreed to stay on and help me with clinic administration."

"No more family shoe shop, Delly?" Katniss asks with a small smile.

"My grandparents may re-open it," Delly says with a smile. "They're coming out on the same train as the medical staff. My little brother, too."

"That's great, Delly," Katniss says, giving Delly a hug. "I know you've missed them a lot."

"I have," Delly admits. "But I've found that all of you have become my family, too."

I see Katniss blush at this. She had never allowed herself to really become close to many people other than Prim and perhaps Gale and Madge - until recently. I know she's still not entirely comfortable with the feeling.

"Have you spoken with Paylor?" Galen asks Haymitch.
"She was busy. She's supposed to call at eight tomorrow morning. I did speak to Plutarch - he said that Paylor wants to review Cressida's video of our visit to the River Clan before talking with us and the Clan delegation. Cressida has been busy since we've returned, editing her footage, and told me she'll have it uploaded by eight tonight." Haymitch replies.

Galen nods thoughtfully. "I'd like to be here for that call tomorrow," he says.

"No problem." Haymitch says. "Once Paylor and Plutarch view the video I'm sure they'll be more than happy to welcome the Clans to District Twelve and Panem. Bonnie's story alone is bound to create a stir. Where is Bonnie, by the way?"

"With Mikel, Nova, Jahn, and Rory," Galen replies with a smile. "They're cleaning the two bears. Thom and Leevy are helping, too. Rory's still pretty upset that his actions resulted in the bears getting killed. Nova has been very patient with him about that. I think he understands that he made a mistake, and that he'll learn from this."

"Sounds like we're gonna have another feast," I murmur to Katniss.

"Like the deer," she replies softly, slipping her arm around my waist. "Only bigger."

"A lot bigger," I say with a smile, sliding my arm around her waist in return.

"Speaking of feasts," Haymitch says, "I don't supposed anyone's thought about dinner tonight?"

"Taken care of, Haymitch," Delly says with a smile. "I spoke to Sae as soon as I knew you were back in the district. She's on it."

"In that case," Haymitch says, standing up slowly from the desk, "Let's go see how our Clan friends are doing with the bears."

PART III

"Mister Winter, I've reviewed the video that Miss Pierce has so expeditiously provided to my office, and I have also consulted with some other members of my administration regarding your petition to be allowed to integrate your population in with District Twelve. I'm pleased to inform you that, so far, your application has been received favorably by all concerned." President Paylor's voice emanates from the computer speakers as we all cluster around the desk. Although I'm standing off to one side, I can see Paylor's smiling image on the computer screen.

Mikel frowns a bit through his smile and glances over at Haymitch. He has the foresight to cup his hand over the microphone before asking, "Elder Haymitch, what did the Elder President just say?"

"Simply put, she and her staff like the idea of the Clans moving here, Mikel," Haymitch replies, trying to stifle a laugh. "And please don't address her as 'Elder President.' 'President Paylor' will be fine."

Mikel smiles his thanks to Haymitch and removes his hand from the microphone. "Thank you, President Paylor. The Clans are eager to meet with you, and the sooner the better."

"Can your representatives be ready to leave in a weeks' time?" Paylor asks.

"Yes," Mikel replies. "Will we be flying to meet you, or riding on one of your trains?"

"I was thinking both," Paylor replies. "We can send a hoverplane to transport your delegation to District Twelve, where you will board an express train for the Capitol. The trip will take one day
by train - that will give my protocol staff enough time to brief your delegation on what to expect when they arrive in the Capitol.

*And enough time to teach them the basics of Capitol customs,* I say to myself. I glance at Haymitch, and from the set of his mouth I can tell the same thought crossed his mind.

"That is acceptable," Mikel says. "I will return to the River Clan tomorrow, and the next day we will send runners to the other Clans to alert them to be ready to be picked up by your flyers."

"Excellent, Mister Winter." Paylor smiles. "I'm very much looking forward to meeting with you. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some matters to discuss with Mayor McElroy as well as Hay - I mean, 'Elders' Haymitch and Galen."

"Of course, President Paylor. I'll make preparations for leaving immediately. I, too, am looking forward to meeting you." Mikel stands up from behind the desk and murmurs something about finding Nova and the others. Katniss and I turn to leave also but Haymitch stops us.

"You two stick around," he says quietly. "I want you to hear this."


"All hear, Madam President," Thom replies.

"Good," Paylor says. "And I assume that Katniss and Peeta are there as well?"

Haymitch shoots us a guilty glance before answering. "I asked that they stay, Madam President."

"Just as well," Paylor says. "This concerns them also. This is regarding your - theory - regarding the firebombing of Twelve. After my talk with Plutarch this morning, I've instructed the Intelligence Ministry to investigate. I've been told that they have assigned the case to two top people. Beetee Latier and Gale Hawthorne."

Katniss and I exchange shocked looks. These were the last two names either of us expected to hear. I can see that the others are just as surprised as we are.

"Although Mister Latier is technically not a member of the Intelligence Ministry, there's no one better at finding obscure computer files." Paylor went on, sounding - to me at least - somewhat satisfied that she had managed to surprise us. "And Captain Hawthorne, in spite of his youth, has a personal interest in discovering the truth. Mister Latier assured me less than an hour ago that he feels he will have some answers for us very quickly."

I can see that Katniss is not at all happy by this news. "Not Gale," she whispers, a stricken look on her face. I grasp her hand firmly.

"Is anyone else aware of your theory, Haymitch?" Paylor asks.

"I've told Cressida Pierce, Madam President." Haymitch admits. "Only because she would have figured it out for herself anyway. She's very resourceful."

"I'll speak to Plutarch about her," Paylor says. "I trust that you impressed on her the need for discretion regarding this?"

"She's promised to keep her mouth shut," Haymitch replies.

Paylor nods thoughtfully. "At any rate, both Mister Latier and Captain Hawthorne have been
instructed to include you all during any and all briefings." It hits me at that time that, before now, neither Thom or Galen had been aware of Haymitch's theory. They both appear as though they're going to say something, so I pick up a notepad and scrawl "I'LL EXPLAIN AFTER" and hold it up for them to see. They both nod slightly and neither one says a word.

"Is that satisfactory to you all?" Paylor asks. I can see Katniss about to object, but before she can say anything, Haymitch says, "Perfectly, Madam President. Thank you."

"Next item," Paylor says. "Your new medical staff. Doctor Wellgood, you can expect Doctors Nivosus and Crawford to arrive on the same express train that will carry the Clans delegates to the Capitol, along with a nursing and dental assistant staff and the equipment necessary to equip your new clinic. Do you know either doctor?"

"I'm afraid not, Madam President," Galen replies.

"No matter. They both come highly recommended by the Ministry of Health. I'm sure that they will be of great help to you, especially since it appears that your population will be growing considerably in the very near future." Paylor says.

"I'm sure of that. Thank you, Madam President." Galen replies gratefully.

"Next item. Mayor McElroy, can you provide me with an update on Twelve's recovery and rebuilding?" While Thom quickly briefs the President on the status of rebuilding efforts, Galen excuses himself, saying something about having to get together with Delly on making sure that the clinic is ready to receive its new staff.

In the meantime, Thom finishes his briefing. "Excellent, Mayor McElroy." Paylor says. "That brings me to the last item. Open elections. Plutarch was telling me that, before the Catastrophes, it was custom in the old United States of America to hold important elections on the first Tuesday of November. You will receive this all in writing, in the form of an Executive Order, but I'll tell you all this now - In November, we will hold open elections for the offices of President, Vice President, Mayor of each district, plus each district will elect two Representatives to sit on the District Congress."

We all glance at each other in surprise. No one expected this so soon!

"I'll be honest with you," Paylor says. "I'm tired of governing by executive order. And the Cabinet, as it stands now, has too much authority. The authority belongs with the districts - not with the Capitol. It's my intention to give each district, regardless of size or population, an equal say in the administration of Panem. My executive order will establish four year terms for President, Vice President, and Mayor, and six year terms for the Representatives - whose first job will be to draft a Constitution of Panem - a set of laws that we can all live by."

"Madam President," Galen begins, "Will you be running for President?"

"Yes, Doctor Wellgood, I will be," Paylor says tiredly. "Reluctantly. And I will serve if elected."

"I can think of no one better for the job," Galen says sincerely.

"Thank you," Paylor says. "Just as I can't think of anyone better suited for District Twelve Representatives than yourself and Haymitch Abernathy."

**PART IV**

Katniss and I are sitting in the living room, cuddled up on the couch together. Our houseguests -
Mikel and Nova in one rooms, Jahn and Bonnie in another - are already in bed for the night. Mikel, Nova and Jahn want to get an early start back to the Clans tomorrow. Bonnie has decided to remain here with us in Twelve until their return.

We all decided earlier in the day to cook up the bear for a feast when the Clan representatives would fly in, as they were all going to spend the night in Twelve before boarding the express train for the Capitol the next day. That way, we could send them off with a celebration and welcome our new doctors and medical staff at the same time.

Nova had very generously provided us with a very large bag of cured *sativa*, not only for my use (and Katniss's as well), but for Galen to study for its potential as a pain suppressant. Katniss and I had decided to share a pipe before going to bed ourselves.

"You know," I say to Katniss as she holds a match to the pipe, "You could have been a little nicer to Paylor when she asked us to accompany the Clan delegates to the Capitol."

"What did I do?" Katniss asks defensively, inhaling a lungful of the fragrant smoke.

"Paylor barely got out her request before you said 'No,'" I say, taking the pipe from her.

"Well, how was I supposed to say it, Peeta?" she asks peevishly. "'No' means 'no,' as far as I'm concerned."

"There's more diplomatic ways of saying it," I say, chuckling. "Like, 'Oh, thank you, Madam President, but I can better serve Twelve by staying here,' or something like that."

"I'm never gonna have your gift for words," Katniss says, taking the pipe from me. "Besides that, this whole bombing business has me upset."

"I just...I don't know, feel - betrayed by those people in Thirteen." Katniss says softly. "Like, what if I actually talked to one of the pilots that dropped the bombs? How could someone like that even look me in the eye after destroying my home and killing -"

"I feel the same way," I say. "But I'm not sure what good it'll do to dig around. Say they find out that Haymitch's theory is true - what then?"

"I don't know," Katniss says miserably, handing the pipe back to me. "I just need to know the truth. I just wish Gale wasn't involved."

I say nothing. Even Katniss mentioning Gale's name made me uncomfortable. Nervously I pick up the TV remote and push the power button.

"What are you doing?" Katniss asks. "Watching Capitol programming?"

"Maybe something stupid will help keep our minds off of - things, at least for a while," I say, then I chuckle. "Haymitch and Galen sure looked shocked when Paylor told them that she wants them to run for District Representative."

"I know," Katniss says with a giggle. "And that's one thing that I don't think either one can say no to!"

We both laugh a bit at the thought of our friends' discomfort at being unwillingly thrust into the public eye. On the Holo-TV we can see a girl - probably from District Ten, from the look of her -
singing in front of what appears to be a panel of judges, who, from their appearance, are all from the Capitol. Behind them, an audience applauds enthusiastically when the girl finishes singing.

"Oh, no," Katniss says, taking the pipe from me. "I know what this is. This is that stupid singing competition show that Plutarch wanted to get me involved in."

"I dunno," I say a little drowsily. "That girl sounded pretty good. I wonder what language she was singing in? I couldn't understand her."

"That's funny, isn't it?" Katniss asks. "That now, someone can sing - or speak - another language without fearing the Capitol and the Peacekeepers."

I take the pipe from Katniss and inhale the last lungful of smoke. I carefully put the pipe down in a bowl on the small table in front of the couch, then turn to take Katniss in my arms.

"I think it's wonderful," I whisper after kissing her. "That someone can speak another language freely. Things are getting better after all."

"Kiss me again, Peeta," Katniss says in reply. I'm happy to oblige her.

And, while one singer after another serenades us, Katniss and I helped each other push our problems to the backs of our minds, even if it was only temporary.

"I love you," Katniss whispers before our lips meet again. Her sighs as I return her kiss tell me that she knows how much I love her too.
CHAPTER 27 - ELDER MIMAS

PART I

The hoverplane comes in slowly from the North and makes a gentle banking turn over the center of town. Katniss and I are standing with what Haymitch somewhat sarcastically calls "the welcoming committee" - Haymitch, Galen, Thom and Leevy, Bonnie, Katniss, and I. Cressida and Pollux are there as well, already busy filming.

Standing apart from us are two representatives from the Capitol Liaison Office - Adolphus Fox and his assistant, Tacitus Cochrane. Adolphus was a fussy little man with jet black hair and a beard reminiscent of the late Seneca Crane's. Tacitus was just the opposite of his boss - tall, blonde haired, muscular, and broad shouldered. In fact, he bore an eerie resemblance to Gloss, the handsome District One tribute that was Reaped and later killed in the Third Quarter Quell. Haymitch had told me earlier that Tacitus had had cosmetic surgery to alter his appearance to that of the dead Victor/Tribute. In spite of their obvious "Capitol" appearance, both had come highly recommended from Plutarch and, despite their lack of social skills, had been invaluable in dealing with the mounds of paperwork involved with the reconstruction.

We're standing in what once used to be the Seam - the run down slum that housed the coal miners and their families. Katniss grew up in this neighborhood, now reduced completely to ash as a result of the firebombing of District Twelve on what many now consider to be the first night of the Rebellion.

The cleanup crews have done a remarkable job. Thom and his crew of District Twelve volunteers had been among the first to return. They all lived in vacant Victor's Village homes while they performed the painful, but absolutely necessary, task of collecting up the remains of over eight thousand dead people, and respectfully depositing everything that they found in a huge pit that had been dug in the Meadow for that very purpose.

The reconstruction of Twelve had begun even before the body collection had been completed, and was still going on, in fact. However, the decision had been made to not rebuild in the Seam - at least not for a long while. Part of the Seam had been taken over for the planting of large community vegetable gardens which, it was hoped, would help feed the district residents during the upcoming winter months. That left a good portion of the Seam bare and untouched - perfect for use as a hoverplane landing area.

This is not the first time that hoverplanes have landed here in Twelve - in fact, they have become fairly commonplace since reconstruction began. Hoverplanes have carried everything from people, to food, to tools needed for reconstruction. But this cargo was much different. Elders from each of the Twelve Clans, as well as Clan representatives known as "Speakers" were on board this hoverplane, along with, from my understanding, some of their close family members as well.

As we watch, the hoverplane slows, flares, and sets down gently, hardly kicking up any dust or ash, most of which had been blown away by previous takeoffs and landings. The hoverplane - the biggest I've ever seen - settles gently on its landing gear as the engines sigh to a stop. We move around to the rear as the back ramp extends and drops with a soft thud onto the earth below.

Quickly, Tacitus forms us into what he calls a "receiving line," ignoring the snide comments Haymitch that was making about Capitol protocol. Finally satisfied, Tacitus takes his place next to
Adolphus as the first passengers descend the ramp into the bright morning sun.

Apparently someone forgot to let the flight crew know about protocol, as the passengers emerged from the hoverplane en masse to squint, shade their eyes, and blink in response to the sunlight. I see several passengers disengage themselves and rush forward to greet us. I smile as I recognize Mikel, Nova, and Jahn.

Katniss, Bonnie and I greet our friends enthusiastically, with hugs and back slaps, then the trio greets Haymitch, Galen, Thom and Leevy more respectfully, given the status that they all hold in the eyes of the Clan, but with affection and enthusiasm just the same.

Adolphus Fox impatiently clears his throat, apparently miffed at being left out of the greetings, so I quickly steer the trio towards the two Capitol representatives for introductions. Mikel, Nova and Jahn are all polite, respectful, and obviously indifferent to both Adolphus and Tacitus, to the dismay of both men. Nova appeared to be more interested in telling Katniss about her flight.

"It was so incredible, Katniss!" Nova gushes. "We were as high as the clouds at one point! And as we traveled South, I could see the ocean, far off in the distance! Oh, I hope to see it again!"

"I'm sure you will, Nova," Katniss says with a smile. "By the way, Peeta and I want to thank you for leaving that large sack of *sativa*. It's come in very handy in treating Peeta's - affliction."

"Yes, thank you so much, Nova," I add, hugging the Clan woman tightly.

"I'm just glad to have been helpful," Nova says with a smile. "Just remember to use it in moderation. It's been known to cause people to become dependent on it."

"Thanks for the advice," I reply, returning her smile. Before I can say more, a commotion behind us from the interior of the hoverplane causes us all to turn around.

"Let me help you, Aunt Mimi," a man's voice says, and a woman - older, from the sound of her voice, replies immediately, "Matti, stop fussing! I'm perfectly able to walk on my own!"

Katniss and I, along with Mikel, Nova, Jahn, and Bonnie, stand off to one side as a group exits the hoverplane. A man, somewhat younger than Elder Willem, is grasping an older woman by the arm and is helping her down the ramp, much to her disgust. Behind them we can see Elder Willem following, along with another woman who's still somewhat hidden by the hoverplane's darkened interior.

"Elder Mimas Ash," Mikel says, almost reverently. "Elder of the Sun Clan and Head of the Council of Elders." Katniss and I get our first good look at the woman and both of us gasp audibly in surprise. The woman bore an amazing, almost uncanny resemblance to someone that Katniss and I had come to know, respect, and even love in the short time that we had known her.

Mags.

True, this woman's dark hair was merely streaked with gray, and she wasn't quite as small as Mags, but the face was remarkably similar. There was one big difference between the two women, however - Elder Mimas had full command of her voice, and used it to its fullest extent.

Elder Willem spots us and steers the man - Matti, Elder Mimas had called him - along with Elder Mimas, towards us, with the other woman trailing behind.

"Elder Mimas, these are the young people I was telling you about," Elder Willem says as Elder Mimas stop directly in front of Katniss. The woman looks Katniss up and down with a critical eye
before speaking.

"So! You're the girl that everyone's made such a fuss about? The one that's caused so much commotion?"

"I - ma'am, my name is Katniss. Katniss Everdeen," Katniss manages to stammer out.

"Yes, yes! I've heard all about you from Will, Mick, and Jahnnie! The hunter, the 'girl on fire,'" - at this Katniss stiffens so slightly I'm sure I was the only one that picked up on it - "and the 'Mockingjay!' I see Katniss's face darken with the mention of the Mockingjay - something that she's been trying very hard to push to the back of her mind.

"I'm told we can add another name to your already impressive list of titles," Elder Mimas continues, either unaware of Katniss's rising anger, or ignoring it. "'Bearkiller.' Mick tells me that your shooting was like nothing he had ever seen before."

"Elder, I was there," Mikel says quickly. "Katniss put an arrow into a charging sow's eye. I would not have believed it if I hadn't seen it firsthand."

"Hmmph," Elder Mimas grunts. "So tell me, Katniss Bearkiller - am I making you angry?"

"Yes," Katniss says tightly, her lips compressed into a thin line.

"Really?" Suddenly Elder Mimas' face cracked in a wide smile. "How refreshing! A good, honest answer! She's pissed and she's not hiding it! Dear, you've no idea how good that makes me feel!"

Katniss stares at the older woman in astonishment. "I...but...that is...you're what?" Katniss stammers.

"Not very good with words, are you, Bearkiller?" Elder Mimas says with a laugh. "I like that. Actions speak louder than words, I always say! Twill!"

The woman that had been following Elder Mimas and the man called Matti steps forward. "Yes, Elder Mimas?"

"Introductions, if you please. You claim to know these people!"

"I've only met one, Elder, but I know of the others." The woman turns toward Katniss and smiles. I can see that she has dark hair and light brown eyes. She's older than Katniss and I but I'm unable to make more than a very rough guess at her age - somewhere between her late twenties to mid thirties. Right now she's gazing at Katniss with a smile, then extends her hands, grasping both of Katniss's in hers.

"Twill," Katniss says in a soft voice. "Bonnie told us that you were alive also, and living with the Sun Clan." Katniss turns to me. "Peeta, this is Twill. She was with Bonnie the day I found them by the lake."

"An honor, Peeta," Twill says with a smile, disengaging from Katniss and grasping my hand warmly. "And I'm so glad to see you and Katniss together." She stops suddenly and examines Katniss and I intently. "You two are 'together'...right?"

"Pleased to meet you at last, Twill," I reply, returning her smile. "And yes, Katniss and I are 'together.'"

The sound of Elder Mimas clearing her throat interrupts the introductions. Twill looks embarrassed.
but recovers quickly. "My apologies, Elder. This is Peeta Mellark."

"The baker boy," Elder Mimas says with a smirk, as I take her hand. "Do you still bake, boy?"

"Yes, ma'am, I do," I say evenly. "And I'm honored to meet you."

"No doubt," Elder Mimas says dismissively. "Alright, let's see it."

I frown in confusion. "See 'it?'" I ask.

"Oh, Stars!" Elder Mimas says in exasperation. "Your mechanical leg, boy! Your leg!"

Embarrassed, I glance at Katniss, then back to Elder Mimas. "I told her about your leg, Peeta," Twill says contritely.

Suddenly, I smile. So Elder Mimas is trying to make me angry now, is she? Without hesitation I pull my pant leg up, exposing my Robo-Leg for her to examine.

Elder Mimas gasps and, somewhat awkwardly, goes down to one knee in front of me, her eyes widening in surprise.

"I - I - thought they were joking," she says while examining the leg closely. "I can see I was wrong! This is no joke! What can you do with it?"

"Anything you can with two legs," I say. I lift my Robo-Leg and extend it out, then flex it back. I turn it to the left, and then to the right. I walk away several steps, then back again.

"Amazing," Elder Mimas says. "And you lost it while being forced to fight in that barbaric ritual?"

"He lost it," Haymitch says, stepping forward, "Because of lack of circulation. He was forced to wear a tourniquet to stem blood loss. It saved his life, but killed his leg."

Elder Mimas stands up, aided by the man she called Matti, and regards Haymitch with a critical eye. "And who might you be?" She asks.

"Elder Mimas, this is Haymitch Abernathy," Twill says hastily. "Haymitch was Katniss and Peeta's Mentor during their Games." Quickly Twill explains the role of a Mentor and how someone became a Mentor.

"Hmmph. Barbaric." Elder Mimas sniffs in disdain. "So, you had to fight in these so-called 'Games' as well?"

To my surprise, it was Katniss that stepped forward and explained to Elder Mimas Haymitch's Games and how hard he worked at mentoring us - and how hard he fought for our lives.

"Elder Mimas, Elders Haymitch and Galen have been most helpful to us," Mikel explains.

"So you're an Elder?" Elder Mimas says in disbelief. Haymitch nods and shrugs his shoulders.

"So they tell me," he replies coolly. Elder Mimas suddenly leans in close to Haymitch and sniffs.

"You drink too much," she says sharply. "And where is this Elder Galen, Mick?"

"Here, Elder Mimas," Galen steps forward. "I'm Galen Wellgood. Honored to meet you, ma'am."

"He's the Healer I told you about, Elder Mimas," Nova explains.
"Doesn't look like you miss too many meals," Elder Mimas remarks snidely. At this Galen merely chuckles as he grasps her hand.

"I never have, ma'am," he says, then bends closer to her, examining her face with a practiced eye. "Elder, are you alright?"

"Why do you ask?" Elder Mimas asks sharply.

"You look a little - well, pale. And slightly green as well." Galen observes.

"She barfed a couple of times on the flight," a boy's voice answers. We quickly spot the source - Rikkert Birch, with his sister, Callisto, close at hand. *If anyone can brighten Rory's spirits, it's Callisto, I say to myself. He's been moping all week. The incident with the bear really shook him up.*

"Rikki, you little -" Elder Mimas fumes. The older man called Matti steps forward quickly.

"Elder Mimas did not find flying - agreeable," he explains. "Like many of our people. I hope you understand." He turns and glares at Rikkert and I suddenly realize who this is - Mattias Birch, father to Rikkert and Callisto. But why was he here?

"Matti is now Elder Mattias," Elder Willem explains, seeing my confusion. "You missed him last week at our camp. Elder Mariah - you didn't meet her, she's been ill - has relinquished her duties as her illness has prevented her from fulfilling her obligations. The Sun Clan voted two nights ago and chose Matti as new Elder."

"Congratulations," I say, stepping forward and offering my hand. We shake hands firmly. "And a pleasure to meet you. Rikkert and Callisto are good kids."

"My thanks on both counts," Elder Mattias says. "I do have one favor to ask of you, though," he continues in a low voice.

"Of course," I reply.

"Before we leave in the morning, I would like to speak to the boy named Rory Hawthorne. Callisto speaks of no one else."

"That's because she's in love," Rikkert says, batting his eyes. I didn't even hear him walk up.

"I am *not*!" Callisto snaps, flushing with embarrassment. "Boys are so *stupid* sometimes!"

"Rikki! Calli!" Elder Mattias snaps, then turns back to me. "Please excuse them. If my wife were here - well, she knows how to keep those two behaving as they should."

"I understand," I reply. "I have - I *had* - two brothers of my own. And Rory lives in Victor's Village with us, so there will be no trouble finding a little time for you two to talk."

Elder Mattias smiles his thanks, but before he could say anything, Adolphus Fox steps forward.

"Excuse me. Excuse me!" Adolphus looks very flustered at the disorganized scene before him. "We have a busy remainder of the day, so I think we should all move to the Village at once."

"Good idea," Haymitch grumbles. "Wonder why I didn't think of it?"

"Excuse me," Elder Mattias says, turning to Elder Mimas, who, feeling ignored, had struck up a conversation with Thom and Leevy. "Aunt Mimi, do you need any help?"
"Huh?" Elder Mimas turns and regards Elder Mattias somewhat coolly. "Oh. No, Matti. But can you and the kids see to our belongings? I'd like to walk to this 'Village' with the Boy Elder, here -" she indicates Thom with a jerk of her thumb "- and his lovely young lady. We have things to discuss." With that, she turns and walks off, with Twill following close behind, talking animatedly with Thom and Leevy.

Elder Mattias stares after Elder Mimas for a moment, then chuckles and shakes his head. "Rikkert - Callisto. Come on, we have our orders." And with that, they join the crowd on the ramp, sorting through assorted backpacks, preparing for the short walk to Victor's Village.

Once everyone and everything was clear of the hoverplane, the pilot closes the ramp with a thump, then, with a barely audible high pitched whine, the engines smoothly lift the huge aircraft back into the air. It spins slowly on its axis, then, dropping its nose, flies off quickly to the west, disappearing from sight quickly.

Elder Mimas barely glances up as the hoverplane flies overhead, still engrossed in an animated conversation with Thom and Leevy. As we get ready to leave, Haymitch turns to me. "I think I like that old woman," he says with a smile.

PART II

"I hope you enjoyed your meal, Elder Mimas," Delly says anxiously as she busies herself with helping clear the table.

"To be honest, young lady, I've never really liked bear meat." Elder Mimas replies with a thoughtful look. "It's usually too stringy and greasy. But this was prepared exceptionally well."

"I'm so happy you enjoyed it," Delly says with one of her brilliant signature smiles.

We're sitting outside in the Victor Village green, enjoying the warmth of a late summer evening. I smile at the exchange between Delly and Elder Mimas. The Clan woman took an instant liking to Delly, and, Delly being the overtly friendly girl that she is, charmed Elder Mimas with her smile from the very first instant.

"Need some help, Delly?" Lars Broadax asks. Delly smiles sweetly at him and loads him up with dirty plates and silverware, which Lars dutifully trundles off to my house.

The feast had been a great success. The formalities had been kept to a minimum, with very short speeches by Adolphus Fox, Mayor Thom, and Elder Mimas. The actual feast had been prepared for the most part by Greasy Sae, who had preferred to labor out of the limelight. Victor's Village was a lively place once more, with every house occupied, including the home that had become a shrine of sorts to District Twelve's first Victor, Kathleen O'Sullivan. Each Clan was assigned a specific home, with Katniss and I hosting our River Clan friends, my old home (still occupied by Galen and Delly, and sometimes Lars) hosting the Sun Clan, and Haymitch's home hosting the Rain Clan.

There was some inevitable spill over into other homes. Katniss and I were hosting Elder Willem, Elder Mattias, Mikel and Nova, as well as Jahn and Bonnie. Of course, Katniss steadfastly refused to make available Prim's old room, but Elder Mattias stated that he would be fine sleeping on the couch in the living room as it was just the one night.

In addition to Galen playing host to Elder Mimas and Twill, he had the other Sun Clan Elder, Steffan, who also acted as the Sun Clan's Speaker. Mikel explained that Steffan had been Speaker for the Sun Clan before becoming Elder and had simply not relinquished his old title. Rikkert and Callisto Birch also would stay at my old house for the night, camping out in the living room much
like their father was doing with us.

Haymitch eagerly opened his doors for the Rain Clan - once he knew that their main trade item was Clan Beer. He also took in Cressida and Pollux as well. Rory managed to talk Haymitch into allowing him to stay the night at my old place with Rikkert and Callisto - well, mainly with Callisto - contingent, of course, on Rory speaking with Elder Mattias first - which, glancing over at them, I can see that they're having their "talk" now, although Rory doesn't seem to be the least bit uncomfortable. On the contrary, he is smiling and laughing with Elder Mattias as if he's known him his whole life.

"Maybe that's what Rory needs right now," Katniss says softly, having detached herself from Nova's company - who, along with Mikel, are now engrossed in conversation with Thom and Leevy - as she watches Rory fondly.

"A man? Like a father figure?" I ask, slipping my arm around her waist.

"Exactly," Katniss says, nodding as she leans in to me. "Gale was able to give him some of that, but Gale isn't here for him. I really wish I knew what happened between them. I've tried to talk to Rory about it but he refuses to say anything."

I say nothing. Although Gale is half a continent away, I still get uncomfortable hearing his name. And I really wish he hadn't been assigned, along with Beetee, to investigate the theory about District Thirteen being involved in the firebombing of Twelve.

I know Katniss can sense my uneasiness. She presses even closer to me, her own arm sliding around my waist. Before either one of us says any more, however, Haymitch walks up, surprisingly steady on his feet in spite of the impressive amount he has drank during the feast tonight.

"Well, I tried," he grumbles, jamming his hands into his pockets. "But I'm stuck. They want me along on this dog and pony show tomorrow."

I glance at Katniss in confusion and see that she's just as puzzled as I am. A dog and pony show? Was there some sort of theater where dogs and horses performed together? Perhaps somewhere in the Capitol? Maybe so, as it was apparent that Haymitch would be accompanying Thom and Leevy to the Capitol in the morning.

"Is Galen going too, Haymitch?" I ask.

"No," Haymitch replies in disgust. "He gets to stay here and get the new medical staff settled in. Why does Paylor want me there? I'm no damn politician...or a diplomat!"

"Well, she did say that she wants you to run for district representative in November," Katniss says, gently teasing Haymitch.

"Hmmph!" Haymitch grunts. "And here I thought I would finally get some peace and quiet in my life!"

"It's not the end of the world, Haymitch," Thom says, as he and Leevy walk up, hand in hand, followed by Mikel and Nova. "I, for one, am really looking forward to visiting the Capitol. During the Rebellion, I never got closer to the Capitol than District Five."

"And I never got out of Thirteen," Leevy chimes in. "I'm really looking forward to doing some shopping while I'm there. Haymitch, if you have time, could you show me where the best clothing shops are?"
At this, Haymitch chuckles. "Afraid I can't be of much help to you there, sweetheart," he admits. "Now, if you wanted to know about some really great bars, I can definitely point you in the right direction." Haymitch looks thoughtful for a moment before continuing.

"However, I know someone that would probably love to help you find the latest in Capitol fashion." He glances toward Katniss and I and grins. "Effie Trinket. She works for Plutarch and I'm sure she will be delighted to help out!"

"That would be wonderful, Haymitch!" Leevy says enthusiastically.

Thom looks doubtful. "Haymitch, if Leevy comes back to me pierced, tattooed, or with her skin some awful pastel shade, I'm holding you responsible!" Thom jokes.

"Don't worry, Thom. I'll be sure to tell Effie that she's limited to clothing only. Speaking of which, I need to go pack." Haymitch regards Katniss for a moment, then says, "Just how in hell did you two get out of this?"

"I said no," Katniss says simply.

"I tried that, Sweetheart," Haymitch grumbles. "Look where it got me."

"You aren't Katniss, Haymitch," I say with a smile. Haymitch just shakes his head and walks off towards his house.

"Katniss! There you are!" Katniss and I turn to see Delly walking up, accompanied by Elder Mimas and Twill. "Elder Mimas has some questions to ask you."

"Of course," Katniss says, eying the older woman warily.

"Relax, Bearkiller - I've only a few questions to ask of you and the baker, here," Elder Mimas says lightly.

"How may we help you, Elder?" I ask.

Elder Mimas actually looks a little uncomfortable before she speaks. "It's about...well, these trains that we are supposed to ride tomorrow. I've been told that they are very fast?"

"Very much so," I say. "What would take a person on foot all day to travel a train can do in just a few minutes. It will take you less than a day to reach the Capitol."

"I see," Elder Mimas says thoughtfully. "And there's no flying involved?"

"No, Elder Mimas," Katniss says gently, sensing the older woman's apprehension at the thought of flying again. "The trains travel on tracks - metal rails set into the earth. You won't ever leave the ground."

"Thank the stars," Elder Mimas murmurs quietly, then, "Well. Thank you for answering my question - Bearkiller, Baker. Delly, would you mind showing me once more how your latrines work?"

Delly takes Elder Mimas gently by the arm and guides her towards my old home. As they walk, I can hear Delly explaining, "And remember, Elder, they're not called 'latrines.' We say 'bathrooms' or 'toilets.'"

"I'm sorry for Elder Mimas bothering you with such a trivial question, Katniss," Twill says,
somewhat embarrassed. "But I've never ridden on a train before - so I couldn't answer."

"It was no bother, Twill," Katniss replies.

"Thank you just the same," Twill says. "She really is a wonderful woman, you know. And incredibly smart. Jersey will have her hands full with her."

"Jersey?" I ask.

"Yes," Twill replies. "Jersey Paylor. I knew her quite well back in Eight."

"That should come in handy," Thom says. "You can act as a go-between."

"Or get trampled," Twill says with a smile. "I know both of these women. Two very strong wills. I'll have to watch my step. But I am looking forward to the trip. Like you, Mayor, I've never seen the Capitol either."

"It's Thom," Thom replies. "And perhaps you could go along with Leevy during her shopping trips...if you aren't too busy, that is. I'm sure she could use some advice from someone not from the Capitol originally."

Leevy shoots Thom a sharp look, but Twill simply smiles and says, "It's a deal."

PART III

The next morning was busy and hectic. The train from the Capitol was due in at ten, and was scheduled to depart again at eleven. Adolphus Fox and his assistant, Tacitus Cochrane, had to move several dozen people, along with their baggage, to the district train station in some semblance of order and have them ready to board as soon as the passengers disembarked.

Galen was all but beside himself with excitement at the prospect of finally collecting up his new medical staff and equipment. He and Delly had worked feverishly to make the new clinic/mini hospital a reality. Delly, too, was eagerly anticipating her reunion with her brother and grandparents.

There was only one small problem that continually reared its head. Ground transportation. There simply was not enough in the way of passenger transport available in the entire district to move everyone at once. What was available, however, was a good supply of trucks.

Adolphus Fox proved his worth and his knack for solving problems by requisitioning the cargo trucks from they various construction projects that they had been assigned to. It wasn't fancy, or even comfortable. But those trucks would get the job done.

The lead truck, driven by Lars Broadax, pulled into Victor's Village just after eight o'clock, and stopped in front of my old house. He was dressed in shorts, as he usually was when working outside, and the sight of his artificial leg was another shock to Elder Mimas. Quickly she beckoned me over and had me stand shoulder to shoulder with Lars so she could examine both of our legs at the same time.

After close examination, Elder Mimas straightens up. "Well, Baker, I think you have the carpenter here beat for functionality - but Carpenter's is much more pleasing to the eye. Tell me, Carpenter, did you lose yours to that barbaric ritual also?"

Lars looked puzzled by her question until I whispered, "She wants to know if you lost it in the Games."
"No, ma'am," Lars says with a laugh. "Mine was an...accident."

"Yours, or someone else's?" Elder Mimas asks sharply.

"Mine," Lars admits.

"Hmph," Elder Mimas grunts, then, "Well, no matter. Are we expected to ride in this?"

"You'll be up front with me, ma'am," Lars explains as the other trucks begin to arrive. Adolphus and Tacitus try to be everywhere at once, assigning people to vehicles, making sure baggage was loaded correctly, and trying to do everything quickly.

Katniss and I decide to walk to the station. It was a pleasant late summer day and we both enjoyed the feel of the sun on our faces. We gratefully leave the controlled chaos behind us as we stroll, hand in hand, out of Victor's Village.

It's not long before we realize that we're being followed at a discreet distance by Rory and Callisto. Rikkert was a last minute addition to the Capitol entourage, having had a falling out with his sister the day before. Elder Mattias, grumbling about having to deal with childhood fights with his wife not present, had decided to take Rikkert along with him - but not before another stern talk with Rory.

The convoy of trucks, mixed in with the few passenger cars available in Twelve, passes us in town just a short distance from the train station. Katniss and I both marvel at how quickly the reconstruction is happening, and we both get a little somber when passing through Primrose Square. Behind us we can hear Rory telling Callisto the story behind the naming of the square and who Primrose Everdeen was.

I glance at Katniss and see her eyes mist over as she listens to Rory talk, but she reassures me with a smile and a kiss that she's alright. I make sure to hold her hand just a little tighter for the remainder of the walk.

The train station was another scene of organized chaos. Adolphus and Tacitus, along with Thom, Haymitch, and Elders Willem, Mattias, and Mimas, work feverishly to keep everyone together.

Shortly before ten we can hear the train approaching, with Katniss and I stepping onto the platform for a better look. Both of us gasp in amazement at the size of the train - much bigger than the Tribute trains that we had ridden on. Only logical, considering how many people this one was going to be hauling to the Capitol.

The train slows, then finally sighs to a stop next to the platform. While waiting for the few incoming passengers to disembark, Katniss and I quickly say our goodbyes to friends both old and new. Cressida and Pollux both receive heartfelt hugs. Cressida had told us the night before that she and Pollux would be out to cover the move of the Twelve Clans into the district, but would remain in the Capitol until that time.

Katniss and I both quickly say goodbye to our new Clan friends: Mikel and Nova, Jahn and Bonnie, Elder Mattias and Rikkert (who's still sulking), Elder Willem, Twill, and of course Elder Mimas. Finally, we say brief, somewhat terse goodbyes to Haymitch. Both Katniss and I are acutely aware that this will be the first time since either of us had returned to Twelve that we will be separated from our old Mentor, and it makes both of us uneasy.

Katniss and I are both aware of passengers beginning to exit the train - Delly had disengaged herself from Galen's side to run to an elderly couple and a young boy, while Galen was talking
earnestly with a small group of people that must be his new medical staff.

I give this group a cursory look - then quickly do a double take. The woman that Galen is talking to looks eerily familiar - although I'm sure I've never seen her before. Still, a vague sense of uneasiness begins to creep over me. Quickly I shift my attention over to where Adolphus and Tacitus are having an animated conversation with a small group of people that are very obviously from the Capitol. *Must be the protocol team,* I say to myself. I can also see that Plutarch has sent out additional camera crews, as they are busy setting up cameras and other recorders to document this first phase of the Clan's journey to the Capitol.

The scene in the station is organized confusion, so neither Katniss or I notice a couple of other passengers that have disembarked from the train. I can see Delly, with her grandparents and brother, has rejoined Galen and is now talking with a man wearing the clothing of a railway freight handler. I'm just about to suggest to Katniss that we introduce ourselves to Galen's colleagues when we both hear a mechanical whir behind us, accompanied by the faint squeak of rubber wheels on the floor.

"Hello, Katniss. Hello, Peeta." A pleasant voice greets us from behind. Startled, both Katniss and I whirl around at the sound of that familiar voice. We've barely registered the voice as coming from a pleasant-faced, middle aged man sitting in a motorized wheelchair, when his tall, uniformed companion speaks for the first time.

"Hello, Mellark. Hello - Catnip."
CHAPTER 28 - UNEXPECTED VISITORS

PART I

Have you ever been in a situation where you run into someone you know, whether a relative, friend, or casual acquaintance, and for a moment your brain just can't process the information that it's being fed, because they were the last person you expected to see? That's just how I felt, and, stealing a glance at Katniss, I could tell she was feeling exactly the same way. But the last thing I wanted was to betray just how surprised I really was.

"Hello, Beetee," I say warmly, bending slightly to shake the hand of the man in the wheelchair. Like Katniss and I, Beetee Latier was a Victor, only from District Three, and had been one of the Victors that had been Reaped for the Third Quarter Quell, along with his District partner and fellow Victor, Wiress. Wiress had been killed in those Games, while Beetee had been badly injured by electric shock and had been left severely weakened. Although he could stand and walk, with difficulty, he much preferred the comfort and mobility of his powered wheelchair.

"Always a pleasure to see you," I say sincerely as he grasped my hand with surprising strength.

"Likewise, Peeta," Beetee says with equal sincerity. I straighten up to greet the second unexpected visitor, hoping that I can at least muster a decent amount of civility, only to find that Katniss has beaten me to it.

"What are you doing here, Gale?" Katniss hisses, her entire body rigid. I can see with more than a little satisfaction that Gale Hawthorne is taken aback by Katniss's reaction, which is clearly not the one he was hoping for. I take this opportunity to add to his discomfort a little bit.

"Hello, Gale," I say, thrusting my hand out toward him. Perplexed, Gale glances quickly at me, then back at Katniss, then back at me once again as he absently takes my hand for a very brief handshake.

"You haven't answered me, Gale," Katniss says coldly.

Gale sputtered and stammered for a moment, trying to form a coherent sentence, before Beetee mercifully comes to his rescue.

"Captain Hawthorne and I have completed our investigation regarding your allegations," Beetee explains. "We're here to present our findings to you - plus, I haven't been back to Twelve since my Victory Tour, and that was all too brief...and, I wanted to see for myself how you two were doing."

"You're done? Already?" Katniss says in astonishment.

"It wasn't all that difficult," Beetee replies with a smile. "But perhaps we should save our briefing for a more private setting."

"Good idea," I agree. "It's a little confusing here right now - Mister Fox and Mister Cochrane are trying to get the out-district delegation onto the trains. It may be a while before we can get transportation."

"Out-district?" Gale repeats, glancing quickly at the assembled Clan representatives. "So these are the savages?"
"Savages?" Katniss practically spits the word. "These people are our friends, Gale!"

"I - I'm sorry, Katniss," Gale stammers. "It's just that - the Capitol networks, they -"

"It's not his fault, Katniss," Beetee explains. "'Savages' is one of the words the Capitol newscasters have taken to calling your out-district friends, along with 'barbarians' and 'aborigines.' I'm afraid the appellation has stuck."

"They're not 'savages,' Beetee," Katniss says softly. "They're good, decent, hard-working people."

Suddenly Katniss bends and hugs Beetee tightly. "It's really good to see you, Beetee."

"Always wonderful to see you, Katniss," Beetee replies with a smile. Returning his smile, Katniss straightens up and turns to Gale. She finally relents and gives him a brief, awkward hug.

"Sorry for being rude," Katniss says to Gale. "You took me - us - by surprise. Hello, Gale."

I had to admit that Gale did cut an impressive figure in his military uniform. It was bluish-gray in color, with a patch on the left sleeve depicting the new Seal of Panem. The old seal had been a stylized eagle clutching arrows in its talons, surrounded by an olive branch laurel. The new seal was a more realistic eagle clutching arrows in one talon and olive branches in another, surrounded by thirteen stars - one for each district. On his collar was an insignia depicting an open, unblinking eye, which I later learned was the insignia for Military Intelligence. On each shoulder epaulet were two silver discs side by side - the rank insignia for a Captain. A white fabric name tape with his last name was sewn above his right breast pocket.

But right now Gale seemed at a loss for words. All he's able to stammer out is another, "Hello, Katniss," before another voice cuts through the noise of the terminal - but I do notice that this time he addressed her by name.

"Latier? Is that you?" Haymitch booms out as he strides quickly across the terminal. With him are Mikel, Nova, Jahn, and Bonnie.

"Hello, Haymitch," Beetee says with a smile, shifting around in his chair. The two older Victors warmly clasp hands and even share a brief hug, then Haymitch straightens and turns to Gale.

"Still playing soldier, huh, boy?" Haymitch asks Gale with a smirk. "Someone forget to tell you that the war's over?"

Gale glares at Haymitch, but before he can respond, Mikel steps forward.

"You're the other," Mikel says with a smile. "Katniss's hunting partner. We've seen you many times, in the forest."

"Seen me?" Gale repeats in confusion. "I don't understand."

"Gale, Beetee - these are some of our friends from the River Clan." Katniss quickly introduces Mikel, Nova, Jahn, and Bonnie to Beetee and Gale, and explains how members of the River Clan watched Katniss and Gale - as well as other hunters from Twelve - on their hunting excursions.

"I'm truly honored," Mikel says, grasping Gale's hand. "Your skills as a woodsman are unmatched."

"Uhh...thanks," Gale manages to stammer. His gaze falls upon Bonnie and a glimmer of recognition crosses his face.
"I've seen you before. On TV. You're the girl from Eight. Took a lot of guts, what you and your partner did, running like that." Gale says to a suddenly embarrassed Bonnie.

"It was nothing compared to leading over nine hundred people to safety, like you did," Bonnie exclaims softly.

"Mister Abernathy! There you are!" The voice of Adolphus Fox reaches us as the fussy little man hurries over to us. "Boarding starts in two minutes!"

"Shit. That's me," Haymitch says in disgust. "Beetee, I thought we were through making trips to the Capitol!"

"Our trips are different now, Haymitch," Beetee replies softly. "Nowadays, we don't escort coffins home."

"Point taken," Haymitch says somberly, then, "Alright. I gotta go before Adolphus has kittens. Beetee - I think I know why you're here - we'll talk after I get back. Mikel and company - time to go!" Our River Clan friends have just enough time for one last round of goodbyes, then they, too, hurry off to the train.

As the delegation boards the train, I notice Galen walking over to us quickly, trailed by two strangers, a man and a woman. The man appears to be somewhat older than Haymitch, but younger than Galen. His head is shaved bald and he sports a long, silver beard on his chin only, cut and styled into a perfect rectangle. As he gets closer I can see intricate tattooing around his eyes and several ear piercings.

The woman I would guess to be around Haymitch's age. Her hair is cut short, almost in a masculine style, and bright crimson. It appears that she's had extensive cosmetic surgery on her face - her cheekbones are almost unnaturally high, her nose ruler straight, and her lips much too full to be anything but artificial. Plus, her skin is a uniform golden hue.

"Peeta! Katniss!" Galen calls out as he approaches us. "Our medical staff has arri - oh! Sorry! Am I interrupting?"

"Not at all, Galen," I assure him, even as I continue to eye the two newcomers.

"Good, good!" Galen says. "And Mister - no, Captain Hawthorne! Welcome home!" Galen grabs Gales hand and shakes enthusiastically. Surprised, Gale can do nothing but return the handshake - the last time he had seen Galen, just a few months after Katniss and I had returned from our first Games, he had said some fairly unflattering things to him - although Galen had dismissed the insults as a result of Typhoid fever delirium.

"And what an honor to meet you, sir!" Galen says, turning to Beetee and offering his hand.

"My pleasure, Doctor," Beetee says pleasantly. "I'm -"

"Beetee Latier," Galen says, almost reverently. "The 'Wizard' of District Three! Your work on neurological micro-circuitry interface makes it possible for Peeta's prosthetic to work as well as it does! What an honor!" Galen grips Beetee's hand firmly, seemingly forgetting his two colleagues standing patiently behind him, until the man softly clears his throat.

At the sound, Galen abruptly straightens up and turns. "Forgive me! My new colleagues, Doctor Tycho Crawford -" the man smiles and inclines his head "- our new dentist and oral surgeon, and Doctor Drusilla Nivosus -" the woman smiles and nods "- our new doctor, specializing in internal medicine and general surgery. Doctors, may I introduce Katniss Everdeen, Peeta Mellark, Beetee
Latier, and Captain Gale Hawthorne."

"Pleased to meet you, Mister Mellark," Doctor Crawford says as he shakes my hand. "I'll be expecting you to pay me a visit soon! Oral health is quite important, you know!" I murmur a vague promise to set up an appointment with him even as I hear the other new doctor talking with Gale.

I feel that vague sense of uneasiness return even as Doctor Crawford turns to greet Katniss. I try to shake it off while wondering why this other new doctor seems familiar to me.

"You're a Peacekeeper?" Doctor Nivosus asks Gale.

"Not exactly, ma'am," Gale replies. "Although quite a few former Peacekeepers have joined us. Technically, we're now called the Defense Forces of the Republic of Panem. We have assumed law enforcement duties, though."

"I see," Nivosus says thoughtfully. "I noticed you on the train with Mister Latier, here, but never had the opportunity to speak with either one of you. Are you coming home to stay?"

"How do you know I'm from Twelve?" Gale asks sharply.

"I remember your 'Final Eight' interviews, of course," Nivosus replies with a smile. "During the Seventy-Fourth Games. As I recall, you're Miss Everdeen's...cousin? Plus, you figured prominently in the propos during the Rebellion, with you and Miss Everdeen fighting side by side."

"Oh," Gale says, somewhat subdued. "And no, Katniss and I are not related. That was just a story they cooked up during the Games. And my home is District Two, now. I'm here with Beetee on an assignment."

"I see," Nivosus says. "A lengthy assignment?"

"No," Gale replies tersely. "We're almost done."

"Well, I hope you enjoy your stay, Captain," Nivosus says with another smile as she turns to me.

"So good to see you again, Peeta," she says warmly, offering me her hand.

"Again?" I ask in confusion, even as I shake her hand. I notice how warm her hand is.

"Oh, you probably don't remember me," she says with a laugh. "I was on staff at the hospital when they brought you and Miss Everdeen in after your first Games. I doubt if you ever saw me without a mask, gown and face shield!"

"Oh...no, sorry, Doctor, I don't remember you," I say. The hospital! That must be it! I say to myself, feeling a little relieved that my feelings of having seen her before have been validated - even if I don't exactly remember her.

"No matter. I'm sure we'll see quite a bit of each other," Nivosus says, "And please call me Drusilla!"

Any further conversation would have to wait, however, as Adolphus Fox chose that moment to let us know that transportation had been arranged for all of us and that our cars and trucks were now ready.

PART II

"They've really done a great job rebuilding," Gale remarks as the car takes us through the center of
town on the drive to Victor's Village. "And I really like what they've done with the square, Katniss. Primrose Square. It's really perfect."

"Yeah, well, I wanted to make sure that people don't forget her," Katniss says quietly.

I could hear the reproach in her voice, and I'm sure Gale could also, as he was silent for the rest of the trip. I found myself actually feeling bad for him. It was his bomb design that had killed Prim - although, oddly enough, Katniss doesn't seem to blame Beetee at all - even though he had been the one to actually build and test Gale's idea.

"I suppose it looks a lot different to you, Beetee," I say, changing the subject.

"Well, it's been quite a few years, Peeta," Beetee admits, "Although my last visit here was limited to the train station, the square, the Justice Building, and the mayor's residence."

"Well, virtually everything was destroyed in the bombing - except for the Village, of course," I explain, "so there's been a lot of construction these last couple of months. Speaking of the Village, I hope that you'll both be comfortable out there. We didn't know you were coming so there's no other arrangements."

"That'll be fine, Peeta," Beetee says with a smile.

The car pulled into Victor's Village a couple of minutes later and stopped in front of the house that Katniss and I shared. We all climbed out of the car as the driver handled the small amount of luggage that Gale and Beetee had brought with them. Gale busies himself with helping Beetee into his wheelchair, then together we all entered the house.

Beetee looked around and smiled. "Just like coming home."

"Are the homes in District Three's Village the same?" I ask.

"Very similar," Beetee replies. "I now live in a small apartment, though. Too many memories associated with that big house...and a smaller place is all I really need, anyway."

I nod solemnly. I understand completely.

"I didn't see Rory at the train station," Gale says. "He's still living here, right? Here in the Village, I mean?"

"Yes," Katniss replies. "You probably just missed him at the station." She gives me a knowing look even as she's speaking.

Slipping up beside me, Katniss says in a low voice, "Rory spotted Gale at the station before Gale saw him. He took off with Callisto. Who knows where they went?"

"They'll have to return sooner or later," I reply just as quietly. "Rory can't avoid his brother forever."

Before Katniss could reply, we all hear the sound of another vehicle driving through the Village. Going to a window, I see a car pull up in front of my house across the way, and see Delly exit and call out, "I'll just be a few minutes!"

Delly disappears into the house that she's been sharing with Galen for these past few months. Curious, I walk back outside, with Katniss at my side and Gale not far behind. Beetee opts to maneuver his chair to the open door to observe from the house.
"I wonder what's going on?" I ask as we all gaze across the way at the idling car. Katniss simply shrugs in response.

Delly emerges from the house carrying a small suitcase. She quickly tosses the suitcase into the back of the car, into an area that I'd heard Haymitch refer to as the "trunk." Slamming the trunk lid down, Delly's about to re-enter the car when she spots us watching her.

"Peeta! Katniss! Hi!" Delly calls out as she quickly crosses the way. I see her eyes widen in surprise as she gets closer. "Gale? Is that you?"

"Hi, Delly," Katniss and I echo as Gale chimes in with his own greeting. "Hello, Delly."

No surprisingly, Delly bypasses Katniss and I to greet Gale first. And, by greet, I mean to clench him in a smothering hug.

"Gale! It's wonderful to see you! You must have been on the train with my grandparents and brother. And is that Beetee?" Delly quickly disengages herself from Gale to engulf Beetee in a hug of his own, only not quite as overpowering.

"Hello, Delly," Beetee manages to say. "Very nice to see you again."

"I'm sorry, I really have to run!" Delly says, straightening up. "My grandparents and brother are waiting for me in the car. I've got a place for all of us to live in town - a little house near the clinic. The rest of the clinic staff will also be living down there - Galen's there now, getting everyone settled in. Eventually he'll be moving out there too! Are you in the district long?"

Gale and Beetee glance at each other before Beetee answers. "We're not sure yet, Delly. Probably not for long, though. We'll probably catch the train back to the Capitol once it returns with the out-district delegation."

"Well, that's over a week, at least!" Delly says as she turns to go. "So we'll have plenty of time to catch up! But I really have to go - bye for now!"

We all say our goodbyes as Delly skips back to the waiting car, climbs in, and waves as the car drives slowly out of the Village.

"For some reason, I always feel tired after being around that girl," Beetee says with a laugh.

"I've known her my entire life, and I know just how you feel," I say.

Beetee backs his chair out of the doorway and says, "Well, perhaps you two would like to hear what Gale and I discovered, before we have any more interruptions."

"Yes," Katniss says. "That's a good idea. Can we do this in the kitchen?"

"Sounds good," Gale says as we all go back into the house - hopefully to get the answers that we were looking for.

**PART III**

"We conducted this investigation in several parts," Beetee says, once we were all settled around the kitchen table, steaming cups of tea in front of each of us. "Once I was briefed by President Paylor and Plutarch Heavensbee, I started with the obvious - a general search of District Thirteen computer records. I didn't expect to find anything and I didn't. It wouldn't be like Coin to leave easy access to such damning records."
"Next, I searched personal computer files, focusing on Coin and Boggs, and secured files of the District Thirteen hoverplane squadron." Beetee continues, "These were more difficult - password protected, security firewalls, and other safeguards. I concentrated my searches using the date of the bombing and key words such as 'District,' 'Twelve,' 'Fire,' 'Bomb,' 'Flight,' and 'Hoverplane.' I managed to break into each file that I searched - some with great difficulty - and again I came up empty. Nothing. Not a single entry anywhere."

Beetee pauses to take a sip of tea before continuing. "Then I decided to search for what wasn't there rather than what was there...and that's when I started to find some very interesting things."

"I don't understand," Katniss says with a frown. "You were searching for what wasn't there?"

"Exactly," Beetee says triumphantly. "Take a look at these." Beetee produces a fairly thick sheaf of paper, bound loosely together.

"What is this?" I ask, idly thumbing through the documents.

"This is from the District Thirteen hoverplane squadron," Beetee explains. "Logs of routine and special maintenance, fuel receipts, crew assignments, flight plans, and manifests for the movement of both people and cargo."

"So?" Katniss says irritably. "I don't see anything unusual in here - no manifests listing bombs as the cargo, no flight plans for District Twelve - nothing."

"That's what I thought at first," Beetee replies. "Until I noticed what wasn't there. There's not a single order, requisition, maintenance log, or flight plan filed for the date of the bombing."

"Is that unusual?" I ask.

Beetee nods. "District Thirteen, as you all well know, is driven by schedules and order. Now, they didn't fly every day - even with stealth technology, it was deemed too risky - but their hoverplanes are meticulously maintained, and detailed records are kept even for routine preventive maintenance. There were absolutely no maintenance records dated on the day of the bombing of Twelve."

"Could it be coincidence?" I ask. Beetee shakes his head.

"I thought of that, so I checked their armory records as well. Again, District Thirteen maintained meticulous records of their weapons inventories. This is what I discovered." Beetee passes over another bound sheaf of computer printouts.

"What are we looking for?" Katniss says in confusion as she scans the pages filled with seemingly meaningless numbers.

"Look for an entry on the far left of the page that says 'INCIN 10 KG,'" Beetee says. I look over Katniss's shoulder as her finger traces down the page until we find the entry.

"Got it," Katniss says.

"That's the entry for ten kilogram incendiary bombs," Beetee explains. "They're small 'dumb' bombs - not guided in any way. They aren't high explosive - on impact the internal fuse ignites the incendiary chemical inside, the casing bursts apart, and flaming material is spewed out in all directions in a radius of about twenty meters. Now, the numbers to the right of the entry indicate the number on hand on each day."
Katniss traces her finger to the right as she and I look at each number in turn, each identical to the number before it - then her finger suddenly stops. My eyes widen and Katniss audibly gasps.

"This one - it's different. Smaller." Katniss murmurs.

"And the date is...the day before the bombing," I say quietly.

"Smaller by how much?" Beetee asks, sounding like a teacher in a schoolroom.

Katniss closes her eyes, her lips moving soundlessly. "Four hundred eighty."

"But then, the day after the bombing, the number goes back up," I say.

"They were replaced," Beetee says. "So they wouldn't be missed during a visual inventory."

"I don't understand," Katniss says. "This report shows a difference in the inventory."

"And that's the first mistake they made," Beetee says triumphantly. "Their automated inventory conducts a daily scan at midnight. Someone forgot about it, or forgot to go back into the computer program to falsify the entry - or, perhaps they figured that no one would go looking. All they did was make sure that the weapons were replaced before the next manual, visual inventory."

"You said their first mistake, Beetee," I chime in. "There were others?"

"Oh, yes," Beetee says with a smile. "A medium hoverplane configured as a bomber can hold one hundred sixty fire bombs. Divide four hundred eighty by one hundred sixty equals three hoverplanes. So, I started digging into their automated logs. I wasn't looking for flight plans - I knew I wouldn't find anything so obvious - so instead I was looking for something else. Usage hours."

"You mean like a clock?" Katniss asks.

"Something like that," Beetee replies. "Land vehicles, such as cars and trucks, have meters that measure how many kilometers that vehicle has been driven, and that drives routine maintenance such as lubrication intervals and fluid changes. The same is true for trains and aircraft, only they have meters that measure how many hours that train or hoverplane has been used. Pilots will keep manual logs of this usage, but manual logs can be falsified. However, each hoverplane has an onboard computer that transmits hours usage to a maintenance computer. What I had to do was compare the computer logs with the manual logs."

"Sounds like a tedious job," I say.

"It was," Beetee admits. "But I found three hoverplanes that each had right around three hours of undocumented usage on the day of the bombing of District Twelve."

Beetee pauses as this information sinks in. Katniss and I look at each other. Her expression is unreadable.

"That's where I come in," Gale says. "Once Beetee had figured out what hoverplanes were used, he was able to track down crew manifests fairly easily. We also got lists of ground crews and ordnance handlers."

"Each hoverplane only had a crew of two," Gale continues. "These crews were assigned to specific hoverplanes and didn't change. Of the three hoverplanes in question, one was shot down over District Two during the battle there, another was shot down over the Capitol, and the third
survived the war. The crews in the two that were shot down were killed."

"What about the third one? The one that survived?" Katniss asks.

Gale hesitates before answering. "One crew member was found dead last February. In District Thirteen. Her death was ruled a suicide. The other has disappeared - last known whereabouts was someplace in the Capitol. He hasn't been heard from since around April."

The room was dead silent for a moment as this news sinks in. Finally Katniss breaks the silence.

"What about the ones that work on the hoverplanes? The, what do you call them, ground crews? And what about the ones that haul ammo? Someone has to be held responsible for this!" I glance at Katniss and see that she's practically shaking with rage.

"Katniss, what we have is called 'circumstantial evidence,'" Beetee says quietly. "A lot of little things that point to the culpability of District Thirteen being involved with Twelve's destruction. What we don't have is a smoking gun...the actual proof that Coin ordered the attack."

"Katniss, I went to Thirteen personally," Gale says. "I interviewed dozens of people. And no, I wasn't nice about it, either. I was here that night, remember? I watched the bombs drop and the fires, and I knew that friends of mine were dying. I want to be able to blame someone just as badly as you and Peeta - but the fact remains, there just isn't anyone left alive to blame."

Katniss sits quietly for a moment, looking first at Beetee, then at Gale. She glances at me once with that same unreadable expression. She pushes herself away from the table abruptly and stands up so quickly her chair falls over.

"Excuse me," she says before rushing out of the room. A moment later I hear the front door open, then slam shut.

Gale watches her leave, then stands up as if to go after her. Beetee looks first at Gale, then at me. Gale moves around the table, but Beetee puts his hand on his arm as he squeezes past his wheelchair.

"Gale," Beetee says quietly.

"I'm going after her, Beetee. Let go," Gale says tightly.

"No. You're not." I say calmly. "She just needs to be alone for a little while. Let her be, Gale."

Gale glares at me but makes no move to break Beetee's grip on his arm. "I know her, Mellark. She -"

"No, Gale," I interrupt. "You knew the old Katniss. You don't know this Katniss. And this Katniss just needs a few minutes - alone."

For a moment I thought that Gale was going to run after her anyway. He continues to glare at me, then at Beetee, then finally he pulls away gently and heads for the back door.

"I just need some air, don't worry," he snaps as the door closes behind him. I can see him clearly through the window as he slumps down in a chair and stares blankly at the fence separating Victor's Village from the rest of the district.

Beetee turns to me. "We of course have already informed President Paylor and Secretary Heavensbee of our findings. As soon as Captain Hawthorne returned from Thirteen we prepared
our report, which we presented to them yesterday morning prior to our departure from the Capitol. Plutarch is, as you can imagine, pleased with the results, and I think Paylor is as well. Thirteen has been putting the new government under a lot of pressure and this will go a long way towards making them back off a bit."

"And whose idea was it for you two to deliver your report to us in person?" I ask. The answer surprised me.

"Mine," Beetee says. "Peeta, I spend a lot of time in the Capitol, although I really don't like it there. I do it because District Three has nothing but unhappy memories for me. Wiress - she and I were colleagues as well as Victors. And she was my best friend as well - the only person that really understood me."

I nod. I know the feeling.

"I think I like it here," Beetee continues. "Unfortunately, you don't have much in the way of a tech industry here. For that, I need Three or the Capitol. But I can see possibly owning a home here - maybe spending a few months a year out here."

Before I can reply I hear the front door open, then close. I identify the soft footfalls as Katniss - with someone else.

Katniss walks into the kitchen - with Rory and Callisto right behind her. "Sorry I ran out like that," she says to Beetee and I.

"Perfectly understandable," Beetee says, then smiles. "Hello again, Rory. It's been awhile."

"Hello, Mister Latier," Rory replies. "Are you feeling better, sir?"

"I'm getting there," Beetee says. "And who is your friend?"

As Rory introduces Beetee to Callisto, I stand up and slip next to Katniss. "Where did you find them?" I ask softly.

"At Haymitch's, with Sae," Katniss replies. "You aren't mad about me running out like that, are you?" She looks at me anxiously.

I chuckle softly. "Of course not," I say, giving her a quick kiss. "You know I understand."

"Thanks, Dandelion," Katniss says softly. I smile inwardly. I love it when she calls me that.

"So what convinced Rory to come over?" I ask. I glance over at Beetee talking with Rory and Callisto - clearly he's fascinated with the Clan girl.

"I just told him that it would be best if he was to come to Gale, rather than have Gale looking for him," Katniss explains. "I talked to Sae. I think it will work out better for Gale and Beetee to stay at Haymitch's, and have Rory and Callisto stay here."

"Good thinking," I murmur. Rory and Callisto are in an animated conversation with Beetee, and from the sound of it, Beetee is trying to learn everything at once about the River Clan.

The sound of the back door opening distracts Katniss and I from the enthusiastic conversation. I glance up to see Gale step through the door and stop dead in his tracks.

"Rory," he says softly. Rory, startled, looks over at Gale, and for an instant I see something - fear?
"Gale. Hi," Rory says tentatively. The two brothers eye each other warily.

"This is your brother, Rory?" Callisto asks.

"Yeah. My brother, Gale." Rory replies. "Gale, this is my - friend - Callisto Birch. Of the River Clan."

"River Clan?" Gale echoes. "So you're a s-...I mean, out-district?" I see Katniss shoot Gale a sharp glance, but Callisto handles it smoothly.

"Yes," she replies. "My father is newly appointed to the Council of Elders." Callisto says this last with obvious pride in her voice. "He's on his way to the place called 'Capitol' with my brother."

"Why didn't you go also?" Gale asks.

"Because my brother and I were fighting - not getting along," Callisto says in disgust.

Gale chuckles at this and looks pointedly at Rory. "I know the feeling," he says.

Suddenly Katniss says, "Gale, I ran into Sae - she keeps Haymitch's house for him now. I thought that with Delly moving into town and Galen being busy with the new clinic that it would be best to put up Rory and Callisto here, at my place, while you and Beetee stay at Haymitch's. It's clean, I promise." She adds the last part with a smile.

"I remember Sae," Beetee says with a smile. "Excellent cook, as I recall - much better than the so-called cooks in Thirteen. If she'll be cooking for us I have no objection!"

"Great!" Katniss says enthusiastically. "It's settled, then. Peeta, can you help Beetee move his things over to Haymitch's? Callisto and I are going over to - Galen's - to pick up her stuff. That'll give Gale and Rory a chance to talk."

"Sounds good to me," I say, not commenting on her hesitation when she almost said "your house," instead of "Galen's." I guess she doesn't want to rub it in Gale's face - and I can't say that I blame her. "Ready, Beetee?"

"Absolutely," Beetee says as he gathers up all of the documents he had shown Katniss and I, stuffs them back into a briefcase, and maneuvers his chair away from the kitchen table.

A minute or so later I'm helping Beetee guide his chair down the front steps, with Katniss and Callisto right behind, when a voice stops us.

"Catnip." Gale is standing in the doorway, right behind Katniss and Callisto. Katniss stiffens just a bit at Gale's use of his old pet name for her, then turns around to face him.

Gale stands in the open doorway for a moment, but makes no move to come out.

"Thank you," he says simply. I see Katniss's features soften just a bit and a small smile crease her face before she responds.

"You're welcome," she replies. "You two need to talk."

Gale simply nods, before shutting the door.
"Okay, Peeta! All done!" Doctor Tycho Crawford deftly extracts the mirror and small metal pick that he had been using to examine my teeth from my mouth. I'm reclined on a soft chair in his examining room. I work my jaw slowly, unused to having my mouth open for such an extended length of time, then take the small paper cup that Doctor Crawford's assistant hands me.

"Go ahead and rinse, Mister Mellark," the assistant - a girl in her mid-twenties with closely cropped jet black hair to go along with the seemingly obligatory facial piercings and intricate tattooing so common among the Capitol-born - says with a smile. When she smiles I can see small gemstones embedded in her teeth.

The fluid in the cup isn't water - it's a mint flavored mouth rinse that reminds me of mouthwash. I swirl the rinse around my mouth vigorously, then lean over to the small porcelain basin next to the chair to spit the fluid down the drain. With a smile of my own, I hand the cup back to the assistant.

"As expected, your teeth are perfect," Doctor Crawford says. "It's one of the few positives about being selected as a Tribute. They would put as much effort into beautifying your teeth as they would any other body part. All I had to do today was a general cleaning, and I applied a dental seal to your teeth that lasts at least five years. Of course, that does not negate your responsibility to brush and floss daily!"

"Yes, doctor," I reply, swinging my legs over the side of the chair and standing up. "Thank you for seeing me so quickly."

"It was my pleasure," Crawford says with a smile as we shake hands. "There haven't been too many requests for my services as yet - but, I'll be plenty busy with all the new patients that I'll be getting, once the out-district people begin to move into the district."

I nod. Katniss and I - well, everyone in Twelve, actually - had been watching the televised proceedings being broadcast from the Capitol as the delegation from the Twelve Clans negotiates with key government officials for admission to the new Republic of Panem. Katniss and I had both been impressed not only with the dignity and intelligence displayed by prominent Clan members, such as Elders Mimas and Willem, as well as Mikel - but with our own Mayor Thom McElroy, and our Mentor, Haymitch Abernathy.

Thom was quickly becoming a Capitol favorite, with his simple, plain spoken ways, extolling the value of adding over a thousand new hard working citizens to District Twelve, hinting that they would be of great help in staffing the new pharmaceutical factory that would become the districts' chief industry, replacing coal mining once and for all.

Haymitch, of course, was already a celebrity in the Capitol. Victors, even aging, rebellious alcoholics like Haymitch Abernathy, had always been embraced by the Capitol. His stature had risen considerably following the Seventy-Fourth Games, when he became the first Mentor in Games history to bring home both of his districts' Tributes - and now he was putting all of his considerable negotiation skills to work in squeezing out as much funding from the Capitol as possible for the relocation of the Twelve Clans.
"So, when can I expect Miss Everdeen to pay me a visit?" Crawford asks.

"I'll mention it to her this evening," I reply, "But you have to understand Katniss. She's stubborn, and really doesn't like doctors all that much."

Crawford laughs pleasantly. "That is a familiar refrain, Peeta," he says. "Just the same, work on her for me, would you?"

I promise to be my most persuasive as I leave the new clinic and walk out into a late summer rain shower. I hunch my shoulders slightly as I walk back towards Victor's Village, enjoying the feel of the light, warm rain on my face. I wave and call out greetings to the few people that I see on my walk back - some are returning Twelve residents, others, like Lars Broadax, transplants from other districts.

I'm looking forward to the return of the delegation in a few days. Victor's Village has been much too quiet, now that the returnees have all moved to town and the Clan delegates are in the Capitol. Even Delly has moved to town to live with her younger brother and grandparents - and, of course, Lars lived in town as well. For now, the Village only has two occupied homes - Katniss and I, along with our temporary guests Rory Hawthorne and Callisto Birch, and Haymitch's place, housing Gale Hawthorne and Beetee Latier until the train returns with the Clan delegates.

Rory was still avoiding his brother, even after they had sat down and talked. Gale, of course, wanted Rory to come back to District Two with him - a move that Rory steadfastly refuses to do. Shortly after their talk, Rory had finally confided in me the details of his estrangement from Gale.

It was actually pretty simple. Once the Hawthornes had moved to Two, and Gale had secured a more or less permanent position with the new Defense Forces, he had become increasingly more difficult to live with. Rory had always idolized his older brother, much in the same way the Prim idolized Katniss - so it had come as a shock to Rory when Gale began to act less and less like a brother, and more and more like a strict disciplinarian father.

"I know what's really bothering him," Rory had told me. "Katniss. He's still not over her. It was eating him up and he was taking it out on us. Finally, one night he just exploded. He started yelling at me because I wasn't fast enough in helping Vic and Posy with the dinner dishes. Actually ordered me to my room! And it wasn't the first time, either! So, locked in my room, I wrote Mom a note, threw a few things in a backpack, and climbed out the window."

Rory made his way to the District Two train station and managed to get a message to the one person that he hoped was still in the Capitol - Delly Cartwright. Hearing about his difficulties, Delly immediately purchased a one way ticket to the Capitol for Rory, placing it in his name, then, once he was on the train, contacted Hazelle Hawthorne and explained that she would watch out for Rory.

Hazelle had been understandably upset by her middle son's running away, but had, in the end, consented to allowing Delly to look after Rory. I learned that Rory speaks with Hazelle, as well as with Vic and Posy, regularly. Hazelle never brings up the subject of Rory coming home.

As for the talk between Gale and Rory, apparently it started out friendly enough - even with both brothers hugging each other in the beginning - but turned sour quickly, ending with Gale once again ordering Rory to return home with him.

"The worst of it is, Peeta," Rory had said, "Is that I miss everyone so much! Even - even Gale. The _old_ Gale, I mean. I don't even know this new Gale." Rory and I are agreed on one thing - both of us will be glad once Gale leaves Twelve.
The entrance to the Village is straight ahead. The rain is falling a little harder as I think about what Rory had told me. I hunch my shoulders and walk a little faster. As I turn into the Village entrance I catch a glimpse of Katniss as she enters our house and shuts the door firmly behind her. I can see Haymitch's geese honking loudly and realize that she had probably been outside tending to the geese, like Haymitch had asked her to in his absence.

I smile, thinking of spending a cozy afternoon with Katniss (even with Rory and Callisto in the house - the kids pretty much keep to themselves), but my smile fades immediately as I see Gale shut the door to Haymitch's place and quickly run to Katniss's door. I feel my mood darken as Gale raps sharply on the door, then lets himself in.

I find myself hurrying to get home, not wanting to leave Katniss alone with Gale any longer than absolutely necessary - even though she claims that she understands that Gale was not directly involved with Prim's death, I can still see the hurt and betrayal in her eyes. But, even as I hurry, a new thought enters my mind.

This may be my only chance, I say to myself, my only chance to hear for myself exactly what Gale means to Katniss. I feel a pang of guilt - eavesdropping is really not my style - but my own insecurities rise to the surface.

Katniss loves me. She's told me countless times that she loves me. I should trust her with my whole heart. But - there's that little voice inside me that tells me that I need to know. After all, Gale is the only other man that Katniss has ever kissed romantically.

Even as I struggle with myself for what I'm about to do, I find myself quickly moving to the back of the house - to the outside entrance of the basement. There, I quickly pull open the outer doors and descend the few steps to the inner door. I fumble in my pocket for the key and quietly insert it, then turn the lock slowly. The door swings open noiselessly and I step into the basement, shutting the door behind me.

Right after I had moved to Victor's Village, Haymitch had pointed out an interesting feature of the basement. It seemed that the first floor vents were placed in such a manner that someone sitting in the basement could hear conversations taking place with perfect clarity through those same vents. And so, I stand in Katniss's cluttered basement, my heart thudding in my chest, quietly listening until I can hear the faint sounds of conversation coming from one of the vents.

Hating myself for what I'm about to do - if you really love her, Mellark, you'd trust her implicitly, I say to myself - I slowly move until I'm almost directly beneath the vent - and I can hear both Katniss and Gale as clearly as if I was standing in the room with them.

**PART II**

"I don't have any lemon for the tea, sorry," I hear Katniss say. "But there's sugar, and milk, and honey -"

"Black's fine," Gale replies. I can hear the clatter of cups rattling against saucers. I'm standing under the vent to the living room.

"So," Katniss says evenly. "You said you wanted to talk. So talk, Gale."

"Yes, well - umm," Gale stammers. "It's just that - well, we've not had much of a chance to talk - alone, I mean - since Beetee and I've been here. And, we're leaving in a few days - who knows when I'll see you again -"
"You gave us your report, Gale," Katniss says in a flat voice. "We appreciate your hard work. But there's really nothing more to talk about."

"We?" Gale replies, an edge to his voice.

"Yes, we," Katniss says coldly. "Peeta and I - and Haymitch, once he returns from the Capitol. It was his theory, remember."

"I remember," Gale says, his voice noticeably softer now. "I remember all sorts of things." He pauses and I can hear the cups clinking against the saucers.

"So do I," Katniss says in a soft voice.

"I need to know something," Gale suddenly blurts.

"What?" Katniss asks warily. I can hear someone - Gale, probably - take a deep breath.

"I need -" Gale begins, then pauses again, before the words come out in a rush, "I need to know - do you hate me?"

Silence. All I can hear is the sound of measured breathing.

"Catnip -" Gale says, a note of pleading in his voice.

"What difference would it make one way or another? And please - don't call me that any more!" Katniss says, her voice suddenly thick with emotion. I find my own breathing becoming labored and my heart thudding in my chest. I should stop. I should leave now. I should -

"It does to me," Gale replies. "And I'm sorry. I'll stop."

"I -" Katniss begins in a halting voice. I hear the clatter of cup against saucer and a new sound as a saucer is set on a table. "I could never hate you, Gale," Katniss says, her voice almost a whisper, "And at the same time, I can never fully forgive you, either."

"You don't think - Katniss, you have to know that I would never do -" Gale sputters.

"But you did," Katniss says sorrowfully. I can hear a hitch in her voice as she speaks.

"Do you blame Beetee also?" Gale asks bitterly. "After all, the idea was mine - but he was the genius that built the fucking thing!"

"You don't understand!" Katniss replies sharply. "It's the idea, Gale! The idea of a bomb that explodes to first hurt people, then explodes again to kill the original victims and the rescuers?! That's not war, Gale! That's murder!"

Gale says nothing, so Katniss continues. "Blame Beetee? No, I don't blame Beetee! I don't blame him because he doesn't really know us! Any of us! You do, though! You were like a brother to her!" I can hear Katniss crying openly now as her voice raises. "You may not have ordered the bombs to be dropped, or flew the hoverplane that did it, but it was your idea!"

"That's not - I would never - I loved her too, Katniss!" Gale cries. "There's not a day that goes by without me thinking about her! She's constantly in my dreams at night! I was sick that Coin used my idea like that! I'm still sick about it!"

"And how would you have felt if it was Capitol medics that went in to treat the wounded?" Katniss asks almost gently. "Would you have been okay with that?"
"We were fighting the Capitol then, Katniss! They were the enemy!" Gale snaps.

"Kids, Gale? Children? That was our enemy?" Katniss replies angrily. "The enemy lived in the Presidential Palace! Not the kids! Even Capitol medics weren't the enemy! Did you know that Capitol medics would treat Rebel wounded when they found them? Yes! Capitol medics treated Rebel wounded!"

If Gale is as stunned as I am, I don't blame him for not responding. Where did Katniss hear about Capitol medics treating Rebels?

"How do you know that?" Gale finally asks incredulously.

"Delly told me the other day," Katniss says wearily. "One of the medical technicians that came out on the same train that brought you was talking with Delly. He was involved in the fighting in District Four. Told Delly about finding wounded Rebels during the Cannery Row Battle in Four, and treating their wounds. He told Delly that his first duty was to help people that needed it, and said that many of the other Capitol medics felt the same way."

"I didn't know," Gale murmurs, sounding subdued.

"No one does, Gale," Katniss replies softly. "Maybe if you'd gone through what I - what we - went through, you'd understand better."

"You mean the Games," Gale says in a toneless voice. "Katniss, I went through a war."

"What the hell do you think the Games were?" Katniss snaps. "The Games were war! Children against children! District against district! Do you have nightmares, Gale?"

"What?" Gale asks, surprised by the question.

"How do you sleep, Gale?" Katniss asks sharply. "Because I have nightmares just about every night. Sometimes I can get through them okay, other times I'm afraid to go back to sleep afterwards. I dream about my father dying, and about the two Games, and about the Rebellion - and sometimes they're all mixed together. You went through a war, Gale - is the war still with you?"

Long seconds of silence before Gale speaks. "Yes," he admits. "Yes, it's still with me. Yes, I have nightmares."

"And you take it out on your family," Katniss says. "Rory told Peeta what happened, and Peeta told me. You'll lose them all if you can't control it."

I expect an angry outburst from Gale when he hears that Rory told me what had been going on in District Two - but what he does say takes me by surprise.

"How?" Gale asks almost plaintively. "How do I control it? How do you control it, Katniss?"

"Sometimes I don't," Katniss replies. "Some days I just go through the motions. But I have help."

"Peeta." Gale practically spits my name.

"Yes, Peeta," Katniss says quietly. "He understands. He's as broken as I am."

"I still say he's dangerous," Gale says. "After the hijacking, after what tried to do to you in Thirteen."

"That wasn't Peeta," Katniss says firmly. "It wasn't his fault. He - "
"I know all that, Katniss," Gale interrupts. "But he still sees Wellgood regularly for injections to help him control the hijacking. He has medication that he can take himself if he feels a seizure coming on. And he can smoke that cannabis, or sativa, or whatever you call it, to calm him. And with all that, he still has those seizures!"

"And when he does, I help him get through it." Katniss says. "And when I wake up screaming, he's there to help me get through it. We protect each other - it's what we do, Gale. Peeta and I have been protecting each other for over two years now - even when we didn't realize we were doing it."

"And what did we do for the four years before the Games, Katniss?" Gale asks. "We helped each other to keep our families alive. We hunted, fished, and trapped together. Went to the Hob together. We protected each other! And I, somewhere along the line, I -"

"And that's exactly why I could never hate you, Gale," Katniss interrupts gently. "And I know what happened - you don't have to say it."

"I should have told you when I first really knew," Gale says bitterly. "That day in the Hob - right after the New Year. When Darius was flirting with you. Remember?"

Darius. The friendly Peacekeeper with the flaming red hair. Katniss's favorite among the old District Twelve Peacekeepers. Who dared stand up to Romulus Thread's brutal flogging of Gale, and was punished by the Capitol turning him in to an Avox. Darius, who was tortured, mutilated, and ultimately murdered before my eyes for my benefit.

"All that would have done is push me away," Katniss says. "I couldn't think of you like that. You were my friend - and the best hunting partner I could have hoped for."

"'Friend,'" Gale says bitterly. "'Hunting partner.' That's all I ever was to you, wasn't it?"

"No. And you know that's not true," Katniss says in a small voice. "But it never would have worked out for us."

"How do you know, Katniss?" Gale demanded. "How can you be so completely sure?"

"You can't see it Gale, but I can," Katniss says sadly. "We're too much alike. Both of us Seam born. Both dirt poor growing up. We've both known starvation, and sickness, and seen too much death at too young an age. We're both angry, Gale! We'll always be angry! And it won't matter how much better things get - because we'll remember how things used to be."

Silence. I try to control my own breathing - the vents work both ways, after all - and strain my ears for the next utterance. Gale's silence is finally broken - by Katniss.

"Peeta is the opposite of you and I," Katniss says. "He's kind, and selfless, and he's not angry. He doesn't have our fire, Gale...the fire that kept us both alive after our fathers were killed. It was my fire that got me through two Hunger Games. It was my fire that allowed me to become something I never, ever, wanted - the Mockingjay. Just as it was your fire that saved those few hundred from the district, and fought by my side in the Rebellion."

"We're alike, Katniss," Gale says softly. "And that's why -"

"Why it would never work," Katniss says. "We're like two fires burning in the same forest. Burning hot and bright, consuming everything in our path - until the fires meet. Then, they flare up and die. Gale, can't you see that's what would have happened to us? It never would have lasted."

Gale is silent for a few moments. When he finally speaks, I actually feel sorry for him - the pain in
his voice is so evident.

"I need to know something else," Gale says, taking a deep, shuddering breath before continuing. "I need to know if you really - love him."

"I do love him, Gale," Katniss says softly. "Peeta is broken, and not perfect - but he's like that first dandelion in the spring. He gives me something no one has ever been able to give me - hope."

I've heard Katniss say "I love you" to me countless times - but hearing her tell Gale that she loves me is somehow more - real.

"I see," Gale says in a voice that seems oddly devoid of emotion. "Well, Katniss - I hear Gale put the emphasis on her name - a pretty obvious dig at her in response to Katniss asking Gale earlier to stop using his pet name for her " - I've taken up enough of your time. And I'm sure Peeta will be back soon - I wouldn't want him to get the wrong idea."

"He wouldn't," Katniss replies quickly, causing a stab of guilt to shoot through me. "I know he trusts me - as I trust him."

I quickly make my way to the basement door, not waiting to hear any more. I slip through the inner door, carefully locking it behind me, then I lower the outer doors as quietly as possible. I take a long, looping course back towards the Village entrance - one that pretty much assures me of not accidentally running into Gale, or anyone else for that matter - and as I walk, I'm consumed more and more with guilt.

You don't deserve her, a little voice says inside my head. You lurk around basement vents, afraid that you'll catch her saying something contradictory to what she's been telling you for months, only to hear her tell Gale exactly what she's been telling you!

I reach the Village entrance, but, instead of doubling back into the Village, I find myself stumbling under the arch on the road back to town. My thoughts are racing - jumbled - barely coherent. The rain is falling harder now as the wind starts picking up, but I'm increasingly oblivious to the weather.

You're pathetic, the voice says as my head starts to pound. She loves you - she trusts you! Too bad it's all one-sided! Too bad you don't trust her! You don't deserve her - you never did deserve her!

I lurch down the road, only vaguely aware of the rain soaking through my clothes. I clutch my head with my hands, squeezing violently in an attempt to stop the throbbing pain shooting through my skull.

You're right not to trust her! A different voice in my head rings out. I recognize this voice and shake my head violently. "No," I hear myself moan. "No! Go away! Leave me alone!"

Don't trust her - EVER! You know what she is! She's a mutt! A MUTT!

I squeeze my eyes shut at the sudden brightness as the realization of what's happening to me hits home. My fingers fumble at my shirt pocket, finally succeeding in pulling out the flat plastic case. I suddenly stop and sink to my knees in the middle of the road as I succeed in popping the case open. My fingers tremble violently as I clutch one auto injector, the others spilling onto the roadway. I pull the cap off with my teeth and, using both hands, press the injector firmly against my neck. My thumb finds the injector button and I hear the voice scream one last time as I feel the sting of the needle penetrate the side of my neck.

No! NO! NOOO! Not the poison! You're killing me, you pathetic little shit! You're -
And blissful darkness envelopes me.

PART III

I wake with a jerk, my eyes snapping open. I take in unfamiliar surroundings and realize that I'm in a hospital of some sort. I have a splitting headache and the side of my neck hurts. I slowly raise my hand to my neck and can feel a bandage under my fingers.

I feel a tugging at my hand as I move my left arm, and see an IV line going into the back of my hand. I look around for some sort of call button or signal of some sort. I'm just about to call out when a young man, not much older than me and definitely from the Capitol, enters the room. I see he's wearing the loose fitting clothing known as "scrubs."

"Oh!" The young man says in surprise. "You're awake! One moment while I grab a doctor." Before I have a chance to say anything, the young man disappears and I hear him calling out for Galen Wellgood.

I let my head fall back onto the pillow and glance around the room. There are several beds on each side of the room, each one separated by a moveable curtain. In addition to the expected hospital smells - antiseptic, alcohol, and soap - the smell of fresh paint is pervasive. It hits me then that I must be in the new District Twelve clinic.

"Peeta!" Galen says as he enters the room. "You gave us quite a scare, young man! It was pure chance that Lars happened to find you. Can you tell me what happened?"

My brow wrinkles as I search my memory. "I - I'm not sure. I - I was walking and - I'm sorry, I just don't know - why does my neck hurt?" I rub the spot where the bandage covers my neck.

"From your auto injector," Galen explains gently. "It looks like you collapsed as you were giving yourself an injection. The needle snapped off under your skin - we had to do a minor surgical procedure to remove it."

"We?" I ask, still trying to remember what had happened.

"Doctor Nivosus and I," Galen says with a smile. "It was very simple, actually. She's quite skilled, Peeta - I doubt if there will even be a scar."

"Oh," I say, as a floodgate opens up inside my mind as I recall the events of earlier. This one I brought on myself - because of my snooping and eavesdropping. I feel myself shudder slightly, then realize that Galen is speaking to me.

"- to see you," Galen says, looking at me intently, concern in his eyes. "Peeta? Are you listening?"

"Sorry," I mumble. "I'm a little groggy, still."

"Not a problem," Galen says jovially. "As I was saying, there's someone here to see you. Shall I send her in?"

Katniss. Do I want to see her? Do I deserve to see her? Numbly, I nod, as I mutter "Okay."

Galen frowns, looking like he's about to say something, then turns on his heel and strides out of the room. I turn my head on the pillow, staring numbly at the far wall. How can I even face her when I don't even trust her. Damn Gale for even being here! Damn Paylor for assigning him to that stupid investigation! Damn Haymitch for his stupid theory anyway! I feel my fists clench in anger and I don't even hear the soft footsteps.
"Hey." Her soft voice startles me and I visibly jerk. I turn my head and see Katniss standing quietly, concern written all over her face as she examines me intently.

"Hey," I reply, my voice almost a whisper. I force my hands to relax.

"Did I scare you?" She asks almost timidly.

"No," I lie. "I just didn't hear you." At least that part was true.

Katniss quietly walks towards my bed and sits lightly on the side. Her hand gently brushes the hair off my forehead as she gives me a small smile. The smile turns into a frown as her fingers trail down to the bandage.

"Galen told me that the needle broke off in your neck," she says, concern tingling her voice.

"Yeah," I reply. "Must have happened when I fell. Good thing it's not very long, huh?" I try to say this last lightly but, from her unchanged expression, I don't think I succeed.

"What happened, Peeta?" Katniss asks suddenly. "What brought this one on?"

I shrug my shoulders. "I don't know," I lie again. "I was walking back from seeing Doctor Crawford and it - just happened."

"It's never 'just happened' before," she says concernedly. I can tell that I'm not being very convincing. "Are you sure nothing happened?"

"I said I don't know!" I snap, and I'm immediately sorry as Katniss recoils slightly. "Oh, shit. I'm sorry, love. I didn't mean to say it like that." My hand searches for hers as her face turns expressionless. For a moment her hand is stiff, and unyielding, then she gradually relaxes as her fingers slowly twine with mine. I look up into her face and see her eyes soften as her smile slowly returns.

"It's alright, Dandelion," she whispers softly, then leans down to gently kiss me. My hand tightens on hers as our lips press together. Katniss then straightens up and again brushes the hair off of my forehead.

"I know how hard it is to deal with this," she says. "But Galen says that the new doctor has brought along a new treatment that she helped develop. Galen's really excited about it."

"That sounds great," I say with a smile. "I'll try anything."

"I wanted to bring you some sativa but Galen and Doctor Nivosus both said no," Katniss says. "Galen said that they'll be giving you the new drug tonight for the first time and they want to see the effects without any outside influence."

"That's right," Galen says from the door, then walks in, Doctor Nivosus close behind. "In fact, we'd like to try the first dosage now."

"Hello again, Peeta," Doctor Nivosus says with a smile. "And, good to see you again, Katniss."

"Hello, Doctor," Katniss and I say in near unison.

"Please, I've already told you to call me Drusilla," she says, holding up a syringe. "I'm going to connect this to your existing IV line, Peeta," she explains. "When it's done, we'll discharge you back home. No need to keep you here any longer than necessary."
I glance at Galen. He's earned my implicit trust. Galen smiles at me reassuringly.

"I've already checked this new serum out," Galen explains. "It's similar to the injections that I give you, and to the auto injectors, but with a few improvements. This shows real hope of eliminating the tracker jacker toxins once and for all."

"And, you won't need nightly injections," Drusilla adds. "Three times a week at most. We'll adjust as needed later on in your treatments." She quickly hangs the syringe next to the IV bag and hooks the needle to the tube. "May I proceed?"

I hesitate for an instant. That vaguely uneasy feeling was back. Still, I shake it off and slowly nod my head up and down.

"Wonderful," Drusilla grins as she pushes the plunger down on the syringe until the contents have been emptied into the IV tube. Seconds later, I feel an uncomfortable cold sensation as the medication flows down the tube and into my hand.

"It's cold," I say.

"That's an expected temporary side effect," Galen explains. "Not to worry, Peeta."

"And he can go home now?" Katniss asks.

"In thirty minutes," Drusilla replies. "We want to see if he has any unexpected reactions to the medication before we discharge him. After all, we want to take care of you both - you've both become somewhat iconic in Panem these last couple of years, after all."

"I suppose," Katniss says. I know how she hates it when someone uses the words "hero," "inspiration," or "icon" when describing her...or me as well.

"Okay," Galen says, as he and Drusilla turn to leave, "He can leave in thirty minutes - not one minute before. Delly's working up front - I'll have her prepare his discharge."

"Thanks, Galen...and Drusilla," I say as the two doctors leave.

"How do you feel now?" Katniss asks, examining my face closely.

"Better," I say with a smile. "That new drug - I don't completely understand all what's in it, but I feel better than I've felt all day."

In reply, Katniss leans down and kisses me again, softly and lovingly. "I'm going to say hi to Delly. And maybe speed her along a bit," she adds with a grin. "I love you, Peeta."

"I love you, Katniss," I reply with a smile as I watch her leave the room. Yes, I feel much better now.

PART IV

"How was the trip?" I ask Haymitch as he steps off the train and onto the platform.

"Well, the players may have changed, but the bureaucracy is alive and well," he grumbles. "That being said, it was probably the best Capitol trip I've ever had - at least this time, no one died!"

I chuckle as we enter the station. I've gone to meet the train alone. Katniss and Rory are busy hunting up fresh game to feed our guests. Beetee and Gale begged off, wanting to be able to present their briefing to Haymitch as soon as he returned home. The train that carried the
delegation from the Capitol back to Twelve was scheduled to depart later on today and they need to be on it.

"Sounds like a productive trip," I say.

"Oh, yes." Haymitch says as we stand and wait at the baggage claim area. Out of the corner of my eye I catch Adolphus Fox and his erstwhile assistant, Tacitus Cochrane, gathering up the Clan delegates, with Thom and Leevy's help. Thom and Leevy both wave cheerily at me then go back to the task of helping collect up everyone's baggage.

"So, I understand there was a bit of excitement here the other day?" Haymitch says with an eyebrow raised at me.

"Just a hijacking seizure," I say lightly. "Nothing worth mentioning."

"That's not what Galen said," Haymitch replies, eyeing me closely. "We generally don't find you unconscious in the middle of the road, with a needle broken off in your neck."

Damn Galen anyway! "It sounds worse than it was, Haymitch - really," I say lamely.

"Hmmph," Haymitch says as his bag comes down the luggage chute. "Make yourself useful, kid, and grab my bag, would ya?" Shaking my head and smiling, I grab Haymitch's bag, grunting a little as I pick it up.

"I thought you packed a lot lighter than this," I say, walking awkwardly alongside Haymitch.

"I did for the trip, kid," he says with a wink, "And be careful with that bag! I've got a dozen bottles of the Capitol's finest hooch in there!"

"I should have guessed," I mutter as we exit the terminal. A line of cars and busses is outside waiting for us. Haymitch examines the fleet of vehicles with interest.

"Which one? Or does it matter?" He asks. I point to the third car in the row. Haymitch nods and heads off for the car, with me dragging his suitcase behind. The driver carefully puts the suitcase in the truck as Haymitch and I climb into the back seat.

"This is for Thom and Delly also," I explain. "So, from the news reports, it looks like the Clan delegates enjoyed the Capitol," I add.

"That's an understatement if I ever heard one," Haymitch says, settling into the seat and pulling a small flask from his coat pocket, taking a quick drink before putting it back. "Kid, they were the toast of the town. Everybody loved them! And some media hack noticed the resemblance between Mimi - that's Elder Mimas to you, kid - and old Mags from District Four. So they talked her in to submitting to a DNA test. Turns out that Mimi and Mags have a common ancestor - oh, about three hundred or so years ago."

"I bet that caused a stir," I reply, wincing as I feel the onset of a headache.

"Oh, yeah," Haymitch says. "Mimi was especially impressed with Mags. Said it was only natural that two such 'strong women' would end up distant relatives."

I laugh while massaging my forehead. Haymitch falls silent. When I look up he's examining me closely.

"You okay, kid?" He asks.
"Yeah," I reply. "I'm on new medication for the hijacking seizures. I've had a couple of doses already. Drusilla and Galen say that headaches are one of the possible side effects."

"Drusilla?" Haymitch asks, cocking an eyebrow at me.


"Ah," Haymitch says. "Galen told me that the clinic is up and running but didn't bother to make introductions."

"I'm sure he will later on," I say, then turn as the car doors open and Thom, accompanied by Leevy, crawls in.

"Hey, guys," I say warmly. "Have a nice trip?"

"Oh, now you've done it," Thom says wearily as Leevy begins to excitedly describe their trip to me in minute detail. She's still talking twenty minutes later as our little convoy leaves the train station for Victor's Village.

"Well, Plutarch was right," Haymitch says, as he, Katniss and I watch the car bearing Gale and Beetee drive down the street towards the Village entrance.

"About what?" Katniss asks.

"That I was not going to find their report satisfactory," Haymitch grumbles. "We have rock solid conjecture, iron clad innuendo, a whole bunch of suspicious circumstances, and a bunch of dead people that can't answer questions any more."

"The one pilot is still missing," I say. "When he turns up maybe we'll get answers then."

"Kid, I doubt he'll be found alive," Haymitch says. "But hey, we can always hope, right? I need to take a nap before dinner. Don't let me oversleep, okay?" Haymitch turns to go, then stops and turns back. "Oh, and Sweetheart?"

Katniss stiffens at Haymitch's pet name for her. "Yes, Haymitch?" she replies coldly.

Haymitch surprises both Katniss and I by stepping forward and giving her a hug. "Thanks for taking care of my birds for me." He then quickly lets her go and disappears into his house without another word.

"I'll never understand that man," Katniss says, shaking her head - but I notice that she's smiling.

"Come on," she suddenly says. "You've got some baking to do and we have to finish getting everything ready for dinner tonight. Lots of people to feed, after all."

I follow Katniss back into the house. She's right. Haymitch might be able to nap - but we've got a dinner to put together - with Sae's help, of course.

"I'm gonna miss them when they fly out tomorrow," Katniss says, snuggling up to me in bed later on that night.

"They won't be gone long," I reply, kissing her forehead. "They're going to start relocation immediately after they return to their Clans. They have a lot of people and property to move before the end of summer."
"It'll be nice, having all those new neighbors," Katniss says, then, "Peeta? Maybe things will calm down for us now. Maybe we can get on with our lives."

"I hope so, love," I say, pulling her closer to me. Deep inside me I still carry guilt from that day I eavesdropped on her conversation with Gale. But, the new medication seems to have an almost *sativa*-like calming influence on me. I don't feel nearly as bad as I did a few days ago. Suddenly I get a stabbing pain between my eyes that's quickly becoming familiar.

I grunt a little and massage my head with my free hand, causing Katniss to raise up on one elbow and look at me intently.

"Another headache?" she asks.

"Yeah," I reply. "Shit!"

"I'm surprised at you, Peeta Mellark," Katniss gently teases, "Having a headache is supposed to be *my* line."

In response, I lean over and kiss her deeply. "It'll have to get a lot worse than this before it comes between you and I," I say, kissing her again. Katniss responds eagerly, and soon I discover, with her help, another headache treatment - this one remarkably effective.

Afterwards, I hold Katniss close, listening to her deep, even breathing. My own eyes are getting heavy, and as I feel myself drifting off to sleep, a thought crosses my mind.

*I think that things are starting to actually get better.*

I find out later on that night how wrong I am.
"Peeta Mellark!"

I stand as if frozen, blinking in the bright early summer sunshine. Did I just hear correctly? Did Effie Trinket really just call my name? All around me the other sixteen year old boys part as if by magic as I slowly start to shuffle forward, my heart threatening to pound its way out of my chest.

Peacekeepers immediately close in around me to escort me to the stage. I walk forward, holding my head up and trying not to let the absolute terror that I feel inside creep out. On the stage I see Effie standing at the top of the stairs, patiently waiting for me to ascend to the stage - and Katniss Everdeen, who had just volunteered for her sister, standing to one side, staring straight out at the crowd, looking slim, and brave, and oh, so beautiful.

Woodenly I walk up the stairs to the stage to a waiting Effie Trinket, hearing her gush over me but not paying her any attention, still trying to digest that I had just heard her condemn me to die. Now she's pushing Katniss and I together, telling us to shake hands.

Katniss. If there was any good in getting Reaped, it was that I would finally have an excuse to speak to Katniss. I extend my hand to her, feeling her warm fingers close over mine, as I look into her eyes, wearing what I hoped was a reassuring smile. To my surprise I see Katniss's lips turn upwards in a smile of her own, as her hand begins to tighten on mine.

I gasp suddenly as an excruciating pain shoots through my hand. I glance down to see Katniss's fingernails, now extending out like claws, penetrate the back of my hand. My eyes widen as I see my blood well up in the wounds to drip onto the stage even as I feel the bones in my hand being crushed and broken.

I cry out, trying to wrench my hand from her iron grip, as my eyes travel back to her face. For an instant I'm frozen with fear as I see her eyes suddenly transform into yellow, gleaming orbs, their pupils lengthening into vertical slits. Her smiling mouth opens to reveal two rows of pointed teeth, and she leans forward, dragging my throat towards her gaping mouth.

"NO!" I scream, trying to wrench my hand from her grasp in a futile effort.

"Peeta," she purrs softly, and I gag as her fetid breath washes over my face.

"NO!" I scream again, feeling her claw-like fingers digging deeper into my hand.

"Peeta!" she repeats, her animal teeth grazing my throat.

"NOOO!" I let out a final gurgling scream as I feel her teeth sink deeply into my throat and the warm gush of my blood spurt out over her open mouth.

"PEETA! PEETA!" She's shaking me now as my eyes suddenly snap open.

"NO! NOOO! Get away! GET AWAY!" I scream, my heart pounding in my chest, my breathing ragged, my eyes wide open, staring into absolute darkness.
"Peeta! It's okay!" A light suddenly flicks on and I squint at the sudden brightness. I realize that I'm in bed somehow and someone is next to me. My head whips around and I see Katniss, propped up on one elbow, staring at me, concern on her face - when suddenly, her face changes, becoming the feral creature that I saw in the darkness.

"No! Get away!" I scream again, pushing myself backward violently, tumbling out of bed and hitting the floor with a thud. I fight to catch my breath as Katniss scrambles out of bed after me, murmuring, "It's okay, Peeta, it's a bad dream. Not real, Peeta, not real! It's okay, I'm here."

I blink rapidly, clearing the horrid vision in my head as I sit stupidly on the floor. Katniss is on the floor also - but keeping her distance. Slowly, mutt-Katniss starts to fade as the real Katniss - the girl I love so deeply - emerges. It's then that we are both aware of a knocking on the bedroom door.

"Katniss? Peeta?" Nova's voice comes through the door. We can both hear the concern in her tone. "Is everything alright? We heard screaming."

"Everything's fine, Nova," Katniss calls out. "It was just - a bad dream. We're okay." But even as she speaks, Katniss keeps a wary eye on me the whole time.

"Do you need anything?" A new voice - Mikel - asks. This time, I answer.

"No, Mikel," I reply, hoping that my voice doesn't sound as shaky as I feel. "We're good. Sorry for waking you. Go back to bed."

Katniss and I hear Nova and Mikel have a short, muffled conversation, followed by the sound of their bedroom door closing. I sag wearily against the side of the bed.

"It was a bad one," Katniss says softly. It's not a question. It's a statement.

"Yeah," I answer shakily. I pull myself to my feet and fumble around for my shorts and a shirt. "I think I'll stay up for a while. Don't want to go back to sleep just yet."

Katniss nods in understanding. "Do you want me to stay up with you? Maybe make some tea?"

"No!" I snap, then I'm immediately sorry as Katniss recoils almost imperceptibly from my tone. "I mean, no, love. No sense in both of us losing sleep. I won't be up long, don't worry."

"Fine." Katniss replies in a flat tone as she crawls back into bed. I turn toward the door, then back toward her, only to see her laying with her back to the door - and to me. Silently I slip through the door and pad downstairs, only turning on lights once I'm downstairs.

I turn on one small light in the living room and sit on the couch in silence, willing myself tired enough to go back to bed. That one was not just a bad one, I say to myself, it was the worst one that I've had since coming back to Twelve.

I've dreamt of Katniss before, but, like I had told her long ago, most of my nightmares were about losing her, and I was fine once I woke up. This one was more like the waking nightmares that I would get while a prisoner of the Capitol - with the hijacking venom coursing through my veins and a taunting voice implanting one false memory after another in my brain.

I'm still brooding on this when another figure enters the living room. I look up to see Katniss pad into the room, a robe wrapped tightly around her. Wordlessly she sits beside me on the couch, causing me to tremble slightly, and puts a loaded pipe to her lips. She strikes a match, puffing on the pipe until it's lit, inhales carefully, then passes me the pipe.
We sit, passing the sativa pipe back and forth until the herb is completely consumed. Katniss carefully lays the pipe in a bowl on a table, then leans back on the couch.

"I know how hard it was to go through what - you went through," she says in a soft voice, "so that's why I can never stay mad at you for long - even when you yell at me." She slides closer to me and cuddles up next to me. I can feel the sativa working its calming effects on me as I welcome Katniss's nearness. I slide my hand around her slender shoulders and pull her closer.

"Just remember that I love you and I'm here to help you," she whispers. In response I kiss her gently and stroke her face. I lay back on the couch, pulling her with me, as I pull the blanket hanging on the back of the couch down over us, until it's covering us both.

"Katniss?" I say.

"Hmmm?" Is her sleepy response.

"Stay with me," I say softly.

"Always," she whispers, just before her lips find mine again.

**PART II**

Katniss and I wave as the hoverplane lifts slowly off the ground, pivots gracefully in mid-air, and begins to climb into the morning sky. We watch for a few moments as it gets smaller and smaller, then turn to walk back home.

Katniss has other ideas. "Uh uh," she says, "We're swinging by the clinic first."

"Katniss, I swear I feel fine," I protest as her hand closes firmly over mine. She shoots me a stern look.

"Peeta Mellark, I don't want to hear any arguments from you!" I sigh and follow her meekly - I know better when she uses that tone. Arguing would be a waste of breath.

We reach the new clinic quickly. Katniss smiles demurely at me as I open the door with a flourish, bowing slightly as I hold it for her. I follow her into the waiting room, the door swinging shut behind me.

"Katniss! Peeta!" Delly's voice greets us and I see her emerge from behind a glass-enclosed reception booth. We quickly exchange hugs with our friend as she talks excitedly about living in town again and being reunited with her grandparents and brother.

"Did you hear? They're building a new school!" Katniss and I nod - we had heard about the school construction a few days before.

"I understand that Twill will be teaching there," Katniss says. "At least, once the Clans get settled in."

"Oh, that's so exciting, don't you think?" Delly say enthusiastically. "When do you think they'll start moving in?"

"I think we can expect to see the first people from the River Clan arrive in less than a week," I say.

"Indeed we can!" Galen Wellgood booms out as he enters the waiting room. "It means another round of inoculations for everyone - won't do if everyone's bedridden once our new neighbors
"Galen," I say warmly, grasping his hand.

"Peeta," Galen says, smiling, before turning to Katniss. "And the lovely Miss Everdeen!"

Katniss blushes a bit at the compliment, but still gives Galen a quick kiss on his bearded cheek. "Hello, Galen," she says with a smile.

"So, what brings you in today?" Galen asks.

"It's Peeta," Katniss says, before I have a chance to open my mouth. "He had a dream last night. A bad one."

Galen frowns at this news. "How bad?" he asks.

"It was - it was the worst I've had since - coming home," I admit.

Galen looks thoughtful for a moment. "Come on back, you two," he says, then turns to Delly. "Do I have any appointments in the next hour or so?"

"Nothing until this afternoon, Doctor," Delly replies professionally.

"Fine, fine," Galen says, holding the door open for us. "After you."

"Hmmm," Galen mutters, staring intently at the computer screen.

"What?" I ask anxiously. For the last hour or so I've been poked, prodded, had blood drawn, even gave a urine sample. Now Katniss and I are sitting in Galen's new office while he examines the results.

"Oh! Sorry!" Galen says, turning back toward us. "This new automated lab is really wonderful! If only I had something like this a couple of years ago during the Typhoid epidemic - the time it would have saved!"

"So what did you find out?" Katniss asks impatiently.

"First of all, the tracker jacker venom has all but disappeared from your bloodstream," Galen says. "However - the residual neurological effects will be with you for life, I'm afraid."

"I think we sort of already knew that," I say. "What can you tell me about the headaches I've been having - and that horrible nightmare last night?"

"I believe the new medication that you've been taking under Doctor Nivosus is the culprit behind your headaches, Peeta. I've examined the drug that she developed quite carefully - I am somewhat partial to what goes into my patients, after all - and I've identified two primary active ingredients - Corticosteroids and Tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC." Galen frowns slightly as he scrolls down his computer screen. "THC is the active ingredient in *sativa*, so your feeling of well-being following an injection is understandable. The Corticosteroid, however - one of the documented side effects in a small number of patients is a severe headache. Corticosteroids have had some success in treating brain trauma, though - and your brain certainly has been traumatized."

"Is there anything that can be done?" Katniss asks.

"About the headaches? I can prescribe Sumatriptan, either by nasal inhaler or auto injector - that
would probably knock out your headache as soon as the drug is ingested.” Galen looks thoughtful for a moment. "But, I'm afraid that as long as you are taking the new drug your headaches will probably persist. The good news is that your new medication is not a lifetime commitment. Drusilla tells me that a few weeks at the most should do the trick."

"What about the nightmares?" I ask. "Last night's seemed to continue even after I was awake!"

"Waking nightmares are actually hallucinations, and I think I know the culprit behind yours." Galen says confidently. "Me."

"You?" Katniss and I say in unison.

"More specifically, the drug that I developed to combat your hijacking seizures," Galen explains, "uses a very small dose of morphling, as do your auto injectors. It seems that you are part of a small percentage of people that accumulate morphling concentrations in your tissues. A common side effect of prolonged morphling use are morphling hallucinations. I didn't think the very small dose that I was giving to you would be a problem, but I see from your labs a much higher concentration of morphling in your blood than I would have anticipated."

"And this new medication doesn't use any morphling?" Katniss asks.

"No," Galen replies. "So these dreams should subside in fairly short order." He turns away and taps on the computer keyboard. "I've just entered your prescription for Sumatriptan - we'll try the nasal inhaler first - and let's see how that works out. Delly will have your inhaler ready for you up front when you go."


"My pleasure, Peeta," Galen says with a smile. Just then a soft knock at the door interrupted whatever Galen was going to say next.

"I'm sorry, Galen - I didn't know you were with a - oh!" Drusilla Nivosus sticks her head through the partially opened door. "Katniss and Peeta! I do hope everything is all right!"

"It seems that Peeta's been having some difficulties," Galen says, quickly explaining my hallucinations to our new doctor.

"Hmmm." Drusilla looks thoughtful. "I think you're spot-on, Galen. Morphling hallucinations due to an accumulation of the drug in Peeta's tissues. And, as you've never been exposed to morphling before, of course you would never have had to deal with the effects of prolonged exposure, and -"

"But I have," I interrupt.

"'You have,' what?" Drusilla says, obviously irritated at my interruption.

"Had morphling before," I say, "For - my leg. Afterwards." Drusilla did mention at our first meeting that she had been one of my doctors after my first Games - where I lost my leg. How come she didn't know I was on morphling then?

"Oh! Of course you were!" Drusilla says with a smile. "Please forgive me. I wasn't involved with your pain management. My concerns were combating infection and ensuring that your body didn't reject your prosthetic implant."

"I see." I say, trying to remember her in the hospital - and failing. Still, I had a lot of doctors and nurses working on me - more than I could possibly remember - and I was pretty heavily drugged at
"And on that note, Peeta, I would like to give you your next treatment," Drusilla says. "It will only take a moment."

I glance at Galen, who smiles encouragingly. "It's quite alright, Peeta," he says. Standing up, I shrug my shoulders.

"Okay," I reply.

"Follow me," Drusilla says, opening the door and holding it open. "You too, Katniss. I want you to be able to see the procedure."

Katniss stands up - reluctantly, it seems to me - and together we follow Drusilla into her examination room.

That evening, I invite Haymitch over after dinner for a game of chess. It had been a while since we've played. Surprisingly, I beat him in our first game, although it was a hard-fought battle. Haymitch simply grunts as he carefully examines the board, then reluctantly concedes.

"Set 'em up again, kid," he grumbles as he fumbles with his hip flask, unscrewing the top for a quick drink.

I chuckle softly, enjoying my victory - Haymitch is not an easy man to beat - and busy myself with setting the board up again when a sudden, blinding pain - like someone driving a nail into my forehead - causes me to gasp audibly and jerk so forcefully that I knock the board, and all the pieces, off the table.

"Peeta?" Haymitch's voice seems to come from far away. "Kid? You okay?" In response I squeeze my eyes shut and gasp again, clenching my hands into fists.

"Sweetheart?" Haymitch calls out, almost conversationally, "Got a minute?"

Katniss steps out of the kitchen, where she had been brewing tea. "What's the problem, Haymitch?" she asks, then stops dead, staring at me.

"Peeta? Is it bad?" she asks, concern in her voice - and I am suddenly irritated by the stupidity of the question!

"No - it feels wonderful!" I hear myself snap back, sarcastically. Is this really me talking like that? "Where's that inhaler?" I ask sharply, squeezing my head between my hands to try to ease the pain.

"I - I thought you had it," Katniss stammers.

"Why would I ask for it if I had it?" I say furiously, getting more and more irritated by the second. Calm down, Mellark - don't take it out on her. It's not her fault! And for all that, I still hear my voice bark out, "Are you that stupid? Now find my FUCKING inhaler!"

What am I doing? This isn't me talking! It's...it's...I don't know this person! I squeeze my eyes tightly shut and moan softly.

"Is this it?" I hear Haymitch ask, and immediately hear Katniss make a relieved sound. "Yes, thanks Haymitch," I hear her say as she presses the inhaler into my hand.
"Found it, Peeta," she says, relief in her voice.

"You have a real talent for stating the obvious!" I shoot back nastily. I quickly insert the tube into my nose and squeeze the bottle, while inhaling deeply. The medication has an immediate effect and I feel my headache start to disappear almost instantly.

"Ahhh," I sigh, leaning back in my chair. MUCH better. As the pain fades away, I can feel something else leaving me...the stranger that was so cruel to Katniss just moments before. I keep my eyes shut, fighting to recall what had just occurred, but it all seems so surreal - more like a nightmare than something that had just really happened.

After a moment I open my eyes, only to see Katniss and Haymitch both staring at me with shocked expressions.

"What?" I ask, looking from one to the other in confusion. I can't understand why they're both staring at me like that. What had just happened feels more like a bad dream than anything real.

"Nothing." Katniss says coldly as she turns and stomps out of the room. I look at Haymitch, hoping he can shed some light on Katniss's strange behavior.

"Haymitch, what -"

"Stow it, kid," Haymitch snaps. "It's getting late. I should be going." Haymitch stands up, a little unsteadily. "Goodnight, kid." Haymitch opens the front door and starts to walk down the walkway toward the street, when Katniss suddenly pushes past me on out the door, running after Haymitch.

I move to follow Katniss but she freezes me into place with a single icy glare.

Katniss catches up to him on the street and I can see them talking urgently to one another, every now and then glancing back toward the house. Finally, confused, I step outside.

"What's going on?" I ask loudly.

"Nothing, Peeta," Katniss replies curtly. "I - I just had to ask Haymitch something." She turns to Haymitch. "Thanks, Haymitch. See you tomorrow."

"Anytime, Sweetheart," Haymitch says agreeably. "'Night. G'night, Peeta." Haymitch turns and lurches his way next door to his house. Katniss and I both watch him, then Katniss turns, and, without another word, brushes past me into the house.

I quickly follow her, seeing that she's really upset about something. "Katniss," I say. "Katniss!" Katniss stops dead, spins, and glares at me.

"What?" she snaps.

"Would you -" I begin, searching her face and seeing anger flash in her eyes. "Will you please tell me what's wrong?"

"As if you don't know!" she says, practically spitting each word.

"Katniss," I say, reaching for her and seeing her recoil away from me. "No, I don't know. Right now I don't know what's real - or not real. All I remember is that sudden awful headache. Please. What's wrong?"

Katniss searches my face for a moment and her expression softens a bit, then changes to worry.
"You really don't know, do you?" she asks softly.

I shake my head. "It feels like a dream. Did I really say the - awful things that I think I may have said to you?" I ask miserably.

Tentatively, Katniss steps to my side, gently taking my arm. "Come on," she says, "You need to sit down." She guides me to a comfortable chair in the living room and sits me down, then turns to leave.

"Where are you going?" I ask plaintively.

"Just sit tight," she says, "I'm just gonna grab the phone. Be right back." Katniss disappears down the hall, but soon reappears carrying her phone. She perches on the edge of the chair that I'm sitting in and quickly dials a number.

"Galen? Hi, it's Katniss," she says. Why is she calling Galen? "I know it's late, but could you possibly come out to the Village?" Katniss pauses, listening intently. "Galen, please - it's about Peeta." I glance sharply at Katniss. It's about me? "I'll explain when you get here. It - it's important. Thanks, Galen - see you in a little bit." She pushes the "End Call" button and sets the phone down on a table.

"It was real, wasn't it?" I ask. "The things I said." I stare at Katniss, feeling totally miserable. I lean my head back, unmindful of the tears that I feel welling up in my eyes, not caring as they leave twin tracks down my face.

"Everything's gonna be okay," Katniss says with a small smile. "I promise."

I wish I felt the same way.

PART III

"You don't remember saying any of those things, Peeta?" Galen asks. He obviously had dressed quickly. I feel awful for being the cause of his being dragged out here tonight.

"No," I whisper. "At least, not like a true memory. It's more like a nightmare while I was still awake."

"Could that build up of morphling in his system have something to do with it?" Katniss asks.

"Honestly, I just don't know," Galen replies. "I'd like to try something. You're to take no more of the special medication that Doctor Nivosus has put you on. I'm also taking your auto injectors. You don't need anything with even trace amounts of morphling right now."

"How about sativa?" Katniss asks.

Galen nods thoughtfully. "It does have a definite calming effect," he replies, "But I would like for you to try different ways of ingesting it - tea, for example. We're looking for an effect that will produce a muted calm - something that will allow you to function normally but still keep you relaxed."

"Tea," Katniss says, smiling. "Nova gave me a recipe for sativa tea." She stands up suddenly. "I think I'll try it now. Excuse me - I'll be right back!"

Galen and I watch Katniss as she grabs up the bag of sativa that Nova had left us and disappears into the kitchen. Galen turns to me with a smile.
"You're a lucky young man, Peeta," he says. "That girl is unique. And totally devoted to you."

"She is one of a kind," I agree, "But I'm the lucky one here. Galen, what's wrong with me?"

"I wish I knew more about psychiatry," Galen replies. "Doctor Aurelius could probably nail a
diagnosis in about ten minutes. But, with my imperfect knowledge, I would say it's a combination
of morphling build-up, new medication, and stress. You really haven't been allowed to heal, Peeta -
you've made tremendous progress, to be sure, but you've also had to deal with repeated mental
trauma - discovering the truth about your Reaping, for example, or meeting the Clans, and the
latest one - the theory that Twelve was bombed by someone other than the Capitol."

"So your prescription is a stress-free life?" I ask with a small smile.

"As much as possible," Galen replies, "Which will be pretty much impossible, what with the Clans
starting their move into Twelve. Peeta, I'm just a simple country doctor - my reaction when a
treatment isn't working is to stop that treatment, plain and simple. Drusilla's new medication is not
having the desired effect on you, and my medication contains morphling - so we discontinue both
and try something different."

"I doubt if that's gonna make Drusilla very happy," I say.

"She's a physician, Peeta - what makes us happy is when our patients respond to treatment," Galen
says with a smile. "And, to put your - misgivings - to rest, I did some digging. Drusilla Nivosus is
exactly who she claims to be - a respected internal medicine specialist and skilled general surgeon.
I found nothing in her background to indicate otherwise."

I say nothing, aside from a thoughtful nod. Absently I rub the spot on my neck where the auto
injector needle had broken off. Galen had been right - I couldn't even see the tiniest of scars.
Drusilla certainly was an artist among surgeons.

*I've brought all this on myself. If only I hadn't eavesdropped on Katniss and Gale talking. That's
when all this started.* I debate whether or not to tell Galen about my eavesdropping, but before I can
say anything Katniss returns with three cups.

"Don't worry, Galen," she says with a smile, "You and I get regular tea." She hands him a cup and
then carefully hands me a cup as well, then takes the last one for herself and sits down next to me
on the couch.

"Tell me what you think," she says anxiously.

I cautiously take a small sip. Not bad - not what I'm used to, to be sure - but still, not bad at all. I
take a slightly larger sip then carefully put the cup on the table.

"Not bad," I say to Katniss, seeing relief wash over her face. "Different, but not bad."

"The sativa should have a nice, calming effect," Galen says carefully, taking a sip of his tea as
well.

We sit for a few moments, sipping our tea while Galen talks about different treatment options.
"The problem with morphling is that it's a synthetic opiate - a class of pain killing drugs that, at one
time, were made from a flowering plant called an opium poppy. Morphling, of course, is synthetic -
it reproduces the analgesic effects of its plant-based ancestors, but it's produced in a factory - much
like the new factory that we will soon have here in Twelve."

"So what do we use as a substitute?" Katniss asks. "Wasn't morphling used originally to treat
"Peeta's hijacking?"

"Indeed it was," Galen replies. "In fact, your sister was the one that first broached the idea of morphling used in combination with soothing images."

Katniss falls quiet at the mention of Prim. I reach over and grasp her hand, squeezing gently, and feel her answering squeeze.

"Drusilla's treatment, as I told you earlier today, has THC - the active ingredient in *sativa* - as one of its components." Galen continues. "I would like to try using an altered form of her medication - one without the Corticosteroids - to see if just small doses of THC by themselves would be effective."

"I'm willing to try it," I say.

"It will take some time to develop," Galen says. "We don't have the facilities here to refine the THC out of the drug that Drusilla brought with her, and we need to experiment a bit with the correct THC dosage - which means that the Health Ministry will have to provide intravenous THC in several different dosages."

"Couldn't you just inject him with however much you need to?" Katniss asks.

"I'm thinking more in terms of pre-loaded auto injectors, Katniss," Galen replies. "Ones to replace the morphling-based injectors I had originally supplied him with."

"I see," Katniss says softly.

"In the meantime," Galen says, standing up, "Continue using your stock of *sativa* that Nova so thoughtfully left for you. And, I'll want to see you tomorrow, Peeta - I would like to run a more thorough battery of tests on you. It will help our case with the Health Ministry if I can be as specific as possible when I tell them what we need."

Katniss and I stand up to walk Galen to the door. "What time?" I ask as we head to the door.

"Is ten too early?" Galen asks.

"Not at all," I reply, opening the door for our friend. "I'll see you at ten."

"We'll see you at ten," Katniss says firmly, shooting me a stern look. "And thank you so much for coming tonight, Galen." She quickly hugs him and kisses his cheek. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, you two." Galen replies with a smile. "See you in the morning!"

I shut the door and turn back toward Katniss, who was standing there holding the three empty teacups.

"Would you like some more?" she asks. In response I slip my arms around her - awkwardly, because of the cups - and kiss her lightly.

"No," I reply. "I'm good. I'm also very, very sorry." I brush a few strands of hair from her eyes as I look at her face.

"You've nothing to apologize for, Dandelion," Katniss says softly. "I admit - your words hurt. And I was angry and upset for a moment or two. I just have to keep reminding myself that it's not you that says those things."
"I hate that part of me," I say, my voice thick with emotion.

"I know. Me too." Katniss says. "And together, we'll push him far away. Now, let me go so I can get these cups washed." Reluctantly I let her go, but follow her into the kitchen. Standing behind her, my arms slip around her waist as soon as she deposits the cups in the sink. I lean forward and start kissing the side of her neck.

"Peeta...mmmm," Katniss says, squirming a bit. "I can't - I can't wash these...mmmm...if you keep doing that."

"I'll wash them in the morning," I whisper into her ear. "Now leave them - or do I have to carry you upstairs?"

In response, Katniss sets the cups down and turns in my arms, her own arms twining around my neck as she kisses me hungrily.

"Carry me anyway," she whispers when our lips part. I bend slightly and easily scoop up her light frame, feeling her settle into my arms as I walk out of the kitchen and toward the stairs.

"Don't drop me," she whispers as I begin to climb the stairs.

"I'll go slow," I reply, kissing her deeply once more as I take each step carefully.

And I don't drop her.

**PART IV**

Katniss and I lay sleeping, our arms and legs tangled with one another. It was really too cool at night to sleep naked, but neither of us wanted to put any clothes on afterwards. We content ourselves with sharing each others' considerable body heat.

Katniss had awakened an hour or so ago, thrashing slightly and moaning from a nightmare. I had simply gathered her in my arms and held her, murmuring softly to her and stroking her back and hair until she quieted again. She kissed me gently, murmured her thanks, and quickly went back to sleep.

As I start to drift off to sleep I feel the bed give slightly and see Buttercup curling up at the foot of the bed, barely illuminated by the dim light filtering in from outside. I sigh quietly and lay my head back on the pillow. I close my eyes and wait for sleep to reclaim me, feeling my body relaxing and my breathing become deep and even.

*Oh, Peee-ee-taa.*

My eyes snap open and I feel my heart race. "Katniss?" I say in a trembling voice.

*Ohh, Peee-ee-taa. Don't tell me you've forgotten about me already? And after all the wonderful times we had together!*

At the foot of the bed I hear Buttercup suddenly hiss loudly and leap off the bed. I look at Katniss, still sleeping quietly next to me. "Katniss? Is that you? Please tell me it's you..." I hear myself pleading but I know that it's not Katniss talking to me.

*Ohh, you stupid boy. Of COURSE it's not Kat-spit talking to you. It's ME! And I think you know EXACTLY who I am, don't you?*
"Yes," I whimper, as fear grips me completely. I feel my heart pounding its way out of my chest and a sob escapes my lips as I feel my bladder suddenly empty onto the bed. "Go away. Leave me alone. Please!"

"Peeta?" Katniss mumbles as she sits up. "What's wrong? Who are you - oh, no! Peeta! What's wrong?" Katniss fumbles for the light as the room is suddenly illuminated.

"Make her go away, Katniss!" I beg. "PLEASE!"

Oh, is little Kat-shit awake too, Peeee-ta? You can beg all you want, darling...but I'm back...and this time I'm not leaving until you FINISH THE JOB!

"No! NO! NOOO!" I hear myself scream.

"Peeta! I'm right here! Who are you talking to? Make who go away?" I feel Katniss slide her arms around me as I begin to sob.

"She's back. She's here." I choke out.

"Who, Peeta?" Katniss says as she clings to me.

"The woman - in the Capitol," I gasp out. "The one that - hijacked me. My Interrogator!"

"Peeta," Katniss says quietly, "There's no one else here. We're all alone."

I'm so glad you remember me, Peeee-ta. We're going to have LOTS of fun together!

I'm sure Haymitch could hear my screams perfectly.
"Well?" Katniss asks, fixing Galen with her steady gaze. Galen grunts in response, his attention fixed on the screen of the medical computer. I'm laying on my back on an examination table, a helmet-like contraption strapped to my head. Galen calls it a portable cranial scanner. Galen studies the screen for a moment more, then looks up.

"It's negative," he announces.

"There has to be something!" Katniss exclaims. "Galen, last night Peeta was hearing voices! And you're telling me that nothing's wrong?"

"I didn't say that," Galen replies. "What I am saying is that this scan is virtually identical to previous scans made of Peeta's inter-cranial region - his brain, to be specific. There's no sign of trauma, no deterioration, no tumors, and no new damage."

"Voice," I say suddenly. "Not 'voices.' Just one voice."

"And you say it sounded like the woman you call your Interrogator?" Galen asks.

"It was her, Galen!" I sit up, fumbling with the straps holding the scanner securely to my head.

"Let me," Galen says, stepping quickly to the table and deftly removing the straps, then the scanner. He sets the scanner aside as I swing my legs over the side of the table and sit up.

"I know it was her, Galen," I continue. "I will never forget her voice!"

"And I don't think it's coincidence that all this started only after our new doctor arrived here!" Katniss adds emphatically.

"Peeta...Katniss," Galen says wearily. "I've checked very carefully into Drusilla Nivosus' background. I've found nothing to indicate that she was ever affiliated with the old Security and Intelligence Ministry. I even checked the backgrounds of members of her family as well as other associates - friends and co-workers - and found nothing. She was on staff with Victor's Mercy Hospital for eight years - to the Quarter Quell and even past the Quell, when the Rebellion was in full swing."

"And during the Rebellion?" Katniss asks sharply. "Where was she then?"

"Victor's Mercy was damaged during some of the initial attacks on the Capitol - the Rebels targeted anything Games-related early on - even hospitals." Galen replies. "There was quite a bit of confusion during those times."

"What about the records from the Security and Intelligence Ministry?" I ask.

"I checked on those as well - with help from Haymitch." Galen says with a smile. "Apparently my stature as District Physician wasn't enough to get me the ears of the right people. But Haymitch managed to knock down a few barriers. Even Beetee Latier worked on trying to retrieve those
"And?" Katniss asks impatiently.

"Destroyed - very carefully and methodically." Galen replies seriously. "Once it was apparent that the Rebels were going to win the war, the Ministry destroyed any and all potentially incriminating files. I guess they were trying to avoid Coin's Purges. Not to mention the executions that Snow was performing on a daily basis. Many of those were carried out because the unfortunate victim just happened to know too much."

"Still, don't you think that it's more than just coincidence that Peeta's experiencing voices and hallucinations only after Drusilla Nivosus arrived here?" Katniss says.

"Katniss...Peeta." Galen says gently. "Maybe you should consider that possibility - that it is just a coincidence."

I see Katniss's face cloud over at Galen's statement - she's made up her mind and it would take a miracle to change it now - but before she can respond there's a quick rapping on the door, then the door opens a bit to reveal - Drusilla Nivosus.

"Galen, I -" Drusilla begins, then stops abruptly, looking at Katniss and I. "Oh! Sorry! I didn't know you had patients! Hello, Katniss. Hello, Peeta."

I listen carefully when she speaks, trying in vain to detect even the faintest suggestion of the purring, taunting tone that I heard so clearly in my head the night before - but all I hear is the open, friendly tone of our new doctor.

"Hello, Drusilla," I reply, trying to keep my tone neutral.

"Doctor," Katniss says coldly.

"Come in, Drusilla," Galen says. "Is there something I can help you with?"

Hesitantly, Drusilla steps through the door, shutting it carefully behind her. "I just wanted to go over the inoculation scheduling with you. The first of the Clans will be arriving soon, after all...but if you're busy right now -" 

"Actually, Drusilla, I am a little tied up now, and -" Galen begins.

"What did you do in the Capitol?" Katniss asks suddenly.

"Excuse me?" Drusilla asks, turning toward her. "Katniss," Galen says, an unspoken warning in his tone. Katniss, as usual, ignores him.

"In the Capitol. What did you do there? Where did you work?" Katniss demands.

"I was on staff at Victor's Mercy - why?" Drusilla replies, confusion on her face.

"And after it was destroyed by the Rebels?" Katniss continues, a scowl on her face.

"I helped at various aid stations and refugee centers - why?" Drusilla replies, her voice turning cold.

"Katniss." Galen says, holding his hand up. Something in his tone makes Katniss pause. "Please. This has gone on long enough. Drusilla, I'm afraid that you've become a victim of coincidence."
"I'm afraid I have no idea what you're talking about," Drusilla says in confusion.

Quickly, Galen explains what had been happening to me - including hearing that taunting voice inside my head last night - and our suspicions that Drusilla and my Interrogator were one and the same. While Galen spoke, Drusilla's face changed from concern, to cold indignation, and back to concern again. Finally, after Galen was finished, Drusilla turned toward Katniss and I.

Katniss glared back at her defiantly. I, on the other hand, began to feel doubt.

"So," Drusilla begins, "You both seem to think that I'm this Capitol monster - this 'Interrogator' that was the mastermind behind Peeta's hijacking?" Drusilla directs this last straight at Katniss, who says nothing, but continues to glare.

"Let me show you something," she says, reaching into a pocket and retrieving a wallet. She opens the wallet and pulls out an identification card that had obviously seen a great deal of use. Wordlessly she hands it to me.

I take the card and examine it. Drusilla's picture was clearly imprinted on the front of the card. The Drusilla that stood before us now - not the Interrogator that I remember.

"Do I look anything like the woman that tormented you in the Capitol?" Drusilla asks, almost gently.

"Well," I stammer, "You both have red hair."

Drusilla laughs for the first time since entering the room. "Oh, dear me!" she says, chuckling. "I've been tried and convicted because of my hair color? Peeta, this shade has been one of the most popular colors for over two years! Ever since Katniss and you made such a splash at the Tribute Parade. Remember?"

How well I remember - Katniss was "The Girl on Fire" at that parade. I glance at Katniss. I know how much she hates being reminded of anything to do with the Games. But the expression that I see on her face is not anger - it's doubt. Katniss has taken the old identification card from me and was examining it as intently as I had been.

"Does my picture - or me, for that matter - look anything like that woman? Other than my hair color, of course." Drusilla asks.

"No," I admit slowly.

"Skin and eye color can be changed," Katniss says stubbornly. She's grimly clinging onto the idea of Drusilla being my Interrogator - but my own doubt is growing.

"Katniss, maybe -" I start to say - before I'm interrupted by a voice from hell.

_Talking about me, Peeeeta? Oh, and I am soooo boring!

My mouth clamps shut as my eyes flit to each face in the room. I can feel my hands trembling and I can hear myself gasp.

"Peeta?" Galen asks in concern. "Are you -"

"She's here," I choke out.

_I won't keep you, darling. I just wanted to say hello. And do say hello to the good Doctors_
"You can hear her?" Drusilla asks in alarm. I can feel tears well up in my eyes as fear and rage fight for dominance.


"What did she say, Peeta?" Galen asks.

"She said...she said to tell you all - hello," I reply, my voice shaking. "By name. She named every one of you."

"All of us?" Drusilla asks. I nod wordlessly, then glance over at Katniss.

Katniss is alternating staring at me, then back at Drusilla, then back at me. "How...how did -" Katniss begins.

"Oh, please, Katniss," Drusilla says sharply. "Are you going to accuse me of telepathy now? Whatever Peeta is going through, and whatever you suspect me of, isn't it becoming more and more clear to you both that I am not to blame?"

"Katniss, Peeta." Galen says gently. "Whatever is happening to Peeta - well, you both are witnesses to the fact that Drusilla was standing right here, in this room, when Peeta heard - the voice. And, in spite of all the advances that the Capitol has made in the fields of medicine, psychology, and even paranormal research, I can assure you that telepathy is not within the realm of science in Panem."

"Do you still hear the voice, Peeta?" Drusilla asks gently.

"No," I say, shaking my head.

"I was so sure," Katniss says softly. She looks at me, worry etched in her face. I reach over and clasp her hand firmly in mine.

"It was an unfortunate set of coincidences, nothing more," Galen says. "Peeta, would you and Katniss excuse Doctor Nivosus and I for a moment?"

"Sure," I reply. Galen murmurs his thanks and he, along with Drusilla, exit the examination room quickly.

"How could I be so wrong, Peeta?" Katniss asks. "I mean, you hear that voice again and Nivosus is standing in the same room that you're in while it's happening."

"We were both wrong, I think," I reply. "The picture on her old hospital ID card - that's her, today, right now." I rub my face with my hands. "I just want to be able to live a normal life, Katniss. With you."

Katniss smiles at me and touches my face gently, then leans forward to kiss me. Before her lips touch mine, I suddenly recoil as an image of her mouth yawning open, filled with rows of animal-sharp teeth, invades my brain.

"No!" I gasp, grabbing her arms firmly and thrusting myself away from her.

"Peeta! What -" Katniss exclaims. I squeeze my eyes shut and then slowly, fearfully open them. Gone are the fangs. All I see now is Katniss, her brow furrowed in concern.

I relax my grip on her arms. "Sorry," I whisper. "I saw...I saw -"
"Bad things," Katniss finishes for me sorrowfully. I nod miserably.

"Yeah," is all I can say. I slowly pull her close to me, feeling her arms slide around me without hesitation.

"I'm so sorry," I say softly.

"Don't be," Katniss replies. "We'll get through this. And you will get better."

I say nothing as I continue to hold her close. I wish I was as confident as she is.

**PART II**

I lay awake in the hospital bed and stare at the clinic ceiling. I miss Katniss so much.

My being here in the clinic, instead of home with the girl that I love, is a result of the talk that Galen and Drusilla had after they left Katniss and I alone. Both are concerned, and rightly so, that combination of nightmares, hallucinations, and the voice that I've heard make me a threat to Katniss's safety.

Katniss, of course, was dead set against my remaining here, insisting that she felt perfectly safe around me and firm in her belief that I would never do anything to hurt her. Only gentle persuading from Galen - and from me - finally convinced her that I should remain here, at least for the next night or two.

Katniss may have convinced herself that I was no threat to her, but I'm not so sure.

To be sure, most of my visions of her have triggered fear rather than rage - except, of course, for the rage that I was barely able to control when I was suffering from that blinding headache. And that's what scares me the most.

I sigh, wishing for some *sativa* tea to help calm me down. Galen gave me a non-morphling sedative earlier, but the effects are starting to wear off. Both Galen and Drusilla specifically forbade any *sativa* use in the clinic tonight, saying that they needed to be able to control medication dosages. At least Galen assured me that I could go home in the morning - as long as everything went well tonight.

*Good evening, darling.*

I feel my breath catch in my throat as the voice penetrates my brain. "Go away," I manage to whisper, all the while staring fearfully around the room.

*Oh, Peetea. I just thought we could have a little chat. I get soooo lonely sometimes.*

"I've got nothing to say to you," I say in a trembling voice.

*Oh, please don't be like that! It would be much more pleasant for you if you cooperated. Do you need a demonstration?*

"A demonstration of what?" I ask, a feeling of dread almost overwhelming me.

There was no immediate response, but suddenly I felt a strange tingling sensation along the right side of my face, followed instantly by a sudden, stabbing pain shooting through my head.

"Stop it," I manage to gasp, clutching my head in my hands. "Please!"
As soon as you tell me what you see.

What? The ceiling? The walls? I don't see - wait, there's something on the wall - formless, slowly taking shape, it's -

"Not real," I whisper. "It's shiny. It's not real!"

Another stab of agony lances through my head.

*What do you see, Peeee-ta?*

"Nothing," I say through clenched teeth. I'll not give her the satisfaction of -

I didn't think the pain could get any worse. I was wrong. I can hear myself cry out even as I fight it. Galen is sleeping in another part of the clinic, but he left a call button on the bed in case I needed anything. I need him right now.

*What do you see?!*

I groan and open my eyes and stare at the apparition on the wall. "Katniss," I manage to croak out.

*With?*

"Gale," I say, even as I feel my tears start to flow. It was recent - Gale's in his new uniform. The apparition-Katniss is passionately kissing the apparition-Gale, clutching at him desperately. I shake my head again. "It's - not real!"

To my surprise, the pain subsides. *How can you deny your own eyes? They're right there in front of you!* Her voice has taken on a different tone - it's gentler, almost pleading.

I grope for the call button and push it frantically. "Please," I beg. "No more."

"Peeta?" Galen's voice, thick with sleep, comes over the speaker mounted in the bed.

*She never did love you, you know. Look at her - crawling all over her soldier like some bitch in heat. You're nothing to her - she used you and you know it!*

"No," I croak. "It's not true. It's not real!"

"Is she there?" Galen asks, sounding very wide awake now. "Peeta? Is she talking to you?"

"Leave me alone," I gasp out. "You're not real!"

"I'll be right there," Galen says as the speaker goes dead.

*Oh, Peeee-ta. Now you've hurt my feelings. I can see you need more - convincing. Of course I'm real. Just like this is real.*

Suddenly the vision before my eyes changes. Gale disappears like he never existed, leaving only the apparition of Katniss on the wall. But she's different - her eyes turning a feral yellow, her lips curling back in a snarl, revealing a mouthful of pointed, needle-sharp teeth. Her hands contract into claws, nails thickening and curving inward. She looks at me and smiles evilly.

*Katniss Everdeen is dead, Peeee-ta. She died in the Seventy-Fourth Annual Hunger Games - killed at the Feast by Clove. She was replaced - replaced by a muttation that's been programmed to kill you.*
A sudden wave of fear courses through me. I know that what I'm seeing is not real. But it feels real. The Katniss-mutt apparition growls at me, causing me to tremble involuntarily.

"Peeta," the Katniss-mutt says. "You're mine."

"No!" I cry out, even as Galen bursts into the room.

"Peeta? Peeta! It's me. It's Galen!" Galen hurries to the bed, where I'm huddled up in a ball, trembling violently.

*You have to protect yourself, Peeee-ta. What are you going to do?*

"No," I manage to say. "I won't do it!"

"Won't do what, Peeta?" Galen asks, as he prepares a syringe. "What won't you do? What does she want you to do?"

I begin to sob, and realize that my bladder has emptied into the bed.

*What are you going to do, Peeee-ta? Say it!*

"Kill...kill her," I gasp.

*Kill who? Say her name, you worthless little shit!*

"Kill who, Peeta?" Galen asks gently as he deftly slips the needle into my arm and depresses the plunger.

"The mutt. Katniss the mutt," I mumble, even as the powerful sedative courses through my veins.

*Very good, Peee-e-ta. I'll let you sleep now. Goodnight, darling.*

Her laugh is the last thing I hear as the drug takes hold and I slip blissfully into unconsciousness.

**PART III**

"I just don't know," Galen says, standing beside my bed. I'm sitting up, the remains of my breakfast - courtesy of Greasy Sae - sitting on a tray on my bedside table.

"Galen, I can't stand another night here," I protest. "Look, you've kept me here for three nights. I haven't heard her voice -" even the mention of it makes me shudder involuntarily "- for the last two."

I don't mention the nightmares that I've had for the last two nights - all prominently featuring Katniss-mutt. But the voice was gone, at least.

Drusilla examines the chart hanging on the end of the bed. "Vitals look normal and steady. Galen, the first of the River Clan is supposed to arrive today. We'll have our hands full with booster inoculations - not to mention any unforeseen problems."

"I'm still concerned," Galen says. "About what you said the other night. About killing Katniss the mutt."

"Galen, how many times do I have to explain it?" I ask warily. "I said what she wanted to hear so she would leave me alone! Do you really think I meant it?"
Galen looks at me, concern written on his face, but says nothing. After regarding me in silence for a moment, he finally turns toward Drusilla.

"Can I see you outside for a moment, Drusilla?" Galen asks, taking Drusilla by the arm and guiding her out of the ward. I sigh, leaning backwards on the bed. If I have to spend one more night here I will go crazy. I hear the door open, then close behind me. I shift around on the bed, turning to face the door.

"Galen, I hope that you have good -" I abruptly go silent as I see who's entered the ward. My heart begins to pound in my chest as I stare.

Katniss.

I haven't seen her in three days, per Galen's instructions. He wanted her to stay away in case her presence caused a trigger of sorts. He was right about that. Seeing her caused all sorts of triggers inside my brain. I just had to sort out the real from the not real.

"Peeta," she says in almost a whisper.

"Hey," I manage to croak out.

Suddenly Katniss rushes forward even as I struggle to stand up, colliding with me and knocking me back onto the bed. She throws her arms around my neck, even as my arms wrap around her slender form. But even as she presses herself close to me I can feel my body tense and tremble - not with love, or passion, or longing - but with something far more insidious.

Fear.

It takes every bit of willpower that I have to force those feelings down and nuzzle my face into the side of her throat. She's crying openly now, her tears hot against my face, burning me like acid - stop that! Her tears are not burning me! She's murmuring "I love you" over and over, her lips kissing my face, her mouth opening and those awful teeth -

No! That's not real! I just hope that she mistakes my trembling for love or desire instead of what I'm really feeling - fear.

"Did you miss me?" She asks suddenly, pulling back far enough to look into my eyes.

"More than words can describe." I reply with a smile.

"Good answer," she whispers with a smile, then pressing herself against me again. And again, the image of Mutt-Katniss floods my mind. I clench my eyes shut even as I wrap my arms around her and pull her closer to me. Not real. Not Real! NOT REAL!

"Peeta!" Katniss gasps, pulling away from me. "Not so tight! I can hardly breathe!"

"Sorry," I mumble, loosening my grip. Katniss steps back slightly.

"That's much better," she says with a smile, then leaning in to kiss me again.

"Galen says that you probably get to go home today," Katniss says, breaking our kiss. I force myself to smile.

"That's really great," I say with fake enthusiasm. What's wrong with me? I want to go home so bad it hurts! Katniss catches my tone and looks up at me, confusion and hurt in her eyes.
Before I can say any more, Galen and Drusilla come back into the room. "Okay, Peeta," Galen says with a smile, "We've kept you two apart for long enough. Go home."

"Yes," Drusilla ads. "There's nothing more that can be done for you here. Besides, we're tired of feeding you." She says this last with a smile, which I return readily. Maybe Katniss and I misjudged her. Our suspicions certainly seem groundless. She's exactly what Galen had described - a skilled, caring doctor.

"Good," Katniss says abruptly, grabbing my hand. "You don't have anything here, right, Peeta?"

I shake my head. "No. Just what I'm wearing."

"Then let's go," she says, pulling on my hand. "Thank you both. We know you have work to do. Come on, Peeta."

"Thanks again, Galen - Drusilla," I manage to blurt out even as Katniss pulls me through the door to the ward. She hurries me through the clinic, barely acknowledging Delly's greeting as we exit the building.

I blink in the sunshine for a moment, feeling the welcome warmth on my face, before turning to Katniss.

"What was that all about in there?" I demand angrily.

"What was what? I wanted you out of there, that's all!" Katniss replies, her eyes flashing.

"Katniss," I say in a softer tone, "I wanted out of there too. But we barely managed to say goodbye. A couple more minutes wouldn't have killed us."

"You don't get it, do you?" Katniss asks in a gentler voice. "I don't trust her. No matter what Galen, or you, or Delly says. And if getting you away from her means hurting her feelings - oh, well!"

"Fine," I reply wearily. "I do get it, Katniss. And thank you for caring so much. I just think that your fears about Drusilla can be put to bed, though."

Katniss looks searchingly in my eyes, reaching up to brush a strand of hair off of my forehead. It's all I can do not to flinch at her touch.

"I love you, Katniss," I hear myself say.

"I love you, too, Peeta Mellark," she replies, grabbing my hand. "Now let's go home."

Together we stroll slowly through the re-awakening District Twelve towards Victor's Village - towards home.

**PART IV**

As soon as we arrived home Katniss insisted I shower, shave and brush my teeth. I didn't have to be told twice. The shower in the clinic was out of order - a point of contention that Galen had with the contractors - so all I had been able to manage were a few unsatisfying sponge baths. I allow myself to luxuriate in the shower, then take my time afterwards shaving and brushing my teeth. Afterwards, I pull on sweatpants, a t-shirt, and sandals and walk downstairs.

I see that Katniss has build a cheery fire in the fireplace - even though it's still late summer and we really don't need a fire to warm the house, I still appreciate the gesture. Katniss directs me to sit
and, while I do, she disappears back into the kitchen.

I allow my body to relax, once again in familiar surroundings, as Katniss re-emerges from the kitchen, holding two tea cups. She hands one to me as she slides down onto the couch next to me. I bring the cup up to my nose and inhale the aroma of *sativa* tea.

"Thank you," I say with a smile, taking a small sip.

"I knew you couldn't have any at the clinic," Katniss explains, "And Galen mentioned it would be a good idea, at least until your new batch of medication arrives from the Capitol."

I feel the familiar buzz of relaxation course through me as I sip my tea and lean back on the couch. Katniss and I sit in silence for a few minutes, cuddled together on the couch with our tea cups.

"This feels good," I say with a sigh. I close my eyes and feel Katniss brush her fingertips lightly against my face. The tea works its magic - I don't even flinch at her touch - in fact, I smile a bit at the pleasant sensation.

"I love you," she whispers to me.

"I love you too," I whisper back, not opening my eyes. I hear her contented sigh as she nestles her head against my shoulder. I take a long, deep breath. I'm so comfortable. I can feel myself slowly start to drift off -

The rumble of a truck passing the house snaps me awake. "What - who's that?" I ask.

Katniss sighs and pulls away from me. She rises gracefully from the couch and walks to the window, peering out between the curtains.

"It's Lars," Katniss says, then snaps her fingers. "That's right. Haymitch hired him to do some work for him. Something about a proper wine cellar."

I chuckle. "I never knew Haymitch was a wine connoisseur."

"It's Effie's doing," Katniss says with a smile. "She told Haymitch when he was in the Capitol with the Clans delegates that as long as he insists on drinking, he should at least drink something with a little class."

"Typical Effie," I say, smiling as I close my eyes again and lean back.

I feel the couch cushions sag a little as Katniss kneels on the couch next to me. "I'll be in the kitchen, Dandelion," she whispers. "Make sure you put your cup down if you are gonna nap." She kisses me tenderly. "Welcome home, Peeta."

"Thanks, love," I murmur, returning her kiss. I hear her light footfalls fading away toward the kitchen. No shudders at her touch. No mutt-visions. No voices in my head for over two days now. Maybe, finally, I can rid myself of the poison inside me. Maybe I -

My whole body jerks as an incredible stabbing pain course through my head. I grunt and double over, my tea cup thumping softly to the carpeted floor. I grab my head in both hands. *No*, I say to myself over and over, *no, no, no no nononono! No more!*

*Ohhh, Peeee-ta...*

"Go. Away!" I manage to snarl through clenched teeth.
"No!" I grunt. It's all I'm able to say before a soundless explosion in my neck floods my body with fire. I scream.

Oh, yes. It's time. And this time, there's no one to interfere. This time, you'll finish the job.

"Peeta, are you -" Katniss's voice penetrates the fog enveloping my brain. I open my eyes and see her - see the mutt - staring at me wide-eyed. The light in the room is suddenly too bright. I hear myself snarl incoherently.

"Not real, Peeta! NOT REAL!" The Katniss-mutt cries out, her pointed teeth bared in a grimace. In a dim corner of my brain, a tiny piece of what used to be me cries out to her - but she can't hear.

"Liar!" I gasp, lurching to my feet. "Lying BITCH!" The mutt staggers back, extending its claws and hissing as it looks for an escape. The small part of me that's the old Peeta fights in vain for control - but the fire coursing through my veins and the voice are too strong...

Good, good, Peeee-ta! Now, finish the job! KILL IT!

Fire explodes inside me with every move I make, yet I move swiftly and deftly. The mutt lunges for the door but I knock it away with a sweep of my arm, sending it sprawling. It looks up at me, fear in its yellow eyes, as it skitters away from me toward the kitchen. I follow easily, my hands clenching involuntarily.

"Peeta." The thing whimpers. "It's Katniss. It's me! It's not real, Peeta! Listen to me, please! I love you!"

"Shut up!" I spit the words out. "Katniss is dead! YOU killed her!" Just two more steps and I'll have it in my grasp.

I feel a searing pain down my left arm even as I'm reaching for its throat. I snatch my hands back, staring at the gash in my arm, the blood welling up and dripping onto the floor. It clawed me! No - I see the knife clutched in its claw.

"Peeta, stop!" It snarls at me. "I swear I'll cut you again if I have to! Please, Peeta, stop!"

I lunge at it, my uninjured arm extended, and, sure enough, it swiped at me again - but this time, I catch the blade in my left hand. I ignore the pain as the blade slices my palm as I clench the knife tightly, finally wrenching it from its grasp and throwing it away violently. Dimly I hear a window break as the knife shatters the glass.

It tries to crawl past me but I kick it roughly into a corner. It can't get away from me now. It starts to scream as I drop to my knees, my fist lashing out against its face. I can't strangle it like I want - my left hand is dripping blood and the pain is too great. But there's nothing wrong with my right hand. I cock my arm back as it stares dully up at me with its yellow eyes.

"Peeta. No." It says nothing more as I feel bone crunch under my hand. I raise my hand again. And again. And again.


Good, darling. Finish what you started. Kill the mutt.

I'm only dimly aware of the front door crashing open somewhere behind me, and a familiar voice
yelling at me. I ignore the voice, my hand raising again, only this time to be caught from behind.

I bellow in rage, bucking backwards against this new threat. My attacker and I fall heavily to the floor in this new struggle. With a last effort I wrench free and scramble back to the mutt. I stare down at its bloody, ruined face and know that I'm *so close to succeeding* -

The back of my head suddenly explodes with pain. I see stars in front of my eyes as I feel myself fall forward. I catch myself with my outstretched hands, leaving a bloody handprint from my injured hand. I groan in pain but it can't distract me from my task. I clench my battered fist once more.

Another explosion. I feel a wave of nausea crash over me from the pain. Even so, I weakly raise my arm, only to feel a final burst of agony on the back of my head. I collapse forward onto the mutt, and, as I slip into unconsciousness, only one thought penetrates my tortured brain.

*I failed again.*
"Haymitch!"

I groan and shift around in the overstuffed chair. Sae has pretty much banished me from my long-time perch at the kitchen table during the day. The living room has become an acceptable substitute.

"Haymitch!"

"Go 'way," I mumble, draping an arm over my eyes. My other hand clutches the bottle that I've been working on for the better part of the morning.

A hand firmly grips my shoulder and shakes me. Someone has a serious death wish, I say to myself as I strike out with my free hand, forgetting for a moment that Sae had gently, but firmly, relieved me of the knife that I had been clutching some time before.

"Son of a bitch!" I sputter, forcing my eyes open to see Rory shaking me vigorously. "Boy, do you wanna end up bleeding or what?"

"Haymitch, please," Rory begs, "You gotta come! It's Katniss and Peeta!"

"What about 'em?" I ask, starting to bring the bottle to my lips once more.

"They're - they're hurt. Bad. Come on!"

I'm suddenly wide awake. Hurt bad? Rory tugs me to my feet. I sway for a second or two, fighting off a wave of dizziness. I see Sae hurry out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel.

"Hurt how, Rory?" she asks.

"It's...it's real bad, Miz Sae," Rory says, and for the first time I notice tear tracks on his face. "Come ON!"

I look at Sae grimly. "Okay, let's go," I say, stumbling after Rory towards my front door. Sae right behind me. Rory is talking rapidly, trying without much success to explain what had happened. The walk is a short one - I'm right next door to Miss Sunshine’s house, after all.

As we hurry up the walk I see a bad sign - the front door, obviously forced open - battered in by something heavy. Feeling my heart pounding in my chest, I enter the house. Rory is shouting for Lars as we enter.

Lars? What the hell is he doing here? He was supposed to be in my basement, designing a wine cellar for me. "In here, Rory!" I hear Lars shout back. The kitchen. I take a deep breath and enter. I thought my nightmares about the Games and my Mama, brother and girl dying were bad. After today's horror I knew I would have new fodder for my night terrors.
I see Lars first. He's sitting on the floor near a man's still form. He's tying the man's hands behind his back with what I recognize as drapery cord. I see the drapes that once covered the kitchen window lying in a heap on the floor.

"Haymitch! You're here!" Lars says as he loops the running end of the cord around the man's ankles. As he works I recognize who he's tying up.

Peeta.

"What the hell are you doing?" I shout, stepping forward. I can see that Peeta's hurt - his left arm is bleeding freely, there's blood on his right hand, and the hair on the back of his head is matted with blood as well. I can tell that he's still breathing, but shallowly.

I reach down to pull Lars away from Peeta, but Rory stops me. "Haymitch, listen!" Rory pleads. "Lars knows what he's doing!"

"Start talking," I grumble at Lars, then realize that he's not wearing his wooden leg. I see the leg, spattered with blood, sitting on the floor a short distance from both Lars and Peeta. "And where's Katniss?" My eyes search the kitchen, seeing another body laying on the floor, the face swollen grotesquely, masked in blood. That can't be, I say to myself.

But it was.

Lars points at the other body. "She's right there," he says grimly.

"No," I whisper, dropping to my knees next to her. I reach out to touch her and stop - afraid of hurting her further. I can see blood bubbling rhythmically around her mouth. Just then, an almost inaudible moan escapes her lips.

"She's alive!" I shout. I turn around and point to Rory. "Get into town. To the clinic. Get Wellgood out here, NOW!"

"He's not there, Haymitch," Rory explains. "He's in the Meadow. With Doctor Nivosus. Leevy and Thom also. They're waiting for the first River Clan people to arrive."

Lars grabs his wooden leg and looks around for something to wipe it off with. Wordlessly Sae hands him the dish towel that she was still holding in her hand from my house.

"Thank you, ma'am," he mutters and quickly wipes the spattered blood off of his leg, then reattaches it in one smooth motion. "Help me up."

Rory hauls Lars to his feet. "Rory, you need to get to the Meadow and bring Doctor Wellgood back here!" I say.

"I'll go," Lars says. "I'll take the truck. It'll be a lot faster." It was only then that I notice that Lars is sporting signs of being in a fight himself - he has the makings of a beautiful black eye and his lower lip is split.


I can feel tears of my own welling up and angrily swallow them. I need to keep a clear head, if I'm going to be of any use to these two kids - that I love as if they were my own.

Sae begins moving carefully around the kitchen, cleaning up. From the mess, the struggle must
have been intense. I look around and beckon Rory over. He sinks to his knees next to me.

"Do you know what happened here?" I ask. Rory shakes his head.

"I - I'm not sure," he replies. "I was helping Lars. We had just come up from the basement - you know the outside door?" I nod. "Anyway, Lars was explaining what he was doing and said that we needed to get a couple of tools out of the truck. We had just come around the side of the house when we heard the window break and someone screaming for help. Lars and I went to the front door but it was locked. He started throwing his shoulder into the door and told me to get the four kilo sledgehammer out of the back of the truck. I ran and got the hammer and he hit the door until it popped open."

Rory pauses for a moment before continuing. "Lars went right in. I could see from behind him that Peeta - Peeta was sitting on the kitchen floor, hitting someone. I came in a little more and could see it was...it was Katniss. Haymitch, there was blood everywhere!"

Rory pauses again, this time to wipe his eyes. "Lars was fighting with Peeta - that's when he told me to go get you. So I did." I drape my arm around the boy's shoulders.

"You did good, Rory," I say lamely. On the floor Peeta moans and moves a bit, struggling weakly against his bonds.

"Why did he do it, Haymitch?" Rory asks plaintively.

I don't answer him. But I have a good idea why Peeta did this.

PART II

Galen charges into the house, followed closely by a woman of about thirty. Lars hangs further back.

"Sweet mother," Galen says softly as he surveys the scene in front of him. He notices me for the first time.

"Lars told us what happened," he says. "Did you touch her?"

"No," I reply.

"Good." Galen turns to the woman and says, "Check him," pointing to Peeta. "I've got the girl."

"Right." The woman kneels next to Peeta, opening the bag she had been clutching. She glances over sharply at me. "Why is this man tied?"

"Because 'this man' is the one that did that to 'this girl,'" I reply just as sharply.

"Oh," the woman says, somewhat mollified. "Have the Peacekeepers been informed?"

"We don't have Peacekeepers any more, remember?" I ask.

"Well, whatever they are now. This is a crime scene. They need to be notified." As she talked, the woman continues to work on Peeta - cleaning up his bloody arm (I can see cuts on his arm and on the palm and fingers of his left hand) and gently probing the wounds on the back of his head.

I sigh softly, and beckon Rory over. "Do you know where the Defense Forces building is?" I ask.

"Yeah," Rory says, unable to tear his eyes away from the bloody scene.
"I need you to go there, and bring back whoever's in charge. Okay?" Rory nods silently and begins to back out of the kitchen.

"I'll take him," Lars says. "We're just in the way here." I catch Lars' eye before he turns to go and nod once, quickly. Thank you. He returns the nod and he leaves quickly with Rory.

"Haymitch, can you bring me the phone?" Galen asks. I start to laboriously climb to my feet, before Sae's hand on my shoulder stops me.

"I'll get it," she says quietly, disappearing quickly down the hall.

"I need a medically-equipped hovercraft here, stat." Galen says. "She needs a hospital trauma center, not a district clinic. Oh, by the way - Haymitch Abernathy, meet Alexa Morris, trauma nurse extraordinaire."

"My pleasure," I say sardonically. The woman never looks up from working on Peeta and grunts something unintelligible in response.

"The phone, Doctor," Sae says, returning to the kitchen.

"Thank you, madam," Galen says, giving Sae a grim smile. "Could you give it to Haymitch, please?" Sae wordlessly hands the phone to me.

"Haymitch, I'll need you to dial for me and hold the phone to my ear, please," Galen says. I scoot closer to Galen, trying without much success to look at Katniss.

Galen gently wipes blood from Katniss's face and peers intently at an oozing wound. "Dial this number," he says and recites a number from memory. I dial, then shift around, holding the phone to his ear.

"District Thirteen hospital. They're the closest," Galen explains. "They - hello! Trauma center? Good. Galen Wellgood here - resident physician for District Twelve. I have a medical emergency. Stand by." Galen glances up at Alexa Morris, and holds up two fingers. Morris shakes her head and holds up one.

"We can treat the man here," she says.

"Hello - yes? Still there?" Galen says. "We need a high speed medical hovercraft to District Twelve, stat. The patient is Katniss Everdeen - female, eighteen years of - sorry? Say again?" I see Galen frown. "What do you mean, you don't have - look, this is an emergency -"

"They're not sending one," I say flatly. Galen looks at me, fury on his face as he nods once, tersely. "Those fucks. Still pissed about what Katniss did to their precious Alma Coin, I bet." I can feel my own fury rising.

"Look, we need something," Galen argues. "Well - yeah, okay. Please connect me. Now!" Galen glances up. "Their high speed medical hovercraft are 'temporarily unavailable' due to some nebulous 'maintenance issue.' They're transferring my call - to the hospital in Four."

"Four? That's twice the distance that Thirteen is from Twelve!" I sputter.

"I know," Galen says grimly. "I just hope - hello! District Four Trauma Center? This is Doctor Galen Wellgood, resident physician for - okay, Thirteen already explained our problem?" Galen carefully lays a bandage across Katniss's left eye, swollen almost to the size of an apple, as he talks. "Yes, that Everdeen. That's right, the Mockingjay. Okay, I'll hold."
Galen looks up and grins for the first time. "They have a fully equipped trauma hovercraft available. They're scrambling the crew now."

"How long?" I ask.

"Couple of minutes," Galen replies. "They - yes! I'm here!" Galen puts a bloody hand over the handset. "It's the doctor on what they call their 'life-flight bird.'" Galen removes his hand. "Yes, doctor. I can hear you fine. Can you hear me?"

"Okay, ready to copy?" Galen asks. "Patient is female, eighteen years of age, one hundred sixty centimeters, forty five kilos. Multiple blunt force trauma to the head. Suspected skull fracture, with confirmed fracture to the left eye orbit. Pupils fixed and dilated. Clear fluid leakage from the ears and nose. She -"

Suddenly Katniss's whole body stiffens, then begins to shake uncontrollably.

"Shit!" Galen shouts. "Seizure! Sorry. Stand by." Galen pulls away from the phone and grabs his bag. Katniss continues to flop and shake on the floor as Galen fumbles with his bag. Alexa Morris, still treating Peeta, calmly opens up a flap on her bag and extracts a syringe.

"Doctor," she says quietly. "Five CC's Phenobarbital." She hands the loaded syringe to Galen, who quickly immobilizes Katniss's left arm and plunges the needle in and injects the drug. The drug takes effect rapidly, her shaking subsiding quickly. Galen lets out a deep breath and looks at me, motioning for the phone.

"Doctor? Still there?" Galen asks, then visibly relaxes. "Good. Yeah - let's change that to 'confirmed' skull fracture. Five cubic centimeters Phenobarbital. What's your ETA?" Galen frowns as he listens. "Is there any possible way you can get here faster?"

Galen looks up at me as he listens and forms the words "one hour" with his lips. An hour? Katniss won't last an hour!

"I - see. Thank you, Doctor. What's that? Umm, I'm not sure. How big is your hovercraft?" Galen glances up at me. "Is the Victor's Village green big enough for a small hovercraft to land?"

"It should be," I reply. "As long as it's not one of those big cargo hoverplanes."

"Yes, no problem," Galen says. "Thanks, Doctor. See you in an hour." I pull the phone away and press the End Call button.

Katniss's breathing becomes shallower and more labored. "We need to prep her for tracheal intubation," Galen says wearily. "The Phenobarbital is slowing her respiration down. How's Peeta?"

"Stable," Morris replies. "Definite concussion, no signs of skull fracture or any other trauma. Significant lacerations to his left arm and hand. His heart rate and respiration are oddly elevated."

"Run a test on him for tracker jacker venom later on," I say, suddenly exhausted.

"Haymitch, do you really think -" Galen begins.

"Yeah," I snap. "I do." I look around. "Where's Nivosus? I thought she was with you at the Meadow. I thought for sure you'd bring another doctor with you instead of a nurse - no offense." I direct this last toward Alexa Morris.
"None taken," she replies dryly.

"Drusilla had to return to the clinic," Galen replies. "She said she forgot one case of the serum we use for inoculating the Clans people. I left word that she was to come here immediately."

I look around. "Well, I sure as hell don't see her. Do you?"

"No," Galen replies softly. "Haymitch, we still need to give her the benefit of the doubt. This isn't Snow's Panem, after all - here, now, people are innocent until they are proven, without a doubt, to be guilty."

Peeta starts stirring, moaning and struggling a bit against the cord that has him bound. Galen doesn't hesitate. "Sedate him."

"Doctor, he does have a concussion," Morris argues.


"Do you want to intubate now, Doctor?" Morris asks.

"Yes," Galen says. "Give me a hand." Together they begin laying out the instruments that they would need on a clean towel that Sae provided to them.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"We're going to put a tube in Katniss's throat to help her breath a little easier," Galen replies. As if on cue I hear Katniss's breathing become raspier. Then she does something that shocks all of us. Her good eye opens and stares at me.

"Haymitch," she whispers weakly. I immediately kneel close to her battered face.

"Right here, Sweetheart," I say thickly, fighting to keep my own emotions in control.

"Peeta?" she whispers. "I...cut him."

"We know," I say quietly. "He'll be okay."


"Don't worry," I say. "He's -" Suddenly Katniss gasps loudly, her body stiffening again.

"Seizure!" Galen barks.

"No!" Morris says, placing a stethoscope over Katniss's heart. "Arrhythmia! She's arresting!"

Galen grabs a plastic case and flings it open, flipping a series of switches, while Morris quickly slices Katniss's shirt open, baring her chest.

"What's going on?" I ask, feeling panic rising inside me.

"Cardiac arrest," Galen says grimly. "Stand back, Haymitch!" He passes two paddles to Morris, who quickly squirts some gel on them and rubs them together.

"One hundred twenty joules," Galen announces. "Charged!"
Morris places the paddles on Katniss's chest. "Clear!" She barks out and depresses a switch. Katniss's body jerks convulsively. Galen immediately leans down with his stethoscope, listening intently. He looks up and shakes his head, then turns back to the plastic case.

"One fifty," Galen says. "Charged!"

Once again the paddles are placed on Katniss's chest. "Clear!" She jerks again. Galen listens. Another adjustment.

"Two hundred joules," he says. "Charged!"

"Clear!" Morris barks. Katniss jerks. Galen leans forward again, then looks up.

"That did it," he says. "We really need a heart monitor in these trauma kits."

"What just happened?" I ask - even though I already know the answer - and it chills me.

"Katniss died. We brought her back to life. Nice job, Nurse Morris." Galen says matter-of-factly. "Now, let's get that tube in her throat."

PART III

"You're the Head Peacekeeper?" I ask incredulously. The boy standing in front of me could hardly be twenty years old.

"Defense Forces," the kid says stiffly. "Not Peacekeepers. And I am the senior ranking soldier - that makes me in charge."

I eye the three Peace- I mean, Defense Forces soldiers warily. "Does your mother know you're here, kid?" I ask. I see the young sergeant's face cloud up immediately at the remark.

"My mother died during the Rebellion," he says in a flat tone. "And, before you ask me how old I am - I'm old enough to fight in a war, kill people, see friends die, and come out the other side more or less in one piece. Now, Mister Abernathy, I was told I had a prisoner to take into custody?"

There I go, sticking my foot in my mouth again, I say to myself. I don't trust myself to speak - I just point to Peeta's still form, lying on the floor. But even as the soldiers move forward, Alexa Morris stands up, placing herself between the soldiers and Peeta.

"Just a moment," she says. "Do you have medical facilities where you plan on taking him?"

"No, ma'am," the sergeant replies respectfully.

"This man has a concussion, some pretty severe lacerations on his left arm and hand, and, from the way his right hand is swelling, I wouldn't be surprised if he has a broken bone or two as well." Morris explains. "So, until all of his medical issues are attended to, he needs to go to the clinic. You can take him to jail once I've cleared him medically."

The sergeant stares at Morris for a long while, then glances at me, then Peeta, and finally at Galen, kneeling on the floor next to Katniss. A breathing tube protrudes from her mouth, connected to a small machine resting on her chest. The machine rises and falls in a slow rhythm.

"I want a guard with him at all times," the sergeant finally says.

"Of course," Morris replies.
"I have a vehicle outside, but no stretcher or anything for the pris-" the sergeant says. "I mean, for him. And no way to lay him down."

"We can take him in the back of my truck," Lars says. Morris nods.

"Good idea," she says, turning to the sergeant. "Is that acceptable?"

"Can one of my soldiers ride in back with him?" The sergeant asks.

"No problem," Lars replies.

"Okay, sounds good." The sergeant says. "Now, how do we get him out?"

"Roll him onto a blanket," Morris says. "Pick him up that way."

I quickly whisper to Rory to go upstairs and grab the largest blanket he can find. Soon he's back down, the blanket laid out on the floor next to Peeta. Under Morris's direction, Peeta is rolled onto the blanket. He moans once but doesn't wake up.

"I guess we're ready," the sergeant says.

"Wait," I say. "What's your name?"

"Franklin." The sergeant replies. "Achilles Franklin. Sergeant, Defense Forces of the Republic of Panem. From District Two." He pauses for a moment and looks down at the battered form of Katniss. "I fought in the Battle of the Nut. I was there the day she got shot. I saw it." He looks at Galen with a pleading expression. "You have to save her."

"We will." Galen says confidently. Franklin looks at Katniss one last time, then directs the two soldiers with him to grab corners of the blanket. He and Lars grab the other two corners. Under Morris's direction, they carefully lift Peeta's inert form.

"You sure you've got this?" Galen asks.


"Check in with me later," he says. "I - I'll be at the District Four hospital."

"Of course, Doctor," Morris replies, then turns to the soldiers and Lars. "Let's go."

Galen, Rory, Sae and I watch them walk out of the house. A minute later we can hear the sound of two vehicles starting up, then driving away.

"That woman should be a doctor," Galen says admiringly. "She has the skills. But, she told me that she prefers nursing - says that doctors get too detached from their patients. She likes the constant one-on-one contact."

After Galen speaks the room is quiet, except for the mechanical sound of the portable ventilator that is helping Katniss breathe. The ringing of the phone causes us all to jump.

"I'll get it," Sae says, reaching for the handset sitting on the kitchen counter. How many times have I seen Katniss cleaning a rabbit or squirrel on that same counter - or Peeta, gently kneading out a fresh batch of dough, or -

My eyes sting with sudden tears. *Stop it, Haymitch!* I suddenly realize that Sae is speaking my name.
"It's for you," she says, handing me the phone. "It's - Una Everdeen."

Una. Katniss's mother. Who now works at the District Four Hospital. I glance at the other three as I reach for the phone. Taking the handset from Sae, I turn to walk out of the kitchen.

"I'm going to take this in the other room," I explain, as I walk out of the kitchen. I take a couple of deep, slow breaths as I put the handset to my ear.

**PART IV**

"Right," Galen says, speaking into the telephone. "Her temp is thirty-eight, pressure is low - ninety over fifty-seven. Pulse is one hundred. She's in shock, and we had to defib her once already. Five CC's of Phenobarbital also for the seizure that she had. She's intubated. Okay. She'll be ready."

Galen punches the End Call button and looks at me. "They're twenty minutes out. They're gonna transport her on a back board and immobilize her head. How did Una take the news?"

"About as well as any mother who's already lost a husband and daughter would," I answer sarcastically, "Upon finding out that her potential son-in-law has beaten her only surviving child to a literal pulp."

"Haymitch," Galen says softly. "We're on the same team here, remember?"

"I know," I reply, "I'm sorry, Doc. You're the last person I should take anything out on."

"Forget it," Galen says, then: "The Golden Hour."

"Huh?" I say. What the hell is a golden hour?

"The Golden Hour." Galen repeats. "It's a term that was coined a long time ago, before the Catastrophes. It means that first hour after someone suffers a traumatic injury - the time when emergency medical treatment is at its most critical."

"You saved her," I say. I'm convinced that Katniss would have been dead a long time ago if it wasn't for this man.

"Did I?" Galen asks bitterly. "She's as stable as I can make her. But a skull fracture - who knows what long term effect that will have on her? She may be prone to seizures for the rest of her life. She may lose partial or total voluntary motor function. She may end up partially or totally blind. She may lose the ability to talk - or to even think. Haymitch, in spite of her psychological troubles, Katniss Everdeen was as full of life as anyone that I have ever met. Only time will tell if I did her any favors today."

I lay my hand on my friend's shoulder. "One thing at a time, Doc," I say. "Let's get her to that hospital first."

"Yeah," Galen says flatly.

Both of us turn when we hear the front door opening, only to see Rory and Lars coming into the house.

"Peeta's at the clinic," Lars reports. "Nurse Morris is working on him. The soldiers are with him also."

"Any sign of Doctor Nivosus?" Galen asks.
"No," Rory replies. "No one's seen her. I even checked her house. She wasn't home there, either."

"Show them, Rory," Lars says quietly. Rory glances at Lars, a guilty look on his face, then at a small backpack that he's carrying.

"Show us what?" I ask, eying the backpack.

"When I checked at Doctor Dru's house, the door was unlocked," Rory explains. "So I let myself in. I was just looking for her, I swear!"

"It's okay, Rory," Galen says gently. "Any one of us would have probably done the same thing. You found something in her house, didn't you?"

I can feel my stomach start to knot up. I have a feeling that, whatever Rory found in Drusilla's house, it will not bode well for the doctor.

Slowly Rory opens up the backpack and extracts a rectangular object. "This," he says.

A book? Galen and I exchange glances. What the hell?

Rory places the book on the kitchen counter. "It was sitting on her desk," Rory explains. "I didn't even pay any attention to it but then I heard sounds coming from it."

As if on cue, a faint beeping comes from the book. With my hand trembling ever so slightly, I reach over and open the front cover.

The book had started out life as a hefty medical tome, but now we all can see that the inner pages have been very carefully hollowed out. There's a grayish rectangle of metal and plastic sitting inside the hollowed out pages. I reach in and carefully extract the object, setting it on the counter top.

"What is it?" Lars asks, examining it closely. I reach behind the object and slowly extend an antenna. The beeping is more insistent now, sounding in time to a small red flashing light on the front. I peer at the inscription below the light. LOW BATTERY.

"She forgot to turn it off," I whisper. "That's why it's beeping. It's a low battery warning. Otherwise Rory would never have known."

"What is it?" Lars asks again. I turn to the big ex-District Seven carpenter and grin.

"It's a radio." I reply. "More specifically, a receiver-transmitter." I examine the back of the radio and see a slender power cord rolled up neatly under where I pulled out the antenna. I pull the cord out, looking around for a electrical outlet.

"By the mixer," Rory says, moving a large mixer - Peeta's, I recognize with a pang. I quickly insert the plug into the outlet. The beeping stops immediately.

Katniss stirs and moans quietly. Galen is by her side in an instant, checking her breathing tube, quickly checking her pulse and blood pressure. He glances at his watch impatiently.

"Wish they would hurry up," he mutters.

"They'll be here soon," I reply, hopefully sounding encouraging. Galen just nods grimly, then turns and adjusts an IV drip that he had started for Katniss.

I turn back to the radio, examining it more closely. On/off switch, power gauge, frequency dial,
volume. Pretty standard. The microphone is on a retractable cord. I pull it out gently, feeling it lock into place when I stop. The microphone is small, but recognizable, with a push-to-talk button on one side. There's another display on the front of the radio marked MEMORY. I tap the button underneath and a display lights up with the number "1." I see three options next to that number - TIMER, TRANSMIT and PLAYBACK. I push PLAYBACK.

"Talking about me, Peeee-ta? Oh, and I am soooo boring!" We all freeze at the unfamiliar female voice - it really didn't sound anything like Drusilla - emanates from the speaker. There's a short pause, then the voice speaks again.

"I won't keep you, darling. I just wanted to say hello. And do say hello to the good Doctors Wellgood and Nivosus for me - and, of course, Kat-piss as well. Ta-ta for now!"

"Who was that?" Lars asks, his voice almost a whisper.

"One guess!" I reply savagely.

"It didn't sound anything like her," Galen says in a soft voice, looking up at us from his perch on the floor next to Katniss.

"So she disguised her voice," I say. "I'm sure that if they match her known voice print with this recording, they'll get an exact match."

"But how was Peeta able to hear her?" Rory asks.

I have a very good idea how. My mind flashes back, right after Katniss had gone to District Eight. There, she had pulled her earpiece out and couldn't hear a word I said to her - and almost got killed by Capitol bombers as a result. So, after she had returned to Thirteen, I felt that a little visit from me while she recuperated in the hospital was in order.

I lean forward, holding Katniss's earpiece in front of her nose, before dropping it to the sheet. "This is your earpiece. I will give you exactly one more chance to wear it. If you remove it from your ear again, I'll have you fitted with this." I hold up a metallic communications helmet. "It's an alternative audio unit." I explain, trying to keep my voice even, "That locks around your skull and under your chin until it's opened with a key. And I'll have the only key. If for some reason you're clever enough to disable it -" I drop the helmet onto the bed and pull a small silver chip out of my pocket - "I'll authorize them to surgically implant this transmitter into your ear so that I may speak to you twenty-four hours a day."

"I'll keep the earpiece in," Katniss mutters. If looks could kill I would have dropped dead then and there.

"Excuse me?" I ask.

"I'll keep the earpiece in!" Katniss shouts.

"She implanted something," I say. "Galen, didn't you say that she did the surgery on him to remove the needle from his neck?"

"Yes, but I was there the whole time," Galen replies. "I never left the room. Unless -"

"Unless what?" I ask. Galen looks at me miserably.

"She asked for the anti-scarring agent. I remember being surprised that it wasn't already on the tray." Galen explains. "But it was in a cabinet in the same room that we were working in. It only
took me thirty seconds to get it. Not nearly enough time for her to place a cochlear implant. And besides, an implant of that nature can receive only. Apparently, she - or someone - could hear Peeta as well."

I suddenly get an idea. "I want to try something," I say. "Call the clinic and see if Peeta is awake."

Galen quickly makes the call, then looks up at me and shakes his head. "He's still out."

"No matter," I say. "I'll try later."

"Haymitch, you aren't thinking of trying to talk to Peeta on that thing?" Galen asks in amazement.

"That's exactly what I plan on doing, Doc." I reply grimly. "That would pretty much prove that Drusilla - or somebody - I roll my eyes at this "- has been tormenting Peeta and making it look like he's going crazy and hearing voices!"

Galen looks like he's about to say something, but the phone in his hand rings just then. He quickly answers it, then looks up at us.

"Two minutes," he says.

Sae, Lars, Rory and I hurry outside, just in time to see a small, sleek hovercraft, a large red "X" prominently displayed with a large number "4" on either side, fly in from the Southwest, spin gracefully in mid-air, then settle to the ground in the middle of the Village green. The rear ramp opens and a medical team run out, rolling a gurney ahead of them.

"Over here!" We beckon them as they run up to the house. We part to let them through. I point and say, "In the kitchen. Short hallway, to the right, first door on the left."

We can hear sounds of the team working inside as Galen walks out, joining us on the front lawn.

"I'm just in the way in there," he says. "Their doctor did say that I could ride back with them. They only have room for one, Haymitch - sorry."

"No worries, Doc," I say. "I have a couple of things to do here first anyway."

"You're coming to Four?" Galen asks. "Why?"

"Because," I say, feeling myself choking up. "I'm still her Mentor. That's why."

PART V

The hovercraft disappears into the early afternoon sky. I tell Lars and Rory to take the day off - and not to worry about my wine cellar. They both refuse.

"We gotta have somethin' to do, Haymitch," Lars explains. "Otherwise we'll both worry ourselves to death!" So, after extracting a promise from me to keep them informed, they both went back to work on my new wine cellar.

"Haymitch, if you don't mind, I'd like to clean up in here a little bit," Sae says. "You know, so when the kids come home they don't have to deal with this - mess." Sae suddenly collapses against me, sobbing quietly. I awkwardly slip my arms around the old woman, patting her on the back.

"Why don't you wait on that for now, Sae?" I say. "I'm sure the soldiers will want to take pictures, or gather evidence, or something. I'll let you know, okay?"
"Okay, Haymitch," Sae says finally. "But I'm going to keep working over at your place. I'm like Lars and Rory - I need something to keep me busy."

"Sure," I reply. "You go right ahead." Sae gives me a small, sad smile before trudging back to my house. I sigh heavily before walking back into Katniss's house, careful not to touch any of the evidence of the struggle that she and Peeta had. I see the phone sitting on the counter, the Message light blinking.

Idly, I pick the phone up and listen to the message. Plutarch. He tried calling my place, got no answer, so tried here. He knows. News about his Mockingjay sure travels fast, I say to myself. Plutarch left me his direct number and a request for me to call him.

I dial the number quickly. Plutarch answers on the first ring.

"Heavensbee," he says curtly.

"Your direct line, Plutarch?" I say sarcastically. "I'm so used to having to go through Effie and Fulvia before being graced with your melodious voice."

"Can it, Haymitch," Plutarch snaps. "I'm not in the mood. Tell me what's going on."

"Fine," I reply. "Remember the incident in the hospital in Thirteen? After the rescue?"

"Yes," he replies quietly.

"This is ten - no, a hundred times worse," I say. "She's almost dead, Plutarch."

I hear Plutarch let out a long sigh. "And of course that idiot doctor just had to call not one, but two districts to trumpet that little nugget?"

"That idiot doctor," I explode, "as you call him, is the only reason that Katniss is still alive! And if I were you, I'd have a talk with whoever is in charge of maintaining Thirteen's medical hovercraft - for some mysterious reason they were all not available today!"

There's a long pause before Plutarch responds. "Haymitch, please tell me what happened today. Take your time."

Over the next few minutes, I tell Plutarch everything that I know - or suspect. When I finish he's quiet for a moment.

"You realize, of course, that Doctor Nivosus has impeccable credentials," Plutarch says.

"AND disappeared this morning, AND the transmitter was found in her house, WITH that incriminating message on it!" I shout. Do I have to beat him between the eyes with Lars' fake leg to get him to understand?

"Circumstantial evidence," Plutarch says, "not to mention illegally obtained. It probably would not be allowed as evidence in a criminal tribunal."

"At this point, I don't give a good shit about prosecuting Nivosus," I bark. "What I do care about is clearing Peeta."

"That's another issue," Plutarch says. "Paylor is not happy with his - relapse."

"She already knows about it?" I ask incredulously.
"She knows enough," Plutarch says grimly. "Aurelius has his head on the chopping block. She's holding him personally responsible."

"Plutarch, until that woman showed up, Peeta was responding to his anti-hijacking treatments!" I could feel myself shaking with rage and I force myself to take a couple of slow, deep breaths before continuing. "Between the medication that Galen was giving him, his auto injectors, and the sativa - excuse me, the cannabis treatments, he was doing better each and every day! Nivosus is responsible for his relapse! Not Galen, and certainly not Aurelius!"

"Be that as it may," Plutarch says reluctantly, "I need to let you know that Paylor is sending out a Defense Forces officer to take Peeta into custody as soon as he's medically able to travel, and bring him back here - either to face criminal charges, with Attempted Murder sitting right at the top, or Murder if - you know." Plutarch pauses for a moment before continuing. "Or, for a competency hearing to determine his fitness to remain in society at large."

"Wonderful," I reply sarcastically. "So his options are prison, or a rope, or commitment to a mental hospital. Well, my friend, I'm here to tell you that none of those options are acceptable to me! Paylor better be ready for a fight, cause she's in for one!"

"Haymitch," Plutarch says softly. "I want you to know - I am on your side. And Peeta's, by default. And, of course, Katniss's."

I suddenly feel drained - and in desperate need of a drink. "I know, Plutarch," I say dully.

"The Defense Forces officer will probably arrive tonight, via high speed hovercraft." Plutarch says. "You know him quite well. Captain Gale Hawthorne."

Of all people. Yet I can't really say that I'm surprised. "Thanks for the heads up," I say softly.

"Haymitch," Plutarch says. "Good luck. And if you need anything -"

"I'll need to get to District Four in a day or so," I say. "I need to take care of things here first."

"Just let me know when," Plutarch says.

"I will. Bye, Plutarch," I say, then punch the End Call button before he can say anything else. I immediately dial another number.

"District Twelve Clinic, Delly Cartwright," the voice says.

"Delly, it's Haymitch," I say.

"Haymitch! What's going on? They brought Peeta in all tied up, no one's seen Doctor Nivosus, the staff here is trying to deal with the Clans, and I keep hearing ugly rumors about Katniss -"

"Delly." I say quietly. "I don't have time right now. I'll explain later, I promise. Right now I need to know if Peeta is awake yet."

"The soldiers won't let him have visitors, Haymitch. I-"

"I know, Delly. I just need to know if he's awake."

"Hang on," Delly says. I hear some truly awful music come over the handset for a few seconds before Delly's voice returns. "Alexa says that he's starting to wake up. He asked where he was. And he asked where Katniss was."
Now's not the time, Abernathy, I say to myself, biting tears back. "Okay, Delly," I say, forcing my voice to remain neutral. "Thanks. I'll talk to you later. Bye." I quickly press the End Call button before she can say anything else. I turn to the radio that Rory found in Drusilla's house.

With trembling fingers, I turn it on, and pick up the microphone. I sure hope it's on the right frequency. Too late for that. I'm not sure what I will do if it's not.

I hold the microphone up to my mouth and hit the Press-to-talk button. "Peeta? It's Haymitch. Can you hear me?" I release the button.

Silence. Oh, please, please, PLEASE answer.

Once again I press the button. "It's Haymitch, Peeta. It's okay. You can talk to me. Can you hear me?" I release the button again and listen intently.

"...Haymitch?..." Peeta's tremulous voice comes over the speaker. Oh, Thank You, I whisper silently.

"Right here, kid," I say, fighting to keep my voice calm and under control. I remember to let go of the button at the last instant.

"...What's going on? How am I able to hear you? Where's Katniss?..." He sounds so bad. And scared to death.

"Don't worry about Katniss, kid," I say. "Just hang tight. I'll come see you as soon as I can." I release the button.

"...Okay. I'm scared, Haymitch..."

"I know. I can't talk long. I'll see you really soon. Everything's gonna be okay." If only I really believe that.

Silence. Either he took what I said as goodbye, or someone came in his room. No matter. I talked to him - on Drusilla's radio. Through something that she implanted in him.

I carefully turn the radio off, retract the microphone, roll up the power cord, and retract the antenna, before I quickly gather up the radio and the false book. I'm hanging on to these until I feel I can trust whoever I'll be turning them over to.

I leave Katniss's house and return to my own, and not a moment too soon. I see a Defense Forces truck pull up, and watch as Sergeant Franklin, along with two other soldiers, gets out and walks up to her house. I see one carrying a camera.

I need to check with them to see if Sae can go over and clean up. I also need to check in with Peeta - preferably before Gale Hawthorne gets here. And, I need to find out what's going on with Katniss at the hospital.

First things first. I carefully hide the radio. Then, I pull a bottle out of a cupboard in my living room, uncork it, and take a single, deep pull from the neck. I sigh contentedly as the liquor burns my throat and sigh again as I feel the familiar warm glow in my belly. I get one - only one - drink. Already I'm switching to something I never thought I would have to do again.

Mentor mode.

I carefully put the bottle back in the cupboard, then turn to head back over to Katniss's house.
I need to see about getting it cleaned up before she and Peeta come home.
Exhausted, I climb the steps leading to my front door. I fumble with the key, inserting it into the lock. I turn the key, hearing the familiar "click" as the tumblers slide into place, allowing me to open the door.

My hand trembles slightly as the door swings open with the slightest of creaks. My other hand slides over the wall, finding the light switch. I turn on the foyer light, flooding the entranceway with its soft, yellow glow.

I toss the key ring onto the small table next to the door, the same way that I've been doing it for the last, let's see, twenty-six years. I catch a glimpse of my face in the small mirror that hangs above the table. Dark, almost black hair, shot through now with streaks of gray. Grayish Seam eyes, reddened by years of drinking. Sallow skin on my face - once olive, like the majority of my Seam neighbors, but now hanging loosely. Two days' stubble growth. I pass my hand thoughtfully over my jaw, resolving to shave in the morning.

Am I really only forty-two years old? The worn face that stares back at me looks at least sixty - and I feel eighty. I jump as a sudden meow sounds at my feet. I glance down to see Katniss's ugly little yellow cat peering up at me with those muddy eyes. He meows again. He must have slipped inside when I opened the door.

"What do you want?" I growl, and get another meow in return. I remember then that the cat originally belonged to Katniss's sister, Primrose. The girl that Katniss volunteered for - exactly like Madge said she would. The girl that died in the Capitol the day that Coin bombed all those children. I feel a sudden stinging in my eyes and blink furiously. No more crying. I'm bad at it anyway.

"I suppose you're hungry," I say gruffly, walking into the kitchen. I open my refrigerator and rummage around until I find the remnants of a sausage. I cut part of it into small chunks and place the bits of meat into a bowl, then place the bowl on the kitchen floor. The cat sniffs once then begins to eat hungrily. I fill another bowl with water and place it next to the food dish.

"Now I'm mentoring cats," I mutter as I make my way into the living room. I debate whether or not to start a fire in the fireplace and decide against it. I open a cupboard and extract a bottle. I uncork the bottle, inhale deeply, then take a single, long pull from the neck. I swallow, feeling the liquor burn all the way down, to settle warmly in my stomach. I carefully cork the bottle and replace it in the cupboard, then sink into an overstuffed chair.

I glance at the mantle clock. Just past midnight. Just over twelve hours since...since Peeta...attacked Katniss. After the District Four medical hovercraft had picked up Katniss, and after I had received permission from the Defense Forces soldiers to begin cleaning up Katniss's house, I had headed straight for the clinic to see Peeta.

What I found there initially was complete chaos.
The first of the River Clan had arrived today - a small group of twenty-five or thirty men, women, and children, including Elder Willem, his oldest son Mikel, and Mikel's wife, Nova. Galen Wellgood and Drusilla Nivosus, our resident physicians, were supposed to be on hand in the Meadow, along with Thom McElroy, the District Twelve Mayor, and his fiancée, Leevy Alexander, as well as the Capitol Liaison, Adolphus Fox, to greet the first arrivals - and to inoculate the new arrivals against any illnesses that they may encounter in District Twelve. And, to mark the historic occasion of the merging of District and Out-District, there was plenty of Capitol media on hand to capture the event.

There was only one small problem. Peeta Mellark tried to kill Katniss Everdeen - and almost succeeded. And Drusilla Nivosus was the cause.

I'm convinced that Doctor Drusilla Nivosus, District Twelve's new resident physician, and the ruthless Interrogator that had tortured, brainwashed, and subjected Peeta to carefully administered doses of tracker jacker venom - which was know to cause powerful hallucinations that targeted the fear centers of the brain...a process known as "hijacking" - were one and the same. And, when word spread among the media of Peeta's brutal attack on Katniss, the River Clan was all but forgotten. Only the presence of the Defense Forces soldiers - there to guard Peeta - prevented the media from completely overrunning the clinic. And that's what I walked in to when I arrived there.

Fortunately, a quarter-century of Mentoring has taught me many different ways to deal with the media. Even as microphones were being shoved into my face and questions shouted at me, I deftly worked my way through the crush of people outside the clinic, ignoring all questions, and even stepping on a few toes along the way. One voice cut through the crowd, however, and it didn't take me long to pinpoint the source.

Cressida Pierce, accompanied by her ace cameraman, Pollux.

Cressida was probably the only member of the media that I completely trusted. She was firmly on Katniss and Peeta's side, and indeed had forged a close friendship with both. When I caught her eye I beckoned her and Pollux forward.

Cressida was just as adept at working her way through a crowd as I was, and soon was standing by my side. As we reached the clinic entrance I turned and faced the mob of reporters for the first time.

"Folks, lemme have your attention, please!" I shout. I have to repeat myself three times before the din finally died away. "Now, I know ya'll are sniffin' out a story, here - and I'm sure there's a ton of speculation and iron-clad innuendo flyin' around out there, so this is what we're gonna do." I pause for a moment before continuing. "Now, Miss Pierce, here, along with her trusty cameraman, are gonna accompany me inside -" at this a new din rises up, and once again I have to shush the crowd "- where I will give her an exclusive interview about the events that occurred here today, that she, in turn, may share with you."

The explosion of dissent was almost deafening. I calmly stand there and wait for it to die down before continuing. "Folks, that's the deal. Take it or leave it." I stare defiantly back into the crowd as I rap sharply at the locked clinic door. A Defense Forces soldier opens it a crack.

"Yes?" she asks in a calm voice. She looks to be in her early twenties.

"Haymitch Abernathy here to see Peeta Mellark," I reply.

"Access to the prisoner is restricted," the soldier says, "to immediate family or legal counsel."
"I'm the closest he has to family, and it looks like I'll be representing him legally as well. So open up," I say impatiently.

The soldier hesitates for a moment. "Excuse me," she says before slamming the door shut and locking it firmly behind her. I glance at Cressida and Pollux with a somewhat bemused expression on my face.

"That went well, don't you think?" I ask wryly as I turn to peer through the glass clinic door. I see the soldier return with Sergeant Achilles Franklin in tow. The soldier quickly unlocks the door then steps aside, allowing Franklin to slip through.

The Sergeant ignores the crush of people and gets right to the point. "I'm told you want to see the prisoner."

"That's right," I reply.

"Mister Abernathy," Franklin says, "To be honest, I'm not sure what your exact status is. People have been trying to get in here ever since word got out." He pauses for a moment, glancing at Cressida and Pollux. "Who're they?" He asks.

"Friends of both Peeta Mellark and Katniss Everdeen," I reply. "And yes, members of the media. And don't worry, Cressida reports honestly - and she knows how to be discreet as well."

Franklin chews this over for a moment, then raps sharply at the door and beckons us to follow. "I hope I won't be regretting this later on. Come on." Cressida, Pollux and I quickly slip through the door behind him. As soon as we're through the soldier on guard quickly locks it again.

"Wait here," Franklin says, then disappears through a pair of swinging doors.

"Haymitch?" A familiar voice calls out. I turn and see Delly Cartwright heading toward us. She hugs me fiercely and greets Cressida and Pollux quickly, but with her usual warmth.

"Can you please tell me what's going on?" Delly asks plaintively.

"Okay," I say, "Before Franklin gets back. Cressida, you might want to listen in also." Over the next two or three minutes, I give Delly, Cressida, and Pollux a quick summary of what had happened earlier in the day. I leave out my suspicions about Drusilla's involvement - sticking to known facts.

Delly was shaken by the news and even Cressida and Pollux were visibly affected as well. "Poor Katniss - poor Peeta!" is all Delly can say.

"Get all that?" Cressida asks Pollux, who nods solemnly. At that time, Franklin returns, accompanied by Nurse Alexa Morris.

"Mister Abernathy," Morris says coolly. "I see you've brought the media with you. Please remember that this is a medical clinic, and that Mister Mellark is still my patient."

"Miss Morris," I begin, as contritely as possible, "I think we may have started out on the wrong foot. Please believe me when I say that I have nothing but Peeta's best interests in mind."

Morris regards me skeptically for a moment before answering. "Oddly enough, I believe you. Come with me." Without waiting to see if we were following, she turns and goes through the same pair of swinging doors that Franklin had earlier. Quickly, we all follow, ending up in an examination room. Morris turns and faces us.
"Mister Mellark is - hopefully - sleeping right now," she says. "This is the extent of his injuries - he's suffered a moderate to severe concussion, and no, it's not dangerous for a concussion victim to sleep. His head hurts but there are no fractures that we've been able to locate. We've treated the scalp lacerations caused when Mister Broadax struck him with his leg -"

"Just a moment," Cressida says, interrupting Morris. "Lars Broadax struck Peeta with his leg?"

"He tried grabbing Peeta at first," I explain, "But Peeta was, quote, 'fighting like a fu - I mean, like a madman,' unquote, and he said he didn't want to hit him with the sledgehammer he was holding. The leg came loose during their struggle and it was the first weapon that Lars could lay his hands on."

"May I continue?" Morris asks icily. "As I was saying, Mister Mellark was struck two or three times in the back of the head, eventually causing unconsciousness. I've run a portable scan on him - it was negative - but he really needs a more thorough scan."

"You can't do that here?" I ask.

"No," Morris replies. "I would need a fully equipped radiology clinic for something like that."

"Like the District Four hospital - or the Capitol," Cressida says.

"Exactly." Morris says. "Now, as to his other injuries. His left arm has two separate lacerations, both caused by the blade of a common kitchen knife. Both wounds are on the inner forearm. The longest measures twenty-one centimeters and is anywhere from two to five millimeters in depth. The shorter of the two measures twelve centimeters, is located closer to the left hand, with similar depth gradient. Neither would affected major blood vessels, ligaments, or muscles. They are both relatively superficial, and have been cleaned, sutured, and treated with anti-scarring agent."

Morris shows us pictures of Peeta's arm while she talks. The wounds did look nasty but she seemed to know what she was doing. Next she showed pictures of his left hand, and I can tell right away that these wounds were significantly worse.

"Mister Mellark's left hand, as you can see, was lacerated more severely than his arm." Morris continues. "The Peace - excuse me, Defense Forces soldiers found the knife to the rear of the house, a few meters past a broken kitchen window, consistent with accounts that Mister Mellark grabbed the knife by the blade, tore it from Miss Everdeen's grip, and hurled it through the window."

"Now, as to the severity of injuries to the hand," Morris says. "There is ligament damage. Mister Mellark will need the services of an orthopedic clinic in order to retain use of his hand. To that end, I've simply cleaned, bandaged, and immobilized that hand."

"Again, he'll need a hospital such as District Four or the Capitol for that," Cressida says.

Morris nods. "Yes, and for his right hand as well." Morris displays an x-ray showing Peeta's right hand. Everyone could plainly see the broken bones. "Mister Mellark has broken his fourth and fifth metacarpal bones in his right hand, consistent with him striking a - hard object repeatedly."

A hard object, I say to myself, such as Katniss's head.

"The good news is, with the right facilities he will make a quick and complete recovery." Morris says. "We just need to get him to that facility."

"What about his mental state, Miss Morris?" Cressida asks.
"Confused," Morris replies. "I don't think he's fully aware of exactly what has happened - or what he did. And he's hallucinating. Mister Abernathy, a couple of hours ago he was carrying on a conversation - with you."


Cressida looks at me thoughtfully for a moment, then nods. "Pollux," she says, making a slashing motion across her throat. Pollux nods and stops recording.

"Okay, Haymitch," Cressida says. "You're off the record."

I turn toward Morris. "He wasn't hallucinating," I explain. "He was talking directly to me."

"I don't see how that's possible," Morris says skeptically.

"Oh, but it is," I say. "Rory found a transmitter in Drusilla's home - entirely by accident, I assure you. Somehow she managed to implant some sort of receiver-transmitter in Peeta. He really was hearing voices in his head - her voice. She even recorded a message that she transmitted using a timer, so she was in the room when Peeta heard it. Nice little way to deflect suspicion."

"I find this a little hard to believe," Morris says.

"Is there any way you can scan his neck for something implanted there?" I ask.

"Our portable cranial scanner can't scan the lower part of the head," Morris explains. "It won't reach the anterior nasal spine, the maxilla, or the mandible. And it won't do the neck area at all."

"Dammit!" I say in frustration.

"However," Morris continues, "We can try ultrasound. Of course, without knowing exactly where to look, we may not be successful."

"It's worth a try," I say.

Morris hesitates for a moment. I can tell that she's not entirely convinced. I really wish I had brought that radio with me so I could prove to her that what I was telling her was the truth.

"Wait here," she says suddenly, then turns and walks out of the room. She's only gone for a minute at the most when she returns.

"Okay," she says. "I'll try it. Ultrasound, I mean. The way I see it, Mister Mellark has nothing to lose and everything to gain. Come on. He's still sleeping." We follow Morris into a familiar room - the same ward that he had just spent several nights in - with one huge difference.

Peeta lay in a bed, his arms awkwardly shackled in front of him. How they managed to get the shackles on him while he was bandaged is beyond me. A length of chain runs from his arm shackles to a chain around his belly, then down to another pair of shackles secured to his legs. I suddenly become livid.

"Take that shit off him - now!" I bark.

"I'm sorry, Mister Mellark," Sergeant Franklin says. "The restraints stay. By order of the officer en route to take custody of the prisoner."

"Let me guess," I sneer. "Captain Gale Hawthorne?"
"Why, yes," Franklin replies, surprised. "How did you know?"

"Gale ordered this?" Cressida gasps.

"Looks like it, sweetheart," I mutter in disgust. On the bed, Peeta stirs a little bit. "Sergeant, you'd be surprised at what I can find out. Listen - you've been decent and fair up till now. Do you really think this boy is in any shape to run away?"

"I'm sorry, Mister Abernathy," Franklin says firmly. "I see your point, but my orders were specific. Full restraints."

Alexa Morris pushes a small cart next to the bed. "This is a portable ultrasound," she explains. "I place the end of this probe," she holds up a cylinder, "On his skin. It uses ultrasonic waves to penetrate tissue and to create a visual image. The image will be displayed on this screen." Morris touches a control on the screen and we watch as it flickers to life, then squirts some gel onto the end of the cylinder. "The gel ensures a good contact with the skin."

Morris looks up at me. "Where should I start?" she asks.

"Where the needle broke off. Work out from there," I reply. Morris nods and gently places the probe against Peeta's neck. I see Peeta flinch a bit at the contact, then relax. I step closer to the bed, standing on the side opposite where Morris was working. I peer at the screen, but can't make sense of the images that I see there.

"Anything?" I ask. Morris shakes her head as she slowly moves the cylinder in a spiral away from the site where the needle had broken off in Peeta's neck.


"What?" I ask urgently.

Holding the cylinder steady, Morris reaches over and taps the screen. "That," she says. "See it?"

I peer at the screen but can't make out anything. Of course, I don't know what to look for either.

I shrug. "What am I looking for?"

"This shadow," Morris says. "Near the right common carotid artery. It shouldn't be there."

"Is it bad?" I ask.

"I'm not sure what it is," Morris replies. "But it shouldn't be there." She presses a switch on the machine. "I've just marked the location of this anomaly. It should be checked out later on."

"Haymitch." Peeta's rusty voice makes me jump.

"Peeta, you have to be quiet for now, okay?" Morris says. I glance down at Peeta and see his eyes flicker towards her, then back to me.

"Okay," he whispers.

"Can he have water?" I ask. Morris nods, watching the screen intently. I turn around to ask for a glass of water, only to find one of the young soldiers already approaching with a cup and straw. I take the cup, nodding my thanks, and bring the straw to Peeta's lips. He drinks thirstily, then gives me a slight smile as his lips form the word "Thanks."
"Aha!" Morris says triumphantly. She holds the cylinder still as she punches a button on the machine.

"What?" I ask impatiently. Morris doesn't answer right away. The machine beeps and a small square of paper emerges from the bottom. Morris punches a couple more buttons, then carefully moves the cylinder away from Peeta's neck, wiping it with a paper towel before placing it next to the machine. She then uses a soft gauze wipe to remove the remaining gel from Peeta's neck, then picks up the paper and hands it to me.

I take it and study the picture. This time the image is clear. A small, rectangular object shows up clearly.

"It's implanted into his mandible - his upper jawbone," Morris explains. "Similar in theory to the trackers that would be implanted into Tributes before each Games."

"Why the jawbone?" I ask.

"Tribute Trackers were simple. Their whole function was to relay location and simple physiological data - primarily, whether or not the Tribute was alive or dead - to the Gamemakers." Morris explains. "But this was apparently used to actually communicate. And the only way an implant could receive and transmit voice messages was through bone conduction." Morris traces the outline of the device shown on the paper.

"So what Peeta was hearing -" I begin thoughtfully.

"- was a signal transmitted through this implant, into his upper mandible...much the same way you can 'hear' your own voice if your ears are covered or plugged." Morris finishes for me. "And, when he spoke, the vibrations from his voice were conducted through the bone to the implant."

"Amazing," is all I can think of saying.

"Haymitch?" Peeta's voice cuts through my thoughts.


"I hurt her, didn't I?" Peeta says, more a statement than a question.

I glance quickly at Morris, who shrugs slightly and raises her eyebrows, as if to say Go ahead and tell him. I take a deep breath.

"Yeah," I reply.

"Bad?" He asks.

"Yeah," I reply again, hearing my voice crack slightly.

"My hands hurt," Peeta says. "My head too. And my arm. Katniss - cut me, didn't she?"

"She was trying to protect herself, Peeta." I say.

Peeta turns his head and stares at the ceiling. "And I'm not crazy? I mean, any crazier than I was before? I really was hearing voices? I heard your voice."

"Yeah, you were, kid," I reply. "We found out how Nivosus was doing it. You're not crazy."

"Can I - see her? Katniss?" Peeta asks softly.
"She's not here, Peeta," I reply gently. "Galen took her to District Four. To the hospital there."

Peeta doesn't say anything for several long moments. I see his eyes close and for a second I think that he's gone back to sleep - until I see a single tear trickle out of each eye.

"She's gonna be fine, Peeta," I say, not knowing if that was even true. There I go again, lying to this boy.

Peeta moves his arms slightly, causing the chains to rattle softly. "I'm in trouble," he says.

"You won't be. It wasn't your fault." I put my hand on his forehead and brush his hair back away from his eyes.

"Katniss cut me," he says again.

"Peeta, she was -"

"She should have killed me."

**PART II**

I jerk awake at the touch of a hand on my shoulder. At least I didn't come up swinging like I normally do. I force my eyes open and see Alexa Morris standing over my chair.

"You awake?" she asks brusquely.

"I am now," I grumble. Dozing in the chair was not the best idea, I'm finding out as my neck protests loudly whenever I move my head. Morris presses a cup into my hands.

"Don't get excited," she says. "It's only coffee."

"Thanks," I mumble, taking a cautious sip, then another. Like most people from Twelve, I preferred tea over coffee - but the caffeine kick it was giving me was more than welcome.

"Captain Hawthorne is here," Morris says. "He's up front with Delly now. He has a bunch of papers with him. He's taking Peeta into custody."

I quickly glance over at Peeta, only to see his eyes closed and his chest rising and falling in a slow, steady rhythm.

"He's sleeping," Morris says.

"Can he travel?" I ask, pointing to Peeta.

"Hawthorne brought a doctor and a nurse with him," Morris replies. "But yes, he can. And the treatment he needs is in the Capitol, anyway."

There's a soft knock on the door, then the door opens a crack and Delly sticks her head in.

"Sorry for interrupting," Delly says, "But Gale would like to see you both."

Morris and I glance at each other, then, without a word, I rise from my chair and we both follow Delly into the outer offices. Captain Gale Hawthorne rises from his chair as we approach. He doesn't offer to shake hands and I don't press the matter.

"Bet you didn't expect to see me again so soon," he says.
"Not at all," I reply. "I suppose you two have already met?" I add, indicating Gale and Morris.

"We have," Morris replies coolly.

"Haymitch," Gale begins awkwardly. "Nurse Morris. I think I need to clear the air here a little. First of all, I asked for this assignment."

"I can't say that I'm shocked," I say wryly.

"Let me finish!" Gale says sharply. "Believe it or not, I'm actually on Peeta's side here. It's gonna be painful enough taking him into custody - knowing the way Katniss feels about him. But I owe him. He stuck up for me over a year ago when he didn't have to. I just want to make this whole business as easy as possible on him."

I nod slowly. I understand perfectly what Gale is saying. After all, we were both from the Seam originally. And, if you're Seam, you pay your debts.

"I have to go in and formally read the charges against him," Gale continues. "And the specifications for each offense. The warrant was drafted by the Capitol High Tribunal. Basically, he's being charged with Attempted Murder, Assault with Intent to cause Great Bodily Harm, and Mayhem. Is he able to travel now?"

"Yes," Morris replies reluctantly.

"Once I finish reading the charges to him, as well as his rights - he does have rights, you know, under the new government," Gale continues, "I will have custody transferred to me from Sergeant Franklin, and we'll leave immediately. I figured the sooner the better."

"What kind of rights?" Morris asks.

"The rights of someone accused of committing a crime may be found in Executive Order Thirty-One, which was drafted and signed by President Paylor last March," Gale explains. "Basically, the accused has the right to have an advocate, the right to remain mute, the right to not incriminate himself, the right to face their accusers, and the right to a speedy trial by a jury of their peers."

"I'll be advocating for him," I say. "Like I did for Katniss after she killed Coin."

"I figured as much," Gale says, allowing a small smile to crease his face. "However, there's not enough room on the medical hovercraft to take you along. You'll have to make your own arrangements to get to the Capitol."

"That's not a problem," I reply. "I can't leave for the Capitol just yet, anyway. I have to make a - stop - first."

"How is she?" Gale asks, his voice almost a whisper.

"Alive when she left here," I reply. "But no news since then. Galen Wellgood went with her to Four."

"Can you - I mean, if you hear anything -" Gale says.

"I'll let you know," I say. "Promise."

"Thanks," he says in a soft voice.

"Just - treat Peeta right," I say.
"Promise." Gale says, extending his hand to me for the first time. Without hesitation I grip his hand firmly.

Gale glances down at the folder full of papers, then looks back at me. "Let's get this over with."

"Wait," Morris says. "I'll make sure he's awake first. And understands what's going to happen. Is that alright?"

"Sure," Gale says.

"Alexa," I call out softly. She glances back at me sharply. That's the first time I've ever addressed her by her first name.

"You've done good," I say lamely. The woman allows a quick, small smile.

"Thanks," she says. "So have you - Haymitch." She quickly disappears into the ward. I glance back at Gale.

"I'd give anything not to be here right now," he says.

"I know," I reply.

**PART III**

The ringing of the phone penetrates the haze that's settled on my mind. I reach over to the end table next to my chair, fumbling with the handset and almost dropping it until I manage to punch the Incoming Call button and raise the handset to my ear.


"Haymitch. Galen." I sit bolt upright, the cobwebs flying from my brain. I had checked my phone when I had first gotten home that night only to see that I had not received any calls while I had been at the clinic.

"How is she?" I ask, trying to keep my voice even.

"Alive," Galen's exhausted voice answers. "Don't ask me how."

"What happened?" I ask, my voice filled with dread.

"She's coded twice - once in the hovercraft, once in the trauma center at the hospital here in Four - which, by the way, has been named Odair Memorial Medical Center." Galen replies.

"Coded?" I ask. "Like - what happened to her in her kitchen?"

"Exactly like that," Galen replies. "Her heart stopped. They had to defib her both times - same as Alexa and I. And she had another seizure in the trauma center. She just got out of surgery maybe fifteen minutes ago."

Just got out of surgery? What time was it? I glance at the mantle clock. One Forty-Five A.M. "You mean she was in surgery for, what, twelve hours?" I ask.

"Calm down, Haymitch." Galen says evenly. He pauses for a moment. I hear him drink something. "And yes, before you ask, I am having one drink. To answer your question, no, she was in surgery for about six hours. But they had to stabilize her first. Her blood pressure was way too low when they first got her here, and the trauma to her head was pretty severe. They had to perform a
trepanation before they could even think about -"

"A what?" I ask. I eye the cabinet with the bottle. No. Later. But not now.

"A trepanation," Galen explains patiently. "They had to drill a hole in her skull to relieve pressure. Now, don't interrupt."

"Sorry," I mutter.

"Okay," Galen continues. "Now, I wasn't actually in the operating room. I would have been out of my league anyway. But they allowed me to view what they were doing, and I spoke with her doctors afterwards. Her neurosurgeon is top-notch. She was able to relieve the pressure from Katniss's brain and repair the damage to her skull. She said that the damage didn't appear to be permanent, but she wants to do some brain scans in a few days to make sure. She did say that it would be a very good sign if Katniss was able to demonstrate normal motor skills and speech once she wakes up. We just won't know anything for sure until then."

"Anything else?" I ask.

"Her ophthalmologist, along with a plastic surgeon, worked on her damaged eye and the broken bones in her face. Her left eye orbit was shattered - specifically, the left zygomatic bone and the left supraorbital foramen." Galen pauses for a moment. "Haymitch, she was damn lucky. I thought for sure she was gonna lose her eye when I first saw it. The ophthalmologist doesn't even think that she'll have any vision problems - and the plastic surgeon was able to completely reconstruct the damaged bone."

"How's Una?" I ask. "I assume she was there?"

"She hasn't left Katniss's side since they brought her in," Galen replies. "Except for the O.R. She had to sit with me in the viewer's gallery. But she was in the trauma center and is with Katniss right now in Intensive Care. She's just sitting with her, holding her hand."

"I'll be there tomorrow," I say.

"Haymitch," Galen says tiredly, "I don't know why. They're keeping Katniss in a medically induced coma while her injuries heal. Now, you and I both know that Capitol medicine is great - they have healing drugs that speed up the process a hundredfold. But even with that, it'll be at least until the day after tomorrow before they wake her up."

"I'm her Mentor, Doc, that's why," I reply. "Because my responsibility to these kids didn't end with their Victory. I never realized it until then, but a Mentor's Victors are a life-long commitment."

"Speaking of that," Galen asks, "How's Peeta?"

I quickly bring Galen up to date with everything that's happened with Peeta, including our discovery of the chip implanted in his jawbone and his being formally charged for Attempted Murder.

"He's been taken into custody by none other than Captain Gale Hawthorne," I say. "And, I know what you're thinking. I had a talk with Gale before he read the charges to Peeta. I really think that Gale is trying to make this as easy for Peeta as possible." I quickly explain Peeta's role in Gale's whipping at the hands of the unmourned former Head Peacekeeper, Romulus Thread.

"I understand the Seam concept of debt," Galen says, "But I would have thought that Gale considered the matter closed after he participated in Peeta's rescue."
"Doc, Gale didn't do that for Peeta," I explain. "He did that for Katniss. He's doing *this* for Peeta."

"And how did Peeta take it?" Galen asks.

"He's - well - confused," I reply. "Doc, the last time Peeta tried - something like this - he was agitated for days, even weeks, afterwards. You couldn't even mention Katniss's name in his presence without Peeta flying into a rage."

"And now?" Galen asks.

"Now," I reply slowly, "It's - well, like someone else did it, and he watched. He's not agitated at all. He's confused, and scared, and - I think maybe suicidal also. I told Gale to watch him closely."

"And did you mention the implants?" Galen asks.

"No," I reply. "I don't want anyone to know about that just yet. That's our proof that he was being manipulated by Nivosus. Plenty of time to remove it after we've proved our case that Peeta was not to blame for this."

"As long as they don't think that someone else implanted it to incriminate Nivosus," Galen says glumly.

"The security cameras in the clinic recorded him when Nivosus was tormenting him," I say. "They also recorded him talking to me earlier. Plus, the ultrasound images that we have are date and time stamped. And, Nivosus is *still* missing. He was never left alone today without a Defense Forces guard right there with him. I think that we have a damned good case."

"Do you know where they're taking him?" Galen asks.

"Victor's Mercy," I reply. "Gale told us that there's a confinement ward there."

"Good," Galen says. "I know people there. Peeta needs to have a full blood scan done. Whatever agent was used to trigger this psychotic episode, it was not tracker jacker venom. A full scan will find everything that's not supposed to be in his blood. And it has to be done by a fully equipped medical center, such as Victor's Mercy or Odair Memorial."

"Doc, I need to call Heavensbee," I say. "And arrange for transportation to Four first thing in the morning."

"And I need to call Victor's Mercy," Galen replies. "Guess I'll be seeing you later on today then - oh, Haymitch? Can you ask Delly to throw some clothes in a bag for me? I've got nothing but what I'm wearing."

"Sure thing, Doc. See you later." I punch the End Call button, then quickly dial another number from memory.

Plutarch answers on the second ring. "Heavensbee."

"Just the man I wanted to talk to," I say cheerfully.

"Haymitch." Plutarch says evenly. "How did you get this number?"

"Plutarch, don't ask questions that you know that I either won't answer, or will lie about," I reply. "Now, do you want the latest on Katniss and Peeta, or will it wait until later on this morning?"

"Go ahead," he says curtly. I quickly bring him up to date on both Katniss and Peeta, based on
what Galen has told me for Katniss, and what I observed with Peeta.

"I've got a call in to Victor's Mercy," Plutarch says. "They're to notify me the second Peeta arrives there."

"How about my transportation to Four?" I ask.

"You'll have a hovercraft land in the Village green at dawn, your time." Plutarch says. "Haymitch. This is bad for the entire country. Have you seen the news?"

"I haven't exactly had the time to holo-view," I say sarcastically.

Plutarch ignores the sarcasm. "Cressida's done a great job on reporting this," he says. "But - even with her heavily edited reports, the word's gotten out. At least when Peeta attacked Katniss in Thirteen, that never became common knowledge until well after the war was over. This is stirring up a whole shit-pile of anti-Capitol sentiment in the districts, and it'll only get worse if Katniss - doesn't make it."

"She's gonna live, Plutarch," I say firmly. "And there's nothing to indicate anything other than the fact that Nivosus was acting alone."

"Don't be so sure," Plutarch says sourly. "She had access to some sophisticated electronics. Anyway, the Ministry of Security is investigating the matter."

"I'm sure they'll do their usual thorough job," I say rather snidely. "Plutarch, I have some other calls to make. I'll talk to you tomorrow - from Four." I punch the End Call button before Plutarch can say anything else.

I've got two more calls to make - a quick one to Delly, asking her to bring a bag to the Village at dawn tomorrow. She readily agrees.

I look at the clock. Three Forty-Nine A.M. I still need to shower, shave, and pack. No sleep for me tonight.

I make the other call to a number that I had just received a few hours ago. The phone only rings once before it's answered.

"Gale? Haymitch. I've got some news for you..."

The almost inaudible whine of a small hovercraft reminds me that it's time to go. Delly was here ten minutes ago, dropping off Galen's small suitcase. My own bag is sitting on the floor at the front door.

I tuck a small flask in an inner coat pocket, then lean over the kitchen table to sign the note that I'm leaving for Sae.

SAE -

OFF TO DIST. 4 TO SEE KATNISS. PLEASE REMIND RORY TO FEED THE GEESE. AND LEAVE SOME FOOD OUT FOR KATNISS'S UGLY LITTLE CAT. IT SHOWED UP LAST NIGHT.

NOT SURE WHEN I'LL BE HOME. HAVE TO GO TO CAPITOL AFTER 4. HOPEFULLY WHEN I RETURN I'LL HAVE K AND P WITH ME.
I grab up both bags and walk out the front door, locking it carefully behind me. The hovercraft is waiting patiently on the green, turbofans spinning quietly. I walk quickly to the hovercraft, where a crewman takes my bags and ushers me to a seat. I'm no sooner settled in when I feel the hovercraft lift smoothly off the ground and surge forward. I'm on my way to District Four.

"Once a Mentor, always a Mentor," I mutter to myself as I lean my head back and close my eyes.
"Mister Abernathy?" A voice penetrates my brain.

"Hmmph." I respond, opening my eyes only with great effort. I have a monster headache.

"Sir, we're ten minutes out," the voice says. I manage to focus on the voice's owner. The co-pilot of the hovercraft.

"And?" I say grumpily.

"And," the co-pilot says, "We need to know if you've arranged for ground transportation."

"Why would I need ground transportation? I'm going to the hospital." I say. "Aren't you?"

"Umm - well," the co-pilot stammers. "There's a problem with that. Their landing pad is for medical emergencies only."

"Sonny," I say, beckoning the co-pilot closer. "I hate doing this, but - do you know who I am?"

"Yes, sir, I do," the co-pilot says stiffly. "But that doesn't -"

I hold up my hand. "Does the name Plutarch Heavensbee ring any bells?"

"Should it?" the co-pilot asks archly.

"He's Secretary of Communications for the Republic of Panem." I explain. "Responsible for that shit you watch on your Holo-TV. No matter. How about President Paylor? Hear of her?"

"Of course," the co-pilot says warily.

"Good!" I say cheerily. "We finally hit on a mutual friend. And I would hate to have to tell our mutual friend that you weren't cooperative and landed me somewhere in Bumfuck, District Four. So, trot back up to the cockpit and get on the radio and tell the hospital whatever the hell you have to tell them to get clearance to land there, because I don't intend on wasting time once we land on finding myself a ride!"

The co-pilot blanches a bit but still looks skeptical. I stare at him balefully. "Are you still here?" I snap. "Git!"

He got. I slowly laid my head back on the headrest and shut my eyes.

"I hate name-droppers," I mumble.

As soon as the hovercraft touched the landing pad I was out of my seat. I grab both bags and wait as the ramp slowly lowers. As the ramp opens I'm hit immediately by a blast of hot, humid air, and I feel sweat immediately burst out of seemingly every pore in my body.
"Figures," I mutter, wiping my forehead on my sleeve. "Only been here twice before and it was the
dead of winter both times - not late summer like now."

I look around and see a sign that reads "MAIN ENTRANCE." I head in that direction and am met
halfway by a fussy little man that reminds me of Twelve's new Capitol Liaison, Adolphus Fox,
who introduces himself as the Hospital Administrator, and who do I think I am, landing here like
that, and on - and on - and on - until I finally get tired of hearing his voice and hand him a card
with Plutarch's number on it.

"Call him," I say (rather rudely, I might add). "He'll straighten everything out." We reach the
hospital entrance and, as the doors slide open, I'm greeted by a welcome blast of cool, dry air. I
step inside gratefully. The little man was still nipping at my heels.

"Look," I say brusquely. "I haven't slept. I'm exhausted. I need to know how my girl's doing. So, if
you would be so kind as to point me in the right direction, you'll never have to see me again.
Deal?"

"Your 'girl?'" He sniffs.

"Yeah," I snap. "My 'girl.' Katniss Everdeen. Where is she?"

At the sound of the name his whole demeanor changed. "We have no patient here by that name."

"Oh, you're good," I say with a smile that's anything but friendly. "You didn't even need to consult
any kind of directory to know that Katniss 'isn't a patient here.' So I'll ask again - where's Katniss
Everdeen?"

"Sir, like I tried to explain, we've no patient here by -" the little man started to say again.

"This shit is gettin' old real quick," I mutter as I brush past him toward a kiosk with a sign that
reads "Hospital Information."

A girl about Katniss's age is seated at a counter in the kiosk. She looks up as I approach and
smiles.

"Welcome to Odair Memorial! How may I help you today?" she asks.

"Well," I say, returning her smile, "You can tell me where I can find a patient that's here
somewhere."

It's then that I notice the girl looking at me quizzically. "Wait a minute," she says, somewhat
breathlessly. "Aren't you...Haymitch Abernathy?"

I sigh heavily. Life was so much easier when I was an anonymous drunk Victor, instead of the

"I knew it!" The girl exclaimed breathlessly, while the annoying little man standing to one side of
me is doing his best fish-out-of-water impersonation.

"I'll take it from here," he says, grabbing my by my arm and propelling me to the other side of the
kiosk. "Mister Abernathy, we could have avoided a lot of unpleasantry if you had simply told me
who you were from the beginning."

"Why would that have mattered?" I ask sharply. "Didn't the hovercraft radio ahead and request
landing clearance?"
"They did - but they made no mention that you were aboard or why you were landing here, so of course landing permission was denied. As for the other - let's just say that we don't release admissions information, nor do we confirm in-patient status, for certain high profile patients," he explains.

"So she is here," I say. "And are you gonna tell me where?" Inside I'm fuming at the idiots piloting the hovercraft.

"One moment," the little man says, picking up a phone and dialing a number from memory. He turns his back on me briefly and speaks quickly, but quietly, into the phone, then turns back to me and hands me the phone. "Someone would like to speak with you," he says.

"Abernathy," I growl into the handset. I'm in no mood to play phone games. Just tell me where she is!

"Haymitch?" A female voice says. Even under the emotional strain I recognize the voice immediately.

"Hello, Una," I reply. "How's your daughter doing?"

PART II

Even though I had seen the wreck of Katniss Everdeen lying in a pool of her own blood on her kitchen floor not twenty four hours ago, it was still a shock to see her laying supine in a hospital bed, with more tubes than I could count running in and out of her.

"She's in a medically induced coma," Una Everdeen explains. "I assume Galen gave you her prognosis?"

"Sort of," I reply. "He said that the doctors were optimistic about her chances of a full recovery."

"Optimistic," Una repeats bitterly. "Oh, yes. In their smug Capitol way. 'Put away your herbal remedies, Missus Everdeen. Your daughter could not be in better hands than ours.' Haymitch, I just wanted to strangle the whole condescending lot of them!"

"Probably a good thing I couldn't get down here any quicker," I say sardonically. "I had enough trouble with the hovercraft crew and your hospital administrator."

"A fact for which I will be eternally grateful," Galen's voice says from behind me. "For as infuriating as they all are, Haymitch slamming their heads against walls would not have been helpful at all."

I turn, and, in spite of the horror lying in the hospital bed not two meters away, I smile at the man that's become one of my closest - hell, one of my only - friends.

"Good to see you, Doc," I say, extending his bag out to him. "Here's the stuff you asked Delly to pack."

Galen takes the bag gratefully. "Perfect," he says. "I owe you, Haymitch."

"I know just how you can repay me," I say, nodding at Katniss's unconscious form. "Make her whole again, Doc."

Galen looks sadly at the small, pathetic figure in the bed. "Physically she should recover nicely," he says. "It's her mind that I'm worried about."
"Brain damage?" I ask, concern in my voice.

"Mind damage," he says, glancing at Una. "What will this second attack do to her mind?"

"She's strong," Una says. "You don't know her like I do."

"And you, madam, need to get some sleep before you keel over," Galen says sternly.

Una did look haggard. I know that she had been up all night, first with Katniss in surgery, then here in the Intensive Care Unit.

Still, she was stubborn. "I'm all right," she insisted, even though she was almost visibly swaying.

"Una." I say softly. She turns to me. "No. You're not 'all right.' And you aren't doing Katniss any good by driving yourself into the ground. I promise that we'll call you if there's any change."

Una looks at me, then at Galen, then back at me. Her eyes were puffy and red, either from crying or exhaustion - or a combination of both. Finally she nods, once.

"Fine," she says resignedly. "But I need to talk to Haymitch first. I'm going to use one of the shift change rooms. Haymitch, would you walk with me?"

"Sure," I say, falling in next to her. "I'll be right back, Doc," I say over my shoulder.

"Take your time," Galen says. "Neither of us is going anywhere."

"You don't look so good yourself, Haymitch," Una says as we walk slowly down a long hallway. "And how much sleep have you had?"

"More than you," I grumble. "At least an hour last night, plus a nap on the hovercraft. So, you wanted to talk."

"Yes," she says, then suddenly stops and faces me. "How's - how's Peeta?"

I laugh humorlessly. "The last person I would have expected you to be concerned about right now is Peeta Mellark," I say.

"Haymitch, I know that what happened was not that boys fault," Una says insistently. "Galen told me that he spoke to you. He said that you told him that Peeta's reaction after - what happened - was not at all like how he reacted in District Thirteen."

"No," I reply. "He knows - at least I think he knows - what he did. He's confused, and scared. Gale took him into custody last night. He's in the Capitol by now, in the confinement wing of Victor's Mercy Hospital."

"Galen told me that he was - injured also," Una says, looking at me for confirmation.

"Yeah," I reply. "Katniss cut him - she managed to grab a kitchen knife. She sliced his arm pretty good. He cut his hand up when he grabbed the knife out of her hand and threw it through the window. The sound of the glass breaking is what alerted Lars Broadax and Rory Hawthorne to the trouble."

"Katniss told me of him," Una says with a small smile. "From Seven originally, right?"

"That's him," I confirm. "I didn't know that you two were talking."
"Oh, not that much, Haymitch. Just a few times." Una says, turning and resuming her walk to what she had called the "shift change rooms."

"Oh," I say awkwardly. "Well, Lars clocked Peeta a good one with his wooden leg. Peeta has a concussion. He also broke some bones in his right hand from..." I let my voice trail off.

"From repeatedly hitting Katniss on the left side of her head," Una finishes for me tiredly. "Haymitch, I watched the surgeries. She'll probably have to have more. I know how much damage was done. I'm a Healer, remember? I know that it's a miracle that she's still alive."

We reach the rooms. The door to one is open. I can see several bunk beds in the room and realize that these rooms are for staff to get a little sleep when they can't immediately get home.

Una turns to me. "Tell Galen to have someone wake me up in three hours."

"Una, that's not nearly enough -" I protest, before she cuts me off.

"Three hours," she says firmly. She turns to enter the room, then stops and turns back to me. "In one of the few times that we spoke, Katniss told me that - she realized that she loves Peeta. That she was sure. And that she told him."

"Yes, she does. And she did," I confirm. The question is, how will she feel when she wakes up? I say to myself.

"Haymitch," Una says haltingly, "I know that I failed her and Prim in so many ways seven years ago. I know that I have no right to expect her to love me. I -"

"Stop that!" I snap. "Una, I think I know Katniss well enough to know that she does love you! She may not say it, or even show it. But she does. Your daughter is one of the single most stubborn people I've ever met. Hell, I thought that I kept things buried inside! But she loves you. Never think that she doesn't."

Una regards me for a moment with a small, sad smile before speaking again. "And it seems that the people that she allows herself to love end up hurting her. Her father and sister die, I mentally abandon her, Peeta tries to kill her - not once but twice. What if she recovers, only to decide that it's not worth it to let herself love anyone?"

"We'll worry about that when the times comes," I say softly. "Get some sleep."

Una nods once, says "Remember. Three hours." The door closes firmly behind her. I realize then that I'm still carrying my bag. I sigh, shake my head, and begin to retrace my steps back to the Intensive Care Unit. I only have to ask for directions twice.

PART III

"Why is she shivering like that?" I ask, watching Katniss's small body trembling violently in the bed. She had undergone another round of surgeries very early that morning. I can see - or at least I imagine that I see - an improvement. The swelling on her face is way down, the ugly bruising beginning to fade.

"It's a bodily reaction to shock," Galen says. "It's a form of seizure. It'll pass quickly."

"I talked to Plutarch this morning, while Katniss was in surgery," I say.

"Oh?" Galen says. "Any news on Peeta?"
"Plutarch was more interested in news about Katniss," I reply, sighing. "I had to pull what he knew about Peeta out of him." I glance at Una, sitting in her usual spot by Katniss's bed, holding her hand.

"Go on, Haymitch," she says.

"They have him on some sort of rapid healing protocol," I say, echoing Plutarch's words. "His arm and hand lacerations are just about completely healed. They even managed to repair the ligament damage in his hand. He'll need some physical therapy to get the strength back. Same with his other hand. The bones set well and are almost completely healed."

"What about his - mental state?" Galen asks.

"He's on suicide watch," I say bluntly. "He's fully aware of what happened - and what he did. He's eating - barely. Doctor Aurelius is treating him. Plutarch says that Aurelius is 'guardedly optimistic,' whatever the hell that means."

"And his blood tests?" Galen asks.

"Tracker Jacker residual venom is at an all-time low with him," I reply. "They did find some compound in his blood that they haven't been able to identify yet."

"Any sign of that woman - Nivosus?" Una asks. I shake my head.

"Nothing. It's like she dropped off the face of the Earth. They're still searching." As I spoke a nurse brushes by me, followed by a technician and one of the residents. Together they approach the bed, now shaking considerably less. Katniss's shivers had diminished dramatically.

"Good news," the resident says, as the nurse and the technician begin working on Katniss. "We're discontinuing her induced coma, and taking her off the ventilator. We'll keep her on oxygen for another day or two, but she should be able to talk as soon as she wakes up."

"How long before she awakens?" I ask.

"Two hours at the most," the resident says. I watch as the nurse pulls a long tube out of Katniss's nose, setting it on a tray next to her.

"Oh, she won't need her feeding tube any more," the resident adds with a smile. "She'll be able to eat dinner tonight."

Una walks over and joins Galen and I. "I was just in the way over there," she explains.

"I'll stay until after she wakes up," I tell Galen and Una. "I want to have something positive to report to Plutarch. But, I need to get to the Capitol. Katniss has overwhelming support here - but I have another Victor to Mentor."

"Peeta will need you, Haymitch," Una says. She puts her hand on mine. "Please tell him, when you see him, that - that I don't blame him."

"I'm sure he'll appreciate that," I reply, squeezing her hand.

"Mom," Katniss's rusty voice is hardly louder than a whisper, but I immediately snap awake, sitting up in the chair that I had been dozing in.

"Katniss. I'm here," Una says gently. I stand up and walk slowly to the side of the bed.
"Thirsty," Katniss whispers. Una holds a tumbler full of water, guiding the straw to Katniss's lips. Katniss drinks thirstily, then relaxes her head on the pillow.

"I - hurt," Katniss manages to say. "What happened? I can't open my left eye."

Una glances at me, concern on her face. Wordlessly I reach for a push the call button on the side of the bed. Immediately a voice from the nurses station pipes up.

"Do you need something, Una?"

"She's awake," I reply.

"We'll be right there!" The voice says.

"Mom?" Katniss says. "What's going on? Why is Mister Abernathy here?"

I frown. Mister Abernathy? Una glances up at me again before replying.

"Katniss," she begins gently, "There was an - accident. You're in the hospital. But you're going to be okay, and everything will be fine."

What Katniss says next chills me right down to my core. "Where's Dad and Prim?"

I can see Una fighting for control as she answers Katniss. "They - they -"

A medical team strides into the room, headed by the same resident that was in here before. Una looks up at them almost gratefully.

"Katniss," she says evenly, "I have to get out of the way so the doctor can look at you, but I'll be right here, okay?" As she talks she stands up and joins me.

"Okay, Mom," Katniss says softly. "I hope Dad and Prim get here soon."

Una and I both step back a bit so the medical team can work on Katniss. We hear the doctor asking questions and Katniss answering, but neither of us is paying attention to the words.

"Haymitch," Una says fearfully. "She thinks - she thinks that Drew and Prim are still alive!"

"I know, I heard," I say grimly. At that moment Galen strides into the room, smiles when he sees Katniss, but looks at us in alarm as Una and I frantically beckon him over to us.

"What's going on?" He looks back at Katniss. "She's awake. That's great!"

"Doc, she called me Mister Abernathy, wondered why I was here, then asked for her father and sister," I explain quickly.

"Amnesia," he says immediately. "Probably caused by her head injuries. What did you tell her, Una?"

"I - I didn't answer," Una says. "I was too much in shock."

"Good," Galen says. "Excuse me." He turns and picks up the telephone, dials a number from memory, and speaks quickly but urgently. After he's done he hangs the phone up and turns back to us.

"Doctor Benignus Stone will be here shortly." Galen announces. "He's staff psychiatrist here. I
spoke with him yesterday about Katniss, and he warned me that something like this was possible."

"And you decided not to share that with me?" Una asks angrily.

"Una - at the time we just wanted to get Katniss past her surgeries and to a point where we could wake her up," Galen says. "And Benignus stressed that this sort of this was a possibility, not a certainty. The last thing I wanted was to burden you with another worry."

"You forget, Galen, that I am a Healer," Una says sternly. "And I would appreciate you thinking of me as a Healer first, and Katniss's mother second."

"Point taken," Galen says, mollified. "My apologies, madam."

Una suddenly hugs him, saying, "Oh, you know I can't stay angry with you! Just don't do it again!"

"Mom?" Katniss says. We all turn to face her. The medical team is finished. The resident lets us know that he will immediately notify her doctors that she is now awake, then quickly leaves.

Una hurries to Katniss's bedside. "I'm right here, Katniss."


"I - uhh - where do you know me from, young lady?" Galen asks her gently.

"You're the company doctor," Katniss says, accusation tingeing her voice. "You gave a talk in my school the other day about Miner's Cough. Dad says you're as useless as tits on a boar."

"Katniss!" Una says in a shocked tone. Galen glances back at me, a shocked look on his face.

"I'm sorry, Mom," Katniss says, exhaustion seeping into her voice. "But that's what Dad said, anyway!"

Galen steps back towards me and inclines his head towards mine. "The Company had me give that talk about Miner's Cough every year to the sixth year students," he says quietly. "So Katniss would have been eleven or twelve when she heard it."

I glance at Una, talking quietly with Katniss. "She was probably eleven," I say. "She keeps mentioning her father. Drew was dead before she turned twelve."

At that moment, a tall, casually dressed man walks into the room. Although he was older than me - his full head of hair was completely white - he was athletic and obviously enjoyed spending time outdoors. His only outward signs of his Capitol birth were some modest piercings on both ears and tattooing on the backs of both hands, barely visible against the dark brown of his skin.

"Galen," the man says with a smile. "Looks like I may have a patient after all." He then turns to Katniss.

"Hello, Katniss," he says with another smile. Katniss eyes him warily.

"Hello," she finally says, never taking her eyes off him.

"You must be Una Everdeen," the man says as Una stands up. He extends his hand to her.

"Benignus Stone. An honor indeed. I just wish the circumstances were a little more pleasant."
"Doctor," Una says, taking his hand.

"Benignus, please," he insists. "I see that Galen has told you of our talk?"

"Yes," she says. "Can you help her?"

"Help me with what, Mom?" Katniss calls out from bed.

"Katniss, you know it's rude to eavesdrop and to interrupt," Una says sternly. Katniss scowls with her one visible eye but says nothing.

Stone moves a little farther from the bed, beckoning us to follow. "Here's the good news," he says in a soft voice. "Based on what Galen has told me, and from reviewing her chart and the nature of her injuries, plus what I've seen here so far, Katniss is afflicted with post-traumatic amnesia of the retrograde variety. This is not uncommon where head injuries are involved, and the effects are usually temporary."

"How temporary?" Una asks.

"Hard to say," Stone replies. "A few hours, maybe a few days. I'm sure that her neurosurgeon will order a brain scan. Once I see that I'll have a better idea. But this sort of thing is hardly ever permanent."

"That's a relief," I say. "By the way, I'm Haymitch Abernathy."

"Benignus Stone," he replies, shaking my hand. "If, after a few days, she shows no signs of returning to normal, I may try some more aggressive therapies - but for now, my suggestion is to wait it out. Her memory, when it starts to return, will be gradual, and she won't even notice that she had lost any memories. They should just come back naturally."

"And if they don't?" Una asks.

"If they don't, I'll have to become a bit more aggressive," he explains. "Hypnosis often helps in these cases. Don't worry, Una - we'll get your daughter back. Now, if you don't mind, I would like to speak with her."

"Of course," Una says as we all turn back toward Katniss. Stone grabs a chair and perches on it next to Katniss's bed.

"Hello, Katniss," he says with a smile.

"You said that already," Katniss says flatly.

"So I did," he says. "My name is Benignus. I'd like to talk with you, if I may."

"Why?" Katniss asks.

"Just ask a few questions - get to know you a little. You can ask me questions, too."

"Okay," Katniss says. "Are you a doctor?"

"Yes," Stone replies immediately. "How old are you, Katniss?"

"Eleven," Katniss replies. "Miner's Cough sounds scary. I hope my Dad doesn't get it. Do you know where my Dad and sister Prim are?"
"I'm sorry, I don't," Stone replies. I feel Una stiffening as she stands next to me.

"I really wish they were here," Katniss says softly. "I hurt."

"I know," Stone says. "You were pretty badly hurt. We're gonna take good care of you, though. Okay?"

Katniss mulls this over. "Okay," she says, cracking a small smile for the first time.

Stone returns her smile. "So, Katniss, tell me about where you live."

**PART IV**

I delay my departure for the Capitol for the time being. There's no way that I could leave with Katniss still living in her eleven year old mind. One positive note, though - Katniss had a complete brain scan and it showed "no apparent abnormalities," according to her neurosurgeon.

Katniss is healing at a tremendous rate. I know I shouldn't be all that shocked - after all, I did see twenty-four years of Victors plucked from various arenas in terrible physical shape, only to appear on Caesar Flickerman's Games Recap show looking none the worse for wear only a few days after the end of the Games.

In a bizarre way, I'm almost used to dealing with eleven year old Katniss Everdeen. Gone is the defiant, sullen, angry girl that I had first met. Young Katniss had a temper - that, at least, hadn't changed - but she was so considerate and actually pleasant to be around. She still insists on calling me "Mister Abernathy" out of respect, and she smiles much more than her eighteen year old self.

Words can't describe how much I miss the old Katniss.

I've spoken with Doctor Juno Aurelius on a daily basis since Katniss emerged from her coma. Juno has assumed responsibility for Peeta's care and has assured me that no legal action will be taken against Peeta as long as he is recovering from his injuries and is under psychiatric care.

That, of course, includes Peeta remaining on suicide watch. At least the threat of tube-feeding him has inspired him to eat when his meals are brought to him.

Benignus Stone has developed a rapport with Young Katniss that is uncanny. He's even gotten her to not ask about the whereabouts of her father and sister. And, he's managed to talk her out of looking at herself with a hand mirror - at least for now - by telling her to wait until her injuries are completely healed.

Katniss is still as weak as a kitten, but she's getting stronger every day. The bandages that had swathed her head and face have pretty much disappeared, although her injured eye is still light-sensitive and is usually covered by an eye patch during the day.

I'm sharing a small house - a "bungalow," the locals call it - with Galen Wellgood. Not that either of us spend a lot of time there. We go there basically to shower, maybe catch a little sleep, and change clothes. I've never spent so much time in hospitals before in my life!

It's been over three days since Katniss emerged from her short, but necessary, medically induced coma, and still she's shown no sign of remembering anything past age eleven. Benignus is even toying with the idea of using hypnosis - at least a light trance - to see if he can't, somehow, reach those buried memories.

As it turned out, he didn't have to.
Katniss’s emergence just happened to take place when I was the only one there. It was the middle of the night. Galen had gone back to the bungalow to catch a few hours sleep. Una was napping in one of the shift change rooms. Benignus, of course, was home in bed. I had been napping fitfully in a chair in Katniss’s Intensive Care Unit, having decided that, as soon as Una awakens, I’m heading “home” to catch some sleep - and take a couple of well-deserved belts also.

I awaken to the sound of quiet sobbing. Katniss had awakened before crying, but somehow this was - different. I struggle to wake up. Maybe a drink of water will settle her down. Maybe a -

"Mom?" Katniss calls out. "Mom! Mom!" Suddenly her voice rises dramatically. I'm at her bedside like a shot. "Katniss, shhhh, it's okay," I murmur, trying to sound calming and reassuring as I settle in the chair next to her bed. There's a small nightlight glowing near the floor. It gives off enough light to see the tears rolling down Katniss's face. "Mom?" Katniss asks again, then opens her eyes. She frowns a bit as she focuses on me. "Oh," she says, "Haymitch."

"Yeah, it's - wait a minute." I examine her closely. "What did you just call me?"


"Sleeping," I reply. Katniss appears to mull this information over before speaking again. "My Dad and Prim are both dead. Real or not real?" She asks, her chin beginning to tremble. "Real," I say softly, brushing a strand of hair off her forehead. "And Peeta," she says, fear in her voice. "Peeta - he did - he...hurt me."

"Yes," I reply gently. "He did."

Katniss stares up at me, her Seam-gray eyes shiny with unshed tears, and I knew at that moment that I was seeing my Katniss again...and soon her tears were no longer unshed.

As her sobs began again, I did the only thing that I could think of doing. I reached down and took her into my arms, feeling her arms cling to me almost desperately as she cries.

I softly kiss her forehead and whisper, "Welcome back, Sweetheart. Welcome back."

PART V

Katniss is back. And as soon as I calmed her down I went to the shift change room and got her mother. Galen and Benignus were the next two on my call list. Finally, I called Plutarch, who, of course, was not available to take my call. Resignedly I left a message for him to contact me immediately at Odair Memorial as soon as possible.

I return to Katniss's unit in Intensive Care to find Una sitting quietly with her. Neither one is talking, but there's no need for words right now. The relieved expression on Una's face is speaking volumes.

In fact, Katniss appears to be dozing as I walk in. "Galen and Benignus are on their way in," I say to Una. "I left a message for Plutarch to call me." I pull up a chair and sit down.
"I suppose you'll be off to the Capitol now," Una says quietly as she brushes a loose strand of hair off Katniss's forehead.

I nod. "Peeta needs me. He's got no one there to advocate for him except Aurelius. I'm leaving as soon as I can arrange for transportation through Plutarch."

"I understand." Una stares down at her daughter's face. "There was a young girl in here this afternoon, asking about Katniss. I've seen her here at the hospital before. I think she volunteers here."

"Oh?" I ask.

"Yes," Una replies. "She told me that her name is Lilly." The mention of her name makes me smile.

"That's Katniss's District Four pen pal," I say. "Her letter was one of the first that Katniss read and answered. They've been writing each other regularly ever since."

"I'm sure that Katniss would like to see her, now that she's - herself again," Una says. "I wish I knew her last name - it would make things so much easier to find where in the hospital that she volunteers at."

"Donegal," Katniss mutters. "Lilly Donegal. And yes, I would love to see her."

"Hey, Sweetheart," I say. "Sorry, we thought you were asleep."

"I was," Katniss says with a sigh, "But how could I stay asleep with you two talking?"

I was forming an appropriately sarcastic reply when one of the technicians entered the room. "Mister Abernathy? You have a telephone call at the nurse's station, sir."

I glance over at him. "Thanks. Be right there." I stand up from my chair. "It's probably Plutarch. Be right back." I hurry down to the nurse's station where the call was indeed from Plutarch, who informs me that he's ecstatic about Katniss regaining her memory, and apologetic when he tells me that he can't arrange for transportation for me any sooner than tonight. But, he assured me that this hovercraft would have landing clearance at Victor's Mercy.

I head back to Katniss's unit, after first grabbing a cup of coffee at the nurse's station. As I approach the open door I hear Katniss's voice.

"Mom," she says quietly.

"Mmm?"

"I'm sorry," Katniss says. I stop dead in my tracks. Katniss apologizing to Una? This is something that I don't want to interrupt - or miss. I stand quietly and listen.

"For what, Katniss?" Una asks.

"I always thought that I was just like Dad, and Prim was just like you," Katniss says. "But it wasn't until after Prim was - when she - you know...left us, that I realized just how much I take after you, too."

"Katniss, you don't -"

"Mom. Please. I've thought about this a lot." Katniss pauses and I can hear the sound of tissues
being removed from a box. "When Dad died, and the Sadness took you over - oh, I was so angry with you! You were just sitting there, day after day, watching Prim and I slowly starve, and doing nothing about it! And at times, I almost hated you for your weakness."

I can hear someone quietly sobbing, and I realize that both of them are crying.

"And then - Prim," Katniss says, her voice trembling. "And I did exactly what you did. Retreated into myself. Shut everyone else out. But still, it wasn't until much later, after I went back to Twelve, that I finally understood. I couldn't help myself, or change how I felt, no matter how much I wanted to. And neither could you, after Dad died. So, I - I'm sorry. For giving you such a hard time. For not understanding."

"Oh, Katniss," Una almost whispers.

"And I do love you, Mom," Katniss says softly.

"I love you, Katniss."

The silence that follows for the next few seconds is my cue. I enter the room to see that Katniss and Una have very obviously been crying. Una is gripping Katniss's hand. They both look up at me as I enter the room.

"I leave tonight for the Capitol," I announce without preamble.

"To see Peeta?" Katniss asks quietly.

I pull up a chair next to the bed and sit down. "Yeah, Sweetheart," I reply. "To see Peeta."

Katniss stares at the far wall for a few seconds before speaking. "It was her, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," I reply. "We think so anyway. She's disappeared. No one's seen her for days. But I have proof that she was manipulating Peeta."

"Remember the deal I made with Coin?" Katniss asks. "The last condition?"

I remember it well. The last line on her crumpled paper when she informed Alma Coin of her conditions for being the Mockingjay.

I KILL SNOW.

"I remember," I reply. Her new promise. No longer a condition. But I can see it as plainly as if she wrote it down.

I KILL NIVOSUS.

PART VI

After a few hours of fitful sleep in the hot, thick, humid soup that passes for late summer air in District Four, I rise from the narrow, uncomfortable bed one last time. I shower, shave and get dressed. My bag is already packed.

I had called back to District Twelve earlier, to bring Thom up to date on Katniss's condition. He sounded harried. The Twelve Clans were now pouring into the district, setting up their yurts in vacant lots both in Town and in parts of the Seam not being used to grow food or for the various hovercraft and larger hoverplanes that come in regularly. He mentions that Elders Mimas and Willem have been an enormous help in getting the Clans settled in.
Thom promises to share my news about Katniss's slow but steady recovery, and adds his own well wishes for both her and Peeta. I promise to pass them on to Katniss.

I leave the little house for the last time, closing and locking the door behind me. It's a short walk from the bungalow to the hospital. Before starting my walk, I pull out my flask, uncap it, and allow myself one healthy pull. The liquor burns all the way down my throat and settles warmly in my stomach as I make the quick walk to the hospital. Once there, I head straight for Katniss's room.

Katniss's doctors had moved her during the day. No longer requiring the around the clock care found in the Intensive Care Unit, she's now in a regular post-surgical ward. I walk into the room, noticing that at least here she has a window. The room is much brighter than Intensive Care and not nearly as cluttered.

Katniss was actually sitting in a chair, the remains of dinner scattered on a tray that she had pushed off to one side. Una, of course, was sitting quietly next to the bed. They were talking quietly as I enter the room.

"Well, this is an improvement," I say with a smile as I look around the room.

"Katniss had visitors this afternoon," Una informs me with a smile of her own.

"Visitors? As in plural?" I ask, pulling up a chair.

"Lilly stopped by to see me," Katniss says. "She said that she'll come by every day that I'm here. She's such a sweet girl."

"And?" I press.

"Annie Odair came by also," Katniss says a little wistfully. "She brought little Finnick with her. He's an adorable baby. Annie's doing better. She told me to tell you that you're on her shit list for not letting her know sooner that I was here."

I smile, thinking of Annie actually using a term like "shit list." Annie Cresta-Odair was probably one of the sweetest Victors I had ever met, in spite of her own bouts with mental illness.

"That's great, Sweetheart," I say. "I'm sorry I missed her."

"So," Katniss says. "You're leaving."

"In less than an hour," I confirm, nodding.

"Can you do something for me?" She hands me an envelope. "Can you give that to Peeta?"

I slip the envelope into an inner pocket on my jacket. "You know it," I say.

"Don't you read it," Katniss suddenly blurts. "It's - well - it's personal. Only for Peeta."

"I promise," I assure her.

"Katniss's doctors were in here earlier also," Una says. "They're starting her on physical therapy tomorrow."

"That's great!" I say. "Sweetheart, you'll be outta here before you know it." I glance at the clock. "Dammit. Sorry, I'm running behind, and I have to talk with Galen and Benignus before I take off."

Una stands up, walks over to me, and hugs me tightly. "Thank you so much, Haymitch," she says.
quietly. "For everything." I awkwardly return her hug, then turn to Katniss, still sitting in her chair.

"No, Sweetheart, don't bother getting up," I joke as I bend down. Katniss shocks me by grabbing me tightly around my neck. As I hug her I can feel her body shaking. I pull away slightly and smile down at her.

"Hey, hey, what's this?" I ask, handing her a tissue. "I won't be gone forever. You'll see me again soon and I'm sure you'll start nagging me about how much I drink again too!"

"Someone has to," Katniss says in a soft voice, wiping her nose and eyes, wincing a bit as she touches her damaged eye. "Only because...maybe I want you around for a while."

I'm truly at a loss for words. "Well," I finally stammer, "I need to run. Katniss, do try to stay out of trouble while I'm gone, okay?"

Katniss glowers at me for a moment, then smiles. "I'll try," she says. "Have a safe trip, Haymitch."

I turn and walk out of the room before either of them could see my own tears make an appearance.
"I talked with Galen earlier today," Aurelius says as he sits in the chair that the orderly had brought for him. Once he's done the chair will be removed from my cell - I mean, my room.

"Oh," I reply. I scratch idly at the healing laceration on my left arm. The doctors here at Victor's Mercy wanted to use an anti-scarring agent on my arm. I refused.

"Don't you want to know what we talked about?" Aurelius asks. I glance over at him. A kindly, middle-aged man. Incredibly gentle with his patients. One of the toughest men I've ever met.

"Sure," I say listlessly. It was about me, I'm sure. As if I give a flying fuck.

"Katniss is awake," Aurelius says carefully, watching me intently for any reaction. I don't disappoint him as I stiffen noticeably. "She was a little...confused...at first, but Galen says that the worst is behind her. She's going to be fine."

Fine? What a joke. Katniss will never be "fine." Thanks to me.

"That's...really great," I manage to stammer out. I don't look him in the eye.

"Peeta," Aurelius says softly. "I have some more news for you. I got your lab results back today. Galen had been concerned about a substance in your blood samples that he was not able to isolate. We've managed to isolate and identify this substance."

"I'm guessing it's not tracker jacker venom," I reply sarcastically.

"No," Aurelius says, pointedly ignoring the sarcasm. "It's a derivative of a drug known as lysergide. Lysergide, used by itself, causes hallucinations and alters the users perception of reality. This derivative causes paranoia and significant hallucinations, very similar to tracker jacker venom, only without the lasting effects."

"Nivosus," I say, my voice almost a whisper.

"Doctor Drusilla Nivosus is the number one suspect for causing your relapse," Aurelius says with a nod. "Every district has been alerted to watch for her."

"She's missing?" I ask.

"She's disappeared completely," Aurelius replies. "The Ministry of Intelligence thinks that she is getting help. They just don't know from who."

"Hmmph," I grunt. I flex the fingers of my right hand, wincing a bit at the pain. The bones have quick-healed, but there's still tenderness. I welcome the pain. It reminds me of what I really am.

"Peeta," Aurelius says gently, "The discovery of the lysergide derivative in your blood means that you were not responsible for what happened." I glance over at him, saying nothing, then turn away. "Are you listening to me?" Aurelius asks, irritation tingeing his voice.

"I heard you," I reply dully. "And I am responsible. I'm responsible for nearly killing the one
person left on this earth that I truly love."

"Peeta, you're -"

"NO!" I shout, making Aurelius jump a little. "When I first started hearing the voice...when I first started having those awful, violent thoughts...I should have left. Had Galen lock me away. But instead, I stayed. Stayed with Katniss! And I...and I..." I start to cry again. And I hate myself for it.

Aurelius says nothing, but instead pulls two tissues from a box and wordlessly hands them to me. I angrily snatch them out of his hand, noisily blowing my nose.

I throw both wadded up tissues into the toilet, hearing the automatic flush as the flimsy paper hits the water. I stand up, suddenly restless, and pace back and forth in my tiny room. Aurelius just sits and watches me, a serene expression on his face.

I catch sight of my face in the small metal mirror mounted above the sink as I pace and I suddenly stop. I stare long and hard at my reflection. My face is gaunt, my eyes red-rimmed. My hair is wild and unruly. I have several days beard growth on my face - not that I have much of a beard to begin with.

"I called Katniss a mutt, doc. Did you know that?" I ask with a bitter chuckle.

"Yes," Aurelius replies as he watches me intently.

I rub my hand over my face wearily. "I was wrong," I say. "Any time I want to see a mutt, all I gotta do is look in this mirror."

I lay back on my bed, staring listlessly at the ceiling. The ceiling, like the walls, is painted a muted pastel orange. My favorite color. Aurelius told me that pastel colors are supposed to have a calming effect - like the soft music that's always playing from carefully hidden speakers.

My bed is comfortable enough - as comfortable as a bed can be without sheets or blankets, that is. A bare mattress and a bare pillow. Aurelius told me that I'm on a suicide watch and can't have anything that I could fashion into a noose to hang myself with. They even considered taking my Robo-leg, afraid that I would try to take it apart and maybe strangle myself with the wires inside or something. What a laugh. There's nothing in my cell that I could tie off to. The faucet is too flimsy. No doorknob on my side of the door.

Even though I'm in Victor's Mercy Medical Center, considered to be the absolute best hospital in Panem, I'm locked up as securely as if I was back in the prison that I had been held in after my capture from the clock arena. Aurelius explained that I'm in what's known as a "confinement" ward - kind of a combination of hospital and prison.

My room...or cell, if you will...is small. The bed is bolted to the wall - a frame with a flexible netting stretched over it, on which rested the mattress and pillow. A toilet sits in the corner with a single roll of toilet paper. A sink and small metal mirror. The one amenity that separates this from a jail cell is the call button on the wall. I press it and someone at the nurse's station answers instantly.

My meals are brought to me three times a day. An orderly sits with me while I eat and, once done, immediately takes the tray. If I want to brush my teeth an orderly brings me a complete tooth care kit, and leaves with it as soon as I'm done. I'm offered books, magazines, and newspapers to read, but I'm not interested.
My only visitor is Aurelius. He spends hours with me every day. We talk - or rather, he talks, and I grunt. I know he's only trying to help, but I don't want his help - or anyone's help, for that matter. Aside from the hospital staff, Aurelius is the only person I ever see.

Until today.

The door slides open almost noiselessly. My eyes remain riveted on an imaginary spot on the ceiling. I hear a brief burst of noise from the hallway that disappears almost immediately as the door slides shut again. I hear the sound of a chair being set down on the floor.

"What shall we talk about today, doc?" I ask, never averting my eyes from the ceiling. "I know. How about we sing instead? Do you know the words to the valley song? It was the first song I ever heard Katniss sing. I can teach you if you don't know it - although I can't sing half as good as Katniss."

"I already know it," a gruff voice replies. I sit bolt upright, my eyes widening in surprise as I see my visitor for the first time.

Haymitch.

He's standing near the foot of my bed, the stool that he brought in sitting behind him. He looks like he's aged five years since I last saw him. I awkwardly climb to my feet, ignoring the pain in my arms as I push myself off the bed.

I stare at Haymitch for long seconds, feeling a wave of emotion pass through me. Haymitch stares back at me, his face an unreadable mask.

"It's you," I whisper. "You came."

"Good to see you, kid," he says as I collapse, sobbing, into his arms.

"I never thought -" I begin to say after I was able to get control of myself again.

"What? That I would abandon you?" Haymitch asks sternly. "Hey, I'm good, kid - but even I can't be in two places at once!"

"You...you were - with her?" I stammer.

"Yeah," he replies. "She's - Peeta, I won't lie to you. She had a pretty rough time. But when I left she was doing a lot better. She's gonna be fine, I think."

"Fine." I whisper bitterly. "She's gonna be fine. In spite of me."

"That's another thing," Haymitch says sternly. "Aurelius tells me that you've been less than cooperative. Believe it or not, kid, but what happened here is not your fault."

I open my mouth to protest but Haymitch immediately throws his hand up. "Shut up. I'm doing the talking here." He sits me on my bed and pulls up his stool, sitting down heavily. "Aurelius told me all about your 'If only I had left' rants. Kid, did you ever consider that Katniss would never have let you leave? This may come as a shock to you, but everyone is on your side here!"

"Not everyone," I reply sharply. "I see how some of the nurses and orderlies look at me when they come in. It's like they can't even stand to be around me!"

Haymitch sighs deeply. "Yellow journalism at its finest," he mutters. I have no idea what he
"Peeta, ever since the - incident - there's been rumors flying all over Panem about what happened. And some of these rumors have been fueled by people in the media that, quite frankly, should know better." Haymitch pauses and rubs his face with his hands. "When the truth comes out, a lot of people are gonna owe you a huge apology."

"What truth?" I snap. "The truth that I almost killed Katniss? Again?! That Snow made me into a monster? That truth?"

"Settle down, kid," Haymitch says calmly. "We have proof that you were being manipulated by Nivosus. Remember when you could hear my voice?" I nod, shuddering slightly at the memory of another, silky, voice invading my mind. "I know how she did it. And I know when she did it. All I need to do is present proof to the High Tribunal and you will be cleared."

"High Tribunal?" I ask in confusion. "I don't understand. Aurelius told me that the charges against me haven't been filed. Not that they shouldn't," I add bitterly. "After all, I'm guilty of everything that they -" 

"That's enough!" Haymitch barks. "Look, kid, I understand your feelings of guilt. I've been there myself. When Snow killed my Mama, brother and girl because of my defiance, it - well, it ate me up. It still eats me up. And I'll be fucked if I'm gonna sit back and see that happen to you! You had no control over what happened! None! And I'm gonna make the Justices on the Tribunal see that - whether you want it or not!"

I sit silently for a few moments. "Still my Mentor, I see," I finally say with a sigh.

"I'm finding out that it's a lifetime job," Haymitch grumbles. "I'm supposed to appear before the High Tribunal tomorrow morning. You will cooperate fully with me. Is that clear?"

"Am I appearing also?" I ask in alarm.

"Not in person, no," Haymitch replies. "Kid, you can forget the criminal charges. This hearing is to determine your competency."

"For what?" I ask.

Haymitch takes a deep breath before replying. "The prosecution will try to prove that you are a danger to society at large. That you are still a risk due to your hijacking. My job is to prove the prosecution wrong."

"And what if you don't?" I ask softly.

"If I don't," Haymitch replies slowly, "You will be committed to a psychiatric hospital until the doctors there decide that you are no longer a threat to society." Haymitch pauses briefly, meeting my eyes with his own. "You could be committed for life."

"Life," I whisper.

Haymitch reaches over and pats my shoulder. "That's not happening. Trust me."

"So you're saving me this time?" I ask. "Sending silver parachutes my way? Is that the deal you made with her?"

"I'm saving you both...again," Haymitch replies simply as he stands up, ignoring my last comment.
"She has nothing to do with this." He reaches into an inner pocket of his jacket and removes an envelope.

"I have to go for now," he says. "But I'll be back." He holds the envelope out towards me. "This is for you. From Katniss. Don't worry, I didn't read it."

I stare at the envelope like it's going to suddenly turn into a snake and bite me, before I finally extend a trembling hand and take it from Haymitch. I turn it over. Written on the front of the envelope was a single word in a slightly careless hand that I've come to know so well.

**PEETA**

Haymitch gives me a small smile, turns, and knocks at the door. After a moment, the door slides open. An orderly comes in and picks up the stool that Haymitch had been sitting on and departs without a word.

"Haymitch," I say softly.

Haymitch turns at the door and looks back at me. "What?" He asks quietly.

"Thanks," I reply, holding up the envelope. "For this. And for - everything else."

"Anytime, kid," he says with a smile.

"Come see me again? Soon?" I plead.

"Count on it," he says with another grin, then he steps through the door. The door slides shut immediately.

I sit back on my bed, clutching the envelope in my hand. I turn it over. It's sealed securely. I sit like that for hours, holding the envelope, staring at it, afraid to open it - and afraid to not open it. Finally, with trembling fingers, I carefully rip the envelope open, take a deep, shaky breath, and pull out a single sheet of paper, neatly folded. I drop the envelope on the bed next to me and carefully unfold the paper, and begin to read.

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**Dear Peeta,**

You know I'm no good at saying how I feel. You never have that problem. But they won't let me call you, so I have to write you this letter. If the envelope is open when you get it, then Haymitch is in trouble.

In spite of myself, I end up smiling at that last line. I take another deep breath and read on:

*It seems that we can never catch a break. It's one thing after another with you and I. I have to tell you that I have a whole new set of nightmares now. About you. I know that probably hurts you but I will never keep anything from you again, even if it's not so nice.*

I knew it. She blames me. I clumsily wipe my eyes on the sleeve of my white scrub top. I don't want to read any more - but I have to find out what else she has to say. With great effort I force my eyes back to the paper.

*Haymitch told me that you weren't anything like you were after that first time, in 13. That now you were confused and scared. Like I am now. He said that he found out how that bitch was controlling you. So I know that it's not your fault. I thought about telling you here that I forgive you but then I*
realized that forgiveness is something that someone does when another has knowingly hurt them, and that's something that you didn't do. Peeta, there's nothing to forgive here because you did nothing wrong.

I'm doing okay and the doctors say that I will recover completely. I have another doctor helping me out, too. He's like Aurelius. He even knows him. His name is Benignus Stone. He and I talk a lot, mostly about you. He helped me realize that, no matter what, I love you.

I have to stop reading after I read those last three words. How? How can she still love me after I did that to her? I read on:

I'm scared, though. Scared that what they did to you will never really go away. But I'm more scared of losing you now more than ever.

I wanted you to know that. And I hope that you love me still. Haymitch will help you, I know he will. And once you and I are back home, I hope that we can finally find some peace and live quietly with each other. I will even help you run the bakery, once you get it going.

Get better so we can be together.

Love Always,

Katniss

PS - I met Lilly, the girl from 4 that I write letters to. She's so sweet and nice and told me that she's thinking of you. My Mom and I understand each other now. Annie came to see me with baby Finnick. Annie said to say that she loves you, too. The baby looks just like Finnick.

I love you, Peeta - REAL

I hug her letter to me as I cry. Only one thought goes through my mind.

I could live a hundred lifetimes and never deserve this girl.

The Holo-TV flickers to life against the far wall. I didn't even know it was there until now. The nurse taps a few controls and a room comes into view. On a raised dais sit five figures, clothed in what appear to be solemn black robes. I know exactly what I'm looking at, even if I had never seen it before.

The High Tribunal of the Republic of Panem.

In District Twelve, there were no courts. Oh, sure, there was the Justice Building. But punishments for crimes were meted out by the hated Peacekeepers. I remember all too well the brutal flogging that Gale Hawthorne endured at the hands of our new Head Peacekeeper, Romulus Thread, for the crime of poaching. Thread had arrested Gale, determined his guilt, and administered his punishment - all in less than one hour.

But Capitol citizens, they were treated differently. Depending on the severity of their crime, they would be tried in front of a Tribunal. The Low Tribunals were administered by a single Justice, who would hear cases involving non-serious misdemeanors. Middle Tribunals would hear cases involving serious misdemeanors and lesser felonies, and would involve three Justices. The High Tribunal had five Justices and would hear only the most serious felonies, as well as appeals made from decisions handed down by a Middle Tribunal. Now that the new Republic of Panem has been born, Tribunals were for all citizens, not just those Capitol-born. Eventually, each district would
I have Tribunals of their own. For now, though, serious crimes would still be tried in the Capitol.

I guess Attempted Murder of the Mockingjay was considered serious enough for the High Tribunal.

"Do I have to watch this?" I ask the nurse as she turns to leave.

"Mister Abernathy left very specific instructions," the nurse replies apologetically. "I'm sorry," she adds.

"Not your fault," I reply. The nurse leaves my room without another word. I glance back at the screen. Not much was going on. The five Justices were shuffling through some papers or examining display screens set up in front of them. At the base of the raised dais, a small desk was set up where a young woman sat, wearing a pair of headphones. A keyboard and display screen was set up in front of her. Further back, there were two other tables set up. Another young woman was seated at the table to the right. The table to the left was empty.

As I watched, I see a man approach the table to the left. I realize with a shock that it's Haymitch. He places a case on the table and sits down. No sooner did he sit than a man steps forward, dressed in the Defense Forces uniform, and instructs everyone in the room to rise.


"Be seated." The First Justice says. Everyone sits. The First Justice examines the display screen to his front, then turns towards the rest of the room.

"This preliminary hearing is to determine whether or not sufficient evidence exists to hold this matter over for a full competency hearing. If this matter is upheld then this Tribunal will set the date for the start of the full hearing beginning three days hence. People's Advocate, are you ready to proceed?"

The young woman at the table to the right stands up. "The People are ready, Your Mercy."

"Advocate for the Defendant, are you ready to proceed?" The First Justice asks Haymitch.

Haymitch lurches to his feet. Has he been drinking? I say to myself. But his voice was steady. "Ready, First Justice."

"Advocate, First Justice is my title," the First Justice says, not unkindly. "Traditionally, Justices are addressed as either 'Your Mercy' or 'Your Wisdom.' Either is appropriate."

"In that case, I'll address you as 'Your Wisdom,'" Haymitch replies. "'Your Mercy' implies that mercy will be needed here today. All that'll be needed today is a good dose of common sense."

The First Justice smiles a little before replying. "Duly noted, Advocate Abernathy." He turns to the other table. "People's Advocate, you may proceed."

I watch and listen as the "People's Advocate" - the young woman at the table opposite from Haymitch - stands up and begins to present the argument that I am not only a danger to Katniss personally, but to society at large due to my hijacking. She calls several witnesses - some doctor that's an authority on the effects of tracker jacker venom, a medical technician that was present during my attack on Katniss in District Thirteen, Sergeant Achilles Franklin, who was the senior Defense Forces official on the scene at the attack in Twelve, even Gale Hawthorne and Doctor
Juno Aurelius. Only the tracker jacker expert and Aurelius testified in person - every other witness gave video testimony. I actually started to find it interesting, if I could forget that what was said could potentially lock me away for the rest of my life.

I shuddered as photographs of the scene were displayed. I remember throwing up when they showed pictures of Katniss, horribly beaten and bloody. Those must have caused me to lapse into a seizure as well, because I missed the rest of Franklin's testimony (the pictures were shown when he first started to speak), and I missed all of Gale's testimony as well. When I finally regained consciousness the TV screen was blank, there was a nurse and an orderly sitting in my room, and I was on the bed in restraints.

I groan as I open my eyes. "Welcome back," the nurse says gently.

"What...what -" I stammer.

"You had a seizure. We had to medicate and restrain you," the nurse explains.

"Oh," I mumble. "Sorry."

"No need to apologize," the nurse says with a smile. "Would you like something to drink?"

"Yes, please," I reply, suddenly aware of my dry mouth.

The orderly moves forward, holding a cup with a straw. "The restraints have to stay on, unfortunately," the nurse explains, "So we'll help you with the straw."

The orderly guides the straw to my mouth and I drink deeply, noticing that it's orange juice. After I drink I lay my head back down. "Thanks," I mutter to the orderly. He smiles and nods in response.

I notice something about the orderly's mouth. Something familiar. "You're Avox?" I ask.

The orderly smiles and nods again. "I'm sorry," I whisper. He shrugs and makes some complicated signs with his hands at the nurse.

"He said to tell you, 'No worries. It is what it is.'" The nurse translates for me. "Most of our orderlies are Avox. Our genetics engineers are working on tissue re-growth therapies that may be successful in regrowing tongues. Zoticus, here, is on the list when they begin clinical trials." The orderly grins and makes more signs.

"He said 'You'll be sorry when I can talk again. You'll never shut me up!'" In spite of myself I can't help but grin. This man had his tongue cut out for some nameless crime under the old Snow regime, was relegated to life as a virtual slave, and still remains positive.

"What happened to the video?" I ask suddenly, taking note of the blank screen.

"They're in recess," the nurse explains. "We contacted Doctor Aurelius and asked him if we shouldn't perhaps turn it off to prevent - well, more occurrences. He checked with Mister Abernathy and the answer is still, unfortunately, 'no.' Apparently the law states that you have a right to face your accusers, even if you can't do it in person. But Doctor Aurelius assures me that his testimony should not adversely affect you in any way."

I sigh and lay back on the bed. It doesn't matter anyway. This latest seizure has pretty much confirmed what I had been fearing for a while.

I understand that what's happened to me is not my fault. And I also know that, no matter what, I'll
never be free of my seizures and flashbacks. All Victors are damaged to a certain extent. Nightmares, insomnia, mood swings, alcohol and drug addiction - the list is endless. Toss in Capitol torture and hijacking and you have me - a ticking time bomb with a fuse that no one is sure how long it will burn for.

I think about Katniss's letter to me. I expected - hell, I deserved - to be told by her to stay far away. Instead, her letter was filled with nothing but love and a desire to be reunited with me as soon as possible - even after all that's happened.

I shake my head. I could live a hundred lifetimes and never deserve this girl. She's had enough suffering already in her eighteen years than most people have to go through in a lifetime. She doesn't need any more.

Suddenly, I see things more clearly than I ever have. I know what I have to do if I want Katniss to live a full, happy life. And if I want to give her a chance at that life, I have to do whatever it takes to make sure that I don't end up locked away in a psychiatric ward for the rest of my life.

The TV screen comes back to life as the People's Advocate calls Doctor Aurelius forward to testify. He sits in a lone chair to the front of the Justices of the High Tribunal and inserts his right hand into a slot on the arm of the chair. A green light flashes over his hand.

The People's Advocate speaks. "Please state your title, name, and profession for the record."

"Doctor Juno Aurelius, psychiatrist." Aurelius replies.

"What is your relationship to Peeta Mellark, Doctor?" The Advocate asks.

"I'm his psychiatrist," Aurelius replies.

"For how long?"

"Hmmmm...ever since his rescue during the Rebellion. Almost a year, I'd say."

"Were you present during his attack on Katniss Everdeen while they were both in District Thirteen?"

"No. I was assigned to Mister Mellark following that incident."

"Could you describe his state of mind when you first met Mister Mellark?"

"Objection!" Haymitch stands up. "The People's Advocate is asking for an opinion, not fact, Your Wisdom."

"Your Mercy," The People's Advocate responds, "Doctor Aurelius is a trained mental health professional, with a well established reputation. And, as this is a preliminary hearing to determine mental competency rather than a criminal matter, his opinion should be considered as admissible testimony."

The First Justice confers quickly and quietly with the other Justices before responding. "The Doctor's opinion will be allowed. Objection is not sustained. However, Mister Abernathy - good catch."

"I watch a lot of Capitol Crime Dramas, Your Wisdom," Haymitch replies as he sits back down.

There is a brief ripple of laughter before the First Justice says, "You may answer the question,
"Peeta Mellark was extremely agitated and violent when I first met him," Aurelius says.

"Was this due to an interrogation technique known as 'hijacking'?” The People's Advocate asks. Aurelius nods. "Yes. Peeta Mellark is the only known case of hijacking to be medically treated."

"And why is that, Doctor?"

"To the best of my knowledge, all of the other hijacking victims are dead."

"I see. And, in your opinion, have Mister Mellark's post-hijacking treatments been successful?"

"His treatments have shown promise, yes."

"So how do you account for his continued seizures and his need for regular injections of medication?"

"You have to understand, that we are basically in uncharted waters here. Following his capture at the end of the Third Quarter Quell, Peeta Mellark was subjected to brutal interrogation techniques prior to the hijacking. And tracker jacker venom targets the fear centers of the brain and causes hallucinations that prey on the victims' deepest fears. When Peeta Mellark first arrived in District Thirteen, the levels of tracker jacker venom in his system were at near fatal levels. Everything that we've done to treat his condition has been largely trial and error."

"Thank you, Doctor. One final question. In your opinion, will Peeta Mellark ever be free from residual effects of hijacking? In other words, will he continue to have these attacks - these seizures - for the rest of his life?"

"Objection!" Haymitch barks, standing up. "Your Wisdom -"

"Objection is not sustained, Mister Abernathy," the First Justice replies in an even tone. "Under the same grounds as before. This is not a criminal tribunal. Please take your seat."

Haymitch grumbles as he sits down slowly. "Doctor, you may answer the question," the First Justice says.

"In my opinion," Aurelius answers slowly, "I just don't know. But it seems likely."

"Thank you, Doctor," the People's Advocate says. "I have nothing further, Your Mercy." The Advocate sits back at her table.

"Advocate Abernathy?" The First Justice says. "Any questions for the witness?"

"Yeah - I mean, yes, Your Wisdom," Haymitch says, standing up and moving around to the front of his table.

"Doc - I mean, Doctor Aurelius," Haymitch begins, "You mentioned that Peeta Mellark was very violent and agitated when he first arrived at District Thirteen. Did he remain in that same state?"

"No," Aurelius replies. "He progressively became calmer over time."

"What do you attribute to that?"

"We started Peeta on an aggressive anti-hijacking therapy, using measured doses of morphling in
combination with calming images and sounds. We also had him spend time with other District Twelve survivors in an effort to help him separate his true memories with the false memories that were implanted by his captors."

"Who suggested the morphling therapy?"

"Primrose Everdeen."

"Objection!" The People's Advocate stands up. "Relevance, Your Mercy."

"Advocate Abernathy?" The First Justice says. "Can you show relevance?"

"Primrose Everdeen is...was...Katniss Everdeen's younger sister, Your Wisdom," Haymitch replies. "Not only was she a very accomplished Healer in her own right - at the tender age of thirteen, I might add - but she, along with her mother - another talented Healer - were both dedicated to Peeta Mellark's recovery."

"Advocate, this is a stretch - but I'll allow it," the First Justice says sternly. "This once. But, I warn you, do not attempt to play to the sympathies of this Tribunal."

"Understood, Your Wisdom," Haymitch says. "Doctor, would Peeta Mellark become agitated at any time during his recovery?"

"Yes," Aurelius replies. "Whenever Katniss Everdeen was mentioned."

"And why was that?"

"Everything about her elicited a violent fear response in him," Aurelius replies. "His altered perception saw her not as a human being, but as a mutt - a Capitol creation."

"Yet didn't Peeta request to meet with Katniss after a time?"

"Yes. He did."

"And how did that meeting go?"

"Well - he wasn't violent. He was quite hostile to her, though."

"And did he remain hostile to her?"

"Yes. But over time, hostility was replaced by confusion."

"Confusion?"

"Yes. Once Peeta began to sort out the memories that were real from those that were not real, he would spend a great deal of time and effort to grasp the real while pushing the not real away."

"I see. Skipping ahead a bit, how would you assess Peeta Mellark's progress from the time of his release from your full time care to this latest incident?"

"Positive. Peeta has been under the personal care of Doctor Galen Wellgood for several months, and every report on the progress of both Peeta Mellark and Katniss Everdeen has been positive. He was responding very well to medication, we had developed an injectable solution for him to self administer if he felt a seizure coming on. Plus, with help from our new out-district friends, he was able to use the herb cannabis to further control these attacks."
"And yet, Peeta suffered through his most significant seizure since that first attack on Katniss Everdeen in District Thirteen."

"Yes. In the days leading up to the attack, he had reported hearing voices and had been experiencing very powerful urges. These anomalies began occurring after he began receiving treatment from Doctor Drusilla Nivosus. In my opinion Doctor Nivosus is personally responsible for, and indeed, directly caused Peeta Mellark's seizure."

"Objection!" The People's Advocate shouts out. "Your Mercy, Doctor Nivosus has merely been named as a person of interest in this case, and was not mentioned as a direct suspect in any wrongdoing at any time during People's discovery. I move to quash any and all evidence regarding this individual from these proceedings!"

"Advocate Abernathy?" The First Justice says, looking at Haymitch. "There was no mention made of this Doctor Nivosus in any capacity other than as a potential involved party in the report filed by the District Twelve Defense Forces Acting Commander, Sergeant...Franklin, nor did you provide the People with your evidence list."

"Your Wisdom," Haymitch says, rising slowly to his feet, "I understand that, under the old government, a defendant must prove their innocence before a Tribunal, and was required to provide all evidence to the People. However, as I understand the new laws, a citizen is innocent until guilt can be proven by the People, and there is no obligation to provide the People with any evidence that would potentially help their case."

"Mister Abernathy," The First Justice says wearily, "Need I remind you that this is not a criminal matter, but one of competency? I'm not sure if these new laws apply in this situation."

"Exactly my point, Your Wisdom," Haymitch says quickly. "You're not sure. So, in the absence of any firm law to the contrary, I beg your indulgence in allowing us to present any evidence that may potentially clear Peeta Mellark of any question regarding his competency or his sanity."

The First Justice conferred briefly with the other Justices before turning back to Haymitch. "Mister Abernathy, the High Tribunal will allow your evidence to be presented and submitted. Sir, for a lay person, you are arguing this case like a professional Advocate. People's Advocate, your objection is not sustained. Carry on, Advocate Abernathy."

"Thank you, Your Wisdom," Haymitch says. "Doctor, please tell us on what you are basing your opinion regarding Doctor Nivosus?"

"Blood samples were taken from Peeta Mellark at the District Twelve clinic immediately after the attack on Katniss Everdeen," Aurelius replies. "Preliminary analysis of these samples at Twelve showed an unknown substance in his blood. These samples were sealed and transported with Peeta Mellark to Victor's Mercy where they were re-analyzed for any known toxins."

"And was anything out of the ordinary discovered?"

"Yes. The blood sample did not show residual tracker jacker venom sufficient to produce a seizure this violent - but it did show high concentrations of a substance known as lysergide - or, more accurately, a lysergide derivative."

"And what is lysergide, Doctor?"

"In its pure form, it is a hallucinogen and alters the users perception of reality, but it generally does not cause the user to become violent. However, this derivative specifically targets the fear centers..."
of the brain, causing a reaction almost identical to a large dose of tracker jacker venom."

"I'm stopping you right there, Doctor," the First Justice says. "Advocate Abernathy, I assume that you have the actual report regarding these blood tests?"

"I do, Your Wisdom," Haymitch says, reaching into the case on the table and extracting a file folder. A Defense Forces soldier steps forward, takes the file, and hands it to the First Justice.

"We will review this at the conclusion of testimony today," the First Justice says. "It's become apparent that we will not be able to wrap this up today. Please continue, Mister Abernathy."

"Thank you, Your Wisdom," Haymitch says. "Doctor, when would this substance have been administered?"

"When Doctor Nivosus arrived in District Twelve, she had in her possession a new treatment for Peeta Mellark's hijacking. She was instrumental in the development of this serum. It would have been a fairly simple matter for her to introduce the lysergide derivative during the manufacturing process."

"I see. And has any of this serum been tested for this substance?"

"It has. The derivative is present in all tested samples."

"Thank you, Doctor. Your Wisdom, that report is included as well in the file that I just gave you."

"Thank you, Advocate Abernathy." The First Justice says. "Please continue."

"Two final questions, Doctor," Haymitch says. "The first question has to do with Peeta Mellark's current state of mind. Could you describe his state of mind?"

"Peeta is extremely remorseful, confused, and very guilt-ridden. He feels that he deserves whatever punishment is given to him. He also exhibits a great deal of fear that he did irreparable harm to Katniss Everdeen." Aurelius replies.

"Not at all like he was after his first attack on Katniss in District Thirteen?"

"The polar opposite, I would say."

"Thank you. Last question. Is Peeta Mellark a danger to society at large, and to Katniss Everdeen specifically?"

"In my opinion, no to both. Peeta's condition is best described as temporary insanity, brought about by a combination of involuntary consumption of lysergide and manipulation of his mind by Doctor Drusilla Nivosus. Although he will never be completely free from seizures caused by the tracker jacker venom, he should have no difficulties in controlling these seizures once he is back on his medication regimen."

"Thank you, Doctor." Haymitch glances at the bench. "I'm through with this witness, Your Wisdom."

"You may step down, Doctor," the First Justice says. "Advocate Abernathy, I see you only have one name on your witness list - but to the best of my knowledge, this witness is neither present or is available by video feed. How do you intend on examining Mister Mellark?"

At the sound of my name my eyes go wide. He's going to call me? But how? Unless...oh no! Not
I watch as Haymitch pulls what looks like a radio out of his case, along with another file folder.

"Your Wisdom," Haymitch begins, "The one unanswered question that remains is this. How did Doctor Nivosus manage to get inside Peeta Mellark's mind. I have the answer right here."

He holds up the file folder. "In this folder are affidavits from Lars Broadax and Rory Hawthorne, as well as Doctor Galen Wellgood and Nurse Practitioner Alexa Morris. In short, Lars and Rory went looking for Doctor Nivosus on the day of the incident. They went to her house and found it to be empty, but as they were leaving, Rory noticed that a book was making a strange beeping sound, so he opened it up and discovered this." Haymitch gestures to the radio-looking device on his table.

"What is it?" The First Justice asks, peering down at the table.

"It's a special kind of receiver-transmitter." Haymitch replies. "And a recorder as well. Before I turn it over to the Tribunal as evidence, I would like to use it to call Peeta Mellark. Now, there's no way that Peeta has a radio of his own. He's watched very closely and under round the clock video surveillance - plus, and correct me if I'm wrong, but he probably has hospital staff with him right now."

*Please don't do it, Haymitch!* I say to myself, tears forming in my eyes.

Haymitch presses some buttons on the radio and picks up the microphone. "I'm sorry, Peeta," he says softly. "May I proceed, Your Wisdom?"

"Please do," the First Justice says.

I see Haymitch take a deep breath and bring the microphone to his mouth. I let out a sob. The nurse looks at me sharply.

*Peeta, can you hear me?*

"That's enough," I sob. "Get out of my head, Haymitch!"

The Justices look at the radio in amazement as my voice comes out of the speaker. Both my nurse and the Avox orderly, Zoticus, look at me in astonishment. "Peeta, how did you do that?" She asks.

*I'm sorry, kid. I'll talk to you later.* I see Haymitch turn back to the bench.

"Your Wisdom, that's how Drusilla Nivosus was able to get inside his head," Haymitch says as he turns off the transmitter. "At some point while she was performing some minor surgery on Peeta, she managed to implant a bone conducting receiver-transmitter in his upper mandible. Nurse Practitioner Morris did a scan of Peeta's neck area and discovered something that should not be there, along with a shadow that indicates another implanted foreign object. Copies of these scans are in this folder along with the affidavits. I will now turn everything over to the Tribunal for your examination."

As the soldier moves forward to retrieve this latest batch of evidence, the First Justice fixes Haymitch with a stern look.

"Mister Abernathy," he begins in a deceptively even tone, "I'm at a loss to understand why you didn't simply turn all this over to the Defense Forces during their investigation. What, sir, prompted this somewhat theatrical display?"
"Simple, Your Wisdom," Haymitch replies easily. "I don't think Nivosus acted alone. I think she had help. And, to that end, I quite frankly was not sure who I could trust. This is important evidence, and I didn't want it to 'disappear.'"

The First Justice sits impassively for a moment before responding. "Point taken, Advocate Abernathy. These are rather unsettled times. The Rebellion ended less than a year ago, and there are still elements that are faithful to the Snow regime."

"I'm glad you understand," Haymitch says sincerely.

"We're taking a short recess to examine this evidence." The First Justice says. "We reconvene in thirty minutes."

I lay back on my bed. "Can someone please take me to the bathroom?" I ask.

"Of course," the nurse says, as she and Zoticus undo my restraints. "Zoticus, stay with him. I'll be right back." As Zoticus watches over me the nurse leaves the room. As soon as I complete my business I return to the bed and look at Zoticus, waiting for him to restrain me again. I feel totally drained.

Zoticus just smiles at me and shrugs. I return his smile with a wan grin of my own. About that time the nurse comes back in.

"I have good news," she says. "No more restraints. We just got the word from Doctor Aurelius."

"Great," I say listlessly, sitting back on my bed. We sit in uncomfortable silence until the TV comes to life again. I watch as the Justices return to the dais and sit.

"We've taken a look at the evidence," the First Justice says, "And all agree that this matter be continued to such time as the implanted device can be removed from Mister Mellark and given over to examination by this Tribunal. To that end, we so order that this device, along with any other foreign matter, be removed from Mister Mellark as soon as possible. We will reconvene once this has been accomplished. This Tribunal is in recess until then."

The image on the TV screen flickers off. The orderly, Zoticus, picks up the control and turns the Holo-TV off. He looks at the nurse and makes more hand signs.

"I've got it," she says. "I think he'll be okay now. You can go, Zoticus." The Avox nods, smiles at me and pats my shoulder, and leaves.

"I think today went really well for you!" The nurse says. I shrug my shoulders.

"I guess so," I say dully. "I hope Haymitch is right. I don't want to be committed to some hospital someplace. She'll be able to get to me in a hospital."

"Who? Nivosus?" The nurse laughs. "I doubt if she will be bothering you, Peeta!"

"No," I shake my head, trying to fight down the wave of grief that is welling up inside me. "Not Nivosus."

The nurse looks at me in confusion. "Then who?" She asks.

I squeeze my eyes tightly shut, feeling a tear escape each eye and trickle down my cheek before answering.
"It's for the best," I say in a trembling voice. "She deserves a happy life. And I can't give that to her. I'm only doing this because I love her!"

"Peeta," the nurse says in alarm, "Are you talking about -"

"Katniss," I finish for her, holding back a sob. "Yes. Once this is over I need to disappear. So Katniss can never find me. So I can never, ever, hurt her aga
"Wake up, Peeta."

I groan and force my eyes open. Wherever I am, it's noisy and there's an intensely bright light directly overhead.

"What -" I croak as I feel hand sliding underneath me. I'm dimly aware of the right side of my neck and jaw aching.

"Come on now, sit up." A kind, but firm, female voice says. I groan again as I'm forced to sit up. The exertion is almost too much and I feel my head spin.

"That's it," the voice says. "Okay, take a few deep breaths. In...out...in...out. That's it! A couple more now - in...out...in...out. Okay, now give me a cough."

I cough weakly. "Come on, now. You can do better. One more." I cough again, a little stronger this time. "That's it. One more just like that." I manage another cough, while attempting to glare at the voice torturing me. It's difficult as I can't even really focus my eyes.

"Okay, that's enough," the voice says, as the hands gently lower me back onto the bed. "Just relax for a bit. We'll get you back to your room soon."

I sigh, allowing my eyes to flutter closed. The memory of where I am begins to come back. I'm in Victor's Mercy Medical Center, in the Capitol. This morning surgeons removed the implant from my jaw, as well as a mystery object located near my right carotid artery.

These items were immediately taken into Defense Forces custody, to be turned over to Haymitch Abernathy. Haymitch was my Advocate, representing me in front of the High Tribunal during my competency hearing. Haymitch was determined to prove that my attack on Katniss was a direct result of the influence and drug-induced manipulation of Doctor Drusilla Nivosus, District Twelve's new physician, who had lead a double life as my Interrogator while I was a Capitol prisoner after the Third Quarter Quell had ended with the destruction of the arena.

Katniss. I squeeze my eyes shut and stifle a sob. For the second time in less than a year, I almost killed her. I'm determined that there will never be a third time. If Haymitch is successful, and I'm sure he will be, my plan is to disappear the instant that I'm released from the hospital. She deserves happiness and a long life - two things that she won't get with me.

I take a few slow, deep breaths before opening my eyes. I can't let anyone in on my plan - especially Haymitch. If he even suspects that I'm planning on disappearing he would make sure that I spend the rest of my hospital stay in full restraints, and would insist on an armed escort to the hoverplane. No, I've already slipped and told one person - my nurse, Amalthea Loveland, I've learned is her name. I immediately swear her to secrecy.

I think Amalthea is a bit star-struck where I'm concerned. Under that cool, professional medical exterior beats the heart of a Peeta Mellark fan. So naturally she was horrified at my plan - but at the same time promised to not betray my trust in her.
"I see you're awake," a new voice says. I force my eyes open and, with difficulty, focus on the source of the voice. A man wearing hospital scrubs and cap is looking down on me. Definitely Capitol, he appears young for a staff surgeon - maybe early thirties. When he sees my eyes open he smiles.

"I just wanted to tell you that everything went well," he says. "You'll have a little soreness for a day or two. Let the nurses know if you need anything for pain."


"I'll check on you tomorrow, Peeta," the doctor says, patting my shoulder. "Try to get some rest." He turns and speaks quietly to the nurse, then, with a final smile, he leaves.

"Your vitals are looking good," the nurse says, examining a diagnostic screen mounted over the bed. "I think we can get you back to your room now."

In short order I'm disconnected from all the machines in the recovery room and wheeled back to my room - or cell, depending on how you look at it. A pair of Avox orderlies help me transfer from the gurney to the bed. I'm disappointed that neither of them is Zoticus.

The nurse fusses over me for a moment, then fixes me with a stern look. "You have an IV line going in you," she says. "I'll make a deal with you. You promise to be good and not mess with your IV and I won't put you in restraints. Deal?"

"Deal," I croak, my voice still thick from the medication.

"Okay," she says with a small smile. "I'll check on you in a bit. Would you like something to read?"

"No, thanks," I reply. "I'm a little tired."

"Get some rest, then," she says with another smile as she slides the door shut.

I sigh and stare up at the ceiling. Katniss. I can't get her out of my mind. Maybe, I say to myself, maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I should go back to Twelve. She says that she loves me, even after everything that's happened. Maybe -

I shake my head vigorously, groaning as pain stabs through my neck and jaw. No. I'm a time bomb. Through some miracle I was stopped, not once, but twice, from killing her. I can't trust myself any more. If I love her, I'll do this for her. I'll walk away, and -

It really hits me for the first time. If I am successful, I'll never see Katniss again. I have to let her know why, though. I have to let her know that it's because I love her that I'm doing this.

A letter. She wrote me a letter. I've read it over and over and over. I'll write her a letter. I'll leave it where Haymitch is sure to find it. He'll make sure that she gets it. I hope she understands.

I was a model patient for the rest of the day - even smiling and laughing a bit when Haymitch came to visit. The continuation of my hearing was scheduled for the next day, and Haymitch was going to introduce into evidence two items: the bone conducting receiver-transmitter, as well as the mystery object - a small shredded capsule that had been implanted next to my right carotid artery, then caused to burst on command from Nivosus - flooding my system with the lysergide derivative. Haymitch seemed both surprised and pleased to see me in such an upbeat mood.

If only he knew the real reason why.
Amalthea was on duty later that afternoon when my dinner was brought to me. I ask her at that time for paper, pen, and an envelope. I didn't tell her what it was for. I didn't need to.

"Peeta...you know I'll help you," she says sadly, "But I really think that you should give this a little more thought."

"Thea, I can't!" I reply insistently. "How many more times? How many more attacks? Nivosus is still out there! She wants to destroy us both! And I know there's others...others that wanna use me to get to her! No. I need to do this. I need to disappear."

Amalthea doesn't say a word in response - but later, when my dinner was cleared away, she presents me with the materials that I asked for.

I end up laying on the floor - the only horizontal flat surface in my room that's firm enough for me to use as a writing table, and slowly, carefully ink my letter. The letter that will sever me from Katniss forever.

Dearest Katniss,

By now I'm sure you know of my disappearance. And, if I know you, you're probably worried sick about me. Please don't worry. I'm alive.

And I want you to stay alive. That's why I disappeared. I've almost killed you twice. I can't risk chancing a third attempt.

I can almost hear you right now - "Peeta, none of that was your fault!" And you're right - none of it was my fault. But knowing that would bring me no solace if you end up dead by my hand.

I want you to know that I love you. I've loved you for over 13 years and I will love you for the rest of my life. It's because I love you that I am doing this. You deserve a chance at life - a chance at finding some happiness. And you won't get that if you live in constant fear of me having yet another seizure.

I know now that I've been selfish. Insisting that you stay with me in spite of the danger. I had no right to expect that of you. I just want nothing but good things for you. I only ask three things of you.

One - please don't come looking for me. We both need to heal. We both need to learn how to live without the other.

Two - never forget me. Please.

Three - please try to find it in your heart to forgive me someday.

I will love you forever,

Peeta

I couldn't write any more even if I wanted to. I clumsily wipe my eyes with the sleeve of my scrubs and then carefully fold the letter and place it in the envelope. I carefully seal the envelope and address it in neat handwriting:

TO KATNISS EVERDEEN, C/O HAYMITCH ABERNATHY
I slip the envelope under my thin mattress. Now that I've put my thoughts on paper, I don't feel the crushing sadness that had been threatening to overwhelm me ever since I realized that I have to disappear in order to give Katniss her best chance at happiness and a long life.

Now I just feel empty.

PART II

"Mister Abernathy, please call your first witness." The First Justice glances down at Haymitch's table from his position on the dais.

Haymitch stands up. "Thank you, Your Wisdom. I call Beetee Latier."

A door off to Haymitch's left opens and Beetee wheels into the Tribunal hall. The soldier escorts him to the witness chair, where he's allowed to pull his own motorized chair next to the witnesses station. The soldier helps Beetee to stand and carefully transfers him to the other chair. Once seated, the soldier instructs Beetee to insert his right hand into the slot at the end of the arm of the chair. Once his hand is in place, a light flashes green.

"The witness is ready, Your Mercy," the soldier says.

"Thank you," the First Justice says. "Advocate, you may proceed."

"Thank you, Your Wisdom," Haymitch says, stepping forward. A small cart has been placed in front of his table. Haymitch pushes the cart over to Beetee.

"'Mornin', Beetee," Haymitch says with a grin. "Thanks for being here."

"Hello, Haymitch," Beetee replies with his own grin. Absently he pushes his glasses back with his middle finger. "And if you recall, I was subpoenaed - by you."

"Objection!" The People's Advocate shoots to her feet. "Your Mercy, it's quite obvious that the witness and the Advocate are on friendly terms. This calls the witnesses impartiality into question."

"Your Mercy, if I may," Beetee says to the assembled Justices. The First Justice raises an eyebrow, but finally nods his head slowly, a small smile on his face.

"Thank you," Beetee says. "I would just like to state for the record that Haymitch Abernathy and I have, indeed, known each other for well over twenty five years. We share a special bond - one that very few people can really understand. We're Victors, Your Mercy...and there are very few of us left. And while I was never known as the most charismatic, outgoing, or likeable - I was known among my peers as a man of integrity. Now, I realize that the People's Advocate cannot be concerned about my not telling the truth - what with my right hand resting on a physiological sensor that will detect the slightest falsehood - but, perhaps she's concerned that I may attempt to lead Mister Abernathy's line of questioning. My intention is simple - to answer his questions. Period."

"People's Advocate, is Mister Latier's assurance satisfactory?" The First Justice asks.

"It is, Your Mercy," she replies.

"Very well," the First Advocate says. "Mister Abernathy...Mister Latier. Please address each other with a tad less familiarity."
"Of course, Your Wisdom," Haymitch says, turning back to Beetee. "Mister Latier, do you recognize the items on this cart?"

Beetee leans forward. He reaches out with his free hand, then glances back at the dais. "May I?" he asks.

"Please." The First Justice gestures towards the cart. Beetee picks up what I recognize as the receiver-transmitter.

"Hmmm," he says, more to himself than anything else. "This is a Vanguard Model Twenty Thirteen receiver-transmitter-recorder. It's favored for its light weight and versatility. It's seen wide service in both the former Peacekeeper Corps as well as the new Defense Forces."

"So, it's applications are primarily government and military?" Haymitch asks.

"Yes," Beetee replies dryly, "especially considering that, under the Snow regime, mere possession of this device was illegal and would result in a flogging, at the very least."

"Thank you, Mister Latier," Haymitch says with a smirk. "Now, about the other item."

Beetee puts the radio back on the cart and carefully picks up a very small item. "Yes," he says, "This is a bone conducting micro receiver-transmitter. It's favored for military use primarily because, once it is implanted, the wearer doesn't have to 'operate' it. It receives a signal from a transmitter, such as the Twenty Thirteen here, and through the anchor prongs -" Beetee holds up the device to display four small, pointed prongs "- into the bone, where the signal is converted to sound and conducted to the inner ear. When the wearer speaks, the voice is conducted through the bone to the anchor prongs and from there to the transmitter."

"How is it powered?" Haymitch asks.

Beetee smiles. "That's the real beauty of this device. The electrical energy created by human nerve impulses provide all the power that it needs. No batteries required."

"And is it difficult to implant?" Haymitch asks.

"Remember the trackers that Tributes were implanted with before each Games?" Beetee replies. When Haymitch nods Beetee continues with, "It's the same principle. The fundamental difference is that trackers were implanted into muscle tissue. This -" he holds up the small object "- is implanted into bone. More care must be observed, but a trained technician can complete an implant in ten seconds."

"I see," Haymitch says. "You're knowledge regarding these devices is impressive, Mister Latier."

"It should be, Mister Abernathy," Beetee replies with a sly smile, "being as I invented them."

"Thank you." Haymitch says, returning his smile. "No further questions."

"People's Advocate?" The First Justice says. "Your witness."

"Thank you, Your Mercy." The People's Advocate stands up. "As this is not a criminal trial, but a preliminary competency hearing, I would like to ask the witness to engage in a bit of conjecture."

The First Justice nods. "Proceed."

The People's Advocate turns to Beetee. "Mister Latier, are you aware of the circumstances
surrounding the acquisition of these two items?"

"I am," Beetee says with a nod.

"And, would you agree that Mister Abernathy has an almost paternal interest in both Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark?"

"The Mentor/Tribute relationship can be extraordinarily complex," Beetee replies thoughtfully, "especially when it evolves into a Mentor/Victor relationship. But yes, his interest goes far beyond mere friendship or any perceived obligation on his part."

"What lengths do you think he would go to protect his charges?"

"I'm not sure I understand your question."

"Let me rephrase, then. Speaking hypothetically, do you think that Advocate Abernathy would fabricate or plant evidence that would be beneficial to his case?"

I can see Haymitch glower at the People's Advocate as she speaks. She pointedly ignores him. To Haymitch's credit, he manages to keep his mouth shut, even as the People's Advocate, for all intents and purposes, calls him a liar.

"If I understand you correctly, you're asking me if Haymitch Abernathy would be capable of lying or cheating to further his cause?"

"Putting it crudely, yes. Please answer the question, Mister Latier."

"In that case - yes. Yes he would."

I stare in amazement at the Holo-TV. Beetee just came out and stated his opinion that Haymitch would plant evidence in order to exonerate me. I can see that Haymitch is just as shocked as I am.

"All Victors are capable of doing what you suspect Haymitch Abernathy of doing," Beetee continues smoothly. "Surviving the Hunger Games is much more than simply killing others without dying yourself. It's as much about outwitting your opponents as it's about killing them. I lied through my teeth to the Career pack in my Games, lulling them into a false sense of security, convincing them that I was on their side - until I electrocuted them. Peeta Mellark convinced his Career pack that he wanted Katniss Everdeen dead as much as they did - before he turned on them and saved Katniss."

"Thank you, Mister Latier. No further -"

"Please." Beetee speaks quietly as he holds up his left hand, palm out. His quiet dignity commands respect, even from the assembled justices. "If I may have the indulgence of the Tribunal."

"Thank you, Your Mercy, I'm through with this witness."

"So noted, People's Advocate." The First Justice turns to Haymitch. "Advocate, would you have any objection to hearing what Mister Latier would like to say to this Tribunal?"

"None at all, Your Wisdom." Haymitch replies, smirking at the People's Advocate.

"Thank you," the First Justice says, turning to Beetee. "Please continue, Mister Latier."

"Thank you, Your Mercy," Beetee says. "I believe the question posed to me by the People's Advocate is actually in two parts. I answered the first part. Now I wish to answer the second."
Beetee pauses for a moment before continuing. "Haymitch Abernathy did not plant this evidence. This particular model of radio is not readily available on the non-government market, and each radio is easily traceable by serial number. First Justice, I assume that the serial number has been traced?"

"It has," the First Justice admits. "There was no indication that Mister Abernathy was ever involved in the ownership of these devices prior to the day of the attack."

Beetee nods in satisfaction. "Furthermore, placing the implant requires medical skill that Mister Abernathy simply does not possess. Now, it's not outside the realm of possibility that his friend, Doctor Galen Wellgood, could have placed the implant, but now, instead of a plot by one man, now you have a conspiracy involving at least four people - not to mention that the target of this theoretical conspiracy, Doctor Drusilla Nivosus, is still missing."

"Thank you, Mister Latier," the First Justice says. "This Tribunal had never seriously considered that Mister Abernathy had any other involvement with this equipment other than what he had stated previously - both by sworn deposition and here in this Tribunal. Further, we have listened to the recordings that remained on the Vanguard Twenty Thirteen and voiceprint comparison has identified the owner of the voice, with one hundred percent accuracy, as Doctor Drusilla Nivosus."

The First Justice examines the computer screen set up in front of him before speaking again.
"Mister Latier, you are excused. Does either Advocate wish to call any more witnesses?"

As Beetee is helped back into his wheelchair and wheels out of the Tribunal, both Haymitch and the People's Advocate decline. "This Tribunal is in recess. We will reconvene in one hour. At that time we will either render our decision or continue the case until tomorrow. However, given the evidence and testimony presented, I feel confident that you will have a decision in one hour."

"All rise!" The soldier standing off to one side barks out. The Advocates both rise as the Justices file out. The screen goes blank.

Amalthea stands up. "I need to check in with Doctor Aurelius, Peeta," she says. "Do you need anything?"

"No," I reply softly. "I'm fine." I lay back on my bed and drape my arm across my eyes.

"No," Amalthea says sadly right before she slides the door shut, "you're not."

Around a half-hour later, my door slides open again, revealing Doctor Juno Aurelius. He flashes me a quick smile before he slides the door shut. He places his chair on the floor next to my bed and sits down.

"Here for the grand finale, doc?" I ask, sarcasm tingeing my voice. "If so, you're a bit early."

"I am," Aurelius admits, ignoring my sarcasm, "but I wanted to talk to you about something first."

Thea! She told him! I fight to keep my face impassive, even as I reply, "Sure. What's up?"

Aurelius looks uncomfortable. "It's - well, it's pretty shocking, actually," he finally says. "Let me start at the beginning."

I relax, now fairly confident that he knows nothing about my plans to disappear as soon as I'm out of lockup. "Go ahead."
"One of the labs techs here made a discovery quite by accident," Aurelius says. "He was running some of your lab work through some fairly routine testing, and, without meaning to, ordered up a DNA cross-match."

"So?" I ask, shrugging my shoulders.

"Peeta, a DNA cross-match searches the data base for any and all matches to your DNA," Aurelius explains. "You remember how the Peacekeepers insured compliance with the mandate for all eligible children to attend the Reapings each year?"

"Yeah." I shudder a bit at the memory of an impatient, bored Peacekeeper pricking my finger with a needle, drawing a tiny amount of blood, and inserting the sample into a hand-held reader, where the sample would be scanned and my identity verified, then pressing my bleeding finger onto the square next to my name in the ledger.

"Yes - well, that DNA remains on file to this day, as does the DNA of every child born in Panem during the Hunger Games era." Aurelius pauses and pulls a sealed envelope from an inner coat pocket.

Handing the envelope to me, he says, "These are the results of your DNA cross-match. I've had the record sealed. But I felt that you have a right to know."

I rip the envelope open, extracting a single page, neatly folded into threes. I unfold the paper and scan it quickly. My name is printed in bold across the top, with strings of, to me, meaningless numbers following. Beneath the numbers a column of names was printed. I swallow heavily as I read the names.

Dad. Mom. My two brothers. My father's cousin Rooba, the former butcher in District Twelve, and her children. All killed the night of the firebombing. A few other names - distant relatives that mean nothing to me. And, at the very bottom, one name that literally leaps off the page at me.

**PRIMROSE EVERDEEN**

I look up at Aurelius in confusion. "Why is Prim's name on here?" I ask.

Aurelius takes a deep breath before responding. "When I saw her name, I had the test run again for confirmation. There's no doubt, Peeta. Primrose was your half-sister."

I close my eyes tightly, taking a few deep, shuddering breaths of my own. *Prim? My half-sister?* My eyes suddenly snap open and I look at Aurelius wildly, feeling panic welling up inside me.

"Wait!" I cry out. "If Prim was my half-sister, that means that Katniss and I -"

"- Are not related!" Aurelius finishes firmly. "Peeta! Do you understand? You and Katniss are not related in any way!"

"This...this is too much," I mutter, leaning back against the wall. "This means that my father...and Una Everdeen..."

"Yes," Aurelius says gently.

I shake my head, a bitter laugh escaping my lips. "Did you ever hear the story about the first time I remember seeing Katniss, doc?" I ask.
"I seem to recall you mentioning it during your first Games," Aurelius replies gently. "But please, refresh my memory."

"It was the very first day of school for Katniss and I," I say, closing my eyes at the memory. "We were both five at the time. I had never met Katniss before that day. She was Seam, I was Town. Seam and Town didn't ever mix well. My father pointed her out to me. She was in a red plaid dress and her hair was done up in two braids, and she was with her father that day. My dad pointed her out to me and said, 'See that little girl, Peeta? I was in love with her mother, but she ended up marrying a miner instead.'"

It was only after I stopped talking that I realize that I'm crying. I glance over at Aurelius. His face is impassive as he hands me a box of tissues. I wordlessly take the box from him.

"I know it's not good to speak ill of the dead, doc," I say after I blow my nose, "but my mother was a stone bitch. I'm not surprised that my father strayed from her. What is surprising is that Una Everdeen cheated on her husband."

"Possibly she still had feelings for your father, Peeta," Aurelius says gently.

"I guess so," I reply flatly. Did you know, Dad? Was this something you kept from us all? And did Una know...or even suspect? Katniss is Seam through and through, while Prim looked perfectly at home among the Merchants.

"You're taking this news remarkably well, Peeta," Aurelius says, relief in his voice.

"It's not - unwelcome, doc," I reply. "Prim and I grew quite close after the Seventy-Fourth Games." That was all true. Prim and I had become close friends in spite of our age difference and radically different backgrounds. I had even begun to think of her as the little sister that I never had.

But now - now I know the truth. Prim was my sister. Always had been.

"Will you tell Katniss?" Aurelius asks. Katniss. Of course she has a right to know. But she will never hear it from me.

"She certainly has a right to know," I reply. There. Nice and neutral. But part of my mind couldn't help but wonder exactly how Katniss will take the news. I somehow doubt that she will be very understanding where her mother is concerned. I know how much she loved her father. I'm sure that this will undo whatever progress she and her mother have made at understanding each other.

I lean back and sigh. Not like she's gonna hear it from me, anyway. My thoughts are interrupted by Amalthea returning, with Zoticus in tow.

"Has it started again?" she asks anxiously, then, "Oh. I'm sorry, Doctor. Are we interrupting?"

"No, and no," Aurelius says with a relieved smile. "You're just in time, it seems." As he speaks the Holo-TV flickers back to life.

**PART III**

"In addition to the evidence and testimony offered during these proceedings," the First Justice says somberly, "there was one additional item of evidence introduced by the Defense Advocate that was not examined in the open tribunal."

The First Justice presses a button on his computer terminal, and a view screen behind and to the right of the raised dais comes to life. Displayed on the screen was an unrecognizable mass that,
when a ruler is placed in the field of view for scale, is actually quite small - not even a centimeter in length.

"People's Advocate, I'm sending a copy of a sworn deposition by the surgeon that removed both the bone conducting communicator as well as this object." The First Justice taps a command on his keyboard. "Please take a moment to review the deposition while we summarize the findings for you."

As the People's Advocate reads the deposition, a voice on the view screen explains that the object is the remnants of a small capsule that appeared to have been implanted at the same time as the object that had been imbedded in my jaw. This object had been placed near my right carotid artery and was similar to capsules used to deliver time release medications. The difference was that this capsule had what the voice on the view screen describe as a "micro-squib" inserted into it. This "micro-squib" was basically a microscopic explosive that, when detonated, would cause the capsule to burst and release the entire contents into my tissues at once.

"Testing of the remnants of this capsule have discovered trace amounts of the same lysergide derivative that has been discovered in Peeta Mellark's blood samples." The First Justice glances at the People's Advocate. "Advocate, it is your right to request independent analysis of the capsule remnants as well as direct examination of the physician that prepared the deposition."

"Your Mercy," the People's Advocate replies, "I accept the findings of the Tribunal and can't find anything to indicate that the integrity of this evidence has been compromised in any way. The People decline analysis and direct examination."

"Then this Tribunal shall now render its decision," the First Justice says as he rises to his feet. The other four Justices follow suit. "Would all parties please stand?"

Haymitch and the People's Advocate both stand up. Aurelius flashes me a quick smile as Zoticus pats me on the shoulder and Amalthea squeezes my hand.

"The decision reached by this Tribunal was unanimous. There were no dissenting opinions. This preliminary hearing has judged that Citizen Peeta Mellark of District Twelve was neither consciously or subconsciously responsible for his actions that resulted in the attempted murder of Citizen Katniss Everdeen this past September Fifth. Further, this tribunal has been presented with sufficient evidence to request that a nationwide arrest warrant be immediately issued for the arrest of Doctor Drusilla Nivosus on several charges, the most serious being War Crimes committed in the name of former President Coriolanus Snow and Attempted Murder." The First Justice pauses for a moment before continuing.

"This Tribunal has determined that insufficient evidence has been presented by the People to hold Citizen Peeta Mellark over for a full competency hearing. Citizen Peeta Mellark is adjudged to not be a danger to society at large. All criminal charges against Citizen Peeta Mellark are hereby dismissed in the interests of justice, and he is released to the care of his Advocate, Haymitch Abernathy, as soon as his physicians judge him to be medically fit for release from their care."

I find myself letting out my breath, unaware that I was holding it the entire time. Aurelius, grinning, shakes my hand, as does Zoticus, while Amalthea hugs me tightly.


"Not guilty," I repeat quietly. Not guilty doesn't mean innocent. It still was me that did those horrible things to Katniss.
The door to my room suddenly slides open as an orderly enters, pushing a wheelchair. I look at him, then at Aurelius, in confusion.

"I'm supposed to move you to a regular bed, Mister Mellark," the orderly explains. "You are no longer in confinement."

"Oh," I reply, feeling panic rise up inside me. Katniss's letter is still under the mattress. How am I going to retrieve it? I get a sudden inspiration as I stand and suddenly hug Amalthea.

"Thank you for everything, Thea," I say sincerely, then, as I hold her even tighter, my lips next to her ear, I whisper, "The letter's under the mattress."

She immediately whispers back, "I'll take care of it," then pulls away with a smile and says, "I'm just glad that everything worked out for you!" Her eyes meet mine for an instant and she gives me a quick, almost imperceptible nod.

I feel myself relax a little as I settle into the wheelchair. "Any time," I say, forcing a smile onto my face. The orderly backs me out of the room as Aurelius promises to visit me in my new room later on that day. He and Zoticus watch me leave with large smiles wreathing their faces.

Only Amalthea watches me with eyes that are infinitely sad.

PART IV

"Here you go, kid," Haymitch says, tossing a small gym bag on my bed as he enters my room. "What's this?" I ask, pushing aside the tray containing the remnants of my dinner.

"After our tearful reunion earlier today, I realized that you had absolutely no clothes to wear for your trip home," Haymitch explains, "so I took the liberty of picking up a few things for you."

"Thanks!" I say sincerely as I open the bag. Two pairs of pants, a couple of shirts, underwear, socks, a pair of shoes, even a light jacket - and toiletries: toothbrush, toothpaste, mouthwash, floss, a razor (not that I needed it all that much), shaving cream, soap, shampoo, a comb, and a washcloth, hand towel, and bath towel. Perfect. Not having any clothing had me worried. I couldn't very well walk out of here in a scrub top and pajama pants.

"I spoke to your docs," Haymitch says. "They feel that you're sufficiently healed to go home, but they still want you under a doctor's care for the time being - just to be on the safe side. And you're welcome." Haymitch pauses, reaches inside his jacket, and withdraws a small flask. He uncaps it and quickly takes a drink, then recaps it and returns it to an inner pocket.

Haymitch must have seen the look on my face by his next comment. "Kid, you and Miss Sunshine have, shall we say, put me through the wringer these last few weeks. I promised myself that I would stay sober until I was sure that the worst was behind us. Well, the worst is behind us."

"If you say so," I reply listlessly, as I carefully replace the contents of the gym bag. "So Katniss is back in Twelve?"

"Kid, you need to work on your enthusiasm a bit," Haymitch says wryly. "After all, I just saved you from a life locked up in a padded room. And, to answer your question, no. She's still in Four. She has some more therapy and rehab to do. I spoke to both Galen and Una earlier."

"Oh," I reply. "I was thinking that maybe she would have gone home by now."
"Not for a while yet," Haymitch replies. "And before you ask, the answer is no. No calls. I also spoke with her psychiatrist, Benignus Stone. She's - kid, she is still having nightmares about - that. Stone feels that she needs more time before she hears your voice again."

"I see," I reply softly. *I'm doing the right thing, I say to myself. No matter how much it hurts.*

"Is this the letter?" Haymitch asks. Startled, I glance up at him and see him holding an envelope. *It can't be. Amalthea slid it under the mattress, the same as my old room.*

"What?" I say, the pitch of my voice rising several octaves.

"Easy, kid." Haymitch waves the envelope at me. "I understand if you don't want me reading it. I'm sure she got pretty personal, and -"

"No. I mean, it's okay. Go ahead." I feel relief wash over me. He was holding the letter that Katniss had given to him to deliver.

Haymitch looks at me strangely for a moment, then pulls the letter out of the envelope. Sitting down in a chair, he reads the letter, glancing up at me a couple of times as he does so. Finally, with a sigh, he carefully replaces the letter in the envelope and puts it back in the small wardrobe mounted on the wall of my room.

"She's special, she is," Haymitch mutters. "I almost forgot to tell you. Plutarch wants to send a crew in to get some footage of you - you know, now that you're...well, not gonna be - you know."

"Committed, you mean?" I ask bluntly. "Locked up in a padded room?"

"Yeah," Haymitch replies softly. "That. I told him that you probably weren't feeling up to it and that he should probably -"

"Sure," I say. "I'll do it."

Haymitch stares at me in surprise. "Are you sure, kid?" He asks. "I mean, even Plutarch understands that you may need some time."

"I'm fine," I say flatly. "Let's do it and get it over with. Tomorrow morning okay?"

"That should work," Haymitch says, picking up the phone in my room. "We can do it right after they discharge you." As he dials the number he says, "Plutarch is gonna owe you big time for this." *And I just saw the code you punched into the phone to get an outside circuit,* I say to myself, as Haymitch speaks in low tones to whoever answered the phone. Finally he glances over at me as he hangs up the phone.

"Okay, it's set," he says. "Tomorrow morning at eleven. And Effie's coming out. She really wants to see you."

I feel a pang when he mentions Effie's name. I am truly fond of her. I really would love to see her. But, I plan on being far away by the time eleven o'clock rolls around tomorrow.

"That'll be great," I say, managing to work up some false enthusiasm. I even manage a smile.

"That's better," Haymitch says approvingly. "Listen, kid, I have to scoot over to Plutarch's office to go over some details for tomorrow. But I'll be back later, okay?"

"Okay, Haymitch," I reply, standing up. The realization that I'll probably never see him again
suddenly hits me. I step forward and embrace him tightly. After a moment his arms come up and he awkwardly pats me on the back.

"Thanks," I manage to say. "For everything."

"Uhh...anytime, kid," he manages to respond as he disengages from me. "Listen, I'll be back soon. Don't go anywhere, okay?" He says this last with a wink and a grin.

*Does he suspect?* I quickly decide that he doesn't. My own imagination is working overtime. I watch as Haymitch walks out of my room. I wait until an Avox orderly comes in to clear away the remnants of my dinner before I pick up the phone. Once I punch in the code for an outside line I quickly dial a number from memory.

I close my eyes as the phone on the other end starts to ring. "Come on, come on - pick up!" I mutter.

After four rings I hear the ring cut off abruptly, followed by a sound that could only be someone dropping their receiver. That sound is followed by a muffled string of curses. In spite of my depression I find myself smiling.

"What?" A female voice finally snarls.

"So nice to hear that some people really never change," I say with a small chuckle.

"Stumpy?" The female voice says after a long pause. "Peeta?"

"Hello, Jo," I reply.

"Peeta, what the hell is going on?" Johanna Mason asks insistently. "Are you back in Twelve? No, never mind, you're calling from a Capitol number. What -"

"Jo, listen," I say urgently, cutting her off. "I need your help. No questions asked. Do you trust me?"

"You know I do," she replies softly. "What do you need?"

"I don't have access to the train schedules here at - where I'm at. I need to know if there's any passenger trains running out of the Capitol tonight. Preferably directly to Seven, but I'll change trains if I have to."

"Shit. Hang on." I hear her footsteps. "Sorry, you woke me up. I'm not worth a shit until I have my coffee."

"Woke you up?" I ask incredulously. "Jo, I've already had dinner!"

"That's what happens when you stay out all night," she mutters. "Okay, hang on, I'm logging on." I can hear a faint beeping in the background, followed by a few bars of a popular song. "Okay, I'm in. Let me find the Panem-Trak site."

I hear her tapping at a computer keyboard. "Okay," she finally says. "Nothing direct to Seven until day after tomorrow."


"Peeta Pure-heart *cursing?*" She says with a laugh. "My, how you've changed!"
"More than you know," I mutter. "Is anything going out tonight?"

"Hmmm," she says thoughtfully, tapping at more keys. "Only thing tonight goes to Ten. Leaves tonight at Ten-Ten. Ha! The train for Ten departing at Ten-Ten!"

"Yeah, very amusing," I say. "Nothing else?"

"Just freight trains," Johanna replies. "The train for Ten arrives very early tomorrow morning, then, let's see - aha!"

"Find something?" I ask hopefully.

"The Western Stinker leaves tomorrow morning from Ten," Johanna replies. "It's a combined livestock and passenger train. Makes the loop from Ten, through Five, Seven, Three, the Capitol, One, Two, then back to Ten. It's a huge train - over two kilometers long, most of which are livestock cars."

"Why do the call it the 'Western Stinker'?" I ask curiously.

"Ever get a whiff of a cattle car?" Johanna replies with a laugh. "It smells like you're swimming in cow shit. Anyway, with luck, you'll be able to catch it. You'll have to hurry, though - your layover in Ten will be less than an hour."

I quickly scribble all this down on a scrap of paper. "Okay, got it." I say. "I guess you figured that I'm headed your way."

"Yeah," Johanna replies warily, "But why is the big question. I woulda thought that you would be chomping at the bit to get back to Brainless."

"It - it's a long story, Jo," I reply softly. "Just trust me, okay? I'll explain when I see you."

"Peeta," Johanna says gently, "You know that I'll help you in any way."

"Then be at the District Seven station when the Western Stinker pulls in," I say firmly. "And please, not a word to anyone."

"See you in three days," Johanna says, and abruptly hangs up.

I stare at the phone for a moment before carefully replacing it in its cradle. No sooner than I do then my door opens and Amalthea walks in.

"I just got off shift," she explains. "And I thought I would check in with you and see if there was - anything you needed."

"Tonight, Thea," I say, standing up. "I need your phone number. I'll call once Haymitch leaves. I go tonight."

Amalthea looks at me with wide, shiny eyes. "What -" she says, swallowing heavily. "- what do you need me to do?"

"You have a car?" I ask. She nods. "I'll need a ride to a bank, and then to the train station."

"Okay," she whispers. "I wish you weren't doing this."

"I wish I didn't have to," I say, my voice thickening. "Have you ever loved anyone, Thea?"
"Yes," she replies quietly. "Once. He was a - he was killed. During the Rebellion. Peacekeepers panicked and shot him one night after curfew. He was a resident, making an emergency call."

"I'm sorry," I say simply.

"The Rebellion took the one man I ever loved," she says, her voice tinged with bitterness.

"Then we both lost something in the Rebellion," I say. "The Rebellion took my soul. Stole from me the person that I once was. And the only way I can protect the one woman that I've ever loved - I have to disappear so I can never hurt her again."

"I think I understand," Amalthea says. "But I still don't like it."

"I hate it," I say flatly. "That's why I know it's the right thing to do. She'll get over it - eventually. She's been through so much worse in her life. She's bent, but never broke."

"How do you know she won't break this time?" Amalthea asks me gently.

"I don't," I admit. "But I would rather have her alive and hating me then dead because of me."

Amalthea turns to leave, but pauses at the door. "I'll see you tonight, Peeta." She leaves before I can say anything more.

I stare at the door for a long time. Then I stand and slowly walk to the wardrobe. I take Katniss's letter to me and carefully insert it into a zipper pocket on the outside of my gym bag. I don't want to forget it. It's my one and only link to her, and the life we might have had together.

I find myself wishing that I had just one picture of her to take with me.
ESCAPE

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER 37 - ESCAPE

PART I

I jerk awake violently at the sound of the monotone, automated voice coming over the loudspeakers in my private berth. "Attention. Arriving in District Seven in ten minutes. Please be sure to take all personal belongings with you when leaving the train. If you have checked baggage, please follow the signs to baggage claim. Thank you for choosing Panem-Trak for your transportation needs and have a wonderful day."

I stare blankly out the window at the District Seven landscape. Rugged, tree covered hills and mountains. Rain streaking the window. Katniss would love this place, with the trees and the mountains.

Stop it. Put her out of your mind. Easier said than done.

I sigh and tap the Holo-TV control built into the arm of the chair. Another amenity of riding in a private berth. Even though this train was given over to hauling livestock more than anything else, it was also equipped to handle a certain amount of passengers, with the first passenger car consisting strictly of private berths, like mine, and a private dining area and bar. I opted to take my meals (the infrequent times I even felt like eating) in my private berth.

A few nights earlier, I had made my escape from the hospital, with the invaluable help from one of my nurses, Amalthea Loveland. I caught a late train from the Capitol to District Ten, riding in a regular passenger car. Fortunately there were very few passengers on that train, but still, I know I was recognized. Once in Ten I opted to purchase the most expensive option on this train to ensure my privacy for the remainder of my journey to District Seven.

I try to focus my attention on the TV as it flickers to life. The first thing I see is a still picture - of me. It's a news program of some sort. I catch a newscaster in mid-paragraph.

"- unconfirmed reports of Peeta Mellark spotted in District Ten following his abrupt disappearance from Victor's Mercy -"

In irritation I tap the channel control, only to land on another news broadcast. This time, it's a still photograph of Katniss, causing me to feel a pang of separation deep down inside. Again, a newscaster is speaking.

"- conflicting reports of the exact nature and severity of her injuries, allegedly at the hands of her fiancée and district partner, Peeta Mellark, during what appears to be a hijacking relapse -"

I've heard enough. Angrily I slam my hand down on the 'OFF' button. It's just as well, though - I'm almost at my destination anyway.

I sit back in my seat, feeling the train almost imperceptibly slowing in preparation for arrival in District Seven. I'm exhausted. This train is used primarily for livestock transportation and freight, and so far has made stops in Districts Two, One, and Three before the stop here today. Even though my private berth comes equipped with a bed, the little sleep that I've managed to get has
been riddled with nightmares. I've been traveling for three days now and I can't wait to get off this train.

Buildings now streak by my window as the train enters Maintown, District Seven's largest settlement. Growing up in District Twelve, I was used to just one town in a district, and it wasn't until Katniss and I embarked on our Victory Tour that I realized that District Twelve, with its small population, was the exception rather than the rule...only Districts Twelve and Thirteen have but a single town or city. All the rest have a single large town, such as Seven's Maintown, and numerous other smaller towns, villages and settlements.

I take in the view of the town as the train continues to slow. Maintown was largely untouched by the Rebellion - the only two areas that suffered significant damage were the Peacekeepers Headquarters and barracks, and the District Seven Victor's Village. At the time of the Third Quarter Quell, Seven only had two living Victors - Blight, who I knew very little about, and Johanna Mason. Blight was killed during the Quell, while Johanna and I were captured by the Capitol. The residents of District Seven must have viewed their Victor's Village as some sort of Capitol symbol, as they wasted no time in putting each house to the torch once the Rebellion was in full swing.

What a waste. If only they had known that both Blight and Johanna were heavily involved in the Rebellion, then maybe they wouldn't have been so quick to destroy their homes.

The train is barely crawling along now and I know that we are approaching the station. I didn't get much of a chance to look around on my only other visit here - unrest was already fermenting in the districts during the Victory Tour, so Katniss and I were whisked from the station to the Maintown Square, where we delivered our speeches and were presented with our plaques, then back to the train to change, then back to the District Seven Justice Building for the Victor's Banquet, then back to the train again. Still, a few landmarks trigger small sparks of recognition in my memory.

In spite of my resolve not to, I can't help but think of Katniss. Katniss. We were both exhausted by the time the Tour had reached Seven - it was the last district stop before the Capitol - and Katniss was an emotional wreck by then. Ten prior districts, ten sullen, angry crowds, twenty families perched on their raised platforms - with huge screens behind them displaying the Training Center image of their dead children - twenty families glaring at us with barely concealed hate. Why you? Their eyes seemed to say. Why did my child have to die? Why did you get to live?

It had been far worse in the Career districts, especially Districts One and Two. But it had not been easy in any of them. Oh, the things that we really wanted to say, but couldn't - not after Katniss’s heartfelt speech in Eleven had inadvertently resulted in an old man's summary execution at the end of her speech.

I squeeze my eyes shut as memories of the past few months flood my brain. Katniss, pale and gaunt, staring at me as I plant primrose bushes by the side of her house. Katniss, reluctantly allowing me to share breakfast with her, while she feeds Buttercup her bacon. Katniss, blood spattered, appearing at my door asking me for help in hauling a deer carcass back to the Village - and finally seeking my arms for comfort, out there in her woods. Katniss and I, working on the memory book together, quietly talking, with her giving me her first shy smiles as we worked. Me baking a cake for her eighteenth birthday. Quietly honoring her sister - now revealed to be our sister - Prim, on what would have been Prim's fourteenth birthday. The Reaping Day anniversary, naming the town square after Prim, and, that night, hearing her say the words that I never thought I would ever hear her say.

You love me, real or not real.
Real.

Other things - the rigged Reaping, Madge's involvement in the Rebellion, Katniss sharing her lake with me, meeting the Clans, District Thirteen's involvement with the firebombing of Twelve, eavesdropping on her conversation with Gale, me almost killing her again.

She called me Dandelion. She told me that she loves me.

The High Tribunal said that I wasn't responsible for what I did to her. One fact remains. It was my fist hitting her, over and over again. The first time, I almost strangled her. Both times I was stopped by someone's intervention - Boggs in District Thirteen, Lars in Twelve. I owe both a debt that I can never repay. Absently I scratch the scars on my arm - scars from the knife that Katniss wielded in self defense.

She should have killed me. I wish that she had killed me.

She loves me. I love her. That's why I have to stay as far away from her as I possibly can. She deserves a chance at life. She's suffered more in eighteen years than most people do in a lifetime. I'm so sorry, Katniss. I don't deserve your love. I just hope that you don't hate me.

The train suddenly lurches to a stop. The automated voice returns. "District Seven. Please check around your seat for personal belongings and follow the signs to the nearest exit from the train. Disembarkation will begin immediately. Once again, thank you for choosing Panem-Trak and have a wonderful day."

I sigh, rising to my feet and grabbing my gym bag. I slide the berth door open and step out into the corridor. I see the "EXIT" sign to my left, and in a few moments, I'm standing on the platform, inhaling the scent of pine, unmindful of the rain.

I'm in District Seven. My new home.

PART II

I hunch my shoulders slightly and awkwardly jog the few steps to the covered part of the platform. I glance back at the train one last time, and as I do so, catch a whiff of why they call this the "Western Stinker." I guess the moving train blew the stench away from the passenger cars, and the air filtration system kept it out when the train was standing still. The train hadn't yet connected to the boxcars holding the livestock when I originally boarded in Ten. I wrinkle my nose in disgust and turn back toward the train station.

As I do, I see a figure hurrying toward me, clad head to toe in a rain suit. Rain jacket with hood, rain pants, and rubber boots. You would think from looking at this person that the rain was coming down in sheets, rather than the gentle storm that's passing over District Seven. Only one person would take such extreme measures to avoid getting wet.

Johanna Mason.

Even though the hood is pulled up, obscuring her face, there's no mistaking the slight figure. Unmindful of the curious stares and finger pointing that my presence on the platform is generating, I stop and drop my bag. The figure stops in front of me and quickly pushes the hood back, revealing short, spiky black hair sitting above a thin, angular face. I find myself cracking a genuine smile for the first time since that horrible day.

"Jo," I say softly, trying to keep my voice from cracking as I envelope her in a hug. She returns my hug ever so briefly then pushes away forcefully, looking around at the crowd that's just beginning
"Come on," she says abruptly, taking my arm to hurry me toward the station. At the last moment I manage to grab onto my bag.

Johanna impatiently pushes the station door open and hurries me inside. It's all I can do to keep up with her as we quickly cross the polished tile floor and head directly to the exit facing the street. She only speaks to me one time while we were in the building.

"Any checked bags?" She asks.

"No," I reply.

"Good." She never lets go of my arm as she pushes the exit door open, holding it just long enough for me to slip through. Once outside, she pauses just long enough to pull her hood up over her head, then grabs my hand and pulls me along behind her. We descend the few steps leading to the street. At street level, she pauses, looks to her left, then her right, then turns to the right and pulls me down the street, stopping at a parked car. She pulls a set of keys from a pocket and quickly unlocks the passenger door.

"Get in," she snaps, as she hurries around to the other side of the car. I open the door and slide into the passenger seat. As I shut the door I hear the drivers side door open, then slam shut. I glance over at Johanna, who's now vigorously toweling off her face and hands.

"Jo?" I ask. "Are you...are you okay?"

"Oh, sure!" She replies sarcastically. "Why do you ask, Stumpy? Just because feeling water on my skin still sends me into panic mode?"

Before I could reply she abruptly starts the car and pulls away from the curb with a jerk. "I didn't know you knew how to drive," is all I can think of saying.

"I learned how when I was twelve," Jo replies tightly, "As big and spread out as Seven is, pretty much everyone learns how to drive pretty young."

"Oh," is all I can think of saying. We drive in silence for a few minutes, until buildings give way to an unbroken expanse of forest. We're on a well-maintained two lane road, heading away from Maintown at a decent clip.

"Where are we going?" I finally ask.

"Camp One," she replies. "It's about ten kilometers from Maintown."

"Why?" I ask in confusion.

"I live there," is her only response.

After a few more minutes of silence, we finally enter what appears to be a small village. I recognize grocery stores, hardware stores, a small diner, and several saloons in the village center, surrounded by small homes and apartment buildings.

Johanna abruptly turns down a side street, drives past several newer-looking homes, and pulls the car up in front of one. She turns to me as she takes the car out of gear and turns the engine off.

"Home sweet home," she mutters, pulling the hood back over her head. She turns and quickly
opens her door, bolting from the car, barely taking time to slam the car door shut. I follow, somewhat slower, grabbing my gym bag with my meager belongings. By the time I close my car door Johanna's already in the house, the front door standing open. I enter through the same door, closing it carefully behind me. I stop for a moment, allowing my eyes to adjust to the dim light inside the house.

Johanna is standing in a small living room, impatiently stripping off her rain gear and carelessly tossing everything aside. As soon as her rain gear hits the floor she grabs a towel off the back of a chair and starts drying herself vigorously.

"Yeah, I know," she snaps. "I'm not even wet. But it's just the thought!" Suddenly she wads the towel up and flings it into a corner. We both stand there for a moment, our eyes locked to each other, then Johanna does something totally unexpected.

She starts to cry.

Tough as nails, nothing gets to me, cold as ice Johanna Mason puts her hand to her face as her mouth twists in despair, tears running freely down her cheeks. Her head drops and I see her shoulders shake. I'm completely frozen with shock, until the first sob escapes her lips. I drop my gym bag with a thump and step forward, my arms going around the woman that is the least likely that I would have ever called friend.

Johanna stiffens at first when she feels my arms encircle her spare frame, then her own arms clinch me desperately as she clings to me, her face buried in my chest, her shoulders heaving with sobs. I murmur quietly to her, not saying anything in particular, just making soothing sounds until her sobs gradually diminish and she finally pulls away from me with a loud sniff.

"Thanks," she whispers, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand.

"It's the least I could do," I reply with a wan smile.

"Peg-leg, you don't owe me anything," she begins. "You -"

"Jo," I interrupt, "You were the only reason I didn't go completely insane in that place. Yes, I owe you. I owe you a lot. And it'll never be repaid."

"I'm sorry you had to see me like this," she says miserably. "It's just - let's just say the last few weeks have been hard. Between my own neuroses and all the shit going on between you and Brainless have really taken a toll on me."

"I'm really sorry I dragged you into this," I say softly. "I just didn't know where else to turn."

"By the way," Johanna says sternly, "Could you have left any bigger trail leading here? Holy shit! You practically published your itinerary and mailed it to Paylor! Who, by the way, is royally pissed off."

"I - there was no way I could hide that I went to Ten," I say defensively. "It was the only train leaving that night from the Capitol that I could have taken. And I was careful to stay in my berth the entire time."

"Okay, so you were seen leaving the Capitol and, the next morning, seen in Ten. Of course by then Haymitch had put out an alert asking people to report if they saw you - which they did, after you left Ten on the Stinker." Johanna says. "That, plus the fact that the Eastern Stinker left that morning also, is the only reason why you haven't been picked up yet. They aren't one hundred percent sure exactly where you're headed."
I breath a sigh of relief. "Then maybe they won't -"

"Don't count on it," Johanna says with a laugh. "Haymitch has already called me, asking me to report to him if you should show up here."

"He did?" I say in alarm. I have a sinking feeling that I'm gonna be dragged back to Twelve in a day or less.

"He also called Enobaria, Beetee, Gale Hawthorne, Annie Odair, Brainless's mother, and some doctor in Thirteen that treated you when you first arrived there." Johanna says with a grin. "He's fishing, Peg-leg. You have a little time before they figure out you're here. I'm sure you noticed the attention that you were attracting in the station?"

"Yes," I reply miserably.

"On the upside," Johanna says. "Even if they do figure out that you're here, they can't exactly come arrest you. The High Tribunal decided that you aren't a danger to society and they've dismissed all criminal charges. They can't arrest you for running away."

"I'm sure they'll tell Haymitch, though," I say.

"So what?" Johanna says. "So they tell him? He calls and I talk to him. He can't drag you back, either."

I sit and think about all this for a moment. "He'll still come out here and try." I finally say.

"You're a free citizen of the new Republic of Panem," Johanna says. "He can't just make you go back."

"No," I say slowly. "He can't."

"Katniss?" Johanna says softly. "Is that who you're afraid will come out?"

"Yeah," I whisper.

"Okay, I'm confused," she says impatiently. "You don't want to be around her. You've basically left her. And you're afraid of her coming looking for you? Afraid that she's gonna do something to you?"

"No," I reply. "I'm not afraid that she would do anything to me. I'm just - afraid. Jo, I'm doing this because I - because I love her." I hear my voice rise. "Jo, I've almost killed her twice. I can't risk a third time."

"Peeta," Johanna says gently, "I've spent enough time with Katniss in Thirteen to learn one thing about her. That girl, for whatever mysterious reason of her own, loves you. I'm your friend, and I'm her friend. That's why I'm telling you this. I'll help you any way you want me to - except lie for you. I'll never do that. But if you go through with this, and walk away from her for good, you will be killing her. You'll kill her emotionally."

"She'll get over it," I say, not sounding very convincing.

"No. She won't." Johanna says simply, then, "Sit down. I'm gonna make us some tea. And you're gonna tell me everything. All I know is what I see on Capitol TV. I want to know the truth. And if you want my help, you'll give it to me."
"And here I am," I finish. Our empty teacups sit on a low table between our chairs.

"And you blame yourself," Johanna says flatly.

I nod. "Jo, I have no one -" I begin.

"Stop." Johanna says quietly, her voice tinged with anger. "Just stop! You know, Mellark, I thought I knew you. Hearing your screams during interrogation, knowing that those bastards were doing everything they could to break you. Using me, Annie, even those two Avox servers - and you hung tough. The only way they could break you down was chemically. And that's the only way that this Nivosus bitch got to you now! What the fuck is wrong with you? Do you have some kind of martyr complex or something?"

I sit in silence for several long seconds. "I don't want to see her hurt anymore by me," I finally say. Johanna laughs bitterly. "Well, isn't that just so fucking noble of you! Peeta, you showed me her letter. That was not a letter that said 'stay away from me.' That was a 'it's not your fault, I love you, come home soon' letter. You don't deserve her. You could live a hundred lifetimes and not deserve her."

Now it's my turn to laugh bitterly. "It seems I've heard that line before."

"I need to tell you something," Johanna says in a much calmer voice. "When you and Brainless were Reaped - or rather, when you were Reaped and she volunteered for her sister, and you dropped that 'the girl that I love came here with me' bombshell on everyone during your interview - well, almost every Mentor thought that was total bullshit. Oh, you should have seen the eyes rolling! Finnick and I thought it was brilliant strategy. We could see how good you were at playing the audience. And during the Games, when Brainless finally caught on and you two were playing that whole 'Star-crossed lovers' thing - well, that just convinced us that we were watching a big, masterful act."

"You said almost every Mentor," I reply.

"We would be sitting in the Mentor's Lounge laughing about it," Johanna continues, "Everyone talking about what total bullshit it was, and how desperate Haymitch had become to bring a Victor home that he would try anything. Everyone, that is, except Seeder and Mags. They knew, somehow, that what was happening was real."

"It was real," I whisper.

"Yeah, well, it took until the Quarter Quell to convince me," Johanna replies, sarcasm tingeing her voice. "And only because I had a chance to talk to Finnick. Peeta, at first Katniss thought that I hated her. I know she didn't care for me all that much. But you wanna know something?"

"What?" I answer thickly, feeling my emotions rising up.

"It wasn't hate," Johanna says softly. "Oh, I thought she was pretty insufferable, until I realized that she was just naive. But it was never hate. I was...jealous."

"Of Katniss?" I ask incredulously.

"Of Katniss," Johanna admits miserably. "Of what she had, and was to stupid to see. Remember in the arena? The Jabberjays?"
"Yeah," I reply. "Katniss and Finnick - it really did a number on them."

"And I said that they couldn't hurt me that way, because I had no one left that I love," Johanna says quietly. "Remember?"

"Yeah," I reply. "I remember."

"Do you want to know why?" Johanna asks, then continues on before I have a chance to say anything. No matter, I did want to know why. "After my Games, I was, to put it mildly, insufferable. Oh, what a cocky little bitch I was! So full of myself! Blight, he tried to rein me in but I was seventeen and a Victor - I knew it all! So naturally, I didn't listen to him."

Johanna pauses for a moment before continuing. "After I returned to Seven, my family moved in with me in the Village. My Dad, my Mom, my younger sister - she was twelve that year, same as Prim -" Johanna's voice hitches a little while she talks, then she regains her composure quickly before continuing on "- they all moved in with me. I had a boyfriend, too. He was eighteen and had just started working on a crew. We had been going together for two years. I always thought that we would get married someday."

"What happened to them, Jo?" I ask gently.

"I was what happened to them!" She snaps. "It was during my Victory Tour. That last stop, at the Capitol? Blight gave me a note, from President Snow, saying that he wished to see me before the reception at the Presidential Palace. One guess as to what he wanted to see me about."

"Finnick," I whisper.

"Yeah," Johanna says thickly. "I can still hear Snow to this day. 'Miss Mason, Victors have certain obligations that cannot be dismissed. Consider this an honor. Not all Victors are so favored by me.'" She shudders. "Do you know what I said to him?"

"I can guess it was no."

"I laughed at him. Peeta, I laughed at Snow! That's how cocky I was! And I told him that I was untouchable as a Victor, even from him. And do you know what he did?" Johanna asks.

"I would think he got really angry," I reply.

"He laughed!" Johanna says angrily. "The son of a bitch looked at me and laughed. Then he said, 'Oh, we'll see, Miss Mason. We'll see.' Then he dismissed me. In my stupidity, I thought that was the end of it." Johanna looks at me with haunted eyes. "The very next morning, while I was on the train back to Seven, my father was run down and killed by a logging truck."

I look at my friend with stricken eyes. "Oh, Jo," I say. "I'm so sorry."

"I found out about it when I got home," Johanna says quietly. "My Dad and I were really close. Of course I called the Capitol right away, and when I finally got in touch with Snow, I begged him to let me whore for him. And he laughed - again. He laughed and said, 'You had your opportunity, Miss Mason. Now you'll learn the consequence of defiance. You're doing me a great service right now, in fact. You are serving as a wonderful example of what happens to defiant Victors. I needed a new example, anyway - Abernathy is much too old and much too drunk to serve as such any more.'"

"So that's what happened to Haymitch," I muse quietly.
"Yes," Johanna says. "Within the next two weeks my Mom, sister, and boyfriend were all killed in 'accidents.' And everyone knew it was my fault - or, at least, that my being a Victor had something to do with it. And at my first Games as Mentor, Haymitch was one of the first to talk to me. I didn't need any convincing, though. By the time those Games were over I was firmly in the Rebel camp."

"So that made you jealous of Katniss and I?" I ask.

"I figured that Snow wouldn't do to you what he did to Finnick," Johanna replies, "and tried to do with me. The Capitol citizens wouldn't have stood for it. You two were the love story of the century." She says this last sarcastically. "But at the Quell, I could see it. I finally knew what Seeder and Mags already knew. You had something that I didn't have and yes, I was jealous. It's not something that I'm proud of."

I didn't know what to say, so I stand up and walk slowly to the window. It's still raining steadily outside.

"Great weather," I mutter, more to myself than anything. The weather certainly matches my mood.

"Didn't you know?" Johanna asks. "District Seven has two seasons - winter and August."

I laugh humorlessly.

Johanna's phone suddenly rings.

I jerk violently at the sound, spinning around to stare at the ringing phone. Slowly Johanna stand up from her chair and walks over to the phone stand. She looks at me pointedly.

"I'm not lying for you." All I can do is nod.

Johanna picks up the handset and punches a button. "Yes?"

"Oh, hey, rummy," Johanna says cheerfully. "What? Really? No shit?" As she talks she grabs the remote control for her Holo-TV and turns it on. She taps a number and the image stabilizes to show - me, walking across the District Four train platform.

The image is blurry, out of focus, and obviously taken in a hurry - and there's no mistaking who the subject is. "Shit," I say miserably as I sink down into a chair by the window. So much for disappearing.

Johanna mutes the sound on the Holo-TV as she talks. "Yeah. I hear you. Listen, asshole, what would you rather he do? Wander all over Panem? At least with me he's safe and sound. What? Look, I know you think you're some ace Advocate now, but...look, Abernathy, I know a little about the law and Peg-Leg's done nothing wrong! Last I heard it wasn't a crime to want to disappear and...what? Okay, okay - hang on for a minute." Johanna cups her hand over the mouthpiece and looks at me.

"He wants to talk to you," she says apologetically.

"Fuck," I mutter. No sense in delaying the inevitable. Wordlessly I extend my hand. Johanna hands me the phone as she sits back down in her chair.

"Save your breath," I immediately say. "I know what you're gonna say and it won't work."

"Boy, how you managed to survive not one, but two games is beyond me," Haymitch growls.
"Your 'disappearing' skills suck - big time!"

"I do alright," I mumble.

"Kid, a blind man could have followed that trail you left behind," Haymitch says reasonably. "But that's not why I'm calling. Jo's right, running away ain't a crime. So don't worry, you won't be seeing soldiers pounding on your door any time in the near future. But you've no idea how relieved I am to hear your voice."

I pause for a moment before answering. "I didn't mean to worry anyone," I say in a small voice.

"No?" Haymitch replies, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "You sure as shit coulda fooled me!"

"Look, I'm sorry," I say quickly. "I just didn't think -"

"Exactly," Haymitch says, cutting me off. "You didn't think! And, you had literally everyone that you know looking for you! Not to mention costing that little Capitol nurse her job."

I have a sudden sinking feeling deep inside. "Amalthea? What happened?"

"What the hell do you think happened? She was fired!" Haymitch replies angrily.

Amalthea was fired from a job she loved. Because of me. No wonder Haymitch found me so easily, with the trail of destruction I left behind me.

"I - Haymitch, you have to help her," I beg. "It wasn't her fault. Please."

"Way ahead of you, kid," replies Haymitch. "I've already talked to Galen. He said he would find a place for her on his staff in Twelve." Haymitch chuckles. "She's 'thinking it over.' She's a Capitol girl, through and through. Not sure if she can take the culture shock."

Haymitch's mention of Galen makes me think of something else. "Did you...did you find...the letter?" I ask.

"Yeah," Haymitch replies. "I did. As soon as you disappeared, and I found the letter, Plutarch got me on a high speed hovercraft to District Four. I hand-delivered your letter personally."

"How is she?" I ask, my voice wavering.

"Physically?" Haymitch replies. "Weak as a kitten. She's in a convalescent facility now, regaining her strength. Last I saw of her, she still needs help walking - which is probably a good thing for you. Otherwise you'd probably be dealing with a very pissed off Mockingjay right about now."

"She's mad." I say. It's a statement, not a question.

"That's an understatement if I ever heard one," Haymitch says with a humorless laugh. "Kid, she's furious! And devastated. And depressed. She told me what was in her letter to you. You really don't deserve this girl at all."

"Didn't you say that about her when talking to her about me once?" I ask.

"Times have changed," Haymitch says gruffly. "Kid, you hurt her a lot worse with your words than you ever did with your fists. I don't know if she'll ever recover."

"I'm just so afraid of hurting her again," I whisper.
"You already have," Haymitch says bluntly.

PART IV

The rest of the conversation with Haymitch went about the same way. By the time Johanna took the phone away from me I was having serious doubts about my decision.

She'll get over it in time. She'll move on - find someone else. Someone who won't hurt her the way I keep doing.

I take no solace in these thoughts.

Jo helps me the rest of the day, mostly by leaving me alone. She tells me that she can go into Maintown tomorrow and buy me some more clothes - the meager wardrobe that I have with me needs a lot of immediate help. I promise to pay her back, which she, of course, refuses.

Later in the day Johanna tries to make dinner. I can see that her culinary skills leave a lot to be desired. I ask her how she manages to feed herself and she simply replies, "I eat out a lot." I take over the cooking and manage to whip up something edible from the mess she was making.

Johanna informs me that she goes out just about every night to one of the many bars in Camp One, and sometimes into Maintown to one of the nicer clubs there. She tells me that we'll be going out tomorrow night to "get my mind off of things for a while." I don't really feel like it but I don't argue.

We sit and talk into the night. Johanna tells me that Camp One was where she was raised, so that's why she chose to come back here. I ask her if the house we were living in is her old house. She laughed and said no, that house had been reassigned a long time ago. This house she picked out herself as her replacement for her old Victor's Village home.

As we talk, Johanna calmly reaches for a small case on the end table between our chairs, opens it, and extracts an item that I'm quite familiar with. An auto injector. Johanna doesn't miss a beat. She uncaps it, arms it, and injects herself directly into her neck. She explains that it's a sedative that she takes within a half hour of her showering. She explains it this way:

"I'm still deathly afraid of the water, but, with this, I just don't give a shit."

It must have worked. I didn't hear her scream once while she was showering. She didn't look all that great afterwards, though.

Shortly after that she goes to bed, grousing about it being way too early for bed. I take the opportunity to get cleaned up, although I don't shave. I decide to let my beard grow and see what happens. Right now it's not impressing me at all.

Finally, exhaustion gets the best of me. I crawl into the bed in Johanna's spare bedroom and quickly fall asleep. I wake up several times, nightmares of losing Katniss dominating my dreams, and spend a fitful, restless night. Finally I drift off and hope for no more nightmares.

I wake up once more. At Three Twenty-Two in the morning, what awakens me makes me wish I was just having a bad dream.

This time, I awaken to shaking.
Now that I'm all caught up cross posting this story from FFN, it's my sad duty to let everyone know that I won't be able to post updates here every day like I have been. I will try to update as quickly as I can! Thanks to all those that have been reading and commenting and thanks for all the kudos!
I'm not sure exactly what woke me up - my bad dream or the shaking. I remember both vividly.

The early morning silence is broken by a loud, shuddering bang that's accompanied by a sharp jolt. My bed shakes vigorously, chasing away what little sleep remained in my brain.

*Something just hit the house*, I say to myself. *But what? A car?*

I hear Johanna's voice call out once from her bedroom. "Peeta?"

And then it starts. My best description would be that I was laying in a bed in a dollhouse, being shaken back and forth by a destructive, vindictive child. I could hear the walls rattle and shudder and feel my bed bounce against the floor. Amid the cacophony of the shaking house and the increasing din of unseen objects toppling over and falling, I hear a faint scream. I'm not sure if it's me or Jo doing the screaming.

I clench my eyes shut, clutching the sheet, blanket, and comforter around me as, incredibly, the shaking becomes even stronger, more pronounced. I feel and hear something bounce off the bed to land with a thud on the bedroom floor. The noise at this point is deafening and the only thought going through my mind is *make it stop. make it stop. Make it stop! Make it stop! MAKE IT STOP!*

Silence. I could feel and hear my heart thudding as an eerie silence descends over the house. I open my eyes, straining to see something, anything, in the absolute blackness of the bedroom. My breathing is ragged and uneven. *I should get up. Find out what happened. See if -*

"Peeta?" Jo's voice calls out from her bedroom.

"Jo?" I reply. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Holy fuck!" Jo sounds shaky as she barks out a short, nervous laugh. Still, I should go check on her and -

"Don't get up!" Jo orders. "Stay right where you are!" I turn toward her voice and suddenly see a beam of light coming from the direction of her room. "I'll come to you," she says. As she talks I fumble for the light switch and press it. Nothing. I press several times with the same result. No lights. I realize that the power must be out. *And that's why she's carrying a flashlight, stupid!* I say to myself.

"Okay," I call back. I watch the beam of light get closer, and I realize that she's got a flashlight. I hear her muttered curses and I can hear her picking her way toward my room. Soon the light is softly illuminating my room and I look around.

The dresser that was against the wall has toppled over. The few pictures that were on the wall are now on the floor. The bedroom curtains are laying in a heap under the window.

"Come with me," Jo orders, "But put something on your feet - or foot, as the case may be - first."
Shakily I climb out of bed, locate my shoes, and slip my feet into them. I follow Jo out of the room to survey the rest of the house.

"What happened?" I ask.

"Seriously?" Jo asks in an amazed tone. "That was one strong quake!"

"Quake?" I ask stupidly. "As in earthquake?"

"I don't know of any other kind," Jo replies. "That was the strongest I've ever felt, though." We reach the living room and total chaos.

A large bookshelf that had contained Johanna's Holo-TV, along with books, magazine and photographs, had toppled over and was on the floor, having narrowly missed her couch on the way down. The contents of the shelves were strewn all over the living room. A smaller bookshelf on the opposite wall was also down, as were several pictures that had been hanging on the wall.

"Shit," is all Jo says as she surveys the chaos by flashlight beam. She bends down suddenly and picks up something off of the floor. I come closer and see that it's the phone.

Johanna holds the phone to her ear. "Dead," she says.

"Broken?" I ask.

"No," Jo replies. "I don't think so. But there's a weird tone. Come on." She tosses the phone onto her couch and together we move into the kitchen.

If the bedroom was bad, and the living room worse, the kitchen is a complete disaster. Every cupboard stands open. The refrigerator door is ajar. We step carefully into the kitchen, hearing broken glass crunch under our feet. Johanna plays the light around the room. The floor and every counter top are completely covered by broken glass, plates, cup, bowls, jars and bottles. The contents of jars and bottles mixes with the shards of glass on the counters and floor.

"Fuck," Johanna breathes. "What a freakin' mess."

I follow her into the bathrooms. Water from the toilets has sloshed out onto the floor in both bathrooms. Jo plays the light under each sink, then goes back into the kitchen and repeats the gesture under the kitchen sink.

"Can't see any leaks," she says, breathing a sigh of relief. "That's a good sign." While in the kitchen, Jo opens a drawer and retrieves a tool, then steps outside. I follow close behind. Right now being alone is the last thing I want.

Jo hands me the flashlight. "Shine it over here, Peeta," she says. "No, more to the right. Perfect." I see her bend over with the tool and begin to fuss at a pipe protruding from the ground.

"What're you doing?" I ask.

"Turning off the gas," she replies with a grunt. "There. Done. I didn't smell any gas but figured we better, just to be on the safe side." She bends back down and quickly pulls a lever away from another pipe. "Water's off for now, too." She reaches for the light and I wordlessly hand it back to her.

For the first time I notice her neighbors outside, too. Some, like Jo, appeared to be turning off gas and water. Others just seem to be milling around aimlessly. Jo strides over to a man standing in the
I can see them talking quietly. The sound is strangely reassuring. Professionals are out there, working.

It's then that I notice, as I scan the moonless sky, a pink glow on the horizon off in the distance. As I peer off in the distance I'm aware of Johanna walking back toward me.

"Whatcha lookin' at?" She asks. I point off in the distance.

"Why's the sky pink over that way?" I ask. Jo follows my arm as I point at the pink glow.

"Maintown is that way," she answers after a moment. "That pink glow is a fire burning somewhere."

"A fire?" I ask in alarm.

"Yeah," she replies. "Don't worry about it. It's probably in Maintown. Long way away. Come on back inside. It's cold out here." Jo turns to go back into the house. I follow closely, suddenly aware of the chill, early fall air.

Back in the house, Johanna quickly rummages through a sideboard in her living room, coming up with a bottle and a pair of glasses. "Come on," she says, walking back into her bedroom. I follow. Her room surprisingly shows little evidence of the quake - but then again, aside from her enormous bed, there's very little else in the room. Jo plops down on her bed and pats the mattress next to her. I hesitate for a moment.

"What?" She asks, amusement in her voice? "Afraid I'm gonna jump your bones or something? Don't worry, Peeta Pure-heart - I'm just inviting you to sit. Or would you rather use the floor?"

Sheepishly, I carefully sit on the edge of the bed. "Here," Jo says. I turn to see her hand me one of the glasses that she had brought into her room.

"What is it?" I ask, as I carefully sniff at the liquid, recoiling a bit as I inhale the fumes of something strongly alcoholic. "I'm sorry, Jo - I don't -"

"Shut up and drink," Jo says firmly. She carefully puts the flashlight on her headboard, the beam shining straight up.

I take a small, cautious sip. The strong liquor makes me cough a little as I swallow. My mind flashes back to a time, almost two years before, when, in a fit of depression over - who else - Katniss, I had made myself sick by drinking too much. That was one time too many for me. But this - this feels different somehow. I take another sip, finding it go down easier this time.

"Like it?" Johanna asks.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Fourteen year old whiskey," she replies. "Nothing but the best for me or my friends." She touches her glass to mine. "To earthquakes."

"One was enough for me, thanks," I mutter, taking another sip. Yes, it was starting to taste pretty good now. "Does that happen a lot here?"

"That was the biggest I've ever felt," Johanna replies. "There was another pretty good jolt, about fourteen years ago, but compared to this one it was nothing. But we get smaller quakes from time to time."
"Hey," I say, "Shouldn't we be cleaning up or something?"

"Relax, Peg-Leg," she laughs. "No power, no lights, remember? We wait until sunrise - and I know I won't be able to go back to sleep. So we sit and keep each other company until it gets light enough to see."

"Oh," I reply, feeling stupid. "That makes sense."

"Here," Jo says, pouring a little more in my glass.

"Thanks," I mutter, taking another sip, feeling the liquor warm me from the inside out. "I felt a shaking something like that once before - in Twelve."

"I didn't know that you had quakes in Twelve," Jo replies.

"It wasn't a quake," I say softly. "There was an accident in the mine. An explosion. I was at school when it happened. Katniss's father was killed. Gale Hawthorne's dad too."

"Oh, wow," Jo breathes. "I knew her father was dead, but I didn't know how."

"She doesn't talk about it," I say. Now I'm sorry I even brought her up.

"I heard some story about you two," Johanna says softly. "Something about bread."

"Yeah," I choke out.

"Sorry," Jo says contritely. "I didn't mean to -"

"It was about three months after the accident," I say, cutting her off, "She and her sister were starving to death. Her mother had what they call the Sadness. Aurelius calls it severe depression. Katniss was in Town that day, trying to sell some of her sister's old baby clothes for money to buy food. She came to my families' bakery and knocked on the door. My mother yelled at her to go away, called her names - worthless Seam trash was the nicest." I pause and take another, larger swallow.

"Peeta, you don't -"

"I was working in the bakery that day - I remember it was pouring down rain. Speaking of rain, I notice that it's not raining now," I point out.

"It does stop from time to time," Johanna says with a small smile.

"Anyway, I saw Katniss going through our...rooting through our garbage cans for something, anything to eat. My mother yelled at her again and she stopped. I saw her stumble over to an old apple tree near the bakery and just slump to the ground." I take a deep breath as Jo puts her hand on my shoulder. "I knew if I didn't help her that she would die there, under that tree, that night. It used to happen a lot in Twelve. People just dying that way."

I take another drink. "So I decided to burn a couple loaves of bread. When my mother saw them she got pissed and hit me, then told me to feed the bread to our pigs. So I took the bread and went outside - only I didn't feed the pigs with it. I threw both loaves over toward Katniss and ran back inside before my mother could see what I did. But she knew anyway. So I got another beating. But later when I looked outside the bread and Katniss were both gone."

"Wow," Johanna breathes. "True story?"
"Yeah," I whisper. "Every word. When we were both eleven."

Johanna rubs my back gently. "And here all this time I thought it was more Plutarch Heavensbee bullshit."


"Are you superstitious, Peeta?" she asks.

"Not really," I reply. "Why?"

"I am," Johanna says. "And if you were, maybe you would be like me and take that quake as a sign."

"A sign of what?" I say as I drain my glass.

"A sign that you really don't belong here."

**PART II**

Once dawn started to break, Jo and I start to clean. Once it was light enough to see, both of us felt overwhelmed by the sheer volume of mess. We decide to just take one room at a time, starting with her room and working toward the front of the house.

Gradually, we put her house back together. Pictures are re-hung on walls, her bookshelves are righted once again ("First chance I get I'm bolting these fuckers to the wall," she grunts as we lift the heavy shelves) and the problem with the mess in the kitchen is solved by me using a snow shovel and her holding a garbage can.

While we work we get several visitors. A man from the power company comes out to inspect the power lines and gas main (his auburn hair reminds me briefly of a long dead girl from my first Games named Finch - that Katniss and I both knew as Foxface). He pronounces the gas main safe and turns the gas back on. We get another visit from the water company, and yet another from the building inspectors, who crawl under the house, checking for foundation damage. I'm impressed with the quick response from all of these different agencies. No serious damage is discovered.

Power is restored around mid-afternoon. Phone service is restored around the same time. Jo and I work steadily until her house is back to some semblance of its original state (although picked up and a mite cleaner - Jo seems to be pretty casual about housekeeping). We don't even take a break until everything is done.

The only real casualty is Jo's Holo-TV. At first glance it appeared unscathed - amazing enough for having a bookshelf basically fall on top of it - but when we tried to plug it back in we discover a connector has pulled completely out of the projection unit. Jo's stereo works fine - we've have music on ever since the power was restored. But the TV is another story.

"I'll head into Maintown tomorrow," she says. "There's a shop there. And I still need to get you some more clothes!"

Dinner that night was out of cans for the most part. I do what I can but, in the end, everything tasted like it came out of a can. Jo adds a visit to the grocers to her errand list. I inform her that I will be joining her tomorrow. She's surprised but doesn't object.

After we eat, Jo takes me outside. Her neighbors - lumberjacks and mill workers for the most part - are staging an impromptu "Earthquake Party," which reminds me a great deal of the get-togethers
in Victor's Village after Katniss and I had arrived back home.

Katniss. Even as I mingle among Jo's neighbors, my mind is never far from Katniss. Was Jo right? Should I take this quake as a sign that I don't belong here? I am just so afraid of what may happen - but at the same time I feel horrible for hurting her more.

"Peeta!" Jo calls out. I turn and see her dragging a large, blonde man by the hand over to where I'm standing. "Someone I want you to meet!"

The man looks vaguely familiar as Jo deposits him in front of me. "Peeta Mellark, this is Gunter Broadax," Jo says with a smile. "Gunter has a cousin that I believe you know."

"You have a glass or a cup?" Gunter asks. I nod and hold out my glass, from which I had very carefully been drinking non-alcoholic beverages. Gunter grabs it and produces a ceramic jug. He grabs the cork in his teeth and pulls sharply, opening the jug with an audible popping sound. He splashes a generous amount of liquid in my glass, then hands it back to me and corks his jug.

I cautiously sniff, half expecting the strong, oak smell of whiskey, and instead I smell - apples?

"What is this?" I ask, swirling the liquid around in my glass.

"Applejack." Gunter replies. "Made it myself! Try it!"

I take a small sip and cough. It may smell and taste like apples, but it has a kick. "Delicious," I sputter.

Gunter laughs and claps me on the back. "Glad you like it!" He roars. "My cousin don't make friends easily. He's got nothing but good things to say about you, though. Glad I finally got to meet ya!" Gunter sticks out one large, meaty hand. I look him in the eye as I grasp his hand firmly. Gunter squeezes, increasing the pressure as we shake hands.

_He's testing me, _I say to myself. _He won't find a weak Townie here! _I squeeze back, causing him to increase his pressure. I look him in the eye, smile, take another drink, and squeeze his hand even harder. Back and forth we go, until finally Gunter releases my hand with a grin.

"Lars is right about you," Gunter says. "He said that Twelve people are as tough as Sevens."

Gunter shakes his hand, flexing his fingers. "I'd say he's right!"

Jo looks at us both and shakes her head. "I'll never understand why men have this testosterone-driven urge to prove their strength to each other!"

"It's a guy thing, Jo," Gunter says with a wink, then turns to me. "So, Peeta Mellark, friend to my cousin - let me first tell you that I believe none of that bullshit on the Holo-TV about what happened between you and the Mockingjay back there in Twelve!"

"Her name is Katniss," I say softly. "Katniss Everdeen. She's not some mythical creature - she's just a girl." I take another swallow of applejack, feeling the pleasant buzz in my head. "An incredible, wonderful girl..."

"Do you want to go home?" Johanna asks, looking at me intently.

"Home here, or home there?" I ask.

"Your choice," Jo replies softly. "I'll support whatever you decide."
I take another swallow of applejack while I mull over what to say. What do I want? It was so clear in the Capitol - so apparent that I had to disappear for Katniss's sake. Now - now I'm just not sure any more. Before I can say anything I become aware of Gunter talking again.

"- married soon!" He says. "I would never have believed it! Especially after Birgitta!"

I peer at Gunter, trying to focus on his face. This applejack is pretty strong, I say to myself. "What?" I find myself asking.

"My cousin, Lars," Gunter repeats, "He's getting married soon. Some Twelve girl named Dolly."

"Delly," I reply, correcting him. "Her name is Delly. Delly Cartwright. We've been friends forever."

"That's it! Delly!" Gunter says. "I never would have believed it - right, Jo?"

"It's a miracle," Jo says wryly. "So, Peg-Leg - what do you want to do?"


Gunter laughs. "What most everyone else does! Lumberjack in summer, work in the mill fall, winter and spring. Why?"

"I need a job," I reply simply. Johanna looks at me in amazement.

"That's your decision?" She asks sharply.

"For now," I snap. "How about it, Gunter? Anything I could do in the mill?"

"I don't get it," Gunter says in confusion. "You're a Victor! You don't need to work!"

"Without pay," I add quickly. "Call it therapy. I just need to do something!"

"Peeta, you don't need to do this!" Johanna says.

"Yes I do, Jo," I reply. I give her a small smile then turn to face Gunter. "Can you help me out?"

"I'll talk to the boss in the morning," Gunter replies. "We're still cleaning up down there. I'm shift lead. I guess I can use general labor."

"Thanks a lot, Broadax!" Johanna snaps, before stomping away.

I watch Jo walk back into her house, slamming the door behind her. I shrug my shoulders. "Looks like she doesn't like my idea." I drain my glass. "Thanks for the drink, Gunter. Nice meeting you. Hope you'll have some good news for me soon." I extend my hand again and we shake, without a test of strength this time.

"I'll talk to you soon, Peeta," Gunter says as he turns to go. "Goodnight. And good luck with Jo!"

"Goodnight," I reply as I turn toward the house, while still trying to figure out exactly why I asked for a job in the first place.

**PART III**

I sink tiredly onto the couch after the end of my shift. I've been working for a little more than three weeks. I'm no stranger to hard work - I worked in my families' bakery for years before my Reaping.
I survived two Hunger Games and a war. But now, I can never remember being so tired.

Johanna walks into the living room, glances at me, and plops into her favorite chair. "Hard day?" she asks with a smirk.

I lay my head back and close my eyes, and in response I simply raise up my right hand and extend my middle finger. Johanna's response is a short, barking laugh.

"You've been hanging around me too long, Mellark," she says. "You act more and more like me every day!"

"You're a bad influence, Mason," I reply. "And a corrupting one at that!"

"Hey, I don't drag you out with me every night -"

"Yes, you do," I say.

" - and even if I did, you could always come back home." Jo finishes.

She's right. I could go home. But I don't. Because when it's quiet, and I'm not keeping busy, I think too much. And it's not good when I think too much. Like right now. I sigh deeply.

Jo glances over at me, then stands up and goes to the sideboard. She pulls out a small pouch and two pipes, then sits back down next to me. Wordlessly she packs both pipes and hands one to me, along with a match. As she packs her pipe I light the match and touch it to the contents of the pipe bowl, puffing until the pipe stays lit. I inhale the sweet smoke deeply, holding it in for a moment before letting it out.

I had to admit that the sativa here in Seven was much smoother than the herb that Nova and the River Clan had introduced to me last summer. Jo calls it cannabis, or just "weed." Smoking a pipe full has become a nightly ritual for us over the last couple of weeks or so, ever since she had a front row seat for my first hijacking seizure since my escape from the hospital.

I had only been working for a few days by then, coming home tired and sore, but with a clear head. But that night was different. Different because of the phone calls.

Haymitch was first. He had gone back to Four to help Una and Katniss's doctor, Benignus Stone, deal with Katniss, who had become increasingly difficult and uncooperative. So his call was to basically yell at me (after first confirming that I had survived the earthquake - there had been some deaths, mostly in Maintown), calling me a selfish spoiled little boy who was only thinking about myself. Needless to say, our conversation did not end well.

Una Everdeen was next. She adopted a different tactic, expressing her concern and understanding what I was going though, then changing to a pleading tone, and finally anger when I tearfully refused to return to Twelve.

"Haymitch was right!" Una had said angrily. "I should have known better than to expect you to be any different, Peeta - but you're just like your father! In the end, thinking only of yourself! Do you have any idea what this is doing to Katniss? Do you?!"

I could feel anger welling up inside me. I had risked my life time and time again to save Katniss! And, believe me, I felt plenty guilty already. And when she brought my father into it - well, what I said next was fueled entirely by emotion.

"And who were you thinking of twelve years ago, Una?" I found myself asking.
"What's that supposed to mean?" she had snapped back at me.

"Does Katniss know about you and my father? And I'm not talking about before you met Katniss's father, either."

Silence. Finally, in a small, trembling voice, she replies, "How...how did you find out?"

"My Dad didn't tell me, if that's what you mean."

"Then how -" 

"Does it matter?" I asked her. "Does it matter how I found out or how I know? All that matters is that I do know - just like I know that Katniss and I have the same sister."

Silence. Then, "No. No, it can't be. I - we were careful. And it was just...we were only - it was just that one night!"

"I saw proof. Prim was my half sister. And Katniss's half sister."

Johanna's eye went wide as she heard my end of the conversation. The number of people that know this secret just doubled, I remember saying to myself.

"Peeta. Are you - did you -"

"Tell her?" I had laughed bitterly at the thought. "No. We aren't exactly speaking. But that doesn't mean that I don't think that she should know. She has a right to know."

And that's how that conversation ended. I could feel myself losing control and could do nothing about it without medication or sativa.

The last call was the worst. President Paylor herself called, issuing vague threats about freezing my Victors' assets, taking me back into "protective" custody, and threatening to charge Jo with being an "accessory," whatever that meant. As she talked I could feel the attack coming on and by the time I had hung up the phone it was full-blown.

All I could do was stagger back, bumping into a chair as I did so. I spun and grabbed the back of the chair in a death grip, closing my eyes and gasping as waves of false memories ripped through my brain. I was only dimly aware of someone rubbing my back and speaking to me in low, soothing tones. It was Jo, of course, helping me back to reality.

The very next day, she went to Maintown and returned with a supply of cannabis, along with smoking pipes. That same night, after we both smoked a bowl full of the herb, I went out with her for the first time, to some club in Maintown. I stayed there with her the entire time, mostly watching out for her, and paid for it the next day from lack of sleep.

Now, tonight, our ritual finished, she gathers up our smoking supplies and returns them to the sideboard. She injects her sedative and turns on the Holo-TV while she waits for it to take effect. I go to shower and get cleaned up.

After I shower and brush my teeth (I had decided to grow a beard, although I can't say that I'm all that impressed with the results yet), I pull on clean clothes and rejoin Johanna in the living room. The sedative, combined with the cannabis, was working well tonight. Jo gives me a crooked grin as she stands up and walks into her bedroom. Shortly after I head her door close I can hear the sound of water running - and no screaming.
I turn back and gaze at the images projected from the Holo-TV. Some sort of news broadcast. The words "District Twelve" scroll across the top of the image so I decide to pay attention. The sound is turned off - Johanna's usual custom - so I turn the sound back on and settle in to see what the program is all about. The camera zooms in on a small hovercraft coming in for a landing, then pans back a bit. A crowd has gathered and I can see many faces that I recognize, causing a pang of homesickness. I see Thom and Leevy, Delly with Lars, Rory Hawthorne standing with Callisto Birch, Mikel, Nova, and Jahn Winter, and many others.

Once the hovercraft is down the back ramp opens and I see several figures inside make their way down the ramp. I can see that it's an overcast, rainy day in Twelve. As I watch the passengers descend the ramp, one small, dark haired girl catches my eye and makes my heart skip a bit. Katniss.

"The return of the Mockingjay, Katniss Everdeen, to her home in District Twelve today takes place under the shadow of the mystery of exactly why her co-Victor and fiancée, Peeta Mellark, had suddenly disappeared from Victor's Mercy Hospital following his favorable competency hearing that had been conducted by none other than the High Tribunal of Panem," the voice of the commentator says, as I see Galen appear next to Katniss, accompanied by Alexa Morris and Amalthea Loveland. In spite of myself I smile and mentally thank Galen for hiring Amalthea. "Peeta, who has been confirmed to be living in District Seven, has refused all requests for interviews, but sources close to both Peeta and Katniss have repeatedly stated that Peeta's decision for his sudden move has been motivated purely by his desire to avoid the possibility of his attacking Katniss again as a result of the long term effects of the forced tracker jacker venom poisoning that he endured while a prisoner of the Snow regime."

I study Katniss intently. She looks thin and pale. I notice that she's wearing a hat - something that I can't ever remember seeing her do before. She flashes quick smiles at her - our - friends as Galen, Alexa, and Amalthea help her to a waiting car.

"She really must be weak, I say to myself, if she can't manage the walk back to the Village. Another thought suddenly strikes me. I wonder if her mother told her about Prim? I notice that Una is conspicuously absent.

The newscast cuts over to an interview with Doctor Aurelius, talking about the long term effects of hijacking, then to a tall, gray haired, dark skinned man that the interviewer introduces as "Doctor Benignus Stone," who talks about the long term psychological effects of traumatic head injuries, and, finally, to my shock, an interview with Katniss herself.

She's sitting in her living room, now wearing a scarf knotted over her head - to cover scars? is the thought that goes through my mind - with a fire blazing cheerily in the fireplace behind her. I notice with relief that she's being interviewed by our friend Cressida.

"Katniss, first of all, welcome home and thank you for agreeing to talk to me today. I know you must be very tired."

"Thank you, Cressida. Yes, I am a bit tired. I'll try not to fall asleep while we're talking."

Cressida laughs at this. "If it gets to be too much, just say so. You must be happy to be home!"

"Sure. I guess."

"I know that this isn't the homecoming that you expected. Someone is missing."
"Yes."

"Have you spoken with him at all since - that day?"

"No."

"Have you wanted to speak with him?"

"Yes." I hear her voice catch a bit. "Very much."

"Then why haven't you?"

"I don't know. Maybe he's afraid. Maybe I'm afraid."

"What do you think he would be afraid of?"

"Hurting me again."

"And why do you think you might be afraid?"

A long pause. "...Maybe...of being hurt...I don't know."

"Are you afraid?"

Another long pause, and when she answers it's almost a whisper. "Yes."

"I'm sorry, Katniss. We can stop if you want."

"No! I mean, no, I'm fine, thank you, Cressida."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"I see that you're holding what appears to be a letter." I notice for the first time that Katniss has a letter - MY letter - clutched in her hand. "Is it from Peeta?"

"Yes."

"And you mentioned before our interview here today that you had sent him a letter also. What did you tell him? And, I think the question that's in everyone's mind is - did you forgive him?"

"No. I didn't forgive him."

"You didn't?" Cressida sounds shocked. "You did tell me that you still love him, though?"

"Yes," Katniss replies in a choked voice. She pauses to wipe her eyes. I can feel myself tearing up and know that I should turn the Holo-TV off, but I can't.

"I didn't forgive him," Katniss continues, "Because Peeta did nothing wrong. What happened was not his fault. He was being used and controlled by an evil woman. There's nothing to forgive."

"You're talking about Drusilla Nivosus?"

"Yes."

"She's still missing, you know."
"I heard."

"Are you worried, Katniss? About Nivosus, I mean."

"No."

"You're not concerned about the possibility of her showing up, to perhaps..."

"Finish the job? No. And if she does, I'll take care of her. Personally." Katniss's voice had grown cold while talking about Drusilla Nivosus. I have no doubt that Katniss would do just what she had said, and "take care of her personally."

"Katniss, I want to thank you for taking the time today, on your homecoming, to talk with me," Cressida says. "Before we go, would you like to say anything to Peeta Mellark directly?"

"Yes," Katniss says softly. She turns toward the camera, and the camera zooms in, framing her face. "Peeta. I know why you're doing what you're doing. And I understand. I really do. But, like I said, there's nothing to forgive. Please come home. Come home to me. We've been through too much together to be apart now. Don't let Snow win, Peeta! I know you're stronger than that!" Her voice is steady and controlled - the only emotion that she shows is a solitary tear track tracing down each cheek.

I can feel my own tears run down my face as Cressida finishes the broadcast. I jump slightly when I feel a hand on my shoulder. I turn my head to see Johanna standing behind me. She's dressed and ready to go out.

"Hey," she says softly. "I saw...and heard. Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I reply.

"You're killing yourself, Peeta," Jo says gently. "And Katniss too." She sinks down next to me on the couch. "In this great noble sacrifice that you think you're making for her safety, you'll end up killing her just as dead. This may come as a shock to you, but I actually care for Brainless...and for you, too. At least think about what she said."

I stand up abruptly. "I will," I say, knowing that I'm lying through my teeth. "Ready? Let's go." Without waiting for her I turn and head for the door.

I never thought I would hear myself saying this, but I need a drink. Or several.

**PART IV**

To my surprise, we stay in Camp One tonight. We head to a lively lumberjack saloon called the "Naughty Pine," whatever that means. I take my usual station at the bar, while Jo begins to "mingle," as she calls it, with the other patrons. The saloon is old, noisy, crowded, and smells strange.

In short, the perfect place to put Katniss out of my mind for a while.

I drink slowly, nursing my mug of the thick, dark beer that's so popular here, and watch Johanna. Jo is popular with everyone, male and female alike. If she's not on the dance floor dancing, she's at the bar shooting whiskey with the lumberjacks. I attract my own fair share of attention from girls that are intrigued by the novelty of a young, male Victor and very quickly I become adept at politely rejecting their advances.
Most everyone around here now knows that I'm here, and more importantly, why I'm here. Every so often someone would plop onto the bar stool next to mine, chat for a few minutes, and then wander off. But they never stayed for long. So that's why, as midnight approaches and the crowd begins to rapidly thin, it comes as a surprise that someone sits down next to me - and stays.

At first, the stranger didn't say anything. He was probably in his mid twenties, very average looking, but definitely not from District Seven originally. He simply didn't have the right "look." After a while it dawns on me that he looks familiar, but I'm not able to readily place why.

The stranger was the first to speak. "Hey."

"Hey," I reply, raising my glass toward him.

"You're Peeta Mellark." It was a statement, not a question.

"Yeah," I say. "Where do I know you from?"

"I joined Gunter's crew a week ago." That's it. I knew I had seen him before.

"You're not from Seven originally, are you?" I ask.

"No." The stranger pauses, looking into his glass. "I was hoping to get the chance to talk to you."

"I'm at work every day," I reply easily.

"No," he says quickly. "Not there."

"Why not?" I ask. He looks down at his glass again.

"People are...looking for me," he murmurs.

"Join the club," I say, raising my glass again. "I know the feeling."

"No," he says, shaking his head. "It's - well, different with you."

I frown. So he's running away from something, just like me. But - I suddenly realize that I knew him from some place other than Gunter's crew.

"These people that are looking for you," I ask, "Where are they from?"

"District Thirteen."

"I knew you there, didn't I?" I ask. He nods.

"I'm sure you saw me there. I remember seeing you there also."

"What was your job in Thirteen? During the Rebellion, I mean."

The stranger pauses for a long time before answering. When he does, he's so quiet that I almost miss what he says.

"Hoverplane pilot."

"What kind of hoverplanes?" I ask, feeling the blood pounding in my temples.

"Bombers." He's looking down at his glass again.
"From Thirteen?" He nods miserably. I stare at him for a long moment, then scan the room. I spot Johanna in a corner laughing with some lumberjacks.

"Don't go anywhere," I say to the stranger, as I get up and head towards Johanna.

"Come to join the party, Stumpy?" She asks with a smirk.

I ignore her. "I'm tired, Jo. I'm heading out. Will you be okay?"

She looks at me sharply. "Everything okay? Who's that guy you're talking to at the bar?"

"I'm fine," I lie. "He's on my crew at work. We both have a long day tomorrow. That's all."

"I'll see you at home, then," Johanna says, a worried look on her face. I quickly kiss her cheek.

"I'm fine," I lie again. "See you later." I turn and hurry back to the bar and take the stranger by the arm. "Come on." He follows without resistance as we step out into the cold, drizzly night.

We hunch our shoulders against the cold and wet and begin to walk. "I have a feeling you have something you want to tell me." I say at last.

"Yeah."

"So talk."

"You found out the truth about the bombing of Twelve." He says.

"We had a theory," I reply, "A theory that we couldn't prove one way or the other. I thought it was supposed to be a secret, though."

The stranger laughs humorlessly. "I have a source or two myself," he explains. "And it's not theory. I know. I was there."

I spin, grabbing him by the shoulder, my fist lashing out, feeling the sting in my hand as I connect with his mouth. The stranger goes down, blood dripping from his mouth as he stares back up at me.

"You killed my family," I hiss. "You son of a bitch. You murdered over nine thousand people. And the bombing in the Capitol? Was that you, too?"

"Are you going to kill me?"

"I should. You killed thousands - and murdered innocent children in the Capitol." I can feel the fury, the cold rage, building up inside me. "Give me one reason why I shouldn't."

The stranger pulls himself to his feet, spitting blood onto the rain-slick street. "It doesn't matter," he says at last. "I deserve it. But I wanted you and the other survivors from Twelve to know the whole story. You have a right to know."

"And what is 'the whole story?'" I ask, my voice shaking with anger.

"We were lied to," he replies. "By Coin. She had hand-picked us. Brought us in for a private briefing before the Quell started. Told us that we would provide the spark that would ignite the final Revolution. I wanted it so badly. I lost relatives in the epidemic that we had a few years before. I wanted revenge."

"So it was Coin," I breathe.
"Only eight of us knew about the plan. Coin, we six pilots, and a highly placed official in Snow's government. What they were calling a double agent. Someone with enough authority to issue attack orders on their own. This person had suggested to Snow the idea of destroying a district from the air as a show of strength, without ever specifying what district or when, and Snow was all for the idea. It was one plan of many to try to subdue the uprisings that were taking place everywhere in Panem at the time. So, as far as Snow knew, the bombing was carried out by the Capitol. Snow didn't suspect that one of his ministers was actually working against him, and knew that the destruction of Twelve would inflame the other districts into full Rebellion."

"Coin told you all this?" I ask in amazement.

"Yes," the stranger replies. "We were chosen for our loyalty as well as our hatred of the Capitol. But Coin did lie about something very important. She told us that Twelve would be evacuated long before our first bomb dropped - that we were, in effect, bombing an empty city. None of us had a problem with that - and none of us would have gone along with the mission if we had known that Twelve was very much populated. We were all shocked when the survivors were less than one tenth of the original population."

"How did Coin explain why Twelve wasn't evacuated?" I ask. I don't know whether to believe him or not.

"She called us all together after the survivors were rescued," the stranger explains, "and said that the Peacekeepers in Twelve had unexpectedly initiated a complete dusk to dawn curfew in response to unrest in other districts. We desperately wanted to believe her - she had been our leader for years - one of the best that we ever had."

I mulled this over. I knew Coin would be capable of something like this, and I knew that she wouldn't hesitate to lie to the people that she needed to carry out these acts. Was this man, along with the other pilots, truly innocent?

"What about the City Center bombing in the Capitol?" I ask.

"By then, just my pilot and myself were still alive out of the original six. Coin briefed us personally - said that we needed to turn popular opinion against Snow. She said that we would be using a special bomb against Capitolite refugees in a hoverplane disguised as a Capitol bomber. She very carefully omitted the fact that all of the refugees were children, and that our own medical crews would most likely be killed as well." The stranger looks at me with haunted eyes. "I wanted to end the war quickly, but both my pilot and I realized that Coin had been using us and lying to us the entire time. But when Coin died, we both figured that was the end of it - until my pilot was found dead in February."

"I was told it was a suicide," I say.

The stranger laughs humorlessly. "I'm sure that's what they want you to believe, but it's bullshit. My guess is that this double agent knew who we were and survived the war, and wanted to shut us up once and for all. I went into hiding but it still took me almost two more months to get out of the Capitol and make my way here."

My original anger towards this man has disappeared. Everything about his story made sense - and as only a handful of people really knew about the theory of Thirteen bombing Twelve, I'm sure that what he was saying was the truth.

"Just a piece in their games," I mutter.
"What?"

"Nothing," I quickly say. "You just - reminded me of something."

"I need to know something," he says suddenly.

"You want to know if I'm gonna kill you, or turn you in, or something?" I ask.

"Yes," he replies quietly.

"What would you do if you were me?" I ask.

"I don't know...something. I deserve something."

"You know about my hijacking?" I ask. He nods once, quickly.

"You were hijacked too," I say softly. "Maybe not with tracker jacker venom, but Coin knew exactly how to get you to do what she wanted you to do. She used your loyalty and hatred of the Capitol instead of venom to get what she wanted. And it was easier for you to continue to believe her than for you to think of yourself as a mass murderer."

"So what happens to me?" he asks, somewhat plaintively.

"From me? Nothing. If you feel like you have to turn yourself in, then do what you need to do. But I'm not going to kill you, or beat you up, or turn you in."

"You...you forgive me?" He asks incredulously.

"No," I reply firmly. "I don't forgive you. But I understand you." I turn to walk home, then stop and turn back toward him, still standing there in the rain.

"Do me a favor," I say.

"Anything."

"Find another crew to work on. In another Camp. I don't want to ever see you again."

He hesitates for a moment before agreeing. I turn and walk home. Jo's still out. When I get home I glance at Jo's phone. The message light is on and I search through her Missed Calls menu, and stiffen when I see the numbers that have been calling over the last few hours.

Seven calls - all from Katniss Everdeen's number.

**PART V**

True to his word, I never see mystery pilot from District Thirteen again. Two weeks after our meeting, while at work one day, I overhear some of my crew mates talking during lunch and catch one of them saying something about the "guy from Thirteen."

"What about him?" I ask sharply.

My crew mate, an enormous lumberjack that I only know as "Moose," says, "I have a friend in Camp Fourteen. The guy from Thirteen moved there and got a job on my buddies crew. He didn't show up for work for a couple days so his foreman went to his place. Found him, dead two days. Morphling overdose. I didn't know you knew him."
"I didn't, not well," I say. "Just talked to him one night at the Pine."

"Damned shame," Moose mutters. "Strange guy, but a decent worker. Almost as good as you, Victor." He says, punching me playfully on the arm.

Just another piece in their games.

I was in a foul mood that night when I return home. I had never told Johanna about the mystery pilot. I didn't even know his name. But she knew that something was wrong the instant I walked through the door.

Jo's learned to not question my moods. I slump onto the couch and turn up the volume on the Holo-TV. Jo says that she actually cooked for a change and that I might even like it for once. I give her a small smile in response and, after telling me that dinner would be ready in an hour, hands me a filled pipe and matches and sits next to me on the couch.

I slow puff at the pipe, the calming smoke relaxing me. Idly I tap at the Holo-TV controls until I land on CNN - the Capitol News Network. I do a double take when I see Cressida's face appear on the projection, with what clearly is the District Twelve Justice Building in the background.

"Today is a day of celebration all over Panem," she says, smiling into the camera, "As the results from the first truly free election in well over one hundred years have been certified and announced. President Jersey Paylor, as expected, has been elected by popular vote to remain in the office of President. Here in Twelve, Mayor Thom McElroy was elected in a surprisingly close contest against his chief opponent, Mikel Winter, late of the Out-District River Clan. Both Mayor McElroy and Mister Winter have been working closely together since the merging of the Twelve Clans with District Twelve two short months ago, and, in spite of being political rivals, remain close friends. Mister Winter has enthusiastically agreed to serve as Vice Mayor of District Twelve."

"As expected, Haymitch Abernathy has been elected to serve as one of two District Representatives for District Twelve, along with Elder Willem Winter of the River Clan. Both new representatives will travel to the Capitol after January First to be sworn in and to assume their new duties."

"But the real reason that I'm here in District Twelve on this snowy fall day is not to report election results," Cressida says with a smile, "But instead, to cover an absolutely epic triple wedding that not only brings several districts together, but district and out-district as well. Now, I've never been a social correspondent, but I absolutely could not refuse to cover what is proving to be not only one of the first cross-district weddings in the New Panem, but the first between district and out-district."

"Today, in the District Twelve Justice Building," Cressida gestures behind her, "Three weddings will take place simultaneously, with Mayor Thom McElroy marrying District Twelve resident Leevey Alexander, Lars Broadax of District Seven marrying Delly Cartwright of District Twelve, and Jahn Winter, former out-district member of the River Clan, marrying Bonnie Osnaburg, one of the brave District Eight refugees that first carried news of uprisings to Katniss Everdeen."

I have to smile at the news. Three simultaneous weddings. And Haymitch a politician! I bet he loves that.

"As can be expected, trying to merge four different marriage ceremonies into one is not without its difficulties, but all of District Twelve is eagerly anticipating the event - and Katniss Everdeen has just arrived at the Justice Building to attend the ceremonies!"

In the background, I can see people arriving, and, as the camera zooms in, I see Katniss, looking
much healthier, but still wearing a scarf on her head, turn and smile at the camera and Cressida as they both approach. I feel that familiar empty feeling inside - then do a double take when I see that Katniss is not alone at this event.

Standing next to her, her arm entwined in his, looking resplendent in full dress Defense Forces uniform, is Captain Gale Hawthorne.

"What did you expect, Peeta?" Johanna asks. "Did you expect her to shut herself in and pine away for you forever?"

"I don't know," I mutter. *I've really blown it this time. I can't believe how much it hurt to see her with him.*

"And all they were doing was going to a wedding," Johanna says reasonably. "I've gone to weddings escorted by male friends - emphasis on the word friends. Her with him means nothing."

"I'm going to bed," I announce.

"I'm sure that will solve everything," Jo says sarcastically. "I'm going out. As usual. If you get hungry later on your dinner will be in the fridge."

Johanna storms out a short while later, slamming the door emphatically on her way out. I sleep fitfully, finally getting up and picking at the dinner that Jo had left for me (I had to admit it was pretty decent - something called "meat loaf") and smoking another bowl of cannabis before going back to bed.

I don't awaken when Jo comes home - but I do when the phone rings at four in the morning. Jo answers it sleepily.

"What? Oh. Hi to you too. Stumpy? He's sleeping. Yeah. Yeah, he saw it. Wasn't worth a shit the rest of the night. Look...listen, Brainless. Between you and him I swear I'm gonna lose my fucking mind. Do you want me to see if he's awake? I doubt if he'll take the call even if he is. I swear you two are the most stubborn people in Panem! You're what? Oh, shit. I hear District Three is nice this time of year - maybe Beetee can use some company. Okay - alright, I'll tell him. No, it's okay, I know you lower districts are early to bed and early to rise. Okay...and Katniss? I'm taking care of him. He's okay. Alright. Bye."

As soon as Johanna hangs up the phone I hear her get out of bed and pad over to my room. She stands in the doorway for a moment before speaking.

"Don't bother faking. I know you're awake."

"I'm surprised you answered the phone," I reply quietly. "Sorry she woke you."

"She has three messages for you." Jo says.

"Go ahead," I sigh. I wish my heart would stop pounding.

"One. She still loves you. Two. Gale went to the weddings as a friend only. She wanted me to emphasize that. Three." Jo pauses.

My mind was still wrapped around a friend only. "Huh?" I mutter stupidly.

"Exactly." Jo replies. "Three. Expect to see her sometime soon. She said to tell you that she's not
letting you let Snow win. That's all, Peg-Leg. Goodnight."

I can almost see the smile on Johanna's face as she pads back to bed.
SOLSTICE

Chapter Notes

WARNING - Descriptive Everlark scene in Part V. If you are offended by mildly graphic smut, you probably won't want to read it. You've been warned.

Also, I know this is a long chapter - so thanks in advance for reading. Sadly, things are coming to an end in "Renaissance," thus the reason for the last two long chapters.

CHAPTER 39 - SOLSTICE

PART I

Solstice.

It's been a little more than a month since Katniss's late night phone call to Jo. For weeks I've been waiting for her to show up at Jo's door, demanding to see me. Now, with Solstice fast approaching, and no further word from Katniss, I've begun to relax a bit.

I still keep tabs on the latest news from District Twelve. The initial construction work on the new medical factory was completed just in time. The first big storm of the winter season (even though it won't officially be winter until Solstice) struck only days after work was completed. Even though more work needs to be done, it can wait until next Spring. The grand opening of the factory was broadcast on the Capitol News Network, and I caught glimpses of many of my old friends - Haymitch, Galen, Thom and Leevy, Delly and Lars, Mikel and Nova, Jahn and Bonnie, Elder Willem, Elder Mattias, and even Elder Mimas were in attendance.

Katniss was conspicuously absent.

Twelve - and for that matter, all of the districts - seems to be thriving. I watch more Holo-TV now than I ever did and follow the news programs on the Capitol News Network closely. Apparently the whole country had been on the verge of a total economic collapse following the end of the Rebellion, but now things were turning around. Everywhere people are working, the districts are rebuilding, and life goes on.

Of course, I had never noticed anything like an imminent economic depression looming - I had been too busy trying to stay sane and working on my relationship with Katniss to bother with such things. Katniss. I've been in District Seven for almost three months now. And the pain is as strong now as it was the day I arrived.

Jo has been incredibly patient with me, although I know that she would be ecstatic if I were to leave. The funny thing is, she won't let me move out to another house or apartment here in Camp One, or anyplace else in District Seven for that matter.

"Peeta, when I say I want you gone, I mean gone...as in back to Twelve," she had said in exasperation one day. And that was that.

So I continue to work, and at night I go out with Johanna, and on bad nights I drink too much of the
dark beer (the Sevens call it "stout") and get sick, and the nightmares are especially bad on those nights.

I hear from my friends sporadically. Galen has written several times. So has Delly. Both of my friends always sound very understanding. Both of them tell me that they know that what I'm doing I do out of love for Katniss and that they understand that I don't want to see her hurt by my hand any more. Reading their letters almost always results in me going out that night and drinking far more than I should.

I hear from Haymitch also. He doesn't write. He drunk-calls and yells at Jo, then yells at me. He accuses me of slowly killing Katniss with my absence, and is sure to bring me up to date on everything going on in Katniss's life - how she hardly eats, how some days she acts just like she did when she first came back to Twelve, how I'm delaying her recovery because she just won't do anything...and I know that Haymitch is being the most honest of them all.

More than once I've felt my resolve waver. More than once I've found myself looking at train schedules on Panem-Trak. I've even caught myself wandering into the train station a few times.

*She'll get over it. She's alive, and I want to keep her that way.*

That's been my mantra, and it's strengthened every time I have a hijacking seizure. Those are the times when I can't separate reality from implanted fantasy. Those times when my eyes go black and my breathing becomes labored and I grip the back of whatever chair might be handy so hard I swear I'm leaving handprints in the wood. It's those times when I know that I'm doing the right thing, no matter how painful it is for both of us.

Then, I smoke some *cannabis*, and I'm no longer sure. I drink too much, get sick, throw up, and try to sleep, and cry into my pillow, and sometimes Jo comes in and says nothing, just rubs my back until I go to sleep. Then I awaken and go to the mill and do my best to work myself into exhaustion.

I hear from Una Everdeen once more, and I apologize profusely for losing my temper with her. I tell her all my fears about hurting or even killing Katniss. She told me that she talked to Katniss about her and my father. Katniss had reacted predictably, blowing up in anger and not speaking to her for several days. When Katniss finally broke her silence, Una told her about our unique connection to Prim - and waited for another explosion that never came. Strangely, Katniss took that news remarkably well, only remarking on how Prim's blonde hair and blue eyes made more sense to her now. But the rift between mother and daughter has begun to widen again...thanks to me.

And now the Solstice Festival is approaching. Solstice is to District Seven what the Harvest Festival is to Twelve. It would also mark the approximate end of the Victory Tour back in the Hunger Games era. This year, the Paylor government has decided to use the event, which is celebrated in some fashion in each district, to coincide with a new holiday - Victory Day, to commemorate the fall of the Snow Regime and the rise of the New Panem.

The only trouble is, I don't feel very festive.

I know that, as a Victor, I will be expected to participate in some "official" manner. The thought really fills me with dread, because I know that the Capitol correspondents that cover District Seven will turn everything into a "why are you here and Katniss is in Twelve" story. It's difficult enough to try to deal with this without reporters trying to dig up more dirt.

My work becomes more and more sporadic. As unpaid labor, I'm not held to a schedule. Some days I work twelve hours, other days two. It doesn't really matter to me. Whatever I feel like doing
that day is what I do. Gunter never says a word to me - he accepts whatever work I'm willing to put in for that day.

I spend more and more time at the Naughty Pine. Unlike other saloons in Camp One, the Pine is open twenty-four hours a day, catering to those night shift workers that feel like unwinding after their shift. Business picks up again in the early evening when the day workers finish their shift, and again shortly after midnight when the swing shift workers get off work. The Pine also serves food (a plus in Johanna's eyes, as she can eat and drink in the same establishment) and normally attracts a decent crowd at lunch. But, if I want to just sit in peace and not be bothered, I've found the perfect time - early afternoon.

Sometimes, after the lunch crowd leaves, I'm the only customer in the place. I'll sit at the bar for hours, slowly drinking my stout, as Shorty, the daytime bartender, watches Capitol TV programming and the cleaning woman works on making the Pine presentable for the evening rush.

Such is the case today. After a restless night I dragged myself to work this morning, only to end up leaving when the crew broke for lunch. Gunter just nodded when I told him I was taking off. I wandered the streets of Camp One for a while, not intending to end up at the Pine, but a late fall freezing rain drove me indoors. The place, as usual, was deserted except for Shorty and the cleaning woman.

Shorty says nothing as I walk in, simply drawing me a mug of stout and setting it at my usual place near the end of the bar, then going back to his usual perch near the Holo-TV. The cleaning woman glances up from washing down tables in the back of the room but, as usual, looks away quickly when I return her gaze and smile. The woman reminds me a lot of Wiress, Beetee Latier's district partner in the Quarter Quell. Plain, even mousy, with short brown hair and sporting thick glasses, I've never heard her say a word to anyone. Painfully shy, she goes about her work efficiently. I never fail to give her a smile, no matter how dark my mood is that day.

I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror behind the bar as I get settled in. My beard is still sparse, with bare patches on my face, and so blonde that it's hardly visible. I haven't had a haircut since coming here, and I keep my lengthening hair tied in back. My eyes are not the eyes of an eighteen year old boy. I've seen and done too much for any youth to remain in them.

Shorty comes down the bar and wordlessly refills my mug. He mutters something about having to go into the back for something. I answer with a nod of my head as I stare down into my stout. As always, my thoughts turn to Katniss. Are you recovering? Do you still think of me? Do you hate me? Can you ever forgive me for the pain I've caused you? Will I ever...see you again?

That last thought always crosses my mind when I think of her. It's for the best. I can't hurt her here. She's alive. I want to keep her that way. Will I ever...see you again?

A cold wind blows in from outside as the saloon door opens, then quickly closes. I don't even glance up. Another early customer, I say to myself. I was wrong.

My last question is about to be answered.

PART II

I slowly raise my eyes from my stout to the mirror behind the bar - and freeze at the reflection of the slight, olive skinned, dark haired girl that I see, standing in front of the bar, gazing intently at me.

Katniss is the first to speak. "Hey." It's so soft I can barely hear her. I'm sure she can hear my heart
trying to pound its way out of my chest.

My mouth suddenly goes dry even as I manage to croak out my own "Hey."

Katniss regards me for a long moment before speaking again. "Jo told me where to find you. I never would have believed it if I hadn't seen it for myself. But, then again, I never would have believed you to be the type to run away, either."

That hurt. Couldn't she see that I was doing this for her?

I don't expect what she says next. "You look like shit."

I drop my eyes back to my beer and laugh humorlessly in spite of myself. "At least I look the same way I feel."

That was the wrong thing to say. "I was afraid that this would be a waste of time." I see her reflection spin and stalk toward the door, and I feel panic rise up inside me. If she walks out that door, you won't ever see her again.

"Katniss." I manage to say. This is wrong. Let her go. She's better off without you! I see her stop, her hand on the door handle.

She doesn't turn around. "What?" She says flatly.

"Don't...don't go," I stammer. "Please."

"Why not?" She snaps.

I can feel my hands trembling. "Be...because. I need to know something. One question. If you want to go after...you can."

Slowly she turns around. "What is it?" Her voice is almost a whisper.

I take a deep breath. "Do you hate me?"

Silence. Finally, "Look at me."

I stare down at my beer instead. "Look at me!"

I slowly raise my head and swivel around on my bar stool. For the first time in over three months, I look Katniss Everdeen in the eye.

She's not wearing a hat or a scarf. Her dark hair, glistening from the cold rain, tumbles about her shoulders. There's a patch on the left side of her head where the hair is much shorter than on the right - they had to shave her head, I realize, so they could operate on her and fix what I did to her - and her face is gaunt, her cheeks hollow. Her silvery gray eyes flash with anger and shine with unshed tears. And, even though she's wearing a long, heavy coat, I can tell that she's as thin as she had been on my return to Twelve, over nine months before.

I find myself blinking back tears of my own, although my voice is remarkably steady. "Do you? Do you hate me?"

I can see her trembling. "No," she manages to whisper, then, accusingly, "You left me."

I swallow heavily. "It's...I just...I was afraid of hurting you more."
"And you thought that abandoning me wouldn't hurt me?" She asks, rising fury in her voice. "Fine. If you want me gone, I'll leave. And you'll -" her voice breaks a little "- if I walk out that door, you'll never see me again. But I want you to look me in the eye and tell me to go!"

The cold, clammy grip of fear closes around my heart as I struggle to breathe. "Katniss, I..."

"Well?" She says, as a tear escapes each eye. "Go ahead! Say it!"

"I...can't," I admit, even as my own tear trails down my face. "I can't." I bury my face in my hands. "I'm so sorry, Katniss. All I do is hurt you," I sob. "I never wanted to hurt you! I would rather die than hurt you!" And I'm unable to say any more after that, as my shoulders shake with grief, and more than three months of pent up emotion bursts out of me.

I lurch off the bar stool, causing Katniss to recoil away from me as I drop to me knees on the well-worn wooden floor. I'm bent forward so far that my forehead almost touches the floor. My breath comes in great shuddering gasps as I cry. I become dimly aware of Katniss kneeling on the floor next to me, not touching me but oh, so close.

I fight to regain control as my breathing becomes less ragged. "I'm sorry," I manage to choke out. "I was only thinking of you."

"Thinking of me?" Katniss asks in disbelief. "And you thought that running away would help me?"

"I'll never be free from the hijacking," I reply. "Ever. I can't let you take that risk."

"I make my own decisions," Katniss snaps. She glares at me for a long moment before she speaks again. This time, she's so quiet I can barely hear her.

"How dare you. How dare you make me feel the way I feel about you, then turn your back on me! You made me love you, you bastard!" Suddenly her right hand lashes out, catching the side of my face squarely. Tears of rage pour from her eyes as she slaps me again, and yet again. It's the first physical contact that we've had since that awful day in September.

My cheeks are stinging from her slaps as she draws her hand back again. I see the pain and anger in her eyes as her hand comes forward again. I catch her hand firmly in my own hand and see something else flash over her face - fear.

"Stop!" I hiss. For a long moment Katniss and I lock eyes, and I can feel her entire body trembling through my grip on her hand.

"Are you afraid of me?" I ask quietly, still holding her hand tightly. She drops her gaze to floor. "Answer me, Katniss. Please."

Her reply is so quiet I almost miss it. "Yes," she says, her voice heavy with misery. "Yes, I am. Ever since - that day." I immediately let go of her hand and sit back on my heels, my vision suddenly blurry with new tears.

"It's no use," I whisper. "I'll never be free and you'll never be free. Snow's ruined us. He's won. He's -"

I never finish what I was about to say. Katniss lunges forward, grabbing my face firmly in both hands. Her eyes blazing, her chest heaving with each gasping breath, she fiercely pulls my face towards her own face as she chokes out, "No, he didn't!"

And Katniss Everdeen kisses me.
I'm frozen in shock as I feel her warm, moist lips press against mine. Her hands slide from my face as her arms wrap tightly around my neck. I can feel her entire body trembling as her kiss deepens and becomes more searching.

I moan as my own arms go around her and I pull her tightly against me. She suddenly breaks the kiss and peppers my face with her lips. "Yes, I'm afraid," she whispers between kisses. "I'm afraid of being hurt, when I never was before. But I'm afraid of losing you more than anything."

"Katniss, I -"

"Shut up, Peeta," she says softly, kissing me again. She pulls back and looks me in the eye solemnly. "You love me. Real or not real?"

I tell her, "Real."

Shakily we help each other to our feet. She clings to me almost desperately. Outside, the rain is coming down harder, drumming against the roof of the saloon in a steady tattoo.

My knees are weak and my legs are like rubber as I lean against the bar. Katniss's face is just inches from mine. I can see quite clearly how much shorter her hair is on the left side of her head than it is on the right, and, as I bring my hand up to her face, I first pass my fingers through the short, downy growth.

"Like Cressida," I murmur, as her own fingers comb through my beard. Katniss gives me a small smile at the comparison.

"You really need to shave and get a haircut," she says softly. "I want my old Peeta back."

"I still get them," I blurt suddenly. "The seizures. The attacks. They still come."

"Let them come," Katniss replies defiantly. "We'll beat them. "We're gonna win, not him! Not...her! Not them!"

I pull her close, kissing her head gently where the hair is the shortest. "I don't deserve you, Katniss."

Her arms tighten around me as she looks up at me. "I never, ever, want to hear you say that again! Do you understand?" Her eyes blaze fiercely.

"But -," I whisper, right before she kisses me again. This time, the ardor and urgency is replaced by a gentleness that I've never felt from her before. I hold her tightly against me, feeling the dampness on her face from our mingled tears.

"No buts! Don't ever let me go, Peeta," she whispers as we break our kiss. "Ever."

I know what she means. She's not talking about physically letting her go. She's talking about letting her heart go. "Just never get tired of me," I reply softly. "I never stopped loving you."

Her lips are against my ear when she whispers, "Neither did I" in return. Neither of us notices the cleaning woman making her way along the wall to the saloon entrance. Neither of us notices her fishing a key out of her pocket and locking the door. The first thing we do notice is a slow, rhythmic clapping.

Katniss and I both look up at the sound. I can see that she's as puzzled as I am. We turn toward the
source of the clapping and see the cleaning woman, leaning up against a table, a strange smile on her face as she brings her hands together over and over again.

"What's going on?" A voice behind me says. I glance past Katniss's shoulder, my arm still around her protectively, and see Shorty standing behind the bar once again, glaring at the cleaning woman.

"You're paid to work, not stand around bothering the customers!" He snaps. "And did I hear you throw the bolt on the door? We're open twenty-four hours!"

"I'm afraid we're closed for the rest of the day," the woman says, and I stiffen when I hear her voice for the first time. As she talks, she reaches under her shirt near the waistband of her pants and calmly pulls out a small object.

A pistol.

Shorty stares in amazement at the gun in her hand. "Hey, now," he stammers. "Let's put that thing away, alright? Someone could get hurt!"

"You're so right," the woman purrs as she raises the pistol. "Like you." The gun in her hand barks once, deafeningly loud in the saloon. Katniss and I watch in horror as a small, neat hole appears in the middle of the barkeep's forehead. Shorty has a look of absolute surprise on his face as he drops in a heap, dead before he hits the floor.


"Yeah," I reply grimly. "It is." The woman never takes her eyes - or her gun - off of us as she rummages in a satchel that she's placed on the table in front of her.

I sigh as I glare at her. "What are you waiting for?" I snap angrily. I tighten my hold on Katniss. "Get it over with...Drusilla."

PART III

"You're smarter than I gave you credit for," Drusilla Nivosus says with a smirk. Her eyes fall on Katniss, who's glaring defiantly back at her. "And if it wasn't for that stupid fucking lumberjack, you'd be dead right now, Kat-shit!"

Katniss says nothing, but continues to glare at Drusilla. "And how fortuitous for both of you to end up here, in the Land of the Stinking Paper Mill. Here I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to reach either one of you for a long, long time - and you both decided to come to me. How considerate of you both!"

I feel the cold grip of fear close over my heart. Not for me. For Katniss. Still, I have to know.

"How did you get here?" I ask.

Drusilla smirks again. "Oh, Peee-pea, I was hoping you would ask me that!" She pulls something out of the satchel and lays it on the table. "I arrived here in a very roundabout way! You see, I was anticipating that you wouldn't fuck up twice...and, as Kat-piss is pretty much synonymous with murderer with the bulk of District Thirteen's population, I would have bet my last coin, no pun intended, that I would be afforded a hero's welcome there and granted asylum."

I can now see plainly what Drusilla had removed from her satchel - a small, hand-held pistol-shaped crossbow. Was she planning on using it on us? I could see her getting off one shot but one of us would be able to get to her before she could cock and re-load. Katniss has noticed it also.
Very slowly, she moves away from me slightly. I tense, wanting no wasted motion if she brings the crossbow to bear and shoots.

"At any rate, darling, you did fuck up...again...so I was forced to alter my plans. I decided to come here to District Seven, instead, and lay low until I could come up with something new." Drusilla picks up the small crossbow and tucks the pistol back under her shirt. "And, before you get any brilliant ideas, this little weapon was inspired by that magnificent weapon that your fellow Victor, Beetee Latier, developed for Kat-shit's incredibly handsome cousin." She smirks when she refers to Gale Hawthorne as Katniss's cousin. "It's got a magazine of bolts and is self-cocking as well as self-loading. I've become quite accurate with this little weapon. Almost as skilled as you with your bow, Mockingjay!"

I risk a glance at Katniss and see her eyes narrow. She hates being reminded of the part she played in the Rebellion. I look back at Drusilla, trying to get a better look at the mini-crossbow. If she's telling the truth then she could, indeed, shoot both of us with it very quickly.

"Anyway," Drusilla continues, now holding the crossbow on us, "I managed to make my escape from Twelve and return briefly to the Capitol. By the way, travel by boxcar is quite uncomfortable! Fortunately for me, the train crews from District Six were more than willing to look the other way, as long as I supplied them with sufficient morphling. Once back home it was another simple matter to alter my appearance again and then simply purchase a ticket for Seven. By the way, this is how I truly look. Do you like it?"

"Why here?" I ask, trying to keep my voice under control as I ignore her question. "Why Seven?"

"Well, it's quite large, darling," she purrs. "Lots of places to disappear in. This plan only came to me when I realized that you had run away from the esteemed Girl on Fire, here." That earns Drusilla another glare from Katniss. "Once I had seen how far you had let yourself go, I decided to take on a job here, so I could better keep an eye on you. I knew it was just a matter of time before I would have both of you here - and I was right!"

I risk another glance at Katniss. She's standing beside me rigidly - her arms crossed in front of her chest in an almost defensive posture. She seems coiled tightly, like a spring ready to release. Don't do anything stupid, Katniss!

"The only glitch was that idiot pilot from Thirteen," Drusilla continues. "I was afraid that he had 'made' me somehow. You see, he and I had an acquaintance in common - the late, unlamented Deputy War Minister - the one that was playing Presidents Snow and Coin off of each other - the very spy that Alma Coin wasted no time in executing once the Rebellion was won. I knew he had talked to you, Peee-ta...and I knew he had a bloody mouth for his troubles. Once he left Camp One so abruptly it was easy to connect the dots and know that he had confessed to you - so I found it necessary to arrange for his 'suicide.'"

"You killed him," I whisper. Katniss glances at me sharply.

"So it's true?" She asks. "About Thirteen bombing Twelve?"

"Yes," I reply. "I met the last surviving pilot here. It's all true." Katniss says nothing, just holds her arms even tighter to her chest.

"Anyway, back to my little toy, here," Drusilla says cheerily. "I thought it was quite appropriate as the instrument of your deaths, considering Kat-shit's legendary prowess with a bow. Quite ironic, yes? Oh, and I plan on making you both feel pain before you both die. Yes, this won't be quick and easy. I can hit just what I want every time! Would you like a demonstration of my skill?" The
sudden, flat snap of the crossbow string is followed immediately by fiery pain blossoming in my right shoulder. I yell in pain, the bolt protruding from my shoulder. I sink to my knees, gasping in agony.

"Bitch!" Katniss screams as her hand, which had worked its way under the sleeve of her coat, suddenly whips out, her arm suddenly extending. Through my own fog of pain, I watch, amazed, as a small knife suddenly sprouts from Drusilla's right shoulder, in almost the exact spot where her bolt had penetrated mine.

I hear Drusilla's scream of pain as her mini-crossbow fires again, the bolt thudding harmlessly into the floor as the crossbow clatters off the wood planking, dropping from her nerveless hand. With her other hand she fumbles under her shirt. *She's going for her gun!* I gasp.

"Guess we'll have to do this the messy way!" Drusilla spits, grimacing in pain as the fingers of her left hand close around the butt of the pistol. I glance up at Katniss, and, to my amazement, I see her standing next to me, calmly watching Drusilla as she awkwardly pulls the gun from the waist of her pants.

"Get out!" I hiss at Katniss. *Run!*

"I didn't come all this way to watch you die, Peeta!" Katniss snaps. Suddenly her arm comes up and snaps forward violently. Drusilla screams again as the twin to the knife in her right shoulder suddenly appears in her left. She struggles to bring the gun to bear, and screams in pain again as her hand spasms and the gun clatters to the floor.

Katniss moves forward quickly as Drusilla staggers back, blood pouring from both wounds as she stumbles against a table and comes crashing to the floor. I can feel my own blood soaking my shirt as I lean my head back against the bar.

Katniss kicks the gun away from Drusilla and bends down, scooping up the mini crossbow. From my spot on the floor I can see Katniss standing over Drusilla, her back to me, clutching the mini crossbow in one hand. I can see Drusilla glaring up at her defiantly.

"Do it!" Drusilla spits. "Come on! Get it over with, barbarian! Oh, how ironic! And with my own bow, too! Come on! Kill me, Fire-Bitch!"

I see Katniss slowly raise the mini crossbow until it's pointed directly at Drusilla's head. The door handle suddenly rattles, followed by someone pounding on the door and shouting unintelligibly.

"The Games have never stopped," I hear Katniss say softly. "Peeta and I win...only to have to go back a second time. I destroy an arena...only to end up fighting a war. You poison Peeta so badly that he tries to kill me - not once, but twice. My - our - sister dies...and so do two Presidents. Peeta and I try...try...along with everyone else in Panem...to put our lives back together, only to have evil like you come along to try to tear us down." I can see Katniss's shoulders shaking and hear a sob escape her lips. "The Games just go on and on - only now, there's no 'Victor,' only more death and more ruined lives."

Katniss shifts the bow slightly and suddenly fires. Drusilla lets out a small scream as the bolt thuds into the leg of the table, millimeters above her head.

"Are you afraid, Drusilla?" Katniss demands to know. "Are you feeling the same fear that thousands of kids felt when they heard their names called over seventy-four Reapings? The fear that - our - sister felt when her name was called? The fear that knots your guts as you stand on that platform and feel it rise up the tube into the arena and you wonder if you'll be dead in two
minutes? The fear that some child is gonna do their best to kill you, all for some sick Game?"

"Katniss," I call out weakly. "Don't -"

"Shut up, Peeta!" Katniss snaps, never taking her eyes off Drusilla. "Oh, yes, Drusilla - you know fear. The piss-stain on your pants says it all. The Games end here, you evil bitch!" Katniss suddenly bends forward as the pounding on the door intensifies. She jerks both knives from Drusilla, causing the older woman to cry out in pain. Straightening up, Katniss drops both knives on the table behind her, then hurls the crossbow across the room.

"No more killing!" Katniss snaps. "I'm sick of death!" She strides over to the gun, scoops it off the floor, then walks purposefully to the door. She grips the pistol in both hands, yells "Stand away from the door!" then fires once, twice, three times into the lock on the door, drops the pistol to the floor and turns her back on the door, hurrying over to my side.

Katniss drops to her knees next to me, her features softening as she examines my wound intently, even as the door bursts open and Johanna, accompanied by three Defense Forces soldiers, bursts into the saloon.

"Oh, Peeta," Katniss murmurs. "You know I'm no good when it comes to hurt people!" She gently presses a napkin near the bolt, trying to stop the bleeding.

In spite of the pain I chuckled, raising my good arm up and sliding it around her shoulders. "We can't seem to catch a break, can we?" I ask wearily, looking into her eyes.

"This is the end, Peeta," Katniss says softly, gently kissing me. "Enough killing. Now we start to live."

"I knew it was a bad idea for me to tell Brainless where to find you!" Johanna says in disgust. "I can't leave you two alone for five minutes and look at the mess you've made!" Johanna's standing over us, the look of concern on her face belying her words. She glances over her shoulder at Drusilla, now surrounded by soldiers as one talks into a commicuff. I hear him order medical to respond to the Pine for two casualties, and request a coroner respond for one fatal.

"Is that her?" Johanna asks coldly. I nod.

"After all she's done to the both of you, and she's still alive?" Johanna looks at Katniss in amazement. "You really are brainless, Brainless!"

"Katniss did just fine, Jo," I say weakly. "She's right. No more killing. The Games are finally ended - here, today."

Johanna looks back at Drusilla, then turns toward Katniss and I. She shakes her head slowly. Katniss looks up at her and says, "Jo, can you grab my knives? They're over on that table." As she speaks, Katniss grabs another napkin and gently presses it near my wound, discarding the blood-soaked one that she had been using.

I groan slightly at the contact as Johanna returns with the knives. Johanna grabs some napkins of her own and quickly cleans each blade. I watch her intently, trying to focus on something other than the pain.

"How did you know to get the soldiers?" I ask.

Johanna finishes wiping down the second blade. "I didn't. I ran into them on the way over. Seems that someone reported a gunshot at the Pine. These guys just happened to be in the Camp One
substation at the time." Johanna pauses to glare back at Drusilla. "Good thing, too. Otherwise they would have had to come all the way from Maintown." Johanna pauses again to glance behind the bar at the body that lay crumpled there. "What a shame about Shorty. I don't think he had any family, either."

One of the soldiers - the one that spoke in the commicuff - approaches. "Medical's on the way," he says. "They're comin' from Maintown, so it'll be a bit. Wish I could do somethin' for you, Mister Mellark, but we didn't think to grab the first aid kit from the sub."

"Thank you," Katniss says softly. "I can take care of him for now."

"My pleasure, ma'am," the soldier says. "Miss Everdeen? Ain't none a' my business, but - well, I seen the stuff on CNN about you two, and the rumors and all, and...well, are you two, ya know...back together again?"

I glance up at Katniss, at her too-thin face, still bearing the faintest traces of scars from the wounds she suffered at my hand, and at the patch of short, downy hair that's so in contrast with the rest of her thick, dark mane, and I reach for her hand with my left hand, gripping it tightly, feeling the slickness of my blood on her fingers - and I smile.


The soldier smiles. "I'm glad," he says, before walking back to the other soldiers guarding Drusilla.

"Always thought that the bow was your weapon," Johanna remarks after the soldier left us, as she picks up one of the blades.

"I'd almost forgotten how good you were with a knife," I say, remembering the demonstration Katniss had given Haymitch on the Tribute train. "Where did you have those hidden?"

"Strapped to my wrists, under my coat," Katniss replies, dabbing at the blood seeping from my wound. I grimace and groan. "Sorry," she says apologetically.

"I have to know something," I say. "Were those - for me?"

"No," Katniss says firmly. "I figured that you wouldn't hurt me physically. I carry them because of Haymitch."

"Haymitch?"

"He insisted that I have some way to protect myself," Katniss explains. "And I'm really no good with a gun, so -"

"I'm surprised he let you come all the way out here by yourself," I say. I look over at Johanna, who seems to be arguing with one of the soldiers.

"I had to wait," Katniss says, "until I was strong enough - and until I could show him that I could defend myself."

Johanna rejoins us before I can reply. "You two can thank me later," she says in disgust. "The soldiers wanted to get statements from you right now. I told the one in charge that they could get them later. He finally agreed."

"How'd you manage that?" I ask.
"Just used my natural charm and powers of persuasion," Johanna replies with a grin.

I chuckle, stifling another groan of pain as I do, but before I can form a reply the door opens and medics hurry in, pushing a pair of gurneys. One team heads for Drusilla while the other team starts to work on me.

"Have you had anything for pain?" A medic asks me.

"No," I grunt as another examines the crossbow bolt sticking out of my shoulder. Katniss reluctantly lets go of my hand and steps back as they work.

"Okay," the medic says, holding up a syringe. "We're gonna give you a little morphling." The medic deftly swabs my left arm and injects the morphling with a single practiced motion. The drug starts to work almost instantly. I lean back and sigh, my eyes suddenly heavy.

"Just relax, Mister Mellark," one says to me as they roll the gurney over to my side.

"Peeta?" Katniss says. "Is it working?"

"Oh, yeah," I say with a smile. "It's working, all right." I can no longer keep my eyes open.

"On three," I hear a voice say. "One, two - three!" I feel myself lifted and the quickly deposited on the gurney.

"We're taking you to Maintown Trauma Center," a voice says.

"I'm coming too," I hear Katniss say firmly, followed by an argument with one of the medics. I fight to open my eyes. Although I can't really focus, I manage to catch sight of a medic and reach out with my left hand to grab his arm.

"She's coming too," is all I manage to say before I sink blissfully into warm, painless unconsciousness.

PART IV

The Maintown Trauma Center was a hospital in everything but name. Much bigger than the new clinic in Twelve, but much smaller than Victor's Mercy in the Capitol, it was well equipped to handle the myriad injuries that plague lumberjacks and mill workers alike. In fact, Lars Broadax was brought here when he suffered the injury that eventually cost him his leg.

Katniss did, indeed, come with me to the Center. In fact, she was the one that handled all of the admissions paperwork, although Johanna did help a great deal with that. As for me, I was only dimly aware of being rushed into an operating room following my arrival there. The recovery room was a confusing blur. My first clear memory was waking up in my hospital bed, with Katniss sitting by my side, gripping my good hand firmly.

My eyes open slowly. I take in the IV bag hung next to my bed, dripping slowly. I feel Katniss's hand in mine. I turn my head to look at her, her head drooping down toward her chest as she dozes uncomfortably in the high-backed chair.

What an idiot I was! I know now that I didn't run away from her, I was running away from me! I was so worried that I would hurt, or even kill, her during one of my hijacking attacks that I never stopped to think about the depth of her feelings for me. I never once stopped to think about how much I was continuing to hurt her by leaving. And I was the biggest idiot of all to think that she would never come looking for me! I'm the luckiest man in Panem to have Katniss Everdeen love me
I gaze at Katniss's sleeping face for several minutes. Finally I see her stir restlessly, shifting around on the chair, and murmuring a soft "Oww" as she turns her head on her stiffened neck. Slowly she opens her eyes to the sight of me gazing up at her.

Katniss frowns. "How long have you been awake?" She asks, her voice rusty from her nap.

I shrug, wincing at the pain shooting through my injured shoulder. "I - ouch! I don't know," I reply. "A few minutes, I guess."

"Peeta!" Katniss says in an annoyed tone. "Why didn't you wake me?"

I smile up at her. "I couldn't do that. You looked too peaceful."

She rubs her neck, wincing a little. "I talked to the doctor. He said everything went well. They have you on fast healing therapy. He thinks you will be well enough to leave the day after tomorrow."

"I can go home then?" I ask.

Katniss bites her lip before replying. "Yeah...I think so. Peeta...when you say go home...do you mean back to Twelve?"

I squeeze her hand. "Yes. Back to Twelve. With you. If you'll take me."

In response Katniss leans forward slowly and plants a gentle kiss on my lips. "Always," she whispers.

Katniss gently touches my face with her fingertips as she sits back up slowly. I take a deep breath. I need to come clean with her on everything, and there's no better time than now.

"Katniss," I begin slowly, "I need to tell you something and also ask you something."

"Sure, Dandelion," she says with a smile. "What is it?"

"Remember when Gale and Beetee came out?" I ask. "And I had that seizure and ended up in the clinic?"

"I remember," Katniss replies quietly.

"I lied," I say in a rush. "About what I was doing before the attack." I quickly recount my hiding in the basement and eavesdropping on the conversation between her and Gale.

"I'm so sorry," I finish. "I knew it was wrong, but...when I saw him go into the house, I figured he would use that time to...well, talk about what he talked about."

Katniss sits and listens as I talk, her face impassive. As I finish talking, she takes a deep breath. Finally, she breaks her silence.

"So, you eavesdropped on a private conversation," she says flatly. "Why are you telling me this now?"

"I - you had a right to know," I stammer. "And I didn't want to keep it from you. Even if...you got angry. I wanted you to know."

"Would you be angry if I eavesdropped on a private conversation that you were having with, say,
Jo?“ Katniss asks.

"I - yeah, I probably would be," I admit.

Katniss leans forward until her face is almost touching mine. "I'll be honest with you now," she says softly. "Yes, I'm angry. Angry and hurt that you didn't feel secure enough to trust me to have a talk with one of my oldest friends, and that you felt that I would keep things from you."

I feel myself begin to flush with embarrassment. "Katniss, I -"

Katniss puts her fingers to my lips. "I'm not done," she says sternly. "When I finally told you last June that I love you, I meant I love you all the time. Not 'I love you unless Gale's around.' And that also means that I can still love you, and be angry at you all at the same time."


Her gaze softens a bit as she replies, "I know you are, and I know you do, and I love you too - very much." She quickly kisses me, then says with a smile, "I'll just have to think of a way for you to make it up to me."

"It's a deal," I say, right before she kisses me again.

"So, you wanted to ask me something also?" She asks.

"Yeah," I reply. "I wanted to know what you thought about our relationship with Prim."

Whenever Prim's name is mentioned to Katniss, she gets what I've come to think of as her "Prim face." It's mostly a distant, infinitely sad look in her eyes. Sometimes it just flickers for an instant, other times, like now, it lasts for a while.

"I - I was surprised," Katniss admits, "but I can't say I was shocked. How did you find out? My mother never really said."

I quickly relay the story about the accidental DNA cross-match that had been done while I was hospitalized in the Capitol. As I talk, a thoughtful look crosses over Katniss's face.

"On the day that I volunteered for Prim," Katniss says, "during the Visiting Hour, your Dad came to see me. He brought me some cookies." I nod. Dad always did that. He said that he didn't want any District Twelve Tribute to have to go off to the Games without having someone say goodbye to them. He started it when he was about fifteen or sixteen - one year after both Tributes were Community Home kids that no one came to visit before they were shipped off to their deaths.

"He didn't say much," Katniss continues, her Prim face firmly in place, "but he promised me that 'the little girl wouldn't starve.' Peeta, do you think he knew?"

"Maybe," I reply. "Or at least suspected." I pause for a moment before continuing. "Were you really mad at your mother?"

Katniss laughs ruefully. "Mad? I was furious!" Katniss admits. "I told her that she cheapened the memory of my father." Katniss pauses for a moment. "Then she told me why she did it."

This was new to me. My brief conversation with Una hadn't included her motivation.

"Your father - he was a good man," Katniss continues. "The night it happened, he was coming from a fight with your mother. Mom said that he was all torn up inside...miserable, desperately unhappy
- and Mom was trying to comfort him. She said that she did it for him, not for her - that what he needed right then was some human warmth and love. She said she never intended to let it go as far as it did - and afterwards both she and your Dad felt awful about it. They never spoke of it, and she never told my Dad - even though she felt that he suspected something after Prim was born. But he always considered Prim his daughter."

"She was," I say quietly. "He was the only father she knew."

"Peeta," Katniss says gently, "I know that after we got back from our first Games that I made things rough on you. And I know that you and Prim became pretty close. I guess what I'm trying to say is, if I have to share my sister with anyone, it would be you."

I don't say anything. I just reach up with my good arm and draw Katniss down to me. I hold her close like that for a long time.

"Oh, shit," Johanna's voice cuts through my thoughts. I look up to see her standing in the door. "Are you two lovebirds at it again?"

"Shut up, Jo," Katniss and I say in unison.

"Good news, Mister Mellark," the doctor says after examining my wound, "There was no nerve or vascular damage. However, I have to warn you that wounds of this nature may eventually cause some mobility loss in the affected arm. Just how much we can't tell just yet - and you may be one of the lucky ones and have no long term effects at all."

"So I can go home tomorrow?" I ask hopefully.

"I see no reason why not," the doctor says with a smile, before turning to Katniss. "Miss Everdeen, I've made arrangements for a cot to be brought in for you again tonight, as you've requested."

I glance at Katniss sharply. "Katniss, you really would be more comfortable at Jo's tonight. You were here all last night - I know that cot can't be all that comfortable."

"No," she says firmly, then turns to Johanna. "Jo, I appreciate your offer, but I'm staying here with Peeta."

Johanna rolls her eyes. "Well, my offer still stands, Brainless," she says. "But, you know, with Solstice and this new 'Victory Day' thing tomorrow, they're not letting either of you off the hook - especially now that you two are reunited."

I sigh and glance at Katniss. I can tell she's as thrilled as I am about the prospect of a public appearance.

"And on that note," Johanna continues, "You and I have a conference call, Brainless. Plutarch is sending Cressida and Pollux, along with Effie Trinket, out to make sure that you both look presentable for this dog and pony show - so you and I need to talk to Plutarch and Effie about the timetable for tomorrow."

"I think that depends on my release," I say. "Doctor, about what time will I be discharged?"

"We can get you out of here by ten," he says with a smile. "I'll personally see to the discharge myself. Now, please excuse me. I have a couple of other patients to look in on." With that, the doctor leaves.
"Come on, Katniss," Johanna says in resignation, "Let's get this over with."

"Shit. Fine." Katniss glances at me, then bends to give me a quick kiss. "I'll be back soon." She and Johanna both flash me quick smiles, then both are gone.

I lay back in the bed, staring up at the ceiling. I sigh and settle my head back, allowing my eyes to close. I was just drifting off to sleep when I hear my door open, then close. I open my eyes and turn my head, then gasp in surprise when I see my visitor.

Gale Hawthorne.

"You look surprised," Gale says as he sits in the chair next to my bed.

"You were about the last person I expected to see," I admit. "What are you doing here?"

"I was sent for Nivosus," Gale explains. "I've already taken her into custody. In fact, we'll be on the same train as you and Katniss tomorrow - at least as far as the Capitol."

"Oh," is all I can think to say. I had hoped to fly home by hoverplane, but a large winter storm front had settled in over almost all of Panem, causing flight delays and cancellations. The freezing rain in District Seven had been replaced by a snow storm.

"You just missed Katniss," I say. "She and Jo had a conference call to make."

Gale nods. "Yeah, with Heavensbee. I know. I came to talk to you."

"What about?" I ask warily.

"Katniss," Gale replies. "Who else?"

"Go on," I say resignedly. "It's not like I can run away or anything."


"Yeah. I do."

"Remember, during the Rebellion, when we were hiding out in Tigris' shop in the Capitol?" Gale asks.

"Yeah," I reply. "I remember."

"Remember what I said about Katniss then?" He asks.

I think back to that time - when my hijacking was still fresh, when I was torn between killing Katniss and dying to protect her. "You said that she would pick between you and I the one that she couldn't live without."

"And that's exactly what she's done," Gale says. "Even if she doesn't realize it." He pauses again. "And, for what it's worth, I think that she made the right choice."


"Yeah," he says with a bitter laugh. "I am." He sighs. "It took me a long time to realize this - but I lost her the second Effie Trinket read Prim's name."
"I don't follow you," I admit.

"After that Reaping," he says, "When the car came and took you both away, I pretty much figured that I would never see her again. Peeta, I came this close - this close - to volunteering for you when they called your name. I wanted to protect her that badly."

"Why didn't you?" I ask.

"Was she pissed when you confessed during the Interviews that you've loved her ever since you were five?" he asks.

I laugh ruefully. "'Pissed' is too gentle a word." Gale nods thoughtfully.

"When I went to see her during the Visiting Hour, she practically begged me to take care of her mother and Prim," Gale admits. "I was the only one she trusted to do that. Imagine how furious she would have been at me if I had volunteered. She probably would have taken stupid chances to make sure I was the one that went home instead of her - if she didn't kill me outright out of anger."

"So why does that make me the right choice?" I ask.

"Because if it was anyone else other than you that went, she would have died." Gale rubs his chin thoughtfully. "Because you were the only one that truly thought of her first. I couldn't even have done that. I would have been thinking about my Mom, and my brothers, and my baby sister. You were only worried about her. I would have been worried about five people. And she would have died."

"So why do you think you lost her?" I ask. "I know how confused she was. She even told me at one point that she loved you."

"You hit the nail on the head," Gale replies. "She was confused. I waited too long to tell her how I felt. And even after you came back from the Victory Tour, I knew even better then that she was gone to me. And I blamed you."

"I can understand that," I say.

"Anyway," Gale continues, "I kept hoping, when what I should have done was move on. Peeta, she belongs with you - not me. You should have seen her in Thirteen before we rescued you. She was a mess. And after this - last time - when you came here to Seven, I was probably the only person in Panem that truly understood why."

"I saw you on Holo-TV together," I admit. "On CNN. At the triple wedding."

"She invited me," Gale says with a rueful laugh, "and did nothing but talk about you. Furious one minute, crying the next, and you know what I did? I shake my head. "I defended you! She even told me that she was coming out here to Seven as soon as she was strong enough. You can thank me for that later. I kinda suggested it to her in a roundabout way."

"I'll thank you now," I say. "Thanks." I offer him my good hand. He takes it without hesitation.

"We'll never be friends, Peeta," Gale says.

"No, we won't," I agree. "But we aren't enemies, either - and we understand each other."

"Anyway," he says after a short pause, "I just wanted you to know that I think that Katniss was right." He shakes his head slowly. "She really has no idea, the effect that she has."
"Tell me about it."

**PART V**

"- And this is Cressida Pierce, reporting live from District Seven, on this occasion of Panem's very first Victory Day and the long-anticipated reunion of Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark. Happy Solstice and a Joyous Victory Day, Panem!"

Cressida pauses, watching Pollux carefully until he flashes her a thumbs up. "Okay, that's a wrap. Thanks again, you two! See you on the train!"

Katniss leans her head against my side - my right side, now almost completely healed, although my shoulder is still tender - and smiles at Cressida. "Thanks for keeping it short, Cressida." She looks up at me. "I think we had better board."

"Yes, you had better!" Effie says, as she flutters around us. "Five minutes until departure! You miss this train and we'll be stuck here for another two days!" She pauses for a moment, delicately pressing a pastel colored scented handkerchief to her nose. "And personally, I don't think I can stand the smell for two more hours, let alone two more days!"

"Good thing Jo isn't around," I say to Effie. "She just might get offended!"

"She is, and she's not," Johanna's voice says from behind me. Katniss and I turn around to see Johanna standing with a packed suitcase at her feet. I hear Effie gasp in surprise.

"Relax, Trinket," Johanna says with a smile. "The only reason I can stand the smell is because I was born here." Johanna turns to Katniss and I. "Hello, lovebirds. Care for a little company on the trip? At least as far as the Capitol, anyway?"

"Jo," I say in surprise. "You're going along?"

"Yeah," Johanna replies. "Ga - I mean, Captain Hawthorne asked me if I would give a sworn deposition at Drusilla's preliminary hearing in front of the High Tribunal." As she talks I see her glance past us and smile. I look behind us to see Gale, along with six other heavily armed soldiers, escorting Drusilla Nivosus, now clad in a bright orange jumpsuit and heavily shackled, onto the train, heading for a car all the way to the rear. I see him catch Johanna's eye and return her smile, then smile and wave at Katniss and I before he disappears into the train along with the others.

"So a sworn deposition requires you to be there personally?" I ask with a smirk.

I then see something I had never seen before. Johanna Mason was actually blushing.

"It's - uhh - well, a special hearing, and, uhh, he asked if I could, and -"

"Never mind, Jo," Katniss says with a smirk of her own. "Peeta, we had better board."

"Okay," I say, giving Katniss a quick kiss. "See you on the train, Jo!" With that, we quickly board.

Katniss and I find that we have been assigned a luxury berth at the front of the train - even nicer than the one that I had on the trip out to Seven. It was as well appointed as the Tribute trains used to be. The luxury was a plus - this train was not an express. We wouldn't arrive in the Capitol until the morning.

Effie, of course, had settled in to her old role as Escort and schedule keeper. No sooner had Katniss and I dropped our travel bags off in the berth than she was calling us to the observation car, where
we settled in for the first part of the trip. Cressida had wanted to do a more relaxed interview - she felt the one in the District Seven train station VIP lounge had been too rushed - so, as the train slowly pulled away and started the overnight trip to the Capitol, Katniss and I settled back and, for the next few hours, talked almost conversationally with Cressida, while Pollux filmed everything. As our group were the only VIP passengers on this train, we had the observation car all to ourselves. We were even served a lunch there.

Effie finally released us long enough to enjoy the scenery until it became too dark to see, then we all met in the dining car for a leisurely dinner. To no one's surprise, Gale joined us for dinner, coming up from the grim confinement car at the rear of the train. As we enjoyed our meal, Katniss and I would catch each other's eye and smile as Johanna was now openly flirting with Gale - who didn't seem to mind the attention at all.

Finally, dinner was over and everyone retreated to their respective berths. It was still fairly early - not even eight o'clock - but it had been an exhausting last couple of days. And, aside from that, Katniss and I had not had anything approaching privacy at all since - well, since last September.

"How's your shoulder?" Katniss asks as we walk back to our berth.

"Tender," I reply, tightening my arm around her. "But it works."

"Good," she whispers as we stop in front of our door. I quickly unlock it and we slip inside. I very deliberately close the door behind us, carefully locking it. I turn to face Katniss. Her eyes are wide and shining in the dim light as she suddenly presses up against me, her arms wrapping around my neck as she drags my mouth down to hers.

Her kiss is a warm tongue of fire, searching my mouth hungrily. Unlike the kisses that we had shared in the Naughty Pine, before Drusilla's interruption, this kiss was demanding, eager. I had no doubt in my mind what she was thinking - because I was thinking the same thing.

My hands slide down her back, my fingers barely brushing the upper curve of her buttocks, when she breaks the kiss and looks up at me lovingly.

"I love you," she whispers.

"And I love you," I reply just as softly.

"It's been a long day," she says. "Why don't you shower and get ready for bed?"

"I have a better idea," I say with a smile. "Why don't we shower together and save time?"

Katniss drops her head slightly and I see a blush creep across her cheeks. "I'll shower after you," she says shyly. "Just don't take too long."

I quickly kiss her again and duck into the bathroom. I think I set a record for fastest shower that night. I was so anxious, I neglected to grab clothes out of my suitcase. A fluffy white robe hanging on the back of the bathroom door saved me from having to walk out of the bathroom naked. Not that it would have bothered me - but Katniss was still unpredictable where nudity was concerned.

When I emerge from the bathroom, I find Katniss sitting quietly on the bed, now turned down. She's wearing a robe identical to the one I found, and has a small bag clutched in one hand. With another shy smile she slips past me into the vacated bathroom, giving me a quick kiss as she passes me and gently touching my freshly clean-shaven face and running her fingers briefly through my new haircut. She has her old Peeta back.
When I hear the water start, I slip out of the robe, tossing it onto the floor and sliding into the huge bed. Outside I can see snow whipping past the window as the train barrels on through the night. I lace my fingers behind my head, wincing slightly at the twinge in my right shoulder. and settle back against the pillows, trying, and failing, to control my rising excitement.

Katniss and I had not slept together in over three months, although she did slip into my bed briefly the past couple of nights while I was in the hospital - once because of a nightmare I was having, and once because of her own night demons paying her a visit. Both times we comforted each other and drifted off to sleep. But tonight - tonight was going to be different. I close my eyes as pleasant thoughts slip through my mind. Oh, Katniss, how I've missed you...

"Are you asleep?" Katniss asks softly. I jerk rather violently at the sound of her voice, guilty as charged of starting to doze off, and open my eyes to see her standing quietly at the side of the bed. I see that she's wearing the white robe.

"No," I lie, earning me a telling look and a smile. "I mean, I was just thinking, and -"

"Oh, hush, Peeta," Katniss says with a small laugh. "It's okay. I mean, if you're tired..."

"No! I mean, no, I'm not tired, really."

"Enough room for me?" she asks, dropping her gaze to the floor as she fumbles with the tie to her robe. The belt falls to her sides, hanging loosely, and I see her blush return as she opens the robe and slowly slides it off her shoulders. I gasp audibly when I see what she was hiding under the robe.

Katniss is wearing a floor length black nightgown, slit up both sides to her hip. Thin black straps go over her shoulders. The gown is virtually transparent in front, leaving literally nothing to the imagination. I feel my heart pounding in my chest and my mouth suddenly go dry.

"Katniss," is all I manage to say.

"Do you - is it too much?" She asks anxiously. "Do you like it? Effie helped me pick it out, but the store in Maintown didn't have a lot, and I wasn't sure if you would like it, and -"

I reach out, catching her hand in mine, and, ignoring the twinge in my shoulder, pull her into the bed next to me. As soon as her head is even with mine I cover her lips with my own, kissing her deeply, passionately, as she moans and her tongue traces my lips before plunging into my mouth, swirling slowly around my own tongue.

"I'll take that as a 'you like it,'" Katniss says breathlessly as she reluctantly pulls her lips from mine.

"I love it," I say with a smile, brushing my fingers gently over her face. I notice then that she had carefully arranged her hair to cover the spot where her head had been shaved.

"I'm glad," she says with a smile, pressing herself completely against me and feeling the center of my ardor press back against her urgently.

"Oh," she whispers, "I guess you do like it!" I groan as I feel her work her hand between our bodies to gently grasp and caress me, as my hands cup her buttocks and pull her firmly against me, then creep up to cup the firm globes of her breasts, feeling her obvious arousal through the filmy material of her nightgown.

Katniss moans softly into my mouth, her hand moving more urgently on me as we gently caress each other. I allow one hand to slide down her body and slip between her thighs, my fingers finding...
and gently fondling her sweet center. Katniss moans again, her tongue moving urgently against mine, then breaks our kiss as she feels me roll her onto her back.

"No," she whispers, gently pushing me onto my back. "Let me. I don't want you hurting your shoulder." She slides on top of me quickly, and I feel her moving the fabric of her nightgown aside as she settles on top of me. I groan as I feel one of her thighs brush against me. Katniss looks into my eyes, her own eyes bright and shining in the dim light.

"I love you, Peeta," she whispers, as my hands slide down her back and over her bared thighs and buttocks.

"I love you, Katniss," I reply as I feel her grasp me firmly, shift slightly, and then we both groan as a wonderful warmth engulfs me. Katniss presses her mouth tightly against mine as our bodies slowly move together.

Our movements get faster and faster as we both try to undo over three months of forced celibacy - because of me and my stupidity - and I force the thought from my mind as Katniss's movements become more and more urgent. She's moaning and gasping almost continually now as I grab her buttocks firmly, pulling her against me over and over again.

The end comes suddenly and much too quickly. I groan and pull her tightly against me as she collapses against me. I feel her breasts heaving against my chest as she moans mingle with my groans. Our combined movements gradually slow, our passion sated - at least temporarily - as I feel her teeth gently nibble at my neck and bite gently at my left shoulder.

I hold her close as our hearts slow and our breathing no longer comes in gasps. We exchange languorous kisses for a few minutes until finally, with a groan, Katniss rolls off of me. I smile at her, earning a return smile, and kiss her once more, lovingly.

We lay next to each other, gazing into each others' eyes for long minutes afterward. I'm suddenly struck by an epiphany - something that I've known for years. I just hope that Katniss feels the same way.

"Katniss, I -" I begin, only to feel Katniss's fingers firmly against my lips.

"Peeta," she whispers, "Shhhh. Don't say it."

"What?" I ask in confusion. "What did you think I was gonna say?"

"You were gonna apologize again," she says, gently chiding me. "You never, ever have to tell me you're sorry about anything, ever again. This was...it was absolutely...amazing."

I laugh softly. "And I agree," I reply. "It was amazing. But that's not what I was gonna say."

"No?" Katniss frowns. "Then what?"

"I was going to ask you a question," I reply, feeling my heart begin to thud in my chest again.

"What do you want to ask me, Dandelion?" Katniss examines my face intently.

"Well," I stammer, "I was kinda wondering if you had any, you know, plans..."

"Plans?" She asks. "Plans for what?"

"Well," I say, trying to keep my voice from trembling, "Life plans. You know. Like for after we get
Katniss smiles. "You mean like what are we gonna do? I figured that maybe you were still gonna go ahead with your bakery plans, and maybe we can finally have a little less drama in our lives, and -"

"I don't mean that," I say, more sharply than I intended. "I mean, I'm not talking about short term."

"Then what are you -" Katniss begins to ask, then I see her eyes go wide as understanding settles over her. "Peeta...are you asking me what I think you're asking me?"

"Yeah," I choke out. My mouth suddenly dry, I reach out with a trembling hand to touch her face. She immediately grabs my hand with her own. "I was kinda wondering, you know, if you had any plans for, say, the rest of your life."

"Peeta," Katniss whispers, her eyes suddenly shiny with tears.

"Shit," I mutter. "This is not going the way I wanted it to." I sit up suddenly, then awkwardly tumble out of bed. I end up on my knees, naked, next to the bed. I see Katniss kneel up on the bed next to the side that I'm kneeling, her eyes squeezed tightly shut as a solitary tear tracks down over her cheeks from each eye.

I reach up and grasp her hand. "Katniss Everdeen," I say solemnly, "Will you marry me?"

Katniss puts her free hand to her mouth to stifle a sob as my words come out. She opens her eyes and looks down at me kneeling next to the bed. "Oh, Peeta," she chokes out, "I can't -"

I release her hand, feeling myself flush with embarrassment. Of course she would say no, you idiot! It's only been a few days since you've even seen her! Whatever made you think that she would agree? IDIOT!

"Katniss, just forget that I -" I begin, but she grabs my hand again with a horrified look on her face.

"No!" She almost shouts. "I mean - no, that's not what I was gonna say at all. What I was trying to say is, 'I can't believe that this is happening.'"

"Wait. What?" I say in confusion. Katniss gently pulls me back on the bed and, when I'm kneeling next to her, she wraps her arms around my neck and kisses me, then pulls her head back, looking in my eyes and smiling.

"Yes," she says simply.

"Yes?" I repeat stupidly.

Katniss laughs softly. "Yes, Peeta. As in, 'Yes, I would love to marry you.'"

And on a moving train, somewhere in District Seven, after we made love, I asked Katniss Everdeen a question that I had rehearsed in my mind a million times.

I asked her to marry me.

And she said yes.
I awaken to a familiar sound - Katniss moaning in her sleep. Her nightmares take on an almost predictable pattern...first comes moaning, and sometimes unintelligible muttering, followed by her tossing restlessly back and forth, and quickly escalating into full-fledged thrashing and screaming.

Tonight I catch her in stage one. I tenderly gather her in my arms, gently rubbing her back and arms with my hands while softly murmuring into her ear. Sometimes even this doesn't work, but tonight it has the desired effect. Katniss quickly quiets down and settles into my arms with a sigh.

I feel her stir once more and I know that she's awake now. She shifts ever so slightly, almost in time with the rhythmic movements of the train. "Sorry," she whispers.

"For what?" I reply just as softly.

"For waking you," she breathes, and gently kisses my cheek.

"I'm not complaining," I say softly. "It's what we do. Protect each other. Even from our bad dreams."

"I love you," she whispers, snuggling closer to me.

"I love you, Katniss," I reply, kissing her forehead. I feel her body relax against mine and soon her deep, even breathing tells me that she's fallen back asleep. I only wish it was that easy for me.

I lay awake, staring up at the ceiling of our berth. Just hours before, I had asked Katniss to marry me - and Katniss had said yes. That one word had sent a wave of happiness coursing through me. If I could only recapture that feeling again, because now it's been replaced by something unwelcome.

Fear.

Lying there in the darkness, I turn my head slightly to face the window. I can't see anything outside - the window is merely a lighter shade of gray against an almost black background. We're in the wilds of District Seven now - deep in the mountainous forest. We'll arrive in the Capitol sometime around mid-morning.

Why am I afraid? I've known for years that I wanted to marry Katniss! And now, after everything that she and I have been through, I finally ask her and she says yes - and suddenly I'm AFRAID?

I know it's not about the usual things that boys - or men, for that matter - usually worry about when the prospect of their marriage looms before them. Money? Not an issue. Katniss and I will both receive our Victor's stipend for the rest of our lives. A decent home? Again, not an issue - we have between us not one, but two, magnificent homes. No, my fear is more base, more visceral, and has nothing to do with either money or home.

Deep down, I'm afraid that I won't be a good husband.

Katniss snores softly and shifts slightly, moving her arm off my chest. As she shifts, I quickly roll out of bed, taking care to be quiet, and fumble around for my robe. I slip the robe on, find a pair of
pajama pants and slippers, and slip them on as well. I pause at the door to our berth, waiting for a moment until her even breathing tells me that she's still asleep, then quietly open the door and slip into the corridor.

I ease the door shut, blinking a little at the dim nighttime light in the corridor. My eyes quickly adjust as I make my way to the observation car. This car is dimly lit as well, and I don't bother turning on any other lights. I find a comfortable chair and settle back, trying to sort out my thoughts.

What if I can't get my hijacking seizures under control? What if Katniss gets tired of me? What if I can't get the bakery up and running, or I do and it doesn't do well, or even fails? What if -

"Sir?" I jump at the sound of the soft voice at my elbow. I jerk my head around and see an attendant standing next to my chair.

"I apologize," the man says contritely. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"It's okay," I begin, then stop and peer at the man closely.

"I know you," I say. "We've met before. Felix, right?"

The attendant grins. "Yes, Mister Mellark," he says. "Felix Bowen. A pleasure to see you again, sir."

"It's Peeta," I say with a smile, offering my hand. Felix shakes it warmly.

"I...I've followed the news about both you and Miss Everdeen since your return to Twelve," he says. "Everything. From the Reaping Day Anniversary, to the meeting with the out-district people, right up to - this latest incident. I hope that this journey finds you both at peace and happier than before."

"Thank you," I reply sincerely. "It - it's been hard. Hard for both of us. And I am the luckiest man in Panem."

"You were very troubled the last time I saw you," Felix says gently. "You seem happier now."

"I am," I admit, then I blurt out, "I asked Katniss to marry me and she accepted!"

Felix's face creases in a wide smile. "Congratulations! When is the wedding?"

"I...I'm not sure," I reply. "I only just asked her a few hours ago."

"Very recent," he says. "Does anyone else know?"

"You're the first person that I've told," I reply with a sheepish smile.

"Oh, my." Felix looks surprised. "I'm honored to be the first to share in your wonderful news!" He pauses for a moment. "Forgive me, Mister Mell - Peeta. I was responding to an alert that I received indicating that someone was in the observation car, and came in to see if you required anything."

"You were alerted to my being in here?" I ask in surprise.

"Oh, yes. After hours, an alert sounds whenever a passenger enters the observation, lounge, or dining cars," he explains. "And the attendant on duty responds to see if they require anything. Is there anything I can bring you? Some warm milk, perhaps, to help you get back to sleep?"
"That sounds great. Thank you, Felix." I say with a smile as the attendant smiles, bows, and retreating from the car, leaving me to my thoughts once again.

I'm not alone for long. No more than two minutes pass before I hear the door hiss open. I turn my head and see Katniss entering the car, dressed as I was in a long robe. I smile and see her return my smile with one of her own.

"I did wake you," she chides me gently as she slides into the seat next to mine. "I'm sorry. Have you been here long?"

I slide my arm around her shoulders as she nestles against me. "Not long," I reply. "I just couldn't fall back to sleep quickly, so I decided to get up for a bit."

"Hmmm," Katniss murmurs. "Why do I have the feeling that's not the only reason why you're up?"

I sigh heavily. "You've really gotten to know me," I say admiringly. "I'm - I'm just scared, I guess."

Katniss tilts her face up toward mine, her silvery eyes seemingly seeing right inside me. "Scared?"

She asks. "Of what?"

"Me," I admit slowly. "Scared that I won't be a good husband. Scared I'll -"

"Stop right there," she says sternly. "I already know the answer. Peeta, you will be a wonderful husband! You are incredibly patient and you've been so understanding and forgiving of my moods and my temper that I - well, I'm just so very happy that you are a part of my life - no, you are my life. You complete me."

I lean down to kiss her, feeling her soft lips press warmly against mine, hearing - and feeling - her sigh against my mouth. Her arms are just beginning to curl around my neck when the sound of the door hissing open interrupts us.

Felix clears his throat slightly as he enters the car. Katniss disengages herself with a jerk, blushing and looking guilty even though all we were doing was kissing. I can't help but smile at her reaction.

"I apologize for the intrusion," Felix says. "I've brought a pitcher of warm milk - and two mugs."

"Thank you, Felix," I say as he sets the tray down on a nearby table. I notice Katniss examining him intently.

"We've met," Katniss finally says.

"Yes, ma'am," Felix replies with a smile, then turns to me. "I've prepared the milk the same way as I did the last time."

"Perfect," I reply, picking up the pitcher and a mug. As I pour I see Katniss glance at me, then the milk, then back to Felix.

"The Tribute Train," she whispers. "The night before we arrived at the Capitol. You brought us the same milk."

"Yes, I did," Felix admits. "A pleasure to see you again, Miss Everdeen."

"Katniss, this is Felix Bowen," I say. "Felix was on my train last March when I returned to Twelve after...the Rebellion."

"Oh," Katniss says, offering Felix her hand. "Nice to see you again."
"Under much better circumstances," Felix says as he shakes Katniss's hand. "And I understand that congratulations are in order."

"You told him?" Katniss looks at me in surprise.

I shrug my shoulders sheepishly. "I - well, yeah," I admit. "Yes, I told him. I hope that was okay."

Katniss smiles at me warmly. "Of course, Dandelion," she says softly, then turns back to Felix. "Thank you, Mister Bowen."

"Just Felix, Miss Everdeen. And it was my pleasure."

"Katniss. It's Katniss."

"Alright," Felix says with a small smile. "I'll leave you to enjoy your milk. Please use the call button if you need anything else. Goodnight, Katniss...Peeta." Both Katniss and I wish him a good night as he bows and quickly leaves the car.

Katniss snuggles in close to me, her legs drawn up and her feet tucked in under her as she sips her mug of warm milk. "Our first congratulations," she says with a smile.

I take a sip of my own milk. It is delicious. "Won't be our last," I reply. "Better get used to it."

"Oh, no," Katniss says in despair. "I just thought of something. Effie. She's gonna want to turn this into a huge Capitol spectacle!"

"Relax," I say softly. "This won't be some fake extravaganza like we were almost forced to put on. This is our wedding! We decide!"

Katniss is unconvinced. "I just don't want this to become yet another Heavensbee production."

I kiss her gently. "It won't be," I promise. "If all you want is to sign the papers at the Justice Building then have the toasting, well, that's fine with me."

Katniss is silent for a moment, pensively sipping her milk. "Well, maybe a little more than just that," she finally says. "But only because Effie or Plutarch will end up insisting on something!"

"Got something in mind?" I ask, nuzzling her hair.

"At the triple wedding, the Clans had a ceremony that they said goes back to before the Catastrophes," Katniss explains. "I thought it was really beautiful. Maybe something like that."

I try unsuccessfully to stifle a yawn. "Sounds wonderful," I say, smiling as I see Katniss stifling her own yawn. "I think we should head back to bed. You know tomorrow will be yet another 'big, big, big day!'"

Katniss laughs softly as she stands up, then helps me to my feet. We carefully put our mugs on the table. "Does Effie have any other kind of day?" She asks as I slip my arm around her waist as we start to head back to our berth.

"I doubt it," I reply with a laugh.

PART II

We announce our engagement that morning at breakfast. The reactions were predictable. Effie squealed; Johanna just sort of smirked, gave Katniss a brief hug, and flashed me a thumbs up when
no one else was looking; Cressida was all smiles as she offered us her sincere congratulations; Pollux had an ear to ear grin - and Gale, his face at first an impassive mask, finally stepped forward, a smile plastered on his face, and shook my hand before giving Katniss a hug and a kiss on her cheek.

I actually felt bad for Gale.

I vividly recall the pangs of jealousy that I would feel when I would see Katniss talking and laughing with Gale at school, or when I would see them at the bakery when they would come in to sell or trade squirrels and rabbit for bread. I remember how awkward I felt after Katniss and I returned home whenever Gale was around - and feeling the waves of hostility coming off of him. I remember these things...and wonder if he's now feeling the same as I did.

I hope not.

Gale and I will never be friends. But he's changed. Maybe it was the Rebellion, or the destruction of Twelve, or just getting a little older. I don't know. But he has changed. And so have I.

I notice that Johanna is being very attentive toward Gale this morning. Whether she's truly interested in him, or simply flirting to distract him from Katniss, I will never know. I do know that I was grateful to her for giving Gale something besides Katniss to focus on, and Gale did seem to appreciate her attention.

As expected, Effie immediately launched into full-blown wedding planning mode. I could see Katniss quickly becoming irritated with Effie and quietly took her aside before she had a chance to explode.

"Let her talk, love," I said to Katniss in a quiet voice. "Social planning is what she lives for. Later on, you and I will have a talk with her and let her know what it is that we want. Okay?"

Katniss reluctantly agrees, but the firm set of her jaw let everyone know that she was not at all happy about it.

Immediately after breakfast, Katniss and I corral Effie as she was on her way to the communication room.

I do the talking. "Effie, do you have a moment?" I ask.

"In just a moment, Peeta," she replies, a hint of exasperation in her voice. "I simply must contact President Paylor's Protocol and Social Office. This news is huge, my dears! Now, after I've made my call, then I will be happy to -"

"Now, Effie!" Katniss says firmly, taking Effie by the elbow. "Not later. This can't wait." As she speaks, Katniss gently, but firmly, guides Effie away from the communication room.

I quickly chime in before Effie could protest. "It's about the wedding, Effie," I say.

"Oh!" Effie exclaims. "Well! Why didn't you say so! Of course I want to hear your ideas!" As we hurried her down the corridor towards the observation car, I hear her mutter, "And if they're not exactly appropriate, we'll have plenty of time to fix them."

The three of us enter the observation car and take the first table. The car is empty except for us. Outside, we can see a full-blown snowstorm whipping past the windows.
Effie reaches into her bag and produces a recorder, which she sets on the table. As she turns it on she says, "Alright! All ready. What are your ideas?"


Effie's eyes narrow a fraction before she replies. "How small is small?"


Effie sits back in her seat, her eyes darting first to Katniss, then to me. She takes a deep breath before replying. "Katniss...Peeta. Believe me, I know that you both would like nothing better than to have a quiet wedding and put the events of the last two-plus years behind you. Trust me, I know how harrowing things have been. But you both have to remember one thing. The entire country is invested in you! Ever since your first Games, you've both been so much more than Victors! You inspire people - both of you! I know that neither of you asked for it - but there it is. People look up to you both - they feel as though you are one of them, as you both most certainly are! So they want to be able to share in your happiness!"

Katniss and I are both taken aback by Effie's passion. Effie was obviously not thinking strictly about the spectacle. She was thinking about what Katniss and I mean to people.

Still, Katniss remains firm.

"I - Peeta and I, we both understand what you mean, Effie," Katniss says softly. "But this is something very personal to us both. We don't want it to become a show."

Effie sighs and leans back, her steepled fingertips touching her lips as she thinks. Finally she looks up and says, "One camera and producer. Cressida and Pollux. You know them both very well, and you know that they will respect the occasion."

I glance at Katniss. "We wanted them there anyway, right?" I ask. Katniss nods slowly. I turn back to Effie. "Deal."

"Wonderful!" Effie gushes. "Now, please tell me about the ideas that you two have."

Katniss brightens a bit, and for the next twenty minutes she quickly outlines her ideas for the ceremony. As Katniss and Effie talk, I begin to understand why the groom feels like an afterthought in a wedding.

"One last question," Effie says after Katniss finishes listing her ideas. "A date. You need a date for the wedding."

Katniss glances at me before replying. "The first day of Spring," she says.

**PART III**

Katniss and I stand in the observation car, waving and smiling and the throngs of reporters and camera crews standing on the platform of the Capitol train station. We feel the slight lurch as the train begins to move once again. Soon the station disappears behind us and we both breathe a sigh of relief.

The scene on our arrival can be best described as barely controlled chaos. The platform had been jammed shoulder to shoulder with reporters and camera crews, there to record not only Gale and his soldiers removing Drusilla Nivosus from the confinement car and into a prisoner transport van, but hoping for an interview with Katniss and I, now that the news of our "real" engagement has
Katniss and I both sink wearily onto a plush, overstuffed couch. Our fingers intertwined, we both just sit in silence for a few moments, staring out at the snow that continues to fall. Neither of us turn when we hear the door hiss open, then closed.

Effie, Cressida, and Pollux join us, sitting across from us. An attendant comes in and announces that lunch is now available, and would we like to be served here? We all agree to eat in the observation car. The train took on more passengers in the Capitol, the dining car was sure to be full, and the last thing that Katniss and I wanted at this time was to cause another sensation by appearing in the dining car at the height of meal time.

"We need to thank the Chief Conductor for reserving the observation car for our use," I say to Effie. "Otherwise, we would probably be forced to spend the rest of this trip in our berths - not that I would complain about that." I look at Katniss and give her a knowing smile, causing her to blush and earning an elbow jab in my ribs.

"You're terrible," she whispers, but at the same time I see her give me a small smile. I kiss her lightly on her lips, which she returns without hesitation.

"Katniss, I was wondering if I could arrange for a short interview with you and Peeta sometime before our arrival in Twelve," Cressida says. "I'm sure we'll have the time. This isn't an express train, after all - and the weather could slow us up even more."

"Another interview?" Katniss asks with a frown.

"I know that you don't enjoy talking about yourself," Cressida replies, "but I was thinking something more along the lines of the marriage customs in District Twelve. I seem to recall hearing about something called a 'toasting?'"

"It's pretty simple, actually," I reply. "The couple, after signing and filing all the marriage documents with the Justice Building, would invite a few guests to their new home, where the guests would act as witnesses to the toasting ceremony. The bride and groom each take a slice of bread and, using skewers or tongs, hold their bread over a fireplace flame briefly until it's toasted. Then they each feed the other a bite of their bread, then pass what's left to the witnesses. The witnesses each take a bite of the bread until it's gone. Only then does the couple feel truly married."

"Sounds very simple," Cressida says with a smile.

"We're simple people, Cressida," Katniss says softly. "No one in Twelve feels married until they have the toasting."

Attendents bring lunch to us then, effectively stopping any further discussion of District Twelve marriage rituals. Effie was the only one unable to enjoy our meal. She was continually tapping away at her portable scheduler. Finally she looks up, panic creeping over her face.

"I can't do it," she says. "It can't be done. Katniss, you really need to pick another date. Three months is simply not enough time to put something like this together."

"It is if it's kept simple, like we want," Katniss replies, her eyes narrowing. "March Twenty-First, Effie."

"Which is on a Wednesday this year!" Effie says, glancing at her scheduler. "No one gets married on a Wednesday!"
"We do," I say with a smile, squeezing Katniss's hand briefly.

"Okay, that's a wrap," Cressida says as she glances over at Pollux, who gives her a grin and a quick thumbs up sign.

Katniss sighs heavily and leans back in her seat. "It was okay?"

"Perfect," Cressida replies with a smile. "You really are a natural, Katniss. You're at your best when you're just being you."

"I hate interviews," Katniss mutters.

Cressida reaches over and squeezes Katniss's hand. "I promise, this is the last one...for a while, anyway," she adds with a smile.

"You've certainly given us both a lot to think about," I admit. "Music, guest lists, food to be served - it's definitely not your typical District Twelve wedding."

"Neither was the triple wedding that I covered in Twelve not so long ago," Cressida says. "There were three distinct district wedding traditions, plus the traditions of the Twelve Clans."

"I liked the Clan traditions," Katniss says. "I'd like those included in our wedding." Turning to me, Katniss quickly explains the ceremony that the Clans claimed pre-dated the Catastrophes. I had to admit I liked the simplicity.

"I think merging your toasting tradition with the Clan traditions will make for a very beautiful ceremony," Cressida says with a smile. "Jahn and Bonnie combined the Clan traditions with the District Eight tradition of looping a ceremonial belt around the bride and groom, while Lars and Delly combined your toasting with the District Seven tradition of the bride and groom standing on a bed of pine boughs and drinking from the same chalice. I think that Thom and Leevy felt a little left out until their toasting."

"Sounds complicated," I say with a laugh.

"It was," Katniss says, "but it was beautiful, just the same." She pauses for a moment, chewing in the inside of her lip, then turns to Cressida. "Do you really think I need to actually write down a guest list?"

"Absolutely!" Cressida replies. "Katniss, it's more than just your circle of friends. You should include every surviving Victor, for example."

"Even Enobaria?" Katniss says in horror. She glances over at me. "Peeta..."

"Especially Enobaria," Cressida says firmly. "Katniss, people all across Panem are going to look at this wedding as something much more than you and Peeta getting married. They'll be viewing this as the war finally coming to a close. No matter how many reforms the Paylor government has implemented, many people are in a pre-Rebellion mindset. We're living in a new Panem. I know that neither of you want to make your special day into some sort of political statement - but inviting a former adversary, whether she attends or not, will send a message to everyone that it's time to reach out and come together as a people." Cressida pauses for a moment, then smiles and continues. "Besides, Enobaria is not such a bad person - once you get to know her."

I can see that Katniss wasn't convinced. I wasn't sure that I was convinced, for that matter. But what Cressida is saying makes a lot of sense. "What about inviting families of fallen Tributes?"
"Hmmm," Cressida says thoughtfully. "It would be impossible, not to mention impractical, to invite the families of every fallen Tribute. Did you have someone in mind?"

"Yes," I reply. "The families of Rue and Thresh, from District Eleven. And Mags from Four, if she has any family."

"Yes," Katniss says softly, nodding. "Yes, that's perfect!"

"I don't think Mags has any family," Cressida replies, "As for Thresh and Rue, Thresh lived with his grandmother and sister, and I know Rue had a lot of siblings - five, I believe. But I'm not even sure who, if any, survived the Rebellion. Eleven was hit pretty hard, remember."

"Cressida, please," Katniss pleads. "Is there any way you can find out? Oh, no...I just realized that I don't even know their last names!"

"I can find out last names easily enough," Cressida says, "But finding the families will take some time - assuming, of course, that any of them survived the Rebellion."

"Please try," Katniss implores Cressida.

"Don't worry," Cressida assures Katniss, "I will. Now, about some of the others. You'll definitely need to invite President Paylor and Secretary Heavensbee as well, as well as -"

**PART IV**

"I have an idea," Katniss whispers. It's late at night. Our hearts are still pounding from our lovemaking. The only light is that which is coming through the window from the full moon glowing in the sky and reflecting off of the snow. It finally stopped snowing and the clouds have parted enough to let the moon peek through. Katniss and I are cuddled together very closely.

"What's that?" I ask softly, kissing the top of her head.

"We get married as soon as we get back - the day after tomorrow," Katniss replies. "We invite our friends over for the toasting that evening. And it'll be done and over with!"

I chuckle softly. "Believe me, Katniss - I know where you're coming from! But I don't think that would really solve anything, or accomplish anything other than getting some very important people pissed off at us."

Katniss sighs heavily. "You're right," she admits. "I just never dreamed it would be this complicated! Guest lists, and what food to have, what music to play, and on, and on, and on! I still have writer's cramp from all the names I wrote down today!"

"I have an idea of my own," I say. Katniss picks her head up off of my chest and twists around to look at me, her face a solemn mask.

"Let's hear it," she demands.

"Simple," I reply. "Let Effie handle everything. We've already talked to her and given her some ideas. She lives for this sort of thing! She does all the work - all we do is reserve the right for final approval on anything she arranges."

Katniss looks at me in silence for a long moment, then her lips curl up in a smile. "Why didn't I think of that?" She arches up to kiss me, then, as our lips part, she suddenly gets a serious look on her face again. "Wait a minute. Oh, shit. That's not gonna work. She works for Plutarch -
she'll be too busy to plan our wedding!"

"Which Plutarch will want to go off perfectly," I add with a grin. "He wants the entire country to see it. He'll want it perfect. So he'll be more than happy to loan us Effie for however long we need her to make sure that it is perfect!"

Katniss smiles and rolls over on top of me, wiggling around until she fits against me perfectly. "You're a genius," she breathes as her lips find mine again.

And, as our kisses grow more heated, I couldn't help but agree.

Immediately after breakfast, Katniss and I grab Effie and all three of us hustle to the observation car. We sit Effie down and Katniss pitches the wedding planner idea to her. I admit I was impressed. Katniss knew exactly what buttons to push to get Effie to agree.

"Effie, you know that when it comes to planning any sort of social event that I'm a total fish out of water," Katniss says in a pleading tone. "I really, really need your help...please?"

Effie sits back, an absolutely stricken look on her face. "Oh, Katniss," she finally chokes out, "My dear - I just don't know if that would be possible! My duties with Secretary Heavensbee leave me with very little time! I mean, I'm more than happy to help in any way that I can during the brief time that I will be in Twelve, and once I return to the Capitol, but I just don't know if Secretary Heavensbee can spare me for any great length of time! I'm so very sorry -"

"We'll put in a call to Plutarch once we get back to Twelve," I say. "If he has no objection, will you do it?"

Effie glances at me, then at Katniss, before replying. "If Secretary Heavensbee agrees," she says slowly, "then yes - I would be honored to plan your wedding!"

The squeal of joy that erupts from Katniss takes both Effie and I by surprise...but the way Katniss launches herself at Effie and wraps her arms around Effie's neck was an absolute shock. I don't think I've ever seen Katniss express this much gratitude to anyone for anything as long as I've really known her.

Effie gently, but firmly, disengages herself from Katniss, then sits up, pulls out her scheduler, and fixes us both with a stern glare.

"All right, you two," she begins, "Let's get started! Even though we won't know until the day after tomorrow if I will be able to see this through to the end, we can still get a lot of work done before then!"

And, as Effie fired a constant stream of questions at Katniss and I over the next few hours, and as she dutifully makes dozens of entries into her scheduler, she couldn't help but to let her lips curl up in a small smile from time to time.

"Where did all these people come from?" I ask, lurching to the right slightly as the train continues to slow.

Katniss and I, along with Effie, Cressida, and Pollux, are standing in the observation car as the train pulls into the District Twelve train station. We can all see that the platform is literally mobbed with people - hundreds of people. How are we even gonna be able to get through this crowd? I say to myself. Katniss squeezes my hand reassuringly.
This is the third time that Katniss and I have returned to Twelve by train together. The first was after the Seventy-Fourth Games, when I was a lovesick, heartbroken newly-minted Victor, still reeling with the revelation that Katniss had been playing the "Star-Crossed Lovers" routine as part of her Game (But "not all of it," she had said at the time - I never did learn which parts were and weren't. Not that it matters anymore.). The second was our return from the Victory Tour where, for the first time, we had actually managed to grow closer together, even with the dual distractions of Gale Hawthorne and President Snow.

But this - this was different. Both of us sincerely in love with the other. Both of us hoping against hope that now we can finally find some peace. And both of us realizing that we are going to be met by an enthusiastic crowd, when all we want is to just go home.

"I'll handle this," Effie says firmly, stepping in front of us. I had to admire her spirit, but Effie wouldn't last five seconds in that crowd. I am about to tell her just that when the train finally lurches to a halt and the doors slide open.

The blast of icy air hits us at the same time as the thunderous cheer from the mob on the platform. I grip Katniss's hand tightly, expecting to be overwhelmed by a crush of people. When that doesn't happen, I quickly see the reason why.

Barricades have been set up from the platform, leading in to the train station, with Defense Forces soldiers stationed behind each line of barricades, roughly an arm's width apart, each one of them facing out towards the crowd. Effie glances behind her, catches my eye, and says urgently, "Come on!"

Katniss and I need no second urging. We fall in behind Effie, with Cressida and Pollux trailing behind closely, and hurry after Effie. Neither Katniss nor I break stride as we smile and wave at the crowd. In seconds we are through the doors into the station, where a solitary man is standing, waiting for us.

Haymitch Abernathy.

I haven't seen him in three months, yet I'm shocked at how much he's appeared to age in that time. He's standing patiently, his face an expressionless mask. Effie rushes over to him, surprising both Katniss and I as she hugs him fiercely and kisses him soundly on his cheek. Even more shocking was that Haymitch returns her embrace willingly.

Effie disengages herself from Haymitch as Katniss and I stop in front of him. He eyes us both before addressing Katniss first.

"Told you those blades would come in handy, Sweetheart," he says with his trademark smirk.

"Nice to see you too," Katniss replies coolly, hesitating for just a moment before stepping forward, throwing her arms around his neck, and kissing his cheek. As she steps back I notice that both Haymitch and Katniss's eyes are glistening.

Haymitch then turns to me. I blink rapidly, feeling my own eyes filling up. "And as for you," he says gruffly, before grabbing me and enveloping me in a crushing hug, "don't you ever fucking do something like that again!"

I'm glad that my face is buried in his shoulder. There's going to be a wet spot on his coat. "Which part?" I ask, my voice trembling. "Try to kill Katniss or run away?"

"Exactly!" he mutters, finally letting me go and stepping back. "Well!" he grumbles, sniffing
loudly. "Glad to see you got cleaned up before coming home. I heard you really let yourself go back in Seven!"

"I wasn't about to let him come home looking like you," Katniss says with a smile. "And speaking of home..."

"Oh, absolutely!" Effie says. "Haymitch, we really need to get out to the Village! We are all absolutely exhausted by this trip! I do hope you have a car for us!"

"Don't get your panties in a bunch, Princess," Haymitch replies. "There's a van waiting for us outside. And don't worry about your checked bags. The van will come back out to pick up any luggage that you may have. Come on."

With Haymitch leading the way, the five of us quickly make our way through the station and back out into the cold, with the crowd cheering us on every step of the way. Fortunately, between the barricades and the soldiers our transition from train to van was a smooth one.

We all quickly climb in to the waiting van, shivering as new snow begins to fall. I finally allow myself to relax just a bit as the van pulls away from the station.

"Where'd all the new soldiers come from?" I ask.

"Capitol sent 'em out a couple days ago," Haymitch replies. "Extra security for your homecoming. There's more at the Village, too."

Katniss and I exchange glances. Neither of us is thrilled at the prospect of living under armed guard. Haymitch sees our exchange and speaks up.

"Relax, you two," he says reassuringly. "It's only temporary. Once all the hoopla dies down things will get back to normal pretty quick. After the party tomorrow night we'll -"

"Party?" Katniss asks sharply. "What party?"

"Relax, Sweetheart," Haymitch replies. "It's a welcome home party for the both of you. Most everyone in the district is probably gonna be there."

"Haymitch," Katniss begins, her tone low and menacing.

"Look," he says. "People wanna get a look at you. Hell, you two are legendary around here! So you show up, let people see you, shake a few hands, and you'll be done. And I guarantee, if you don't show up, you'll have soldiers guarding you for a lot longer than you want."

I sigh heavily. "So where's this thing taking place?" I ask. "Not the Justice Building - that's not big enough. Same for the Victor's Village mansions."

"Right there," Haymitch says, pointing. "The Hob Community Center."

My eyes follow where Haymitch is pointing, and I see a large building sitting roughly where the old Hob used to be.

"When did they build that?" I ask.

"While you were gone," Haymitch replies. "It's plenty big enough. A combination meeting hall and commercial center."

I see Effie staring at the building as we pass and notice a smile crease her face. "Perfect," she says
softly, digging her scheduler out of her bag and making a quick note. "Katniss...Peeta. I just found where your wedding will be!"

"Oh yeah," Haymitch says. "That reminds me. Congratulations, you two!"

I murmur thanks, while Katniss says nothing. I catch her staring at the building and I'm certain I know exactly what she's thinking. That place looks like it can hold hundreds, even thousands.

"Welcome home," I whisper to her, squeezing her hand.

"First thing we do," she whispers fiercely, "is finalize the guest list!"

**PART V**

The party at the Hob Community Center was actually a lot of fun. Most everyone there was either an original District Twelve resident or a member of the Twelve Clans, along with a sprinkling of others, most notably Galen Wellgood, Tycho Crawford, Alexa Morris, and Amalthea Loveland from the Clinic and Achilles Franklin from the Defense Forces detachment.

I made sure to congratulate the newly married couples - Thom and Leevy, Lars and Delly, and of course Jahn and Bonnie. Delly was positively glowing with happiness, and at one point she took Katniss and I aside to let us in on her secret - she was already pregnant.

"You'll make a great mother, Delly," I had said to her. Katniss just turned red, smiled, and mumbled her congratulations. I know why the subject makes her uncomfortable - and I am determined not to push her.

Of course, our Clan friends were there as well. Mikel has settled in nicely in his new role as Vice-Mayor of Twelve, Nova is working at the Clinic as a Healer/Midwife, while Jahn has been helping Bonnie and Twill with the new District School. Elder Mimas has assumed the role of what Haymitch calls "Elder Statesman," basically just being available to dispense advice to whomever asks for it. Elder Willem, along with Haymitch, were going to be leaving for the Capitol in a few days to be sworn in and assume their new roles as District Representatives.

Both Katniss and I had noticed several budding romances at the party. Galen and Twill spent a great deal of time together. Rory Hawthorne and Callisto Birch were inseparable, completely dropping the "just friends" pretense. Callisto's brother Rikkert was spending a great deal of time with the daughter of a member of the Capitol Liaison office - which prompted a comment from Haymitch about "Two worlds colliding." As for Haymitch, he and Effie were getting along much better than Katniss and I could ever remember, even dancing together.

At one point, Katniss and I decide to see exactly what was going on, so we cut in while they were dancing, with Katniss finishing the dance with Haymitch while I whisk Effie away.

"So," I say as we dance, "What's going on?"

"I beg your pardon?" Effie says innocently. "Going on with what?"

"You and Haymitch," I say bluntly.

Effie actually blushes before replying. "What makes you think anything is going on, Peeta?"

"You two have never gotten along this well before," I reply, "plus, you are staying at his house, not ours."
I didn't think it was possible for someone to blush even more. "Well, I - that is to say, you and Katniss, well, I just thought that you would enjoy your privacy, and now that Sae is keeping house for Haymitch, I can actually find a clean place to sit, and I can walk through his house now without my feet sticking to his floors, and, well, we've known each other for years, and -"

"Okay, okay," I laugh. "I get it. There's nothing going on. Just forget I said anything."

"Well," Effie says softly, looking down, "I never said that there was nothing going on...but it's still early, Peeta. I just - well, now that he's a District Representative, he'll need someone to help him navigate through Capitol politics!"

"And I can think of no one better qualified than you, Effie," I say sincerely. "As long as you come back here to help us plan the wedding, now that Plutarch has given his permission for you to stay as long as necessary."

"Of course I will, Peeta!" Effie gushes. "Oh, this will be so exciting! And the Clan ceremony that you've chosen is perfect! So much better than a Capitol wedding!"

"I'm surprised to hear you say that," I remark, "considering that you wanted a huge production."

"Peeta, Capitol wedding ceremonies are more like a business transaction. It's a contract for a set number of years. At the end of the period one or both parties can choose not to extend the contract - and the marriage is over, just like that." Effie pauses for a moment before continuing. "But you and Katniss - and all the districts, for that matter - you marry out of love, not out of convenience. And I give you my word, your wedding celebration will be one that you both will treasure forever."

The song finishes before I'm able to reply, so I settle for a hug and a kiss on her cheek. When Katniss rejoins me we step outside for a quick breath of air and we confirm to each other that Haymitch and Effie are, indeed, well on their way to becoming a couple.

The news is oddly comforting to us both - as is the revelation that Elder Willem and Cressida appear to be well on their way to becoming a couple as well. When I asked Cressida, she stammered out something similar to Effie's excuse of Willem needing someone to help him navigate through the Capitol, but in the end admitted that she had developed a deep attraction for the charismatic Clan Elder.

Katniss and I were pleasantly exhausted by the time the party had come to an end. We had company walking back to the Village that night - in addition to Haymitch and Effie, we found ourselves with several new neighbors - Thom and Leevy had been set up in a house designated as the official Mayor's residence, Mikel and Nova in the Vice-Mayor's residence, Elder Willem (along with Cressida) in one of the homes designated for a District Representative, and Elder Mimas had a home to herself due to her status as the most senior Clan Elder.

Katniss and I both agreed that it was nice having neighbors once again. We said our goodnights and entered our darkened home. Katniss disappeared into the kitchen while I busied myself with stoking the fireplace until I had a nice blaze going.

Katniss returns to the living room with two mugs of hot chocolate. We cuddle on the couch, sipping our warm beverages and watched the fire in silence for a few minutes.

"Tired?" Katniss asks me softly.

"Mmm hmm," I reply, kissing the top of her head.

"Ready for bed?"
"Yes. How about you?"

"Yes. How...how tired are you?"

I smile at her question. "Not that tired."

"Good," she whispers, turning in my arms to kiss me, then standing up. "I'll be right back, okay?"

"I'll be right here," I say with a smile as I watch her walk from the room. Life is finally settling down. I'm home, Katniss accepts me for who I am, she loves me, I love her, and we've finally found peace.

I can hear water running upstairs. I get up to stoke the fire a little. As I place another log on the blaze I hear the sound of the water stop. I straighten up and step to the living room entrance. I'll want to be waiting for her right here when she comes back down. I can feel my heart quicken in anticipation. I hear our bedroom door open - and then it hits me.

I gasp and clench my eyes shut, my entire body trembling with the hijacking seizure. Blindly I grope out, my hand banging into the back of a chair. I grip the back of the chair tightly with both hands as I fight to control my breathing. Horrible, false images flood my mind.

"Peeta?" I hear Katniss calling out my name as though from far away.

"Get...AWAY!" I gasp, digging my fingers harder into the chair back. I can feel my control slipping.

"No," I hear her say, softly yet firmly. "No. We win, not her. It's not real, Peeta. This is real." As she talks I feel her slender arms wrap around my waist from behind, encircling me as she holds on tightly, even as I shudder and tremble. She continues to murmur to me softly as my seizure gradually subsides. Finally, I release the chair and straighten up, opening my eyes as her arms fall away from me and I slowly turn around to face her.

I notice that she's wearing lingerie similar to what she wore the first night on the train, only this was red instead of black. She's staring up into my face with a solemn look, her eyes never wavering from my face.

"That was dangerous, what you did," I say softly, reaching up to touch her face before resting my hands on her bare shoulders.

"I know," she replies simply, her eyes never wavering from mine.

"Were you scared?" I ask.

"Yes," Katniss admits, "but I wasn't about to let go."

"Why?" I ask, staring into her eyes.

"You needed me. I love you. That's all the reason I need," she replies softly.

I pull her close to me and kiss her gently. "I love you," I whisper. She smiles up at me, then steps back and takes my hand.

"Come to bed now, Peeta," Katniss says quietly.

She doesn't have to tell me twice.
PART VI

Months of planning are behind us now. Spring - and my wedding day - is tomorrow. And I am terrified.

Effie had borne the brunt of Katniss's mood swings effortlessly, as well as managing to hide her distaste at many of our decisions - colors, for example. My attendants (groomsmen or ushers, Effie had called them) were to be dressed in sunset orange tuxedos. Katniss's attendants (Effie called them bridesmaids) were to wear forest green gowns. Both choices were nods to our favorite colors - forest green for Katniss, sunset orange for me. Effie shuddered but, to her credit, said nothing.

Thom, as District Twelve Mayor, would conduct the civil ceremony, which basically consisted of him witnessing our signatures and then signing the marriage documents himself. Elder Mimas would conduct the actual public ceremony. I had to admit that I was impressed after our rehearsal. The ceremony was, indeed, quite beautiful.

Katniss's mother Una had arrived two days ago, and had immediately taken charge of getting Katniss ready for her wedding - no small relief to Effie. Haymitch was prepared for his role, standing in for Katniss's father. Effie had even managed to curtail his drinking until after the ceremony was over. Haymitch said on more than one occasion that he was ecstatic to be finally able to "give Katniss away," and that once the wedding was over, she would now be "my problem, and not his."

Galen had agreed to stand by me as my Best Man, while Katniss shocked everyone by asking Johanna to stand by her as her Maid of Honor. Even though Johanna was heard to mutter about the "awful green gown" and "being dressed as a tree one last time," I know that she was thrilled and honored to be included.

Delly, Nova, Leevy, and Bonnie all agreed to be Katniss's Bridesmaids, while Lars, Mikel, Jahn, and Beetee agreed to be my Groomsmen. Everything was set. Guests coming from out of the district had been arriving for the past few days. Effie had taken care of every tiny detail. Sae was in charge of the food. We had even received word that the families of Thresh and Rue would be coming, as well as Enobaria, our fellow Victor from District Two. Effie had even decided to recycle one of the outfits that I had worn on one of the countless public appearances that Katniss and I had made - a black tuxedo with flame highlights on the lapels and cuffs. Every contingency had been planned for.

And I am scared to death.

I have to get away, even if it's just for a few minutes. Victor's Village has become mass confusion anyway - I'm sure I won't be missed. I don't tell anyone that I'm leaving. I just quietly slip out my back door and head quickly to the Village entrance, hoping against hope that I don't run into anyone.

Luck is with me. I manage to slip through the gate and I head towards town, veering off after a couple of minutes to head towards the old district boundary and the old fence line, even though the fence is no longer there.

My destination is the Meadow.

I squat next to the dirt mound that covers the mass grave, shivering slightly in the chill late winter air. I zip up my jacket, blowing on my hands. A few patches of snow still remain on the ground, and I can already see shoots of green sprouting up on the mound of earth.
"I wish you were here to talk to," I say to the mound, straightening up and jamming my hands in my pockets. "I miss you all the time, Dad - but it's times like this that I just don't know what to do."

"I mean, I love her more than anything," I continue, "and I've dreamed about this moment for years...and now that it's here I am scared to death. Scared that I will end up hurting her, or not being a good husband to her, or just letting her down. And I know that you would have an answer for every fear that I have."

Of course, the mound is silent. It always is. I find myself asking the same questions over and over. What would Dad do? What would Dad say? I sigh in frustration and kick a loose clod of dirt toward the mound.

"Did he answer?" A soft voice asks. I jump at the sound and spin around to see Katniss standing behind me, her face impassive, her luminous eyes seemingly boring into my soul as she stares at me.

I sigh again and shake my head. "He never does."

"Then why do you keep coming out here?"

I shrug. "I don't know. Why do you?"

Katniss shrugs. "Don't know. Same as you, I guess. You're scared."

"Yeah, I am," I admit.

"Me too," Katniss says quietly. I look at her sharply.

"You? Scared? Of what?"

Katniss takes a deep breath before replying. "Of disappointing you."

I step forward, closing the distance between us in three strides. I gently take her in my arms. "You can never disappoint me."

Katniss rests her hands on my chest, not embracing me but not pushing away either. "I've never heard anyone sound so miserable with just three words."

"Katniss, no. No, you haven't." I insist.

"I see how you look at Delly. I see the sadness in your eyes. That's something that I can't give you."

"Oh, Katniss," I say quietly. "I don't want to marry you because I want kids. I want to marry you because I love you."

"See. You do want kids." I can see tears forming in her eyes.

"But it's not the end of the world if we don't," I say. "I'm just as afraid of not being a good husband."

"That's silly," Katniss says, relaxing a bit.

"It's true. I worry about that all the time."

"Well, you shouldn't. I know you will be a good husband."
"And I know you will be a good wife."

Katniss stares up at me with that same solemn look. "I wonder if ever couple about to get married has the same fears."

I smile. "Probably. And my Dad was no help."

"Yes, he was," Katniss says. "I see him in you every day. He may not be here with you anymore, but he's always with you. Your father was a good, decent man, Peeta. And he made you into a good, decent man."

I kiss her. "Is it any wonder that I love you?"

"I love you too, Dandelion. We should head back before people start looking for us. If Effie catches us together she'll have kittens on the spot. We aren't supposed to see each other for twenty-four hours before the wedding - according to her it's bad luck."

I sigh, slipping my arm around her waist. "Sleeping alone tonight will be so hard."

As we begin to walk back to the Village, Katniss says simply, "I know."

Wedding day.

I stand behind a large curtain in the Hob Community Center. Nervously I peek out for the tenth time.

"The place is packed," I whisper.

Galen firmly takes me by my elbow, moving me away from the curtain. "Settle down, Peeta. You've been in front of much larger crowds before."

All I can do is nod. "So much for 'small and intimate,'" I mutter.

"Galen?" Galen and I glance at the source of the voice. Lars Broadax, looking decidedly uncomfortable in his tuxedo, is beckoning to Galen. "It's time. We need to get lined up."

Galen nods, turns to me for a quick "See you soon," and disappears with Lars. I sigh and turn away, fidgeting nervously.

"Boy, you need to relax," Elder Mimas says with a grin. "You've gotten yourself into a state!"

"Yes, ma'am," I say quietly, turning toward the curtain as new sounds come from the assembled group.

"What's that?" I ask nervously, wishing I could take just one more peek.

"The Groomsmen are walking the Bridesmaids to the front," Elder Mimas says. "Don't worry, someone'll be along to get us shortly. Just do it like rehearsal and it'll be just fine."

"Just like rehearsal," I mutter. I glance over at Elder Mimas to see her leafing through an old book. She's ignoring me. I fidget some more.

"Mimi - I mean, Elder Mimas?" Rikkert says, poking his head around the curtains. "They're ready."

"Thank you, Rikki," Elder Mimas says, then turns to me. "Alright, boy - it's showtime. Follow me."
My legs are trembling as I follow Elder Mimas out into the Center. I briefly catch Cressida's eye and she gives me a grin and a thumbs up. I smile wanly back at her. Beside her, Pollux is manning the camera for the live feed to the rest of Panem.

I see two lines - Groomsmen and Bridesmaids. Galen is standing at the head of the Groomsmen. I step next to Galen and stop. I quickly glance at Johanna standing at the head of the Bridesmaids, who gives me a quick smile and a wink. Nervously I scan around the front - the “altar” was what Elder Mimas had called it - and see a small table set up off to one side, with Thom and Effie standing by the table. Papers are on the table that could only be the marriage documents.

Turning away, I quickly scan the crowd. Familiar faces - Greasy Sae, Alexa Morris and Amalthea Loveland from the Clinic, Elders Willem and Mattias, President Paylor, Plutarch Heavensbee, Gunter Broadax from District Seven, and three shocks - Thresh and Rue's families from District Eleven, our fellow Victor Enobaria from District Two, and Captain Gale Hawthorne with his family.

I'm still trying to process this when the music suddenly changes and everyone turns to face the rear of the hall. Haymitch appears, looking almost dignified, with Katniss on his arm. Everyone rises to their feet as Katniss and Haymitch deliberately walk down the center aisle - towards me.

I've never seen her look so beautiful.

She's wearing a simple white sleeveless gown, her hair down and tumbling loosely over her bare shoulders. She's clutching a bouquet of flowers in her hands, that I identify as she draws nearer as a mix of dandelion and evening primrose. Her face is covered by a delicate veil. The dress is far simpler than the one she was forced to wear by President Snow - and infinitely more beautiful.

Haymitch and Katniss slowly make their way up the center aisle until they reach the altar. Haymitch stops, turns, and gently embraces Katniss. He murmurs something to her and I hear her laugh softly, then he turns to me, fixes me with a stern gaze, and mouths Don't fuck this up. He then turns and walks quickly to the front row, taking a seat next to Una.

Katniss slips her arm easily through mine as Thom clears his throat. "Before we continue the ceremony, there are some official matters to attend to." He beckons Katniss and I forward to the table, where we both quickly sign the official District Twelve marriage documents. Once we sign, Thom and Effie both counter-sign as witnesses, then, with a smile, Thom beckons us back to the altar.

Katniss and I step back to the altar and face Elder Mimas. Katniss is gripping my arm very firmly. "You're shaking," she whispers.

"Me?" I whisper back. "I thought that was you." Only then do we become aware that Elder Mimas is fixing us both with a stern gaze.

"Are you both finished?" she asks sternly. I feel myself redden as a wave of laughter rises up behind us. All I can do is nod numbly.

"Good!" She says with a smile. "Let's get started then, shall we?" Elder Mimas glances down at the old book that she's holding, then back up at us.

"What a long, torturous road you've both been forced to take to get here today," she says. "I've married a fair number of couples in my life. Most have been your typical, boring couples in love. But you two are far from typical." She pauses and looks at each of us intently.
"I've heard it said that fear is strong, but hope is stronger. I'm hear to say, and these two young people are living proof, that love is the strongest of them all. Love conquers fear and is a first cousin to hope. Love is what kept these two alive through not one, but two of those barbaric Hunger Games that your people were forced to play every year. Love kept these two alive through a devastating war. And love is what allowed this young man to overcome unspeakable abuse to come back from a very dark place to the girl that owned his heart."

"But, I'm sure that no one here came to listen to the musings of an old woman," Elder Mimas continues, "so what do you say we get these two married?"

Spontaneous cheers and applause erupt from our guests. "Now, as I understand it, you two were legally married as soon as you signed that bunch of papers over there." She tilts her head towards the table where Thom and Effie still stood. "But, for you to be married, your hearts must be joined. With that, Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark, please turn and face each other."

We both turn until we are facing each other. I can see, through the veil, that Katniss's eyes were shiny with unshed tears and I know that mine are the same. "Please join hands," Elder Mimas instructs. I reach out and Katniss slides her hands into mine and squeezes gently. I smile.

"Who gives this woman to be joined to this man?" Elder Mimas calls out.

Haymitch stands up. "Her Mother and their Mentor do." He flashes us a quick smile before he sits back down.

"Peeta Mellark. Do you willingly give your heart to this woman, Katniss Everdeen, to be her husband? To love and to cherish, to have and to hold, in sickness and in health, in times of plenty and times of want, in good times and bad, to cleave only to her, for as long as you both shall live? If so, please state 'I do.'"

"I do," I say in a firm, clear voice.

"Katniss Everdeen. Do you willingly give your heart to this man, Peeta Mellark, to be his wife? To love and to cherish, to have and to hold, in sickness and in health, in times of plenty and times of want, in good times and bad, to take only him, for as long as you both shall live? If so, please state 'I do.'"

"I do," Katniss says clearly. I see a solitary tear roll slowly down her cheek as she smiles.

"The rings, please," Elder Mimas says. Galen and Johanna step forward to hand us the rings.

"The rings are a symbol of the never ending love that they have for each other," Elder Mimas explains. "Peeta?"

I take Katniss's left hand in mine. "With this ring, I become your husband. I pledge my love to you now and forever." I slip the ring on her finger. Katniss glances down at it, then does a double take and I see her eyes widen in astonishment.

"My pearl," she whispers. "I thought I lost it! Oh, Peeta!"

"Katniss?" Elder Mimas says with a smile. Katniss jerks her head towards the elder, then mumbles "Sorry" as she turns back toward me.

"Take your time, dear," Elder Mimas says. "It's your day, after all!"

Katniss grabs my left hand, slipping a simple gold band on my finger as she says, "With this ring, I
become your wife. I pledge my love to you now and forever."

"If there is anyone present that has any objection to the marriage of this woman to this man, speak now or be forever silent." I can feel my heart thudding in my chest as I half expect Gale to leap to his feet, shouting out his objections for all to hear, but there's nothing but silence.

"The veil, Peeta," Elder Mimas says. I brush the veil back from Katniss's face as the elder says, "In the eyes of these witnesses, and by your own laws, you are now married. You may now kiss your bride, Peeta."

"You love me. Real or not real?" I ask, staring into Katniss's eyes.

"Real," she breathes, as she arches up against me in a long, tender kiss.

Elder Mimas leans forward. "Save something for later, you two," she gently chides. Blushing, we break our kiss as Elder Mimas grabs us by our shoulders and turns us to face our guests.

"It is my pleasure to introduce to you for the very first time, Katniss and Peeta Mellark!"

The applause and cheers that went up were truly thunderous.

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**PART VII**

The party (Effie called it a 'Reception') was finally over. Katniss and I ate until we were stuffed, and danced until our feet were sore. I very carefully stayed away from alcohol. Now, only one tradition remained before Katniss and I would feel truly married.

The Toasting.

We had invited the wedding party, as well as a select few others, back to our house for the Toasting. Cressida had asked our permission to record the ceremony. Katniss and I readily agreed.

As we all assembled in the living room, I explained the ceremony. "District Twelve tradition has always called for a newly married couple to perform a toasting to celebrate their marriage. And, although Katniss and I are now legally married, no married couple in Twelve really feels married until after the toasting. First, we light a fire in the hearth together."

Katniss and I quickly build a fire in the fireplace, using traditional flint and steel rather than matches. We quickly had a nice blaze going.

"Next, we each take a skewer or a pair of tongs and hold a slice of bread over the fire. Once the bread is toasted, Katniss will feed her slice to me and I will feed my slice to her. We each take one bite and then pass the rest back to our guests. Once the bread is gone then, and only then, do we truly feel married." I hand Katniss a skewer and a slice of bread and then take one of each for myself.

Katniss and I sit quietly, toasting our slices. We pull our bread out of the fire and Katniss offers me her slice first. I gingerly take the hot bread off the skewer, and offer my bread to Katniss. As Katniss slides the bread off the skewer I hear her gasp softly.

"I'm sorry, love," I say contritely. "I seem to have burned your bread."

Katniss holds the burned bread with trembling fingers, tears rolling down her cheeks as she takes a small bite, as I take a bite
"Oh, Peeta," she sobs. "I love you so much." She kisses me warmly.

Behind us, I hear Plutarch say in confusion, "Okay, did I miss something here, or is there a reason why she's crying over burned bread?"

Katniss smiles at me as we hand our bread slices to those behind us, then she turns and faces our guests.

"When I was eleven," she begins haltingly, "The worst thing that ever happened to me up to that point happened. My father was killed in a mining accident. My mother, my sister and I were given one months' pay and told that we would be expected to fend for ourselves after that time."

Katniss pauses and looks at her mother with sad eyes before continuing. "But my mother was sick. She was sick with something that I only came to understand a long, long time later. She was so sick that she couldn't work. Couldn't even take care of Prim and I. So it fell on me to try."

By this time, every eye was on Una Everdeen. Una was sitting quietly in a chair, not meeting anyone's gaze.

"Mom, I want you to know that I do understand why you couldn't take care of us, and I'm so sorry that I gave you such a hard time," Katniss says tearfully. Una raises her head, tears streaking her own face, and nods silently. Galen walks over to her and gently places a hand on her shoulder, while Haymitch does the same on the other shoulder.

"Anyway," Katniss continues, "We were starving. I had sold everything that I could sell. One April evening, I was going door to door in the Merchant section, trying to sell Prim's old baby clothes. I came to the bakery last. Peeta's mother screamed at me and threatened to call the Peacekeepers. I even went through their garbage cans looking for something, anything, to eat - with no luck."

The room was silent as Katniss continues. "I finally collapsed under an apple tree across from the bakery. I didn't have the strength to continue. I sat there in the rain, waiting to die. I could hear yelling and screaming coming from the bakery and then I saw the door open and a boy step out into the rain, holding two burned loaves of bread. He saw me, pretended to throw the bread to the pigs, and instead threw them into the street towards me."

Through her sobs, Katniss says, "You don't forget the face of the person who was your last hope," and tearfully kisses me again.

"That...that was beautiful," Plutarch says, then he turns to me. "You were the boy, I assume?"

"Yeah," I answer simply.

"Wonderful!" Plutarch exclaims. "What a story! Cressida, you got all that, right?"

"No," Cressida says coolly. "I didn't get a word."

Plutarch looks like he's ready to explode. Haymitch steps over to him quickly and drapes an arm around his shoulders. "Plutarch, there's just some stories that are best left private - and this is one of them."

"I agree," President Paylor says. "Miss Pierce, thank you for not recording that very personal disclosure from the Mellarks. Now, if you all will excuse me, it's been a very busy day, and I have
an early train to catch." Paylor walks over to Katniss and I and embraces us both warmly as we stand up.

"Congratulations to you both," she says sincerely.

"Thank you, Madam President," we both say in near unison.

The rest of our guests leave quickly, once the President has left. Soon Katniss and I are alone in our house. I gather her up in my arms and kiss her. She returns my kiss eagerly.

"I love you, Missus Mellark," I whisper.

"I love you, Mister Mellark," she replies, kissing me again.

"Are you tired?" I ask.

"Yes," Katniss replies, "But I can be persuaded to stay awake for a little while longer." She smiles at me playfully.

"There's another tradition that Effie was telling me about," I say, "Called 'carrying the bride across the threshold.' Apparently a new bride is supposed to be carried into her new home for the first time."

"But this isn't a new home, Peeta," Katniss says in confusion, the squeals in surprise as I suddenly bend and scoop her up in my arms.

"Let's modify that a bit to 'carrying the new bride to the bedroom,'" I say as I climb the stairs while holding Katniss.

"Peeta, be careful." Katniss says breathlessly.

"Always," I reply, as I kick our bedroom door shut.

I awaken in the middle of the night. The light from the nearly full moon is streaming through the window. Carefully, so as not to awaken Katniss - my wife - I climb out of bed and go to the window.

As I stare out the window, I think back to a time just about a year ago. A time when a broken Peeta Mellark first returned to District Twelve. The district was more dead than alive then. Now, there are well over two thousand people living here, and the population keeps growing.

A broken Peeta. Well, I am far from whole - and I don't think I ever truly will be - but I am certainly not the broken shell that I was. And I have Katniss - Katniss Mellark now - to thank for it.

The nightmares, the hijacking, Katniss's breakdown at the death of our sister Prim - those all changed us. Changed, yes - but neither of us let those things break us. We bent. But we snapped back.

I hear a soft snore and turn to see Katniss rolling over, a small smile playing on her lips. Good, whatever she's dreaming it's making her smile. If only I could make her smile all the time. I'll try. It's my job as her husband to try to keep her happy.

We both fought in two Games. We both have blood on our hands. We survived a war. I almost killed Katniss twice. But for all that, we survive. And, to honor those that didn't survive, we live.
We live for Rue and Thresh, whose families we met today, and who had nothing but smiles for us on our special day. We live for the thousands of District Twelve residents that died that awful night. We live for Boggs, and Mitchell, and Messalla, and Castor - comrades in arms that died for a cause they believed in. We live for my family, dead in the firebombing, and for Katniss's father, long dead but never forgotten. And most of all, we live for our sister, Primrose, who touched so many but never was allowed to reach her full potential.

Katniss and I still play the real-not real game, for those times when even *sativa* doesn't work. Usually we don't have to play for long, and I manage to clear the fog from my brain and start to function again.

What the future has in store for us is anyone's guess. I can only hope that it's not as bad as what we've already been forced to go through.

I turn back toward my sleeping wife, and carefully crawl back into bed with her. She murmurs and cuddles in close to me, draping one arm across my chest. As she stirs I know that she's now awake.

"You okay?" she asks quietly.

"Yeah," I reply. "Sorry if I woke you."

"Don't be silly, Peeta," she murmurs. "I love you."

"I love you, Katniss," I say, kissing the top of her head.

"I'm cold. Stay with me?"

I smile as I wrap my arm around her bare shoulders.

"Always."

**THE END**
Katniss and I face the crowd as everyone stomps, claps their hands, and cheers wildly. I can feel the back of my neck turn warm and glance quickly at Katniss. Her cheeks, neck, and shoulders are a nice rosy shade. It's official. We're both completely embarrassed by this display. I turn back to the crowd and somehow manage a smile.

I'm dimly aware of music playing, then of a hand on my shoulder. I turn my head, expecting to see Katniss, but it's not her. Effie is standing directly behind us, one hand firmly on each of our shoulders, urging us forward.

"Go, you two!" Effie hisses, her voice somehow carrying over the din and the music. "The music's your cue, remember? Down the aisle to the back of the hall to your table. The wedding party will be right behind you. You two are seated dead center of the long table - the one decorated with that horrid green and orange motif you insisted on!" Still, Katniss and I hesitate a moment too long, only to receive a firm shove from Effie's hand. "Now move!"

No Drill Sergeant was ever more commanding than Effie Trinket trying to keep two stubborn kids on a schedule.

Katniss slips her arm easily in mine as we both walk slowly, with an almost exaggerated dignity, toward our target - the long table at the rear of the hall. I try to tune out the din and the sight of everyone on their feet, watching our every move. Instead, I focus on Katniss - my wife. Wife. It still hasn't sunk in. As I look at her I'm almost giddy with the surge of love that I feel for this wonderful, incredible girl - no, woman - that has just married me. Her face is impassive as she mechanically sets one foot in front of the other. I know how much she hates crowds and being the center of attention. I smile reassuringly at her but she doesn't notice.

"Go, you two!" Effie hisses, her voice somehow carrying over the din and the music. "The music's your cue, remember? Down the aisle to the back of the hall to your table. The wedding party will be right behind you. You two are seated dead center of the long table - the one decorated with that horrid green and orange motif you insisted on!" Still, Katniss and I hesitate a moment too long, only to receive a firm shove from Effie's hand. "Now move!"

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Katniss stumbles a bit from my sudden stop, then recovers and spins toward me, concern on her face. Immediately I regret stopping so quickly. She's probably thinking that I'm on the verge of a hijacking seizure!

"Peeta, what -" she begins, but never finishes her question as my arms slip around her slender waist and I pull her tightly against me, my lips pressing firmly against hers.
I feel Katniss stiffen in surprise, her hands pressing against my chest - and for an instant, I think that she's going to push me away - until I feel her relax completely in my arms as her moist lips flower open against mine and I feel her sigh into my mouth as she returns my kiss enthusiastically.

Katniss and I kiss for long seconds, completely lost in each other and unaware of the crowd roaring its approval. Finally, reluctantly, I pull my face back from hers, looking down into her face, now heavy-lidded, her cheeks rosy from a different kind of blush.

"Feel better now?" I ask softly. Katniss smiles, nods, and gives me a quick peck on my lips in response.

"We better get to our table," I say with a smile, "before Effie has a complete melt down right here and now."

And somehow, my wife and I manage to finish walking the short distance to the table, but not before Katniss softly whispers just exactly what she wants to tell Effie what to do with her schedule.

I'm pretty sure that what Katniss is suggesting is anatomically impossible.

Dinner.

Katniss and I were shocked to discover just how hungry we both were once we arrived at our table. Of course, neither of us had had much of an appetite the last few days. Now that we were officially married, our appetites had returned with a vengeance.

We waited until the rest of the wedding party joined us at the table before we sat down. Beetee looked especially grateful to finally be able to sit. It had been a stroke of genius to pair Nova with Beetee in the wedding party. Beetee had insisted that he stand for the entire ceremony and that he walk the aisle with Nova...a feat that he managed to accomplish only with the aide of a pair of powered leg braces of his own design. Combined with Nova's solicitous assistance, Beetee had managed to walk the aisle twice and stand throughout the ceremony. He's earned the right to sit for a while.

I quickly stand up and walk over to where Beetee was sitting. I want to thank him for the effort it must have taken for him to do what he had just done. As I approach, I see that someone had substituted his chair for his own powered wheelchair.

Beetee looks up and smiles as I approach him. It was so hard to believe that this gentle genius was not only a Victor, but had single-handedly killed the entire Career pack in his Games.

"Peeta," he says warmly. "A truly moving ceremony. My sincere congratulations to you and Katniss...and thank you again for asking me to be a part of your special day."

I squat by his chair, no mean feat with my Robo-leg. "I'm the one to be thanking you, Beetee," I say with a smile. "I know what it must have taken for you to stand and walk the way you did."

Beetee reaches over and grasps my hand in both of his. "Peeta, don't think for a minute that I was going to sit through this most important day. Having said that, it feels wonderful to be able to sit!"

"And don't worry, Peeta," Nova adds. "I promise to take good care of Elder Beetee."

"You've done an excellent job thus far, my dear," Beetee says with a smile. "And Peeta...please remind Katniss to save a dance for me later on. I think I can coax a little more life out of my legs!"
"I'll go tell her right now," I say, clasping my hand on his shoulder before making my way back to my seat. Katniss turns as I sit and gives me a quizzical smile.

"What were you and Beetee talking about?" She asks.

"You, of course," I say, lightly kissing her. "Actually, I was thanking him for standing and walking during the ceremony. He has a message for you, also."

Katniss arches her eyebrows. "Oh?"

"Save a dance for me," I say.

"A slow one," Katniss replies with a grin. "I don't want to overwork him!"

Before I could reply, Effie stands up and, picking up a microphone, begins to make an announcement.

"May I have everyone's attention?" She trills. "Oh, thank you! I would just like to announce that dinner will be served shortly. The wedding party will be served at their table. A buffet line has been set up over there -" she points to a long table covered with a spotless white tablecloth "- for everyone else. Madam President - Mister Secretary. I'm afraid that includes you as well."

President Paylor stands up. "Miss Trinket...this is the Mellarks' special day, not mine. And this is not the first time I've had to stand in line for my dinner. Mister Heavensbee and I will be just fine!"

No sooner did President Paylor finish speaking than a large plate was placed in front of Katniss, then another in front of me. I glance down at the contents of the plate, then turn and smile at Katniss.

"Lamb stew?" I ask.

Katniss returns my smile. "Why not? It is my favorite, after all!"

"Good thing I like it, too," I reply. "I just don't remember deciding on this."

Katniss looks nonplussed. "Oh, Peeta," she laughs, "It's just one of a thousand little details that you were oblivious too. All I can say is, thank goodness for Effie!"

I take her hand in mine, kiss it, and squeeze it gently. "I'm starved," I say suddenly, "and this smells wonderful!"

Katniss glances up and down our table. "Everyone has their dinner. Let's eat!"

Lamb stew has never tasted as good as it did that day.

Dinner was pleasant and relaxing, in spite of Johanna's lewd and sometimes shocking remarks about many of our guests. It was probably a good thing that she was seated directly to my left - I'm probably one of only two men in the Hob Community Center that exerted any semblance of control or influence over her.

The other man to have any influence whatsoever with Johanna is sitting near our table with his entire family. Captain Gale Hawthorne, resplendent in full dress uniform, seems to be enjoying himself, along with his mother, brothers, and little sister. He was even very friendly and charming to Callisto Birch, Rory Hawthorne's girlfriend - much to Rory's relief.
At one point, I see Gale glancing over at our table - a little wistfully (at least that's how it seemed to me), only to see his eyes widen a bit and a blush form on his face, then smile. I glance quickly over at Johanna to see her gazing intently at Gale, running her tongue suggestively over her lips.

"Jo!" I hiss. "Seriously! Now?" I find myself smiling in spite of myself.

In response, Johanna chuckles deep in her throat. "Remember the elevator in the Training Center?"

Now it's my turn to blush. "How could I forget?" The image of Johanna deliberately stripping naked in front of Katniss and I is burned indelibly into my brain.

Johanna leans close to me and whispers, "This lovely forest green color that your bride selected for our gowns has inspired me to recreate that moment. Tonight. For Soldier Boy, there." She inclines her head toward Gale. "But this time, I won't be getting off on the Seventh Floor."

I shake my head, laughing. "Jo, you're impossible!"

"You know me only too well, Stumpy," she laughs. "I just thought you would want to know that you and Katniss will have some competition tonight in the noise-making category."

"What's so funny?" Katniss asks, leaning towards Johanna and me.

"Jo and I were just talking about old times," I say, partially truthfully.

"And about this gorgeous shade of green that you chose for the gowns," Johanna adds - not very convincingly.

Katniss smiles at Johanna and I sweetly. "Your reminiscing wouldn't have included the time in the Training Center when you stripped buck naked in front of us both, would it?"

It's one of the few times I've ever seen Johanna speechless. Fortunately for her - and probably me as well - Galen chooses this exact time to rap his spoon sharply against his water glass as he stands up.

"May I have your attention, please," he says, trying to be heard over the din of the crowd. Effie quickly hands him a microphone. "Thank you, my dear. Ladies and gentlemen, may I please have your attention!"

Gradually the din quiets as Galen raises his wine glass. "I've only known these two for a short while," he says, "not even three years. And, our relationship, at first, was somewhat, ahem, rocky."

"Rocky, my ass!" Haymitch shouts out. "Katniss couldn't stand you!"

A quick ripple of laughter follows Haymitch's outburst. Galen grins at him and says, "Well, as I recall, neither did you!"

Haymitch responds by lifting his own glass in salute. I can see that it's filled with something considerably more potent than wine.

"But I digress," Galen continues. "I found, in time, that Katniss is a girl that does not easily let her guard down with people. To finally break through her barriers and become one of the select few that she calls 'friend' is indeed a rare accomplishment. And to earn her love is nothing short of extraordinary." Galen turns to Katniss and I and raises his glass. "A toast to the Mellarks. May their union last a lifetime, may their lives be fruitful, and may their love be eternal."
Galen lifts his glass and drinks, as our guests follow suit and do the same. Katniss and I each take a small sip from the flutes placed before us, and I turn to her afterward and grin. Our glasses have been filled with sparkling cider instead of wine or champagne.

And a good thing, too, as the toasts went on for over twenty minutes. Haymitch, Thom, Lars, Plutarch, President Paylor...a seemingly endless series of testimonials. But only two really stood out.

The first was from the man that I least expected to stand up and say anything - Captain Gale Hawthorne. When I saw Gale rise smoothly to his feet, wine glass in hand, I admit to feeling a moment of doubt. What's he gonna say? Is the thought uppermost in my mind. A quick glance at Katniss confirmed that she was thinking along those same lines. Our fears were soon laid to rest.

"Hi," Gale begins in a soft voice. Someone quickly hands him the microphone. "Hi," he says again, stronger. "I'm Gale Hawthorne. I was born here in Twelve and I've know Catnip -" another wave of laughter at Gale's revelation of the special nickname he had for Katniss "- I mean, Katniss -" more laughter "- for close to seven years now. I won't go into detail about our relationship, but I will say that she was the best hunting partner I could have ever hoped for."

The room is dead silent now as Gale continues. "The only time I ever saw Katniss smile back in those days was in the forest. But now, I see her smile for an entirely different reason." He looks pointedly at me. "It's you, Peeta. You make her smile. Only one other person was ever able to make her smile like that, and it wasn't me, or anyone else in this room for that matter." Gale pauses and I glance over at Katniss. She's sitting stock still, a smile frozen on her lips, tears trembling in her eyelashes. "Peeta...Katniss. I wish you love, peace, and a long, quiet life."

You could have heard a pin drop, it was that quiet. I'm still looking at Katniss when she looks directly at Gale and mouthes, "Thank you."

Effie quickly gathers up the microphone from Gale. "Well!" Effie says. "Those were certainly some moving toasts to our bride and groom! Does anyone else have anything they would like to say?" There's silence for a few moments, then Effie continues. "Then perhaps we should start the music so the Mellarks can enjoy their first dance as husband and wife -"

"I do," an unfamiliar voice says from the middle of the crowd. Katniss and I both search the room with our eyes in the direction of the voice as a woman stands up. Slightly built, her dark brown skin weathered by a life spent outdoors laboring in the sun, I recognize her the instant she rises to her feet. I have no idea what her name is but I will never forget her face. Rue's mother.

I head Katniss gasp and I know that she, too, has recognized this woman as well. "I'd like to say something, ma'am," she says in a clear voice. Effie hesitates for a moment, then hurries over to the woman and wordlessly hand her the microphone.

"Thank you," the woman says politely, then turns to face us. "I never got a chance before...but I would like to thank you, Katniss, for the kindness you showed my little girl. When I said goodbye to her -" at this her voice hitches "- when we said goodbye, she told me her biggest fear was dyin' alone. I know you bein' there with her brought my Rue peace. Thank you...and bless you both."

It was only then that I realize that I've been holding my breath while she speaks. As I exhale, I hear the scraping of Katniss's chair and turn just in time to see her spring to her feet and hurry into the crowd. Effie retrieves the microphone right before Katniss gets there, so I can't hear what she's saying to Rue's mother, but then I see both women crying as Katniss hugs the older woman tightly.
to her, then kisses her on her cheek.

Johanna, seated next to me, sums up my feelings in a single word.

"Wow."

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Effie is the perfect Mistress of Ceremonies. Following the last toast, she quickly and efficiently gets the reception back on schedule, almost shoving Katniss and I onto the dance floor for our first dance as a married couple. That was followed quickly by the rest of the wedding party, then the remainder of the guests. I do notice that once Johanna's "duty dances" were finished (dancing first with Galen, then me, then the other men in the wedding party) she firmly latched on to Gale...who didn't seem to mind the attention one bit.

There were other little ceremonies to perform during the reception - cutting the wedding cake and Katniss and I feeding each other a slice of cake ("Is this some kind of Capitol toasting or something?") Katniss had asked. I just shrugged my shoulders and smiled, ignoring the calls from people in the crowd that Katniss and I should shove the cake in each others' faces. "Wearing their wedding cake must be some sort of Capitol tradition," I had whispered as I carefully fed Katniss her cake). This was followed shortly thereafter by a ceremony where Katniss threw her bouquet of flowers backwards over her head in the general direction of the single women and girls, then I performed the same ritual by removing a garter from Katniss's thigh (which made me blush a little) and tossing it backwards over my head toward the single men and boys.

Elder Mimas caught Katniss's bouquet, while Rory Hawthorne caught the garter.

Effie explained to both Katniss and I that, according to legend and tradition, whoever caught the bouquet and garter would be the next to marry. Katniss and I thought that was funny. The Capitol sure has some strange legends and traditions.

Elder Mimas thought that was the funniest thing she had ever heard. Rory was, predictably, horrified, until we managed to convince him that he was not expected to get married until he was good and ready.

Finally, though, we were both able to enjoy the party and mingle with our guests. Katniss became a very popular dance partner with the men and boys, while I had a steady stream of women and girls asking for dances. Neither of us refused, although, speaking for myself, I would have much preferred being able to dance with my wife instead.

My wife. Those words haven't still sunk in completely. I catch a quick glimpse of Katniss dancing with Gunter Broadax...or, more accurately, she was grimly hanging on while he was twirling her around the dance floor with reckless abandon, although, to her credit, her smile never wavered. I was dancing with President Paylor at the time, who seemed, at least to me, to be uncharacteristically relaxed, even insisting that I call her by her first name.

Fortunately, the music soon ended, and I thanked the president graciously, while making a bee-line toward the beverage table, trying to find Katniss at the same time. I never made it.

"Tired already?" A woman's voice says from behind. "I thought Victors were supposed to be tough!"

I recognize the voice and the soft accent, even though I've only spoken to her a couple of times. I stop and turn to face her.

Enobaria.
She still has the same athletic build that I remembered so well, even though it was well hidden by the conservative dress that she was wearing. She gives me a tight-lipped smile and grabs me by the hand, leading me firmly back on to the dance floor.

"Come on, Twelve," she says with a laugh. "It's a slow one. I promise I'll be gentle."

As if I have a choice. We begin to dance slowly. To my surprise, she's an accomplished dancer and follows my lead effortlessly. We don't speak at first but when she smiles at me I know the expression on my face showed my surprise.

Enobaria's teeth were...well, normal. Two rows of perfectly even, white teeth. Gone were the fangs that had become her trademark during her heyday as one of District Two's most popular Victors.

"Surprised, Mellark?" Enobaria asks, her grin widening.

"A little," I admit.

"I had to have them all capped," she explains. "But it was worth it. I couldn't wait to get my mouth back to normal!"

"I don't understand," I reply in confusion. "I thought that your teeth were your...well, trademark."

"Not mine!" Enobaria hisses angrily. "The Capitol's. Snow's! Finnick Odair wasn't the only Victor that the Capitol 'owned.'"

So Enobaria was like Finnick. Forced into prostitution. "I'm sorry," is all I could think to say.

"You and Everdeen...I mean, Katniss - your wife - are lucky," she says with a bitter laugh. '"Star-crossed lovers.' And untouchable because of it. And I didn't know whether to be happy for you or envy you for it. So I think I ended up doing a bit of both."

I was feeling more than just a little uncomfortable. Enobaria had been one of the more visible faces of the Games, and had always outwardly been a staunch supporter of the Snow regime. I guess being forced to whore for Snow changed her mind, I say to myself.

"Anyway," Enobaria continues, "I just wanted to let you both know I appreciate your including me today. It seems that no one in Two really knows what to do with me." Another bitter laugh. "Not much call for a retired Career Victor."

"Were you Clove's Mentor?" I find myself asking.

"Yeah," she replies curtly.

"I'm sorry," I say. "About Clove, I mean. And Brutus too."

Enobaria fixes me with a searching gaze. "I really think you are sorry," she finally replies. "But you don't have to be. She knew the odds. Brutus too."

"I'll always be sorry," I say. "It was such a waste."

"And all it took was a Rebellion for me to see that," Enobaria says softly. I look at her in surprise.

"Enobaria -" I begin to say before she stops me.

"My friends just call me Eno," she says. Now it's my turn to examine her face closely.
"Are we friends?" I finally ask.

"Well," she replies after a moment, "We aren't enemies any more. I'm not sure if we ever really were. Besides, there's only seven of us Victors left. We understand each other in a way that outsiders never will. So why not friends?"

After a moment, I smile at her and nod. "I can't argue with that, Eno," I say. "I have one condition, though - you call me 'Peeta,' and not 'Mellark!'"

For the first time, Enobaria's smile is actually friendly. "Deal!" She says, then, "Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"Go ahead," I reply.

Enobaria hesitates before bringing her mouth close to my ear. In a whisper, she asks, "What do you and Katniss do when your nightmares come?"

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After the dance ended, Enobaria agrees to go with me to find Katniss. Enobaria's unexpected vulnerability is still a surprise to me...and I'm sure it will be just as big a surprise to Katniss.

We quickly find Katniss, standing near a table, talking with a group of people. As we draw nearer, I realize that the group that Katniss is talking with includes Rue's mother and a dark skinned, athletic looking girl that appears to be roughly the same age as Katniss and I. *This must be Thresh's sister,* I say to myself.

Katniss smiles broadly when she sees me, and her smile never wavers when she realizes who I am with, although I see her eyes narrow just a bit.

"Peeta," Katniss says warmly, standing and giving me a quick hug and a kiss. "I was just talking to our guests from Eleven." She pauses and looks pointedly at Enobaria. "I see you've been mingling as well."

"Just being a good host," I say with a smile, turning to Rue's mother. "Hello, ma'am," I say, taking her hand. "Thank you so much for coming. I'm Peeta."

Rue's mother stands and hugs me, murmuring her thanks for my generosity. I realize that she's referring to my promise that I had made during our Victory Tour, when I gifted the families of Rue and Thresh one month's Victor's earnings per year as long as Katniss and I live. I have no idea if either family ever received so much as a single coin, and truthfully I have no idea how to ask.

Fortunately, Katniss comes to my rescue. "Harvest was just telling me that the government has set up a trust from both of our Victor's accounts and has finally paid both families." Katniss nods towards the tall, athletic girl as she speaks.

"Three months' worth, in fact," Harvest says with a grin. I notice that she speaks with the same lilting sing-song accent that I had heard from Thresh...the few times I actually heard Thresh speak, anyway.

"I'm glad that the new government is making good," I reply. I gently disengage myself from Rue's mother and extend my hand to Harvest. "I'm Peeta. It's a pleasure to meet you, Harvest."

"Likewise," Harvest says, grasping my hand firmly in hers. It's about at this time that I notice the little girl standing closest to Rue's mother staring, wide eyed, at Enobaria.
Enobaria, who, up until now, has been standing quietly by my side, notices the little girl at about the same moment that I do. She squats down gracefully and smiles at the girl, who bears an amazing resemblance to Rue.

"Hello, honey," Enobaria says, extending her hand. "I'm Eno. What's your name?"

The girl stares at Enobaria and makes no move to take the proffered hand. "I know who you are," she says flatly. "You're the lady from District Two with the scary teeth."

At this Enobaria smiles widely, showing her teeth completely. I see Katniss's eyes widen in surprise as I move closer to her, slipping my arm around her waist. "I'll explain later," I whisper. Katniss can only nod.

The little girl's eyes widen in surprise as well. "Your teeth!" She says. "They look normal!"

Enobaria laughs and says, "I did have scary teeth once, but I got them fixed. See?"

The little girl examines Enobaria closely, then slowly extends her hand. "You're not scary any more. I'm Sage," she says. "Nice to meet you, Eno."

"The pleasure is all mine, Sage," Enobaria says huskily as she squeezes Sage's hand gently in her own.

Finally, thankfully, the party begins to wind down. Katniss and I are both pleasantly exhausted, even though we know that we have one more ceremony to perform. The toasting.

Only a handful of our closest friends have been invited to partake in the toasting. The rest of our guests will probably stay on here at the Hob Community Center...eating, drinking, and dancing until the small hours of the morning.

Katniss and I are taking one last slow turn on the dance floor, holding each other close and, every now and then, taking turns murmuring our love in each others' ear. At one point, as Katniss and I lazily spin on the floor, I catch sight of Enobaria, now sitting with the contingent from District Eleven, chatting and laughing animatedly.

"That's really great," a voice says from off to the side. I glance over to see Cressida dancing with Elder Willem. Cressida and Pollux had, hours ago, put away their cameras and recorders at the urging of Katniss and myself, and had joined the party. In fact, Pollux had let both Katniss and I know that he had been selected to be one of the Avox to participate in the clinical trials for tongue regeneration as soon as he returned to the Capitol.

"Eno's not a bad sort at all," Cressida continues, "and when I look around this room, seeing Eno sitting with Eleven, and all the other districts mingling with each other and with us vain Capitolites, I'm seeing an unexpected benefit of your wedding taking place right before my eyes."

"What's that?" Katniss asks.

"She's talking about district relations," a new voice says from behind us. Katniss and I spin slightly to see Plutarch Heavensbee dancing by with Nova Winter. "This single wedding reception has advanced district - and out-district -" he adds, smiling at Nova "- forward about ten years."

"I couldn't agree more, Elder Secretary," Elder Willem says with smile, pulling Cressida closer to him.
"There you two are!" Effie's voice says. Katniss and I see her hurrying toward us, an amused Haymitch hanging tightly onto her hand. "This party's winding down, and we still have to go back to the your house in the Village so you two can do this 'baking' thing!"

"'Toasting,'" Katniss corrects gently. "It's a 'toasting,' Effie."

"'Toasting,' 'baking,' whatever! We have a schedule to keep! So come along, you two!" Effie spins away from us, only to be brought up short by Haymitch.

"Whoa, sweetheart!" Haymitch laughs. "Don't get your corset in a bunch! Have a drink and relax!"

"And you!" Effie barks at Haymitch, then shocks all of us by throwing her arms around his neck and kissing him soundly. "You're conspiring with these two! Well, I wasn't born yesterday, you know! Now let go so I can make the announcement!" Katniss and I both notice Effie's gaze soften a bit before her next statement. "I'll deal with you personally, Haymitch! Later. Much later!"

As she strides toward the band, no doubt to announce the upcoming toasting, Katniss and I lookquestioningly at Haymitch, who actually blushes, shrugs his shoulders, and says, "I'll explain later."

"You better," Katniss says teasingly. We both listen as Effie makes the announcement, then Katniss and I both quickly say our goodbyes and walk out of the Hob Community Center into the cool, clear night.

The cool air hits us and we both inhale deeply, arms around each others waist. We both gaze up at the stars and moon, shining brightly in the dark sky above. A car pulls up near us and the driver leans out the window.

"I'm here to drive you to the Village," the man says.

I look at Katniss and smile. "How do your feet feel, wife?" I ask her.

"Fine, husband," she replies with a grin. I bend down to kiss her quickly and then turn back to the driver.

"Someone else can ride up," I say. "It's a beautiful night. I think my wife and I will walk home."

"Yes, sir," the driver says with a smile. Arms firmly around each others' waist, Katniss and I begin strolling towards the Village.

My wife and I are going home.
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