The Hunger Games - Peeta Mellark

by Everlarked

Summary

this work is the first book of the THG trilogy written from Peeta's POV. I want to try to stay as close to the original as possible. There will be dialogue that will be literally the same as the original. This is a great challenge, to see the story from how Peeta saw it. I hope to honor the fandom with it.

Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own The Hunger Games, I do not own Peeta Mellark or any other characters in this story. I did make up some names for Peeta's brothers, friends, prep-team and unnamed tributes.
I am grateful to Suzanne Collins for her incredible piece of work and I want to thank the THG fandom who inspired me to do this.
Disclaimer: all the dialogue with Katniss present is directly taken from the original book: The Hunger Games written by Suzanne Collins.
On the day of the reaping

Part 1: The tributes

When I wake up, after a fitful night I hear my father downstairs in the bakery. He always starts his day early, even on reaping day. He’s probably baking cookies. He does that every year, bakes cookies and brings them to the square in the afternoon. To the reaping. If someone he knows gets reaped, he’ll give them the cookies. Most of the time the cookies go back home with him. I hope this year it will be like that too.

Sleeping is out of the question now, reaping day is always a guarantee to a bad night of sleep. So I decide to get up and help him. I love working with my dad in the bakery. Baking bread, frosting cakes. Something I’m actually good at. I get dressed fast and hurry downstairs. My mother and my two brothers are still asleep. Reaping day is supposed to be a holiday, no work in the mines, no school. So sleep in when you can. Of course it is not really a holiday. At least not to us, the people from the 12 districts that surround our Capitol. Especially the children dread this day, all the children between 12 and 18 have the chance to get reaped. I am sixteen, I have 5 entries this year. The odds are not against me though, because there are a lot of children, mostly from the Seam with more entries. They sign up for tesserae, putting their names in more times gives them oil and grain, extra food they need because a lot of people from the Seam suffer from poverty and hunger. Being the son of a baker, I do not need to sign up for tesserae. This doesn’t mean we always have good food on the table. But we have food and it suffices.

I hear some noise in the bakery, a soft voice, my father’s, wishing someone good luck. When I get down I see him carrying a squirrel to the kitchen.
“Peeta, there you are,” he says, when he sees me. “You can help me gutting the squirrel.”
“Okay,” I say, “where did you get it from?”
“Traded it from that kid from the Seam, the one who always hunts with the girl from Everdeen, you know.”

I do know. He is a tall eighteen year old, who makes the heads from every girl in school turn around. The girl from Everdeen, as my father calls her, is in my year in school. Her name is Katniss. She is not just a girl. She is everything any girl should be. We’ve met when we were five. It was our first day in school. My father brought me to school and pointed her out.

“See that girl,” he said, “I wanted to marry her mother, but she ran off with a coalminer.” He explained to me how Katniss’s father could sing so beautiful that all the birds would fall silent at the sound of his voice. That day, in school, the teacher asked who knew the Valley Song and her hand shot straight up. The teacher made her sing it in front of the class. I fell for her, right there and then. I was a goner. In one word: beautiful.

Sure, I was just five years old back then. But I’ve kept track on her from then on, always watching her. Watching other girls too, of course. But none of them could hold a candle to her. But she’s from the Seam. There seems to be some unspoken boundary between Seam people and merchant people. What Katniss’s mother did, marrying a miner, was a radical move. It caused a breach between her and her family. I know that, because the apothecary, right across the street from our bakery is owned by family of hers and they are friends of my parents. They do not speak to their relatives from the Seam, do not even acknowledge them if they pass them on the street. I bet Katniss doesn’t even know they are related.

I help my father gut the squirrel. He always thought it would come in handy for us boys to learn
such things, even though we do not use this skill on a daily basis. But there are always the Hunger Games looming over us, and if the unthinkable happens, at least we’ll be a little prepared.

The Hunger Games are the Capitol’s reminder of their power over the districts. Each year, every district has to deliver one boy and one girl to be sent off to the Capitol. To be trained there and tossed into an Arena, where they have to fight to the death. Until one remains, the victor. This victor will live the rest of his or her life in wealth. To decide which girl and boy are to be send, there is a reaping. And today is the day of the reaping. We are expected at the square at two, this afternoon.

After we’ve finished the squirrel, we’re making cheese buns, which is actually my specialty, except from frosting, which I also love to do. We have a lunch together with my brothers and my mother. The atmosphere is tense, my mother is cranky. We eat the squirrel, she’s not too happy about my father trading with people from the Seam. But it is cheaper than meat from the butcher, at least now we can eat something substantial. After lunch Rye and I have to change into fancy clothing. Brannick is out of the reaping, he’ll turn twenty next month. For Rye this is the last year as well. I have two more years to go if I’ll make it through this year. Anyways, it is expected from eligible children to dress up, and so we do. A white button down shirt and some nice trousers. My mother insist I comb back my blond curls and put some fat in it to make it stick.

At one o’clock we head for the square. Rye and I sign in and I go to stand with the other sixteen year olds. I’m surrounded by my merchant class friends, the boys and girls from the Seam standing a little apart from us. It is weird how this boundary between us and them seems to exists. To exists based on what, exactly? We are all subject to the cruelty of the Capitol. Of course, the odds are there will be two Seam kids standing in front of the Justice Building after the reaping. But that is not something that we, the merchant class, can influence. We just had the good luck of being born into a merchant family. These tesserae rules are grossly unfair, I know that. But what can we do? We can’t do anything but hope that our names will not be drawn.

While we stand in the square, the major and District Twelve’s escort, Effie Trinket, take their seats in front of the Justice Building. There are two glass balls on the stage before them. One for the girls and one for the boys. After a boring speech from the mayor, that is the same every year, Effie Trinket will take a piece of paper from each ball and read the name of the unlucky boy and girl, who will then become tributes and escorted to a certain death.

Being from District 12 gives our tributes a disadvantage. We are the smallest, poorest district of Panem and we have the worst statistics when it comes to the Games. Only two survivors in 74 years. Only one of them is still alive, his name is Haymitch Abernathy. He won the fiftieth Games, 24 years ago. Haymitch is an alcoholic. I guess that is how victors cope.

Just as the town clock strikes two, the mayor steps up to the podium and reads the speech. It is a story with a single purpose: to intimidate the districts and let us know the Capitol has all the power. Then he names the list of victors and Haymitch appears on the stage, clearly very drunk. Like I said, he is an alcoholic. Haymitch walks unstable and reaches Effie Trinket and gives her a hug. At that point, the mayor introduces her and she fend of Haymitch and comes to the stage.

She starts with her usual phrase, “Happy Hunger Games! And may the odds be ever in your favor.” She looks around, to assess our reactions, as if this is the best line she ever expressed. Even though she says it every year. Then she continues, “It is such an honor to be here again to select one boy and one girl from District 12 for our 74th Hunger Games.” Of course it is, I roll my eyes at my friend, Nick, next to me. He smiles a nervous smile. We all know Effie Trinket is not honored at all and can’t wait to leave our small and unattractive district as soon as possible. I turn my attention to the stage again as I hear her say, “As always, ladies first.”

Effie walks to the ball filled with names of the girls between 12 and 18 of our district. I think of all
the girls I know who are in this ball. My friends, like Delly, but most of all I think of Katniss. Her name will be in that ball a lot of times. After her father died in that mine explosion she surely signed up for tesserae. And I can’t help thinking that it’s not her, not her, not her. I feel the muscles in my stomach tense as Effie takes a slip of paper and gets back to the podium, she unfolds the paper and reads the name. And it’s not her.

It’s Primrose Everdeen.
What are the odds?

Chapter Summary

Katniss volunteers for her sister and then Peeta gets reaped. What are the odds of that happening?

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own the hunger games nor Peeta Mellark all dialogue with Katniss present is literally copied from The Hunger Games, written by Suzanne Collins

One time, when I was coming home from school, she stood at the backdoor of our house. A small girl, blond hair in two braids, like Katniss used to wear it when she was little. Primrose was there to trade a goat cheese with my father. My father loved her, how couldn’t he. She is sweet and adorable, always leaving a few cheeses aside for us and always patient and nice. You wouldn’t think there was a breach between Seam and merchant if you talked with her.

The goat cheese is something we use for a goat cheese and apple pie, it is a popular pie so we are always in need of goat cheese. This goes through my mind as I assess the reactions around me. People look frustrated and defeated. No one is happy with any name drawn, but if it is a twelve year old, somehow that is even worse. Cause she doesn’t stand a chance against older, brutal tributes from districts 1, 2 and 4, who train for these games and volunteer to go. We all know that Primrose is walking into a certain death.

I see her come through the crowd and walk to the stage. What happens next is unprecedented but somehow it doesn’t come as a surprise to me. I hear her voice from behind me. “Prim!” It sounds like the cry of a girl who is lost in despair. “Prim!” This time a little bit harder and even more desperate. Katniss runs by me towards the stage and pushes her little sister behind her.

“I volunteer! I volunteer as tribute!” she manages to get it out. The nerves I felt before are nothing compared to what I feel now. Nauseous and dizzy. Because this isn’t happening. This girl, volunteering as tribute, taking her sisters place and on her way to slaughter. This girl is the girl I have a crush on since forever and I never did anything to express my feelings towards her and now it is too late.

Well, I did something, it was five years ago. I don’t know if she remembers it but I’ve never forgotten. It was a couple of months after a terrible mine explosion that killed her father. Leaving his wife and two children without any support. They were slowly starving to death, a common thing in the Seam. I watched her at school getting thinner and skinnier by the day. I didn’t know what to do about it and was actually mad at myself for that. Why didn’t I help her? Give her my lunch or something. But I didn’t have the nerve. Until that day. I heard my mother screaming in the kitchen and sloshed after her to see what was going on. There she was, staggering and finally falling against the old apple tree in our back garden. She was famished. I walked back to the ovens, racking my brain to find something to do to help her. Clearly, food was what she needed. I looked at the loaves of bread in the oven, they were ready to be taken out. You always have to be
careful with that, because they can easily fall through the rack in the flames, with burned bread as a result. In my mother’s eyes that is a disaster because burned bread cannot be sold. Suddenly it hit me, it can’t be sold but it can be eaten! So I gathered my courage and dropped two of the loaves in the fire. I had to get them out immediately, otherwise they would turn to coal in no time. I burned my hand but got them both out. They were fine, except for some burned areas, but well enough to eat. At that point my mother walked back in kitchen and saw what I’d done. She got really mad at me and started yelling and hit me hard in my face with a large wooden spoon.

"Feed it to the pig, you stupid creature! Why not? No one decent will buy burned bread!” she screamed at me.

My cheek burned from where she hit me, but I didn’t care. I carried the loaves of bread to the backdoor and started to tear of the most burned parts and tossed them to the pigs. Thankfully the bell of the bakery rung, a customer. My mother went to the store and I threw the loaves of bread, fast in Katniss’s direction, without even looking at her. I walked back to the house fast and closed the door carefully behind me. I crossed to the window where I hid behind the curtain. I made sure she wouldn’t see me, but I saw her. She got up and shoved the loaves under her shirt and walked away. No one noticed what happened and I was extremely glad I finally had worked up the courage to help her. My mother could slap me all she wants for all I care, I wouldn’t trade this day to anything.

The next day I went to school and saw her again. She already looked a little better. I’d lost my courage though, so I stuck with my friends and didn’t dare to look at her. If only my mother could beat more courage in me. By the end of the day I was so fed up with myself, when I saw her again on the other side of the school yard. This time I didn’t look away but kept staring at her. She noticed me and dropped her gaze down to a dandelion in front of her. She bend down, plucked the dandelion and ran off. I have no idea why she did this, but after that day I haven’t seen her famished again. She started going to the woods and hunting. When her father was still alive he used to trade squirrels for bread at the bakery. Now she took over that job. I know she has an excellent shot, because the squirrels are always shot straight to the eye. My father showed me the perfection of it. I wonder now if her skills as a hunter will help her in the Games. It must help her, and she is strong and brave. I feel a flicker of hope for her. She is not dead yet.

Primrose doesn’t share this hope with me though, because she begins to scream. I can hear it from all the way back where I’m standing. "No, Katniss! No! You can’t go!" There is some disturbance, I can’t see what is happening there, but clearly there is a struggle going on as Katniss frees herself from her sister and climbs the stage. I see the boy, the one who traded the squirrel with my dad this morning, taking Primrose away, while she is still screaming and struggling in his arms.

Effie Trinket looks a little abashed but gets her act together fast. "Well, bravo! That's the spirit of the Games! " What a ridiculous thing to say, this woman is totally clueless. Katniss comes to stand next to her and Effie asks, "What's your name?"

"Katniss Everdeen," she says.

"I bet my buttons that was your sister. Don't want her to steal all the glory, do we? Come on, everybody! Let's give a big round of applause to our newest tribute!" trills Effie Trinket.

But we refuse, we refuse to relish in her joy with her. Katniss doesn’t deserve applause, she deserves the highest honour for what she just did. I look around and see that I’m not alone in this thought. I see a few people bringing their three middle fingers to their mouth and holding them out. I immediately follow their example. It is a sign that means thanks and admiration. To say goodbye to someone you love. Others follow and soon the whole square stands in unison, hands held high.

At this point Haymitch decides to show up and destroy the moment. He goes to Katniss and says
"Look at her. Look at this one! I like her! Lots of... " He trails off and then adds in a triumphant tone, "Spunk! More than you! More than you!" he shouts, pointing directly into a camera. The guy is obviously very drunk. He staggers forward and falls off the stage.

"What an exciting day!" shouts Effie Trinket, and then adds the words I’ve been dreading to hear. "But more excitement to come! It's time to choose our boy tribute!"

She walks over to the glass ball that contains the slips with the boys names on them. I have a strange feeling in my stomach, I feel like I already know what she will say once she opens that piece of paper. I don’t know why, call it fate, but it turns out I am right. She opens it and reads the name.

“Peeta Mellark.”

My first reaction to this is disbelief. I must have heard it wrong. But Nick, standing next to me, grasps my arm and I know I haven’t heard wrong. It is my name. It is me. I am going into that wretched arena with Katniss Everdeen as my adversary. How on earth could it have come to this? I steel myself and walk to the stage and stand next to Effie Trinket. Katniss standing on the other side.

“Well,” says Effie, “is there anyone who would like to volunteer to take his place?”
Silence. I expected this. And I don’t want anyone to volunteer for me. Because how could I live with the fact that someone else offered their life for me. No, this is how it is supposed to be. I have to face the fact that this is the end.

The mayor starts reading the Treaty of Treason and after that he motions us to shake hands. I turn to Katniss and squeeze her hand tightly. Will she understand? Will she know that there is no situation in which it is possible that I would ever try to kill her? As the anthem plays I wonder how this will work out in the arena. Will there be a point where we would come to stand across from each other? And will she kill me? Could she do that? I believe she could. Odds are someone else will get me before she does.

Of course, the odds have not been very dependable of late.
Saying Goodbye

Chapter Summary

Peeta has to say goodbye to his family and friends and then he’s send off to a train with Katniss. They are on their way to the capitol.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own the Hunger Games. Dialogue in presence of Katniss is literally the same as the original, THG written by SC.

The moment the anthem ends, we are surrounded by peacekeepers. They usher us inside the justice building and put us both in separate rooms. The door bangs closed behind me but it doesn’t lock. I sink down in a plush velvet chair and lower my head in my hands. I’m trying to comprehend what just happened to me. How the entire world just changed in one moment. I have to face an imminent death. I’m overwhelmed by all this and can’t think straight.

The door opens and my parents walk in. Shock written on both their faces. My mother is crying and when she sees me she almost runs toward me and holds me tight. My father’s expression is solemn. In his hand the bag with cookies we baked together this morning. When my mother releases me I shake my head at him.

"I don't want them" I whisper, barely audible, because some force I cannot see seems to choke me. "Give them to Katniss."

He nods and puts his hand on my shoulder. Tears well up in my eyes because I realize this will be the last time I will see either of them. It’s not that I’ve given up on life already. I will do the best I can, but I am realistic. I do not stand a chance against the older, brutish volunteers from the other districts. And even if I can... I don't know if I can win, knowing this means that she will die. I can't cope with these thoughts. And I have no time to think about this now, I have to enjoy these last moments with my parents.

My mother has composed herself now and she starts babbling.

“You know,” she says, “there might be a chance district 12 will have a winner this year. She is a survivor, she is.”

I stare at her uncomprehendingly until I realize I’m not the only one who’s given up on me. Apparently my own mother doesn’t think the odds are in my favour either. Well, at least she thinks Katniss will stand a chance. Still, it makes me sad, to see how little faith she has in me. Brannick is her favourite son, I’ve always known that. If he were reaped, she’d probably say no one else would stand a chance against him. But it’s not him, it’s me now and my parents don’t have any hopes of getting me back. Maybe it is for the better, false hope is worse than no hope.

There is a knock on the door and a peacekeeper tells my parents to leave. I hug them both goodbye and tell them I love them, and then they are gone.

I am alone for less than a minute, the door opens again and Rye and Brannick enter and
immediately I’m in their arms and we stand with the three of us close together in our own familiar brother hug. I’m getting upset now, even more than with my parents. I love my brothers and we are very close together. Rye could have volunteered for me but I’d never let him. I’d rather go myself than let anyone take my place. We let go of each other and Brannick starts making jokes because that is what we know to do best in awful situations.

“You know, possibility is that the arena will actually be a big cake and your frosting could be a very secret but powerful weapon.”

“Yes,” adds Rye, “do make sure to frost the others to death, huh?”

We laugh, although I am too nervous to really hear what they’re saying. When they leave I’m on the verge of a breakdown.

My next visitor is my best friend, Nick. He hugs me and we hold each other very tight. Maybe other sixteen year old boys would be uncomfortable with this kind of affection. But we grew up together and this is who we are.

“Love you, bro,” Nick says finally and lets me go.

“Me too,” I manage to get out.

“What a piece of bad luck, Katniss Everdeen.” Nick says.

He is the only person in the world I completely trust and therefore the only person who knows about my crush on Katniss. If I’d told my brothers I wouldn’t here the end of it. Nick would also tease me about it, challenging me to go up and talk to her. But not as bad as my brothers would be. And I never took the bait.

“Well, on the bright side,” I say, “I’ll probably finally get to talk to her now.”

Nick smiles at that. “I’m going to miss you, Peeta,” he says.

The tears were already gathering in my eyes, and now they start to pool over. I let them run freely over my cheeks as I say goodbye to my best friend.

My last visitor is Delly Cartwright. She lives next door to me and is probably the most positive and upbeat person I know. We used to play together when we were younger. Draw with chalk on the sidewalk in front of our houses. Delly bursts out in tears as soon as she sees me.

She takes my hands and says, “Peeta, I’m so sorry this happened. But I do believe you’ll stand a chance. You’re so smart and funny.”

I don’t see how me being funny can help in any way in the Games, but what she says next surprises me.

“You can make anybody like you, it would gain you sponsors, you know. Or you could get into an alliance with other tributes. You should try something like that.”

Weird, wonderful Delly is strangely the one person who gives me a positive feeling. Like all is not lost yet.

Effie Trinket comes in and Delly gives me a hug and leaves. Effie takes me and Katniss to a car, and we are brought to the train station. My eyes hurt a little from the crying and my face is probably flushed. I do not care about that. At the train station there will be camera’s, this will be aired over all of Panem. People would probably think I’m weak, but I don’t care. I just had to say goodbye to every person I love, except one. As far as I’m concerned, I can cry as much as I like.

Katniss, on the other hand, looks like she haven’t shed a tear. She is so strong, already wearing a blank expression on her face, looking arrogant and self assured. She is such a bad-ass! I think my mom is right about her, she stands a chance. I think she doesn’t even notice, but heads turn as she walks by. Everyone in school is in awe about her, hunting, going into the woods, trading in the Hob. She is the only sixteen year old who does things like that. She is gutsy. She’s not really tall, but she is beautiful. Long dark brown hair, mostly tucked in a braid. Full lips, a straight nose, and most beautiful are her eyes. Silver-grey eyes. I have a feeling there is a whole world behind those eyes. But she won’t let me in. In fact, she doesn’t even acknowledge me sitting next to her in the
car. I wonder if she thinks about the unpleasant task of killing me. Or maybe she hopes someone else will do the job.

When we arrive at the train station there are a lot of camera’s. We have to stand in the doorway for a while and then we enter the train and leave our home. The train is really luxurious. Effie shows us around and I get my own chambers where I have some time to shower and change for dinner.

When I’m done I go to the compartment where we’ll have dinner. The table is set for four people but the room is empty. I take a random seat and stare in the distance. After a few minutes the door opens and Effie and Katniss come in. Katniss has changed as well and I immediately see the gold of some sort of pin against the dark green colour of her shirt. She sits across from me and I see the pin resembles a bird. It is a mockingjay. A mockingjay is a cross between a mutation called jabberjay and the regular mockingbird. Mockingjays are not supposed to exist, they are a chink in the armour of the Capitol. This combined with seeing the bird on Katniss, makes me smile somehow.

"Where’s Haymitch?" asks Effie Trinket.
"Last time I saw him, he said he was going to take a nap," I tell her.
"Well, it’s been an exhausting day," she says.
I don’t know about that, I think Haymitch is probably very drunk and that is the reason he’s not here.

Dinner comes and it’s good. I eat as much as I can because this is by far the best food I’ve ever tasted. I especially love the chocolate cake. We make it sometimes at the bakery, but chocolate is hard to come by and extremely expensive. So even if we make it, we never get to taste it.

"At least, you two have decent manners," says Effie during dinner "The pair last year ate everything with their hands like a couple of savages. It completely upset my digestion."

Clueless, this person is totally clueless, I think. Because we are being prepared for slaughter and all she cares about are manners. And the pair from last year were both from the Seam and had probably never had a decent meal in their lives before they were reaped. Obviously Katniss agrees with me because from here on she leaves the silverware and eats the rest of the meal with her fingers. She is so gutsy, I love it. Effie, on the other hand is not as pleased as I am.

After dinner we watch the re-cap of the reaping. This will be the first time we get to see what we’re up against in the Arena. The tributes from district 1, 2 and 4 are all volunteers. Well-trained fit 18 year olds. Brutal. I don’t see how we can stand against them. Most of the tributes are underfed and small, except for the male tribute from district 11, who is huge, the largest of all the tributes. In stark contrast with him is the girl from 11. She can’t be older than 12, she looks like she’s 10 at the oldest. A pang shoots through my chest because I know for sure she’ll die. These Games are so unfair.

Then we see our own reaping. At Haymitch’s tumble over the stage, Effie comments, "Your mentor has a lot to learn about presentation. A lot about televised behavior."

I laugh at that and say, "He was drunk, he's drunk every year."
"Every day," Katniss adds and she smirks a little.
"Yes," Effie Trinket says, "How odd you two find it amusing. You know your mentor is your lifeline to the world in these Games. The one who advises you, lines up your sponsors, and dictates the presentation of any gifts. Haymitch can well be the difference between your life and your death!"

Just then, Haymitch enters the compartment. "I miss supper?" he is obviously intoxicated, and as if to proof this he vomits all over the floor and then falls into it.
"So laugh away!" says Effie Trinket. She hops in her pointy shoes around the pool of vomit and flees the room.
On the train

Chapter Summary

Peeta and Katniss are on the train on their way to the Capitol. They have to cope with a drunken Haymitch who needs to mentor them. Peeta also has to cope with the fact that if he wants to win, Katniss will have to die. Can he live with that?

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own THG, dialogue with Katniss present is copied from THG.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

For a few moments, Katniss and I take in the scene of our mentor lying in his own pool of vomit. Then we walk towards him and help him get up.
"I tripped?" Haymitch asks. "Smells bad."
"Let's get you back to your room, clean you up a bit." I tell him.

We walk through the train towards Haymitch’s compartment and put him in his bathtub. Katniss turns on the shower. I look at her and see she has trouble keeping the heavy food from our dinner down at the sight of a drunken Haymitch, covered in vomit.
It's okay," I say to her. "I'll take it from here."
"All right, I can send one of the Capitol people to help you." Katniss answers.
"No. I don't want them," I tell her. Because this is not their business. Letting them help would be like an intruding of Haymitch’s privacy. It feels wrong somehow. Katniss nods and leaves and I start undressing Haymitch. He is pretty out of there. I take a bottle of soap, unscrew the lid and pour the contents of the bottle over his body to get rid of the vile smell of the vomit. Then I rinse him clean, dry him and put him to bed. I don’t think he noticed anything of it. But it feels good to help him. And Effie is right; we need him to help us find sponsors. And I’m guessing he’ll be in a better mood tomorrow if he wakes up clean and well rested rather than waking up in a pile of vomit.

When I’m done I return to my own compartment. I change into pajamas and lie on the bed, even though it is still early. But there is no way that I will sleep. My head is stuffed with all that happened today. Only this morning I helped my father bake cookies and gutting a squirrel. Now my life has changed 180 degrees.
I think back at this afternoon, saying goodbye to my family and friends. I remember what I thought, about winning. And how winning means that she will die. I still can't cope with these thoughts but now there are no people around me to distract me from them. So as the night continues I keep on going back to the fact that if I want to win, this means Katniss has to die. And the more I think about it, the more I feel the impossibility of it. I don’t know if I can even live a life after being in an Arena and witnessing 23 kids die. Maybe even being responsible for the deaths of some of them. Let alone live and know it was at the cost of Katniss’s life. It’s true, apart from the exchange with the bread; we haven’t interacted in any way. We haven’t even spoken a word to each other. But she is Katniss, the girl who sings so beautiful that all the birds fall silent as they hear her. The girl who is strong enough to provide for her family, to take over the role of her
father at the age of 11. I cannot help but admire her spirits. I also cannot help but think about how
beautiful she is, and I wonder how her skin will feel against my hands or her lips against mine.
Something I’ve fantasized about a lot, and now I know fantasies are all I’m going to get.

Winning is out of the question, I think. But what if she dies very soon, then at least I’ll have to try
to stay alive. Or maybe there is something I can do to keep her alive. Although I have no idea
what that might be.

I toss and turn and finally get up to roam the train. It is a beautiful train. And if you go to the back,
there the windows retract into the ceiling and you can look at the stars. I lie down on one of the
couches and stare into the night sky. I start to notice the patterns of the stars. Even though the train
moves at an incredible speed, the stars know their place in the sky. They are like sentinels, silent
and sure, keeping watch in the night. They hold their course and their aim. And each in their
season returns and returns. They are always the same. There is something reassuring about that,
about the stars being always the same. And it’s like they are watching over us. It feels like maybe
there is someone up there who still cares.
With these peaceful thoughts on my mind I finally fall asleep.

When I wake up the sky is grey and it’s early morning. I walk back to my compartment and take a
shower. Effie knocks on my door to tell me to get out of bed, but I’m already done and follow her
to the dining car.
Surprisingly, Haymitch is already there. He is sitting at the breakfast table, which is filled with
delicacies. A tureen filled with fresh fruit on ice, rolls of bread, eggs, cheese, and ham. There is
coffee and orange juice and an attendant explains to me that the rich brown stuff in another cup is
hot chocolate. I take a sip and it’s delicious, warm and creamy. I love it.

Effie says brightly, “I wonder what’s keeping Katniss so long, we have to start discussing
strategies.” She says it like she’s talking about a game of sports. I wonder how it is possible that
people from the Capitol can handle the Games like this. So I go ahead and say, “I think a good
strategy will be if I take the offense and Haymitch the defense.” Effie looks at me like I’m talking
in a foreign language but Haymitch cracks up at this and adds, “maybe Effie can be the goalie
cause with her wig she’ll be able to stop every attack.”
At that Effie rises from her chair and takes her coffee with her, muttering obscenities. I feel a bit
embarrassed at having chased her away. She passes Katniss on her way out. While Haymitch still
chuckles I take a roll of bread and break it and dip it in hot chocolate. Haymitch notices Katniss
and waves her over, "Sit down! Sit down!" he says. Katniss sits down and takes in the side of
food before her. I see her looking at the hot chocolate and tell her what the attendant told me.
“They call it hot chocolate, it’s good.”
At that she reaches for the cup and drains it after taking a tentative sip. I cannot help but smile at
that a little. Apparently she loves it just as much as I do. While she eats I keep on breaking off bits
of roll and dipping them in the hot chocolate.

After Katniss finished an enormous amount of food, she turns her attention to Haymitch. "So,you're supposed to give us advice"
Haymitch looks up from his liquor and answers, "Here's some advice. Stay alive," He bursts out
laughing. This is no good, because we need him to be on top of things. We need him to mentor us
in all this. I look at Katniss and see her looking back at me with the same expression in her eyes.
We have to do something about this guy.
"That's very funny," I say and I lash out at the glass in Haymitch's hand. "Only not to us."
A moment of total silence follows, in which the liquid runs through the car. Then Haymitch gets
up and punches me in the face so hard, I fall on the ground.
As I try to get up I see Katniss driving her knife in the table, almost cutting Haymitch’s fingers. He
seems abashed by this. He leans back in his chair and looks at us.
"Well, what's this?" he says. "Did I actually get a pair of fighters this year?"
I manage to get up and take some ice from under the tureen to put on my burning jaw. But
Haymitch stops me, "no, let the bruise show. The audience will think you've mixed it up with
another tribute before you've even made it to the arena."
"That's against the rules," I say.
"Only if they catch you. That bruise will say you fought, you weren't caught, even better," says
Haymitch. And he turns to Katniss and continues, "Can you hit anything with that knife besides a
table?"
As a response to this, Katniss takes the knife and throws it in the wall.

"Stand over here. Both of you," Haymitch says. We both get up and stand next to each other in
the middle of the room. I can feel Katniss’s body heat radiating from her, it makes me warm too.
Haymitch starts walking around us, touching our arms, checking our muscles, examining our
faces. "Well, you're not entirely hopeless. Seem fit. And once the stylists get hold of you, you'll be
attractive enough."
I believe him. That Katniss is fit and attractive is obvious. As for me, I’m fit enough. Working in a
bakery requires strength and persistence. Whether or not I’m attractive I’ll leave for others to
decide. Haymitch decides so, I’m fine with that. He also decides something else, as he says, "all
right, I'll make a deal with you. You don't interfere with my drinking, and I'll stay sober enough to
help you. But you have to do exactly what I say."

"Fine," I say, it seems fair enough and the best we can expect from him anyway.

"So help us," Katniss says, "When we get to the arena, what's the best strategy at the Cornucopia
for someone -"
But Haymitch interrupts her."One thing at a time. In a few minutes, we'll be pulling into the
station. You'll be put in the hands of your stylists. You're not going to like what they do to you.
But no matter what it is, don't resist." He says.

Whatever, I think. But Katniss starts to object. "But -" she says. At that Haymitch interrupts her
again. "No buts. Don't resist."

He probably knows what he’s talking about, so I don’t mind. I don’t really care either; those
stylists can do whatever they want. Haymitch takes a bottle and leaves the car at the same time we
enter a tunnel and all grows dark. Katniss and I are still standing in the middle of the room and we
continue to stand there in the darkness until the tunnel ends and we see the Capitol. We both
immediately run to the window to see it. It is an explosion of colors, most of them too bright, and
the people that walk around are the same. Too bright. But I remember what Delly said about
gaining sponsors so I start waving and smiling at the crowd until we arrive at the station. Katniss,
on the other hand, backed away from the window as soon as the people started noticing us. I see
her staring at me now and shrug.

"Who knows? One of them may be rich." I say.

The look in her eyes is wary, suspicious even. I realize she doesn’t trust me. Doesn’t trust me at
all. And why would she, for all she knows I’m already busy with strategies on how to kill her.
And for all I know she is fighting hard to kill me.

Chapter End Notes

Disclaimer: When Peeta is lying on the couch looking at the stars, what he thinks
about the stars are lines from the song ‘stars’ from the musical ‘Les Miserable.’
The girl on fire

Chapter Summary

Peeta gets a make-over from his prep-team and then enters the tribute parade with Katniss. Their costumes are on fire.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own the Hunger Games, Suzanne Collins owns it. Dialogue with Katniss present is copied from the original.

R-i-i-i-p! I grit my teeth as a woman, who introduced herself as Morna is waxing my eyebrows. After we left the train we've been brought to the Remake Center and I have met my prep-team. I’ve stated earlier that I don’t care about stylists and all that, I have to revisit that. I do care. I care that these people, my prep-team, are waxing my eyebrows. Why do they need to get waxed in the first place? But Haymitch told us not to protest and so I let them have their way with me.

My prep-team consists out three people. Morna, a tall, slim woman with purple flowers painted on her cheeks and a purple wig that somehow resembles the wig Effie Trinket wears. Then there is Sensa, a small woman, a girl even. She has long, sleek blond hair, extravagant make-up and I think her skin is painted or something, because it is so pale, it looks unnatural to me. Still, I can’t be sure, because maybe this is just her normal skin color. Josius is the only man in the team, although he might as well be a woman too. He is dressed in hot pink clothes and even though he has a well-trimmed beard, he seems to have a feminine quality about him. Maybe that is also because he’s been babbling non-stop to me about how amazing it is to be here and how exciting this all is.

Sensa smears some vile reeking stuff on my face and explains to me what it does. “It prevents your facial hair from growing back. Isn’t it amazing! Now you won’t have to shave during the Games, your skin will stay smooth for weeks.” She assures me and then gives me a smile from ear to ear.
Her smile is endearing and I can’t help laughing because what she says is so ridiculous. Like I would worry about anything as stupid as shaving during the Games.

“I don’t know what we should do about that bruise,” Josius murmurs. My cheek is still sore from where Haymitch punched me and it is all red and a bit swollen now. “We can’t do anything about the swell, but we can cover it up with make-up,” Josius continues, “How did you get it anyway, it wasn’t there at the reaping yesterday?”

He sure is perceptive, having noticed that it wasn’t there yesterday. I think about what Haymitch said about the bruise, that it shows I’ve been in a fight with another tribute. But I can’t very well tell my prep-team this, because the only other tribute I’ve met so far is Katniss, and I don’t think I’ll earn any points saying I fought with her. So I make up some excuse, because I also don’t want to tell the truth about Haymitch. Despicable as he may seem, he is our mentor and if I tell these people the truth, who knows what will happen and who will hear it? “I’ve tripped and fell,” is all I say.
“Oh, you poor boy,” says Sensa, “don’t worry about it, we’ll put some salve on it and you won’t feel a thing, trust me.” Right, well, that salve would actually be useful to me in the Games, compared to the other one that prevents my beard from growing in. Not that I’ve much of a beard anyway. She applies the salve and it does help a bit with the throbbing.

Around lunch the team is finally ready and I get to meet my stylist, Portia. She has a dark skin and blond curls, this combination looks odd, but other than that she looks fairly normal. Her lips are a dark purple color but the rest of her face is cleared from make-up. She is of average height and has a slim figure. My guess is she is about thirty years old. She comes in and examines me, nods to her prep-team and leads me to another room where there is a table with two red couches. We sit and Portia orders lunch by pressing a button. At that the table splits and our lunch appears on another table. I’m impressed by the mechanics of it and the food is exquisite. We have chicken in a creamy sauce with fruit and vegetables, mashed potatoes, rice and bread. I take a roll of bread and examine it. It is very fluffy; they’ve probably used special yeast for it. There is also a slight taste of cumin. They added some in the dough, I can see the little seeds in it now. I can’t help but wonder how they made this bread and my fingers ache because I want to go and find out and make it myself.

Instead I have to sit here and listen to Portia. After she introduced herself and we’ve eaten she tells me the plan for tonight.

“My partner, Cinna, and I have chosen to be stylists for District 12, together. Cinna is the stylist for the girl tribute from District 12. We want to dress you in complementary clothing for the tributes parade this evening.”

I nod; it is common for tributes from the same district to dress alike during the parade. We have to represent our district. The parade means we’ll have to stand on some kind of chariot, pulled by four horses. We’ll drive through the city and it will be the first time for the Capitol audience to see us. It is a very important part of the Games, making a noticeable impression on the parade can already decide it for sponsors.

Portia continues, “It is common to represent the main industry of your district, but Cinna and I thought we have to make something more out of it for this parade. We do not like the coalminers outfits the tributes from 12 have worn for years. They are not flattering and do not make a lasting impression.”

I cannot disagree with her here, but what is the alternative, I wonder?

“So, Cinna and I have come up with something new! We have thought about coal and realized that coal is used for fire. Now, we created a synthetic flame and put it in your costume. During the parade we will light it.” She must see the astonished expression on my face because she adds, “don’t worry, it is safe, you won’t feel a thing, I promise.”

I don’t know about that. I do know that people in the Capitol must be some sort of crazy. That is the only way I can explain all this weirdness. But there is nothing I can do about it. I am just a piece in their games, a puppet, and somebody else is holding the strings. It makes me frustrated to the point that I clench my teeth together so hard my jaw hurts. At least it will be a hairless jaw, is what my mind conjures up at this moment.

A couple of hours later I am dressed in a black coverall, with leather boots. The cape and headpiece are orange, yellow and red and resemble the flames. Then Portia brings me to another room where Katniss is waiting in the exact same outfit. It looks good on her, I immediately notice. We are brought to a gigantic stable at the bottom of the Remake Center. There are the horses and chariots and the other tributes with their stylists as well. The thought of them makes me nervous. But then Katniss is next to me and whispers, “what do you think? About the fire?”

"I'll rip off your cape if you'll rip off mine," I tell her, my teeth gritted, my jaw really hurts now. "Deal," Katniss says. "I know we promised Haymitch we'd do exactly what they said, but I don't think he considered this angle."
At her mentioning of Haymitch I look around, but I don’t see him. "Where is Haymitch, anyway? Isn't he supposed to protect us from this sort of thing?" I say. "With all that alcohol in him, it's probably not advisable to have him around an open flame," Katniss replies. I laugh at that and she laughs too. I think it is the first time I’ve seen her laugh like this. Beautiful. Although I also hear her laugh is filled with nerves. She is as scared as I am about being turned into human torches.

We know the parade is starting when the music begins. We are the last to leave so we get to watch each of the other chariots go and hear the enthusiastic roar of the crowds when the chariots appear on the plaza. When it is our turn Cinna comes towards us, He is holding a torch. "Here we go then," he says, and he sets our capes on fire. I do not feel the heat I expected, what I do feel is a sort of tickling, but it is so faint, I wonder if I imagine it. Cinna climbs on the chariot and ignites our headdresses next. "It works." He says. At that I turn to Katniss and my jaw almost drops. She looks absolutely amazing. It looks like she actually is on fire and the flames circle her face, illuminating her every feature. Cinna puts a hand on Katniss’s chin. “Remember, heads high. Smiles. They're going to love you!"

With that he leaves the chariot and as he lands on the ground he shouts at us, I can’t quite hear him with the music being so loud but he shouts again and gestures to our hands, “hold hands!” "What's he saying?" Katniss turns to me now and I see the surprise in her eyes. There seems to be a hint of admiration in them, but I wonder if I am imagining that. It must be the fire she admires, not me. "I think he said for us to hold hands,” I tell her and grab her hand. It feels warm and I can’t help but feel a stirring in me when I feel her fingers twined with mine. We look to Cinna who gives us a thumbs-up and then we enter the city.

The reaction of the audience is overwhelming. They are screaming and shouting and calling out our names. Well, Katniss’s name mostly. This is not surprising at all, because she looks dazzling. We wave at them and Katniss is actually blowing kisses. There is a first for everything, I guess. I’m starting to feel a little dizzy because of all the noise and the lights and the unfamiliar wobbling of the chariot. As Katniss loses her grasp on me, I regain it immediately. "No, don't let go of me. Please. I might fall out of this thing." I tell her, because I really feel unstable, and also, I really do not want to let go of her hand. "Okay," she says. The whole ride takes twenty minutes. We end up at the City Circle where President Snow shows up and gives a speech. I don’t hear a word of it. Instead I keep my focus on the screens and on the warmth of Katniss’s hand in mine. We both look good; I realize when I watch the screens. I do think this is the best impression district 12 ever made.

After the anthem we drive into the Training Centre, which will be our home for the next couple of days. Inside our prep-teams come running towards us, babbling about how amazing we were. I see actual tears in Sensa’s eyes because of the excitement. Portia and Cinna are there to and help us get of the chariot. Then finally Katniss lets go of my hand. It hurts from holding on to her so tightly and I massage it, seeing Katniss doing the same. "Thanks for keeping hold of me. I was getting a little shaky there," I tell her. "It didn't show," she says, "I'm sure no one noticed." "I'm sure they didn't notice anything but you. You should wear flames more often, they suit you.” I say and smile at her, hoping it will give her some assurance and hope for the Games. Her reaction surprises me as she stands on tiptoe and kisses my cheek. Right on my bruise.
The roof

Chapter Summary

Peeta and Katniss arrive at their floor in the training center. They have dinner and then visit the roof.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own the Hunger Games, Suzanne Collins owns all of it.
Dialogue with Katniss is copied from the Hunger Games.

The Training Center has a tower designed exclusively for the tributes and their teams. The tower has twelve floors and because we are from district 12, our floor is the twelfth floor. We take the elevator with Effie Trinket, who stays our escort here in the Capitol as well. I’m trying to assess the kiss Katniss just gave me downstairs. I can’t help but wonder why she did that. But I won’t allow myself to hope it means something more. Because either way, we’re going to be dumped in an Arena in a couple of days, and there is one thing I do know: my days are numbered. On the other hand, if they’re numbered I can hope whatever I want. It doesn’t matter much anymore, does it?

We’ve arrived at our floor and Effie is babbling about how she’s been talking us up to the audience. "I've been very mysterious, though," she says, "Because, of course, Haymitch hasn't bothered to tell me your strategies. But I've done my best with what I had to work with. How Katniss sacrificed herself for her sister. How you've both successfully struggled to overcome the barbarism of your district."
Oh, did we now? I didn’t know that. But if it helps us to get sponsors, I’ll go with it. "Everyone has their reservations, naturally. You being from the coal district. But I said, and this was very clever of me, I said, 'Well, if you put enough pressure on coal it turns to pearls!'" At this Effie gives us a radiant smile and I can’t help to compliment her cleverness even though what she’s saying is total nonsense.
“That is great, Effie,” I say, “thank you!” Katniss nods at my response and Effie seems delighted by it.
"Unfortunately, I can't seal the sponsor deals for you. Only Haymitch can do that," she continues. "But don't worry, I'll get him to the table at gunpoint if necessary."
I wonder if that is going to work. Most likely Haymitch wouldn’t squint a bit when a gun is pointed at him, but maybe she can influence him.

Effie shows us to our rooms. In my room I take off the uniform and give it to an attendant and ask him to deliver it to Portia. Then I take a shower. This is actually harder than it seems. The shower is so different from what I’m used to at home. Being of the merchant class, we have a shower in our house. It is not much though and you run out of hot water in less than 5 minutes. But this shower is something else completely. There seem to be a million buttons on it and as I press one randomly I’m immediately soaked in some sort of foam that smells like roses, so strong I’m afraid I’ll smell like them for the rest of my short life.
After I’ve changed into clean clothes I leave my room to look around the rest of the floor. I meet Cinna, Katniss’s stylist, in the sitting room.
“Checking out the rooms?” he asks me. I nod.
“Have you seen the roof?” Cinna gets up and motions me to follow him. We walk to a door in the corner of the sitting room. Cinna opens it and I follow him up the stairs to the roof. It is nice to be in the open air and the view from up here is quite amazing. There is a garden too, filled with wind-chimes, their music filling the air.
“Are we even allowed to be up here?” I ask.
“Sure,” Cinna says.
“But aren’t they worried someone would try to escape?”
“You can’t. It is secured, look.” At that he reaches out his hand and I hear a sharp sizzle and he jerks back his hand. “An electromagnetic field,” he explains.

We go back inside and join Portia on a balcony on the other side of the room. Katniss comes out of her room, she showered as well, I can see, and dressed in simple clothes. Still beautiful, but looking more like herself now. As dinner is being served, Haymitch is there as well. The food is exquisite and I eat as much as I can while the others talk about the parade. When a cake is brought in and the servant sets it on fire, Katniss turns to her and asks "What makes it burn? Is it alcohol? That's the last thing I wa - oh! I know you!"

I see her cheeks turn red and wonder how she could possibly know this girl. Effie vocalizes my thought.
"Don't be ridiculous, Katniss. How could you possibly know an Avox? The very thought."
"What's an Avox?" Katniss asks.
"Someone who committed a crime. They cut her tongue so she can't speak," says Haymitch.
"She's probably a traitor of some sort. Not likely you'd know her."
"And even if you did, you're not to speak to one of them unless it's to give an order," says Effie.
"Of course, you don't really know her."

Katniss’s cheeks are almost purple now. "No, I guess not, I just - " she stammer, and I feel the anxiety beneath her words. I sense I just have to help her out. Without thinking I snap my hand and say, "Delly Cartwright. That's who it is. I kept thinking she looked familiar as well. Then I realized she's a dead ringer for Delly."
"Of course, that's who I was thinking of. It must be the hair," Katniss jumps on my suggestion.
"Something about the eyes, too," I add.
"Oh, well. If that's all it is," says Cinna. "And yes, the cake has spirits, but all the alcohol has burned off. I ordered it specially in honor of your fiery debut."

After dinner we watch the recap of the parade. When we see ourselves come out of the Remake Center, Haymitch asks "Whose idea was the hand holding?"
"Cinna's," says Portia.
"Just the perfect touch of rebellion, very nice," says Haymitch. Then he turns to us and tells us to go to bed.

I walk with Katniss to her room and lean against her doorframe. Call me curious, but I want to know where she recognized that Avox girl from and I have a feeling she won’t tell me if I don’t press her a little. "So, Delly Cartwright. Imagine finding her lookalike here." I say. Katniss turns red again and stares into the distance as if trying to figure out whether to tell me or not. Maybe she’s afraid we will be overheard so I ask her, "Have you been on the roof yet?"
When she shakes her head I continue, "Cinna showed me. You can practically see the whole city. The wind's a bit loud, though."
At this Katniss says "Can we just go up?"
"Sure, come on," I say and I lead her to the roof.
"I asked Cinna why they let us up here. Weren't they worried that some of the tributes might decide to jump right over the side?" I tell her, when we arrive on the roof.
"What'd he say?" Katniss asks.
"You can't," I say and show her what Cinna showed me. "Some kind of electric field throws you back on the roof."

"Always worried about our safety," Katniss says. "Do you think they're watching us now?"
"Maybe," I admit. "Come see the garden."

In the garden, covered by the wind-chimes, Katniss tells me the story of the avox girl.

"We were hunting in the woods one day. Hidden, waiting for game," she starts in a whisper.
"You and your father?" I whisper back.

"No, my friend Gale. Suddenly all the birds stopped singing at once. Except one. As if it were giving a warning call. And then we saw her. I'm sure it was the same girl. A boy was with her. Their clothes were tattered. They had dark circles under their eyes from no sleep. They were running as if their lives depended on it." She is silent for a moment and then continues.

"The hovercraft appeared out of nowhere, I mean, one moment the sky was empty and the next it was there. It didn't make a sound, but they saw it. A net dropped down on the girl and carried her up, fast, so fast like the elevator. They shot some sort of spear through the boy. It was attached to a cable and they hauled him up as well. But I'm certain he was dead. We heard the girl scream once. The boy's name, I think. Then it was gone, the hovercraft. Vanished into thin air. And the birds began to sing again, as if nothing had happened."

"Did they see you?" I ask.
"I don't know. We were under a shelf of rock," she answers and then trembles as if remembering something, or maybe she's just cold.
"You're shivering," I say, as I take my jacket of and wrap it around her shoulders.
"They were from here?" I ask while I fasten a button around her neck. She nods and I think about it for a while.

"Where do you suppose they were going?" I ask.
"I don't know that," she responds, "or why they would leave here."
"I'd leave here," I say without thinking. Shocked by my own words I look around and amend what I've just said with a laugh and add, "I'd go home now if they let me. But you have to admit, the food's prime."

I'm getting cold without my jacket and am suddenly exhausted. "It's getting chilly. We better go in," I say. Inside I ask about this guy Katniss mentioned. "Your friend Gale. He's the one who took your sister away at the reaping?"
"Yes. Do you know him?" she asks.
"Not really. I hear the girls talk about him a lot. I thought he was your cousin or something. You favor each other," I say.
"No, we're not related," Katniss says.
I nod and ask, "did he come to say good-bye to you?"
"Yes," she says, while she’s staring at me, and then continues, "So did your father. He brought me cookies."

So he did give her the cookies, I think, and subconsciously I raise my eyebrows. But I don’t want her to know I asked him to, so I say, "Really? Well, he likes you and your sister. I think he wishes he had a daughter instead of a houseful of boys."
Katniss looks surprised at this. I try to explain where it is coming from, "he knew your mother when they were kids."
"Oh, yes. She grew up in town," Katniss says.
Too soon we reached her door and she gives me back my jacket. "See you in the morning then," she says.
"See you," I reply and walk to my own room.

In my room I change into pyjamas and lie in the bed, thinking about Katniss. The way she looks at
me, she is hard to read. Sometimes I feel she likes me but other times it seems she doesn’t trust me at all. Not even enough to tell the avox story. It makes sense for her not to trust me, I guess. I wonder about her and Gale, does she like him? They’re not related. I feel a pang of jealousy, thinking of him. As the night continues I toss and turn and my thoughts grow darker. I wonder if she’ll kill me. I wonder if she cares if I die. I wonder if she’ll be happy if I die. As I’m pulled down into sleep I manage one last thought. I wonder if she’ll enjoy watching me die.
Training

Chapter Summary

Peeta and Katniss train together and have their private sessions with the Gamemakers.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own the Hunger Games.
There is a lot of dialogue with Katniss in this chapter, therefore it will be very similar
 to chapter 7 of THG. I hope it's still interesting enough though.

My slumbers are filled with disturbing dreams. Most of them involve Katniss trying to kill me. Where does this come from? Do I really think she wants me dead? Did I actually wonder last night if she’ll enjoy watching me die? I can’t believe she will. But I have to conclude that maybe she doesn’t necessarily want me dead, but she wants to stay alive for sure. And my death is just necessary for that to happen.

An avox enters my room in the morning, bringing me my clothes for training. Tight black pants, a long-sleeved burgundy tunic, and leather shoes. I change into them and leave my room for breakfast. In the hall I meet Haymitch and we walk to the dining room together. Katniss is already there.
“Good morning,” I say to her and Haymitch follows my example. She looks at us and I see she’s wearing the same outfit I am. I wonder what Cinna and Portia hope to achieve with this. First the handholding, now the clothes. I guess we’re supposed to be a team, but I do not see what the point is.

When we’ve finished eating Haymitch says, "So, let's get down to business. Training. First off, if you like, I'll coach you separately. Decide now."
"Why would you coach us separately?" Katniss asks.
"Say if you had a secret skill you might not want the other to know about," says Haymitch.
I look at Katniss and say, "I don't have any secret skills, and I already know what yours is, right? I mean, I've eaten enough of your squirrels."
"You can coach us together," Katniss says to Haymitch and I nod.
"All right, so give me some idea of what you can do," says Haymitch.
"I can't do anything," I say. "Unless you count baking bread."
"Not really. But I can hunt," she says. "With a bow and arrow."
"And you're good?" asks Haymitch.
Katniss stays silent for a while and comes with a lame answer, "I'm all right."

I get a little irritated, because she is underestimating herself. I don’t understand why, so I go on and say, "She's excellent, my father buys her squirrels. He always comments on how the arrows never pierce the body. She hits every one in the eye. It's the same with the rabbits she sells the butcher. She can even bring down deer."
Katniss looks at me suspiciously, "what are you doing?"
"What are you doing? If he's going to help you, he has to know what you're capable of. Don't underrate yourself," I tell her.

Somehow she doesn't take this well, because she snaps at me, "what about you? I've seen you in the market. You can lift hundred-pound bags of flour, tell him that. That's not nothing."

"Yes, and I'm sure the arena will be full of bags of flour for me to chuck at people. It's not like being able to use a weapon. You know it isn't," I hear my voice rising in anger at the nonsensical things she’s saying.

Katniss now turns to Haymitch, "he can wrestle, he came in second in our school competition last year, only after his brother."

"What use is that? How many times have you seen someone wrestle someone to death?" I say in disgust.

"There's always hand-to-hand combat. All you need is to come up with a knife, and you'll at least stand a chance. If I get jumped, I'm dead!" Katniss rises her voice and now I'm really upset and I burst out.

"But you won't! You'll be living up in some tree eating raw squirrels and picking off people with arrows. You know what my mother said to me when she came to say good-bye, as if to cheer me up, she says maybe District Twelve will finally have a winner. Then I realized, she didn't mean me, she meant you!"

"Oh, she meant you," Katniss says and she waves her hand at me.

"She said, 'She's a survivor, that one.' She is," I clarify my mothers words, and as I say them I feel the pain I felt in the Justice Building. Thinking back at my parents, who don’t have any faith in me.

Katniss falls silent for a while and then whispers, barely audible, "but only because someone helped me."

I look at the roll of bread in her hand and realize she is referring to that day, that one day in the rain, the day when I tossed her the bread. So she remembers. I don’t see how it makes any difference now though, so I shrug and say, "people will help you in the arena. They'll be tripping over each other to sponsor you."

"No more than you," she replies.

I just have to rolls my eyes at Haymitch because she is so oblivious to the impact she has on others. "She has no idea. The effect she can have," I say to him, then I stare down while running my fingernail along the wood grain in the table.

Haymitch looks at us both and says, "Well, then. Well, well, well. Katniss, there's no guarantee they'll be bows and arrows in the arena, but during your private session with the Gamemakers, show them what you can do. Until then, stay clear of archery. Are you any good at trapping?"

"I know a few basic snares," she says.

"That may be significant in terms of food," says Haymitch. "And Peeta, she's right, never underestimate strength in the arena. Very often, physical power tilts the advantage to a player. In the Training Centre, they will have weights, but don't reveal how much you can lift in front of the other tributes. The plan's the same for both of you. You go to group training. Spend the time trying to learn something you don't know. Throw a spear. Swing a mace. Learn to tie a decent knot. Save showing what you're best at until your private sessions. Are we clear?"

We both nod and I am dying to leave this table and be alone but Haymitch has something to add.

"One last thing. In public, I want you by each other's side every minute."

"But, - " I begin. Katniss also wants to start to object, but Haymitch slams his hand on the table. "Every minute! It's not open for discussion! You agreed to do as I said! You will be together, you will appear amiable to each other. Now get out. Meet Effie at the elevator at ten for training."

Katniss gets up, walks to her room and slams the door closed. I sigh and am mad at myself for yelling at her. But I don’t understand why she would underestimate herself like that. What pulls me up short is how she knows about the flour and the wrestling. It looks like she kept track on me.
But why?
At a few minutes before ten we go to the elevator and Effie brings us down to the training centre. We are the last to arrive and I’m intimidated by the sight of the other tributes. Especially the Careers. I think about what Delly said about getting into an alliance, maybe I should try to get into an alliance with them. Although I have no idea how to pull that off and wonder if it won’t get me killed the first hour of the first day.

A woman explains how the training works and after she’s done I take Katniss’s arm. She jumps at the touch. Obviously she doesn’t like being teamed up with me, but we have Haymitch’s instructions to follow. So I say, "where would you like to start?"
"Suppose we tie some knots," she says, after surveying the training centre.
"Right you are," I say and we go to the knot-tying station and stay there tying knots for an hour. Then we move on to camouflage, which I like. I’m working with the mud and clay and berry juices to replicate sunlight shining through leaves in the wood. The trainer is enthusiastic but Katniss is distracted by the other tributes showing off.
"I do the cakes," I explain to her.
"The cakes? What cakes?"
"At home. The iced ones, for the bakery," I say.
At that she examines my work and says, "it’s lovely. If only you could frost someone to death.” I smile, because it reminds me about what Rye and Brannick said at our goodbye. "Don't be so superior. You can never tell what you’ll find in the arena. Say it's actually a gigantic cake - " I start, but she won’t let me finish. "Say we move on," she says shortly. I think she is still mad at me for telling Haymitch about her skills.

And so we go from station to station, trying to learn new skills. We lunch together as well and try to keep up a conversation. Katniss is edgy and short and it is hard to come up with things to talk about. I do notice how the bread that is served during lunch resembles the districts and I explain this to Katniss.
“The little bite-sized square-shaped rolls are from district 3, and the green ones are from 4. They are tinted with seaweed.” I tell her and she nods. After I finished going through them all I scoop them back in the basket.
"And there you have it," I say
"You certainly know a lot," Katniss replies.
"Only about bread. Okay, now laugh as if I've said something funny."
We laugh a little at this and I continue, "All right, I'll keep smiling pleasantly and you talk."
"Did I ever tell you about the time I was chased by a bear?" she starts.
"No, but it sounds fascinating."
Then Katniss tells me a story about when she challenged a black bear over the rights to a beehive. It is actually funny and I laugh as she tells it. She sure has a good sense of humour, although I doubt she is aware of this. She seems so oblivious sometimes.

On the next day, I notice the girl from 11 following us as we move from station to station. While Katniss tries to throw a spear, I whisper, "I think we have a shadow."
She picks up another spear and now I throw. "I think her name's Rue," I tell her. She bites her lip and then asks rather harshly. "What can we do about it?"
"Nothing to do," I say back. "Just making conversation." There is nothing to do, but still I feel my stomach clench as I see this little girl, so small, so innocent. The odds are not in her favour.

Haymitch is getting more cranky by the day. He stopped drinking and he is drilling us around, together with Effie. When we’re on our way to bed I mumble to Katniss, "Someone ought to get Haymitch a drink."
She kind of laughs at this but suddenly stops herself and says, "don't. Don't let's pretend when there's no one around."
"All right, Katniss," I say and I sigh. This night my dreams are filled again with Katniss, trying to
kill me. I guess reactions like these is where those dreams come from. I’m getting tired at this, I wish I could find a way to tell her that there is no need for her to act like we’re adversaries. But we are. It is messing with my mind. I almost want to get up, go to her room and scream at her to stop hating me. It’s not my fault we ended up here, all I want is for her to live.

On the third day of training, after lunch we have our individual sessions with the Gamemakers. Here I have to show them my strength in the hope of getting a good score. When they summon me, Katniss unexpectedly starts talking. "Remember what Haymitch said about being sure to throw the weights." I thought we weren’t speaking when no one is around. But I’m glad she says it though, maybe she doesn’t hate me that much. Maybe there is some part of her that trusts me. "Thanks. I will," I say. "You shoot straight."

I enter the gymnasium and walk towards the weights. The Gamemakers are not very attentive. More focused on their food and drinks than on me. As I throw the weights I do notice some of them looking at me appreciatively. I continue throwing the weights until the head Gamemaker nods at me. Then I give a slight bow and walk straight toward the exit after being dismissed.
The pieces of the puzzle

Chapter Summary

After their private sessions with the Gamemakers, Peeta and Katniss get their scores. Katniss's high score helps Peeta with the pieces of his puzzle. He has an idea how to help her win these games.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own the hunger games. dialogue is copied from the original.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As I stride toward the elevator, I’m relieved that training is over. No more awkward conversations with Katniss. Just some days of prepping for the last interview and then; let the Games begin. I arrive at the twelfth floor, go to my room to change and then head to the living room where Haymitch and Effie are waiting for us. Cinna and Portia are there as well. I’ve just sit down when the elevator opens and Katniss appears. Effie and Cinna call her name but she doesn’t respond, Instead, she runs straight to her room and slams the door close.

Haymitch looks at me for an explanation but I just shrug because of course I have no idea what’s wrong. Possibly the Gamemakers weren’t paying attention to her, like they weren’t to me and she got upset because of that. It seems the most logical explanation to me.

When we’re about to have dinner, Katniss shows up with eyes red from crying. I see her looking at me and raise my eyebrows, wordlessly asking her what happens. She shakes her head. The adults chitchat while we eat. But after a while Haymitch says, "Okay, enough small talk, just how bad were you today?"

I decide to jump in and answer immediately, hoping my answer will make Katniss feel better. "I don't know that it mattered. By the time I showed up, no one even bothered to look at me. They were singing some kind of drinking song, I think. So, I threw around some heavy objects until they told me I could go."

"And you, sweetheart?" says Haymitch to Katniss.
Katniss finally opens her mouth and says, "I shot an arrow at the Gamemakers."
Everyone stops eating. "You what?" says Effie in dismay.
"I shot an arrow at them. Not exactly at them. In their direction. It's like Peeta said, I was shooting and they were ignoring me and I just, I just lost my head, so I shot an apple out of their stupid roast pig's mouth!" Katniss says.

I am in total awe. This girl. She is absolutely amazing. She shot an arrow at the Gamemakers! An arrow. At the Gamemakers. A-ma-zing.
The silence around us tells me that not everyone from our party agrees with me on this. "And what did they say?" says Cinna carefully.
"Nothing. Or I don't know. I walked out after that," she continues. "Without being dismissed?" Effie seems to lose it, but I think it’s hilarious.
"I dismissed myself," Katniss says.

Of course she did. Again, amazing. Leave it to Katniss to just stalk out of the room. It makes me think about that one class we had, not even that long ago. It was a biology class and the teacher was talking about animal life in the woods. He told us how squirrels would have a hibernation sleep and that was why they were always collecting nuts. Katniss disagreed with him, saying squirrels were still around during winter time. Well, she knew, because she was in those woods almost every day. Still, the teacher didn’t like being told off and they had a big argument about it. It ended with Katniss leaving the classroom without a second glance at the teacher. She was always gutsy like that. It was what I liked about her so much.

"Well, that's that," says Haymitch.
"Do you think they'll arrest me?" she asks him, and I realize that is why she’s so upset. She’s scared of punishment.
"Doubt it. Be a pain to replace you at this stage," says Haymitch.
"What about my family? Will they punish them?"
"Don't think so. Wouldn't make much sense. See they’d have to reveal what happened in the Training Center for it to have any worthwhile effect on the population. People would need to know what you did. But they can't since it's secret, so it'd be a waste of effort," says Haymitch.
"More likely they'll make your life hell in the arena."
At this, I jump in, "well, they've already promised to do that to us any way."
"Very true," says Haymitch. "What were their faces like?"

Now I see a hint of a smile on Katniss’s face. "Shocked. Terrified. Uh, ridiculous, some of them. One man tripped backward into a bowl of punch."
At this we all laugh, and Effie says, "Well, it serves them right. It's their job to pay attention to you. And just because you come from District Twelve is no excuse to ignore you." She looks around the table and adds, "I'm sorry, but that's what I think." I think I'm starting to appreciate Effie a little better.
"I'll get a very bad score," Katniss says.
"Scores only matter if they're very good, no one pays much attention to the bad or mediocre ones. For all they know, you could be hiding your talents to get a low score on purpose. People use that strategy," says Portia.
"I hope that's how people interpret the four I'll probably get. If that. Really, is anything less impressive than watching a person pick up a heavy ball and throw it a couple of yards." I say, and in the hope of lifting Katniss’s spirits, I add, "one almost landed on my foot."
It works, she smiles her beautiful smile at me before cutting off a piece of pork, which she dunks in mashed potatoes, and starts eating.

After dinner we get to see the scores. I’m getting nervous when we see the numbers flashing in front of us. The Careers get high scores, between eight and ten, the rest mediocre. We are last and when my face appears on screen I am surprised by the eight that turns up next to me. An eight, that is not so bad, not bad at all. But the real surprise comes next. Because Katniss pulls up an eleven.
The highest score of them all! Everyone gets up to congratulate her. She seems baffled herself.
"There must be a mistake. How, how could that happen?" she stammers, while looking to Haymitch for an explanation.
"Guess they liked your temper," he says. "They've got a show to put on. They need some players with some heat."
"Katniss, the girl who was on fire," says Cinna at that. "Oh, wait until you see your interview dress." "More flames?" she asks. "Of a sort," is his reply.

I walk toward her and congratulate her on her high score. I can tell she’s a bit embarrassed because after this she immediately turns to her room. I decide to follow her example, I want to be
alone to think.
Because the puzzle pieces are starting to come together: Me, having a crush on this beautiful, gutsy girl. Delly, telling me to use my wits. Cinna and Portia, suggesting for us to hold hands and matching our clothes. Haymitch, presenting us as a team in front of the other tributes. Katniss, pulling an eleven in training. And finally me again, not wanting to be a piece in their games.

An idea starts to form in my head. If only I would have the guts to do it. To tell everyone, on the evening of our televised interviews, that I love her. I believe it will give her an edge. It will give her an advantage and her chances of winning will increase. Saying that you love another tribute, no one has ever done that, it will make a lasting impression, I’m sure of it. I also have to find a way to protect her for the Careers, too. Because they are highly dangerous. If I can convince them to make me their ally, in that way I can try to protect her. Lure them away from her, but act like I want to help them find her. I have to play it carefully though. As soon as they figure it out, I’m a dead man.

I decide I want to include Haymitch in my plan. He can give me advice on it and help me work it out.

The next morning I make sure to catch Haymitch before Katniss arrives at breakfast. He and Effie are already eating when I come in the dining room.

“Haymitch?” I ask, after I filled a plate with exquisite food.

“Hmm,” he grumbles over his stew, it consists out of lamb and dried plums.

“I want to be coached individually for the interview,” I tell him.

At that he stops eating and stares at me.

“Why would you—” Effie starts, but Haymitch waves her away.

“Sure,” he says. “That sounds like a good idea.” He turns to Effie and says, “we split them up, four hours with each of them. I’ll discuss content and you appearances.” Effie nods and at that point Katniss enters the room. “I’ll tell her about this,” Haymitch says in a hushed voice.

We all stop talking as Katniss fills her plate with the stew and starts eating as if this is the first time she ever ate anything. It makes me think about the poverty of the Seam. Sure, she wasn’t famished after I tossed her the bread. But food still was hard to come by. I realize how lucky I’ve been, being a merchants son. Always having enough to eat, never needing to put my name in more times for tesserae. I guess this explains the breach between us and them.

Katniss looks up from her stew, breaking me from my reverie. "So, what's going on? You're coaching us on interviews today, right?"

"That's right," says Haymitch.
"You don't have to wait until I'm done. I can listen and eat at the same time," she says.
"Well, there's been a change of plans. About our current approach," says Haymitch.
"What's that?" she asks and I feel my stomach tighten, because I don’t know how she’ll react on my request. Although I don’t see why she’d care. She was the one who made clear she didn’t want anything to do with me.

Haymitch shrugs. "Peeta has asked to be coached separately."

Chapter End Notes

I had to mention the piece of pork, which Katniss dunks in mashed potatoes, especially for my friend, eala-musings.
The interviews

Chapter Summary

Peeta is preparing his interview with Haymitch. During the interviews he's watching the careers closely to see if there's anything useful in there for him to know, because he is going to join their pack. After Katniss's interview it's his turn to confess to the world...

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own the Hunger Games
Disclaimer: I've used some lines from Peeta's interview from the movie The Hunger Games.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Betrayal. That's the first thing I see in her eyes. It is only there for a short moment, but I saw it. So she did trust me, and she feels betrayed by my request. I feel a pang of guilt and wonder if I should just come clean with her and tell her what's going on. But I decide to wait and talk with Haymitch first. He might be a drunk most of the time, but he also seems bend to get us in shape and I do trust him. He is the one with twenty four years of experience on mentoring kids in the Games. Katniss composes herself again and turns to Haymitch, ignoring me altogether.

"Good," she says. "So what's the schedule?"
"You'll each have four hours with Effie for presentation and four with me for content," says Haymitch. "You start with Effie, Katniss."

After breakfast, Haymitch and I go to the living room. We sit and he looks at me for a little while before he asks, “tell me, why do you want to be coached separately for the interviews?”

I don’t know where to begin, because I feel self-conscious about this and confessing my crush on Katniss is something I only did once, to Nick. And then only because he pulled it out of me. It was only a couple of years ago. We talked about which girl in our year was the prettiest. We discussed them all and when we came to Katniss I couldn’t help saying I thought she was beautiful. I gave it away then, Nick immediately picked up on it and asked me where that remark came from. We’d talk about girls being pretty or sexy or even hot. But beautiful, that word has another ring to it. It has more value and more truth. I felt the blood rise to my cheeks and he started laughing at that.

But Haymitch is no Nick, and I don’t know if he’ll pull it out of me. After a few moments of silence he asks, “is it because of the eleven, yesterday?”

Well that did have something to do with it, yes. But not in the way he implies. As if I’m intimidated by her now. Of course he would interpret it this way, after all we’re supposed to be killing each other, not wanting to protect each other instead. But this is my intention though, I want to try to get her home alive. So I go ahead and tell Haymitch my plan.
“No, not because of the eleven. But I want to make a confession on that interview tomorrow, and I don’t know if it’s a good idea that Katniss will know about it. That is what I want to discuss with you.”

I look at Haymitch to see his reaction and say, “I’ve had a crush on her since I was five years old.” Haymitch raises his eyebrows but doesn’t comment on it. “I was thinking about telling this to Caesar Flickerman at the interview.” I tell him, “I was thinking, it may give her… uhm, us an edge in the Games. What do you think?”

Haymitch rubs his eyes with his wrists and suddenly laughs. “You love her!” he calls out. I look around embarrassed, hoping no one was close enough to hear it. “Shh,” I say.

“Sorry… But it is a great idea,” Haymitch says, “I love it. And it is going to work, I’m sure of it. You’re right about not wanting to tell Katniss about it. She needs to be taken by surprise, I think that will bring the best reaction out of her.”

“But how do I do this?” I ask him, “because we don’t know if Caesar Flickerman will ask me about it.”

“Well, if he doesn’t ask you about it you should just give him a hint. Flickerman is a professional, he always asks the right questions. Say something about roses and he’ll connect it to romance and asks you about it. Trust me on that one.” Haymitch says.

It seems a bit far off, but I believe Haymitch about Caesar Flickerman’s professionalism. “I don’t know how everyone will react,” I tell him. “Especially Katniss.”

“Everyone will be blown away!” Haymitch exclaims, he is practically beaming. “And don’t worry about Katniss, she would be hard to convince.”

“What do you mean?” I ask him.

“Well, she is a distrustful person. She’ll believe you said it just for the advance it will give you. I doubt if she will believe you mean it.”

Somehow, I do not like this insinuation. If I tell the world I love her, I want her to know it’s the truth.

We continue to discuss how I should approach the interview and decide on a strategy of self-deprecating humour. We actually have a good laugh when I tell him about the bread that represent the districts and how you could compare the tributes from their districts with their bread. When lunch comes we are in pretty good moods, I have a good feeling about this interview tomorrow.

After lunch Effie gives me a lecture about manners and how important they are. She is happy with me though, because apparently I am a lot easier to work with than Katniss, she assures me and she says she doesn’t need to coach me as much. We are done early and I spend some time on the roof, enjoying the fresh air and muse about what the interview will do for Katniss. Will it give her the edge I hope it would?

When it’s time for dinner, I notice Katniss is not there and Haymitch is pretty drunk. “What happened,” Effie asks Haymitch. He just grumbles something inaudible. “Where is Katniss?”

Effie tries again, but still no answer from Haymitch. I hope they didn’t have a fall out or something, because he needs to mentor her in the Games.

There is nothing more to do this night so I go to bed early. I’ve slept so bad these last few nights, I’m really tired. And coming up with this idea has put my mind to rest. As a result I fall asleep fast and sleep a dreamless sleep only to be waken in the morning with a tentative knock on my door. It is Morna, and Sensa follows right after her. They smile at me and tell me how excited they are for this day. The last day before the Games actually start and the interviews tonight are so important. Because they will shed a light on the tributes and gives the Capitol audience the chance to get to know them.

“And I, for one, already feel so privileged,” squeals Sensa, “because I already know one of them, the best one!”

I can’t do anything else than smile at them and be friendly to these people. It is weird, they enjoy watching kids being slaughtered, which is appalling. But at the same time they are so naive and
clueless. It is as if they don’t understand the full impact of it.

After my prep-team is done Portia comes in and dresses me in a black suit with flame accents on it. “No complementary clothes this time,” she says.

“Well, I doubt I’ll look good in an evening gown anyways,” I reply and she laughs. We go to the elevator where we wait for Katniss and her team to go downstairs together. Katniss looks amazing. I am running out of adjectives to describe her beauty. The gown she wears seems to be made out of gemstones and fit her small frame very well. When she moves it looks like she is literally on fire and her body seems to be glowing. She is radiant. Both our teams are giddy with excitement on how well we look together. Even Haymitch and Effie look pleased by our appearance. I do notice Katniss is ignoring Haymitch.

We go down to where the interviews are held, on a stage in front of the Training Center. Just before we enter the stage, Haymitch reminds us on how to appear on camera, he is practically growling as he says, "Remember, you're still a happy pair. So act like it."

I can tell that Katniss isn’t too happy about this, but as we are to sit on this stage during the interviews, there is no time to interact so it doesn’t really matter. She seems to be extremely nervous though, fidgeting with her hands. I wish I could say something to calm her down, but it’s not possible and also might make it worse.

The interviews start and I can tell that Haymitch was right about Caesar Flickerman. He asks the right questions and makes every tribute shine in their own way. I pay close attention to what the tributes from the Career districts are saying. Maybe there is something I can use when I try to join their alliance. I tell myself to at least remember their names.

Glimmer, the girl from district one, is the first. She looks extremely sexy in a see-through gown and very self-confident as she answers Caesars questions with ease. I can tell she is into her looks, which is common for girls from district one, their industry is jewelry. I guess everything is about looks in district one. But Glimmer is also muscular, I can see that very well, because of that see-through gown. She might come across as shallow, but I make a mental note not to underestimate her and to compliment her a lot. Because with every compliment from Caesar she beams.

The boy from district one is called Marvel. He is tall and athletic and appears rather sympathetic as well. Caesar and Marvel joke around and make the audience bursts out laughing several times. He is funny, not like me, but more in a sarcastic way. There is also some harshness underneath it all. I am sure he is very dangerous.

But not as dangerous as the tributes from district two. The girl, Clove, is vicious, the way she looks at the audience and the way she approaches Caesar shows this. She is even more muscular than Glimmer and I’ve seen her throwing knifes in training. She assures Caesar now that she can hit anything with a knife and kill a person in at least twenty different ways with it. The boy from two, Cato, is just as vicious and brutal too. He is beefy, his arms are so big, to be honest, he scares me a bit and there is something in his eyes that make me question his sanity.

The girl from four, Marly, seems the nicest out of the Careers, and I think I’ll make the best shot with her. So I’ll try to approach her tomorrow and hope for the best. Still, trying to get into their pack is going to be very tricky. I hope they will appreciate my skills with knifes and my strength, and most of all, my link to Katniss. Because she will be high on their kill list, due to the eleven in training. If the Careers think I can be of use to kill her, that will make me invaluable.

I look at Katniss now and see she still is very nervous. She tries to wipe her hand on her dress, but it isn’t working. I regret not having a handkerchief with me to give to her.

I don’t pay much attention to the other interviews. Only when the boy tribute from eleven is on I start to listen again. He doesn’t say much, answers questions with yes or no. He is so big though, I
think he will be one of the favorites when it comes to winning the Games.

Then finally it’s Katniss’s turn. She gets up and walks to Caesar, a little shaky. "So, Katniss, the Capitol must be quite a change from District Twelve. What's impressed you most since you arrived here?" asks Caesar. Katniss seems to be in total confusion at his question. I am a bit surprised at this, she seems so out of there. To me, Katniss is strong and she has so much guts that I didn’t expect her to black out like this. Thankfully, Caesar is really patient with her. When she finally says, "The lamb stew," he laughs and makes the audience laugh at well. Then he asks, "The one with the dried plums?" Katniss nods ad this and he continues, “Oh, I eat it by the bucketful. It doesn't show, does it?"

Caesar now starts talking about our costumes during the tributes parade and Katniss actually makes a funny joke about getting over the fear of being burned alive. Then she compliments Cinna on his work, "I thought Cinna was brilliant and it was the most gorgeous costume I'd ever seen and I couldn't believe I was wearing it. I can't believe I'm wearing this, either. I mean, look at it!" She gets up and turns in a circle. The light reflects on the gemstones and it looks like she is on fire. The audience goes berserk, Caesar asks her to do it again and Katniss starts spinning around until she needs to clutch Caesar’s arm for balance. "Don't stop!" he says. "I have to, I'm dizzy!" she says and she giggles. Caesar wraps an arm around her. "Don't worry, I've got you. Can't have you following in your mentor's footsteps."

At this the camera’s go in search for Haymitch, but he waves the attention back to Katniss. "It's all right," Caesar reassures the crowd. "She's safe with me." He returns his attention back to Katniss, “So, how about that training score. E-le-ven. Give us a hint what happened in there." "Um, all I can say, is I think it was a first." Katniss says and I suppress a smile at the mental image of Katniss shooting an arrow at the Gamemakers. The Gamemakers themselves are chuckling too. "You're killing us," says Caesar, "Details. Details." Katniss looks up at the balcony, where the Gamemakers sit and asks. "I'm not supposed to talk about it, right?"

One of them shouts out, "She's not!"

"Thank you. Sorry. My lips are sealed," says Katniss while giving a mischievous smile. "Let's go back then, to the moment they called your sister's name at the reaping," says Caesar. "And you volunteered. Can you tell us about her?"

At this question, Katniss’s expression changes immediately. She looks alarmed, as if she didn’t expect this or doesn’t know what to say. But she answers quietly, “Her name's Prim. She's just twelve. And I love her more than anything."

Dead silence from the audience. "What did she say to you? After the reaping?" Caesar asks. Katniss’s reply is soft, "She asked me to try really hard to win."

"And what did you say?" Caesar also brings down the volume. It builds up the suspense, the way he deals with this. I’m impressed.

When Katniss speaks again her voice sounds cold, "I swore I would." There is a promise in this to all her adversaries, that she would be hard to kill. I don’t feel threatened by it, I’m not planning on killing her. "I bet you did," says Caesar, and then the buzzer goes off. "Sorry we're out of time. Best of luck, Katniss Everdeen, tribute from District Twelve."

The audience applauds and Katniss goes back to her seat. It’s my turn now.

Caesar welcomes me and asks how I feel about the other tributes, being last and having heard all their interviews.
“Well, Caesar, you know I’m a bakers son, and therefore I know a lot about bread.” I begin, “Now every district of Panem has their own bread. Let me now tell you something about how these tributes resemble the breads from their districts.” Caesar looks at me expectantly. “Did you notice the tributes from district three are as square as their bread?” I ask him. The audience laughs at this, so I continue comparing the green in the dress from the girl tribute from district four, Marly, to the seaweed in their bread and how the black poppy seeds on the bread from district eleven resembles the colour of the skin of their tributes. Caesar laughs and asks the right questions, but there is nothing that will lead this to what I want to say. I remember Haymitch said something about roses, so when Caesar asks me how I find the Capitol I start to talk about the perils of the showers.

"Tell me, do I still smell like roses?” I ask Caesar, “take a whiff?” Caesar starts sniffing me and I sniff at him in return. "You smell better than I do.” I tell him. Big laughs from the audience at this. “Well, I’ve lived here longer.” Caesar says. “That makes sense.” I reply and Caesar laughs again at this. We sure have fun, but I’m getting nervous now, because we are also running out of time.

But when the audience finally quiet down Caesar asks me, “So, Peeta, tell me, do you have a girlfriend back home.”

This is it then, I hesitate for a moment and give my head a small shake. Caesar immediately picks up on my hesitation and continues. "Handsome lad like you. There must be some special girl. Come on, what's her name?"

I give a deep sigh. "Well, there is this one girl. I've had a crush on her ever since I can remember. But I'm pretty sure she didn't know I was alive until the reaping.”

The audience makes some noise at this but I’m too worked up to register it. "She have another fellow?” asks Caesar.

"I don't know, but a lot of boys like her,” I say, I feel the nerves clench my stomach. "So, here's what you do. You win, you go home. She can't turn you down then, eh?” says Caesar encouragingly.

"I don't think it's going to work out. Winning, won't help in my case," I says. "Why ever not?" says Caesar, mystified.

Here we go, there is no turning back now. I am going to confess to the whole world that I am in love with Katniss Everdeen.

I feel the heat coming on my cheeks, they will be beet red by now. And I stammer out. "Because, because, she came here with me."

Chapter End Notes

This is the end of The Hunger Games, part 1: The Tributes. It has been very exciting so far and I can't wait to start with part 2: The Games. Thank you all for your comments and reviews!
A piece in their games

Chapter Summary

After his interview, Peeta gets shoved by Katniss and the talks with her on the roof of the Training Center. The next days the games begin

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own the Hunger Games, all dialogue with Katniss present is copied from the original.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Part 2: The Games

Chapter 10 – A piece in their games

For a moment there is silence when people try to process what I’ve just said. I stare at the ground, trying to get rid of the nervous spasms and the ball of tension in my abdomen. My thoughts are spinning. How will she react on this? How will everyone react? Will it have the desired effect? The effect of giving her an edge in the arena. I look up and see the camera’s are now fixed on Katniss, who is just as red as I am and staring fervently at the floor with pressed lips.

"Oh, that is a piece of bad luck," says Caesar. I can actually hear the pain in his voice and I can also discern the audience now, who seem shocked by my confession. "It's not good," I agree with him, I really do. I’m thinking back on how I never had the guts to talk to her before. And how it is too little, too late now.

"Well, I don't think any of us can blame you. It'd be hard not to fall for that young lady," says Caesar. "She didn't know?"

I shake my head, a bit ashamed. "Not until now."

The camera’s turn on Katniss again and I can see she’s still blushing. That blush on her face sends a shiver through me. Why is she blushing like that, only because of my confession, or could it be something more? I stop myself here, it is quite useless to think like this.

"Wouldn't you love to pull her back out here and get a response?" Caesar now turns to the audience. They start screaming for Katniss to come back to the stage but that can’t happen. "Sadly, rules are rules, and Katniss Everdeen's time has been spent. Well, best of luck to you, Peeta Mellark, and I think I speak for all of Panem when I say our hearts go with yours."

At that the crowd starts clapping and screaming my name. It is kind of overwhelming and I have to sit there for a while until they quiet down. I manage to get out a “Thank you” and then return to my seat. Next to Katniss. We have to stand for the anthem, there is no time to exchange a look and see how she’s taken it. We raise our heads and I see how the camera’s zoom in on our faces. I look sad, Katniss looks baffled. Both of us still flushed. The impact of it cannot be denied. We look like two people involved in a tragic love story, a love story that can never be.
When the anthem ends, the show is over and we are sent back to our floors. I am in an elevator together with Marly and I manage to smile at her. She is my way into the Career pack, I’m sure of it. So I’m bold enough to talk to her, “you look lovely,” I tell her. “Yes,” she answers, “like seaweed, right?” And she laughs. But we already arrive at the 4th floor and she gets off before I have a chance to reply. Just when the doors close I hear her say brightly, “See you tomorrow, lover boy!”

The rest of the ride I contemplate this. She made it sound like we would see each other in school instead of in the Arena. As if tomorrow would be like any other day. As if she’s looking forward to it. I wonder how the careers can think like this.

The doors open to the 12th floor and I step out of the elevator. Katniss is on me at that instant. She slams her hands into my chest so hard and unexpected that I’m thrown backwards and crash into the urn that stands across the elevators. It falls and shatters into pieces. While I fall down I stretch out my hands to break my fall. I feel the cuts of several pieces of urn pierce into the palms of my hands. Blood starts flowing and I’m taken aback at this sudden turn of events.

"What was that for?” I say.
"You had no right! No right to go saying those things about me!” She is literally shouting and I am perplexed and amazed at the same time. That gemstone dress combined with the fury in her eyes makes her look brilliant. I also see little red dots in front of my eyes, caused by the fall. All of this together is like an explosion of colors. Beautiful, despite the circumstances.

The elevator brings Effie, Haymitch, Cinna, and Portia, who all stare at our little scene. Me in the shards of the urn, Katniss standing over me, practically bursting into flames.

"What's going on?” says Effie, immediately sounding upset. "Did you fall?"
"After she shoved me,” I tell her and hold out my arms. She and Cinna help me up while Haymitch turns to Katniss. "Shoved him?”
Katniss now redirects her anger to him. "This was your idea, wasn't it? Turning me into some kind of fool in front of the entire country?"

"It was my idea,” I say, while I am trying to pull out the traces of the urn from my hands. I wince at the pain. But I don’t want Katniss putting the blame on Haymitch. "Haymitch just helped me with it.”
"Yes, Haymitch is very helpful. To you!” she spits at me.
"You are a fool,” Haymitch says, "Do you think he hurt you? That boy just gave you something you could never achieve on your own.”
"He made me look weak!” Katniss sputters.
"He made you look desirable! And let's face it, you can use all the help you can get in that department. You were about as romantic as dirt until he said he wanted you. Now they all do. You're all they're talking about. The star-crossed lovers from District Twelve!” says Haymitch.
"But we're not star-crossed lovers!” she is still in a rant. Not seeing what Haymitch tries to tell her.

I'm focused on my hands, they are still bleeding, as Haymitch grabs Katniss by her shoulders and pins her against the wall. "Who cares? It's all a big show. It's all how you're perceived. The most I could say about you after your interview was that you were nice enough, although that in itself was a small miracle. Now I can say you're a heartbreaker. Oh, oh, oh, how the boys back home fall longingly at your feet. Which do you think will get you more sponsors?"

I look at Katniss, who now gets away from Haymitch, a clear sign of disgust on her face. Cinna approaches her and puts an arm around her. "He's right, Katniss.”
"I should have been told, so I didn't look so stupid.” She says.
"No, your reaction was perfect. If you’d known, it wouldn't have read as real,” says Portia.

"She's just worried about her boyfriend,” I say, it sounds a little harsh, because I don’t like the
truth of it. I toss away a bloody piece of the urn and have to admit I’m a little disappointed by her reaction. Why is she so oblivious to all this? Maybe I should tone it down a bit, make it sound like I didn’t mean it. I see Katniss blushing, at me bringing up her boyfriend. She jumps on it too. “I don’t have a boyfriend.”

"Whatever," I say. "But he's smart enough to know a bluff when he sees it. Besides you didn’t say you loved me. So what does it matter?"
I shrug and I see my words are having the desired effect. She believes I pulled off a scheme. And I see it dawning on her now, that this might be a positive thing for her. That I actually did her a favor. I hope she will acknowledge that at some point. She turns and looks at the others.

"After he said he loved me, did you think I could be in love with him, too?" she asks.
"I did," says Portia. "The way you avoided looking at the cameras, the blush."
Effie acknowledges that she didn’t have a shadow of a doubt about Katniss’s love for me. If only that were true, I think sarcastically. Cinna, too, nods in agreement.
"You're golden, sweetheart. You're going to have sponsors lined up around the block," says Haymitch.

Now Katniss turns to me and apologizes, "I'm sorry I shoved you."
"Doesn't matter," I shrug again. "Although it's technically illegal."
"Are your hands okay?" she asks, turning her eyes to my hands. "They'll be all right," I say, I don’t want to confess that they actually hurt pretty bad. And they keep on bleeding too.
There is a short silence and then Haymitch says, "Come on, let's eat."

As we start walking to the dining room I see I actually leave a blood trail on the floor. Portia sees it too. "Peeta, you're bleeding really hard!" she exclaims, "We have to do something about it. Come."
She leads me to my room where she gently washes my hands and picks the remaining shards from the urn from my palms with a pair of tweezers. Suddenly she looks up and examines my face.
“Are you okay?” she asks. I nod, but I don’t feel okay. I feel sad and tired, even though the interview worked so well. “You love her,” Portia says matter-of-factly, “it was not a scheme.”
“It’s not your fault,” I say tiredly.
“I know, but I feel for you." She smears some salve on my hands and wraps them both in white bandages. It is awkward, I can’t move them properly. “We’ll take them off tomorrow morning,” Portia says. After that we turn to the dining room to join the others for dinner. I see Katniss looking at the bandages and by the expression on her face I can tell she feels guilty.
After dinner, we watch the replay in the sitting room. Again, I watch the interviews with the careers closely, to see if anything is useful. I’m confirmed in my idea that Marly is my best shot.
Katniss is just as beautiful on screen as in real life. She doesn’t believe it herself, but Cinna and Effie bury her in compliments. Then comes my interview. I come across well, funny and charming. I can see the Capitol audience adores me. When I confess my love for Katniss, they go berserk. Objectively, my interview is the most impressive one, the one people will remember in the days to come. It is not that I am exceedingly proud of myself for pulling it off, but I am happy with the result. And Katniss, beautiful and desirable, a star-crossed lover, she is unforgettable.

The broadcast is over and with it our relative peaceful time in the Training Center. Tomorrow the Games begin and tonight we have to say our goodbyes to Effie and Haymitch. We have to get up early tomorrow morning and they have to go to the Games Headquarters to sign up our sponsors. The reality of this sinks in as silence fills the room.
Effie is the first one to break it. She stands and takes my hand in her left hand, Katniss’s in her right and looks at us. I see tears shining in her eyes. “It has been such a privilege to be your escort
this year. You both have been amazing, the best tributes I’ve ever had. Truly. And I wish you
good luck.”
She squeezes our hands, causing me pain because of my wounds. And then astoundingly she
adds, "I wouldn't be at all surprised if I finally get promoted to a decent district next year!"
I don’t know why she had to say something awful like that. She kisses our cheeks and practically
runs out of the room, while wiping her eyes.
Haymitch rises as well and crosses his arms. I look at him now and ask, “Any final words of
advice?”
"When the gong sounds, get the hell out of there. You're neither of you up to the blood bath at the
Cornucopia. Just clear out, put as much distance as you can between yourselves and the others,
and find a source of water," he says. "Got it?"
I got it, but I’m not going to take this advice. If I take off immediately there is no way to join the
Careers later on. They will kill me at sight. I have to throw myself into the thick of things. Highly
dangerous, but I’m dead anyway. So who cares?
"And after that?" Katniss asks.
"Stay alive," says Haymitch. Of course, that is the whole point of these games, right. Staying
alive. Katniss and I nod and she goes off to her room. I wonder if I’ll ever talk to her again.
Maybe tomorrow morning?
Cinna and Portia are still sitting on the couch. “How are your hands?” Portia asks.
“They sting a little, but I’ll be okay,” I say to her.
She nods, “Go to sleep, Peeta, you’re going to need it.”
Okay,” I say, “See you in the morning.”
I walk to my room and change. Then I sit on my bed for a while. My mind wanders off to my
family and friends. What did they think of me during the interview? I wonder if Nick had a good
laugh about my confession. Or maybe he’s amazed that I finally had the guts to say it. Tomorrow
they will all watch as the Games begin. How long will I last? How hard will it be for them? I wish
I could give them a call or something, to say them again that I love them. I regret not having said
that during the interview. They would’ve heard it. But there is nothing to be done about it now.
I lie down and try to sleep, but it is no use. The faces of the people I love flash before my eyes.
And I get frustrated lying in this stuffy room. So after a few hours I get up and head to the roof.
I can look down from it to the streets, where people are walking, singing and laughing. Full of
anticipation for the Games. It reminds me of how little I matter to them. I’m just a piece to them,
necessary but disposable. I think about Games of the past, how tributes killed each other, how
careers seemed to enjoy it. As if the Games turned them into killing machines. I don’t want that to
happen to me. Protect Katniss, yes. And if that means to kill someone, I’ll probably do it. But
turning into some kind of monster… I sigh and look up at the stars. They still have their own place
in the sky. The thought calms me down.
I’m startled by her voice coming from behind me. "You should be getting some sleep."
I don’t turn around but shake my head and say, "I didn't want to miss the party. It's for us, after
all."
Katniss now comes to stand beside me and looks down on the streets where people are still
dancing around. "Are they in costumes?” she asks.
"Who could tell? With all the crazy clothes they wear here.” I answer, and then stating the
obvious, “Couldn't sleep, either?"
"Couldn’t turn my mind off,” she says.
"Thinking about your family?" I ask.
"No,” she says, to my surprise."All I can do is wonder about tomorrow. Which is pointless, of
course."

She looks at me and her eyes dart down to my bandaged hands."I really am sorry about your
hands."
"It doesn't matter, Katniss," I say. "I've never been a contender in these Games anyway."

"That's no way to be thinking," she says.

"Why not? It's true. My best hope is to not disgrace myself and. " I hesitate, I don't know if I should tell her my thoughts, about protecting her. Maybe better not to tell, but I do want to get off my chest what I thought earlier.

"And what?" Katniss asks.

"I don't know how to say it exactly. Only. I want to die as myself. Does that make any sense?" I ask her. She shakes her head and I continue, trying to explain to her my conflicting emotions. "I don't want them to change me in there. Turn me into some kind of monster that I'm not."

I look at Katniss, who bites her lip and then asks, "Do you mean you won't kill anyone?"

"No," I shake my head, "When the time comes, I'm sure I'll kill just like everybody else. I can't go down without a fight. Only I keep wishing 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," she says. "None of us are. That's how the Games work."

"Okay, but within that framework, there's still you, there's still me," I say, wanting badly for her to understand this. "Don't you see?"

"A little. Only, no offense, but who cares, Peeta?" she says.

It frustrates me to no end, that she doesn't seem to get it. Who cares? What kind of question is that? I care. So I turn to her and say, "I do. I mean, what else am I allowed to care about at this point?" I can hear the anger in my voice while I lock my eyes on hers. The lights from the street reflects in them, making them shine like polished silver.

She takes a step back, startled by my intensity and says, to my disappointment, "Care about what Haymitch said. About staying alive."

I give her a sad smile, giving up on trying to make her understand. "Okay. Thanks for the tip, sweetheart."

This rubs her the wrong way, I can immediately tell. She bursts out, "Look, 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. "Give my mother my best when you make it back, will you?"

"Count on it," she says and then she’s gone.

I'm left alone with her image on my mind. Her dress on fire, the flames licking in all shades of orange and yellow and red. The intensity of her silver eyes. The colors mesmerize me. After a while I decide to try to sleep again. I take one last look at the stars, whisper them goodbye and leave the roof.

Back in my room I drift into a fitful sleep, colors twirl before my eyes until morning comes and Portia wakes me. We go up to the roof where a hovercraft will escort us to the Arena.

When I'm in the hovercraft, a Capitol attendant tells me he will insert me with a tracker. Every tribute has one. With it, the Gamemakers will always know where a tribute is. The tracker can also tell if the tribute is alive or not. An alarm will ring in the headquarters of the Gamemakers if the tracker signals the death of the tribute. Then the Gamemakers will push a button which contains the sound of a cannon. This sound can be heard anywhere inside the Arena. This way all the other tributes know someone died. So the tracker keeps track on the living and the dead for both Gamemakers and tributes. I feel a sharp pain in my forearm as the attendant pulls in the needle.

After this, Portia is pulled up from the roof and we have breakfast together. I eat rolls of bread, with hot chocolate and try to enjoy it as much as I can. But the nerves are getting to me and soon I feel nauseated and have to stop eating.

Portia puts a hand on my arm and strokes me with her thumb. It relaxes me a little, but not much. I look through the windows and see the city disappear in the distance.
After half an hour the windows black out and shortly after that we land. Portia and I walk to the Launch Room. From this room I will be deported into the arena in less than two hours. I shower and change into the clothes I will wear in the arena. Portia examines them closely. “These are clothes for cold weather,” she says. I nod while I double knot my shoelaces. “Does it fit well?” she asks. “It fits fine,” I say.

After I’m dressed Portia takes of the bandages. My hands look good enough, the salve did its work. “I’m going to put a new set of them on you anyways,” she said, “who knows, they might come in handy.” She applies a new set of bandages, but not as thick as the ones from yesterday, so I can move my hands properly.

Then there is nothing to do but wait. Portia and I sit next to each other while I eat another roll of bread, this time topped with goat cheese. “I love goat cheese,” I tell Portia, just for the sake of saying something. She smiles at me. “It has been my privilege to be your stylist, Peeta.” She says. “Well, it's been my privilege to be your first tribute. You absolutely did an amazing job, you and Cinna together.” I say. Then a voice announces it is time and I walk over to the circular metal plate which will launch me into the Arena. Portia comes to stand before me and squeezes my hand until a glass cylinder encircles me. She gives me a thumbs-up as the metal plate begins to rise. I close my eyes for a while and when I open them again I am in a meadow, the sun shining down on me and all around me, my fellow tributes. Longing to kill me.

Then I hear the legendary announcer, Claudius Templesmith, as his voice booms all around me. "Ladies and gentlemen, let the Seventy-fourth Hunger Games begin!"

Chapter End Notes

Let the Games begin!
Sixty seconds. That's how long we're required to stand on our metal circles before the sound of a gong releases us.
I look around, trying to find my bearings. In front of me I see the Cornucopia, filled with food, weapons and supplies. My eye falls immediately on the silver bow that is standing there, right in front of me. They put that there for Katniss, no doubt about it. And if she sees it she will try to grab it. I’m sure she will be stubborn enough to ignore Haymitch’s advice. Because of this I try to locate her, to see if I can do anything to keep her from going into the fight. I look around and notice her, she is five tributes to my left. I stare at her intensely, willing for her to look my way. The minute ticks away and is almost up when she turns her head in my direction. I immediately start to shake my head at her and see the doubt register on her face in the sunlight.

Then the gong goes off and she still stands there, only for a few seconds, but it is long enough for me to know she won’t be going in.
This is the last thing I can do for her now, because the fight is starting and I have to earn my place in the pack. So I jump of my plate and sprint to the Cornucopia.

Others have already reached it and start plundering it for supplies and weapons. Clove, the girl from district two is efficient. She reaches a pack of knifes and takes half a dozen or so in her hand. Her eyes are searching the field for victims and she runs of, throwing a knife while she moves. Not in my direction, thankfully. She never misses.

I’ve reached the Cornucopia now and grab a long knife. Good, a knife I can work with. And I need to, because others are on me now. It is total mayhem. I defend myself with the knife as I see the boy tribute from, I think district five, approaching me with some kind of blunt object in his hand. He punches me with his other arm and tries to lift whatever it is to hit me with it. It seems to be very heavy. While I punch him back, he hauls it up, ready to bring it down on me. I raise my knife, in an attempt to deflect his blow. But it is not necessary. Marvel, the boy from district one appears behind him and slices his throat. I nod at him, as if I’m thanking him for his help. As if it is implied that I’m not going to be his next victim. He nods back and turns around, surveying the area to see who’s next.

I feel something behind me and I spin around, ready to lift the knife again. But the kid who bumped in to me doesn’t even acknowledge me, she is just trying to get away from this bloodbath.
My eyes are trying to take in what is happening around me. I see tributes falling to the ground. Flat out dead in the first minutes of the Games. Of course, it is always like this, I know that. But the reality of it is perplexing. I have too much adrenaline pumping through my veins now though, I can’t pay attention to dead tributes. As far as I know, not one of them is dead because of me, I’m only on defence mode as I try to reach Marly. I have to try to talk to her. I have no idea how to pull that off in this craziness, but it is all I can think of. I see her now, she is saying something to the boy tribute from four, who stands next to her, while they try to finish of the girl tribute from district three. The girl fights back hard though, and she has a weapon in her hand. It looks like a small awl. I see it flicker in the sunlight as she stabs it in the neck of the boy from four. Marly shrieks as the blood pours out of him. Within seconds he plummets down. She is on her knees next to him and I see my chance.

I run towards them and kneel down. I tear the bandages of both my hands and press them against the neck of the boy. They are soaked with blood instantly. I look up at Marly and see the question in her eyes. “Got my back?” I ask her. She nods and stands up. With her knife she slashes at the girl from three to finish her off, and then looks around. She is standing next to me in a protective stance while I work on the boy, trying to stop the bleeding.

Cato comes running towards us with a sword in his hands. She stops him, holding out a hand. “He’s with us.” She says.

The blood has stopped pouring out from the neck of the boy, it changes into a steady dripping instead. He already suffered a lot of blood loss. “I need bandages.” I say to Marly. Around us, some of the tributes are still fighting. Katniss is nowhere to be seen and I see other tributes disappearing in the woods. Marly walks towards the Cornucopia and comes back with a first aid kit. I pull it open, grab cotton bandages out of it and cut them with my knife. Then I put some salve on the wound and bind him with the bandages. There is still a lot of blood, the awl must have hit an artery. The boy is pretty much out of here and I wonder why I bother and why Marly would care about it. He’s dying anyways. And why would that be a bad thing? Sure, their alliance will be one man short, but an alliance can’t last forever and eventually all the members have to die at one point if you want to win.

Marly does seem to care about it though, as she kneels down again and holds his hand. “You’re going to be fine, Brandon.” She tells him. Not that he can hear her. I sit back and look around. The fighting has stopped and there are no tributes left but the four other careers. Marvel and Cato are searching through the supplies at the Cornucopia. “Let’s take everything out of here and bring it to the lake.” Says Marvel. “It’s easier if we camp near the water.”

I get up and help them bring the supplies, the food and the remainder of the weapons to the lake. At some point the cannons go off, signifying the deaths of the tributes. They’ve been dead for a while now, but the Gamemakers don’t release the cannons during the first fight. Too much happening for us to keep track. For those tributes who took off, these cannons are news. I’ve already counted the bodies. There are ten of them. But eleven bangs fill the air and then a hovercraft appears. It stands still in the air above the Cornucopia. We all drop our things and stare at it. Marly is still sitting next to Brandon. Glimmer and Clove are at the lake but head in our direction now.
Then a long arm comes down from the hovercraft and picks up the dead girl from district three, right next to Marly.

“Marly, get away from there,” I shout at her. At that she stands and comes walking towards us. The dead girl disappears into the hovercraft and the arm comes down again. Its forks open around Brandon, and he too is lifted into the hovercraft. So that was the eleventh bang, he died, just as I expected him too.

“I’m sorry,” I say to Marly. She just shrugs. “Let’s build up camp and start hunting,” she says. The hovercraft continues to drop its long arm until all the dead tributes are collected. They will be put in wooden coffins and send back home.

We walk to the lake where the others are already working on the camp. Glimmer points at my arm and throws a first aid kit to me. “You’re bleeding,” she says.

It is only now that I start to feel the pain. The adrenaline has left my body and I’m sore all over. There is a shallow cut in my arm. A knife went straight through my jacket and my blouse. I can’t even remember when that happened. I bandage it and examine the rest of my body. My left knee is swollen and my face too. I do remember the boy from district five punching in my face before Marvel came from behind to slid his throat.

I notice that I’m covered in blood. Most of it is Brandons. I go to the lake and wash it off as good as I can.

Then I turn to the others and suggest building a fire and cooking some food. They haven’t even thought of it. They are all busy attending their own wounds. I gather some wood and get a fire going fast. It’s something I am actually good at. The others nod in approval while I search through the supplies.

“We’re going to eat and rest,” Cato says. “And only after nightfall we will start hunting.”

He shows us two pairs of glasses. “They make you see in the dark.” He explains. “It will give us an advantage, and they will never expect us, so they will make for easy prey.” He talks about the other tributes as if they are animals. Calling them prey. The other careers are excited about the idea. How is it possible that these children truly seem to enjoy this? I know it is seen as a big honour to win the Games in their districts. But do they take in the effect these Games are having on us? And how weird and disturbing it is to watch an eighteen year old boy die in your arms? I try to shake myself free from these thoughts because they are not helping. Instead I go to find a big pot and fill it with water to cook rice and vegetables in it. We eat and then come up with a schedule on who sleeps and who stays on watch.

I am allowed to sleep first, together with Clove and Marvel. I am a bit worried about sleeping with these people around. For all I know, they’ll try to kill me in my sleep. But what choice do I have? I need my sleep. My job now is to keep them from finding Katniss. This is my job until I die, it is as simple as that. And I will need energy if I want to do this right. It is assuring to me that Marly stays awake while I sleep, her I trust the most.

I wake at the sound of the anthem. The sky has already grown dark and I see the stars appearing. I get up and sit next to Marly while we watch the sky. The pictures of the dead tributes are shown, now everyone will know who is still alive and who isn’t. Marly sighs deep when Brandon’s picture comes up, but she doesn’t say anything.

When the sky goes dark again I point out the stars to her and say, “The stars are always at the same place in the sky, depending on what season it is.”

“I like stars,” she says. “They shine.”

“They do.” I say. She smiles at me and goes to lie down and sleep.

Around two in the morning, Clove and I wake the others and we set out to hunt other tributes. I assume Katniss will be somewhere high up in a tree. Safe and unseen, so I am not too worried about her. We discuss what paths to take.
“Let’s go into the woods,” Marvel suggests.
“Why not the other side?” Glimmer asks. There is some field on the other side of the Cornucopia, with waving long grass.
“Who knows what might be hidden in that grass,” Marly says, “I don’t like the feel of it, and most of the tributes went into the forest, so we have a better chance of finding any of them in there.”
“I think I saw the boy from district eleven go in that direction,” says Clove, “we should hunt him down.”
“Well, I don’t feel like going into that grass, let’s go in the woods and deal with eleven later.” Marly insists.
“The woods it is,” says Cato. He seems to be the one in charge. It is not surprising, really, he is so big and strong. I think the others are a little afraid of him. Although Marly did stood up against him this morning.

We enter the woods on the right side of the lake. Cato and Clove are the once who wear the night vision glasses, so they take the lead. We walk for what seem hours and dawn is already beginning to come, when Cato lets out a hoot. “Found one,” he says. We break into a run.

I can smell the fire and after another few yards I see it too. The soft glow of it against the dark sky. Cato is already there and I hear the voice of a girl, not Katniss, pleading, “Please, don’t hurt me.” I hear the fear in her voice but her pleading is useless. We circle around her and Cato stabs her in the abdomen with his sword. As the blood pours from her body she lets out an excruciating scream.

“Nice one, Cato!” Clove shouts out and the others are laughing. It is repulsive, but I realize I have to join in, I can’t fall out of place now. “Congratulations,” I call out, and Marvel slaps my back and grins at me. “Twelve down and eleven to go!” he shouts out and we all laugh. It is a ridiculous thing to say, because at least five out of the six of us are going to be part of these eleven to go. And my plan is that it’s going to be six out of the six of us.

Cato checks if the girl has anything useful on her, she has not. A small pack which contains some matches, a bottle of iodine and an empty water flask.
"Better clear out so they can get the body before it starts stinking.” Cato says. Glimmer takes the pack and we move on.

After twenty yards Marvel stands still and puts a hand up. "Shouldn't we have heard a cannon by now?"
"I'd say yes. Nothing to prevent them from going in immediately.” Marly replies.
"Unless she isn't dead." Marvel says.
Cato looks annoyed at this. "She's dead. I stuck her myself." He says irritated. It doesn’t take much to get him angry.
"Then where's the cannon?" Marvel insists.
Clove starts to join the argument. "Someone should go back. Make sure the job's done."
"Yeah, we don't want to have to track her down twice." Marly agrees.
"I said she's dead!" Cato almost screams now. The guy must be crazy, the way he gets worked up like this is not normal.
Clove puts a hand on his arm, which I don’t think is a good idea. She tries to reason with him. "Maybe she is almost dead."
"No,” Cato insists, “she is dead, I searched her for supplies and there was no heartbeat.”

They continue to argue while I look around at the trees. It’s almost light now and I’m tired from the long walk and hungry too. I want to go back to the lake and eat. And of course, the girl is not dead yet, the cannon proofs that much. So I break of the argument by saying, "We're wasting time! I'll go finish her and let's move on!"
Chapter Summary

Peeta kills the girl from 8, then they go back to the lake and notice food is missing. They need to booby-trap their supplies. But how?

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own THG, nor the amazing Peeta Mellark. There are some lines of dialogue in this chapter that are copied from the original, The Hunger Games, the author of that being Suzanne Collins.

Thank goodness, I had the foresight to bring a knife. Cato gave me a spear when we left, but I’m not really good with a spear. I tucked a knife in my belt just before we went. It comes in handy now. "Go on then, Lover Boy," Cato says to me as I walk back to the girl. "See for yourself."

She is unconscious but still breathing. I kneel down beside her and ask myself how it is possible that Cato thought she was dead. Her chest is heaving. I see the blood dripping from the wound in her stomach. She is beyond saving. To end her suffering I slid her throat with the knife. It is horrific and my stomach turns by the sight of the gash I make in her throat. I have to tell myself I am doing her a favour. Still it is a lot to take in. In less than a day watching so many people die around me, even in my arms. Now this girls death will officially be of my doing.

The people in the Capitol can place bets on who kills who and therefore they keep up a score. I really hope no one ever thought I’d kill her. The idea that someone makes money out of this is so horrendous, I feel like I couldn’t bear it.

I walk back to the others, who were whispering but they stop talking altogether when I arrive. They were probably talking about me and how useful I am to them.

Cato turns to me, “Was she dead?”

“No. But she is now,” I say. The cannon fires, telling us the truth of my words. “Ready to move on?”

The others nod and we run in the direction of the lake, while the sky is slowly turning from black to blue.

We arrive at the lake about an hour later. There we slump down in the chairs that were part of the supplies of the Cornucopia. Marly goes to the food supply to get us all some bread and apples.

“Hey,” she shouts out, “Someone has been here, there is stuff missing!”

We all get up and check out the supplies. Marly is right, some of the supplies are gone.

“I told you we should have left a guard here,” Clove says to Cato.

“But we need to stick together as we hunt,” Cato says.

“Why? There are enough of us here to leave one or two behind.” Clove says.

“No,” says Cato in an authoritative voice, “We can’t trust anyone to stay behind.”

“That is nonsense,” Clove starts to get worked up now.

“I don’t think it is a good thing to split up,” Marvel joins in the argument. “What if some of the
other tributes have alliances too, and some of them are really strong, like that guy from Eleven.”
“But we have to figure out something to protect the supplies.” Marly points out. “Because next
time there will be nothing left of it.”
“Maybe we can put it in the ground?” Marvel suggest.
“No,” says Glimmer, “that is way too much work. I was actually looking forward to lying in the
sun today. Not to exhaust myself with something as stupid as burying the supplies.”

Is she serious, she wants to go sunbathing? I shake my head and search through the supplies to see
if there is anything in there that could be of use for protection.
Marvel joins in and we discuss the possibility of building some fence around it. But nothing we
come up with could really stop another tribute from reaching it.
The girls have given up and are back at the camp now. I am pretty tired and I see the others aren’t
as alert as they were either. So I suggest to take a break and rest for a while. “We might come up
with something later.” I say. The others nod and we join the girls at the lake where we have
breakfast together.

Now that I am sitting still I feel how tired I am and how overwhelming all this is. I lie down and
close my eyes and think about the girl I killed, how her parents will mourn her. How she will be
shipped back home to be buried. Gone. Because of me. I think about that night on the roof with
Katniss. Telling her I didn’t want to become a monster. Have I become a monster already? But I
killed her out of mercy, right? To end her suffering. Still, she is dead because of me. And I know I
will never be able to forget that or discard it like it doesn’t matter.

My mind wanders to Katniss. How is she doing? I trust she can handle herself pretty well in the
woods. But she will need food and water and she doesn’t have a bow. The silver one I saw at the
Cornucopia is here. Glimmer has it, she took it with her during our hunt. I haven’t seen her
shooting it though, so I have no idea how good a shot she is.

I wish I could do something to transfer that bow from Glimmer to Katniss. With a bow she can
just sit in a tree and shoot people from it. I wonder again if she’d shoot me. Maybe, if she saw me
here with the Careers, without understanding my plan to protect her, she would be so furious that
she even wants me dead. It doesn’t matter much. I will die anyway, maybe rather by her doing
than by Cato’s.
I hope she is okay. I can’t help worrying about her. There has been no cannons, except the one
from this morning, that means that at least she’s still alive. Staying awake and worrying about her
is quite useless. There is nothing you can do about it, I tell myself, and then I drift off to sleep.

Someone shakes my elbow and I open my eyes. It is afternoon already, judged by the sun. Marvel
is standing in front of me, holding out a roll and an apple. “Here, lunch.” He says. I take the food
and eat it slowly. At least, with all these supplies there is no hunger in these Hunger Games. Not
for me. A lot of the other tributes will possibly be hungry. It always gives the careers a big
advantage, they take a hold of all the supplies and their chances of starving to death are next to
nothing.

Cato and Clove are caught up in another discussion about hunting and the supplies. Clove thinks
we should split up. Cato thinks not. They get on my nerves and I see Glimmer and Marly are also
irritated by them.
“We have to come up with something before we go out on a hunt again.” Clove says, stubbornly.
“Okay,” says Cato, “I tell you what, we take a break from hunting tonight. We try to come up
with a plan. But even if we don’t come up with anything good, we’re going again tomorrow.
These Games are not about supplies, they are about killing tributes.”
“I know that.” Clove snaps at him, “but you have to admit we need the supplies too.”
I like Cato’s idea. No hunting tonight. Instead we build a big fire and together with Glimmer and
Marly, I make a nice dinner while the others sleep.
We eat together. The anthem starts and we see the face of the girl. She was from district Eight. No other faces in the sky. We didn’t hear any cannon so that makes sense.

Cato divides us in three pairs. Four of us can sleep while two of us take watch. My first watch starts at midnight, together with Glimmer. She doesn’t acknowledge me in any way so we both just stare over the lake.

"We have to come up with a way to booby trap our stuff." Glimmer suddenly says after an hour of silence. I nod.

"Any ideas lover boy, or are you as useless as you look?" she spits at me.

Nice. She is a lovely girl, isn’t she? I think it is best to not to take the bait though, if I want to stay alive. "Nope, no ideas, as useless as I look." I say.

"I have an idea." the voice is soft and comes from behind us. Both Glimmer and I jump at the sound and she arms her bow.

The boy is standing at the tree line, his palms facing us in a defensive stance. Glimmer aims at him but I put a hand on her arm.

"Wait, let’s hear what he has to say." I tell her, "we can always kill him later. Maybe it’s a good plan."

Glimmer lowers the bow and glares at the boy. "Come over here," she orders.

He shakes his head and she pulls the bow back up. "Come over here or die." her voice is merciless. I nod at the boy to come over.

After a few seconds of doubt he slowly crosses the field to our camp. "What's your idea?" Glimmer spits at him. He is standing right in front of us and I recognize him now, he is the small, ashen boy from district three.

"I know how we can booby trap the supplies." the boy starts. "We can use the mines."

"The mines? What mines?" Glimmer asks, and I can hear the impatience in her voice.

"The mines that are buried around the pedestals." says the boy.

"But the mines were disabled after the first sixty seconds." Glimmer points out.

"I know that," the boy looks her in the eyes now. "But I also know how to reactivate them."

That gets our attention. Glimmer cocks her head to one side and raises her eyebrows. "Really?" she asks.

"Yes, it isn’t even that hard," the boy explains, "we just need to dig them up, I can reactivate them and we place them around the supplies. If anyone comes near them they will be blown sky high."

"Anyone including us," I say skeptically.

"Well, we could leave a path free to the supplies," he says, turning to me now.

"But if we leave a path, others can find it too," I say, "and that makes the whole thing useless, now, wouldn’t it?"

Glimmer nods but the boy is not taken aback by our replies. "If we make the path illogical, if we let it bend and turn instead of making a straight one? So that only we know what the safe route is?"

It sounds like a plan. I look at Glimmer. "We have argued and discussed it all day and haven’t come up with anything good," I say.

"That’s true," she admits. "I’m going to wake the others to discuss it."

"Maybe better to wait till our watch is over?" I say, "I don’t think they’ll like being woken up before time."

"Okay," Glimmer says to me and then she turns to the boy and orders, "sit."

When our watch is over we wake Cato and Marly and let the boy explain his plan to them. They are both up for it as well. Marvel and Clove will be informed in the morning. The boy, Glimmer and I go to sleep now.

In my dreams the girl from district Eight visits me. She is not doing anything, not saying anything. She just stands there, looking at me, the accusation is plain in her eyes.
The warmth of the sun is what wakes me in the morning. Clove and Marvel are awake, the others are still sleeping. I get up and go to the lake to freshen up a bit and purify a two liter bottle of water. Then I put some more wood on the fire and start frying eggs and bacon for breakfast. Not much later the others wake as well, we have breakfast together and discuss the plan with the mines. We decide to build a pyramid out of the supplies, in such a way that everything is still accessible. Marly comes with the idea to put a net around it, to protect it from birds. The girls are set on the task of rearranging the pile of supplies. Marvel, Cato and I go to the meadow and dig up the mines from all 24 pedestals.

I bring the first one to the boy from three and he goes to work with it. After a couple of hours all the mines are piled up at his feet and he is reactivating them fast. “Careful now,” he warns us, “these mines are highly sensitive, only a little pressure can already set them off.” We dig holes around the pyramid and bury the activated mines again. There is a path through them to get to the food, but you have to know where to walk. One step out of line and you’re history.

The afternoon goes by without much happening. We sit around, take naps and wait for the cover of darkness to resume the hunt.

It was an uneventful day according to the sky, no deaths. I wonder if the people in the Capitol are getting bored. Probably most of the other tributes are spread out wide over the arena. It is going to take a while to locate them, and then we still have to kill them. We are with seven people here, which means there are five others out there. Katniss, of course, both the tributes from Eleven, the boy from Ten and the girl from Five. It’s not much, I guess that means that this alliance will soon start to turn on each other. If that happens, I’d better get out of here, but not yet. This night we’ll hunt again and I want to wait and see how that goes.

We don’t leave until after midnight. The boy from three is staying behind with a spear to watch the pyramid. It isn’t really necessary, but it’s also not necessary to bring him. Cato and Marvel are wearing the night vision glasses and we’re off again on a long hike in the woods. Our guess is most of the tributes will be hiding there, probably in trees too. The hike is uneventful. No signs of any tributes anywhere. As the hours pass the others are getting irritable. We are all tired and my feet hurt from half walking, half running all night. When it’s almost dawn the girls want to go back to the lake. Cato objects, saying we still have a good hour to go before it will be light.

I just want to give my opinion when I smell it. The smell of burning wood. And I hear it too. The roar of the flames. I turn around to see where it’s coming from. It would be hard to miss the wall of fire descending on me.
We found her

Chapter Summary

Peeta and the careers have to run because of the fire that is descending on them. But that night they find Katniss. What to do?

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I don't own THG. Some of the dialogue with Katniss is copied from THG.

My first impulse is to immediately run in the opposite direction, but I trip over a branch and fall flat on my face. The others have noticed the fire too and sprint ahead. I get up on my feet as fast as possible and chase after them. I catch them soon enough but the smoke of the fire is advancing too.

I see Marvel pulling his shirt over his mouth and I do the same. It helps a little, but the smoke is thick and it doesn't take long before we're almost choking on it. I cough to try to get rid of the poisonous fumes that enter my body. I see Glimmer in front of me stop and puke. I almost run her over but am able to dodge her at the last second.

I jump over logs and run faster than I ever did. Soon I'm completely out of breath and gasping. I've outrun most of the others, only Marvel still in front of me, and I follow in his path.

Where did this fire come from, and so sudden? It must be something the Gamemakers generated, it is too immense for it to be otherwise. The smoke is everywhere. It makes it hard to see and I trip a few times more, even with Marvel clearing the path for me. The fire is catching up on me now and I can feel the heat of it breathing down my neck.

Suddenly a burning branch falls from a tree and hits me in the chest. The pain is immediate and agonizing and I hear myself scream because of it. Fire is licking at my pants now, so I almost jump forward. Even though the smoke isn’t clearing, I recognize my surroundings and I am relieved because I know we've come close to the stream we've passed a couple of times. When I see it I splash into it without thinking. The current is strong and I am too tired to fight it, so I’m washed away for a couple of yards. But the cold water immediately relieves me from the burning pain on my chest and my legs, so I relish in it.

The others catch up on us now and have all emerged themselves in the water. I’m struggling against the current to get back to them. The water’s not deep at all, soon I’m back to the place where I first hit the water. I lift myself up to the side and let my legs dangle in the stream. Marly comes to sit next to me, still panting from the exertion.

“We have to get back to the lake,” she sighs, “we didn’t bring any first aid stuff with us.” It is stupid, really. None of us thought about bringing anything with us, thinking we’ll just go to the lake if we would be in need of anything.
“Next time we’re out, we should better equip ourselves,” I say and she nods at this. We can’t go back to the lake yet either, because the smoke of the fire is too thick and it leaves you gagging. We stay at the stream for a couple more hours, until the smoke clears somewhat and we’ve regained our energy. We walk slowly now, tired and hungry, since we also didn’t bring any food with us.

At the lake, the boy from three is sitting around, doing nothing. He tells us nothing eventful happened during the night. I slump down on the ground, after I’ve taken an apple out of a burlap sack that hangs on top of the pyramid. It is clever, the booby-trap, but not very practical, because we have to exert ourselves to get to the food.

My chest is burning and I take off my jacket and blouse to examine the damage. A long burn is crossed over it, all red and blistered. Thankfully, a light breeze has filled the air and gives me a little relief. But other than wind or water, we don’t have anything that will really help us out with the burns. The first aid kits only contain bandages and fever pills, nothing useful. There is not much more to do than just let time heal it. The others are pretty out of it too. Clove has a big burn on her calf and Cato also has some burns on his legs. Glimmer is still coughing and refuses to eat anything. We resolve to laying around, recovering and not doing anything else until late afternoon.

My mind wanders to Katniss. How is she? Has she been a target of this fire too? I think so. Isn’t it too convenient to burn the girl who was on fire? I hope she won’t be too damaged by it. At least she’s still alive, right? I wish there was some way for me to know how she’s doing. But we only get told who died, not in what state the other living tributes are. That wouldn’t be fair. Still, I want to know, it may give me some piece of mind, to know that she’s okay.

A few of us have dozed off when Cato suddenly is on his feet. “We have to hunt,” he says, “because this fire was put here by the Gamemakers for a reason. We couldn’t find anyone last night cause everybody was spread out over the arena.” He looks around him and continues, “that is why they did it, to drive us together. Chances are that there are some tributes near, now!”

The others are dismayed, not really feeling up for it, still tired and nauseated from the events of this morning. But we have to agree with Cato. Gamemakers do these things to drive us together. I’ve seen it happen in earlier Games often enough.

“But before we go, we have to eat,” Clove points out.

“I’ll start a fire,” I suggest and Marly gets up to help me with it. We boil rice in a pot and add sausages from a can, we chop some onions and mix it all together. It is not a fantastic meal, but there is enough and at this point I don’t really care about what I’m eating, as long as it’s something substantial. We have some dried fruit and cake for dessert and then Cato jumps up again. He’s getting restless and he’s not a patient person.

“Come on,” he barks, “we’re going!”

He thrusts a spear in my hand and turns to the boy from three. “You stay here.”

We all get up and follow him towards the woods. The sun is about to set, it won’t be long before it will grow dark again. I wonder if we find anyone tonight. I have a feeling we will, because nothing has happened since we killed the girl from nine. There was no cannon during the fire either. The Gamemakers don’t like to kill off tributes. We have to do the killing ourselves. The fire is just a sadistic method for them to toy with us.

Suddenly Cato gives out a shout, “there she is!” and he breaks out in a run, calling for us to follow. “it’s her, eleven!” he shouts over his back at us.

Eleven? Does he mean that small girl, Rue? But before I even finish this thought I hear Marvel yell, “ah finally! We’ve got her.”
And that’s when I know. I feel my heart sink. We found her. No thanks to me of course, but we found her nonetheless. While I follow the others uncertain, my mind races. What can I do? Who can I kill with this spear before they get to her? I’m so occupied with my thoughts that I bump into Clove, because the others have stopped running. I look up to see why, and there she is. Katniss. About twenty feet up a big tree. We are standing in a half circle around it, all staring up at her while she surveys us. She doesn’t look too good. I can see from down here the fire got to her too. She looks exhausted and like she is in pain. And unarmed. She is absolutely no competition for any of us.

But she is high up in a tree and we are standing on the ground. As if realizing this herself, she calls down at us, "How's everything with you?"

I have to hide a smile, because I can’t very well let the others know how amazing I think she is. They’ll kill me at sight. To be honest, now that we’ve found her, I don’t know how useful they think I am, maybe my time is up, already. But their focus is on Katniss and mine has to be on her as well. I wonder how much she hates me now, seeing me standing here with the Careers. I doubt she’ll understand my being here.

Cato takes the lead and answers, "Well enough, yourself?"

"It's been a bit warm for my taste," Katniss answers, "The air's better up here. Why don't you come on up?"

"Think I will," Cato says.

Glimmer offers him her bow, "Here, take this, Cato."

I can feel Katniss looking at me, almost forcing me to look back, but I avoid her. I am too afraid to see the accusation in her eyes, the hate she feels. So I start to polish my knife with the edge of my shirt and focus my gaze on that.

"No," says Cato, pushing away the bow. "I'll do better with my sword."

At this he starts to climb the tree. I look up again and see Katniss started climbing even further up the tree. How does she do it? Within no time she is thirty feet up and the branches are really small up there. They certainly can’t carry Cato’s weight. Just at this moment I see the branch on which Cato is now, give away under him and he falls down to the ground hard. He gets back to his feet, swearing loud and thumping up a fist. The guy is besides himself with anger.

“Glimmer, you try,” Marly suggests, “you’re a good climber, right?”

Glimmer is a better climber than Cato and she goes up the tree fast. I can hear the branches under her feet start to crack as well, but she stops and aims her bow at Katniss. I’m holding my breath as I see the arrow fly. However, she doesn’t have a good shot at all. Katniss didn’t stop climbing and is scary high up the tree. The arrows fly by her, they don’t even come close. One of them hit the tree itself and she retrieves it, waving at us with it. If the others knew what she could do with it? Again, I wish I could transfer that bow to her.

But I can’t and now I have to think fast, because if they come up with another plan, she could be dead within the hour. They could hack the tree or set it on fire. It would be easy enough and there would be nothing she could do about it.

Glimmer has come down now and the others are discussing other options. Before they come up with a real good idea I have to stop them. It’s getting dark now, we can hardly make her out from down here. So I say harshly, "Oh, let her stay up there. It's not like she's going anywhere. We'll deal with her in the morning."

At least that will buy her some time.

The others take up on my idea and we make camp at the foot of the tree. We light some torches and sit in a circle on the ground. I have no idea what my next step will be, but for tonight, I at least have to stay awake and guard her. Maybe I can kill some of them before they get to me. But I can’t kill all of them, and that will leave Katniss unprotected.
I am in a haze, my thoughts rambling over one another. I look up at the tree but I can’t see her. She is too high up and it’s almost completely dark now. I look at the others and see Marly smile at me as she points to something above my head.
Tracker Jackers

Chapter Summary

Peeta tries to stay awake all night, to come up with a plan for Katniss to escape. He does fall asleep though and when he wakes it is mayhem! The Tracker Jackers are upon them...

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own the Hunger Games. I did use a few lines from the original book, THG, chapter 14.
Disclaimer: Clove killing a lizard is something I picked up from the movie.

My eyes follow the line of her finger up into the foliage above me. I can vaguely see the stars through them.
“They are still out there,” she says.
This girl, she astonishes me. How can she enjoy killing others and be like this with me at the same time? Would she be able to kill me? Or is she getting attached now? No, I don’t believe it, she wants to win, and we can’t win together. Still, I don’t think she’ll like killing me. Although there is really no say to what she likes. Evidently someone can like stars and killing at the same time.

The anthem starts and shows that again there were no deaths today. But with the fire and us finding Katniss, I think the audience must be fine with how things are going. As long as it’s not boring, they’ll be fine with whatever happens.
We all are still pretty worn out because of the fire. Therefore we quickly set up a watch in pairs and those who don’t have to watch the first shift drift off to sleep. I am determined to stay awake though. There must be an opportunity somewhere during this night to do something. I’m racking my brains about what that something can be. Kill them in their sleep? How will I do that? It is impossible, because there is always someone else awake and I don’t think I will be fast and quiet enough to pull it off.
Maybe Katniss can escape while the others sleep. But again, we watch in pairs and she probably can’t see who is awake and who is not. It is dark and she is so high up that tree. And even if she knew, I doubt she would take the chance to come down. And as for me, she doesn’t trust me, I’m sure of that. I felt the accusation in her eyes a couple of hours ago, when she looked down on us.

The night continues and I let every possible scenario pass before me. It is maddening that I can’t come up with anything. This was the whole point of teaming up with the careers, to protect her. And now that we’ve come to it, there is nothing I can do. Useless, I am useless.
My eyes are getting heavy and I try to keep myself awake. I turn to my side and stare hard in the bushes in front of me. Stay awake, I tell myself. You can sleep when you’re dead, now stay awake! I can feel I am starting to lose this battle with myself. My eyelids are drooping. I take one last effort to stay awake by turning again. The others come in sight now. I am a little outside the circle and able to see them all from here. Glimmer and Clove are on watch. Glimmer is sitting with her back against the tree. Clove is practising with her knives, arranging them in her jacket, they are all neatly lined up there. She has several different ones and she is choosing one carefully now, to
kill a lizard. Another lizard shoots through the trees to get away from her. I wish I was that lizard. I wish I could get away from all of this. My thoughts come in a blur as sleep finally pulls me in.

A hard thump followed by a piercing scream make me jump up on my feet. I take in my surroundings and do not hesitate for a second, I bolt. A tracker jacker nest has hit the ground and is ripped open straight away. It must have fallen from the tree. No, not fallen. Tracker jacker nests do not fall out of trees. This means someone threw it from the tree. And that someone can only be one person. Katniss.

While her action is better than any of the ideas I tried to conjure up, I have no time to relish on them now. Because the wasps are on us. The girls are screaming and Marvel cries out “To the lake! To the lake.”

That makes sense, since wasps can’t swim and probably won’t follow us into the water. Still, these are tracker jackers. They are no ordinary wasps. I recognize their solid gold bodies in an instant. They are extremely dangerous and they track down anyone who disturbs them. And right know, according to them, we are the ones who did the disturbing. And they are fast. While I run as quick as I can, I feel the sting under my ear. The pain is instantaneous and it feels like I’ve been stabbed with an ice pick. Tracker jakers are venomous too, I can sense the venom running through my veins. In the distance I hear the voice of a girl screaming for help. I can’t make out who it is, but I do know no one will come to her aid. Another sting follows on my chest, one on my abdomen and one on my lower back. The pain is blinding but I don’t stop running. I have to get to the lake. I feel a final sting on my left calve when I’ve reached the water and emerge myself in it.

Marvel and Clove follow me in the lake. The boy from three, who was sitting calmly, starts screaming now, since we brought the tracker jackers with us and they are on him now. “Get in the water,” I yell at him and he jumps in.

The next one who emerges from the threes is Cato, he is followed by the sound of cannon. I startle at that. Someone died. This must be because of the tracker jackers. If you receive enough stings, they can be lethal. Is it Katniss, who died? No, that can’t be. She is the one who threw the nest down. Marly and Glimmer are still not here. It must be one of them.

The venom is racing through my body, making it hard to think. But I know I have to get out of here and see what the damage is. See if Katniss has made an escape. See who died and if somebody maybe needs help.

The wasps have vanished and I climb out of the water unsteady. The others don’t react. They are to abashed to even notice, overwhelmed with the sudden turn of events and they are badly stung too. I grab a spear from the ground and race back through the woods. I hear a second cannon fires, but I’m not sure, because there is a buzzing sound in my ears. The world seems to twirl and spin, which makes it hard to focus. The venom is doing its job, making me dizzy and faint. I scramble on, tripping over the smallest stones and branches, trying to reach the tree. It seems to last forever and as I trip again, over something large, I fall down hard. I try to get my bearings, to know where I am and what I’m doing. I know it is something really important but the hallucinations, caused by the stings, are starting to wash over me. The world seems to burst in colors. The sky is hot pink and falling down on me in waves. The ground beneath shifts dangerously and is trying to swallow me alive. I struggle to get on my knees and shake my head, trying desperately to clear it.

I look around me and see now what it is, the large object I tripped over. It is a girl, covered in tracker jacker stings which makes her almost unrecognizable. The stings cause big swellings, about the size of plums and her face is covered in it. She is dead, there is no doubt about it. I vaguely remember the cannon and sigh in relief, because it’s not Katniss. But wasn’t there another cannon? Wasn’t there another girl too? And who is this girl, lying here in front of me? I strain my eyes trying to identify her. I look at her distorted face and the dark hair lying in a wave around her.
It is Marly, the girl from district Four. Shock hits me in the guts. Marly is dead. Gone. It is hard to process this with the venom in my body and as I look down at my arms I see worms coming out of the ground and crawling over me. I try to shake them off, which doesn't seem to work. Somewhere in the back of my mind an alarm is ringing, telling me to get a grip on things. To focus. Because something very important is going on right now. I am forcing myself to look at the situation at hand. Marly is dead, which is already pretty awful in itself. But this whole thing has consequences for me too. There is no way the careers will keep me in this alliance with Marly gone. Especially now that Katniss dropped the nest on us. And I've just stormed away from them at the lake. They might think I'm off to kill Katniss, but if I don't succeed, which obviously I won't, my time is up. I have to, again, face the fact that I am heading to my death. I know this already, this was my plan all along. Still, having a plan which involves dying is not the same thing as actually seeing death in the eye. In the end my first animal instinct is to preserve myself. In any case, no matter what happens, I can't stay in the alliance any more. So my next job is to get up, go to the tree to see how Katniss is faring and work out a new strategy from there. Somehow the thought of Katniss gives me some clarity and I am able to get up.

That is when I hear the sound of footsteps behind me. Someone has come to follow me, to kill me probably. I tighten my grip on the spear in my hand and lift it. Then I crash through the trees and I am finally at the spot where it all happened. Katniss is sitting right in front of me. She gazes at me, a shocked expression on her face. Next to her lies a mutilated body. I recognize the blond curls, it is Glimmer. So this was the second cannon. Marly and Glimmer gone. What I don’t understand is why Katniss is sitting here before me. Staring at me like I’m some unearthly creature. When I see the bow and sheath of arrows in her hands I realize that she must have had the wherewithal to take them from Glimmers body after the cannon fired. But she must have been stung badly too. That is the only reason why she would still be sitting here.

It is no good, because the footsteps are approaching and whoever it is, he won’t just run by us, he is on a mission to kill. I think it’s probably Cato, because he is the most bloodthirsty of them all. Katniss needs to get out of here.

"What are you still doing here?" I hiss at her. She keeps staring at me like I talk in a foreign language. I can see the sting of the tracker jacker in her neck and realize she probably suffers from hallucinations too. But there is no time to snap her out of it. So I flip the spear in my hand and push her with it.

"Are you mad?" I shout out, she is still sitting down so I poke her harder. "Get up! Get up!" She rises slowly, still looking at me uncomprehendingly. I start pushing her now, but she still doesn’t really react. The tribute who is chasing us is getting closer and I resolve to more desperate measures. I shove her really hard and scream at her, "Run!" She turns away from me now as Cato appears behind me. Run!" I scream at her and she finally does what I tell her. She’s fast and disappears into the bushes within seconds.

I turn around and see Cato staggering, trying to stay on his feet. He is even more disoriented as I am and has a big tracker jacker sting under his eye. But he is holding is sword in his right hand and is approaching me now.

The hallucinations are coming back to me when I see him sparkling and encircled in a cloak of bright colours. He still moves forwards and a fight will be inevitable. And that is going to be hard, because the worms have come back and have multiplied, they are crawling over my arms and sliding in my clothes. And Cato seems to have grown to twice his size as he stares down on me and grins. His teeth are all black and scorched and there is a scorpion sitting on his right shoulder. I don’t know how long it will take before these delusions will get the better of me and I black out.
I enter a nightmare of illusions, things that are not real intertwined with things that are. I take a step back as Cato advances on me. The spear in my hand is squirming and coming to live. The head has turned into the head of a snake and I can see it’s forked tongue coming out of its mouth. I can’t do anything else then drop it on the ground at this instant.

Somewhere inside of me I know that this is not real, not really happening. It must be the poison from the tracker jacker that causes this. But there are also parts that are real. Cato, for instance, he is here. I see him now, my view is distorted, and there are fumes clouding my vision. But I know he is here and he is up to no good. Thankfully, he has been stung too, and very bad. My hope is that he will be less capable to handle the poison than I am.

My mind turns to Katniss and I know what I have to do. I have to keep him off from chasing Katniss. She seemed really out of it and I don't think she can get far fast in this condition. My last act must be one of defending her. Keeping Cato occupied so he can't chase her. I must show for myself that I didn’t act as a piece of the Capitol's game. And that if I die, I’ll die with dignity. Somehow that seems important.

I hear the sound of laughter and look up. Cato grins at me and says, “so this was your plan all along, lover boy? Defending her?”
“‘Yes,’’ I reply, “it was.’”
“Well then, it was a stupid plan and it will lead you nowhere. Nothing but death is waiting for you now. And she’ll probably won’t even thank you for it.” His tone is sneering. “And even then, I’ll make sure she won’t live long enough to enjoy the time you’ve given her.”
He laughs again but I shake my head. “You have to catch her first, you know.” I say.
“Ha, and you don’t think I’ll be able to do that?” he snorts, “mark my words, Lover Boy. She’ll be dead by morning! And you will know it. I’ll let you live long enough to see her picture in the sky. Or even better, I’ll kill her right in front of you.”

I don’t know what he is trying to achieve with his words. But if they are meant to scare me, it doesn’t work. Because they are having the opposite effect on me. I won’t let it happen. I was never a contender in these games, but this I do know; I am strong, I am handling the venom well enough at the moment. I will do whatever it takes to keep Cato from killing her.

At this very moment Cato is staggering to stay on his feet. This is my moment to plunge at him. I bend down to grasp the spear, but I stop in my tracks when I see it is still writhing on the ground. Then I remember I still have my knife tucked in my belt. I take it in my left hand and turn to Cato.
When he sees the knife in my hand he starts laughing again. “And what do you think you’ll accomplish with that?” he asks.

“Well, I don’t know,” I say, “but I do see you haven’t accomplished much with that either.” And I point to the sword in his hand. He looks down at it and at that moment I jump forward and slash at him. He deflects my attack by turning aside fast. My knife cuts his arm, leaving a deep gash in it. The blood flows instantly. It has a strange, bluish color. But then again, almost everything has a strange color by now. The sky is still pink, the trees and the bushes are like rainbows around me. All this caused by the venom.

Cato lets out a scream and turns on me now. “You are going to pay for that,” he snarls at me. He lunges forward but I take a leap over a branch. I trip and fall again, but I roll on my back just in time to see him coming towards me. Everything is blurred. I know I have to get up and fight, or run. Either one of them will be better than lying here. However, it is too late because Cato is on me now. I am aware of the sword in his hand, coming closer. Apparently, for Cato things are just as blurred as for me, because when he tries to cut me, he misses and plunges his sword in the ground, right next to me. I scramble back on my feet and start to walk backwards, away from him. He hauls the sword out of the ground, screaming in frustration. “I’ll get you, I’ll kill you!”

I’m overwhelmed by the pain of the stings, the one under my ear is swelling even more now and the pull of the venom is getting stronger. I know it won’t be long before I’ll black out. The one thing I can do is try to get away from Cato. I take off in the opposite direction from where Katniss went.

Cato is chasing after me, he is still screaming but I can’t make out what he’s saying. It seems the stings are getting the better of him too. He is catching up on me and he shoves me hard. “Die, you evil creature,” he screams at me. He thrusts his sword forward and stabs me in my upper left thigh. The sword pierces through my skin, going through nerves, veins and muscle. I feel the tip of the sword hit against my thighbone. The pain is excruciating and I hear myself cry out.

Cato pulls the sword back and I’m sure he’ll end me now. Cut my throat or behead me altogether. But he doesn’t. He is standing over me, shouting. “Die! Die now!” Suddenly his eyes grow wide with terror as he stares at me. He turns around and runs away fast, still screaming for me to die. There is no logical reason for him to run away like this. The terror in his eyes explains to me that he must have been seeing some kind of monster in my place, a hallucination as an effect of the tracker jacker poison.

Whatever it was, I am on my own now. I prop myself up on my elbows to take a look at my leg. There is a gash in my left thigh. The cut is deep and blood is seeping out of it. The pain is blinding me and combined with the tracker jacker stings it is unbearable. I can only form one coherent thought; I have to get out of here. I lay out in the open, visible for everybody in a five meter radius. I twist my head to the side to see if there is some place to hide. On my left I see a couple of low bushes with big leaves. I crawl towards them on my elbows and my good leg, dragging my left leg along, whimpering because of the pain. It seems to take forever and I don’t know how I did it, but I’ve finally managed to reach the bushes and crawl under them. I lie on my back and stare at the foliage, as the venom slowly takes away my sanity. The last thing I remember are the leaves changing into a million dragonflies. Then everything grows black.

The nightmares show me my parents getting killed in front of me, my brothers and friends being tortured. And most of all Katniss. Katniss jumping out of trees, getting stung by tracker jackers so bad, that she finally looks like Glimmer and Marly looked when they died. Katniss bursting into flames and turning to ashes. Katniss transforming into a bird and flying away, away from me. Never to return. I don’t know how much time passes. I can’t tell when I’m awake or when I’m sleeping, and what is real and what not. It scares me more than I would imagine.

The anthem blares, cutting through my nightmares and I will my eyes to open and look at the sky. Glimmers picture is just fading and right after that Marly shows up. Then the sky grows dark,
except for the stars. I remember the last thing Marly said to me, “they are still out there,” before the nightmares pull me back under.

I wake twice more by the sound of the anthem, both times there are no pictures in the sky. No deaths. That means that I am still alive too, I am dumbfounded, I thought I was supposed to be dead. It sure feels like it. But more important than this, Katniss is also still alive. With that in mind I sink into a soundless sleep.

When I finally open my eyes again I see the sun through the foliage. It must be somewhere around noon, because the sun is high up in the sky. How many days have passed? The anthem is my clock. I think back, not entirely sure if my memory can be trusted. But it is all I have to rely on now. Three times, I think it were three anthems. With Glimmer and Marly in the sky the first time and no more deaths after that.

My throat is burning with thirst and I’m hungry too. My leg is hurting like crazy and the tracker jacker stings are aching and itching. There is no way I can walk, but I have to get to the stream somehow. I can hear the water flowing, it is nearby. As I peak under the foliage the only living beings around are mockingjays. The arena is actually filled with them. They remind me of the pin on Katniss’s shirt. The coast seems clear enough, so I take my chances. I’m crawling towards the stream, trying to be soundless, which is impossible. Thankfully, the stream is only a couple of yards away and I am grateful when I arrive there. The cool water refreshes my skin and I scoop up a few handfuls to drink. I don’t have any iodine to purify the water, but there is nothing I can do about that. And I am beyond caring.

Lying down next to the stream, I stare at the sky and see the sun slide over it, bringing the day to an end. My stomach is growling now, therefore I resolve to catching a fish. Fishing was something I used to do with my brothers, but we had tools, a net, a fishing-rod. All I have now are my hands. After a few attempts I have success though. The stream is filled with fish, even without the tools it’s not really hard. The fish would taste better cooked, but there is no way I could make a fire, so I resign on eating it raw. It is not bad at all. But after all this exertion I am exhausted. Staying near the water seems like a better idea than returning to the foliage, because moving is to painful. But I do need some camouflage to cover me up. I cover myself in mud and replace myself so that I’m behind a big rock. It is getting dark and the anthem plays again. No deaths today.

The night brings me my father in a dream. He is standing in the bakery, wearing a white apron, streaks of flower on his clothes and in his hair. He turns around and sees me standing in the doorway. “Peeta,” he calls my name and stretches his hand out towards me. “We are going to bake cookies together, okay?” he smiles and I smile back at him. He orders me to get a box of eggs out of the kitchen. With both my hands carefully wrapped around the box I walk back to the bakery. But I stumble over the threshold and the box is flying out of my hands and landing on the ground. I stretch my hands to break my own fall and cut a finger on the sharp edge of the cabinet that is standing next to the door. The floor is filled with egg whites and yolks. Tears well up in my eyes because I know how expensive they are and I’ve ruined them. But my father is there now, and he gently lifts me in his arms. “It’s okay, Peeta, don’t worry about it.” He takes my hand and examines the cut in my finger, he smiles at me and says, “I think we're going to have to fix that.”
Frosting, the final defence of the dying

Chapter Summary

Peeta is lying at the riverbank and needs to disguise himself better to prevent others from finding him.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own the Hunger Games.

I have decided to trust him wholeheartedly. He is my father after all. But I also know that eggs are expensive and a waste like this would surely end in punishment. But the night has given me a good dream and my father just cleans the wound and puts a bandage on it. Then he cleans up the mess and throws the egg box in the trash bin outside.

“Come, lets bake cookies,” he says again and we go back to the bakery.

The dream gets interrupted by the sound of a cannon. It brings me back to the misery of my life. Leaving my father in the mist of the night and reality hits me hard. I am a tribute in the Hunger Games. I will never bake cookies with my father again. It was just a dream, but it felt so real. And so peaceful. I stare at my finger, expecting a cut and a bandage. My hand is covered in small scars, a result of Katniss throwing me against the urn in the Training Center. But there is no sign of the cut I received in my dream. Because it was never there. Because it wasn’t real.

The sound of cannon, I think suddenly, means that someone died. Katniss! Before I know it I whisper her name. She can’t be it, though. I will not accept it. And there are still a lot of tributes left, chances are it’s someone else. Someone who isn’t armed with a bow. Katniss is probably high up in a tree, safe and able to defend herself. This thought convinces me that she is still alive.

The sun is slowly rising now. It must be early morning. My throat is paper dry so I manage to get myself up in a sitting position. I scoop up water with my hands. Wondering what it’ll do to me, because I don’t have anything to purify it with. After I’ve quenched my thirst I check my leg. The gash is still there, but it stopped bleeding. I wonder if I left a trail and suddenly I realize I will be too easy to find like this. A little bit of mud and leaves is not good enough to conceal me. Anyone walking by me would see me immediately. And then I’m dead for sure. I know I am already dying. But I prefer doing it here, lying at this riverbank, instead of being killed by another tribute. Maybe, if I can conceal myself properly I can go off dreaming of my father again. Or of something else that is peaceful and happy.

I have led a happy life so far. It wasn’t always easy. My mother, I love her, but she could be harsh sometimes. She’d hit me for doing something wrong. The fear in my dream, after I dropped the eggs, was there because of that. If she were there, instead of my father, she’d hit me for sure. And it was hard work sometimes, at the bakery. But overall, I loved it. I like baking, I like spending that time with my father and my brothers. I liked our summers, where we would wrestle in the backyard, just for the fun of it. My brothers would win, of course, being older and bigger than I
was. But I was getting better. Last year, during the wrestling contest at school, I lost to Rye, but just barely. Another year of training and growing up and I could have taken him for sure. But now there is no way to find out anymore.
The thought makes me sad and I shake my head to clear it. I have to focus on the task at hand: concealing myself.

Where to start? I have to stay close to the stream. I want to be able to drink, with this hot sun I’ll be dehydrated in no time if I don’t drink. My mind wanders to the camouflage spot a the Training Center. The trainer had only those supplies at hand that are accessible in this arena. Mud and clay, berry juices. My eyes fall on a bush with red berries, close by. If I sit up some more and stretch I will be able to reach it. The berries come off easily and I take about a handful of them. What else? I spin my head around to survey the area. If I move a couple of yards further on, there is a small gap between a rock and the riverbank. It is filled with plants, which I could also use to conceal myself. It will be hard for me to get there, but I am sure it will also pay off with peace and quiet for the remaining days of my life.

I start to drag myself to the gap slowly. Making sure the area doesn’t give away any signs of my being here. I erase my tracks as good as I can and I make it to the gap. I just fit inside of it. Working my way with the plants, the berry juices and a lot of mud and clay. Because I’m close to the water, there is a lot of mud and clay, and it sticks well. I cover my legs with a thick layer of it. There are some small rocks lying around, I can gather them from where I lay and place them on my lower body. Soon there is nothing left of my legs. It is covered in the rocks, plants and mud. My upper body is a bigger challenge. I’m working for what seems like hours. I have to take several breaks, because it is warm and the work is tiring. And my energy level isn’t as high as it used to be. I’m scooping up water to create more mud. I plaster it in my hair and on my face as well, to make sure every inch is covered. When I think I’m about done, I sit up and look at my reflection in the water. Even sitting up, I’m almost unrecognizable.

I’m also officially wiped out. It is late in the afternoon, my energy is drained as I let myself sink back into the gap. Slowly, I’m losing my consciousness.

My father returns to me in my dream, we are still in the bakery, it is like we picked up where we left off.
“Dad,” I ask him, “why weren’t you mad at me for dropping the eggs?”
He looks at me with a concerned expression on his face, “listen son, you can’t be mad at someone for something they did unintentionally. Well, you can, but its hardly fair. And even if someone does something to you on purpose, if you get mad at them, it won’t win you anything. And it doesn’t help or resolves the harm that is done. I am not saying you should accept injustice, but it is not always helpful to shout out in anger. Channel your emotions into something that is actually useful.”
I stare at him as I let his words sink in. My father, so full of wisdom. Not that he never got mad. Everybody loses their temper sometimes, I know I do. And he did too, but over all he was a quiet and patient man. All I know about life is what I have learned from him. He was the one who never accepted the breach between Seam and merchant. He always points out the good in people. He helps me be a better person and I love him for it.

We continue to bake cookies. And after that we frost them. My talent from frosting is something I got from my mother. She could draw lines perfectly and had a steady hand. I would just copy her work in the beginning, but later on I started to create my own patterns. Flowers, animals. Anything I could think of. If someone ordered a birthday cake I would ask them for whom it was and what they’d like, what their favourite colors are and stuff like that. With this knowledge I would frost a cake exactly to their liking. Soon there came special requests for me to do the frosting and I took over the job from my mother. She was fine with that, because it took up too much of her time. Today, in my dream, I frost the arena on the cookies. The trees, the cornucopia,
the tracker jackers. My father doesn’t seem to mind the unusual pictures. And for me it is a way of coping with the truth of my life now. I guess that is what dreams do, they help you handle the reality.

There is a noise, a blast, filling the air and I feel the ground underneath me trembling. I open my eyes and know immediately that this is not a part of my dream. For a moment, everything seems frozen in time and I am confused. Then I remember where I am and I lift my head to stare backward into the air.

Chapter End Notes

A special thanks to my friend eala-musings for helping me with ideas about how to fill this chapter.

I'll be away for the weekend. Next chapter won't be up until monday evening. I hope it will be worth the wait!
Blasts and cannons

Chapter Summary

Peeta is lying in his mudbank, hearing blasts and cannons. And in the middle of the night he awakes at the sound of footsteps. Did anyone found him?

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I don't own THG

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The impact of an explosion somewhere in the arena is what causes the earth to tremble ever so slightly. The loud bang that I heard just now already indicated this. The air is clear from where I am looking. But the sound wasn’t that close by, so this doesn’t tell me anything. What has caused this? It takes me a while to figure it out. It can’t be a cannon, cannons can be heard all over the arena, but they aren’t this loud and they sure don’t make the ground quiver. The only thing I can think of are the mines, the booby trap we build together with the boy from district three. But what could have caused them to go off? And by the sound of it, it’s not just one mine. It must have been all of them. Did some of the careers make a mistake trying to get supplies from the pyramid? Maybe because they were delirious from the tracker jacker venom? This must also mean someone died, or maybe even more than one. The sound of cannon could easily be lost in the blasts caused by the mines.

I strain my ears to make out any sound, maybe they would wait with the cannons till after the explosions. The cannons are there so we know someone died. It doesn’t make sense to fire a cannon when nobody can hear it. Another blasts sounds, but this is not a cannon either. It must be one of the mines we buried a little further away from the pile. We buried a few of them in half a circle, strewn around the pyramid. Boom! Boom! Another two mines explode. I am fully awake now. It must be total mayhem there. I wish I could go see what is happening. But I know I have to wait until the anthem tonight to see if the blasts implied any deaths.

Not long after the last few explosions I do finally hear a cannon. So at least one person died today. Oh wait, two people died, because this morning there was a cannon as well, waking me from my dream.

Something tells me I should get up to try to find some food and also drink some water. But I don’t feel like it, I actually enjoy lying in this mud bank, quietly and peaceful. And I’m not hungry anyway, so why should I? Instead I just lie and watch the sun go down. The stars appear at the same time with the anthem and the capitol seal becomes visible in the sky. The boy from three is the first face, that must have been the second cannon, after the blow. Somehow I don’t think he was killed by the mines, he was too smart for that. No, this must be the work of the careers. He outlived his usefulness for them. The consequences of the explosion suddenly become clear to me. The supplies are probably all gone. We’ve buried twenty four mines around them and by the sound of it, they’ve all gone off. Of course this means the end of the boy from three. No need to keep him in an alliance when the food is gone. Cato probably killed him.
The second face in the sky is from the boy from ten. I don’t remember him, I don’t think I’ve seen
him anywhere since the gong went off.

Eight of us left. Marvel, Cato and Clove. The girl from five, both from eleven and both from
twelve. I would never have thought I’d make it this far. Eight. This means there will be camera
crews on their way to our district. They will interview my parents, my brothers. Katniss’s mother
and sister as well. Some of our friends. This is customary for the Games. With only eight tributes
still alive, the people of the Capitol want to know more about them. They get interested. Not really
of course, just as long as a tribute lives, which is, for seven of us, not very long. As soon as we
die, we are reduced to nothing. And no one remembers us, but our own loved ones. And even
they will move on with their lives eventually. This is what dead means. To be honest, I would
want them to move on. I don’t want them drowning in their grief over me. What use is that to
anyone?

My eyes turn back to the sky. The stars have all appeared and are shining brightly. I watch their
patterns and wonder if one falls, will it be missed? And by who? Is there anybody out there? I saw
a falling star once, a bright streak of light racing through the skies. I asked my father where it was
going. “Who is to know?” he answered, “we can’t answer all the questions of the universe, Peeta.
Sometimes we just have to live with the unknown.” I didn’t like that answer, because I was a
curious kid back then and I wanted to know.

But my father is right, we can’t know everything. What I do know is that I am not feeling well.
The temperature drops as the night continues, but I’m not cold. In fact, I feel extremely warm,
unnaturally hot. I must have a fever, probably caused by all the unattended wounds. I haven’t
eaten all day and only had a couple of sips of water. But strange enough, I’m not hungry nor
thirsty. This isn’t a good thing, but I just have to accept that I am on my way out. Let nature just
lead her natural course.

The sound of several footsteps wake me from my slumber. Not long after that I hear hushed
voices talking. It must be late in the night, dawn is approaching and the only people that would
walk around this time of night, in a group, must be the careers. They’ve come to a halt now. It’s
not that they are standing right next to me, but they sure are close. I’m terrified to make a sound
and stay as still as I possibly can. Being caked in mud, plants and rocks does help. All this weight
upon me make it hard to move. But why are they standing still here? Maybe they’ve seen me? But
no, they are not approaching me, their attention is on something else.

“I want to go back to see if that net I’ve set up caught anyone yet.” It is Marvel’s voice.
“What is the use?” a harsh voice, Cato. “We just came from that direction. We’ve searched
everywhere. Those fires were a set up.”

“Still, I think it will work, we’ve placed that net on the route to that second fire. The tribute who
did this, must go back there and that can be any second. If anyone gets caught under that net, we
have to be there to finish the job.” Marvel insists.

“Why must they get back there? That is nonsense, Marvel. And I don’t know about you two, but
I’ve had it for now,” Clove answers, she sounds pretty tired and impatient. “I want to go back to
the lake with this food we’ve collected and the bread we got from the sponsors, to get a decent
meal and some rest. I mean, we’ve chased those fake fires all day, hunted the tribute who blew up
the food all night and we’re still empty handed.”

“I know,” snarls Cato, “you don’t have to remind me, Clove. That is exactly why we should
continue hunting instead of walking back to that stupid net.”

While they argue I ponder on what net they could possibly be talking about. Perhaps Marvel had a
net on his pack, or something. And their food is blown up! Apparently, someone did that! Could it
be Katniss? But how on earth would she achieve something like that. I wish I could talk to her,
ask her about it.

“I’m going back to the lake,” Clove is almost shouting now, breaking me out of my train of
thoughts.
“Okay, come, we’re all going to the lake, have something to eat and rest a little” Marvel says, “but by noon I want to go back to check out the net.”
“You do that,” Cato says, I can hear the sarcasm dripping from his voice. “You just go and do that, in the meantime, Clove and I will actually hunt tributes, ok?”
“Whatever.” Marvel mutters. Then their footsteps sound again, they’re moving away from me, in the direction of the lake. I wait five minutes before I dare to open my eyes. The colour of the sky tells me morning isn’t far away.

I’m propping myself up on my elbows and lean into the direction of the stream to drink a little. The movement takes away all the energy I have. The water is only two feet away from where I’m lying, but it is too far. After two attempts I give up and lay back in the mud. I reposition the plants to make sure that everything is back to place. I feel myself getting weaker and weaker as the morning slowly changes to afternoon. It won’t be long. I won’t last long here. A couple more days maybe. My leg still hurts, but it’s become sort of a constant throbbing, that I hardly notice. What does bother me is something Clove had said, “the bread we got from the sponsors.”
I suddenly realize that I’ve gotten nothing from sponsors. Not a single thing. Did Haymitch forgot about me? Or is he too drunk to help me out? No, that can’t be it. The only explanation I can think of, is that he’s given whatever he’s got to Katniss. And that is fine. It really is. I want her to live.

“Katniss,” I whisper her name, almost without my own volition. But it sounds good. “Katniss,” I repeat again. I want to see her one more time before I die. Just see her face, those beautiful grey eyes. Her small frame, her spirit, her humour. That long dark hair, braided on her back. I regret that I’ve never found the courage to talk to her. To just go up to her after school and ask her whatever. How she’s doing maybe? If she wants to join me for a drink. But even now, the idea seems preposterous. Imagine Katniss coming home with me for tea. I can almost hear my mother’s dismay. It doesn’t matter anymore. All of that is out of my reach now. The only thing I can do is fantasise about her. How her lips felt, soft and warm on my cheek. How she smelled. I imagine her standing here in front of me. I can see her now and take up every inch of her, never wanting to forget how she looks. Her face, her eyes, her hair, her body.

Chapter End Notes

A special thanks to my friend Jannieta who offered the idea of the passing by of other tributes for this chapter.
Thanks to my friend eala-musings for helping me with suggestions on how to fill this chapter.
Towards the end

Chapter Summary

Peeta is slowly going towards the end and is reminiscing his life.

Chapter Notes

unfortunately, I do not own the Hunger Games, I do enjoy writing the story again from Peeta's perspective.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The boy that I used to be would have been ashamed of having thoughts like these about a girl. But I am going towards the end and I am beyond caring. I am waiting for dead to arrive, the least I can do to make that bearable is to think about whatever I want to think about. So my mind wanders back to Katniss. How warm her hand felt in mine on that chariot. How she clang to me. I want to know how it would feel to have her in my arms. To hold her close to me. To kiss her lips and caress her hair.

The sound of a cannon fire somehow resonates in my ears. In my befuddled mind I consider that this means someone died. Katniss? No not Katniss, right? I thought this exact same thing about the cannon from yesterday morning. The one that signified the death of the boy from ten. At that time it wasn’t Katniss. But now? I can’t know for sure. Again, I have to wait for the anthem. Not long after the first cannon a second fires. Two more people dead. Only six left now, six. And I am still one of them. I didn’t expect to live to be in the top eight, I certainly didn’t expect to last till there are only six of us left. There is no knowing who died. But I am grateful that the sun is already close to the horizon.

The cannons give us a heads up, but the time to wait for the anthem is agonizing. I want to know, I have to know who died and who is still alive. And there is nothing to do to keep me busy. I am too weak to get up or move. I am not interested in food or water. I try to distract myself by thinking about Katniss again, but this doesn’t help at all. It only makes me worry more about the two cannons and I wish I’d never heard them or that the faces would come in the sky immediately.

What will it do to me if this time, her face will appear? Will it make my last days any worse than they are now? I think yes. I’ve tried so hard to keep her safe, to protect her from Cato. To play these games on my own terms. If I failed, what does that mean? Will it make my life completely useless, have I lived it in vain? My father says nobody’s life is useless. Everyone has a purpose, even if we don’t see it. I find it hard to believe though. What could possibly be the purpose of a young child starving to death. And what is the purpose of dozens of people getting blown up in the mines. And what is my purpose, dying in a mud bank, not able to protect this girl I’m in love with.

While I think my way into a depression the sun sets and finally the anthem starts and the Capitol seal appears in the sky. The first face is a big shock to me. Marvel. Another career gone. How could this have happened? Will the other one also be a career? My question is answered as the
second picture appears. It is Rue, the little girl from district eleven. This girl, so small, so young. I expected her to die from the first time I saw her. Still, it hurts to see her picture in the sky. A reminder of the cruelty of this all. At the same time, I can’t help to feel relieve that it wasn’t Katniss. She survived to live another day.

But how did Marvel die? Where were the other two careers when this happened? Did it have anything to do with the discussion they had the other night? They talked about a net, or something. I don’t really remember. Marvel had said something about going back and Cato had disagreed with him. They probably split up. That is the only reason I can think of why Marvel alone is dead. I don’t think Cato or Clove killed him. Or maybe they did. Who is to say?

I fall asleep slowly, not minding the cold of the night. I’m packed in my mud and it’s keeping me warm enough. My fever is also pretty high, as far as I can tell. How long can a person live like this? Not eating, not drinking, a nasty wound and a high fever. I think back on how many nights it’s been since Cato stabbed me. The anthem and dead toll help me with that. The first night was with Glimmer and Marly in the sky. Then I think there were three nights in a row with no deaths. Everyone was pretty out of it those days, because of the tracker jacker. The next day the boy from three and the boy from ten and today Marvel and Rue. Five nights.

This night I’m not sleeping as well as I was before. I wake up several times. Shivering from the cold or shivering from the fever. Too hot, too cold. Everything feels uncomfortable. I am so tired and so sick of this. I think at this point I am okay with dying. Especially when dying means that I won’t feel this miserable anymore. But I’m not dying, at least not yet. Dawn announces another day. Another day of lying in the mud. I’m not looking forward to it.

It is an uneventful day. There is nothing happening around me. No one appears except for some animals. There are a few birds around. They are Mockingjays. I can tell because they’re whistling some sort of tune. It must be something someone taught them. It sounds like a melody from a song. Mockingjays can copy sounds. My father told me that if you sing to them, they’ll listen and copy it. But only if you’re really good at it. That was the reason Katniss’s mother chose the coalminer. Because he could sing so beautiful. And every Mockingjay would fell silent to listen, and then copy the melody. He came to our store often, sometimes bringing Katniss with him. I remember, a long time ago, we must have been around seven years old, when he came and sang a song about a tree. I don’t really know what the lyrics were about, but I listened carefully, to check if my father was right about the birds. He was. It was almost eerily quiet after Katniss’s father had stopped singing. Only for a while, because after that the Mockingjays picked up the tune and started their own song.

Katniss has a pin with a Mockingjay on it. She wore it on her outfit on the train. A golden pin on a green shirt. How I am able to remember these vivid details in my delirious state is beyond me. Do people have moments of clarity before they sink into a coma? Does everything becomes clear towards the end?

The day drags on. It is a warm day and I feel like I’m practically cooking inside of my mud coverings. I also slip in and out of consciousness several times. The people I love visit me in my dreams. Nick tells me to ditch classes with him, to play ball instead of listening to our boring English teacher. My brothers tease me and provoke me to wrestle with them. My mother sings me to sleep, like she did when I was young and she wasn’t as bitter as the years made her.

My father and mother do not have a happy marriage. My father was in love with another woman. My mother was in love with him and too blind to see he already gave his heart away. They got married before she found out. After their marriage she became pregnant with Brannick, very soon. All the love she didn’t get from my father, she got from my older brother. They were and are very
close. For Rye and me it was different. She was nice enough in the beginning, but I always felt that she loved Brannick more. When I was around seven years old, things started to change. Brannick was 11 and became an annoying teenager. My mother resented him for it and became bitter. But she took it out on Rye and me. When Brannick got older, they grew back together, but my mother kept her temper. I think that was mostly because she was dissapointed in my father. Most of his attention went to the bakery, the rest of it he spend on us. My mother was at the back of the line. I guess it explains her bitterness. But I like to remember her now, like she was when I was still young, I want to forget that she loved someone else more than me. I want to forget every bad thing that ever happened to me and only remember the good things. The acts of kindness in my life.

My father tells me it is okay. I can let go, I fought hard and brave and all is good now. Towards the end, all is good.

Vaguely I hear the anthem start and I want to see the sky. Were there cannons today? I don’t know. I wasn’t awake all the time, I might have missed it. It takes some effort to open my eyes. I want to stay in my dreamworld where everything is alright. When I finally open them I see the seal of the capitol and after that just blackness.

A trumpet resounds through the night. I don’t understand. We just had the anthem, right? Am I hearing things that aren’t there now? But then a voice comes over the speakers, I identify as Claudius Templesmith.

“Congratulations to you, the six remaining tributes,” he says, “there has been a rule change in the Games. Listen very carefully.” He is silent for a second, as to wait for us to catch up on him. “Both tributes from the same district will be declared winners if they are the last two alive.” Another few seconds of silence and then he repeats himself. “Both tributes from the same district will be declared winners if they are the last two alive.”

What? Both can live? As long as they are from the same district. But that means, both of us can live. Katniss and me. This is new, this is unheard of. Both of us can live. Before I can stop myself, I call out Katniss’s name.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to my friend eala-musings for helping me with ideas about how to fill this chapter.
Part 3: The Victory
Katniss finds Peeta, tends his wounds and then finds a cave for them to hide in. And they share their first kiss....

Chapter Notes

I do not own THG and I have copied the dialogue from THG chapter 19 to use in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Part 3: The Victory

I clap my hands over my mouth in shock. The movement exhausts me immediately. What am I doing? Now I have to rearrange the plants and rocks again and I don’t have the energy to do that. What scares me more was the sound of my voice. So weak and barely audible, though I involuntarily tried to give it some volume. Both of us can live, but it is not likely that will happen at all. I would be surprised if I would even make it through another day. I try to rearrange the rocks a little and lie back down and let my mind wander.

What will happen now? Will Katniss come to find me? She knows I’m still alive, right? Why else would this rule change be here? The only other couple who benefit from it are Cato and Clove. Cato and Clove, such a lovely couple, always bickering and arguing against each other. They are not the reason for this rule change. I know it for sure.

It must be us then, the star crossed lovers. Because of my interview, teaming up with the careers, fighting Cato. We are most likely a big hit. Things are probably pretty boring for the Capitol audience right now. Only six of us left, widely spread across the arena, and I am lying in this mud bank for days now. What is the fun in that? They want some action. Hence the star crossed lovers twist. I guess it means they will anticipate that Katniss will come looking for me. But this whole thing, it is not real. At least not for her. So will she come looking for me? Why would she? We are allies now, if we both can live it would make sense for her to come look for me. If we’re a team, we have to work together to survive.

But I can’t work, I can’t do anything. I’m practically dead. Except Katniss doesn’t know that. So she will come, right? I want to believe it. I so want to see her again. See her silver grey eyes, her smile. If I’m dying, let me die with her face imprinted in my memory. And if she finds me, I’ll tell her to win. To live a good life after this. To hang in there and not give up. I’m sure she can win. Cato and Clove are a tough couple to beat, but Katniss is smart. She can do it.

I sink into a deep sleep and Katniss comes to visit me in my dream. She tells me she is on her way to find me and I smile. When I wake it is light again, another day in the arena. I think about the rule change but then a wave of doubt brushes over me. I’m not sure what Katniss will do, if she
will be on her way, because why should she? Would she make the connection with the star crossed lovers? Haymitch did tell her it would be in her advantage. And if she does come looking for me, how on earth would she find me? I guess I just have to trust her. That is all I can do.

It is still early in the morning, when I find out that trusting her was the right thing to do. I hear the footsteps. They are eerily soft, and I know right away that this must be Katniss. Maybe the girl from district five is able to walk like this, but why would she be here? I haven’t seen her since the gong went off. And it can’t be any of the others. My heart almost jumps out of my chest with the sudden feeling of extreme happiness. She came! She came to find me. And that means I can see her again, before I die.

When I hear her whisper my name, relieve flushes over me. She is really close now, I open my eyes and see her standing there. Just a few yards away from me, her back towards me, her eyes searching the area. "Peeta! Peeta!" she calls my name again. A mockingjay begins to mimic her tones and she turns around and walks in my direction. She doesn’t see me and I know soon she will have moved on. I have to let her know I’m here. She is standing right next to me, ready to step into the water. I’ve closed my eyes again, the light of the sun is too much for them to handle, so I am invisible. But I can talk, so I say, "You here to finish me off, sweetheart?"

I can feel her moving around and I hear her whisper, "Peeta, Where are you?"
I am enjoying this too much to answer her just yet. The sound of her voice, saying my name. It is all I can wish for. "Peeta?" she whispers again and now I can feel her right next to my right leg. "Well, don't step on me."
She moves again and I have to open my eyes now. She is standing next to me and bends over me now, gasping in surprise and I laugh at the expression on her face. Katniss’s eyes wander over my body, trying to make out what is me and what is not. "Close your eyes again," she orders. I close my eyes and my mouth. Katniss kneels beside me. "I guess all those hours decorating cakes paid off," she says.

Rye, saying goodbye to me in the Justice Building. And Katniss, cutting me of in the Training Center. The memory makes me smile. "Yes, frosting. The final defense of the dying."
"You're not going to die," she tells me, and I'm surprised at the finality in her voice.
"Says who?" I whisper.
"Says me. We're on the same team now, you know," she says.
My eyes open. "So, I heard. Nice of you to find what's left of me." She is sitting next to my head now and takes her pack from her back. She pulls out a bottle of water and gives me a sip. The water is cool and purified.
"Did Cato cut you?" she asks.
"Left leg. Up high," I answer.
"Let's get you in the stream, wash you off so I can see what kind of wounds you've got," she says.

Katniss, always practical. I think about the star crossed lover thing again and decide to remind her. "Lean down a minute first, need to tell you something." she leans over and puts her right ear to my lips, and I whisper. "Remember, we're madly in love, so it's all right to kiss me anytime you feel like it."
She jerks back, but laughs. "Thanks, I'll keep it in mind."
I smile at that. I can’t help but wonder what she thinks about the whole thing. She’ll probably still thinks I’m faking it. What did Haymitch say about it? Something about her being hard to convince? Not that it matters much now. I’m just happy she found me. That is all I care about.

Katniss is set on getting me in the stream and tries to get me up. But I have no strength left and she is having a lot of trouble trying to get me out of my camouflage. I haven’t felt pain in days, but now that she pulls on me, I feel it again. The pain of the stings and most of all, the pain in my thigh. Katniss tries to drag me towards the stream and I cry out in pain. I’m trying to be quiet but it
is impossible. When she tugs at my legs I have to put my hand on my mouth to muffle the sound of my screams. The tears are streaming over my face. She got me out of the mud and plants and stands over me now.

"Look, Peeta, I'm going to roll you into the stream. It's very shallow here, okay?" she says. "Excellent." I reply. She crouches down beside me, one hand on my arm, the other on my upper leg. "On three," she says and she starts counting. "One, two, three!" She pushes me towards the stream and the pain is agonizing. I can't stop the growling sounds escaping my mouth. I'm on the edge of the stream when she finally lets go.

"Okay, change of plans. I'm not going to put you all the way in," she says. "No more rolling?" I ask her as I open my eyes. "That's all done. Let's get you cleaned up. Keep an eye on the woods for me, okay?" she says. At that I turn my face towards the trees. It is hard to see anything at all. Little stars and red dots are clouding my view. But now that I'm lying still the pain ebbs away a little. Katniss starts pouring water over my body. With it the mud and dirt flows away into the stream, revealing my clothes beneath it. The cold water makes me shiver. Katniss takes my jacket and shirt off, and then has to cut me out of the undershirt. She's drenching me again in the water and surveys my body with skilled eyes to assess the damage done.

I'm lying in a pool of mud, staring at her. Wondering if she is really there or if I'm starting to see things. But when she begins tugging on me again, propping me up against a large rock, the pain in my leg reminds me that this is real. I don't complain though. What is there to complain really? I am sitting here in the sun, and I'm taken care of by the girl I love. To me, this is almost heaven. She starts treating my wounds now. First the tracker jacker stings, she pulls at them, digging out the stingers. It hurts and I wince. Then she takes some leaves out of her pack and starts chewing them. I don't know why she does it, but when she takes the green blob out of her mouth and puts it on the lumps, the pain dulls immediately. This stuff is amazing and I sigh in relief. I have trouble believing that this is really happening, Katniss taking care of me, healing me, and for what?

Katniss starts washing my clothes while I let the sun warm my body. I can feel I'm really hot, too hot, my fever must be very high. I look at the trees again, but not much is happening there. I watch Katniss spread my jacket and shirt over boulders, to let them dry. Then she returns to me, takes a small pot out of her pack and applies a cream to my chest. The aching of the burn on my chest is reduced to almost nothing, because of it. I hardly notice, though, cause I'm feeling woozy and so tired.

"Swallow these," Katniss says and I stare down at her hands. She holds out a few white pills and I take them. "You must be hungry." She says and turns to her pack to get out some food for me. "Not really. It's funny, I haven't been hungry for days," I say. She holds out her hand, offering me something that smells really bad and my stomach turns. I wrinkle my nose and turn my head away from the smell.

"Peeta, we need to get some food in you," Katniss insists. "I'll just come right back up," I say. Just the idea of it nearly makes me retch. Katniss keeps pushing though, and finally I cave and take a piece of dried apple from her. The taste of it almost makes me gag again but I manage to keep it down, for her sake. "Thanks. I'm much better, really." I say, although I feel exhausted. "Can I sleep now, Katniss?" I ask her. "Soon," she answers "I need to look at your leg first." She takes off my shoes, socks and pants. The pain in my leg is flaring up again. I look at Katniss and see the color drain from her face as she takes in the wound. "Pretty awful, huh?" I say. "So-so." she shrugs, and I almost laugh because it is so clear that she is lying. "You should see some of the people they bring my mother from the mines. First thing is to clean it well."
Oh yes, Katniss’s mother is a healer. I haven’t thought about that before. I’m lucky then, that she is here to help me. She must have some knowledge of it. The green stuff on my tracker jacker stings have proven that already. But the wound on my leg is something different. I remember the tip of the sword touching my thighbone, the wound must be very deep. I can see the doubt in Katniss’s eyes. It is clear that she has no idea what to do about it.

"Why don't we give it some air and then. " she doesn’t finish the sentence and I start to feel sorry for her. Here I am, almost dead, and she comes to find me and now she has to deal with this huge wound. I can’t help feeling a bit guilty about it. Teaming up with me, I’m not sure if that was a good idea for her. Because let’s face it, I am a burden to her.

"And then you'll patch it up?" I say.
"That's right," she replies. "In the meantime, you eat these."
She gives me a few dried pear halves and I start chewing them. Not because I want to, but because I want to help her out. She is back at the stream, washing my pants and then searching through a first aid kit. I wonder where she got it. Probably at the Cornucopia?

"We're going to have to experiment some," Katniss says to me. She takes another mouthful of the leaves and starts chewing on them. After a while she takes them out of her mouth and presses them into the wound on my leg. It hurts, but I don’t object. I feel a trail of pus streaming down the side of my leg and train my eyes on Katniss again. Her face is green and I can see straight away that she is having trouble keeping her food down. I’m racking my brain to say something to help her out. Something to distract her maybe.

"Katniss?" I say, she looks up at me, despair written all over her face. I mouth the words at her. "How about that kiss?"
It has the desired effect, because she bursts out laughing.
"Something wrong?" I ask her in a high pitched voice.
"I, I'm no good at this. I'm not my mother. I've no idea what I'm doing and I hate pus," she says and lets out a groan. "Euuuh!" She rinses away the first round of leaves and applies a second when she groans again, louder this time. "Euuuh!" I'm a little surprised at her reaction though. "How do you hunt?" I ask her.
"Trust me. Killing things is much easier than this," she answers. "Although for all I know, I am killing you."
Oh good to know! Well, I'm dying anyways. "Can you speed it up a little?" I ask.
"No. Shut up and eat your pears," she says, and I smile at that. Obediently I prop another pear in my mouth while she continues to work on my leg.

"What next, Dr. Everdeen?" I ask her, when she’s finished with the leaves. She stares at the wound and says, "maybe I'll put some of the burn ointment on it. I think it helps with infection anyway. And wrap it up?"
She smears some salve on my leg and covers it in white cotton bandages. Then she hands me a backpack. "Here, cover yourself with this and I'll wash your shorts."
"Oh, I don't care if you see me," I say.
"You're just like the rest of my family, I care, all right?" she says and turns her back at me. I pull of the undershorts and throw them in the stream. I put the bag in its place instead while I ask myself why she cares about that so much.
"You know, you're kind of squeamish for such a lethal person," I tell her while I look at her beating the shorts clean between two rocks. "I wish I'd let you give Haymitch a shower after all."

She wrinkles her nose and I smile. "What's he sent you so far?" she asks me.
"Not a thing," I say. The question takes me by surprise and then I realize what it implies. "Why, did you get something?"
"Burn medicine," she says it as if she's ashamed. "Oh, and some bread."
"I always knew you were his favorite," I tell her.
"Please, he can't stand being in the same room with me," she says.
"Because you're just alike," I mutter. I turn my head to the trees again and close my eyes. I don’t care that Haymitch send her stuff while I lay dying in this mud bank. I don’t care about anything at this point. I’m just happy to lay here in the sun, covered in just a backpack and a white bandage around my thigh.

I must have dozed off, because the next thing I know is Katniss shaking my shoulder and the day is already coming to its end. "Peeta, we've got to go now," Katniss says.
"Go? Go where?" I look at her, confused. I don’t really know where I am and where she wants us to go.
"Away from here. Downstream maybe. Somewhere we can hide you until you're stronger," she says.
I look around and remember where we are. In the arena, next to the stream. And now that I’ve lost my camouflage, Katniss’ request makes sense. She brings my clothes and helps me in them. First the undershorts, as I remove the bag Katniss turns away from me, like she did earlier today. I put the shorts on and then Katniss helps me with the rest of my clothes. Not my socks and shoes though, cause she wants to walk through the water. She helps me get up, but as soon as I put a little weight on my left leg, I almost faint from the pain. "Come on. You can do this." Katniss tells me.

For her sake, I try. Leaning against her shoulder, her arm around my waist. The pain is literally blinding me, my vision blurred by big black dots. After about fifty yards, Katniss sits me down and pushes my head between my legs. I try breathing deep because I feel like I’m losing my consciousness. I feel Katniss’ hand on my back. I vaguely sense the warmth of it trough the material of my jacket. After a while my vision becomes clear again and I sit up straight. Katniss points to a cave, twenty yards away, indicating our goal. Twenty yards, I can make that, I tell myself. Katniss half carries me to it and I’m breathing heavily and shivering from the sudden cold when we arrive. I sink down with my back against the rocks. Katniss covers the floor of the cave with pine needles and then tucks me into a sleeping bag.

I stare at her from where I lay. She’s fussing around. Props something in my mouth, I’m hardly aware of it. Some sips of water and she offers me a piece of apple, but I turn my face away from it. She gives up and starts covering the entrance of the cave. I realize again how teaming up with me gives her a disadvantage. Being high up in a tree is much safer than staying with me in this cave. Maybe I should just tell her to go. I can feel myself sinking, but I want to stay awake. I want to see her. So I keep my eyes fixated on her face while she works. It’s not good enough though, I feel like I’m drowning. Like the ground is ready to swallow me.

"Katniss," I whisper. She turns and comes to sit beside me. With her hand she brushes the hair back from my eyes. The feel of her hand against my forehead, it is strange somehow. "Thanks for finding me." I say, while I’m trying to keep my consciousness. I want to tell her how she should win, and that she shouldn’t be bothered with me, cause I am on my way out of here anyway. I can feel it.

"You would have found me if you could," she says.
She is right, I would have. But for her to acknowledge that, makes my heart lift up. She knows, she knows that I would do anything for her. And somehow, that makes me happy. It doesn’t change the fact that I want her to be safe though, high up in a tree.
"Yes. Look, if I don't make it back - " I begin my argument, but Katniss interrupts.
"Don't talk like that. I didn't drain all that pus for nothing," she says.
"I know. But just in case I don't - " I try again.
"No, Peeta, I don't even want to discuss it," she says and then her fingers are on my lips.
"But I - " I want to tell her, even with her fingers against my lips. Except suddenly she leans
forward and her lips are on mine. Warm and soft. I feel a rush going through me, despite the fever. I know I told her to kiss me, but I didn’t expect she would actually do it. Too soon she breaks away and pulls the edge of the sleeping bag up around me. "You're not going to die. I forbid it. All right?"
"All right," I whisper.
Whatever you want, I think, I’ll do it. I’ll fight for you, stay alive for you. For you, I’d do anything.

I stare at her as she walks out of the cave and I try to assess this kiss we just shared. This is the first time a girl kissed me. And not just any girl. Did she kiss me for the star crossed lovers act? Or is there another reason? I think back on how she looked at me a couple of times before, after the parade, when she’d kissed me on my bruise. And how she’d noticed these things about me, my wrestling, my strength. Could there be more? I can’t believe that she, as a Seam girl would actually fall for someone like me. But still, it’s not that she’s indifferent either.

I’m hardly conscious when I hear her voice, calling my name. "Peeta!" I’m startled by the feel of her lips against mine again. Is this real or am I dreaming? But the smell of pine needles and the very real pressure on my lips makes my doubt ebb away. Katniss is here and she is kissing me. I can’t think of any reason why she would kiss me, other than because she wants to. Or is it because of this star-crossed lover thing? I don’t know, but I want to believe that she likes it though, that she likes kissing me.

I open my eyes and smile at her. She holds up a pot and says. "Peeta, look what Haymitch has sent you."

Chapter End Notes

thanks so much to eala-musings for being my beta on this chapter!!
When the trumpet sounds

Chapter Summary

Katniss has a lot of trouble getting Peeta to eat and they find out he has blood poisoning. And then the trumpet sounds and Claudius Templesmith invites them all to a feast...

Chapter Notes

The Hunger Games is owned by Suzanne Collins, not by me :( 
Peeta and Katniss interact a lot in this chapter and most of the dialogue is literally copied from the original

Getting the broth into me takes Katniss a long time because I really don’t want it. I feel sick and I don’t want to eat. It tastes horrible, although she claims it is the best thing in the world she’s ever tasted.

She kisses me and begs me and I open my mouth to let a spoonful of the stuff in, for her sake. At the second one I turn my head away. She takes my face in her hand and forces me to look at her. “Peeta, please, you have to eat it. You need it.” I nod and she gives me another spoonful of the broth. While swallowing hard, I look at her and she smiles at me encouragingly. “See, it’s good, right?” she says. No it’s not, but I want to placate her so I nod again. If I could choose, though, I’d rather have her lips on mine, because that actually feels good.

She’s threatening me now. “Eat, Peeta! Haymitch sent this to you, it probably costs a million and you’re not going to let that go to waste.”

“Then you eat it,” I say peevishly. She shakes her head. “I don’t need it, you do. Please,” she begs and I open my mouth again for another portion. Katniss leans in and her lips are on mine again. I can taste the saltiness of the broth in this kiss. She breaks away and makes me eat. Sip by sip I empty the pot. When it’s all gone she makes me lie down again and kisses my forehead. I drift off to sleep.

I am burning, the heat is excessive. A cool cloth on my forehead. The whisper of my name. All of it comes to me in an unclear way. Sometimes I open my eyes and look into the darkness. I am aware of Katniss lying next to me, her body pressed against mine in the sleeping bag. Is this really happening? The pressure lifts again. Is she gone? Did she leave me? Suddenly I’m scared. My dreams are feverish and full of red colors. When I finally really awake I am alone. A panic surges through me and I try to get up. Where is Katniss? Why isn’t she here with me? She was here last night and now she’s gone. Are Cato and Clove here, did they find her? They didn’t kill her, right?

A moment later Katniss appears at the entrance of the cave and relieve washes over me. "I woke up and you were gone," I say to her. "I was worried about you." She laughs, kneels besides me and makes me lie down again. "You were worried about me? Have you taken a look at yourself lately?" she says, with the smile still around her lips.
"I thought Cato and Clove might have found you. They like to hunt at night," I say. I am still too shocked to laugh about it.
"Clove? Which one is that?" Katniss asks.
"The girl from District Two. She's still alive, right?" I say, because I don’t really remember anymore.
"Yes, there's just them and us and Thresh and Foxface," she says. I raise my eyebrows in a question. Foxface? "That's what I nicknamed the girl from Five," she explains. "How do you feel?"
"Better than yesterday. This is an enormous improvement over the mud," I tell her. "Clean clothes and medicine and a sleeping bag. And you." Above all, you, here with me.

I smile in relieve that she’s still here. She reaches her hand out towards me and I take it in mine, pressing my lips against it. It seems like a natural thing to do, like something I’ve done for years. She looks at me with a smile in her eyes but then pulls her hand back and says, "no more kisses for you until you've eaten."
She helps me up against the wall of the cave and feeds me berries mixed with water. I can taste the tartness of them. They’re not bad, really. After I’ve finished it Katniss wants to give me some meat again, but I refuse. “What is that stuff?” I ask her.
“It’s called groosling,” she says, “tastes like chicken, you should try it.”
“Maybe later,” I promise and then look at her face closely. She looks worn out, like she hasn’t slept in days.
"You didn't sleep," I say.
"I'm all right," she say. But I don’t believe that for a second.
"Sleep now. I'll keep watch. I'll wake you if anything happens," I say. Katniss seems uncertain.
"Katniss, you can't stay up forever." I insist.
She realizes the truth of what I’m saying and gives in.
"All right, but just for a few hours. Then you wake me."
She goes and lies down beside me, on top of the sleeping bag. Her hand is on her loaded bow, as if she’s ready to shoot at any moment. I sit against the wall and set my gaze on the entrance of the cave.

I stretch out my arm and brush the hair of her forehead, like she did to me yesterday. "Go to sleep," I say and I keep stroking her hair while I listen to her breathing. It slows down and becomes even within a matter of minutes and I know she’s gone. I keep stroking her hair as I stare into the distance. A part of me is amazed that she lets me touch her like this. She is so strong and independent, but now, she has let me in. Allowing herself to be vulnerable right in front of me, allowing me to be the one who watches over her instead of the other way around. I can’t help the burst of happiness exploding inside of me as I realize this. She trusts me completely and that means more to me than all the kisses in the world.

After an hour my eyes trail to her face. She looks so young and carefree in her sleep. The scowl is washed away from her face and even though she looks tired, she is beautiful to me. I’m still brushing her hair, and touch her cheek as well. Her skin is smooth and warm against the back of my hand. A shade darker than my pale skin. I notice it as I compare the color of my hand with her face.

It is hard to believe that only a day ago I was lying in a pile of mud and now I’m sitting next to Katniss. And she’s taken care of me. Cleaning my wounds, feeding me, kissing me. I like her kisses. The feel of her lips against mine. I wish I wasn’t this sick, so I could appreciate it more. But I have to face the fact that I am sick. As the day continues I feel weaker and weaker. Katniss has instructed me to eat and drink but I can’t get myself to do it. I don’t want it, I am just fine, sitting here, stroking her hair.

Katniss awakes late in the afternoon. I’ve let her sleep longer than she told me to and she notices it when she’s fully awake and realizes how late it is. "Peeta, you were supposed to wake me after a
A couple of hours," she says. 

At this, she scowls at me and I smirk. It is so easy to be myself around her and I want her to get to know me for who I am. More than a sick, dying boy. She sits up and puts her hand against my cheek.

“What have you been drinking?” she asks me and I nod. Not wanting to worry her. She tests the water containers and nods her head. “You’re not telling me the truth,” she says. She reaches for some fever pills, makes me swallow them and then she makes me drink almost half a container of water. “I’m going to check how you’re doing, okay?” she says and she undresses me. Applying another round of chewed leaves on the stings and a new layer of burn ointment on my chest. Then she takes off my trousers and unwraps the bandage on my leg.

I look down on it and know instantly that this is not good. My leg has swollen to almost twice its size and I can tell it is infected. Red streaks are creeping up my leg and this tells me the awful truth. Blood poisoning. There is no question about it. I know I felt pretty bad the last couple of days, but this, this is beyond saving. There is nothing in that first aid kit that will do me any good. I am on my way out.

I can see in Katniss’ expression that she’s reached the same conclusion. She doesn’t want me to know it, though. "Well, there's more swelling, but the pus is gone," she says, but I can hear her voice shaking.

"I know what blood poisoning is, Katniss," I say. "Even if my mother isn't a healer."

"You're just going to have to outlast the others, Peeta. They'll cure it back at the Capitol when we win," she turns and looks at me. But what she’s saying will only work if the others drop dead within the next couple of hours. And somehow I don’t think that will happen. I want to mollify her though, so I say, "Yes, that's a good plan."

"You have to eat. Keep your strength up. I'm going to make you soup," she says. I don’t like that idea. Her going out of this cave, making soup for me, while I’m beyond saving anyways. "Don't light a fire, it's not worth it." I tell her.

"We'll see," she shrugs, grasps the pot and leaves the cave. I’m shivering and put my clothes back on. I know this is not good, because I can sense the temperature is very hot. Unnaturally hot. Katniss stays away for some time and I lie down on the sleeping back. I feel miserable, physically, but I’ve come to terms with my death days ago, and one way or another, I’m glad that I’m not alone. Katniss, I still can’t believe she came to find me. That she’s here.

When she returns to the cave I feel my face light up. I can’t be anything else but happy to have her here with me in the remaining hours of my life. She crouches down beside me and puts a cool cloth on my forehead.

"Do you want anything?" she asks me, genuine concern written all over her face. It endears me and I want to say yes, just for her, but what would I want? Nothing to eat, that’s for sure. I’m already dreading the soup she’s making.

"No, thank you." I tell her, but then I think of something. Something to lighten the mood and to fill my head with happy things. I don’t want to linger on the inevitability of my death, instead I want to focus on good things. “Wait, yes. Tell me a story.”

"A story? What about?" she asks me.

"Something happy. Tell me about the happiest day you can remember," I say.

She sighs as if my request of a happy story is more difficult than healing my leg. She’s silent for a while, thinking over her options.

"Did I ever tell you about how I got Prim's goat?" she finally asks and I shake my head. I look at her eagerly and she begins the story.

“My mother had an old silver locket lying around. She didn’t wear it anymore and I asked her if I could sell it.” Katniss’ voice takes over a loving tone, talking about her mother and her sister. “I
wanted to buy Prim something special, you know. It was her tenth birthday. So I went to the market with Gale to see if I could find anything for a nice dress. I was running my finger over a length of thick blue cotton cloth, when something caught my eye. There's an old man who keeps a small herd of goats on the other side of the Seam. Do you know who I mean?” She asks.

I do know, the Goat Man. A weird looking fellow with a bunch of goats. Before Prim started to sell us goat cheeses, my father used to sent me to the Goat Man, to buy goat cheese from him. Katniss continues her story, telling me how she bought a sick goat from the Goat Man. And once she got him, she bought a pink ribbon and tied it around his neck.

“You should have seen Prim's reaction when we walked in with that goat. Remember this is a girl who wept to save that awful old cat, Buttercup. She was so excited she started crying and laughing all at once. My mother was less sure, seeing the injury, but the pair of them went to work on it, grinding up herbs and coaxing brews down the animal's throat.” Katniss smiles at the memory, her face lighting up.

I can almost see them working on that goat in their small kitchen. Katniss sure paints a picture. "They sound like you," I say, after she falls silent.

"Oh, no, Peeta. They work magic. That thing couldn't have died if it tried," she says. As her words sink in I see her biting her own tongue.

It is as if she expects herself to safe me from this blood poisoning. While we all know that she can't. And I don't want her to worry about it or feel guilty.

"Don't worry. I'm not trying," I joke, trying to cheer her up. "Finish the story."

She smiles at me and continues. "Well, that's it. Only I remember that night, Prim insisted on sleeping with Lady on a blanket next to the fire. And just before they drifted off, the goat licked her cheek, like it was giving her a good night kiss or something," she says. "It was already mad about her."

"Was it still wearing the pink ribbon?" I ask.

"I think so," she answers. "Why?"

"I'm just trying to get a picture, I can see why that day made you happy." I say, while I see her before me now, standing in her kitchen, smiling at Prim with her goat.

"Well, I knew that goat would be a little gold mine," she says.

"Yes, of course I was referring to that, not the lasting joy you gave the sister you love so much you took her place in the reaping," I say, and I laugh a little. This rubs her the wrong way.

"The goat has paid for itself. Several times over," she says, the arrogance clear in her voice.

"Well, it wouldn't dare do anything else after you saved its life," I tell her. "I intend to do the same thing."

"Really? What did you cost me again?" she asks me.

"A lot of trouble. Don't worry. You'll get it all back," I say. I don't know how exactly, but I do get the feeling that her caring for me while I'm dying will help her win this thing. It will give her an edge and hopefully more people will come to sponsor her once I'm gone.

Katniss doesn't pick up on this, though. "You're not making sense," she says and puts her hand on my forehead. Her hand is icy cold against my skin, which tells me I'm burning up. "You're a little cooler though," she says.

I shake my head a little and want to comment on her lying skills when the sound of trumpets fills the air. Katniss jumps up and walks to the mouth of the cave.

Claudius Templesmiths voice follows the trumpets. “Good day to you, tributes! This is an invitation to a feast!” his voice booms in my ears. I see Katniss waving her hand in the air as if she’s waving his offer away, but he’s not finished. "Now hold on. Some of you may already be declining my invitation. But this is no ordinary feast. Each of you needs something desperately.” Oh no, I can see where this is going.

"Each of you will find that something in a backpack, marked with your district number, at the Cornucopia at dawn. Think hard about refusing to show up. For some of you, this will be your
last chance," says Claudius.

It is what I was afraid of. There is going to be some medicine at that feast for blood poisoning. And Katniss will want to go. I get up as fast as I can and get hold of her shoulder. With as much authority as I can master I tell her, "no, you're not risking your life for me."

"Who said I was?" she says defensively.

"So, you're not going?" I ask her.

"Of course, I'm not going. Give me some credit. Do you think I'm running straight into some free-for-all against Cato and Clove and Thresh? Don't be stupid," she says and she helps me back to the floor and into the sleeping bag. "I'll let them fight it out, we'll see who's in the sky tomorrow night and work out a plan from there." But she's not fooling me, she's not fooling anyone with this. It is clear as crystal that she wants to go. And why? Why would she want to go? To save my life. She is willing to risk everything to save my life. A flicker of hope rises in me, because maybe, just maybe, this means that there is more to us than just fellow tributes on the same team. Maybe she really does love me. But it won’t do, I won’t let her risk her life to save mine.

"You're such a bad liar, Katniss. I don't know how you've survived this long." I say sarcastically, and I start mimicking her voice, "I knew that goat would be a little gold mine. You're a little cooler though. Of course, I'm not going." I shake my head and smile grimly. "Never gamble at cards. You'll lose your last coin."

Her face flushes with anger as she snaps at me, "All right, I am going, and you can't stop me!"

"I can follow you. At least partway. I may not make it to the Cornucopia, but if I'm yelling your name, I bet someone can find me. And then I'll be dead for sure," I tell her.

"You won't get a hundred yards from here on that leg," she points out.

"Then I'll drag myself, you go and I'm going, too." I say and I stare her in the eyes, challenging her. She must know I can't let her go to that feast. Risk her life for some medicine. We don’t even know what it is they’re going to leave for us there. We don’t even know if I'll stay alive long enough to take it.

"What am I supposed to do? Sit here and watch you die?" she says and I can hear genuine despair in her voice. I’m suddenly overwhelmed, because I realize this is the truth of why she wants to go. She really doesn’t want me to die.

"I won't die. I promise. If you promise not to go," I plead.

And miraculously it is working, because she agrees, be it reluctantly. "Then you have to do what I say. Drink your water, wake me when I tell you, and eat every bite of the soup no matter how disgusting it is!" she snaps at me.

"Agreed. Is it ready?" I'm happy that I appear to have won the argument, I'll eat anything right about now.

"Wait here," Katniss says and she leaves the cave to get the soup. Soon she is back with the broth pot filled with soup. I take the pot from her and eat without any help from Katniss.

"It’s really good, it really, really is." I say, but Katniss is scowling at me. So I exaggerate some more. "It’s delicious, Katniss, you should become a cook." I say and nod and smile at her, while scraping out the pot. But she just shakes her head and gives me another dose of fever pills. I sink back to the ground and close my eyes. I feel exhausted, the energy seeping out of me. Katniss leaves the cave again and I doze off, feverish and drained.

I’m startled awake when Katniss comes in, with the broth pot in her hand. "I've brought you a treat. I found a new patch of berries a little farther downstream."

She kneels next to me, and offers me a spoon filled with a red mixture that looks like jam. I open my mouth and taste a very sweet flavor. This is a weird kind of berry. Something is not right about the taste. I frown and say, "they're very sweet."

"Yes, they're sugar berries. My mother makes jam from them. Haven't you ever had them before?" she says, while she gives me the next bite.
"No," I say, "but they taste familiar. Sugar berries?"
"Well, you can't get them in the market much, they only grow wild," she says and gives me another spoonful of the stuff. Something doesn’t add up here. The taste of these berries, what is it?

"They're sweet as syrup," I say when Katniss feeds me the last bite. "Syrup." I repeat and it hits me. There is sleeping syrup in this mixture. She’s fed me sleeping syrup! I recognize the taste now. It will knock me out in no time. I know straight away why she did it. And Haymitch must have sent it to her. To get her to go to that feast. To leave me here alone and go off into that free-for –all as she called it. She will go into a highly dangerous situation in which she could get herself killed easily. I can’t believe she did this to me. As I try to spit out the berries she clamps her hand over my mouth and nose, forcing me to swallow. I feel the pull of the syrup and in my last effort I’m trying to vomit, to get rid of it. But it's too late. I’m already losing my consciousness. I stare at Katniss’ face though, accusing her with my eyes. As if they’re screaming at her. Do you think you’re doing me a favor by drugging me!

And just like that, I’m thrown into another world and I realize that it doesn't matter.

Chapter End Notes

thanks to my friend Eala musings for being my beta!
What dreams may come

Chapter Summary

Peeta is under influence of the sleep syrup and dreams the night away

Chapter Notes

I do not own the Hunger Games.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

In the remaining hours my dreams are gauzy and full of light colors. Pink and violet, light green shades. Streaks of yellow like sunbeams. The people I love are all around me. Smiling at me. Telling me everything is going to be okay. Fluffy clouds float by. It is a good dream.

I know it is not the reality. Something is pushing me down, making it impossible for me to get back to life. I do not care. A happy dream is better than the grim truth. The truth of Katniss who betrayed me. Giving me sleep syrup to go to the feast. Chances are she’ll die there. And if or when I wake up I’ll be alone again. Alone and on my way out. So yes, I prefer my dream of cotton clouds and soft colors over this awful piece of reality I live in now.

This dream is also so different from the nightmares I had a couple of days ago. The terrible, haunting nightmares caused by the tracker jacker stings. Watching my family and friends die in all possible ways. Experiencing excruciating pain myself. Even worse than the actual pain that was caused by Cato’s sword. Katniss was everywhere in those nightmares too. I remember this one really vivid dream where we were standing across from each other on a plain field. Staring in each other’s eyes. Then she suddenly turned around and walked away. I wanted to stop her but I couldn’t move and I couldn’t talk. All I could do was watch her disappear.

But she didn’t disappear. She stopped walking after a couple of yards and then turned around. She held her bow in one hand and drew an arrow from the sheath on her back. Then she loaded her bow and pointed the arrow at my heart. The terrible truth was dawning on me. She was going to kill me. I felt the tears sliding from my cheeks. I don’t mind the part where I’m dying, but does she really want me dead? Losing Katniss, by her leaving or by her killing me. Either way this was the worst of all the nightmares I’ve experienced.

After that, my dreams got better. I remember dreaming of my parents, baking cookies with my father. And now, the sleep syrup Katniss forced on me gives me what I want to see. I’m laughing with my friends, wrestling with my brothers, baking with my parents again. But most of all I’m with Katniss. Holding her in my arms. Feeling the warmth of her body pressed against me. Her soft lips on mine. To stay like this forever, that is all I want.

Before the games, Katniss was a fantasy for me. This girl in the distance, the one I could never have. Her mother ran off with a coalminer, while she could have married my dad and live in security. For me this means that if her mother would prefer a coalminer over a merchant, Katniss would most definitely chose that guy she hunts with over me. What do I have to offer her that she
could possibly want?

It was a safe choice, to be honest, to have a crush on a girl who you don’t have a chance with. But now the cards are dealt differently. We are here together, just the two of us, in our own universe. Here there are no miners or merchants. No hunters or bakers. Here it is just me and her.

And my crush has changed. When I think about her now I feel my heart swelling. This is what love feels like. And it goes deeper than I’ve ever felt for anyone before. She has become everything for me. I know for sure that I’d rather die than live without her. Maybe this sounds over the top, but this is my reality now. My life is just me and her in this cave. And without her, there would be no me. I don’t even want to be me without her.

My vision changes. The colors disappear in a beautiful silver grey mist. Katniss slowly appears from the mist. Her eyes shining silver, the exact same color as the mist. She looks at me, her eyes have a soft expression. She extends her hand and brushes my hair from my forehead. “You are not going to die, I forbid it, all right?” she whispers to me. I nod, “all right.”

Katniss. I love you. Please don’t leave me here. Don’t go where I can’t follow. I can’t bear the distance between us. To be with you, that is all I ever wanted. All I hoped for. It is the reality I live in now. Almost heaven. If you would just stay. If you stay, I won’t die. We would just be here together, in our own little infinity.

Gauzy purple clouds float by. There is soft music in my ears. Katniss is still with me. We dance. A million stars are shining above our heads. Giving everything a silver glow. There are birds flying and butterflies too. When the world is like this all the time, that must mean we have arrived in paradise. Where time stands still.

But then suddenly something changes. And I feel a sharp pain in my left arm. Like being stabbed by a needle. Fluid courses through my veins. Pumping through my body and reaching my heart. I feel my heartbeat accelerating. Slowly and gradually I am pushed back to reality. The purple clouds are vanishing. The grey mist lingers. I am vaguely aware of the smell of blood. I can feel the difference between the warmth of a body on my left side and the cold of a lifeless rock on my right.

Something inside me tells me to wake up. To leave this world that I love so much and go back to reality. I feel the cold, hard ground beneath me now. There is a breeze coming through the opening of the cave. I am starting to get more aware of where I am, though I am not fully realizing it yet.

I don’t know how much time passes, but I can feel my eyelids getting lighter and lighter and finally I am able to open my eyes. There is light coming from above me, indicating evening just begun. I still feel the pain of the stab in my left arm. I try to lift it now and stare at the curve of my wrist.

Chapter End Notes

Disclaimer: I have stolen ‘our own little infinity’ from The Fault in Our Stars, written by John Green.

Disclaimer: the title of this chapter is taken from the movie ‘what dreams may come.’ I have not seen this movie, so I don’t mean to imply anything with it, I just liked the sound of it.
In our own little universe

Chapter Summary

While the rain pours down, Katniss and Peeta spend time getting to know each other a little better, and they kiss! But they are also slowly starving...

Chapter Notes

I do not own the Hunger Games and in this chapter I've used the dialogue from chapter 22 of the Hunger Games

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sound of rain brings me to my senses and I sit up and take in my surroundings. I’m in a cave in the arena of the 74th Hunger Games. I look around and am stunned by what I see because right next to me lies Katniss. In a large pool of blood. She lies so still, and there is so much blood. I’m scared out of my wits that she’s dead. Slowly I stretch out my shaking hand to press my fingers against her neck. It’s very faint, but I feel the pulse of her veins drumming against my fingers. I let out a sigh of relief. For one horrible moment, I really thought she was gone.

The first aid kit is lying at my feet and I stretch to get it. The cloth Katniss used on my forehead has fallen on the ground next to me. I take it now and drench it with the rainwater, that pooled in a corner of the cave. Slowly and carefully I wipe Katniss’ forehead clean from the blood. I can see now that there is a big gash in her forehead, probably caused by a knife. But how? What happened? Suddenly I remember the trumpets, the announcement, the sleep syrup. Katniss went to the feast. And she was wounded but made it through. I see the hypodermic needle now. It rolled to the edge of the cave. It explains the soreness in my right arm and the stab I felt before I woke up. She did it. She got the medicine. But she is hurt too, and it looks pretty bad. I have to do something about that.

The wound is clean now, so I look through the first aid kit for bandages. First, I smear some of the burn ointment on the wound, Katniss said it helped with infection, so it might be of use for this as well. Then I wrap her head carefully with white cotton bandages. We are lucky we have so much of it, because we sure need it.

Now that her head is wrapped up, she looks a little better. I try to clean the blood from the floor as well. Throwing away a handful of blood soaked pine needles. When everything is as clean as I can possibly get it, I carefully wrap Katniss in the sleeping bag after taking off her shoes and socks, which are soaked. She probably walked through the stream without taking them off.

The rain I heard earlier is a slow trickle, but even though it’s not much, it comes through the opening between the rocks and spatters down on us. I look around and see Katniss’ pack lying next to me. I take it and search through it for anything useful. There is a large square piece of plastic in there that will do just fine. I’m on my knees now and wedge the plastic between some rocks, to build a sort of shelter to shield Katniss from the rain. When I sit back down I realize I was able to sit on my knees without passing out from the pain. I stare in disbelief at my leg.
As fast as I can I push down my pants and remove the bandage. There is still some swelling around the wound, but the gap has closed a little, and more important, the red streaks indicating the blood poisoning are gone. Whatever was in that needle, it did its job.

A grumble in my stomach tells me that my appetite is back too. I’m practically famished. Thankfully, there is still a lot of food left and I wolf down a couple of pieces of the strange bird Katniss called groosling. Then I become aware of the fact that we can’t do much to expand our food supplies any time soon. I shouldn’t have eaten this much. Stupid. Back to a strict diet, I tell myself.

The sky has slowly turned dark and I go to stand at the mouth of the cave, staring at Katniss in the dark. She looks likes she is sound asleep now. I wonder how long it will take for her to regain consciousness. Probably best to let her sleep through the night. The anthem breaks my reverie and I look up at the sky. There was a feast today, there must be pictures. After the seal, the face of Clove lights up the sky and then it grows black again. So Clove died. After cutting Katniss? I think so, her headwound has Clove written all over it. Did Katniss kill her? I wonder what happened, but there is no telling. I’ll just have to wait till Katniss awakes, she can fill me in.

The temperature drops down as the night continues. After an hour of shivering I cave and slide into the sleeping bag, next to Katniss. Her body is warm. It is weird to be so close to her while she is so far away. Her headwound starts bleeding again a little which makes me worried. I change the bandage and then I carefully wrap my left arm around her shoulders, let her head rest on my chest. She doesn’t move and I’m suddenly scared again. What if she doesn’t wake up? There was a lot of blood loss, but how much can a person handle? I have no idea. I try to stay awake, in case Cato or Thresh shows up. But the rain has become heavier and somehow I don’t think they’ll find us in this weather. So eventually I let myself drift off to sleep.

When I wake up, it is early morning. At least, I think it is, it is hard to tell because it’s still raining. I scoop out of the sleeping bag and rearrange the broth pot to catch a steady drip of water, coming through an outlet in the rocks. After drinking half a bottle I fill it with rainwater and purify it with the iodine I found in Katniss’ pack. I check my leg again and the swelling is vastly reduced. Katniss stirs in her sleep and I go over to her. Brushing away the hair on her forehead and whisper her name. "Katniss." She doesn’t react, so I say, a little louder, "Katniss, can you hear me?"

Her eyes flutter open and I see the fear in them as she takes up her surroundings. Then her gaze locks on me and I can see the fear being exchanged for relief. "Peeta," she whispers. "Hey," I say. "Good to see your eyes again."

"How long have I been out?" she asks.

"Not sure. I woke up yesterday evening and you were lying next to me in a very scary pool of blood," I tell her. "I think it's stopped finally, but I wouldn't sit up or anything."

She lifts a hand to her head and touches the bandage. Gently I put my hand in her neck to lift her head a little and put the water bottle to her lips. She drinks almost half the bottle and then I lay her back down. She looks at me and says, "You're better."

"Much better. Whatever you shot into my arm did the trick," I say. "By this morning, almost all the swelling in my leg was gone."

"Did you eat?" Katniss asks me. There is something protective about the question. She's making sure that I am alright, even in the state she is in now. The simple question moves me somehow.

"I'm sorry to say I gobbled down three pieces of that groosling before I realized it might have to last a while. Don't worry, I'm back on a strict diet," I say.

"No, it's good. You need to eat. I'll go hunting soon," Katniss says.

I don’t think that is a good idea, so I say, "not too soon, all right? You just let me take care of you for a while."

I say, I do. I feed her groosling and dried fruit and make her drink a whole 2 litre bottle of water. She is shivering from the cold. Her socks and boots are still soaked. So I take her feet out of the
sleeping bag and rub them between my hands until they're toasty warm and rosy. Then I take off my jacket and wrap them in there. Katniss complains, saying I need the jacket but I refuse. While I tuck her back in the sleeping bag I say, "Your boots and socks are still damp and the weather's not helping much."

There is a clap of thunder, followed by lightning and we both stare outside. "I wonder what brought on this storm? I mean, who's the target?" I say.

"Cato and Thresh," Katniss answers. "Foxface will be in her den somewhere, and Clove... She cut me and then..."

"I know Clove's dead. I saw it in the sky last night," I say. "Did you kill her?"

"No. Thresh broke her skull with a rock," she answers. "Lucky he didn't catch you, too," I say.

Katniss swallows hard and I hear her throat is choked up when she says, "he did. But he let me go."

I look at her questioningly and she explains what happened. "I blew up the food of the careers and then the boy from District One killed Rue." She says, "Rue was my ally, we made the plan together, to blow up the food. But he killed her and I killed him."

So Katniss killed Marvel. I remember seeing his face in the sky, at that point I already suspected it was Katniss. I was right, although it doesn't give me any satisfaction.

Katniss continues, "I received a bread from District Eleven for it."

That amazes me, districts usually don't provide gifts totributes from other districts.

"Thresh overheard Clove saying to me that they killed Rue. So he smashed her skull and asked me what she meant. So I explained to him that I was Rue's ally and that I killed the boy from One. At that, he let me go. Because it was like paying off a debt of sorts for him."

"He let you go because he didn't want to owe you anything?" I ask, I can hardly believe this.

"Yes. I don't expect you to understand it. You've always had enough. But if you'd lived in the Seam, I wouldn't have to explain," Katniss says.

This rubs me the wrong way. What is she implying? That I don't understand what it's like to owe someone? It's just, these are the Hunger Games. What good would it do him to let Katniss live. I shake my head in frustration and say, "and don't try. Obviously I'm too dim to get it."

"It's like the bread. How I never seem to get over owing you for that," she tries to explain.

"The bread? What? From when we were kids?" I say. "I think we can let that go. I mean, you just brought me back from the dead."

"But you didn't know me. We had never even spoken. Besides, it's the first gift that's always the hardest to pay back. I wouldn't even have been here to do it if you hadn't helped me then," she says and then adds, "why did you, anyway?"

"Why? You know why," I say. Katniss shakes her head slightly. How is it possible that she doesn't know what I already told to the whole world? I think back at what Haymitch said when we were preparing the interview and say, "Haymitch said you would take a lot of convincing."

"Haymitch?" she asks. "What's he got to do with it?"
"Nothing," I say, suddenly I don't want to talk about this anymore, if she is so oblivious about my feelings for her, I'd rather change the subject. "So, Cato and Thresh, huh? I guess it's too much to hope that they'll simultaneously destroy each other?"

"I think we would like Thresh. I think he'd be our friend back in District Twelve," Katniss says, her voice quivers.

"Then let's hope Cato kills him, so we don't have to," I say, and I can hear the harshness in my tone.

I look at Katniss and see the tears shining in her eyes, which makes me worried instantly. "What is it? Are you in a lot of pain?"

She sounds like a small child when she answers, "I want to go home, Peeta."

It almost breaks my heart. "You will. I promise," I tell her and I bend down and place a kiss on her lips. They feel soft against mine.
"I want to go home now," she says.
"Tell you what. You go back to sleep and dream of home. And you'll be there for real before you know it," I say. "Okay?"
"Okay," her voice only a whisper. "Wake me if you need me to keep watch."
"I'm good and rested, thanks to you and Haymitch. Besides, who knows how long this will last?"
I tell her, hoping to reassure her that it is okay for her to sleep now.

Katniss falls asleep fast after this and I sit next to her, staring into the distance. I can’t help but think back at our conversation. She doesn’t know that I am in love with her? How is that even possible? I told her, right? Or maybe I didn’t and she just thinks this is all a scheme. That must be it. Maybe I can find a way to tell her what I really feel. But I feel self-conscious about it and have no idea how to bring it up.

I’ve waited for Katniss to wake before eating, so when evening comes I’m famished. Thankfully Katniss awakes and I ask her about the food. "Should we try and ration it?"
"No, let's just finish it. The groosling's getting old anyway, and the last thing we need is to get sick off spoiled food," Katniss says and she divides the food that is left in two equal portions. After we finished eating she turns to me and says, "tomorrow's a hunting day."
"I won't be much help with that," I say. "I've never hunted before."
"I'll kill and you cook," she says. "And you can always gather."
"I wish there was some sort of bread bush out there," I muse, thinking about the freshly baked bread in our bakery.
"The bread they sent me from District Eleven was still warm," Katniss says, then she holds out a couple of mint leaves and says, "here, chew these."

The anthem starts and the sky tells us there are no deaths today.
"Where did Thresh go? I mean, what's on the far side of the circle?" Katniss asks me.
"A field. As far as you can see it's full of grasses as high as my shoulders. I don't know, maybe some of them are grain. There are patches of different colours. But there are no paths," I say.
"I bet some of them are grain. I bet Thresh knows which ones, too," she says. "Did you go in there?"
"No. Nobody really wanted to track Thresh down in that grass. It has a sinister feeling to it. Every time I look at that field, all I can think of are hidden things. Snakes, and rabid animals, and quicksand," I tell her. "There could be anything in there."
"Maybe there is a bread bush in that field, maybe that's why Thresh looks better fed now than when we started the Games."
"Either that or he's got very generous sponsors," I say. "I wonder what we'd have to do to get Haymitch to send us some bread."

Katniss raises her eyebrows in a question, but before I can ask her what it is, her face smoothes over and she takes my hand. She strokes the back of it with her thumb slowly. Tracing patterns on my skin.

"Well, he probably used up a lot of resources helping me knock you out," she says playfully. I entwine my fingers with hers but frown at her reminder of the sleep syrup."Yeah, about that. Don't try something like that again."
"Or what?" she asks.
"Or... or. " I'm trying to find an argument. "Just give me a minute."
"What's the problem?" she says and a smile plays on her lips.
"The problem is we're both still alive. Which only reinforces the idea in your mind that you did the right thing," I say.
"I did do the right thing," she says self-righteously.

It infuriates me more than I thought it could, and I clutch her hand. "No! Just don't, Katniss! Don't die for me. You won't be doing me any favors. All right?" I'm thinking back on the weird dreams I had after she drugged me and how I couldn’t imagine a world without her in it. I shake my head.
to get rid of the fear I feel when I think about losing her.

Katniss is startled by my outbursts at first, but then she says, "maybe I did it for myself, Peeta, did you ever think of that? Maybe you aren't the only one who... who worries about... what it would be like if... "

She takes me by surprise. I didn’t know, never realized that this could actually be a two way street. Katniss is stammering, trying to get the words out. I recognize the fear in her eyes, it is the same fear I felt just a minute ago. The fear of losing someone you truly love.

"If what, Katniss?" I ask her.
She looks away and I can almost see the shutters go down. "That's exactly the kind of topic Haymitch told me to steer clear of," she says.
There is a dead silence for a moment, except for the rain drumming on the cave. I can feel the tension in the air. I realize she is not good at this, but there was something real there. Something in her eyes, in her voice. So I decide to take the lead.
"Then I'll just have to fill in the blanks myself," I say and I move in to her.

As my mouth is moving against hers, she slowly parts her lips. I can taste her scent on my lips and I feel a stab of arousal in my abdomen as I gradually run my tongue over hers. Her hand rests in my neck and I feel her fingers in my hair as she pulls me to her. The kiss deepens and I put my arms around her and press her closer. I open my eyes, not remembering when I closed them. I want to see her beautiful face. I also need some air, because I forgot to breathe. Slowly I break away from her to draw a breath. Then I see the red stain on her bandage.

Katniss looks at me like she’s disappointed that I broke away from her, but I’m worried now. I kiss the tip of her nose and say, "I think your wound is bleeding again. Come on, lie down, it's bedtime anyway."
I get her socks and she makes me wear my jacket again.
“I'll take the first watch,” she says. I want to object, but I’m tired and she insists. It is getting cold fast. I get into the sleeping bag and tell her to come in here with me. She’s shivering and there is no use for her to sit in the cold if she can be here and we can warm each other. And also, I want her close. I want to feel the warmth of her body beside me. As she slides in next to me I wrap my arm around her shoulders again, her head rests on my upper arm. I put my other arm around her waist, and in this way I fall asleep. Feeling happy and warm and somehow it feels like even though I am asleep, I’m protecting her. She is safe when she’s in my arms.

Katniss wakes me after a couple of hours. Apologizing for the short time she let me sleep. I don’t mind though. Being awake with her in my arms is no punishment.
"Tomorrow, when it's dry, I'll find us a place so high in the trees we can both sleep in peace," she says, before she falls asleep.

I sit up a little, shifting her body closer to me, and stare with the night vision glasses on into the dark. I realize I’ve dozed off when the light of day wakes me. Katniss is still asleep in my arms and the weather is still as awful as yesterday. Even so I am relieved that we’re both fine, because sleeping on my night watch isn’t something I’m proud of.
Katniss wakes from a powerful thunderclap. Now would be the perfect time to eat some breakfast. Except that we don’t have anything to eat. “Shall I go out to see if I can find anything?” I ask, but Katniss shakes her head. “It is pointless, with this storm you’ll be washed away, you won’t be able to see anything and trust me, you won’t find anything worth your time and your trouble.”
I nod and sink to the floor. She’s right, but for the first time since these Games started, the hunger is starting to become painful. And there is nothing else to do either, to distract me from it. Everything is cold and wet. Katniss tells me to get into the sleeping bag again with her, reflecting each other’s warmth will at least keep us from freezing. Somehow I’m drained from energy. I’m
still wounded, even though my leg is a lot better. And the hunger isn’t helping either. Half the day I’m napping and the other half fighting to stay awake.
When evening comes Katniss nudges my shoulder, waking me from a slumber. I look at her questioningly and she asks, "Peeta, you said at the interview you’d had a crush on me forever. When did forever start?"
"Oh, let’s see.” I say, “I guess the first day of school. We were five. You had on a red plaid dress and your hair, it was in two braids instead of one. My father pointed you out when we were waiting to line up."
"Your father? Why?” Katniss asks. I can hear the wonder in her voice. 
"He said, 'See that little girl? I wanted to marry her mother, but she ran off with a coal miner,'" I say.
At this, Katniss sits up, "What? You're making that up!" she exclaims. 
"No, true story,” I say, shaking my head. "And I said, 'A coal miner? Why did she want a coal miner if she could've had you?' And he said, 'Because when he sings. even the birds stop to listen.'"
"That's true. They do. I mean, they did,” she says softly.
I smile at her and continue my story, my memory of her, "so that day, in music assembly, the teacher asked who knew the valley song. Your hand shot right up in the air. She stood you up on a stool and had you sing it for us. And I swear, every bird outside the windows fell silent."
"Oh, please," Katniss replies, and she’s laughing, incredulous.
"No, it happened. And right when your song ended, I knew - just like your mother - I was a goner," I say, as I look in front of me. "Then for the next eleven years, I tried to work up the nerve to talk to you."
"Without success," Katniss says.

"Without success. So, in a way, my name being drawn in the reaping was a real piece of luck,” I smile at her again. Thinking about that day so long ago. Katniss in that red dress. Her silver grey eyes shining in excitement, in the anticipation of singing that song in class. I remember that she’d loved to sing a lot in those days. Only after her father died, she’d changed. She became silent and withdrew herself. I’ve missed her voice since that day.

I look at her now and see those same eyes locked on me. Shining again, but then her expression changes and I see a hint of confusion, of doubt in them. 
"You have a... remarkable memory," she says, hesitance plain in her voice. A strand of her hair falls in front of her face. I reach out to tuck it behind her ear, stroking her cheek while doing it. "I remember everything about you," I say. "You're the one who wasn't paying attention."
"I am now,” she says
I can’t help but feel a jolt of excitement at that, but I tell her, "Well, I don't have much competition here."
Katniss swallows and bites on her lip, staring at the ground. But then she raises her head towards me and says, "You don't have much competition anywhere."

She moves closer to me and presses her lips to mine. Their warmth is overwhelming, but a thump just outside of the cave breaks us apart. Katniss already has her bow in her hand, arrow in it. I squint through the opening in the rocks. There is no one out there, but I do make out a shadow of a parachute. A parachute! A gift from a sponsor. This can only mean food. I give a hoot of surprise and jump out of the cave. As soon as I’m outside I see the silver parachute attached to a great woven basket. I pick it up and hand it inside to Katniss. From this short expedition I am already soaked but I don’t care. Because when I’m back in the cave, I see Katniss has opened the basket and I’m not let down. Inside it is the food we’ve been longing for so desperately. Bread, cheese, apples. And how telling, a bowl of lamb stew with dried plums. It reminds me immediately of Katniss’ interview with Cezar Flickerman.

I smile a wide grin of happiness at this unexpected gift. "I guess Haymitch finally got tired of
watching us starve."
"I guess so," Katniss says. There is something in her tone which I do not particularly like, but I
decide I am too happy to care.
Instead I kiss her on the cheek and whisper in a mischievous tone, "sweetheart."

Chapter End Notes

I had to leave in the ‘he moves into me’ after the whole discussion we had about that
on tumblr ;)

The line "She's save when she is in my arms" is inspired by the song 'Only you can
save me' from Darin.
After spending some more time in the cave together, Katniss goes hunting and Peeta gathers berries.

Every cell in my body wants me to dig into the stew to eat without even swallowing. But I know this isn't a good idea, we should take it slow. I can see Katniss also wants to start eating without thinking first, so I say, "We better take it slow on that stew. Remember the first night on the train? The rich food made me sick and I wasn't even starving then."
"You're right. And I could just inhale the whole thing!" she says.
I divide the food, make sure it is not too much. We decide to slice an apple in half and serve only a few spoons full of the stew on to the plates. The basket also gives us silverware, so we can eat like we have manners. I wonder if Effie Trinket, our weird escort, had a hand in this.
The food is gone within the blink of an eye and Katniss sighs, "I want more."
"Me, too." I agree, "tell you what. We wait an hour, if it stays down, then we get another serving,"
"Agreed. It's going to be a long hour." she says.
"Maybe not that long," I say while smiling at her. "What was that you were saying just before the food arrived? Something about me. No competition. Best thing that ever happened to you."
"I don't remember that last part," Katniss replies and I laugh, because I see her cheeks getting red.
She is so cute like this.
"Oh, that's right." I say, still laughing, "that's what I was thinking."
I shiver because the temperature starts to drop as evening falls. "Scoot over, I'm freezing." I tell Katniss and we crawl into the sleeping bag together. There is not a lot of room in a sleeping bag meant for one person, so we cuddle close together. Katniss lies in the circle of my arms, her head against my shoulder. I'm immediately warmed by her presence, her body pressed against mine. So close to me. I think back at that night in the train, on the way to the Capitol. How I fantasized about the feel of her against me. And how I'd reached the conclusion that fantasies were all I was going to get. I never would have expected that I was going to be wrong about that.
"So, since we were five, you never even noticed any other girls?" she asks me. The question surprises me, in a good way. Because it tells me that she actually wants to know more about me, that she's interested in me.
"No, I noticed just about every girl, but none of them made a lasting impression but you," I tell her. And I think about all the conversations I had with Nick on girls. Sometimes he'd ask me if there wasn't anyone else who I'd like, but the answer was always no.
"I'm sure that would thrill your parents, you liking a girl from the Seam," Katniss says.
"Hardly. But I couldn't care less. Anyway, if we make it back, you won't be a girl from the Seam,
you'll be a girl from the Victor's Village," I say. Her hair tickles my chin as she turns her head and looks at me with a shocked expression. "But then, our only neighbor will be Haymitch!"

"Ah, that'll be nice," I say. Katniss gives a shiver which makes me tighten my arms around her. "You and me and Haymitch. Very cozy. Picnics, birthdays, long winter nights around the fire retelling old Hunger Games' tales." I smile at the idea.

"I told you, he hates me!" Katniss says, but I can hear the laughter in her voice. "Only sometimes. When he's sober, I've never heard him say one negative thing about you," I say. "He's never sober!" Katniss exclaims.

"That's right. Who am I thinking of?" I say, "Oh, I know. It's Cinna who likes you. But that's mainly because you didn't try to run when he set you on fire. On the other hand, Haymitch. Well, if I were you, I'd avoid Haymitch completely. He hates you."

"I thought you said I was his favorite," Katniss says.

"He hates me more, I don't think people in general are his sort of thing." I say and I think about Haymitch and wonder how he turned out like this. Now that I've seen a couple of people die in these games, I feel like I understand him a little better. The impact it makes. I can imagine it can damage a person badly. If I make it out of here alive I’ll only be happy if Katniss is standing next to me. That is something that never happened before. The victor is always alone. Alone and with no one to relate to. Living alone in Victor's Village, at least in Haymitch’ case. Yes, I can understand that will make a person bitter. I tell myself that if I make it home and become his neighbor, I will do something about it, he won't be alone anymore.

It is quiet, except for the constant drumming of the rain. But the atmosphere is peaceful, I am warm, and if I weren’t this hungry I’d probably fall asleep. I never felt this peaceful since the games start. Maybe I never felt this peaceful ever. Katniss shifts her head against my shoulder and I press my face in her hair, inhaling her scent. Drinking her in. Thinking about living next door to her in Victors Village when we get home. Somehow, next door doesn’t sound close enough to me.

Katniss suddenly says. "How do you think he did it?"


I’ve thought quite a bit about Haymitch but I never considered this. I try to picture him as a young boy, without that bitter drunken attitude that he has now. What did he have that made him win? When I strip him away from his drunken exterior and I see him sober in my mind’s eye, I know what it is that gave him the victory. "He outsmarted the others," I tell Katniss. She nods and we are quiet again.

I'm trying to go back to the peaceful feeling I just had, but my stomach is growling and food is all I can think about. The hour isn’t finished by far, but I’m tired of waiting. I want more. Thankfully Katniss shares my opinion.

She just started to fill our plates when the anthem plays. I press my eyes against a small opening in the rocks to see if I can make anything out. "There won't be anything to see tonight," Katniss says. "Nothing's happened or we would've heard a cannon."

But she’s wrong. Apparently we missed the cannon. Because there in the sky the face of Thresh appears.

"Katniss," I say quietly.

"What? Should we split another roll, too?" she asks.

"Katniss," I say again, trying to get her attention. I turn and stare at her.

"I'm going to split one. But I'll save the cheese for tomorrow," she says and looks me in the eyes.

"What?"

"Thresh is dead," I say.
"He can't be," Katniss shakes her head in disbelief. "They must have fired the cannon during the thunder and we missed it," I give the only logical explanation. "Are you sure? I mean, it's pouring buckets out there. I don't know how you can see anything," Katniss obviously still doesn't want to believe me. But now she comes up and pushes me away to see for herself.

I finish filling the plates as Katniss hunches down on the floor. Her face white from shock. And pain? She looks like she’s in pain. Because of Thresh?
"You all right?" I ask her.
She nods, but her eyes tell me something else. She has her arms pressed against her body and she’s rocking herself very slowly.
"It's just. if we didn't win. I wanted Thresh to. Because he let me go. And because of Rue."
"Yeah, I know," I say. "But this means we're one step closer to District Twelve."
She doesn't look convinced. I give her a plate. "Eat. It's still warm."

Katniss starts eating, but I can tell she’s having difficulty swallowing. She still seems pretty upset. Because Thresh died. I understand she’d prefer him winning over Cato. I prefer that too. But still, most of all I want us to win. And wouldn’t she want that too? I eat slowly, thinking about Thresh and Cato. Wondering how Cato did it and what will happen next. I don’t want to kill him, everything inside me protests against the idea of taking somebody’s life, even if it is Cato. But when the time comes and the opportunity, I will do it. For her sake.
Katniss’ mind is also on Cato, as she says, "it also means Cato will be back hunting us."
"And he's got supplies again," I say.
"He'll be wounded, I bet," Katniss says.
"What makes you say that?" I ask.
"Because Thresh would have never gone down without a fight. He's so strong, I mean, he was. And they were in his territory," Katniss answers.
"Good, the more wounded Cato is the better," I say. "I wonder how Foxface is making out."
"Oh, she's fine, probably be easier to catch Cato than her." Katniss sounds a little petulant.
"Maybe they'll catch each other and we can just go home," I say. "But we better be extra careful about the watches. I dozed off a few times."
"Me, too, but not tonight," she says.

She still looks pale though, and eats her food in silence. So when we’ve finished I offer to take the first watch and let her sleep. She pulls the hood of her jacket over her face and almost hides in the crook of my arm. I put my other arm around her waist, hugging her close to me. She’s upset, that much I can tell.
It must still have something to do with Thresh. What were her words again, because he let me go. If you owe someone your life, it’s only normal that it hurts you when they die. I think about him and I suddenly realize I owe him my life as well. If he’d killed Katniss, I would’ve died as well. Thresh. He was so big and strong. Sullen at the interview. But there must be more to him than that. There are people in district 11 now, who are heartbroken because of his death. People who knew him. Who laughed about his jokes. Who loved him. This thought makes me so sad, I hold on to Katniss a little more, pull her closer to me. As to give her some comfort, although she’s already vast asleep.

The night continues slowly. I’ve put my cheek on Katniss’ head and try to stay awake by giving myself ridiculously difficult math problems to solve. After a couple of hours my stomach starts growling again. I try to ignore it but finally I give in. I sit up carefully, as not to wake Katniss and reach for the food. Rolls with goat cheese. This is what I ate with Portia before I entered the arena. I love goat cheese, I told her then. It’s true, I love it. And it’s great in combination with apples, so I slice an apple and cover half a roll with the cheese and apple slices. It tastes like the apple and goat cheesecake we sell at the bakery, but better. While I eat my mind wanders to Prim. Since Katniss
bought her that goat, she comes to our house to trade the cheese with my father. He even gave her a small piece of the cake one time, to show her what we did with it. I remember her blue eyes wide from surprise that she could have a bite. My father has a soft spot for her, and I can understand that. She is such a sweet and gentle girl, it is not difficult to understand that Katniss loves her so much. She is different than Katniss, but I actually look forward to living next door to her as well.

The roll is history before I’m even aware of it, and I realize I haven’t discussed it with Katniss. So I spread the other half with the cheese and apple slices and then wake her, holding out the bread."Don’t be mad. I had to eat again. Here’s your half."

"Oh, good," she says and puts her teeth in the bread. "Mm."
I smile at that and decide to share my memory with her. "We make a goat cheese and apple tart at the bakery."
"Bet that's expensive," she says, with her mouth full.
"Too expensive for my family to eat. Unless it's gone very stale. Of course, practically everything we eat is stale," I say. I’m exhausted, so I lie down, pull the sleeping bag up to my chin and fall into a deep and dreamless sleep.

When I wake, Katniss is hovering over me. I stretch my arms, put them around her neck and pull her down to kiss her. I’ll never get used to the feel of her lips against mine. The warm feeling is spreading over my body as I taste her and smell her natural scent of pine needles and wood. I already feel I miss her the moment she starts to pull away.

"We’re wasting hunting time," she says.

"I wouldn’t call it wasting," I say, sitting up and stretching my arms, they’ve gone stiff from sleeping on a ground that is only covered with a thin layer of pine needles. I notice the rain stopped, which means hunting is a serious option. I also notice my stomach growl again, as I ask “So, do we hunt on empty stomachs to give us an edge?”
"Not us," Katniss says. "We stuff ourselves to give us staying power."
"Count me in," I say. Katniss divides everything that is left from the stew and hands me a plate full. I’m surprised she wants to finish everything. "All this?" I ask her.
"We’ll earn it back today," she replies.
We start eating, the stew still tastes really good. I absolutely love the food they make in the Capitol. The only good thing the Capitol has to offer. Katniss has finished her plate and is now scuffing up every last bit of it with her fingers. "I can feel Effie Trinket shuddering at my manners."
The thought of Effie makes me mischievous somehow. "Hey, Effie, watch this!" I shout out as I throw my fork away and I run my tongue over the plate, making loud smacking noises. "We miss you, Effie!" I yell. Katniss stretches her arm towards me and covers my mouth with her hand.
"Stop! Cato could be right outside our cave." She says, but she’s laughing.
I take her hand and pull her closer. "What do I care? I’ve got you to protect me now." I kiss her but she’s reluctant and she’s pushing me away.
"Come on," she says, impatience clear in her voice. It startles me a bit. But I don’t have the time to assess what exactly is going on, because Katniss is obviously in a hurry so I help her packing our things to get ready for leaving our cave.

It is weird to be outside again. In the open. The sky is clear, but the tension is suddenly back. Our cave, our own little world, drew us away from the harsh reality of the Games. But now we can’t deny it anymore. Only four of us left, and Cato must be on the move. Katniss gives me a knife, I tuck it into my belt. Carrying a weapon only increases my awareness. Where can he be? Maybe he’s already located us and he’s just waiting for an opportunity. We have the upper hand, but I don’t think that will hold him off.
"He'll be hunting us by now," I say to Katniss. "Cato isn't one to wait for his prey to wander by."
"If he's wounded - " she begins.
"It won't matter," I interrupt her. "If he can move, he's coming."

We walk to the stream, it has overrun its banks because of the heavy rain. We fill our water bottles and purify them. Katniss checks the snares she set but they give us nothing.
"If we want food, we better head back up to my old hunting grounds," she says.
"Your call. Just tell me what you need me to do," I say.
"Keep an eye out," Katniss answers. "Stay on the rocks as much as possible, no sense in leaving him tracks to follow. And listen for both of us."

We walk alongside of the stream, into the direction of the forest. Walking is difficult, I’m limping, putting all my weight on my right foot while trying to keep the left one going. In the same time I listen intensely for any signs of someone following us. I don’t see anything. After we covered a mile or so, Katniss turns to me and looks at me questioningly.
"What?" I ask.
"You've got to move more quietly," she replies. "Forget about Cato, you're chasing off every rabbit in a ten-mile radius."
"Really?" I say, I wasn’t even thinking about hunting, because I was too occupied with Cato.
"Sorry, I didn't know."

We continue on our way and I try to diminish the noise I’m making. But it’s hard, because my leg hurts and I have to keep an eye out for any adversary, so my mind is more focused on that than on my walking.

After a couple of yards, Katniss stops again and asks, "Can you take your boots off?"
"Here?" I ask her and I look around. The ground is covered with pine needles, branches and small rocks. It isn’t inviting to walk barefoot here.
"Yes," Katniss says. "I will, too. That way we'll both be quieter."

We take of our boots and socks and continue barefoot. It isn’t pleasant. Little stones are itching my feet and branches prickle my ankles. We go even slower now, because of this.

There is no sign of any rabbit or squirrel where we walk and if I listen closely I can tell why. I’m still making too much noise. This way we won’t catch anything. The only option is to split up.

"Katniss," I say. She turns around. "We need to split up. I know I'm chasing away the game."
"Only because your leg's hurt," she says.

"I know. So, why don't you go on?" I suggest, "Show me some plants to gather and that way we'll both be useful."

"Not if Cato comes and kills you." Katniss says, I can hear the concern in her voice. Somehow it makes me laugh. "Look, I can handle Cato. I fought him before, didn't I?"

This doesn’t convince Katniss at all.

"What if you climbed up in a tree and acted as a lookout while I hunted?" she says. Obviously Katniss wants me out of the way and out of Cato’s reach. I do love the fact that she seems so concerned for my wellbeing, but that is not going to happen. First, because I can’t climb trees, and second, because there is no way that I’ll just strap myself in a tree while Katniss is out there, hunting, alone and unprotected.

"What if you show me what's edible around here and go get us some meat?" I say, mimicking her tone. "Just don't go far, in case you need help."

Katniss gives in and shows me some edible plants. I need to dig them out, because it is their roots that we need. She also suggests a whistle for communication. Then she sets off with her bow and I turn to my task at hand. Whistling the notes in an interval of a couple of minutes.

After digging up a rather sizeable pile of roots I stretch and look around. I hear Katniss whistle and give her an answer as my eye falls on a bush filled with burgundy colored berries, close to the stream.

I walk over there and pluck a few handfuls of them. They look the same as the ones Katniss...
showed me. I take them back to the pack and the roots and put out the square of plastic to spread them out to dry. Then I turn back to the bush to harvest some more of the berries. The stream is loud and I hardly hear her voice over it, calling my name. She sounds frightened and I hurry my way back to the pack as an arrow comes flying at me, and sticks in a tree just a few centimeters to my left. It startles me so that I jump back and the berries in my hand fly through the air. I’m instantly reminded of the dream I had, about Katniss shooting me. She stands right in front of me now. Her eyes wide with anxiety. 

"What are you doing?" She yells at me. “You're supposed to be here, not running around in the woods!"

"I found some berries down by the stream," I say, shocked by her intensity. "I whistled. Why didn't you whistle back?" she’s snapping at me, trembling. "I didn't hear. The water's too loud, I guess," I say as I walk towards her and put my hands on her shoulders. Her body’s shaking beneath my hands and she’s still not calming down. "I thought Cato killed you!" she yells.

"No, I'm fine." I wrap my arms around her, pulling her to me, trying to get her to stop shaking. She stands stiff and non responding in my arms. I get a little worried now. "Katniss?" I ask her. She pushes me away from her. "If two people agree on a signal, they stay in range. Because if one of them doesn't answer, they're in trouble, all right?" 

"All right!" I say. 

"All right. Because that's what happened with Rue, and I watched her die!" she says.

Now I feel a little guilty for not paying enough attention to the whistles. And she is genuinely afraid when it come to my well being. Katniss goes to the pack to get some water and turns to me again, anger in her voice now as she says, "And you ate without me!"

"What? No, I didn't," I say. "Oh, and I suppose the apples ate the cheese," Katniss says.

I’m getting a little annoyed now. Being afraid for me, fine, but accusing me of something that isn’t my fault, no. "I don't know what ate the cheese, but it wasn't me." I say slowly, "I've been down by the stream collecting berries. Would you care for some?" 

Katniss opens her hand and holds out the berries.

The cannon fires totally unexpected. Katniss jumps and turns to me, staring at me as if she’s amazed I’m still standing here. I raise my eyebrows in a question as the hovercraft appears really close to where we are. In its arm I see a small body, long red hair. Foxface. This means Cato must have got to her! And only a hundred yards away from us.

He can be here any second, he probably even heard Katniss screaming at me.

I take a step towards her and take her arm, pushing her toward a tree. "Climb. He'll be here in a second. We'll stand a better chance fighting him from above."

Katniss lays her hand on my arm and shakes her head. "No, Peeta, she's your kill, not Cato's."

"What? I haven't even seen her since the first day," I say. "How could I have killed her?"

Katniss opens her hand and holds out the berries.
Chapter Summary

Foxface died and Peeta and Katniss return to their cave. The next day all the water is drained and they're send to the lake. Then Cato appears but runs right past them...

Chapter Notes

I do not own THG and I have used the dialogue of THG chapter 24 for this chapter.

It takes a while before I understand what Katniss is talking about. She explains that she saw Foxface steal food from the pyramid and she would only take a little bit so no one would find out. Katniss looks at the berries again, and adds, “she knew our berries were safe, because we were preparing to eat them ourselves. So she didn’t question it.”
"I wonder how she found us," I say. "My fault, I guess, if I'm as loud as you say."
"And she's very clever, Peeta.” Katniss says, taking her eyes from the berries and fixing them on me. “Well, she was. Until you outfoxed her.”
"Not on purpose. Doesn't seem fair somehow. I mean, we would have both been dead, too, if she hadn't eaten the berries first." As I say it, I know it’s not true, so I revise myself. "No, of course, we wouldn't. You recognized them, didn't you?"
Katniss nods. "We call them nightlock."
"Even the name sounds deadly," I say, and sigh. "I'm sorry, Katniss. I really thought they were the same ones you'd gathered."
"Don't apologize. It just means we're one step closer to home, right?" she asks.
"I'll get rid of the rest," I say and I pick up the sheet of plastic, wrapping the berries carefully in it and I'm heading to the bushes, to throw them in there. Just as I am about to fling them away, Katniss’ voice stops me.
"Wait!" she calls out. She kneels down by our packs and comes up with a leather pouch. She walks towards me, takes the berries from me and scoops a few handfuls of them into the pouch.
"If they fooled Foxface, maybe they can fool Cato as well. If he's chasing us or something, we can act like we accidentally drop the pouch and if he eats them - "
"Then hello District Twelve," I say and smile at her.
"That's it," she says while she fasts the pouch to her belt.
I look around me, almost expecting Cato to burst out of the bushes. "He'll know where we are now," I say. "If he was anywhere nearby and saw that hovercraft, he'll know we killed her and come after us."
"Let's make a fire. Right now.” Katniss says, picking up a few branches.
"Are you ready to face him?" I ask her, surprised by her decision.
"I'm ready to eat. Better to cook our food while we have the chance. If he knows we're here, he knows. But he also knows there's two of us and probably assumes we were hunting Foxface.” She says, while gathering the branches with some dry leaves into a neat pile. “That means you’re recovered. And the fire means we’re not hiding, we're inviting him here. Would you show up?” She looks at me now, the question in her eyes.
"Maybe not," I say and kneel down beside the pile. I find matches in the pack and light the dried leaves, keeping my hands around them to keep the wind from blowing out the fire. Once they’re fired up good I take little twigs and put them into the small fire. Then the bigger branches, which are still damp. They need a strong fire before they’ll light themselves. First the little twigs and leaves, then the bigger branches. I can hear my father’s voice in my head, from when he was teaching us how to build a decent fire. We sometimes used it for the ovens, when there was a problem with coal supplies. Usually after a mining accident. The knowledge is useful now. I also make a sort of spit where we can roast the rabbits and the squirrel Katniss shot. She wraps leaves around the roots and puts them in the fire. We search for some more greens to spice up the food. Cato doesn’t show up, like we thought.

When the food is cooked, Katniss packs it up and gives me a rabbit’s leg to eat, then she says, “let’s search for higher ground and a good tree to sleep in?”
I shake my head. "I can’t climb like you, Katniss, especially with my leg, and I don’t think I could ever fall asleep fifty feet above the ground."
"It's not safe to stay in the open, Peeta," she says.
"Can't we go back to the cave?" I ask. "It's near water and easy to defend."
Katniss sighs and I can tell she’s almost out of patience. I really hope she’ll give in though, because I don’t see how I’ll ever climb a tree, let alone sleep in it. I am not a fan of heights. Rye and Brannick used to climb the apple tree in our back garden, but I never participated. I don’t know why, but the idea alone makes me dizzy.

I see Katniss struggling as she suddenly reaches towards me and presses her lips against mine. They taste like rabbit and feel very warm. “Sure. Let's go back to the cave.”
I smile with relieve, I really expected an argument. "Well, that was easy."

Before we take the long hike back, we light up the fire with damp wood, which causes a lot of thick, grey smoke. I wonder if Cato can be fooled by it. He is not particularly smart, but he’s not entirely stupid either. And Katniss did use the fire trick once already with Rue, when she blew up the food.
The memory of this makes me think about Foxface. This incredible smart girl, with beautiful red hair. I know she needs to die for us to live, but I don’t like to be the one who is responsible for that.

I hope, like I did with the girl from Eight, that no one betted on me killing Foxface. But in the end, it doesn’t matter who betted on this and who didn’t. I am responsible for this girl’s death. Even more than the other. And I don’t like it. She is no longer. And for this girl as well there are people mourning, people with broken hearts. Because of me. I wonder how often she will haunt me in my dreams.

We head back to the cave. When we reach the stream Katniss suggest to walk in it, to cover our tracks. This seems like a good idea. If Cato can’t find us, we can have a peaceful night, hopefully.

When we arrive at the cave, we are officially drained. The sun is almost setting and the wind is gaining force. It is good that we have the cave for shelter. This wind would’ve blown us out of a tree. As Katniss sorts out the pack and divides food over two plates I realize I have trouble keeping my eyes open. I rest with my back against the rocks and feel my head fall to the side, which gives me a start.
Katniss notices it too. “You should go to sleep, I’ll take the first watch.” She says.
I want to protest, but I’m too tired. So I get into the sleeping bag and she tucks me in. While I’m sinking deeper into sleep I am vaguely aware of the warmth of her lips pressed to my forehead.

Both Cato and Foxface visit me in my dreams this night. We are standing in front of the Cornucopia and they are laughing at me and telling me that even if I win, I’ll still lose. I have no
idea what they mean by it, but it gives me a slight uncomfortable feeling, which lingers when Katniss wakes me. I have to get my bearings, because the Cornucopia and the bright sunlight is gone. Instead the gray light piercing through the cracks in the rocks indicates the day has just begun. I stare at the sky and turn to Katniss and say, "I slept the whole night. That's not fair, Katniss, you should have woken me."

I climb out of the sleeping bag and Katniss gets into it. "I'll sleep now. Wake me if anything interesting happens." She says, yawning.

She is sleeping within a few seconds and I stare down at her face, looking young and beautiful. Her long eyelashes almost touch her cheeks. I tuck a strand of dark hair behind her ear and kiss her on her temple. Then I sit up, my back against the wall and my gaze fixed on the entrance of our cave.

Even if I win, I’ll still lose. The words are banging in my head. I know it was just a dream but it is tugging at me. What will I lose? My innocence maybe, because I killed? My hand reaches out for Katniss, to stroke her hair. I freeze midair when the thought appears to me that I could lose her. And I’ll be lost without her. This notion makes me want to wake her and hold her in my arms and kiss her, to never let her go again. But I don’t give in, she needs her sleep and I feel she wouldn’t appreciate it. I feel an uncertainty when I think about her. Sure, she kissed me, she told me I had no competition. But I can’t shake the feeling from me that something is wrong. And I wonder, does she love me, like I love her. It is unhinging and makes me restless. I’m glad when Katniss wakes up in the afternoon, because I want to do something to get away from these disturbing thoughts.

She gets out of the sleeping bag and asks, "Any sign of our friend?"

I shake my head. "No, he's keeping a disturbingly low profile."

"How long do you think we'll have before the Gamemakers drive us together?" she asks.

"Well, Foxface died almost a day ago, so there's been plenty of time for the audience to place bets and get bored. I guess it could happen at any moment," I tell her.

"Yeah, I have a feeling today's the day," she says, "I wonder how they'll do it."

I'm staring outside, not answering her question because I have no idea.

"Well, until they do, no sense in wasting a hunting day. But we should probably eat as much as we can hold just in case we run into trouble," she says.

I start gathering our stuff, rolling up the sleeping bag and putting everything in the packs. Katniss is dividing almost all of the food that is left. We eat ourselves full with the rabbit and the last bread with goat cheese. And then we set out to leave the cave. We won’t return to it, at least, I have a feeling that we won’t. This thing has to come to an end sometimes, and I sense that now is that time. Today will be the day.

Katniss reaches down and pats the rocks with her hand, as if saying good-bye and we go to the stream to wash up. Our water bottles are still full, but a splash of cold water in my face would be welcome. I don’t get it though, because when we reach the stream, all that is left is a dry bed. Katniss kneels and puts her hands on the ground.

"Not even a little damp. They must have drained it while we slept," she says.

This must be their way to drive us together, then.

"The lake," I say. "That's where they want us to go."

"Maybe the ponds still have some," Katniss says.

I am sure that they won’t, but I’ll placate her. "We can check," I say and we walk towards a pond, which is also dry as bones.

"You're right. They're driving us to the lake," she says. "Do you want to go straightaway or wait until the water's tapped out?"

"Let's go now, while we've had food and rest. Let's just go end this thing," I say. And I mean it, it has been enough. I want to get out of here. This haunting place with its camera’s and its unnatural
temperature, this place which has been the end of 21 children, and will be the end of at least one more.
Katniss nods and I close the space between us and envelop her in my arms.
"Two against one. Should be a piece of cake," I whisper in her ear.
"Next time we eat, it will be in the Capitol," she answers.
"You bet it will," I say.
She rests her head on my shoulder and I feel her arms around me now, holding me tight. All the disturbing thoughts of this afternoon vanish as I breathe her in and feel her body against mine. The curve of her breasts against my chest, her hips touching mine, her one hand around my waist, the other rubbing me between my shoulder blades. To stand like this forever…
But too soon we break apart and head for the lake.

Under the tracker jacker tree we rest. I sink down, my back against the tree, like Glimmer was sitting before the nest fell upon us. Katniss kicks at the remains of the nest. Dust flies around as the wind blows the nest into oblivion. Although I’m sure I will never forget.
"Let's move on," Katniss says to my relief. We get up and carry on our way towards the lake.
It is not far from the nest, but when we arrive at the field, the sun is starting to set. The Cornucopia stands there, silent and alone. We walk around it. There is no one here. We cross the field to go to the lake, where we fill our water bottles.

While I purify the water with iodine, Katniss says. "We don't want to fight him after dark. There's only the one pair of glasses."
"Maybe that's what he's waiting for. What do you want to do?" I ask her, “go back to the cave?"
"Either that or find a tree. But let's give him another half an hour or so. Then we'll take cover," she says.

So we end up just sitting by the lake. With the sun setting the sky has beautiful colors, it is twilight, my favorite time of the day. The sky gets a special sapphire color which I could never quite capture in icing. Maybe with paint I could make it work, but paint is a useless product for everyday life and extremely expensive. But if I win these games, I will have enough money to buy paint. And time too, I would love to really paint. I’ll paint Katniss, I tell myself while I stare at the sky.
The trees are filled with mockingjays and Katniss starts to sing to them. It is the same melody I heard the birds whistle when I was lying in the mud bank.

While Katniss sings all the birds fall silent. They listen intently to what she has to offer. After she repeats the song they start to answer her and fill the world with their music. It is beautiful.
"Just like your father," I say softly.
Katniss touches the mockingjay pin on her shirt and says. "That's Rue's song, I think they remember it."
We sit in silence, listening to the beautiful music that fills the air.
Katniss closes her eyes and I stretch my neck to locate the birds in the nearby trees. That is when I hear it, the heavy footfall of Cato in the distance. Approaching us. The mockingjays cut off their song and yelp in alarm.
I rise instantly and help Katniss up as well. She loads her bow and I release my knife from my belt. This is it, I think, when we see Cato crash through the trees, heading towards us. The moment of truth.
Katniss lets an arrow fly and it hits his chest, on the exact place where his heart is. But the arrow just falls on the ground, without doing him any harm.
"He's got some kind of body armor!" Katniss shouts.
I stare at Cato who is only a few feet away from us now. He is panting hard, his face red from exertion. And he runs straight past us without even acknowledging our presence. He is already halfway through the field when we realize he is running from something.

I strain my eyes to see what it is, when Katniss gives a cry and chases after Cato. The creatures they are running from appear in front of me now and I turn and run after Katniss as fast as I can, to
save myself.
Peeta and Katniss fight off the mutts and then they have to fight of Cato. When they finally win, the Gamemakers change the rules back. Only one can be crowned as victor...

Cato has made a beeline for the Cornucopia, and Katniss is following him. He has crawled on top of the horn and she has her hands already on the tail when she turns around to check on me. She loads her bow and shoots an arrow at the mutts that are chasing me. I can sense that they are very close. The chance of them catching me grows by the second. And if Katniss stays where she is they will catch her too. So I wave my hand at her and shout, "Go, Katniss! Go!"

She climbs the Cornucopia and I run with all that is in me. Trying to ignore the stabbing pain in my leg, because the wound isn’t fully healed and my leg complains loudly at my running. I see Katniss loading her bow, aiming at Cato when I reach the foot of the Cornucopia and the first of the mutt pack reaches me. I cry out in fear as I feel their breath on my heels. Katniss repositions her bow and shoots at the mutts instead.

"Climb!" she yells at me. I m scaling the metal, which is really hot, because it has been warmed up by the sun all day. With my knife still in my hand and my leg hurting like crazy it is difficult to get a grip.
I have to, I tell myself, and I haul myself up with all the strength I have in me. In the mean time Katniss is shooting arrows at the mutts. When I reach her feet she grabs me by my arm and helps me up.
Cato is at the top of the Cornucopia. He lies there, gasping for breath and I hear him call out to us, “Can they climb it?”
"What?" Katniss shouts back over the noise of the mutts. They’re growling and placing their paws on the metal.
"He said, 'Can they climb it?'" I answer her question and we both turn to look at the mutts below us.

The mutts look like wolves but there is something else about them, that makes them creepy. We see them standing together in half a circle now, on their hind legs and they have something human about them. It seems like they are discussing their strategy on how to reach us.
We both are staring at them as one of them takes a leap and jumps at us. Katniss gives a yelp and I see her arms shaking, trying to get control over the bow. The mutt is hanging on the metal of the Cornucopia, about ten feet below us and is slowly sliding backwards, not able to get a grip on the smooth metal, even if its claws are razor sharp. Katniss lets an arrow fly into its throat and it
crashes on the ground. I see Katniss shake beside me and I lay a hand firmly on her arm. "Katniss?" I ask. "It's her!" she gasps. "Who?" I ask again.

Katniss examines the pack of mutts while terror widens her eyes. She doesn’t answer my question and I start to get worried about her. "What is it, Katniss?" I ask again, shaking her shoulder. "It's them. It's all of them. The others. Rue and Foxface and... all of the other tributes," she says, as she points at the animals.

I take a look at them now and see what she means. Their eyes, they are real human eyes and I gasp as I recognize them too. Rue and Foxface, as Katniss pointed them out. But also Marvel and the boy from three. And right in the front stands Marly, her brown hair waving around her and her eyes look at me intently. I see hatred and betrayal in them.

"What did they do to them?" I say, turning to Katniss, not wanting to see those eyes looking at me. "You don't think... those could be their real eyes?"

Katniss just shakes her head and I look at the mutts again, to see if there is any recognition in their eyes. I don’t see it, just lot of hatred, that’s all. It is just another Gamemakers trick to scare us, I’m sure. I’m about to say so to Katniss as we see them divide into two groups and they try to jump their way onto the Cornucopia. I feel the sharp teeth sink into my calf and scream from the pain. The mutt pulls me down and Katniss is almost going down with me, cause I am still holding on to her with one arm. She braces herself to keep us both alive. The pain is bad I know I have to focus on getting that mutt off me now. I stab at it with my knife. Katniss is shouting above me. "Kill it, Peeta! Kill it!"

I wiggle my head to see what I’m doing and with a clear view I drive the knife down into the head of the mutt. It releases its grip on me and Katniss pulls me back on the horn where we start climbing to the top.

As soon as we are there I slump down on it and check my leg. There are two large gashes in it, made by the canines of the mutt. Blood is pouring out from it and I already feel weakened because of it. I put both my hands on it to stop the bleeding. Katniss loads her bow again to take out another mutt.

I’m still focused on my leg, so when I’m grabbed from behind it comes as a surprise. Cato. I almost forgot that he is here. And that he is an enemy too, just as the mutts are. He hauls me up and locks his arm around my throat. With my arms I reach for him to try to escape his grasp. The lack of oxygen makes it hard to focus.

Katniss loads her bow again and points the arrow at us. But she can’t shoot him without hurting me too. Cato has figured this out as well because he starts laughing and says, "shoot me and he goes down with me."

I look at Katniss standing in front of me. An expression on her face of utter concentration, trying to think her way out of this. I feel the lack of air pulling me down so I have to think fast. He is holding me with his arm. If she shoots him in the head, he will fall and take me down. She can’t shoot him anywhere else, because he has some kind of armor on. Only his head and his hands are exposed. If she shoots his hand, he would probably release me in a reflex and that will be my cue to push him over the edge. This is still a long shot, but it is all I can think of and Katniss needs to act fast, because I feel I am losing it here. The question is how to get Katniss to shoot his hand?

With all the strength left in me I pull up my arm and stretch out my index finger to draw an X on the back of Cato’s hand while looking at her intently.

Katniss reacts immediately and lets the arrow fly. It goes straight through his hand and he releases his grip on me, just as I had anticipated. Instantly I slam my elbow in his abdomen hard and he stumbles, trying to prevent himself from falling down. I almost lose my balance and would’ve gone over myself if it weren’t for Katniss, who jumps forward and catches me just in time. Saving
my life again.
I see Cato slipping on my blood, that has spread out all over the horn and the next moment he is
gone. We hear the thud of his body hitting the ground and the growling of the mutts who are on
him in that instant.

Katniss has both her hands on my shoulders and I close my arms around her. Beneath us the mutts
are working on killing Cato. But Cato fights back, we hear the yells of pain coming from the mutts
and I realize he must have his sword with him and is attacking them now. He can’t win. There are
too many of them and he is on his own. He has that armor that protects him but I don’t think it will
gain him anything in the end. Even worse, it will only slow down his inevitable death.
The sun is setting while Katniss and I wait for the sound of cannon. But it isn’t coming, not yet.
The end of the Games must be bloody and terrifying.
When the darkness comes and the anthem plays, the temperature drops. I start shaking and I feel
the blood loss is taking its toll. We go to sit down on the Cornucopia and Katniss investigates my
leg.
“It needs bandages,” she mutters, and before I can object, she takes off her jacket and her shirt in
this blazing cold. She shakes as hard as I do as she puts the jacket back on. Then she pulls at my
shoulders to make me lie down as she attends to my leg.
“It is not enough,” she says. She’s not exactly talking to me, just busy healing me. Something she
is actually good at, although she won’t admit it. She takes her last remaining arrow from its sheath
and ties it in her shirt, which she has wrapped around my leg. I have no idea what she’s doing, but
I trust she knows it better than I do, so I don’t question it.

I close my eyes and feel her lie down next to me.
"Don't go to sleep," she says, and with that I open my eyes again and turn to look at her. Her lips
are blue and her teeth are chattering.
"Are you cold?" I ask her and unzip my jacket. She moves closer and presses her body against
me. I fasten the jacket around her. With the two of us inside my jacket, it is a bit warmer, even
though the night is still young. And the metal of the Cornucopia is cooling down fast.

"Cato may win this thing yet," I hear Katniss whisper.
"Don't you believe it," I say as I pull up her hood and tighten my arms around her. I’m shaking
badly, though, and having trouble keeping my eyes open.
The night continues and seems to get colder every minute. Beneath us, Cato is eaten alive by the
mutts. We are constantly reminded because he’s moaning and whimpering and even though he
was brutal in life, he didn’t deserve to die like this. I hate it and I wish there was something I could
do. But all my energy goes to staying alive myself as it is.
Katniss voice breaks my thoughts, “Why don’t they just kill him?”
"You know why," I say, and I pull her still closer to me. To keep her warm, to stay alive, to keep
warm myself. I’m telling myself this over and over again as a mantra to keep from losing
consciousness.

It’s not working, I have the sensation of falling deeper and deeper and that it’s okay to fall and to
never land anywhere. Darkness is twirling around me. Katniss’ voice brings me back to the
dreadful reality, the panic in it so clear that I know I have to stay awake for her. I can’t leave her
alone now that she needs me so desperately. I open my eyes again and see her staring at me, plain
fear in her eyes. “Please,” she whispers now, “Peeta, don’t go.”
But the darkness is pulling at me and I try to fight it, I really do, but it is hard. Katniss starts
screaming my name now, she refuses to let me go. I turn my head and look at the sky. The
patterns of the stars and the moon indicating that time is passing by, even though it doesn’t feel
like it.
I point at the sky and start whispering to Katniss, “the stars, they all have their own place in the
sky. They all know their course and their aim and return every season. Do you see?”
She nods, and I continue, “You can see them shift and the moon as well, it indicates the passage
of time. It means there will come an end to this night.”

Katniss rests her head against my chest, staring at the night sky and sighs. “I promise,” I say softly, “there will come an end to this nightmare, there will. When you’re feeling lost, I will keep my love hidden in the sun. For when the darkness comes.”

She doesn’t react but I feel her hand tighten around my waist. I keep pointing at the stars and the moon and keep telling her it will be okay.

After what seems like an eternity I see rosy streaks in the sky, indicating sunrise. “Katniss,” I whisper, “the sun is rising. Look! It’s beautiful.”

She lifts her head and looks at me, I can tell from her face that I’m not looking well. She presses her ear against the horn to listen if Cato is still there. I can barely hear him, right under us.

"I think he’s closer now. Katniss, can you shoot him?" I ask her.

"My last arrow's in your tourniquet," she says.

"Make it count," I say and I unzip my jacket to let her out. As soon as she is away from me I feel the cold through my bones and how weak I am.

Katniss takes the arrow out of the tourniquet, as it is apparently called. She reaches over the edge of the Cornucopia to get a good shot and I hold her by her waist to give her support. I hear the arrow fly and haul Katniss back up the horn.

"Did you get him?" I whisper, suddenly overwhelmed by all the misery of the past hours. The cannon fires and I sigh. I don’t feel victorious but the cannon does mean it’s over.

"Then we won, Katniss," I say, and I can hear how hollow my voice sounds.

"Hurray for us," she replies, barely audible and utterly exhausted. Are we supposed to be glad now? I don’t know, I don’t feel glad. I feel like I want to sleep and never wake up.

The mutts disappear but nothing else happens. No hovercraft appears, there is no announcement of our victory.
"Hey!" Katniss shouts. "What's going on?" There is no answer.
"Maybe it's the body. Maybe we have to move away from it," I say. I don’t know if that is true, but it is all I can think of.

"Okay." She says, “think you could make it to the lake?"

"Think I better try," I say.

I don’t know how though, because there is no strength left in my body. I’m leaning heavily on Katniss as we make our way back to the lake. There I slump down while Katniss scoops up water with her hands and brings it to my lips. I drink thirstily and think how weird it is to drink water out of her hands. Wonderful weird though, despite everything. Finally the hovercraft appears and takes Cato’s body. I see tears falling from Katniss’ cheek, tears of relief. But nothing happens. I don’t know what is going on and I see my leg is bleeding again. I won’t last long like this.

"What are they waiting for?" I ask slowly, it takes effort even to speak.

"I don't know," she says and gets up and picks up the arrow that still lies there from when she shot Cato. At the same time the voice of Claudius Templesth's tells us what the hold-up is.

"Greetings to the final contestants of the Seventy-fourth Hunger Games. The earlier revision has been revoked. Closer examination of the rule book has disclosed that only one winner may be allowed," he says. "Good luck and may the odds be ever in your favor."

Of course. I should have known. I should not be surprised at this. The Hunger Games have only one victor. This is how it was, this is how it is and how it forever will be. So much for not wanting to be a piece in their games. Because here we are now, forced to kill each other. If they think this will change my mind about protecting her, they’ve got another thing coming. Katniss will just have to kill me and that will be it.
Katniss gets up, the arrow in her hand, staring at me incredulously. Well, this is it then. But I’m dying anyway and it was my plan all along, right? To let her live. "If you think about it, it’s not that surprising," I say softly as I painfully get up on my feet. I take the knife from my belt to throw it in the lake.

Katniss has the bow in her one hand, the arrow in the other, and as if on cue, she loads the arrow and points it at my heart.

Katniss, this is it, you’re going to kill me now…

I didn’t expect her to act this fast, though. I drop the knife into the lake as I raise my eyebrows at her.

Her cheeks burn red and she drops the weapons and takes a step back. "No," I say. "Do it." I walk towards her and pick up the weapons to put them in her hands. "I can't, I won't." she says and I see the tears fill her eyes again.

"Do it. Before they send those mutts back or something. I don't want to die like Cato," I tell her.

"Then you shoot me," suddenly she’s raging and shoves the bow at me. "You shoot me and go home and live with it!"

I shake my head and thrust the bow aside. "You know I can't," I say. "Fine, I'll go first anyway." I bow down and take off the shirt that is still around my leg. I can feel the blood sliding down my leg towards the earth.

"No, you can't kill yourself," she says desperately and the next moment she is on her knees in front of me, trying to wrap my leg in bandages again.

"Katniss," I say. "It's what I want."

"You're not leaving me here alone," she says. The terror in her voice brings the tears to my eyes, but it is no use. Only one of us can win and anyone can see it should be Katniss.

"Listen," I say as I take her shoulders and pull her up, I lock her eyes with mine, trying to persuade her. "We both know they have to have a victor. It can only be one of us. Please, take it. For me." I sigh, and continue, “Katniss, I love you, I don’t even want to live a life without you. You are my life and really, I’m okay with this. Knowing you’ll live and you’ll love and have a good life. Please.”

I stop talking and look at her intently. She looks at me but her thoughts are somewhere else.

I see her fingers go to the pouch with poisonous berries. I grasp her wrist. "No, I won't let you."

"Trust me," she whispers. I look at her eyes, trying to read them. I don’t know what she’s up to but I do trust her. I let go of her wrist and hold out my hand. She pours a handful of berries in my hand and then empties the pouch in her own hand.

"On the count of three?" she asks.

I can’t believe this is happening. Are we going to die here? And Katniss is actually willing to die with me? Why? Doesn’t she want to live a life without me either? Or is it something else that led her to do this? I lean down and kiss her on her lips, soft and gentle. "The count of three," I say. She turns around and presses her back to mine and reaches for my empty hand. I entwine her fingers with mine.

"Hold them out. I want everyone to see," I say. If we are going to do this, I want them to know that they are accountable. And that we do not agree on their terms. We are not another piece in their games. It dawns on me that this might be what Katniss is thinking too, that we do not agree on their rule of one victor. It will be either two or no one.

Katniss squeezes my hand as a signal and we begin counting. "One."

I look around and focus on the feel of Katniss beside me, "Two."

It is as if I feel the world slipping by us. "Three!"

I lift my hand to my mouth and open it to let death in as the trumpets begin to blare. And above them Claudius Templesmith shouts out. "Stop! Stop! Ladies and gentlemen, I am pleased to present the victors of the Seventy-fourth Hunger Games, Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark! I give you - the tributes of District Twelve!"
Chapter End Notes

Disclaimer: I’ve used some lyrics from the song “When the darkness comes,” from Colbie Caillait. I also used this as the title for this chapter. The song goes like this:
I'll be here waiting
Hoping, praying that
This light will guide you home
When you’re feeling lost I'll leave my love
Hidden in the sun
For when the darkness comes

Disclaimer: I also used the song ‘Stars’ form the musical ‘Les Miserables’ again, just like I did in ch.4
To lose a leg and gain a life

Chapter Summary

Peeta and Katniss spew out the berries and are picked up by a hovercraft. But then Peeta loses his consciousness. When he wakes, he learns that his leg is amputated.

Chapter Notes

Yes again I would like to say that I don't own THG and I've used a little dialogue from chapter 26.

I spew the berries from my mouth, pull Katniss with me to the lake, where we slump down on our knees and scoop up hands full of water to rinse our mouth. Then I pull Katniss towards me and she puts her arms around my neck, holding me close.

"You didn't swallow any?" she asks.
I shake my head. "You?"
"Guess I'd be dead by now if I did," she says.
“Guess so,” I reply. “That was just in time.”

There is a lot of noise drowning out my voice and I can hear the howling, yells and applause from the crowd in the Capitol. I barely register it, because despite the fact that I didn’t swallow any berries, I feel more dead than alive and I know I won’t last long. The loss of blood makes me lightheaded. A hovercraft appears and drops two ladders. Katniss helps me to get on my feet and holds me tightly. I am grateful for that because I can’t master the strength to stand on my own. We stand together on one of the ladders and I’m glad that there is an electric current to keep me where I am. While we rise into the sky and enter the hovercraft, the last thing I remember is the feel of Katniss’ arms around me, before I collapse into darkness.

It seems to last for a long time, this darkness. It is totally empty and nothing happens. Does this mean I’m dead? But a searing pain in my left leg tells me I’m still alive. The dead don’t feel pain in their legs, right? It takes even more time for me to actually regain full consciousness and open my eyes. When I finally do, I see I am in a sterile white room, lying on a white bed and covered with white blankets. Several tubes are inserted in different places in my body and attached to bleeping machines. I try to lift my head and move my arms but it’s not possible, I just don’t have the strength or there is something else that is holding me back. It is as if I am completely paralyzed. After what seems like twenty minutes of lying here alone and helpless, the door opens and a woman in a white uniform enters the room. She approaches the bed and smiles at me.

“I see you are awake, finally,” she says. “My name is Dr. Mendall and I’ve treated you since you were announced victor of the 74th Hunger Games. Congratulations!”

I stare at her in disbelief. Did this woman just congratulate me? For what? Being treated by her or winning the Games? For neither one I want to be congratulated.

“Where is Katniss?” I manage to get out. My voice sounds hoarse.

“Don’t worry about Katniss, she is fine,” dr. Mendall says, “we have to focus on getting you better, because you’re supposed to be ready for your crowning tomorrow night already. Isn’t it great! I’m sure we’ll get you there in time. But it is essential for you to know all the ins and outs of
how to walk with a prosthetic.”
It is obvious that I am in the Capitol again, only doctors from the Capitol can talk like this. But wait. A prosthetic? What is she talking about?

Apparently she sees the question in my eyes, because she starts explaining to me what happened after we were announced victors.

“Yes, well, you were bleeding heavily because of the wound in your left calf. Katniss made a tourniquet and I have to say, it saved your life. It was a close call, your heart stopped two times but we made it work again!” she smiles at me triumphantly.

“Unfortunately, a tourniquet has its risks. And I am very, very sorry, Peeta, but we had to amputate the lower half of your left leg.”

Silence follows as I try to comprehend what she just said. My leg is gone. Gone. I try to get up again to see for myself, because it is hard to believe.

“Don’t get up yet,” doctor Mendall says, as she reaches for me. “You are too weak and there is an IV here that drips a fluid in your body which keeps you from moving. It will help you to recover your strength sooner. In an hour or so you will be able to move. Just be patient for now. It has been days since your victory and you’re very weak.”

The pain in my left leg is agonizing and I don’t understand it, the doctor just said they amputated it, so why does it hurt so bad?

“What is this pain I feel?” I ask her, “If my leg is gone, how come it hurts?”

“That is normal,” doctor Mendall answers, “it is called Phantom limb pain. After an amputation, you feel the pain as if the leg is still there. Your brain doesn’t comprehend that your leg is gone and tells you that the pain is still there. Don’t worry, it will pass and I’ll give you something for the pain.”

She starts fussing around with the tubes and enters a code in some sort of square, flat machine, which lights up. I see a lot of numbers and letters on it, but I can’t make out anything that makes sense. I do feel some fluid entering my body through a tube entering the hollow of my elbow. It eases the pain instantly and makes me sleepy.

The doctor sees my eyelids droop and nods. “yes, good, sleep some more, I will check on you in an hour and then we’ll get working on your prosthetic, okay?”

I nod and let my eyes fall closed. I enter the darkness again but this time I don’t mind. Right now it is better than living without my leg.

Someone is shaking my shoulder. “Katniss” I say and I open my eyes.

“Sorry, no,” the man standing next to my bed looks at me apologetically. “Doctor Mendall ordered me to wake you because we have to get working on the prosthetic.” He says. “But Katniss is doing fine, don’t worry about her. One more day, and then you’ll see her again.”

I don’t understand what happened to my life. My whole world diminished when I went into the arena, where Katniss and I lived to survive and nothing else mattered. But now that world is gone and I am alone in a white room, strange people are telling me weird things and Katniss has disappeared. Where is she? And where am I? I am so confused. I forgot that there was a world outside the arena, that there is a capitol and that there are people out here. And our home, back in District 12, it all seems so unreal and irrelevant when your world becomes so small.

“Where is she?” I ask the man, “I need to see her.” She is the only thing I can think of that still makes sense.

But the man shakes his head. “You can’t see her now, tomorrow evening will be your live reunion on stage, then you’ll see her again.”

I nod, defeated, and the man helps me to sit up. “My name is Robin,” he says, I am dr. Mendalls assistant. She will be here any minute now, with your prosthetic.”

He casts away the blankets that were covering me and I stare at what should’ve been my leg. Just below my knee, where Katniss had tied her shirt around my leg, there is nothing now.
“don’t worry about it,” Robin starts chattering, “with the new developments these days we make great prosthetics and they fit perfectly and after you get used to it, you won’t even know the difference anymore. Seriously!”

I nod, not knowing what I could respond to him. The door opens and dr. Mendall enters. In her hands she has a large box. She sets it on the table next to my bed and opens it. In it is a metal and plastic device shaped in the form of a lower leg.

“Hello Peeta, good to see you up and about!” dr. Mendall says cheerily. “Here, this is your prosthetic, I am going to fasten it to your leg and then we are going to try walking on it, okay?”

She moves towards me and shows me how to fasten the prosthetic to my knee. She takes it off again and lets me try it. I thought it would be painful, but I hardly feel anything. The prosthetic fits my stump perfectly.

“It has been made especially for you,” the doctor explains.

Robin helps me to get on my feet and I place my first step tentatively. It is really weird and difficult to walk around like this and I still haven’t adjusted to the fact that I’ve lost my leg. After a few steps and turns I feel already wiped out.

“This is enough for today,” dr. Mendall says, “you need your rest, you sleep now. Tomorrow morning we’ll do this again and then you’re off to get ready for the big reunion!” She beams brightly at me, somehow it reminds me of Effie.

I lie down on the bed, Robin gives me a sedative and I’m asleep before I can even count to ten.

Katniss is there in my dreams, looking healthy and beautiful. She calls out my name. There is desperation in her voice. I’m about to tell her that I am right here, but she vanishes in thin air, leaving me behind.

“Peeta!” a voice calls for me. I recognize it as Katniss and sit up straight.

“Katniss?” I respond, I try to give my voice some volume, but I sound hoarse. There is no response and nothing happens. I look around and have to get my bearings again. I tell myself I am in a hospital room in the Capitol and Katniss is doing fine. This knowledge calms me down although I can’t get rid of the anxiety I feel building up in my chest.

A little later the door opens and Robin enters. He has breakfast for me, toast and orange juice. I eat like I’ve never eaten before, only now realizing how hungry I am.

Robin helps me with the prosthetic and we practice walking. He gives me a cane to give me more balance. “You’ll get used to it,” he assures me, “and then you won’t need the cane anymore, trust me.”

I want to believe him, but to trust someone from the capitol is a little too much for me, after what I’ve been through.

Just before lunch, doctor Mendall enters the room and tells me that my prep-team will come and make me ready for tonight’s event.

The next person walking in is not someone from my prep-team though, it is Haymitch. The relief of seeing someone I know washes over me. Finally I am sure that I’ll be okay, if Haymitch is here.

He walks over to me and puts an arm around my shoulder.

“You did a great job, boy,” he says.

“How is Katniss?” I ask him, “can I see her?”

“She is fine, eager to see you too, but they decided to do you reunion live.” Haymitch says.

“I know, they told me that already,” I say, “but everything is so unreal and I want to see her.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t do anything about it,” Haymitch answers my plea and I can hear the pity in his voice, “just a couple of hours and you can see her, okay?”

I nod and he lets go of me. Behind him stands Effie, tears in her eyes and a big smile on her lips.

“Peeta! It is so great to see you, you look wonderful. I am so proud of the two of you,” she begins and hugs me tight. “I’ve told everybody how you both are like pearls and how amazing you were!”

She babbles on about pearls and how happy she is and I just smile at her.

A cart is rolled in with lunch served on it and then there is Portia and my whole prep team. Sensa,
Morna and Josius are all thrilled to see me. Portia smiles and holds me tight. “It is really good to see you.” She just says.

Effie and Haymitch leave and so do the doctor and her assistant, leaving me behind to have lunch with Portia and my prep-team.

“Normally, we would do this on our own floor,” Portia says, “but Katniss is there with her team and the doctor thought it would be better if you stayed here where you can be monitored.”

We eat while Sensa and Morna chatter about the Games, how amazing they were and how great I did. “You were wonderful,” Sensa says to me and lays a hand on my arm. “How you fought off Cato after you’d been stung by these nasty wasps, I thought that was so courageous!” She smiles a genuine smile at me and I smile back. “Thank you, Sensa.” I say.

“I was just at the hairdresser when that happened!” Morna squeaks out.

They continue telling about the Games and what they felt and did. I smile and nod at them, not saying much. All the while thinking how weird it is that they talk about their own feelings without acknowledging the awful truth of these Games. The death of 22 innocent children.

While they chatter on I feel I finally get a grip on my life again. Katniss and I both survived the Games, against all odds. Tonight I will see her again and tomorrow, after the mandatory interview with Caesar Flickerman, we will go back home, to district 12. I’ve lost my leg, but I’ve gained my life!

Judging by my prep team, everyone in the capitol is thrilled about us both getting out alive. Something is tugging at my mind though, because I feel that they didn’t change the rule back for no reason. They never intended for both of us to live. But yet, here we are, because Katniss pulled out those berries. Did she anticipated this? Did she know they wouldn’t want two dead bodies instead of a victor? That two victors is better than no victor. Maybe she did, maybe not, but either way, I do think people will interpret it that way. And somehow I feel that won’t be in her favor. Our country’s government runs a tight ship and anything smelling of rebellion will be pushed down immediately.

I glance at Portia over the table, wishing I could voice my thoughts to her, but I realize I can’t say any of this out loud. This room is probably under surveillance and I can’t risk putting Portia in danger. It is disturbing me, but there is nothing to do about it. I just have to wait until we’re back in 12 so I can talk to Katniss about it. I shake my head to clear my thoughts and answer Josius’ question about how the lamb stew tasted in the cave.

An avox enters and clears the table. This is the signal for the prep-team to start working their magic on me. They tell me I don’t look too bad and they will be able to make me handsome again in no time.

While they smear stuff on my face and massage my hair, Portia leaves to get my clothes. Effie comes to check in on me again, telling me again how proud and happy she is. “And Katniss is doing well, Peeta, don’t worry,” she says to me before she hops out again, reminding everyone that we are on a schedule. Her mentioning of Katniss only increases my anxiety. I want to see her again and I am worried, now that I’ve figured out how our berries could be construed. Portia enters with my clothes, sturdy boots, black trousers and a shirt that shimmers like candle light. “We’re still on fire, I see.” I say to her. She smiles at me. “You should see Katniss,” she says, “she looks radiant!”

“I can’t wait,” I say.

“You’re nervous, I can tell,” Portia says, while she examines me closely. “There is no need, Peeta. You both are safe now and you’ll be just fine, okay?”

“Okay.” I nod. But there is something in her voice, that makes me question the very thing she just said.

Portia helps me get dressed and walk around a bit with the cane and then it is finally time to go to the area from where we’ll get launched unto the stage. It is a poorly constructed area, they had to rearrange things because there are two victors now, with two stylists and two prep teams. We share a mentor and an escort, but still, things needed to be revised and I can tell from where I’m standing that this was all last minute work. Another pointer that there weren’t supposed to be two
victors. The room seems to be divided in half by a cardboard wall and I assume Katniss is standing behind it. Just a little while and I’ll see her again. I hope seeing her will help me clarify my thoughts and lessen my unease. Just to really see her and know she is alive, that is all I want.

Portia leaves me alone to get to her own position. All of them will be represented to the ecstatic crowd. I can hear the loud noise they’re making, screaming and clapping and stamping their feet. Everyone is excited to see us again. The adrenaline starts pumping through my body, because now I get excited too. I walk to the metal circle from where I’ll be exported onto the stage and take my place and I listen to the voices and the music and realize the last part of the Hunger Games is about to begin.
Is this how it ends?

Chapter Summary

Peeta and Katniss have their live reunion on stage and the day after they have their final interview with Caesar Flickerman. And then they go back on the train to District 12.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own THG and I've used THG dialogue for this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The anthem booms in my ears, and then I hear Caesar Flickerman greeting the audience. The show is about to start. I do not care about that show for one second, I only care about seeing Katniss again, holding her in my arms again. I have to wait though, because first the prep team, Effie and stylists are introduced. They all receive big rounds of applause. Then Caesar announces Haymitch, and the applause seems to last forever. I understand he did an amazing job, keeping us both alive, but all I want is for time to hurry up and for these metal plates to start moving. After a couple of minutes they do and I’m lifted up onto the stage where I’m temporarily blinded by the lights. My head turns to where I expect her to be and I feel my face breaks into a huge smile because there she is. Finally. Looking healthy and stunning. Her dress is a soft yellow, shimmering like candlelight. She flings herself at me and I have to steady myself with the cane, because I’m still not used to this artificial leg yet. Katniss presses her lips against mine and I kiss her fervently. Her arms are around my neck, her fingers curling in my hair, making me shiver. Our mouths fit perfectly. Her lips taste sweet and at the same time like pine needles and forest, the way Katniss always smells. She clings to me like there is no tomorrow. I forget my surroundings, forget the Capitol audience, Caesar, and the whole of Panem watching us now. It is just me and her again, in our own little universe.

Our lips part and I feel a warmth rushing through me as I taste her. Our tongues are darting together in a sort of dance which makes my cheeks burn and my stomach clench in anticipation. My arms tighten around her. With my one hand I’m drawing patterns on her naked shoulder blades, the other is clasped around her waist, my fingers digging into the soft fabric of her dress. It’s all I can do not to pick her up in my arms and take her away.

Caesar claps me on my shoulder and I take my arm from Katniss’ waist and impatiently push him away. I am vaguely aware of the roar the audience makes but I just don’t care. Katniss breaks away from me to gasp for air and I bury my face in her neck, showering her with kisses, on her neck, her jaw, her cheekbone and back to her lips. We kiss again, long and lingering. Kissing Katniss feels like fire going up and down through my body. It is something I could just do forever. I don’t know how much time passes until I finally hear Haymitch growling in my ear that that’s enough. His arm is persistent on my shoulder so I break away from Katniss. Out of breath and feeling overwhelmed with happiness, because we are safe and sound.
We turn to a red velvet love seat, from where we will watch a summary of the Games. Katniss sits next to me, but after she exchanges a look with Haymitch, she kicks off her shoes, puts her legs on the couch and leans against me. I put my arm around her and draw her closer to me as I try to prepare myself for what I’m about to see. I can feel Katniss tense under my arm and know she must feel the same fear in anticipation for this. We don’t want to relive the terrible things we’ve gone through. However, we have no choice but to sit here and watch. At least we’re together and I’m glad that she doesn’t have to face this alone, that I am here with her. That I made it against the odds. Katniss takes my hand with both her hands. She holds on to me so hard that I can feel a tingling going through my hand. It reminds me of the tributes parade. How we held on to each other then and had to rub our hands at the end of it to get the blood circulation going again.

Caesar asks us if we’re comfortable and laughs. I nod and then he yells out to the audience, “Let the show begin!”

The show starts with the reaping, the tributes parade, our training scores and our interviews. And then the Games start. There is a full report of the bloodbath at the Cornucopia. I see how the boy from Five comes at me and I try to defend myself with the knife. And how Marvel slices his throat from behind. I see Brandon dying in my arms. Marly’s expression of defeat, which changes quickly to indifference. I can almost hear her think: We can’t show any weakness in the arena. Then there is a lot of me on screen, teaming up with the careers, staying awake under the tree, fighting Cato and finally lying in that mud bank, whispering Katniss’ name. Did I do that? I only remember it vaguely. Katniss squeezes my hands and I smile an encouraging smile at her. They also show how Katniss blew up the food, which makes me beam with pride. And then she goes searching for Rue and the camera’s point of view changes and I see Marvel throwing a spear which enters Rue’s body. The next thing he knows is the arrow in his neck and he dies choking on his own blood. To see the whole thing is awful, even though I know it happened. Katniss told me when she came back from the feast.

What’s beautiful is what happens next. Katniss kneels down and takes Rue in her arms and starts to sing a song. So sweet and soft, her voice choking on tears, but still beautiful. She sings a song about a meadow and I recognize it, because it is a common song in district 12, which we sing to rock babies to sleep.

Here it’s safe, here it’s warm
Here the daisies guard you from every harm
Here your dreams are sweet and tomorrow brings them true
Here is the place where I love you

Katniss gets to sing the whole song before they cut to the announcement of the rule change. We see Katniss looking for me, finding me and bringing me back to life. The feast is pretty awful, the moaning of Clove, lying on the ground dying. Thresh towering over Katniss, telling her to run. It is still weird for me that he did that. He didn’t owe her anything. Now that I’ve heard Katniss sing that song to Rue, I do feel I understand it a little better. Katniss returns to the cave and heals me with the needle. We see a short glimpse of the fight between Cato and Thresh. It is intense and Cato won by luck, because at one point Thresh slipped over a rock and lost his balance. Cato almost beheads him with his sword. Slapping his own chest triumphantly, which looks ridiculous. Then Foxface steals my berries and dies and it’s just us and Cato. The mutts are another terror which I didn’t want to relive. Cato’s death is horrific and even in this summary it seems to last forever.

Our moment with the berries arrives and once again I feel Katniss stiffen under my arm. But why? At this particular moment nothing too awful happens. Except that our action made the Gamemakers change the rules again to let us both live. Which is a good thing. Right?

I expect it to end after the announcement of our victory, but after the announcement the view shifts again and I see Katniss inside the hovercraft. She is pounding on the glass that separates her from
me and she’s screaming my name. I can actually feel the tears pricking in my eyes, because of this. Her voice dripping from despair, her hands balled into fists, tears rolling down her cheeks. To see her like this and to realize that it’s because of me, it moves me to tears. I squeeze her upper arm and pull her even closer to me to kiss her on the top of her head.

We raise from our seat when the anthem starts. Holding hands and waiting while President Snow comes on stage with a girl who is carrying a cushion with the victors crown on it. The president bends over the crown and it separates into two halves. Then he approaches me with the first half and smiles at me when he places it on my head. I smile back, but there is something in his posture that makes me feel uncomfortable. When he places the second crown on Katniss, there is something in his eyes that sends shivers down my spine. It is as if there is something wrong here, but I can’t quite put my finger on it.

The president leaves again and we wave and smile while the audience goes berserk. Caesar Flickerman reminds everyone to watch the final interview tomorrow and then we’re off the stage and brought to the president’s mansion. A great Victory Banquet is held there in our honor. The food is great but the whole thing is tiring. It seems like billions of people are coming up to us to talk to us and take pictures with us. I wish there was a way to get out of here, to be alone with Katniss. But I know I just have to endure it and be patient. At least she’s at my side, holding my hand throughout the whole evening. Feeling the warmth of her hand in mine reassures me.

It is almost morning when we finally get back to our floor in the Training Center. There Portia comes towards me and tells me to go with her to fit my suit for the interview. I walk with her to my room and sink down on the bed. Exhausted. While Portia dresses me in a white suit with a red shirt I feel my eyelids drooping. “Sorry,” Portia says, “you must be drained. You know what, we’ll do this before the interview. Let’s just sleep now.” “I want to speak to Katniss first.” I say.

The door opens and Haymitch enters, he obviously heard what I just said because he shakes his head. “Not now, she’s sleeping and you should be sleeping as well. The interview is in the afternoon and you need your rest.” Before I can say anything in protest, he turns around and walks out of the room.

Despite the fact that I really want to be alone with Katniss, I give in and crawl under the covers in just my undershorts. I feel Portia’s lips on my forehead as she kisses me goodnight. “I’m proud of you,” she whispers, and I smile as I fall asleep.

Portia is also the one who wakes me again after a couple of hours. I feel like I could have slept through the day. “I let you sleep as long as possible,” she says, “but now we have to hurry for the interview.” She gives me a bowl of stew for breakfast and I eat while she discusses my make-up with Sensa. We are ready soon enough and I walk out of the door, towards the sitting room, where the interview will be held. I’m glad it is in our own quarters and there won’t be an audience, except for our own team and a few people from the television crew.

I see Katniss getting a hug from Caesar and I walk towards her immediately, taking her arm and pulling her away from Caesar and the others. “I hardly get to see you. Haymitch seems bent on keeping us apart.” There is a flicker in her eyes, but she only says, "Yes, he's gotten very responsible lately." "Well, there's just this and we go home. Then he can't watch us all the time," I say.

Katniss looks at me with a weird expression on her face and I’m about to ask her what’s wrong when the director tells us to come over and we sit next to each other on the love seat. Then Caesar says to Katniss, "Oh, go ahead and curl up next to him if you want. It looked very sweet.” I wrap my arm around her again, just like yesterday, and she leans her head against my shoulder. The interview starts and Caesar begins with reminding me of my interview. “So, Peeta, I remember at our interview I told you to win this thing, so this girl you have a crush
on will have to go out with you.” He laughs hard and says, “What do you think about that now?”
“Well, I haven’t asked her out yet,” I say, “so I don’t know.” Caesar chuckles and I hear some of
the people in the room laugh.

Caesar and I do most of the talking while Katniss smiles and hides in my shirt. I remember how
nervous she was for the first interview and I realize she doesn’t like the attention given to her at
all. When Caesar asks her how she experienced the weather, for instance, she says, “well, I didn’t
like the rain much, what about you, Peeta?” And she leaves it to me to answer the question more
thoroughly. Caesar notices it too, and brings up the topic of our romance.
"Well, Peeta, we know, from our days in the cave, that it was love at first sight for you from what,
age five?” Caesar says.
"From the moment I laid eyes on her," I say, truthfully.
"But, Katniss, what a ride for you. I think the real excitement for the audience was watching you
fall for him. When did you realize you were in love with him?” asks Caesar.
"Oh, that's a hard one.” Katniss laughs a little and stares down at our hands, lying entwined in my
lap.
"Well, I know when it hit me. The night when you shouted out his name from that tree,” says
Caesar.
"Yes, I guess that was it. I mean, until that point, I just tried not to think about what my feelings
might be, honestly, because it was so confusing and it only made things worse if I actually cared
about him. But then, in the tree, everything changed," Katniss says.
"Why do you think that was?” Caesar asks, desperate to get more information out of her to sway
the audience.
"Maybe… because for the first time... there was a chance I could keep him," she answers,
stammering a little.
Her answer sinks in and I feel overwhelmed with happiness, she wants to keep me! Well, she can
have me, all of me, I am hers.
I press my forehead into her temple and ask, "So now that you've got me, what are you going to
do with me?"
She turns her face to me, a serious expression in her eyes, "Put you somewhere you can't get
hurt."
At that I lean forward and kiss her softly on her lips. Wishing we could already be there, in that
place where we can't get hurt. Just to be there, safe and together.

But we have to sit through this interview first and Caesar asks us about all the hurt we’ve been
through in the arena. We talk about the burns and the tracker jacker stings and how the canines of
the mutt sank into my calf.
“That must have been painful,” Caesar nods empathetically and continues, “and then that
tourniquet. Tell me, Peeta, how is your “new leg” working out?”
"New leg?” Katniss says, and she sits up and reaches down to pull up my pants. I hear her
whisper. "Oh, no," as she sees the prosthetic.
"No one told you?” asks Caesar and she shakes her head.
"I haven't had the chance," I say and shrug.
"It's my fault," Katniss says. "Because I used that tourniquet."
"Yes, it's your fault I'm alive," I tell her, because she needs to know that no one blames her, me
the least of all.
"He's right,” says Caesar. "He'd have bled to death for sure without it.”
Katniss seems very upset though and she hides in my shirt for real now.
“Hey Katniss,” I whisper, “it’s okay, it really is.”
But she just shakes her head and presses her face harder against my chest. It takes a couple of
minutes before she turns her face towards the camera again and Caesar starts questioning me again
about the leg so she can recover from the shock. I’m touched that she cares so much, but I really
hope she’ll stop blaming herself for saving me.
When we’ve come to the moment with the berries, Caesar directs his questions to Katniss again. "Katniss, I know you've had a shock, but I've got to ask. The moment when you pulled out those berries. What was going on in your mind, hm?" he says.

Katniss stays quiet for a long time, I almost think she forgot to answer, when she finally says, "I don't know, I just... couldn't bear the thought of... being without him."

"Peeta? Anything to add?" asks Caesar.

"No. I think that goes for both of us," I say and I stroke Katniss’ arm and kiss her on top of her hair as I think about that moment, when we held out those berries. How terrible the idea was of living without her and how overwhelming it is that she actually feels the same.

“Well,” Caesar says, “and with that we end the 74th Hunger Games. The Games that told us love can overcome even death.”

The camera’s turn off and it is over. Katniss and I get up and Caesar hugs us both and congratulates us. I see both our prep teams are crying as we say our goodbyes to them. Portia too has tears in her eyes when I hug her. “I’ll see you again for the victory tour,” she says and I nod. The victory tour will start in about six months, when Katniss and I have to travel through all the districts and the capitol to celebrate our victory. It is mandatory, a constant reminder of the Hunger Games and the power of the Capitol. The tour is something I’m not looking forward to, but at least I won’t be alone.

Effie reminds us that the train awaits us so we hurry down the elevator for the last time and are brought to the train station in a car with blackened windows. Even so, there are still a lot of capitol citizens who know or guess we’re in it, because once we’ve arrived at the train station it is filled with people waving at us and applauding. They want pictures and autographs, but Effie won’t let them. She leads us through the crowd straight into the train.

Once we’re inside the train starts moving. Effie brings us to the dining room where we have dinner with her and Haymitch, who is of course coming back to 12 with us. After dinner we watch a replay of the interview. Katniss looks likes she is not really here with her thoughts and after a few minutes she gets up and tells us she wants to change. She leaves the room and I stare at her back until the door closes behind her. I have the strange feeling that something is off, a feeling I have felt a few times before when we were still in the Games. But I always waved it away, telling myself it was probably nothing, or my own insecurity making me see things that aren’t there.

When she comes back, changed into normal clothes and with a face clean from all the make-up, I still see that distant look in her eyes. She settles on the couch next to me and I put my arm around her again. But instead of leaning in towards me, she sits upright, a bit stiffened beside me. Only giving me more fuel to my doubt.

An attendant comes in and tells us we’ll stop for fuel and we can get some fresh air if we want. Katniss and I get off the train and walk hand in hand along the track. She’s dead silent and I’m lost for words too. I don’t want to vocalize my doubt but I also don’t know what else to say. Instead I let go of her hand and drop to my knees to gather some flowers for her. She takes them from me and smiles but the smile doesn’t reach her eyes. I finally work up the courage to speak and ask, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she answers as she takes my hand again, but it somehow doesn’t convince me.

As we keep on walking, Haymitch comes up behind us and says, in a low voice. "Great job, you two. Just keep it up in the district until the cameras are gone. We should be okay."

He turns and walks back to the train while this unhinging feeling starts to grow bigger and bigger inside of me.

"What's he mean?" I ask Katniss.

"It's the Capitol. They didn't like our stunt with the berries," she answers, suddenly flushed.

"What? What are you talking about?" I say.
"It seemed too rebellious. So, Haymitch has been coaching me through the last few days. So I didn’t make it worse," she says.

Of course, I could have guessed that the berries seemed rebellious. But what is this with Haymitch coaching her?

"Coaching you? But not me," I note.

"He knew you were smart enough to get it right," she says.

"I didn’t know there was anything to get right," I say, but the truth is dawning on me now. "So, what you’re saying is, these last few days and then I guess… back in the arena… that was just some strategy you two worked out."

"No. I mean, I couldn’t even talk to him in the arena, could I?" she stammers

"But you knew what he wanted you to do, didn’t you?" I say and as I see her bite her lip it is almost as if I can hear my own heart breaking. "Katniss?"

I drop her hand and she takes a step, as if she needs to catch her balance.

"It was all for the Games," I whisper. "How you acted."

"Not all of it," she answers, but she doesn’t even dare to look at me and it frustrates me to no end.

"Then how much? No, forget that. I guess the real question is what’s going to be left when we get home?" I ask, clinging to my last thread of hope that there is still something there that is real.

"I don’t know. The closer we get to District Twelve, the more confused I get," she says.

And then the silence falls down on us. She just stands there, staring at the ground while I feel an aching, piercing pain in my chest. So this is what it feels like when your heart breaks. I never knew I was so vulnerable, so breakable. And suddenly, I don’t want to be here anymore, here in front of this girl whom I love so much. And who doesn’t love me back.

"Well, let me know when you work it out," I say, and I hear the pain in my own voice and feel the tears pricking in my eyes. But I don’t want to cry in front of her, so I brusquely turn around and walk back to the train. Leaving her behind with the broken pieces of my heart.

Inside the train I hurry to my room and slam the door. I lock it too, just in case anyone, and Katniss in particular, would want to come in. Then I sink back on my bed and rest my face in my hands. It is as if I am drowning, the truth sinks in and waves of sorrow are crashing over me. I feel hot tears sliding down my cheeks and I wipe them away furiously. I don’t want to cry, I don’t want to sink, I don’t want to lose her. But I have. I have lost her. Even more, I never had her to begin with. And can you even lose what you never had?

Is this how it ends? After all we’ve been through? I can’t believe it, and I can’t take it. Suddenly my life doesn’t make sense anymore. During this night, that seems to last forever, while the train takes us back to our home, I feel homeless, my roots taken away from me. And I ask myself over and over again why she didn’t just let me die.

But here I am, still alive when morning comes. I don’t come out for breakfast because I am not ready to face her. Instead I get working on building walls around my broken heart. I’ve done it before. After my mother rejected me, preferred my brother over me. At one point I decided I wouldn’t let her hurt me anymore, and I closed myself off from her. So I know how it works. I just tell myself that it doesn’t matter, that she’s not worth it. I tell myself this lie long enough to believe it. And I’ll keep up my walls whenever I’m around her from this moment on.

Determined, I get up, take a shower and change my clothes before I walk towards the doors, where Katniss is already waiting for me. I nod at her, and I know my face shows nothing. When we see the station of district 12 out of the window, indicating we’ve arrived, I extend my hand to her.

She looks at me, I see doubt and pain in her eyes, but she can’t touch me anymore.

"One more time? For the audience?" I say, there is no emotion in my voice.

She take my hand, holding on tightly. I feel the pressure and the warmth of it and it sends pain in waves through my heart. It reminds me how unstable these walls of mine still are. But we have to
prepare for the cameras who will be on us as soon as the train stops. So I make sure my face is clean of emotions, but in my heart I am dreading the moment when I will finally have to let go.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, I've finished the first book! I am really happy that I did it and I want you to know that I will continue with Catching Fire!
A special thanks to MTK4FUN and Shadowofthemoon for commenting on almost every chapter. Your comments really kept me going and kept me motivated, thank you so much!! I hope you'll join in again for CF!
Also special thanks to my friends Jannieta and Eala-musings for giving me feedback and being my beta. Your encouragements were really important to me, so thanks a lot and lets continue with CF.

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