Sacrifice

by ellembee

Summary

“Peeta thought he could save her, but with just a few words, he sacrificed the one thing Katniss would not, could not, ever give up.” Peeta’s lie about the baby has devastating consequences.

Notes

This is meant to be only one chapter. I hope you enjoy!

The crowd is silent as Peeta’s words sink in. Shock transforms to horror, and then half the audience is on their feet.

“A baby?” someone cries.

“We cannot allow this!”

“This is outrageous!”

A moment ago there were individuals in the audience: men and women separate and distinct from one another. Now they move and cry together, a single dark creature with a single purpose. They are a reminder of how easily a crowd can turn.

As the Capitol’s anthem plays, the victors join hands in a show of unity. The lights cut out, but the crowd’s cries grow louder.
Production assistants escort the victors offstage in the dark and usher them back to their living quarters. Peeta doesn’t see Katniss again until they both have been stripped of the Capitol’s make-up and clothing. They reunite in her room to wait for the news.

“They won’t cancel. They can’t.”

“Maybe they will,” he says. “Or maybe they won’t make you go in.”

“Peeta…”

He takes her hand, and she doesn’t pull away. Lately, she’s been more receptive to his touch. Holding her at night is easy, when it’s dark and private and necessary, but he finds her gravitating toward him during the day, brushing her arm against his as they walk. He doubts she realizes she’s doing it, but he welcomes it all the same.

“It could work,” he says. “You saw how the crowd reacted.”

“I won’t let you go in there without me. You can’t. You can’t.” She wraps her arms around him. She smells like the Capitol, of excess and overly sweet flowers, but he knows she’s there underneath, grass and trees and fire.

“I know you made some sort of deal with Haymitch, but he made me promises too,” he says into her hair.

Katniss pulls away just enough to see his face.

“I can’t lose you,” he says. “Without you, I’d have nothing. No one. If you stay here, maybe I can win. Maybe I can come back.”

“I don’t want you to save me,” she whispers before pressing her lips to his. He’s kissed her dozens of times before, always in front of a crowd or camera. But this, this is private. This is just for them. It is the first kiss since the one they shared in the cave that he believes in. The desire he feels, the happiness and lightness that floods through him, is reflected back in every touch of her skin against his.

And it’s terrifying.

He gasps when her hand slides beneath his shirt. Her palm burns a trail across his abdomen, and his heart fails him, stops mid-beat.

She lays her head against his chest. He wants to ask her what she’s thinking, but he worries what will happen if she examines her actions. He lets the moment unfold instead, quiet except for the sound of their breathing.

“I won’t let you go without me,” she mumbles against his shirt.

The door opens, and Haymitch and Effie enter the room. Peeta expects Katniss to jump away and pretend that an intimate moment wasn’t just interrupted. Instead, she turns toward their mentor and escort, her arm still locked around his waist.

“The games are still on but…” Haymitch pauses. Hope blossoms in Peeta’s chest. “But Katniss isn’t going in.”

Peeta is so relieved, he feels sick. It’s overwhelming, the weight that lifts from his shoulders, the way he can suddenly float to the ceiling. She looks aghast, but before she can object to this new
Haymitch speaks again.

“Snow decided that the only way to be fair to the other victors and to remain true to the spirit of the Quarter Quell is to reap a relative.”

His words are a grenade launched into the center of the room. Katniss and Peeta are too dazed to dodge it.

“No,” Katniss whispers. She takes a step away from Peeta. “I won’t let him.”

“I’m sorry,” Haymitch says. “Snow’s making the announcement now.”

“We’ll tell him Peeta lied. We’ll tell him I lost the baby! Tell him I’ll go anyway. Haymitch, please, please don’t let him do this!”

Peeta remembers the day he was reaped when Katniss’s voice traveled over the crowd even as the peacekeepers blocked her path. It was one thing to save her sister when she had only been a passive witness to the carnage of the games. After living through it, carrying the scars it left behind, letting her sister go is impossible. Unbearable. Unfathomable.

Katniss sinks to her knees. Her entire body trembles. Peeta feels a similar earthquake inside him, faults and fractures forming as his body crumbles. He wants to touch her, comfort her. But this is his fault.

“Please,” Katniss says to no one. “Not Prim.”

Peeta thought he could save her, but with just a few words, he sacrificed the one thing Katniss would not, could not, ever give up.

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Prim arrives shortly before dawn, pale and dazed from being wrenched from her home and loaded onto a hovercraft like a piece of cargo. Katniss gathers Prim into her arms, and whispers everything she knows about hunting and fighting and the arena.

It doesn't matter. There is no preparing for the Games.

Peeta watches the scene unfold from the doorway of his bedroom. Katniss has not spoken or looked at him since Haymitch’s announcement. He can still feel her hand tracing his skin, but the memory is tainted now. Recalling it makes him nauseous.

He wants to apologize, but there are no words in existence that can adequately express how deeply sorry he is. He could slit his wrists and bleed out at her feet, and still it would not be enough.

When Snow made the official announcement, he spoke of honor and sacrifice and commended Primrose Everdeen on her bravery. As much as the Capitol adored Prim, they loved a good story more, and the drama of Katniss’s little sister, the sister Katniss volunteered to save, stepping in to save Katniss’s unborn child is too bittersweet to pass up. People from the districts aren’t real to the Capitol anyway. They’re all just stories. A beginning, a middle, and a tragic end.

Cinna disappears into Katniss’s room with Prim’s outfit for the arena shortly after sunrise. When the trio emerges, there are no tears. There isn’t anything: just blank faces, empty eyes, stooped shoulders.

Katniss was never one to give her smiles away easily, but looking at her now, Peeta cannot
remember how her smile once looked. It is possible she has never smiled or laughed in her seventeen years. Her stony face could never form the shape.

Katniss holds Prim close until there is no time left, and Cinna leads Prim away. Peeta has a few more minutes, but Katniss is frozen, staring at the closed door. He cannot stand to have his last moment with her not be a moment at all. He has to say something, an apology, a promise to protect Prim at all costs. He wants to touch her hair, feel the smooth stone of her cheek, but he knows he doesn't deserve it.

Portia takes his hand gently in hers. They turn to leave but then Katniss has her arms around him, her face buried in his neck, stone turned soft once more.

"It's not your fault," she whispers. "It's not your fault." She says it over and over, her breath warm in his ear, and he can remember how her laughter sounds. It is faint in his head, a memory from a hundred years ago.

She kisses him fiercely, an echo of their kiss the night before. It is perfect and awful, but it is something he can keep. He tangles his hand in her hair, and kisses her back, trying to convey how sorry he is for what he's done, but there is no more time. There was never going to be enough time.

"She's my sister," Katniss says after she pulls away. She doesn't ask outright for Peeta to die, but he knows what her words mean. What the kiss means.

She’s saying goodbye.

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The countdown is white noise as Peeta stares down at the water. He can’t swim, and he’s not sure if Prim knows how. He doubts it.

He looks around, but he doesn’t see her. She must be on the other side of the Cornucopia. He told her to run, make herself scarce until he could find her. He hopes the other victors will ignore her, as she’s not exactly a threat.

The arena erupts into chaos as the victors dive into the water and swim toward the cache of weapons. A couple of minutes later, Finnick plucks Peeta from the water and reveals Mags and Prim behind him, both safe and unharmed.

"Why are they helping us?" Prim asks as she and Peeta follow the District 4 victors into the jungle.

The sun glints off the gold bangle on Finnick’s wrist. The same bangle Effie gave Haymitch last night before handing Peeta a gold locket with a picture of Katniss inside.

“I guess we’re allies,” Peeta says.

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Prim might not be strong, but she is quick and quiet. She must get it from Katniss. She’s an excellent lookout and insists on slinking up ahead to make sure the Careers don’t lie in wait.

Peeta hates this tactic, but Prim wants to be useful as desperately as Peeta wants her to be safe. Every time she disappears from view, even if it’s only for a minute, he finds it hard to breathe.

Her scouting is useful though. She discovers the force field that spans the perimeter of the arena
and stops them from walking right into it.

Prim escapes the fog, survives the monkeys, and figures out the arena is a clock thanks to Wiress’s rambling.

Eventually thought the alliance will have to break. Peeta knows this. Somehow, he will have to take on Finnick and Johanna and Wiress and Beetee to save her. He only hopes that when the time comes, when he tells her to run, she will.

He hopes she runs fast and far and doesn’t look back.

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Katniss is screaming for him. Her voice tears through the trees and explodes onto the beach.

“Peeta! Help me! Peeta, please!”

He runs into the jungle, sword in hand. She’s here. The Capitol dropped her in, those bastards dropped her into the arena even after they took her sister, and she’s in pain, she’s hurt, she’s screaming—

Finnick catches up with him quickly. Before he can speak, Annie’s voice joins Katniss’s, and the jabberjays attack.

Peeta and Finnick realize their loved ones are not there at the same time. They run back toward the beach, under assault from the jabberjays and the paralyzing thought that the Capitol has Annie and Katniss right now, torturing them to capture these twin cries of anguish.

Finnick hits the force field first. He panics and punches the invisible barrier over and over. Johanna and Prim crouch on the other side yelling what Peeta can only assume are words of comfort, but he cannot hear them over the sound of Katniss’s and Annie’s screams. He sinks to his knees, buries his head in his hands, and waits an eternity for the pain to stop.

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It is after the jabberjays disappear, after Prim hugs him and tells him everything is all right that Beetee reveals his plan.

And without having a better option, Peeta and Prim agree to help.

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Peeta startles awake in a hard bed in an unfamiliar room, and thinks, Prim. He rips the IV from his arm, certain it is poison, and pushes himself out of bed. In his half-drugged state, he fails to notice his prosthetic leg is missing and crashes to the ground.

He realizes it has already started: the torture and humiliation tailored to one Peeta Mellark. He doubts he’ll ever see his prosthetic again.

As he struggles to stand, using the bed as support, more pain erupts in his body, fire down his spine, across his back, up his good leg. He pushes the pain out of his head and focuses: Prim. He has to find Prim.

The last thing he remembers is throwing the spear at the force field and an explosion of lights and noise. Prim had been nearby. Hadn’t she? He swears he saw her dark braid swinging just up ahead before he—
He sinks onto the edge of the bed, realizing his mistake. Katniss wasn’t there. Everything is jumbled in his brain, and the pain makes it hard to concentrate. He tries to remember the final moments in the arena again: Beetee unconscious on the ground, Finnick charging toward Peeta, screaming his name, and Prim…nowhere.

She had gone off with Johanna an hour before, dragging the wire behind her like a trail of breadcrumbs.

Bile surges up his throat. He leans over and wills himself not to be sick. He takes a deep breath. And another.

Another.

When his stomach settles, he focuses on his good leg and stands once more. He takes his time, and hops toward the exit, his hand against the wall for balance. He’s halfway to the door when it opens. He braces himself for a baton to the gut, but instead, he is met with a familiar face.

“Haymitch?”

“What are you doing up?” Without asking permission, Haymitch wraps an arm around Peeta’s waist and ushers him back to bed.

“What happened? Where are we? Where’s Prim?” The questions spill from Peeta’s mouth as he sits down.

Haymitch stands over him, hands up in a placating gesture. “Calm down. You’re safe. Prim’s safe. Everything is all right.”

“What happened?”

“You destroyed the force field around the arena,” Haymitch says. “You blew it up. But we got you out. We’re in District 13.”

“Thirteen?” Peeta echoes. “I thought 13 was destroyed.” He shakes his head, tries to refocus his thoughts. “Prim’s okay? Are you sure?”

“She’s fine. We picked her up right after you. We got Finnick and Beetee too.”

“What about Johanna?”

Haymitch looks away. “There was no time. We barely got away ourselves.”

Dread pools in Peeta’s gut. “Where is she?”

“The Capitol.”

Peeta buries his face in his hands to stop the room from spinning. The dread climbs up his body, fills his lungs. He can’t breathe. He is suffocating. But he has to ask.

“Where’s Katniss? Is she with Prim?”

Guilt washes over Haymitch’s face. This is the first time he has ever looked truly regretful.

“Haymitch,” Peeta says.

“We couldn’t get her out.”
Peeta grabs Haymitch’s shirt. “What do you mean you couldn’t get her out? Wasn’t she with you? Watching the Games?”

“Snow moved her into the mansion the moment the Games started. He had guards posted outside her room. No one could get to her.”

Peeta yanks Haymitch forward and lands one good punch before the remainder of his energy evaporates.

“Why would you leave without her? Why?”

Haymitch rubs his jaw where a bruise is already forming. “If we tried to extract her, it would have alerted Snow to our plan. Then we’d all be trapped in the Capitol.”

“You left her. You left her to die!”

“I’m sorry, kid. We tried—”

“Get out,” Peeta says. When Haymitch doesn’t move, Peeta flips the tray table next to his bed. “Get the fuck out!”

No one comes in after Haymitch leaves, not even a doctor to administer drugs or reconnect his IV. Peeta prefers it this way. He squeezes his eyes shut and lets the pain take over his body, and it’s enough to drown out the image of Katniss, bruised and broken and gone.

But he can still hear her screams. He remembers them vividly.

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Hours later, when the doctor finally reattaches Peeta’s IV, sending morphling straight into his veins, Peeta tries to object. He deserves the pain. He craves it. But the morphling muffles his thoughts too, and Katniss becomes distant, blurry, and for a little while he sleeps.

When he wakes, Prim is sitting in a chair beside the bed, staring at her hands.

“You’re okay,” he says.

Prim looks up and gives him a soft smile. “I’m okay.” She touches his hand. Her skin is ice cold.

“You’ll have your leg back soon,” she says. “Haymitch wanted me to tell you. It was damaged in the explosion, but they’re fixing it.”

Peeta nods, grateful that soon he’ll be fully mobile.

“Is there any news?” He doesn’t know why he asks. Prim would have told him immediately if there was, but he needs confirmation.


Panic runs through him. He can tell from the tone of her voice that whatever she has to say is not good. “What? What is it?”

“The doctors want to wait to tell you, but you deserve to know.”

She doesn’t look at his face. She can’t.

Peeta isn’t sure what he expected, but it is not this. The idea that his home, an entire district, can be gone is impossible.

“I don’t understand.”

“Gale said there’s nothing left but rubble,” Prim says.

Peeta doesn’t want to ask. Once he knows the answer, he can never un-know it. Once he knows the answer, it’s real. “Were—were there any survivors?”

“Not many.”

“Your mother?” Peeta asks.

Prim nods, still unable to look at him.

“My…my family?”

The answer is in the silence that fills the room, heavy and unbearable. Prim leans over the bed and wraps her arms around Peeta. She rests her head on his chest and whispers, “I’m sorry.”

Her tears seep into his hospital gown. He rests a hand on her head and notices her blonde hair is twisted into a braid identical to the one Katniss always wears.

He’s not alone, but he is. No parents, no brothers, no…Katniss. He’s alone in a district full of strangers.

The pain fills every part of him, every muscle, every joint. It sinks into his bones until it is a permanent part of his body. He cannot move without thinking of loss. Without remembering that all of this is his fault.

Thousands of lives, an entire district, reduced to rubble and ash because of a lie he told to save a girl he loves. It is an unimaginable weight to carry.

He closes his eyes, wishes for death to take him too, but that would be too merciful of a fate.

So he opens his eyes, hugs Prim back, and takes another breath.

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Two weeks after Peeta arrives in District 13, he is discharged from the hospital and Plutarch introduces him to President Coin. There is no skipping around the subject. They immediately ask him to be the voice of the revolution.

Peeta wants to laugh. He wants to sweep an arm across the table, disrupt all their paperwork, their plans, all the details they laid out in private and will never reveal.

“Think of your family,” Plutarch says.

Peeta flexes his hand, wishing for the sword he had in the arena so he can wield it now. Has Plutarch ever touched a weapon? Has he ever felt fear? He is still a gamemaker, and the revolution is his new arena. He’ll feed Peeta lines, broadcast him to the districts, but he will never see the violence up close. He will never understand the consequences, the cost.

Of course Peeta is thinking of his family. He dared to stand up to the Capitol and an entire district burned to the ground. Who will burn next?
A couple of days later, Johanna is executed on live television. She kneels in the center of the stage, hands tied behind her back, and smiles. It’s a familiar smile, the one she wore in the arena, when she looked into the sky and threatened President Snow.

Even in her final moments, despite the bruises, the sunken eyes, the skin stretched tightly across her face, she is fierce and unafraid.

“Johanna Mason has been found guilty of treason by aiding the radicals in their attempt to overthrow our government and destroy our hard-earned peace,” President Snow announces. “This is a serious crime punishable by death. Any person found to be conspiring with the radicals or associating with the Mockingjay symbol will be punished accordingly.”

Johanna’s laugh is unnatural and sharp, as if it has been ripped from her throat.

“Yes, punish me! I’m guilty!” she yells, eyes wild and defiant.

Katniss stands beside President Snow, face blank, eyes unfocused, hands clasped in front of her. She does not flinch when the gun is fired or when Johanna’s body hits the ground.

The peacekeeper holsters his gun and takes Katniss’s arm. It would be a funny image—Katniss in a bright yellow dress, arm linked with a peacekeeper’s as he escorts her offstage—if the pair did not have to walk through Johanna’s blood to reach the stairs.

Hand covering his mouth, Peeta stares at the red stain blooming at the hem of Katniss’s dress. It is the first time he has seen her since saying goodbye before the Quarter Quell. She is so much skinnier and paler than he remembers. Almost like she’s fading away.

Finnick sinks to his knees in the middle of the District 13 cafeteria. His hands, usually busy with his knots, shake too hard to hold onto the rope. He oscillates between distress over Johanna’s fate and fear for Annie.

“She’s next. They’ll kill her next,” he says. “They killed Johanna. She wanted to—she wasn’t supposed to—she, she—”

Sentence fragments tumble from his mouth, and Peeta wants to comfort him, but Peeta cannot remember how to move. The Capitol Seal fills the screen as the anthem plays. The familiar tune is enough to snap everyone from their stupor and throw District 13 into chaos.

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After Johanna’s public execution, Coin and Plutarch lean heavily on Peeta to begin filming propos for their cause. It’s not until he extracts the promise that Katniss and Annie will be rescued at the earliest opportunity that he agrees to be their voice.

It’s silly, really. He stands in front of nothing, gives speeches about courage and valor and ending their hunger for justice. He says it with conviction, with strength, but he lives underground now. He has no idea what is going on above.

 Nonetheless, the roles are cast. He is the voice, Gale is the warrior, and Prim the innocent. The trio will play their parts until their Mockingjay can be rescued, and she can lead them into victory.

Judging from Katniss’s glazed eyes and shrinking frame, she will lead no one. Every time Snow appears on screen, she stands by his side like a propped up doll. She never speaks.
Peeta wonders what she would say if she knew the three people closest to her were participating in a revolution she never wanted to be a part of. He hopes she knows they’re doing it to get her back. While he longs for Snow’s brutal regime to end, he’d be just as happy to run off with Katniss, disappear into the woods, and let the war rage on without them.

When Coin authorizes Prim to be filmed at a hospital in District 8 without Peeta’s knowledge, he slams Plutarch into a wall. Boggs has to pull Peeta off him.

“She’s just a kid, and you sent her out there! Are you insane?”

“Mr. Mellark, calm down,” Coin orders while Plutarch remains as far from Peeta as possible. “There are no military targets left in the area. She’ll bring the people there some comfort.”

“Do you think Katniss would want her sister out there?” Peeta demands, shaking off Bogg’s hands.

“She’ll be fine,” Plutarch says, a good distance behind Coin, as if he has any experience with the real world. As if he knows a thing about war. “She said she wanted to go.”

“Of course she said she’d go,” Peeta snaps. “She thinks if she plays along you’ll rescue her sister. She’d walk into battle if she thought it’d bring Katniss back.”

When Prim returns with dirt-smudged cheeks, a gash on her forehead, and a haunted look in her eyes, Peeta hugs her tightly. Without Katniss here, he is supposed to keep her safe. Instead, she was nearly a casualty in the bombing that decimated the hospital.

“If you send her out in the field again, I won’t say another word on camera,” Peeta threatens. “I’ll be done. You can find another puppet.”

“What about Katniss?” Plutarch asks. “No propos, no rescue mission. You know the deal you made.”

The idea of never seeing Katniss again, not in person, not happy or healthy or real is a possibility Peeta carries with him every day. But he will not back down.

“Haven’t you been paying attention? Katniss wouldn’t want Prim out there no matter what it cost her.”

Coin concedes surprisingly quickly. “It was a mistake to let her go out there. Prim will remain here from now on. But we’re airing the footage.”

“People need to see what the Capitol has done, and they need to see Prim as someone to rally behind,” Plutarch says. “This revolution needs a symbol of hope.”

“She’s not a symbol,” Peeta snaps. “She’s a little girl.”

“She’s thirteen. Not that much younger than you.”

“Exactly,” Peeta says before storming out of the room.

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The next time Snow addresses Panem, it is to condemn the destruction of the dam in District 5. Beetee jams the signal less than a minute in and overlays Snow’s image with the propo featuring Prim.
Prim cuts in and out as she makes her way through the makeshift hospital, offering comfort to the wounded who have only minutes left to live. Katniss’s head jerks up. She still appears dazed, but there is a flicker of recognition. For a moment, her eyes focus.

The next shot of Prim is in front of the burning hospital, Gale’s arm around her shoulders as she cries and tells Cressida what she has seen.

Katniss takes a step forward. Peeta stares at her shaking hands. What are they pumping through her system to keep her so complacent? What are they doing to her?

“Prim?” Katniss asks. “Prim!” Her voice is weak, but suddenly she is moving, charging toward the camera. Her words jumble out of her mouth so fast even Snow does not have time to react.

“They’re coming, Prim. You’ll be dead by morning. You need to—“

A peacekeeper yanks Katniss out of the frame, and Snow signals to someone to cut the broadcast. Haymitch recognizes her words as a warning, and District 13 descends to their bunkers to wait out the airstrike.

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Peeta watches the doctors examine her through the observation window. The back of her hospital gown is not properly tied, and he can see her pale, almost translucent skin and the bones protruding underneath. He counts her vertebrae, certain she has never been this skinny, not even on the day he threw her the bread.

But she is here. Rescued. A week after Katniss saved them, Coin finally authorized the mission.

Finnick is down the hall, spinning Annie in his arms. Peeta can hear their cries of joy.

“Can I go in? When can I see her?” Peeta asks as Haymitch approaches.

“They’re only letting in one person at a time. Family’s on their way up. She’s…she’s not well, Peeta.”

Peeta leans his forehead against the glass. He aches to touch her, just to confirm she is real.

“She threw a bedpan at me.”

Peeta laughs, actually laughs, but instead of guilt, he feels reassured. “She can’t be too bad then, right?” he asks. “If she’s already mad at you.”

Haymitch shrugs, but his expression is uneasy. “She asked for Gale. He’s all she’s asked for so far.”

The disappointment is heavy and sudden, like a stone sinking in his gut. But he cannot let pettiness ruin this moment. She is here. She is alive. He shouldn’t be surprised that she does not want to see him yet. It’s his fault she ended up as Snow’s captive for almost two months, his fault her sister had to endure the horror of the arena.

But then it occurs to him: “What about Prim? She didn’t ask for Prim?”

“I told her Prim was on her way. That’s when she threw the bedpan at me.”

Unease slithers up Peeta’s spine like a snake. Fangs graze his neck as he stares at the still, rigid form of Katniss’s body. A doctor speaks to her, but she stares straight ahead.
Something is wrong, but that’s to be expected, isn’t it? There is no chance she could spend two months in the Capitol and return whole.

“Is Gale on his way?” Peeta asks.

Gale disappeared hours ago when Coin refused to allow him to volunteer for the rescue mission. She deemed him a risk because of his emotional attachment to Katniss. Peeta assumes he is with Beetee, channeling his anger and need for action into a new weapon.

“They’re trying to locate him,” Haymitch says. He looks around the hospital wing. “Why don’t you go in? Just until Prim gets here. Make sure she’s okay before Prim sees her.”

“Sure,” Peeta says, his heart leaping into his throat, threatening to choke him. “I can do that.”

He opens the door to Katniss’s room, and the ache he has carried since waking up in District 13 intensifies. It physically hurts to walk toward her, but it’s the kind of pain he welcomes.

The doctor nods at Peeta before leaving the room.

“Katniss?” Peeta asks as he walks in front of her.

He is unprepared for what awaits him. An eye swollen shut. A gash across her cheek. Bruises spread over her neck and shoulders. He thinks he sees a burn mark peeking out from beneath her hospital gown.

Her body tells the story of beatings and sleep deprivation, malnutrition and torture. All because Peeta told a lie. He thought he was saving her, but he nearly destroyed her.

“You’re here,” he whispers.

The change is sudden: the exhaustion leaves her face and fury takes over instead.

“You son of a bitch!” Katniss yells. She pushes him back as hard as she can, and he slams into the wall. He expected anger, but not violence or the words that come next.

“You killed her. You killed her!”

She swings at him, but he sidesteps her. He raises his hands in front of his chest in a placating gesture as he backs away from Katniss and toward the door.

“Katniss, what—”

Katniss throws a glass of water at his head, cutting off his words. Even in her disoriented state, even with her lack of depth perception, her aim is impeccable. It hits the side of his head and smashes to the ground.

“You’re a liar! You manipulated me, you manipulated Prim, and then you killed her!”

Haymitch is suddenly by Peeta’s side. “We need to go. Now.”

“No,” Peeta says. “I don’t understand.”

Prim runs into the room, blonde hair twisted into her familiar twin braids. She rushes past Peeta to stand in front of her sister.

“Katniss?”
“Oh,” Katniss says, covering her mouth with her hand. “Prim. What did they do?” She sinks to her knees in front of her sister, not noticing the bed of glass beneath her legs.

Peeta and Haymitch shout Katniss’s name at the same time and rush over to pull her up. Her blood is already a stream running over the shards.

“Was it the Capitol?” she asks. “Or did they make you here?” She reaches out to touch Prim’s face, but Peeta and Haymitch lift her into the air before she can make contact. The doctor charges in with a syringe.

“Get off me! Let go! You killed her! I saw you, I saw you, I—” Her screams fades into whimpers as the sedative takes effect. The doctor helps her lay back in bed.

Haymitch ushers Prim and Peeta out of the room as the doctor looks over Katniss’s newest wounds. Peeta doesn’t realize he is bleeding too until he wipes the tears from his eyes, and his fingertips come away red.

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Peeta learned very quickly what the Capitol is capable of after he survived the 74th Annual Hunger Games. He learned even more during the Victory Tour, at the announcement of the Quarter Quell, after an honest conversation with Finnick, and watching Johanna’s execution on television.

But somehow, the Capitol still managed to find a way to surprise him. Present him with a new, fucked up version of misery.

“They call it a hijacking,” Plutarch explains. He sits beside Coin in the control room. Haymitch, Peeta, Prim, and Gale sit on the other side.

As Peeta listens, he tugs at the edge of gauze that covers his stitches. Prim touches his elbow and shakes her head.

“It’s a kind of fear conditioning. They’ve altered her memories not just of Peeta but of the Quarter Quell. She thinks Prim died in the arena,” Plutarch explains.

“But she saw me,” Prim says. “She recognized me.”

“She thinks you’re a mutt,” Plutarch says. “That the Capitol or District 13 created you to trick her.”

“How could they do that?” Peeta asks. “How is that even possible?”

“Tracker jacker venom,” Plutarch says.

Those nights on the train, when Katniss would wake screaming from nightmares, he held her and listened as she described all the ways she saw Prim die. Months later, the tracker jacker venom long gone from her system, the images still haunted her.

It would be easy, then, to do it again.

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Peeta watches her. For days, he presses his face against the glass and watches Dr. Aurelius talk at her. He watches her hug Prim and stroke Prim’s hair because even though she doesn’t believe Prim is real, she would never turn her back on her sister.
“She says she’ll still take care of me. Protect me,” Prim confesses late one night in Peeta’s room. She’s crying now, tears spilling down her cheek, sliding down her neck. “She says that it’s not my fault that I’m a mutt.”

Peeta wraps an arm around her, lets her cry into his chest. He doesn’t say his very selfish thought out loud: at least Prim can be near her. Peeta has not been allowed to visit since the day of Katniss’s rescue.

He waits and watches and waits and watches like he’s back in District 12. All those years have made him good at waiting, but he does not want to do it anymore.

So Peeta plays along and continues filming his propos. He even consents to fly to District 12, so they can film him and Gale among the rubble. He stands in front of the shell of the bakery, stands on top of his family’s graves, and condemns the Capitol.

He’s already lost everything. There is nothing to stop him from speaking as freely as he wishes. Who cares who burns next? They probably all will.

After the District 12 propo airs, and District 3 starts a riot, increasing the number of districts in rebellion to nine, Peeta demands to see Katniss.

“It’s been two weeks,” Peeta says. “I want to try again.”

Plutarch shrugs. Peeta hates how excited Plutarch was when they discovered Katniss’s condition, how he spoke of assembling a team like Katniss’s illness was a new frontier to explore. Peeta knows Plutarch will want to test Katniss again eventually. How can he resist?

“I don’t know,” Coin says. “Dr. Aurelius still considers her dangerous.”

“Let’s see if the therapy is working. We’ll restrain her,” Plutarch says.

“No! No restraints.” Peeta doesn’t want her to associate any form of pain or fear with his presence. Not anymore than she already does. “I want to see her. Now.”

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A guard walks Peeta to the room. Peeta watches as he enters the code, committing it to memory. The door slides open, and Peeta enters. He winces when he sees her right hand is handcuffed to the bed.

“I told them that wasn’t necessary,” Peeta says. “I’m sorry.”

Katniss glares at him as he approaches. “I’ve had worse restraints.”

Images flicker through his mind of Katniss in a cage, bound and gagged. He wasn’t entirely honest with himself before. He doesn’t want Katniss restrained because it reminds him of what she has been through. The horrors he brought upon her.

“I’ll get the key.”

“Don’t bother,” Katniss says. “They won’t give it to you. They can’t risk any harm coming to the voice of the revolution.”

Peeta’s eyes widen in surprise. He wasn’t sure if she knew anything about what he’s been doing for the rebel’s cause. Does she remember the propo featuring Prim in the hospital? The one that
broke through her haze and allowed her to save them all?

“You think I don’t know what’s going on? Of course they have you spouting their bullshit. Lies always fell so easily out of your mouth. You’re a master manipulator.”

“Any lie I ever told was to save you,” Peeta says, sinking into the chair beside her bed.

Katniss lunges forward, but the handcuff holds her back. “Don’t you dare lie to me. Not here. Not anymore.” She sits back and rubs her wrist where the cuff cuts into her skin.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to ask for the key?”


“I’m not—”

“You want to dress me up and parade me around. You want me to be the Mockingjay. I hold up a few berries, I save your life, and now I’m some kind of god damn symbol.”

He knows Coin and Plutarch hoped to incorporate Katniss in their propaganda films, but these were their plans before her rescue. Before they understood what had been done to her. The idea of pushing her out in front of a camera now is crazy. It’s cruel.

Peeta touches her free hand but she rips her arm away. “Don’t touch me!”

“You don’t have to do it,” Peeta says. “You don’t have to do anything they ask you to. You just need to get better.”

Katniss laughs. It is loud and unfamiliar. Her shoulders shake from the effort. “Get better. You mean accept your lies as truth.” She shakes her head. “Don’t think for one second you’re safe here. They can handcuff me, drug me, lie to me all day, but I will never, ever forget what you did.”

“Katniss.” Peeta wants to deny it again, but what else can he say? What else can he do?

“I hope you all kill each other. I hope the whole country burns, and there’s nothing left. Not even a memory.”

“I’ll be back tomorrow,” he says, standing up. He can’t listen to this anymore, can’t stand to see the pain in her eyes, and the faint bruises that still mar her skin. But he’ll come back.

What other choice does he have?

***

His second visit is nearly identical to the first: guard outside the door and handcuff around her right wrist. He promises himself that he will stay longer this time.

“I don’t get it,” Katniss says. “What’s so special about you? Why does everyone stop to listen? You’re not even good-looking.”

Peeta nods as if he agrees. The words hurt, but he also savors them. Let her be mean and cruel as long as she keeps talking to him.

The third visit is short. Katniss stares at him, refusing to answer any questions. He even invites an insult by telling her about the propo he just shot, but she stares right through him. When he tries to
get closer, force her to see him, she kicks him in the stomach, and the guard bursts in.

On his fourth visit, Katniss lies in bed, eyes drooping closed. The doctor has increased her dosage of morphling. He wonders what she did earlier to earn the sedative.

“Peeta.” It’s a greeting. The first one he has gotten from her since she arrived. Her voice, while muffled and hazy, sounds kind.

“Hey,” he says, taking up his usual post in the chair next to her bed.

“Tell me. Please. What really happened?”

His heart bursts with relief. Finally, she is listening to the doctors. She believes them. Him. She—

“How did you kill her?” she asks. “There are so many versions in my head. I don’t know which one is the real one. And I deserve to know.”

“I didn’t kill her. I didn’t kill Prim.”

“Get out,” she says, turning her head away. “I don’t want to hear it.”

“You have to listen to me.”

“Get out!” She screams so loud the blood vessels burst in her eyes, and both the doctor and guard rush in.

The guard leads him out the door, and Coin revokes his visiting privileges.

***

Peeta films another propo. Another district rebels. Prim is promoted in the hospital. Gale rarely leaves the weapons lab except to visit the hospital.

And Katniss stares at the ceiling all day even as Dr. Aurelius talks to her. Even as she is poked with needles and blood is drawn. She only turns her head when Prim visits. Sometimes she speaks to Gale.

Peeta starts going to her room at night. Just to check on her. Just for a few minutes. Sometimes she is awake, and he can hear her mumbling to herself. Most of the time, she is asleep.

After a week and a half of sneaking into the hospital wing, he catches Katniss in the midst of a nightmare. She wakes up screaming, and without a second thought, Peeta punches in the code and rushes into her room.

He freezes in front of the door, unsure how she’ll react to his being there. The nightmare may have been about him.

“It was just a dream,” she says. “I’m sorry.”

Her voice trembles, but she does not scowl at him. She is too preoccupied with getting her breathing under control.

“It’s okay,” Peeta says. “I get them too.” He knows he has to leave before the last remnants of sleep leave her, and she realizes who she is speaking to. “Goodnight.”

“Wait, Peeta.”
He turns slowly, almost reluctantly, because he cannot bear an insult. Not when they are acting out a scene he remembers so vividly. If she is cruel now, this memory will be ruined.

“Will you stay with me?”

Her request cracks his world open. Suddenly, possibility and hope are rushing in, adding color to the darkness that shadows his every movement. It may be a trick, but he will not turn her down. He never could.

She moves over, giving him room to lie in bed. He wraps his arms around her.

“Always,” he says.

He holds her close, and eventually her breathing evens out and she is asleep.

He follows soon after.

***

He wakes up a split second before he crashes to the floor.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Katniss yells as she scrambles out of bed. “Get out! Get out!”

An unfamiliar doctor runs in, but Peeta holds up his hands. “I’m not leaving,” he says.

“Mr. Mellark, I have to insist—”

“No!” Peeta is so tired of bending to the will of these people. Speaking on command. Disappearing when his presence is inconvenient. He has to fix her. At the very least, he has to make her believe that Prim is alive. He owes her that much.

“Katniss, why don’t you believe Prim is real? Why do you think she is a mutt?”

“You made her to trick me. To make me agree to be a part of this rebellion!” She has not moved any closer to either Peeta or the doctor, but Peeta sees the way her hands tremble, ready to attack. Or defend herself.

“She’s real,” Peeta says. “I promise you. Even if you never believe another word that comes out of my mouth, you have to know she is real. I would never hurt Prim. Not even to save you.”

Katniss’s eyes fill with tears, and she sinks to the floor.

“I have never lied to you,” Peeta says. “I will always tell you the truth. Always.”

“I hate this place,” she says. “I hate all of you. I can’t tell what’s real and what’s not.”

“Katniss,” Peeta begins.

“Leave. Both of you.”

Peeta steps toward her, but the doctor grabs his arm and drags him out.

“This is good,” the doctor says. “This is progress.”

“Curling up on the floor and sobbing is progress?” Peeta asks, watching Katniss through the
“She’s admitted she’s confused. She didn’t respond with violence. Yes, I call that progress.”

***

The next time Peeta visits her, two days later, he is dressed in the blue suit he wore on the Victory Tour, and she is free of handcuffs.

“You’re all dressed up,” Katniss says. “More propaganda to film and shove down the districts’ throats?”

“Actually, I’m attending a wedding,” Peeta says.

Katniss nods as if this is the most normal thing in the world: a celebration underground while a war rages above.

“We were engaged. Weren’t we?” she asks.

Peeta sits on the edge of her bed, testing her reaction. Her body tenses, but she does not attempt to push him off.

“Yes,” he says. “But it was fake. Do you remember that?”

Katniss stares down at her blanket and picks at a loose thread. “I don’t know. Maybe. I remember you proposing on a stage.”

“We had to make the country believe we were in love. To protect our families.”

“That didn’t work out so well, did it?” she asks. “Your entire family is dead.”

Peeta winces at her bluntness. He tries to push the images of his family from his mind, but he falls into the pain so easily. For a moment, the room disappears, and there is only death.

“Who’s getting married?” Katniss asks. “If it’s you and me, I’ll need a better outfit.”

Her joke—she made a joke!—pulls him from the darkness. He stares at her in disbelief.

“Annie and Finnick,” Peeta finally says.

“What?” Katniss jerks upright. “They’re getting married? I want to go. I have to go.” She covers her mouth, but she almost looks…happy?

“Annie’s getting married,” Katniss says softly. “I can’t believe it.”

Peeta forgets sometimes that Annie was with Katniss during those weeks in the Capitol. Annie refused to answer a single question about her imprisonment, but he is encouraged by Katniss’s reaction. Katniss is still capable of compassion and concern. It just depends on the person.

Peeta knows Coin will say no, but Plutarch will agree. The wedding is being filmed for the next propo to show how happy and safe everyone is in District 13. To remind the people of Panem that good times are still possible. Plutarch will jump at the opportunity to feature his Mockingjay alive and well.

“I’ll find you a dress,” Peeta says.

She casts a suspicious glance his way. “Why?”
“So you can go. I’ll be right back.”

***

He doesn’t want to force Katniss to wear an outfit from the Victory Tour, but that’s all there is: a few of her dresses and a few of his suits reclaimed from Victors’ Village on his last visit.

Prim helps her dress and brushes her hair before twisting it into her familiar side braid. Plutarch insists Katniss wear the Mockingjay pin, and Katniss is so eager to be out of her hospital room that she doesn’t argue.

A guard trails her from the hospital to the ceremony. He stands behind her, but Katniss barely notices as familiar faces surround her. Greasy Sae greets her with a teary grin. Delly Cartwright tells her how gorgeous she looks. Even Gale cracks a smile when Katniss hugs him.

Before the ceremony begins, Katniss approaches Annie. Peeta watches their reunion, shocked when the girls cling to each other and tears stream down Annie's face. Why hadn’t anyone thought to allow Annie to visit Katniss? They both look so happy, so relieved to see one another.

Later, when Annie and Finnick’s union is official, and the dancing begins, Katniss sits alone, guard behind her, to watch the festivities. Peeta approaches her cautiously, but she doesn’t frown or tense up at his presence, so he takes the empty seat beside her.

“They look so happy,” Katniss says softly.

Peeta follows her gaze to the newlyweds, holding each other close in the center of the room, swaying slowly despite the upbeat tempo being played.

“Annie was so sure she’d never see him again. They…” Katniss shifts in her seat and tugs at her dress. “They told her he was dead once. They threw a severed hand into her cell and told her it was his. Just to watch her cry.”

Peeta remains absolutely still, certain any movement will break the spell Katniss has fallen under. She has been so calm today and so happy to be around familiar people. He hopes that Coin will allow her out more often. Maybe even join her family’s living compartment.

“I told her they were lying. But I couldn’t prove it. She screamed and sobbed all night. When they took me away the next morning, I was actually relieved.”

She turns her head and makes eye contact for the first time since saying goodbye before the Quarter Quell.

“Was it real? Any of it?” she asks.

“You and me, you mean?”

She nods.

“It was real for me,” he says. “Snow may have bullied us into an engagement, but I loved you Katniss. I still do.”

She looks down at her trembling hands. He covers them with his own, and she doesn’t pull away.

“And Prim?”

“That’s your Prim,” he says. “The same Prim you took care of after your father died. The same
Prim you volunteered for at the reaping.” He reaches out and touches the tip of her braid. “I’m sorry,” he says. “For everything that has happened. I am so sorry.”

She looks up at him, eyes brimming with tears. “I don’t believe you,” she says.

He doesn’t ask her to clarify which part she doubts. He knows she doesn’t believe anything he says. He’s lost her. The moment the lie about the baby left his mouth, she was gone.

He walks away without looking back.

***

Later that night, after the rest of the district is asleep, a quiet knock on Peeta’s door pulls him out of bed.

Katniss waits for him outside.

“What are you doing out here?” he asks. He grabs her wrist and pulls her inside, sliding the door shut behind him.


“I’m not. See?” Peeta asks. “I’ll even leave it a little bit open. I just don’t want them to find you out of bed. They’ll start handcuffing you again. How’d you get out of your room?”

“I told Prim I needed to see you, so she let me out. She’s keeping watch outside.”

Katniss stands in the middle of his compartment still wearing the blue dress from earlier. Her braid has unraveled, and her hair spills over her shoulders in dark waves. Her eye is completely healed, and all of the bruises are gone. The only remaining physical evidence of her torture is a scar across her cheek.

She looks like Katniss. The way he remembers her.

“What are you doing here?” he asks.

“I’ve been thinking about something I remembered. I woke up in the middle of the night on a train and you were beside me. You held me until I calmed down and fell back asleep. Did that really happen?”

“Yes. We slept in the same bed to help each other with our nightmares.”

He takes a step toward her, but she holds up her hand to stop him.

“It’s like there are two of you,” she says. “I remember both versions, but I can’t tell which is the real one and which is the lie.”

“I know.”

“But I think I might be able to. Someday.”

She drops her hand, and he takes that stubborn step forward. “Yeah?”

“Prim says you would never hurt her. She says you kept her safe in the arena and here after you were rescued. She says she’s real and you are too. I want it to be true. I want it so badly.”

Peeta closes the space between them. He grazes her arm first as a test, and when she remains still,
he wraps his arms around her. She doesn’t hug him back, but it’s tremendous progress.

Prim slips inside the compartment. “I need to get you back, Katniss. The shift change is in a few minutes. They’ll check on you first.”

Reluctantly, Peeta lets go and watches Prim take her sister’s hand.

“Can I visit you tomorrow?” he calls out. “Would that be okay?”

Katniss looks over her shoulder and gives him the smallest of smiles. The first smile he has seen her wear in months. It reminds him of so many lost moments, memories she may never recover or recall without fear. It’s beautiful and painful, and it fills him with hope.

“Yes,” she says. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

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