Cato's whole life was amounting to a moment of victory. But he was trapped inside a system that manufactured perfect tributes. Life wasn't easy with the expectations of glory constantly hanging over his head. He was a teenager, stripped of a normal life and forced to become a murder craving psychopath.

Set before the 74th Hunger Games during Cato's Career Tribute Training and his time in the Capitol.
Chapter 1

I could escape. Perhaps I could hide in an outlining District, change my face, my hair, my body. Peacekeeping in District 12 isn’t as strict, so I hear. I could make it there. No. I could have. It’s too late now. Leaving my District would have been difficult, but the Capitol; I’d sure enough be caught. My only choice is to survive. Survive as a monster.

Her fingertips wrapped themselves around my thigh like sharp edged rope, cold and tight. Instead of relaxing me it caused my muscles to contract and tighten to fight against her constricting rope fingers. 10 knives gauged at my skin with their cold tips and I cried out. I felt the tension release as her hands fell to her sides. She sighed out my name.

“Cato, you’re going to have to relax.” Her tone was patronising, but I submitted and put myself in a peaceful frame of mind and let her fingers lightly touch me as fingers, not blades. I didn’t react, just laid face down, my head tucked in my arm. She became violent again and I felt my muscles cower at her touch. They retracted which shooting pains through the whole of my thigh. My breathing grew heavy. I clenched my jaw in pain as he fingers transformed once more into jagged knives. I can never be comfortable in these situations. I cannot relax when someone jabs at my exposed skin with cold fingers, but my injury only made my distaste much more discomforting. I had collapsed during training with a pain in my right thigh. I tried to continue but fell once more to the ground. I limped alone to the Doctor’s office who sent me to the physiotherapist, who now had grown tiresome of my whimpers and retreated her hands from my skin.

“You’ve overworked yourself, again.” She said once more with a condescending sigh to her voice.

“They overworked me” I muttered into my arm.

“Cato. Criticism is not welcomed here” She said and I turned to lay on my back. “What they’re doing is marvellous. They’re training you to be a victor and as victors themselves, they know what they’re doing.” Ignorance. Their training was nothing like this. We have become experiments. They try out new techniques and high levels of training that they never experienced to try turn us into perfect specimens; perfect murderers.

She started adding a thermic balm to my thigh that heated with touch. She started to massage it into the back of my thigh and I immediately felt the heat draw out the torture of my leg.

“You’re going to have to take a week off, at least.” She said with her balm-coated hands held in the air. A week off in this life is a huge setback. Such slacking is noticeable in the dealings they take and I wasn’t happy risking my training and my development. I tried to protest, but she demanded that further training would only harm me and I would have no hope in competing, not that that was an issue.

“What if I didn’t train my legs? Just do upper body training” I said with a desperate widening of my blue eyes.

“You need to rest, everything.” I tried to argue, but wasted my breath. I took my shirt off and had her apply the balm to other sore areas of my body. She just shook her head with disappointment. I clenched my jaw with anger this time as she continually condescended me, my abilities and my limits.
My body was elate with warmth as my chest, shoulders and arm were coated in the thermic balm.

“Try not to overwork yourself from now on” she said to me. I limped out of the door with my t-shirt in my hand and made my way alone to the weights room to find my trainer, Brutus. He was harsh and cruel. He believes that he was weak in his own games, despite winning; believes he was treated lightly. Because of his low opinion of himself from when he was eighteen, he pushes us all to limits beyond human capabilities.

His searching eyes found me as I walked in and he abandoned his spotting duties and left a students to struggle under the immense weight that Brutus had put onto him. One of the other boys rushed to his aid as the heavy weight came down on his chest. Brutus just shook his head with disillusioned disappointment.

“Cato, you ready to start again?” He said to me with his large arms folded and legs at shoulder width apart. He always stood in this stance, like he was trying to intimidate everyone whilst being prepared to defend himself from an attack.

“Physiotherapist says I have to take a week out to let my muscles relax” I said to him, overly playing on my disappointment and anger. The idea of a break had quickly settled in my mind and I was looking forward to a week away from this harsh lifestyle.

“A week! Do you realise how much training that is!” He shouted. He clenched his fists and took deep breaths. “This is fucking unbelievable.” He said to me.

“I’ll be back as soon as I feel even the slightest recovery” I said to try and reassure him, but he stormed off without listening to a single word, probably to go argue - and upset - the physiotherapist. I started to make my way through the corridors that had started to feel like home to me. The walls were blue, and through the middle was a golden strip that travelled through the whole of the Career Training Centre as a motif for victory, which was for both motivation and to show how we, in District 2 had won The Hunger Games more than any other district, while also showing wealth as our District was one of the wealthiest, and we always liked to show it off with costly celebrations throughout the year, expensive buildings and an unnecessary price range on everything from food to clothing, just to show that we could afford such ‘lavish expenses.’ I found it all to be disillusioned as The Capitol was harsh on us just like the other districts. To them, we were still poor. To them, none of us were victors.

My comfort in these hallways was beginning to worry me. The building had slowly become homely. The idea of Career training finally had become natural in my mind. Before, this place and the thoughts that lingered around it like ghosts that surround a haunted mansion, haunted my mind and forever struck my soul with a fear like standing on a ledge, where one small slip meant crashing to the ground.

Heavy training begins at the age of ten, but initial training begins at the age of five. It’s barbaric, but it’s the system. Training for the Hunger Games comes in three stages. The first stage is what we call initial training, or preparation. It begins with an application and selection process where those who already shown sign of mental or physical strength are chosen. This stage lasts for five years along with primary education and builds the foundations for carving a fighter, constructing early strength, stamina and agility. The second stage is known as Heavy training. It begins with another selection process, narrowing the numbers down to 12 boys and 12 girls to match the Games. This entails seven years of harsh training to further develop strength, stamina and agility while also introducing weapon mastery.

Before I decided to specify in sword fighting, I chose to fight with a spear. The reason was that it was the closest to a trident that I could take up. I was nine years old when Finnick Odair visited
my house on business with my parents. He had just finished his victory tour and was here for reasons I didn’t know, but he met with my parents for three of those days. The time overlapped with my brother’s second selection at the Training Centre, so my parents were out for a while. He had stayed overnight in our guest bedroom. He was very mature for a fifteen year old, and he was kind to me. Rather than hiring a baby sitter, Finnick looked after me. I remember little of the time I spent with him, but somethings have stuck in my mind, like his warm smile and dimples, and his deep sea green eyes and messy bronze hair. I can recall the feeling of happiness and enjoyment. I also recall something he told me. When my brother came back, having found that he hadn’t made it into Stage two, he kneeled in front of me and whispered in my year: ‘Cato. Don’t let them ruin you’. I didn’t know what he meant; didn’t know who he was talking about it, but it mattered to me because he said it. He had had a piece of ivory cloth that he tied around his wrist with a selection of sea shell bracelets. I took it off his wrist and for some reason he let me keep it. I used to wear it, but slowly it became more precious to me and so I kept it hidden and held it only when I felt alone or angry and wanted to feel those memories that he gave me.

I was fourteen years old and sat alone in my room, fumbling with this piece of cloth. I was still living with the relief of having not had my name chosen in the Reaping as I was so unprepared, although that is the point of these games. Every day leading up the tributes evaluation they play back some the favourite victories. That day they showed Finnick’s victory. I used to be amazed by it, used to get excited every time I saw him kill a person with his magnificent trident, just because it meant he was winning. But this one time as I held that piece of cloth in my hand and watched as he slit the throat of another tribute in cold blood, I understood what he meant.

I saw the life leave the boy’s eyes and I watched the life leave Finnick’s. Each kill was a wound to himself. Each time he took the life away from another person, The Capitol took away part of his life. They were running him. I started crying in my room when I realised what position I was in, understanding that that could be me on the screen in the fast approaching future, slitting the throat of an innocent. I wanted out, but there was no way. Once you apply you cannot go back. I thought of purposely failing Stage Two, but they already knew enough of me. I was one of the top pupils and couldn’t forfeit myself for they knew what I was capable of. I was one of their strongest; a true contender. If I were to quit then there would be repercussions. I had never felt true fright before that point. I was trapped in an unfortunate punitive world now, and it took three years before this brutality settled in my mind and I was able to normalise it.

Stage Three selects a single boy and girl who will volunteer on the day of the reaping to represent their District. I may have accepted my position in the system and the procedure I was trapped in, but I wasn’t in any way hopeful to participate in The Hunger Games. I want my life to be whole. I wanted to be whole, not a fragmented ghost who spent his time a ghost of the Training Centre, wandering without a trace of self-will, ruined by the Capitol.

Once I got home I took a long, warm shower. This was the start of my relaxation period so for 45 minutes I stood naked with the water cascading over my muscles, hooking onto the now cold balm, pulling it off my skin.

I sat in my house for half an hour alone, with no sound and no clothes, wondering what I can do with myself. Usually, when I found myself bored I would go on a run or back to the centre to do extra weights. I would find some other way to improve my strength, or practice my sword skills, but I was supposed to be relaxing. I found myself lost without the training. It scared me. The ghosts of the training centre had followed me home and haunted my mind. My life had been consumed by the Games. Were they already ruining me? I asked myself. I hoped not. I hoped that this wasn’t what Finnick had meant. At the thought of him I sprang to the small wooden box I kept hidden under jeans at the bottom of my wardrobe and pulled out his piece of cloth and wrapped it around my wrist. It comforted me and I felt peace in the room, but not in my mind. Fabric cannot expel ghosts.
“Cato!” my mother said in surprise at my being home. “What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be at career training?” She said. She looked confused, but my father concerned.

“I injured my leg, overworking apparently. Physio says I got to take a week of to let I heal.” As soon as I said I saw my father draw a breath and look to the window with anger. It reminded me of Brutus and his anger, but less outwardly expressed. My sister ran into the kitchen when she heard me. Her pink skirt flowed behind her like a tail as she ran into me and wrapped her small arms around my waist. She shouted my name and squeezed tightly.

“Oh honey, leave Cato alone, he has a bard leg” my mother said taking her hand and prying her away from me.

“Is Cato going to be okay?” She asked looking up at me. I crouched down so I was at her height. It hurt my leg so I instead balanced with my right knee on the floor, for less strain.

“I’m going to be just fine” I told her and she smiled gladly. She kissed my nose and skipped back into the living room. My sister was eight years old and never entered into career training. I guess my parents were content enough with myself being such a ‘success.’

“How is this going to affect your training?” My father asked, his head still turned to the window.

“Hardly at all” I said to reassure him. He showed no reaction and my mother seemed hardly concerned with my training.

“Is it just your leg?” My father ask, asking himself the same questions that I had asked the physiotherapist.

“Mainly my leg, but I’ve been told to rest it all to since there were some other minor pains.” He took a worrying breath once more. “I’ll be back as soon as I’m feeling better” I said to him. He didn’t seem to be listening. Instead he looked on the verge of a rant. I wouldn’t be surprised if he went to the centre to argue with the physiotherapist, just like Brutus. He stood still though, not moving from his spot for the entire time that I was in the room.

After that I didn’t know what to do with myself. I found myself yet again bored. It reached a point where I hoped to recover overnight just so that I could occupy myself for these moments when I was free. It was ironic because even when I was given leave from my training, I was still tied down by it.
I had been off for two days. My thigh was healing, I could feel it. It was less tense but still my muscles felt like a pulled elastic band. I told myself that if I felt improvement the next day then I would return to training. I knew I would feel better, so there wasn’t truly a question of ‘if.’ Being off from training meant I stayed in school till the end of the day and didn’t have Careers leave. I stuck to my usual school routine, however. I hung out with my friends who continued their daily mission of bullying those they deemed less fit than themselves. It was almost a mirror of the Capitol, as wealth in the districts destined popularity. As a Career in training and a member of one of the wealthiest families, I was born into high school royalty, but the lifestyle never sat comfortably with me. I was confident and sociable and happy enough with these people that I called friends, but ultimately there were people I could get along with better. More humbled people.

Theo and I had been friends since we were in initial training together, however he wasn’t chosen for secondary training. He lost any status he had and became an outcast in teenage society. I liked him, however. People often saw past his beauty, both inner and outwardly. People found it difficult to look beyond the choppy haircut and glasses, but I could. Theo had light brown eyes that were always wide to absorb the world around him, and his tan skin was smooth and clear with a slight redness on his cheeks. I was his only real friend, so he was always grateful when I would divert the bullying from him, and he was always happy to hang out after school times. We never spoke during school though. The classification system of popular and unpopular was like the Capitol to the District, and unless offering him up for a tribute, I myself would be judged harshly for any involvement with him.

The original plan was to meet with him after school, however a heavy amount of homework meant he was unable to. Being a training career I don’t get given homework. There is an unspoken rule in the schools that our preparation should not be compromised. We are treated better by teachers with higher than earned grades and no homework. It’s not so awful though. It doesn’t give us any more opportunities than those who aren’t training Careers. Whoever volunteers to partake in the games will have a life mapped out for them. Their lives will be different with whole different opportunities, and arguably worse ones; a life slaving as mentors for the games, training teenagers for slaughter. Anyone else has the reputation of a failed tribute, which can sometimes be a hindrance. The majority of people, whether failed tributes or not, go on to a career in masonry, our districts main profession. Sometimes, because of their muscular build, failed tributes are better at their job and favoured more, but ultimately favouritism in high school doesn’t offer any help once you leave.

I’d be content enough working as a mason, but ultimately I’d rather be doing something else. I’d like to take over my father’s business. He owns a couple of gyms in the District and provides the necessary equipment for the Training Centre. He wanted my brother to take over, but he doesn’t have the knowledge and responsibility to run a business. But something tells me I wouldn’t be taking control either. My father would be utterly disappointed with me if I did not make it into the games. The pressure weighed down on me more so than they ever did on my brother. If I was to fail to make it into the games, then my father’s attention will turn back to my brother, or maybe my sister. I would be a failure to him.

I got off the phone with Theo and thought that I would watch some TV. I had never felt as lazy as I had during that half an hour sitting on the sofa. My body craved activity. I needed a release from all the energy that was building up. My mind was convinced I was ready to start
training again as my leg was healing; the boredom was excruciating. I heard someone come in. It was my brother. The living room door swung open at a force, left a dent in the wall and came back into my brother’s face. He stumbled back onto the floor and cursed at it. He was drunk.

“Fucking hell, Lucius. It’s only 4:30 in the afternoon.” I said and held a hand out to help him up.

“Is that it?” he murmured out and looked at his wrist for the time, but had no watch on. “Guess I’ll go back out then.”

“No you won’t” I said and dragged him to the sofa. He flailed in my grip and shouted at me. “Sit there, I’ll get you some water.” I brought him a glass and he took a mouthful of the water, but spat it onto me. He drunk the rest willingly.

“Why are you here? You’re usually in training.” He said to me with a glance from the corner of his eye.

“Got sent home for an injury.” I answered.

“What did dad say?” Lucius asked.


“He was worried about the games wasn’t he?” He said. I clenched my jaw and dropped my eyes to the floor.

“Yeah. So what?” I said to the ground.

“I can’t stand that dick.” Lucius said and stood up off the sofa. He started walking towards the door but I stopped him.

“He’s our father. Don’t be so disrespectful.” He shook his arm from out of my grasp and looked up into my eyes.

“Disrespectful? Maybe he doesn’t deserve respect. Nobody who disowns a ten year old for not being strong enough to kill another boy deserves respect.” Despite his inebriated state, his words were sharp and expressed his bitterness without a single slur. “And now he’s getting pissy with you because you’ve got to make up for my failure. It’s sick that he treats us in this way, Cato. We’re his children.”

“He provides us with our money, our clothes, and our house. You don’t have to be his best friend, but he’s done a lot of stuff for us.” I tried to defend him, but I could see Lucius’ answers building in his mind. He knew exactly what to say, knew every counterattack.

“He hasn’t done it for us, he’s done it for himself. This house is all part of the image for him. He wants a victor because that’s good business. He’ll get money from the Capitol and sky rocket the business. He’ll turn you into a mascot and you know it. An attractive, muscular victor is all he wants from you to be the face of his gyms.”

“Nobody is that self-serving.” Lucius took a breath for his next argument.

“The Capitol are, and we’re living in their shadow. That has an effect on some people. He’s half a Capitol citizen.” Realizations were forming over me like rain clouds. I never liked my father, but I put up with him. However, I couldn’t argue against Lucius any longer. His words were like a sermon and I was believing every word of them, overcome by the knowledge being provided for me. After my brother stormed out of the house I felt the rain of revelation start
pouring from the clouds and I was overwhelmed by pain and disappointment. I was drowning in the understanding that I was a business plan. I didn’t try to understand the emotions I was feeling at that time. I didn’t question further. I boxed my emotions. Boxed the thoughts, the questions, and new comprehension. But I didn’t know what to do with myself. My body felt hollowed, so I let anger in. I was angry at my father. I was angry at my brother, The Capitol and myself. I couldn’t remain comfortable with that rage that refused to settle. Those emotions had to convert to actions. I was not normal because I couldn’t control my anger. When I saw red, I became a bull and my mind and body could do nothing but be consumed by it. It turned me into a loaded gun with a trigger always half pulled. When that trigger is pulled though, it’s such a burst that the doe doesn’t have time to react or to escape. I just fire before anything else can be done.

I let loose on the punching bag that hung in my garden. I took off my wet shirt and began punching it with intense fury. It rippled with my skin as my knuckles made hard contact with it. I kept punching and punching. In the sun I sweated immediately. The heat got me flustered and I felt my punches slow and weaken. My hair was damp, skin shining with sweat and my knuckles began to hurt, but my anger wasn’t satisfied. My black jeans burned my skin so I took them off and in just my boxers I punched and I kicked the bag. The gentle breeze cooled my skin and I felt a recharge and punched and kicked with more strength. Clenching my teeth into a Vesuvian smile I attacked, fired my bullet into a bag like target practice. My hands trembled with pain but I didn’t hesitate a single punch and continued using up all energy that my arms contained.

After so long I felt my rage subside. Via the outlet I calmed myself, but my shoulder began to seize up and the pain in my leg had doubled from the energy it took to kick. But I didn’t care, it was my only vent and waiting for my injury to heal required patience that I didn’t have. I gave up when I couldn’t stand any longer and my hands couldn’t retain a fist. I sat on the wooden decking, my shaking hands limp between my legs. I thought why couldn’t I feel these emotions without having to physically react? Why did I always require somatic responses? Why couldn’t I let myself recover? Everything around me fell silent when the bag stopped swinging, except for the gentle breeze that breathed over my burning skin. I started to cry. For twelve years I had been training to be victor, but I realised then that I was useless. I wasn’t human anymore. I didn’t know how to be a human. Didn’t know how to handle my emotions. I was given an upsetting truth and it made me feel more than one emotion, but I channelled it all into anger and took it out on a punching bag. I didn’t know how to be a person. All I knew how to do was fight, not how to live. Then I apprehended, I would be a superlative Tribute.
Chapter 3

My mother found me passed out on the decking. She woke me and spoke quietly with concern. “Get up before your father sees you” she said, picking up my clothes. My little sister stood watching as I pulled myself up, putting my weight on just one leg and keeping my hand on the wall to steady myself. “Have you been crying?” my mother asked looking into my red eyes. I didn’t say anything but tried to seem calm and collected.

“Cato, what’s wrong?” My sister asked with her hands folded over on another in front of her with a contorted look of concern.

“Cato’s just tired.” My mother said to her. “He’ll be just fine. Go inside and play.” She obliged, skipping happily through the glass doors. She checked to see if my father was nearby. When the coast was clear, she exuding a relieving sigh then looked into my eyes. Her gaze was stern; face like stone.

I tore away from her locked eyes. “I’m going to shower” I said. She grabbed my arm. He grip was strong and rigid like a vice but I could feel a pain from within her. When she touched me, that stern look on her face look became a look of worry.

“You can’t let him see you like this.” She said. Her voice was still strong and demanding. “Training is hard. I know. I went through it.” I had no clue that my mother had been a training career. I was frozen by the shock of more revelations, my mind swarming with ponder. I tried to speak but she cut me off, refusing to open up. “Not now” she said and I nodded. I was released from her grip and walked into the house, but she remained outside. I was concerned for her, so I went back to check on her. She stood straight with alarm when she saw me; made herself stone again, but there was crack, I could see it. She commanded that I go back inside. I walked past my father heading up stairs.

“Why aren’t you wearing any clothes?” he asked.

“Been training.” I replied bluntly without pause.

“So you’re feeling better?” He asked again.

“Much better” I lied. He immediately became pleased and receded back to the living room with a jolly stride. I took a long shower, letting the hot water fall over my body. I stood there, thinking. Why didn’t I know she was a training Career? Why hasn’t she told me before? I had never been close with either of parents. I wasn’t one to pester for answers about their life, but this meant I had questions to be answered. My mother and I now shared something that I couldn’t share with my father. Perhaps she understood the position I was and the fear that I was feeling; the torture on my mind and my body. I didn’t know how long she was training for but hoped she reached the same stage as me so that I could talk to her about it. I needed advice on how to deal with the idea that I was being trained to kill. It was inhumane and my body defending itself from the notion like fighting off disease by shutting down. I was terrified that I might be chosen as the next career. That thought induces fear in the mind and everything becomes irrationalised. I was convinced that I would be the next tribute.

“You still may not be chosen.” Theo tried to convince me. I rang him as soon as I got out of the shower.

“I’m exactly what they want.” I said.
“You’re not a monster.” He said to me.

“I didn’t say I was a monster.”

“No, but that’s what they want. To them, the villain is the hero, and you can’t be a villain if you’re scared of it.”

“But that’s what they do. They change you, they make sure that you’re not scared.” My blood was pumping faster and my breathing heavier. Fear was coursing through my body once more.

“So hold onto it, Cato. Be afraid. It’s what keeps you human. It’s what stops you from being the villain.” A silence fell over the phone. I had to embrace my fear. Not stop it or stand against it. “Go talk to your mother, she’ll know better than I do what you’re going through.”

“Thanks, Theo” I said.

“No problem. I’m always here for you.” I hung up the phone and put on some joggers and t-shirt. I went into my wooden box in the wardrobe and pulled Finnick’s piece of ivory cloth. I wrapped it around my wrist and tied it tightly. It used to be a comforter, but now it was a terror inducer. I envisioned that this simple piece of cloth was capable of keeping my fear as fear and not anger. When I opened my bedroom door, my sister was standing in front of it, her hands folded over one another again, the same concerned look on her face.

“Is Cato ok now?” She asked me.

“I’m fine.” I replied and crouched down to her height.

“I have a question” she said so I nodded for her to speak. “Why aren’t I training to be a Career?” She asked. She was 7. Two years had passed since she was eligible to be entered and not once had it crossed my mind as to why my parents hadn’t entered her into for training. Maybe it was because I had gotten to the second stage, had surpassed my brother and they thought it not necessary. Perhaps my father thought she wouldn’t make a good company face. She couldn’t show the strength and power that I could to represent a gym. I assumed it was both; because of my success, they didn’t offer her up as a sacrifice.  I felt relieved, however, realising that she was safe. It was likely that she would ever make it into the games. If she ever was chosen to be tribute, a career would volunteer instead of her. Of course, some years we don’t send in career at all if the trainers feel nobody is worthy of it or if someone does not volunteer like they were supposed to, but that was very rare. The appeal of being a victor was great these days and there is always someone in these brutal districts to offer themselves up to a life of death and misery.

“It’s because you’re their favourite” I lied to her. “They didn’t enter you because you’re too special to them.” I bright white smile stretched across her face. Then it turned into a frown.

“Do they not like you?” She asked.

“Not as much as they like you.” I said and she smiled again. I stood up and she took the sign to leave and skipped back into her room. I now had more questions to ask. My father was still confined to the living room. It was unlikely that he would come out until dinner so I had an opportunity to talk to my mother, alone.

The walk to the kitchen became immensely daunting. It felt as though my steps were trivial, like every time I placed my foot down the door travelled further away. Battling against the escaping destination, I made it into the kitchen with a beating heart that screamed to be calmed. Never had I opened up to my parents. I was always distant from them. I considered myself an outcast within
the house, though not shunned; just not understood. But all pariahs seek company and to relate. You see, Loneliness can be torture.

My mother looked at me with the same stern face she had earlier, only showing more concern now that before.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were in training?” I wasted no time. Instead I let the fear take me and I sputtered out my question, fumbling at Finnick’s ivory cloth with my other hand.

“Because I know how hard it is, and I didn’t want to put any more pressures onto you.” *But this knowledge wasn’t a pressure, it was a relief* I thought.

“I want to know more.” I stated and she nodded, put down the chopping knife in her hand and leaned on the kitchen worktop.

“There’s not much to know. Your grandparents entered me for training and I wasn’t chosen for the final selection, hence why I am here today.”

“But didn’t you think that this knowledge would have helped me. Knowing that you’ve felt what I am feeling is a relief because now I have someone to relate to.” I couldn’t understand why she didn’t see that. She shook her head.

“This information isn’t going to help you, Cato. I wasn’t strong enough to be chosen, but you are. You have the potential to be a victor. But this just gives you more goals to surpass. I know how you feel, yes. You put pressure on yourself to be the best, to make sure that you get to be the one to gain all the glory that victory offers, and that is enough motivation. More than that and it can just discourage you, and I didn’t want to do that.” All the world around me all of a sudden became bleak. She didn’t understand at all what I was going through. She didn’t understand that I was afraid. She didn’t understand that I didn’t want this. She shook her head.

“This information isn’t going to help you, Cato. I wasn’t strong enough to be chosen, but you are. You have the potential to be a victor. But this just gives you more goals to surpass. I know how you feel, yes. You put pressure on yourself to be the best, to make sure that you get to be the one to gain all the glory that victory offers, and that is enough motivation. More than that and it can just discourage you, and I didn’t want to do that.” All the world around me all of a sudden became bleak. She didn’t understand at all what I was going through. She didn’t understand that I was afraid. She didn’t understand that I didn’t want this. She just thinks that I’m being conscientious and that I’m stressed. We couldn’t relate, and once again I felt an outcast. My body felt as though it was being tugged by an invisible tether to leave, to escape before this lonely torture consumed my fear struck body.

I collected myself as my usual mind took my emotions and channelled them into anger like it usually does, tried to suppress all emotions. I had more questions that needed answers.

“Why haven’t you entered Naomi for training?” I asked. I heard the kitchen door open and my father walk in.

“Because she is a girl. The games are no place for my daughter” he said.

“She can’t handle the training.” My mother said and continued cutting vegetables, handing the floor over to my father.

“Why does her being a girl make a difference?” I asked.

“Don’t be so stupid. She’s not like you, strong and fierce. I am appalled that they let women in the games. Such hostility is for men only.” My father said. I knew he had sexist observations of the world, but this angered me. Naomi was strong and kind. Being born female isn’t a weakness, nor is it a strength. It is but who you are.

“There have been plenty of women win the games.” I said.

“Not in recent years.” My father answered back. “The last time a woman won was… the year before Finnick Odair won. Since then it has been just men and that’s because Career training has made the men stronger and women can never face up to that. Look at you, Cato. You’re
strong and powerful and mighty. No female could take down you.”

“Strength isn’t everything, and there are plenty of girls who can overcome that. Intelligence is key to victory, not brutal force.” I said. I saw anger paint across my father’s face in the same way it would painted my own.

“Why are you asking us this?” he said through clenched teeth.

“I was curious…I wanted to know.” I replied.

“You believe your sister should be in the games?” He spoke intensely before I had even finished my sentence. “You want to turn into Gloss and Cashmere; brother and sister victors? You would jeopardise the safety of your sister?” My mother remained out of the discussion.

“That’s not what I’m saying at all.” I shouted back.

“You dare to raise your voice at me? Who the fuck do you think you’re talking to?” He said with his chest puffed out.

“What are you on about? You’re jumping to irrational conclusions. I don’t want Naomi to compete. I never did. I wanted to know why she wasn’t entered after you entered both of you other children!” My body was warm with anger. My suppression was failing.

“Well now you’ve had your answer.” My father said, quick and sharp.

“So if you had another son, you would enter him for training?” I asked.

“The games is what every man aspired to win. Victory is a true statement of a man’s worth.” The words could not be comprehend in my mind. Life is about more than proving your strength. Being a man did not mean confinement to brutality. I was about to speak out further as I felt my rage call for a release, but my father stopped me. “I want to hear no more of this discussion.” After a silence that was weighed down with heavy tensions, I left the room. I was about to head upstairs but I was shaking for a release. Any more heavy training could seriously damage my muscles, so instead I left for a walk to subside myself.

As I walked around the town square, that was calmer than usual but still full of people, I thought of how alone I was. I got answers to my questions but now I was more lost than ever. My mother and I had a link in career training, but her own perceptions of it just made the void between us greater than anything. Both of them were blind. The shadow of the Capitol had corrupted them both and now they misunderstood me, and what worried me was that I felt closer to my brother because of this. I was seeing in them what he sees. More than ever did I want to forfeit my participation in training, and I would have done so, if it wasn’t for the damage it would bring on my family by the unspoken societal expectations. Naomi would be the sister of a coward and drunken reject who would soon obtain the title of a misfit and be harshly judged. What would Brutus do if his favourite pupil were to quit? What wrath would that bring? I just hoped that someone proved better than I and that they could succeed as victor over me. It would ideal to have no victors and no deaths, but this was the best thing that reality could perhaps offer.

My walk had taken me from the town square to denser, more urban areas that were formed from shops and homes. I was so deep in thought that I couldn’t hear my name being called. I was startled when I felt a firm grip on my arm.

“Cato. You okay?” the person said. I stared at him for a moment, confused as to who he was. Then I realised it was Abel. He was also in career training with me. I hardly interacted with him but we always acknowledged one another.
“Abel, hey.” I said slowly, wondering why he felt the need to stop me.

“Are you ok?” he asked me. I nodded.

“Just fine.” I said and looked into his narrow green eyes. He didn’t look convinced.

“What are you doing wandering about? I saw you an hour ago walking about at the square and now you’re here.” I hadn’t realised how long I had been out for. I wasn’t fine and that was evident, so I didn’t try to dissuade his thought.

“Just needed to think” I answered. He nodded in acknowledgment, understanding that I didn’t want to be pushed further.

“I’m heading to Clove’s party. You wanna come?” He asked me. Clove and I weren’t particularly close. She wanted to compete in the games and made that known to everyone. It discouraged me from pursuing a friendship with her, but we were both in the same ocean, and she was tolerable. Plus, I hadn’t been to the centre in days and suddenly, being with Abel comforted me. I fell back in my habitat being with him. The ghosts of the training centre followed me once more. It was scary, that the training centre was again becoming my comfort, but as Theo said, that fear is what will keep me human. So I embraced it and followed it to the party.
Clove’s home was in the west quarter. Peacekeeping there wasn’t so strict, especially when it came to parties and the younger people. Andrew, the head of the unit there, was young for a peacekeeper and allowed house parties so long as they were kept under control. A small unit stay nearby in case things get out of hand, although only once have they ever intervened. Abel and I made our way there as the sun was setting behind the tall, jagged mountain that overlooked the quarter. Abel was one of the most popular of our age group. It was mainly because of his good looks; he was insanely attractive. He had narrow, green eyes overlooked by thick, straight eyebrows. His faced was chiselled, with high cheekbones and hollow cheeks that creased and dimpled whenever he smiled and laughed. His strong jawline and thin, Greek nose give finish his heavenly face. His hair was jet black, cut short on the back and sides but kept long on top. Today, he had a fringe that fell on the right hand side of his forehead, placed in a perfect mess. He was a bit under six foot, probably 5’11. His body fat was close to nil, but he was muscular. His body was sculpted to the point that it was jagged, especially his arms that seemed to zigzag from shoulder, to tricep, to forearm; his large, veiny hands at the end of them.

He had turned eighteen a while back, which meant he was able to get tattoos without his parent’s permission. Although, when he turned sixteen he was allowed one by his parents, so on his arm he gotten a large red rose surrounded by small green leaves. Since then he has gotten more in the same area, forming a half sleeve around his elbow and the bottom half of his upper arm. On it was a bird, whose large golden wings stretched around his bicep, dominating the others, the body of the bird not noticeable between them. Some green clouds surrounded the bird, and between the wings, below the rose, golden streaks of light shone out. A second flower was added, blue and deep pink, next to the rose. On the back of his arm, on the tricep, was a wolf, silver and light blue, howling at a grey moon. As the sun disappeared shadows stretched across the district and a silver crescent shone down over the district. I asked him what his tattoos meant since he wore a tank top and his muscular arms were on show:

“Why? You thinking of getting one?” he asked me with a smile, his freckled cheeks, dimpling.

“Maybe, if you convince me” I said.

“The rose, doesn’t mean anything, but the fact that it is a tattoo itself holds meaning. A tattoo is permanent, and if I can be dedicated to marking my skin for life, then that means I can have the motivation and dedication to keep working at something, like my fitness, or my art, which are perhaps temporary.” He said. Clove’s house was approaching in the distance, every light on, the peacekeepers sitting outside on watch.

“You’re art?” I asked him.

“Painting, sketching, sculpting, I love it all” he said. He smiled again and I felt my stomach drop as his pearly white teeth showed from his thin pale pink lips; he was truly beautiful.

“It’s not something I expect of you” I admitted to him.

“I didn’t expect it either” he said and raised his eyebrows.

“So how did it come about?” I asked.

“A few years back I was in the justice building one day, meeting with the Mayor’s son. I wandered about and came to a room that was full of paintings. One of them was of the lake near
the training centre, and the blossoms that line along the east side. It wasn’t it in its traditional state, however. Whoever had painted it had played with the colours, so that the water was pink like the blossoms, which were pale blue, like the sky, which was a greyish-brown like the tree bark; you get the idea. I thought it was fascinating, the way they made something so familiar to me so surreal. Since then I’ve been in love with art.” His eyes were wide and glimmering with passion. He blinked the look away then and his cheeks turned a slight pink colour. “It’s so stupid and gay.”

“No” I replied. “You’ve found something you’re passionate about, there’s nothing wrong with that.” I stood there, wishing I could be fanatical about something like that. I spent most of my time training, and although it was natural to me, it was something I had grown to like, it wasn’t something that sparked a blaze within me. We stood at the front of her house. On the pavement outside a few people stood chatting amongst themselves.

“I’ll tell you about the rest of my tattoos another time.” He said to me and I nodded. I stood there for a moment, staring into his green eyes not moving. “You going inside?” He asked. I snapped away and my cheeks turned pink.

“Yeah, yeah” I repeated awkwardly laughing, scratching the back of my neck. I walked through the open door into Clove’s home. It wasn’t small, but not large; the West quarter was in the middle in terms of wealth. The North was the wealthiest, and the South the poorest. The East was where the masonry happened.

People from school and the training centre were there; nobody I didn’t know. Music played in the background. I heard that music differs from District to District. What is played elsewhere I do not know, but here, everything is based around a voice. Accompanying the singer can be pianos, percussion of different kinds, although usually drum kits, guitars, strings and brass are used also. It’s nothing like the glorious transcending brass pieces you hear on projections from the Capitol when they have something to report, but it is, to us, still glorious. We found Clove reading the track listing of the vinyl that was playing.

“Abel, Cato!” She said in excitement as she saw us. She motioned for us to come over. “It’s so nice for you to come.” We both wished her a happy birthday and she told us about the music playing. It was a present from her grandparents. “They said they said that during the daytime, when there were other commotions that attracted the peacekeeper’s attention, they would quietly play this and dance from start to finish.”

“She has a beautiful voice. Who is it?” Abel asked her.

“I don’t have a clue. There is no name.” Clove said with a smile, looking contently down at the spinning record. “We have alcohol, if you want any.” I wasn’t a huge drinker, usually sticking to wine when my parents allowed it. It was expensive so rarely we drank it; only on special occasions. I had only once been drunk off of liquor bought from the market by my brother. I did it for fun and adventure. My brother did it to rebel in his own way. I was 16 and threw up in my brother’s room over his floor. I didn’t want to feel that again, but tonight I thought that perhaps it could numb my emotions. My parents weren’t around, so I adopted my brother’s role. I stayed with Abel for a while, drinking to song and cheer with him until he was grabbed by Clove for a dance. I sat alone until a group of boys grabbed me and pulled me up to dance. We didn’t take it serious, but danced comically with legs like a marionette swinging from side to side. For a time I was happy. There was such a good vibe in the air and the sound of liveliness elated me.

When drunk, things happen unexplainably and I found myself kissing an undoubtedly straight boy. I don’t know whether it was a dare or not, but everyone laughed at it. After a while, however, the sedation of alcohol and joyfulness wares off. When my previous fear began to return, my heightened emotions latched onto it. I ran into the bathroom and tried to get myself to calm down, but my strength was weakened by the liquor and I couldn’t grip the fear that my
monstrous mind was turning yet again into anger. I stormed out of the bathroom, annoyed at nothing, just channelling fear into something that I could physicalize. Someone bumped into me, and immediately the loaded gun that I was fired the bullet that had been edging out. I pushed him back, and pretty soon a fight broke out. I punched him a few times till there was blood; that was when Abel intervened.

Seeing him was a call to reality. It was like I had been placed before a mirror and I saw what I had become. People were staring in silence at me. I invited fear back into my mind. “I’m not a monster” I said to him quietly.

“I know you’re not, Cato.” He said, but I didn’t want comfort; as Theo had told me, I needed fear to be human, not a monster, so I found a way to make my fear somatic; I abandoned the party and ran away from the house. Abel followed me and quickly caught up. His long, thin fingers wrapped around my shoulder.

“Cato. Stop. What’s wrong?” He asked me. I looked into his green eyes again.

“I’ve become a monster. They turned me into a monster.” I said.

“You’re not a monster. Where are you getting this idea from? Who are they?” He asked. I just shook my head and looked to the ground in shame. Everything was happening so fast that my mind couldn’t process everything.

“Is he ok? The boy I hit. I don’t…everything is blurry.” Abel chuckled.

“He’ll be fine” he said. “You don’t drink regularly, do you?” he asked me. I shook my head. “It’s probably a good thing that you don’t; some people just aren’t good at handling it” he said and rubbed my back to comfort me.

“I hate alcohol” I said and he laughed.

“C’mon. I’ll take you back to my house; sober you up.” When we got to his house, on the border of the north quarter, a mile or so away from my own house, I immediately felt relief. I wasn’t scared, or angry, but comforted by his presence. I started to wonder whether or not it was the familiarity of the training centre that he brought that comforted me, or if it was him himself. His bedroom surprised me. It was small and rectangular. The door opened on the smaller wall with a window on the adjacent wall. To the right was a wardrobe and to the left a desk. He had a double bed that stretched from wall to wall and occupied the further half of the room below the window. It was covered in plain black sheets. His walls were painted a grey-green colour and had a dark wood floor that seemed old and worn. Coloured specs of paint were on the floor that he hadn’t cleaned.

“It’s not much” he said and gestured for me to sit on the bed. He went and got me some water and told me drink to help sober me. After a while of sitting with him in silence, I felt the intoxication lose its effect slightly, but still I was drunk. I thanked him for allowing me into his home and helping me.

“Don’t worry about it” he said with a cheerful smile. I stretched my injured leg out when I felt the tightness of it return as the alcohol within me was being soaked up.

“Why have we never spoken before?” I asked him.

“We have spoken.” He said, but I shook my head.

“No, that’s not what I mean. We’ve never had a proper conversation, never made friends. We acknowledge each other, yes, and make idle talk, but never . . . got to know one
another.” I didn’t know where my words were coming from. I had never thought for a moment why I wasn’t friends with Abel, never questioned it, hardly thought about him. I admit to sometimes having a dirty thought or dream, but that was the extent of it.

“I don’t know, Cato. I’ve always admired you. You’re Brutus’ favourite . . . that can be intimidating” he admitted to me. “Why have you never spoken to me?”

“Perhaps because I find you intimidating also.”

“What about me is threatening?” he asked.

“You’re a beautiful creature” I said and he laughed but while blushing. A silence passed over us. “Why did you talk to me, invite me to the party? Why today?” I asked.

“No reason. You just looked like you could use a distraction.” I shook my head and drank some water.

“That’s not why, is it?” I asked and he gave in and shook his head.

“You turn into Sherlock when you’re drunk, huh” he said.

“Who’s Sherlock?” I asked with a raised brow.

“A character in a book; don’t worry.” I felt bad to keep pushing him for answers, but I wanted to know why then out of all times did he chose to talk to me. He probably only confessed to me because he himself was inebriated.

“Why wasn’t I intimidating to you then? Why did you speak to me?” This, he only admitted to me in the hope that I wouldn’t remember come the morning.

“The truth is, I had gained some information a few days before. I found out that you were gay. I wanted to speak to you, but you haven’t been at training. I think you’re rather attractive and when I saw you wandering, for a few hours, I took it as an opportunity to speak to you.” He smiled awkwardly at the ground.

“You’re gay?” He nodded. “And you find me attractive?” He nodded again but chuckling this time. Then I kissed him. He was startled by it and pulled away.

“What are you doing?” He asked, standing up.

“Sorry, I just thought that you would want to…”

“Maybe, one day, not know” he said.

“Why not?” I asked. I took my shirt off and kneeled on the bed. “Why one day? Why not now? There’s a bed right here.”

“Because you’re drunk, Cato. I can’t have sex with someone while they are drunk. They need to be able to give consent.” He sat down on the bed next to me and sighed glumly, but for some reason I kissed him again. He pushed me away, however. “You can sleep here, if you want. I’ll take the couch” he said and started to walk out the room but I stopped him.

“Don’t go.” I said with a puppy like pout and sigh.

“You can have the bed to yourself.” He said.

“I don’t want the bed to myself. Please stay.” He eventually gave in and crawled under
the black sheets with me. I wrapped my arms around him but he pried himself from my grip.

“Just go to sleep, Cato” he said. I obliged and stuck to the one side. I thought about Abel, being in bed next to me. Up until then he was a stranger to me, and even though we were on two separate sides of the mattress, a vacuum between us, I felt relaxed and comforted. I wasn’t angry. I wasn’t scared. I was content in his presence, breathing his air, feeling the same warmth as him, his sheets against my skin. He comforted me.

I woke up in the morning with only a vague recollection of what had happened. I had images that came in flashes to my mind of what had happened. I wasn’t in my bed, I knew that. I remember then that I was in Abel’s. Why was I in Abel’s bed? I had ran from the party after I started a fight... and Abel was gay. I remembered that I kissed someone... the boy at the party... and then Abel! I strained my mind trying to recollect any more memories and apprehend what had happened. I soon realised that I wasn’t just in Abel’s bed. I was naked in Abel’s bed. When had I gotten naked? I thought to myself. I looked over to the other side of the bed. He was still asleep, the sheets pulled up to his waist; and he wasn’t wearing a shirt. I didn’t check to see if he had anything else on underneath, but I took this as solid evidence as us having sex.

I hardly knew him and I had slept with him! I started to breathe heavy in a panic. I didn’t have issues with sex, or with people who hardly knew each other having sex. But I was a virgin, and I didn’t want to throw something that still made me a child away on nothing. To me, the first time having sex is acceptance into maturity and adulthood, even if I’m not an adult, and I wasn’t ready for that yet. I climbed out of the bed as quietly as I could be. I didn’t wake him and quickly got dressed and left.

When I got home my parents were already up and waiting for any sign of me. My mother embraced me.

“Thank God you’re alright. You never told us where you were or what you were doing?” She said with my face between her hands. I uncomfortably pulled myself away from her.

“I told you he’d be fine.” My father said, his attention elsewhere.

“Where have you been?” My mother sternly asked.

“Clove’s birthday party; stayed over a friend’s house.” I said to her. My mother seemed relieved. Her concern was uncomforting; it came and disappeared always, making her unpredictable.

“Are you going to training today?” My father asked; of course, wasting no time to show concern for me before asking.

“I don’t know. I’m feeling a bit rough” I said. It was true. I had a hangover, my head throbbed and stomach churned. I also felt emotionally drained by what had happened. “Tomorrow for definite” I said to reassure him and quickly made my escape to me room. It was only when I got upstairs and was alone that the smell of bacon and eggs filled my nose. My stomach made a noise and sick begin to raise in my throat. I ran into the bathroom, breaking the lock in the process and started to throw up into the toilet. My brother was brushing his teeth.

“Dude, what the – ew” He said as the left over alcohol that lingered in my stomach was thrown up into the toilet. “You stink like alcohol; like me” he said and laughed.
“Fuck off, Lucius.” I said and took off my shirt that had been caught by some sick.

“Alright, just want to congratulate you on letting go for once” he said and swilled his mouth with some mouthwash.

“Don’t piss me off.” I told him.

“It seems like someone has already done that” he said to me. I shook my head and tried to get my breathing under control. I flushed the toilet and pushed him out of the way of the basin and swilled my mouth out with water and then with mouthwash. “So you went out and got drunk, stayed out all night….no! Little Cato hooked up!” he exclaimed and slapped me on the back. He could be so patronising at times, even though if turned my rage onto him, he wouldn’t last a moment. I turned around in anger and pushed him against the wall and stood over him, looking down at him, staring into his eyes.

“Don’t fucking mess with me right now” I said. He just laughed and slithered away from me.

“I’m congratulating you, on taking a page from my book.” I grabbed him by the arm and pushed him out of the bathroom and tried to lock the door but realised I had broken the lock. My mother was shouting from downstairs, demanding to know what was going on. I sat against the door to stop anyone from coming in. I had to think of how I was going to deal with this; figure out what I was going to say to Abel when I saw him. He was probably awake and wondering why I left. I felt shit for being a fool and getting drunk; losing my virginity to someone who was practically a stranger, but I was more concerned for Abel and what he might think of me.
I felt a breath of cold fright pass its way over me. It gave me anguish. I had no clue if it was him that was knocking on my front door, but I could feel Abel’s presence like a supernatural presence. The last, scorched rays of sunlight were peering through the windows. The sun was looking for a final glance before it fell behind the mountain. My mother answered the door. There was a moment of apprehension after she called my name. I left my room, eyes wide and limbs stiff. Abel stood inside with the closed door behind him. His weight was on his one leg and shoulders slouched slightly; relaxed. I stood at the top of my stairs, but couldn’t have a conversation with him while my parents could overhear, so I invited him up to my room. He had a smile on his face. I was expecting a stern look. He followed me into my room but I left my door ajar.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“I’m alright. The morning was a different matter.” I said and he laughed. He was always laughing. I indicated for him to have a seat on my bed. I sat at the other end to him.

“You were gone before I woke up” he said. His voice did not waver with disappointment, or anger. He showed no sign of being hurt like I expected of him. His tone was steady.

“I’m sorry about that.” I said with remorse.

“Don’t. You had no reason to stay” said Abel.

“I had a moral obligation.” I sounded frustrated. I was frustrated; he looked confused, but I didn’t think much of his cocked head. “It’s wrong of me – of anyone to abandon anyone after having sex, let alone after they showed them kindness.”

“Cato, what are you on about?” he said. I was distressed.

“Us. Me; treating you like a fling.” There was a moment of thought before he laughed, his cheeked creasing and eyes squinting into thin slits. I had no understanding of why he was laughing. Was my reaction wrong?

“We didn’t have sex” he said and laughed lightly. The air around me released me from its pressure and I was relieved. He still laughed though and it made me feel patronised. But we were both naked I thought.

“I was naked though…and I didn’t check but I thought you were too.” Obviously he wasn’t, that I see, but still, I was. I looked down, embarrassed.

“That’s because you tried to have sex with me. You clearly don’t remember so I’ll allude. After your first attempt, we both went to sleep. I wasn’t naked, but I was shirtless. It gets very hot in my room so I took my shirt off. I usually sleep naked but wasn’t going to while sharing a bed with you. I woke up during the night because you, still drunk, were stroking my chest.” I was so embarrassed. “I won’t go into details, but you tried your best to get me to have sex with you, which included you getting naked to ‘show me what you had to offer.’ I got you to go back to sleep on the condition that we cuddled and you remained naked. You soon fell asleep and unconsciously made your way to the other side of the bed.” My skin was burning. I was distraught.

“This is embarrassing” I said, massaging my temple. Abel just laughed as he often did,
and he laughed loud and deep. He had the kind of laugh that was authentic. It was deep and unrestrained. He probably thought his laugh to be unattractive, but it was adorable and it was genuine, something rare in our society.

“Maybe just a bit embarrassing, but I’m the only one who knows what happened, and I found it flattering to an extent.” He said.

“Flattering?” I questioned in doubt.

“To an extent” he repeated and I shook my head and he laughed again. I couldn’t see what was so amusing about the situation, but he found the funny side, so I let him laugh.

“Well, it’s a relief to know we didn’t…you know, have sex.” His face contorted into a frown and his laughter died out quickly. I immediately regretted my choice of words.

“A relief? Is there…is there something wrong with me.” Our voices collided and battled over each other.

“No, not at all. That’s not what I meant.” I said.

“I really hope I wasn’t just some drunken expedition.” He spoke over me. I put my hand on his thigh and it startled him but stopped him talking.

“Abel, I didn’t mean to offend you. I didn’t mean that.” I said.

“What did you mean?” he asked. I took my hand off him.

“I meant – there is nothing wrong with you, and I would honestly feel overwhelmed by pride, and be happy if I could be with you…but I would just like to remember it and be fully conscious during it. It’s not often in our world that you meet someone special, so when you do, you should be able to keep the memories of it.” He blushed and awkwardly smiled. I wanted to kiss him.

“That was nice to hear” he said. “Although ironic considering you don’t remember last night” and he laughed. I joined in with my own light laughter, but I couldn’t be genuine with it.

“I’m sure many people have said the same thing.” I said.

“Not really.” He then looked glum and ashamed. “People tend to treat me like a conquest. I’m not going to act like I don’t know people find me attractive, but it’s frustrating when people can’t see you beyond your looks. I’m okay having purely physical relations, but I still like to be recognised as a person and not an object. I like to make people happy, Cato. I’m happy to satisfy people but not so that they can brag about it. God, I sound really egotistical!” He said and laughed awkwardly. His smile made my stomach churn. Those straight, white teeth, his creased cheeks and sharp cheekbones. I felt the urge to kiss him again and this time I did. I took his face in between my hands and fitted our lips together. He returned the kiss immediately but I dragged myself away from him, being strict with myself to treat him like a person and take things slow.

“One step at a time.” I said to him and stood up from the bed. He did the same and stood up, his body close enough for me to feel his emanating warmth. He kissed my lips and they tingled. His taste was meaty. He closed the airy gap between us, but cupped my crotch and briefly palmed my semi-erect penis. I pulled away from his mouth and he stepped back, a mischievous smirk on his lips.

“Now we’re one step closer” he said. I gulped and coughed awkwardly. He raised his eyebrows then furrowed them and said “Sorry. You excite me.” His cheeks turned a subtle pink
I was back in training the following day. Brutus became elate when he saw me, his shoulders back, and eyes open, not squinted with disapproval. We had little formalities or even personal talk; after a brief greeting we immediately started training. I had to ease myself back into routine so strength training was lighter than usual and cardio was a bare minimum. Abel trained with me under the heavy supervision of Brutus although his attention was divided predominantly toward myself and paid Abel little notice bar the usual occasional insulting comment. He nicknamed Abel ‘pretty boy,’ a patronising title. Brutus belittled us all and some took it harder than others; Abel brushed it off, just like specks of dust on his clothes.

After a few hours, Brutus took me away from Abel into one of the weaponry rooms. I don’t know what type of equipment the other career districts have, but here it’s basic. In terms of swords we have sharp and we have blunted; for now, I use blunted. Generally, I practice on Brutus. He believe that for me to learn, I have to be thrown into the deep end. Brutus would be the toughest opponent. When I do train with some of the other training tributes, it’s more for their benefit than my own. Sometimes I train on dummies; it doesn’t help my skills much, but the contact helps reinforce the right muscles and boost my strength. When in the room, Brutus adopts the moto ‘like Gladiators.’ I know little of history, but the idea is that every time we fight we do it to the death. Neither one of us shows mercy, and strike each other with our blunted swords at every opportunity.

Being back in the training centre felt so normal. I didn’t have an abundance of free time and I had something to occupy myself with. Training proved a distraction from my emotional tempests. I didn’t know whether that was good or not, but I wasn’t in emotional agony. Without Abel near, though, I could not fully relax. Like a whisper in my ear, I was haunted by the ghosts of the training centre. In between our rounds my eyes always searched the room for comfort and relief. Every time Brutus would hit me with the sword, fear seeped into me like leak. Hold onto fear. Don’t let them ruin me. I repeated this in my head as I fought back. When I hit him, I calmed. I didn’t realise how contradictory it was to be training to kill people and to try and remain human, free from the guilt of murder. Abel came in at some point, I didn’t notice him enter, but in between one of our rounds when my eyes scanned the room, they caught him sitting on the floor. He smiled at me, and I smiled back. Brutus struck my arm with the sword. I felt the pain of the attack, but not the fear.

When I finished my training with Brutus, Abel and I went for a light jog. We left the Training Centre and started heading north. The Centre is located at the bottom of the North Quarter, the richest area of the District and home to both Abel and I. At the centre of it is a lake, circled with cherry blossom trees. We made our way there to take a break and sat on one of the grassy banks to catch our breath.

“This place is different to me than it used to be” he said. I queried his remark. “The painting. This place sparked a passion of mine. It’s like holy ground to me.” He then giggled to myself. “I know it’s stupid.”

“No. It’s not.”
“I find it funny that nature made this. The trees are now green, but they were once clouds of pale pink petals. The grass remains green. The sky remains blue. Somehow, these colours exist and are confined in to their roles of the leaves or the bark or the grass and we can’t change that; that is until you paint it. I wasn’t always creative, but there is so much freedom in art. That tree trunk you’re leaning against. In reality, it’s perpetually brown, but in art, it can be blue, pink, orange, yellow; whatever you want. That’s why art is so great. It can take normality and make you question what normality really means. It bends the rules of life. It’s an escape from life and it’s restrictions.”

“Real life isn’t art though.” I said disappointedly.

“Unfortunately. But what if it was? We wouldn’t have to be like the leaves; green until we become old and brown and weak so that the wind can blow us away, leaving the tree bare of all its life. If art was real, we could make The Capitol the leaves and we can be the sky.”

“You should be careful of what you say so publically.” I whispered to him and indicated to the patrolling peacekeepers on the opposite side of the lake.

“Life in their shadow is not life.” He said. I agreed but dared not voice it.

“I wish The Games was just art; an image of someone’s cruel mind.” I said. I was a colour in a role that I could not escape.

“But that is exactly what it is! It’s just a painting, and image, that a cruel soul has made into reality.” His face shone with an inner glee at the power of art, but it converted into sadness. Art amazed him, but he just found a dark side to it. Everything has a dark side to it. The air grew heavy around us. It pushed down on us with its hands and wrapped them around our throats. This wave of depression passed over and we found ourselves suffocating underneath it. We didn’t speak, we couldn’t, but we thought the same things as we stared across the lake at the departing peacekeepers. Our thoughts were of The Games and The Capitol’s brutality. Such thinking was dangerous to myself and my role in the life that was The Hunger Games, and no more. I wanted a new role, any role with Abel in it, but life isn’t art. I was trapped.

I took off my damp shirt to let the breeze caress my skin and calm me down; Abel mimicked me. We sat next to each other on the grass. He looked up at the clouds that passed over us; I looked at him. He continually showed me his passion, so I showed him my passion. I kissed the skin of his shoulder lightly. It caught his attention and he looked down at me. His fingers laced themselves in my short hair. He soothingly played with it as I placed delicate kisses on his pale skin, from his shoulder, to his chest and then his pink lips.

I sat on his lap and let him wrap his arms around me. His hands were cold, but I didn’t mind it because his touch was light. His palms settled on the small of my back. I felt a growing erection in my shorts but couldn’t help it. Yet this wasn’t a sexual thing, it was passionate. His one hand cupped my ass, but it was simply to hold me. It was just an intimate moment. I separated myself from him and reclaimed my seat upon the grass. I kept my one leg up to hide the issue in my shorts, but he could see it. He giggled to himself.

“I could help you with that, if you wanted me to” he offered. I shook my head.

“This moment doesn’t need to become sexual. I’m more than satisfied.” I said.

“What spurred that kiss?” he asked.

“Art is your passion. I wanted to show you that you’re my passion.” His cheeks turned light pink, and he smiled, showing his creased cheeks and sharp cheekbones again.
“This is not what I expected from you.” He said. “Who would’ve thought that Cato, the brute, would be so romantic?” I blushed awkwardly. “It was cheesy, however. Really cheesy.” I rolled my eyes and pushed his shoulder. I didn’t realise my own strength and pushed him down to the ground.

“Are you alright?” I was concerned and kneeled over him. Abel just laughed and sat back up.

“I’m fine, Cato. You nudged me.”

“Sorry, sometimes, I worry too much.” I said. I sat behind him on the grass, with him between my legs.

“What? Why do you worry?” he asked me and leaned back into my body. His skin was damp with sweat, but so was mine. I was cold, but he was warm. He didn’t flinch at the contact, just sat back in confidence and rested himself against me.

“Everyone expects me to be a monster, a killer. I’ve been raised to be a murderer. So I always have to be strong and brutal; that’s all I know how to be. It scares me, Abel. I don’t want to be a monster.” I couldn’t comprehend why I spoke to Abel about such deep and personal things that I myself found difficult to comprehend. Admitting fear is difficult, but there was something in the way he asked me that was like a key to a chest, and I opened up. Perhaps he was expecting a treasure, instead he got nothing. Just my inner turmoil.

“I can feel your heart beat.” He said to me. My heart was racing in my chest and it didn’t surprise me that he could feel it. He asked for my arm, so I gave it to him and he wrapped it around his stomach. I allowed him to do the same with the other. “You just proved that you’re not a monster. To open up like that and admit your flaws takes great courage. You are strong. You are brutal. But you also have a heart, a heart that I can feel between all this skin, desperately trying to show you something. When you react like that, when your pulse is running wild, your heart is giving you a message. This message is *I’m real. I am a heart. Monsters don’t have hearts.* We’re both a product of the Hunger Games, but that’s not all we are.” He broke free from my grip and turned around, placed my hand on his chest above his heart. I felt its faint beat. “We are human.” He whispered. He placed the palm of his hand over my heart. We stared at each other, hands over our hearts. Mine came to a steady pace.

“Why do I connect with you more than I do anyone else?” I asked him.

“I’ve been asking the same question.” He blushed and smiled awkwardly again, his hollow cheeks creasing. I gently traced a thumb over his creased cheeks. “We hardly know each other.” He said to me.

“That doesn’t matter. We connect. That matters.” I said.

“You always know what to say” he replied.

“So do you.” It was true. Abel comforted me and that was mostly because he could give me answers to questions I had been asking for a long time with no result. The last time I felt such comfort and understanding was when Finnick looked after me.

Some peacekeepers approached us and asked us to leave. Public displays of affection were always received with a mixed response, especially homosexual displays. Many in our District retained outdated opinions. We finished our run by heading back to my house, a couple of miles east of the lake. When we got there only my father was home. I introduced Abel to him, but his interest in who I bothered with was extremely limited. Once he was reassured that Abel was also training to be a tribute, he returned almost immediately to his abode within the living room.
We ventured to my bedroom that was still messy. Jeans and underwear remained scattered across the floor. I started to pick some of it up, but Abel stopped me, said he wasn’t bothered by the mess and that his room was usually messier. We laid on the unmade bed and kissed. He tried to pull away, but his taste hooked me in and I followed his lips, re-attaching mine to his. We let our tongues meet and he crawled on top of me. As our tongues battled with one another, he rotated his hips on my crotch. Within moments his grinding got me hard and I found myself whimpering underneath him for more. But I promised that I would take things slow. I pulled from our kiss; he didn’t follow me like I did to him.

“One step at a time.” He said and stood up. He was hard too and had to alter the position of his erection so as to be comfortable. My body shivered at the sight of him putting a hand down his shorts, underneath the fabric of his boxers. I moaned internally as he grabbed his own dick. My eyes were latched onto the movement of the bulge that now stretched along his thigh. “Soon, Cato, I hope” he said, referencing to my blatant lust for him. He laughed and I did too. He was always making me laugh. Days ago I was an emotionally crippled mess, half naked, crying in my garden.

I didn’t feel love for Abel that much I knew, but whatever it was, it was strong. It was more than just physical. He drew me from immobilising fear. I still got fearful, but because of him I could be comforted and saved from it and the numb pain in my chest that it brought.
Abel came into the room with just a wet towel wrapped around his waist. He looked so perfect. His sculpted body was scattered with freckles, like the small splatters of paint that were dashed across his wooden floor. His shoulders and chest were particularly dotted with dark freckles. Some larger than others, some just specks only visible up close. There were many of them and it gave his body such a characteristic look. As his hands pushed clothes from side to side in his wardrobe I looked at his back. It curved inwards into his slim, tight waist then his backside protruded out. He was slim, but still muscular. It curved and creviced. Formed troughs and mountains, but he still looked small. Athletic. But his arms were distinctively not athletic. His triceps were thick and strong and made his arms sharp and jagged. Although he appeared small, his arms by no means gave that impression. When he held up a t-shirt his arms bent and his muscles flexed. The sight of strength was not an unusual one for me. I see it in myself when I look in the mirror. I see it in the other boys at the training centre. But Abel’s body fascinated me. At first it was the same as all the others that I have seen, but when I look closer, I see uniqueness; like his freckles and his sharp arms.

He sealed his body from his eyes and put a light blue t-shirt on, then slid the towel from around his waist. I watched as it fell to his feet; he was wearing underwear underneath. I felt like he was teasing me. He pulled a pair of light grey shorts of out a draw and pulled them onto his powerful legs. He turned to me and smiled with his creased cheeks. His hair was wet and pushed back revealing his dazzling face that filled me with a delight I hadn’t felt since Finnick.

“You sure you don’t want to shower?” he asked me. I shook my head.

“I’ll shower when I get home.” I replied. He ran over and jumped on the bed. It shook beneath me. He grabbed my shoulders and pulled me down to lie on it with him.

“You smell of sweat.” He said and laughed. I looked at his beautiful face and listened to his contagious laugh.

“Well we did just go for a run.” I said.

“I know. I’m just noting that you stink.” I laughed at his frankness and kissed him on the lips. I took his tongue into my mouth and he climbed on top of my large body. His torso was flush to mine as we kissed. It wasn’t rough, but soft. The kisses still thrilled me, but not like our first ones that were like a passing of lust between us. They had grown familiar to me and my body was beginning to crave stronger experiences.

I wrapped my hand around his bicep. He winced and pulled away, sitting on my thighs.

“I’m sorry, did I hurt you?” I asked. “Sometimes I don’t realise my own strength.” He shook his head.

“Sore muscles, that’s all” he said and smiled at me, but then it quickly vanished. Abel’s smiles usually lasted for a while. He could never shake them off. When he did, they would return almost immediately. This smile vanished and didn’t return.

“What’s wrong” I asked him. I saw him take a breath for a moment, as if to prepare for lie but he exhaled and looked me in the eyes.

“I truly admire you, Cato” he said to me.
“Why?” I asked. “What have I done to deserve your admiration?”

“I’ve always admired you. For different reasons than now. These past few weeks since you and I have been together, it hasn’t been easy on me. I love to be with you. You aren’t the issue. There are moments when I can’t smile because I’m physically and emotionally exhausted. Brutus is brutal with you. It’s difficult to keep up sometimes with what he expects of me, and that is less than what he expects from you. I can feel myself getting stronger, so I guess he is doing a good job, but I also feel weak. I know that sounds stupid but my body is numb when I leave the centre. I feel drained. I don’t know if you noticed, but I struggled to keep up with you on our run today.” I did notice, but thought that I was the one expecting too much of him.

“Maintaining this level of work is hard. From the day I started training with you I felt the extra work load. But every week he pushes me harder and it’s before I have chance to recover. I know that I will grow use to this kind of work and adjust, but sometimes it feels like I’m going to collapse. With every new goal he sets me, a little bit of me is being drained. I worry that I’ll become an empty vessel before I have time to adapt.”

Brutus pushed me harder, that I knew, but I wasn’t aware of just how hard that might be as I had no one to share those pressures. “Is that what you think of me as? An empty vessel” I asked.

“No, Cato. That’s why I admire you!” He gently caressed my arm, feeling the muscle. “You’re strong and it takes both physical and mental strength to endure what you do. I admire you because you’re able to take everything that is being thrown at me and more. I have so much more respect for you now that I have tasted your life.”

“Sometimes I can’t handle it…” I muttered. “So why do you admire me and not pity me?”

“I do pity you. I wish you had the same freedom as everyone else.”

“I have no more less freedom than you. We’re just two of many products of the Hunger Games.”

“That’s true. Then let us pity each other. The Games are our tragedy, and tragedy brings us closer together.” Abel was unlike any other teenager. His words were always to virtuosic. It made my attraction to him so much stronger, because I felt outmatched by him. He was a greater person than I ever could be. When you’re so outmatched, acceptance is easy; I didn’t have to compare myself to him like with everyone else. I don’t have to size him up and then reflect on myself. I can be happy that I have someone I don’t have to compete with.

“OK. I have a question for you” I said. He stood infront of me, shifting his weight from one leg to the other. He raised his arm to me in indication for my question. “At what point in all of this do we become boyfriends?” The question had pondered in my mind for days. Each question just urged the question more and more. I had never been in a relationship or had any relations. It was’t a topic that I had discussed with anyone. I felt so clueless.

I felt a connection between myself and Abel. It’s a connection that’s only there when there are mutual feelings. He smiled with a delight and it didn’t fade.

“Whenever you want us to be.” I let my mind process the words before I smiled and answered him.

“You know what, I don’t think I want us to be boyfriends.” I teased. “I’ve grown bored of you.” He laughed and pushed me back. He called me a dick and I laughed and pulled him on
top of me and I kissed his light pink lips.

“I love the way you taste” he said. “Boyfriend” he added. The word was so foreign to me. I realised I should confess my secrets to him. Confess to my chastity. I just hoped that it wouldn’t turn him away from me. I worried that for him to learn that his boyfriend was so inexperienced compared to him could prove a difficult obstacle.

I was about to make my confession but he told me to hang on to my thought. He pulled from his desk a black sketchpad and sat next to me. He flicked through the pages of the book slowly to show me his art. I only saw drawings of the District. There was one of the lake, and one of the mountain. Then another of the town square. He stopped turning the pages.

“There are lots of drawings in here. After this point, the subject changes. Please know that these drawings are relics from my Cato free life. I am dedicated to you.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You’ll see.” His drawings portrayed his profound talent. They were all intricate and realistic. It made me happy to see how skilled at his passion he was. And I was happy that he had a talent that he could escape in.

He handed me the book. There was something significant about this. He wasn’t just giving me paper and pencil. They weren’t simply drawings, they were part of his life, his driving force. They were a piece of him and he entrusted me with it. I turned the thick page slowly to the next drawing. It was of a man, standing alone in an alley and his hands were in his pocket. I recognised the alley as being the one behind the bakery in town. At the bottom in Abel’s delicate and elegant handwriting was written David. The man had short hair, like my own, but black. He had a slim build and wore a number of layers over slacks and thin black boots.

“After a while of drawing plants and landscapes and what not, I found myself being drawn to people. The different shapes of them, the different clothes, the way that the hair of just one person could fall in what’s like an infinite amount of ways. So from this point on in the book, there are only drawings of people.”

“Did you know this David?” I asked him. I was transfixed on the drawing that seemed so detailed and realistic, but there was something effortless in the pencil strokes.

“No. I was fifteen when I drew this. I was fascinated by his look. I asked him if I could take a photo of him and he said yes. He was very kind.” He looked roughly in his late 20s. From his clothes I wouldn’t think him to be particularly wealthy, but I see why Abel would have taken interest in him.

I turned the page. This time there was a woman; Abel’s mother. He said it was mainly for practice that he drew her.

“After this, the drawings become different.” I turned another page and was greeted by a young man, perhaps early 20s. He was a beautiful man with chiselled features. He sat on a bed in just a pair of shorts. His body was defined. He wasn’t insanely in shape, looking nothing like Abel or myself, but he was defined. At the bottom was written Sebastian.

“He was the man I lost my virginity to.” I didn’t want to interrupt him so just let him talk. This was his time to open up. “I had not long turned 16 and was desperate to have sex. I met Sebastian at the Cold House.”

“You’ve been to the Cold House?” I exclaimed, breaking my no questions rule. The
Cold House was a bar bordering the north and east quarters. It’s usually quiet, but that’s because most of its business happens behind closed doors. I had never been there, but knew roughly of it. There was a staircase at the back of the bar. Up the stairs, on the second and third floors was a brothel. In it women sold their bodies to men of all different backgrounds. There was heavy stigma around it, especially in the wealthier areas, but many went there from all ends of the social spectrum. The most common customers, however, are the Peacekeepers. They keep their dealings with the women discreet as prostitution is illegal. But as they enforce the law, they see themselves as above it.

“They do male prostitution there?” I asked and he laughed and shook his head.

“No. Only female. You see, the staircase at the back goes both up and down. Up the stairs is the whore house, but down the stair is different. It leads to large cellar with a number of different rooms in it. The whole thing is strictly men; it’s where men go when they are looking for other men.”

“You mean for hook ups?” He nodded.

“I know it sounds very grim, and it can be at times. Disease spreads easily in those situations. I’ve been careful or maybe just lucky to have not encountered any issues.”

“So you’ve been there often?”

“I went there a large number of times. Sometimes it was stress relief, sometimes it was boredom, but most of the time I just craved intimacy and a muse. Sebastian and I got along immediately. I saw him in the corner alone, smoking a cigarette, drinking a whisky. He had this brown jacket on and jeans and his hair was black hair pushed back. I went to speak to him which led us to making out in the corner. I couldn’t take him back to my house, so we went to his. He lived alone with his son who was 3 the time. Sebastian was 22 and bisexual. When he was 18, after the final reaping, he celebrated his freedom from the Hunger Games upstairs in the Cold House. It was his first time there, and he got the girl he was with pregnant. They weren’t in a relationship and continued seeing other people, but they bought a house together to raise their son, but shortly after the baby was born she was killed leaving him to raise the child alone.”

“That’s so sad. How did she die?” I asked.

“Sometimes, being a prostitute can be risky. Men can be aggressive. Drunk men can be lethal. Sebastian found her beaten to death on the ground on his walk to work. We met up often for a few months and often I would draw him. This is the only one I kept.”

“It’s amazing” I confessed to him. He thanked me. I turned the next page to another man, this one named Neil. He was yet another good looking man with a muscular build and chiselled body. Abel had drawn him lying on a bed in underwear.

“Neil and I met at the Coal House also. He was beautiful.” He had a sharp nose and long hair that was pushed back. His body reminded me of my own, but his one shoulder had an odd shape as it was rounder than the other and smaller. “It was his big insecurity. I loved it though. Imperfections give uniqueness and individuality is beautiful.”

I turned through the pages one by one, examining the beautiful men that Abel had drawn. Many were shirtless, many clothed in public. Every one of them was one of Abel’s lovers. For a boy, almost eighteen years old, he had gotten around and I was still a virgin. With each page a pit was being dug in my stomach. I grew nervous that he may not accept me once he found out that I couldn’t share my own sexual experiences and bring them to our relationship.
I came to one drawing of Abel himself. He either used a mirror, or took a photo, but it was of his face only. He captured his likeness so perfectly. The freckles in the right places and his jagged features perfectly displayed, and somehow, even in a drawing, he managed to show how soft his skin was. The next one was another of Abel, this time he was naked. A full body drawing of his likeness. Only half of his tattoos were present in the drawing and his body less sculpted than it is now.

“I had just turned 17 when I drew that.” My eyes naturally darted to his manhood. I obviously had no preference of size and no idea of its accuracy. The only penis I had seen was my own and it didn’t look dissimilar. I found it odd that he was so comfortable with me seeing him so exposed; I guess now that we were boyfriend, we had to take down any barriers are show each other our true naked selves. I was afraid to show him mine.

The next few pages were more men. One of them was a boy at the training centre with us. He was arrogant and I disliked him. Admittedly, he was attractive.

“He wanted to experiment, and I offered.” Abel explained. “He stopped talking to me a few days later. He’s a jerk so I’m not bothered by any loss of friendship.” I then reached a point in the book that startled me. There were drawings of me. They were just of my face and weren’t a complete likeness, but they were of me.

“That’s really what I wanted to show you.” He said.

“When did you do these?” I asked him.

“I started drawing these after we first started hanging out.”

“Why?” I questioned.

“There’s a lot of men in this book, I know that, but none of them have made me feel the way you make me feel. You cause something in me; a feeling that I enjoy. When I’m not with you, I draw you to keep that feeling for as long as I can.” There were several pages of just me. “They don’t look much like you. It’s difficult to recall every feature without you being here to model.”

“I think they look good.” I said. I closed the book when I got to the last picture and put it next to me on the bed. I looked into his eyes.

“Do you mind if I take a photo of you so that I can do an accurate drawing.” I nodded and he excitedly ran to his wardrobe. From the bottom of it he recovered an old Polaroid camera and held it up to his face. “Smile” he said and I did, but a forced smile is awkward so I wiped it off my face before he took the photo. “Fine. Be spiteful” he said and I laughed to myself. In that moment he snapped the photo of me and permanently captured my natural smile. He took the picture out and placed it face down on the desk so that it may develop.

I tried to process the amount of lovers that he had had while we waited for the photo, and it was difficult. I didn’t judge him or condemn a slut like many would. I was just afraid and insecure. I couldn’t reassure myself that everything would be okay. Instead I sat and let myself become frightened again. This proved contagious as Abel soon became glum.

“I was afraid of this.” He said. “I know that I’ve probably slept around a bit much for a 17 year old. I just hoped you wouldn’t judge me like I was afraid you would.”

“No. I’m not judging you. I just - ” He interrupted me.

“Then what is it? Can you not look at me the same way? I’m still the same person,
Cato! It is funny how I complain that people objectify me and treat me like sexual object, but that’s exactly what I do to myself! Please, Cato. Don’t let me be some conquest!” His breathing was heavy as he panicked at the thought of losing me.

“Abel, be quiet and let me speak.” I said. He silenced at my bark. “I have to be honest with you now. I’m upset because seeing you with all this experience is making me question our relationship and the legitimacy of our connection. I’m worried that you won’t see me in the same way anymore.”

“What do you mean I won’t see you in the same way?” He asked me.

“I have never had a boyfriend; before you, that is. I’m a virgin…and you are far from it.”

“And you’re worried that your inexperience may prove an issue” he said. His voice slightly raised at the end, making a question out of his sentence. I nodded in agreement and dropped my head.

“You were my first kiss.” He awed as I said that.

“Sorry, that was perhaps a bit patronising” he said but I laughed it off. “I am honoured to be your first.”

“But isn’t my inexperience an issue?” I asked. He shook his head.

“I won’t push you to do anything you don’t want to do. I want us to communicate, because that’s necessary for a relationship to work. Whenever you’re ready, let me know. You don’t have to make it explicit, but just let me know that you’re ready to take this relationship to the next stage because I need to know that I’m not going to do something that may hurt you.”

“It’s not that. What if I can’t satisfy you?” I asked.

“My satisfaction is not an issue. When the time comes, I’ll do all the work and make this if your experience. If I can pleasure you, then that’s satisfying enough.”

“That’s not good enough for me! I want to know that I am pleasuring you!” I told him.

“Don’t worry about that. It will be pleasurable for the both of us. And as time goes on and we learn what each other really likes, it will get better. Nobody’s first time goes smoothly, so don’t be worried about it. I’ll guide you through my own desires and I’ll find all of yours.” He kissed me on the cheek and rubbed my back. He then went to the desk and picked up the now developed picture and showed it to me. “You are truly handsome.” I looked at the photo. I had never thought much of my physical appearance, it had never concerned me. But hearing that and seeing the photo gave me confidence in the knowledge that I was good-looking, even if only Abel thought so; his opinion was the only one that mattered.

“I’m ready, Abel. I want to have sex with you.” I declared. It was time that I start to experience life as a teenager and not as a tribute.
“Are you sure you’re ready for this?” Abel asked me. It sounded patronising but I knew he was truly concerned for my own welfare. He always was. I wanted him now more than I ever did. I craved sex. I craved his touch, his smell, his meaty taste.


“Of course.” He said and leaned down to kiss me, his head tilted at an angle. He immediately explored my mouth with his tongue. The kiss felt different to our other ones. It was much more pungent. It was like I was tasting the lust and the forthcoming sex. Our bodies already began to exude all the smells and tastes that sent our minds into an erotic frenzy. He pushed me onto my back and attached his mouth to my own. The way he treated me now felt forceful and demanding. We had exchanged kisses many times, so he had no requirement to be gentle yet. It was predatory and I loved it. Perhaps I preferred a rough handling to a gentler touch. That I did not know until I had experience to call from.

He detached himself from my thirsty lips and took off his loose shirt, casting it away. I stretched out my hands to feel his body. I started with his carved abs, feeling the bumps and the crevices beneath my palms. His skin was so soft and smooth. Women would fight to have skin like his and he wasn’t even concerned by it. I extended my arms further up his long and slim torso and felt his chest. I squeezed his pecs with my hands and he moaned. The reaction surprised me and I wondered whether or not such pleasures were shared by all, or whether it was just Abel. I continued to squeeze his pecs and rub his nipples; it made him moan louder and bite his lip in pleasure.

“You like this?” I asked. My raging teenage libido clouded my awareness of my strength. I did not comprehend how hard I was gripping him, but he nodded his head in reply and exhaled with a low moan that vibrated the air. He put his hand behind my head and entangled his fingers in my hair/ At first I thought it was for the intimacy and for comfort, like when a mother plays with the hair at the back of your head as you lay on her lap. But he gripped onto my blonde locks tight and pulled me into his chest.

“Nipples are one of my sensitive spots.” He said and winked at me. My prior insecurities had vanished and I was oblivious to my doubts as they were reassured by my ability to pleasure him. He made a kissing face and I understood. I lightly kissed his hard, pink nipples. I didn’t receive the reaction as before, so I replaced my lips with my tongue and circled his nipple. He muttered something that I didn’t quite catch and was too concerned with his body to exclaim a pardon. His cock was fully hard from this stimulation; I felt it pressed to my abs. He was grinding into me, creating friction between us. What were my own sensitive spots? I had never explored my own body or had anyone explore mine to find them out.

He clambered off me and put his hands on the hem of his shorts. I waited with eager anticipation for him to push them down, but his fingers clung to the hem of the grey elastic material, toying with it.

“Cato. I think I should warn you that first time, there might be pain, so just relax and it will go away. But I have quite a large penis, so if the pain doesn’t go and you think I’m hurting you, please let me know and I’ll stop.” I never really knew what classed as a big penis. I had measured my own a number of times as I grew up out of curiosity. It was mainly due to the boys at the training centre and at school who often were concerned with the size of each other’s penises. It was peculiar to me and I never understood why it mattered who had the bigger dick. I never involved myself in those conversations, but over time they grew less concerned and so did I.
Abel pushed his trousers and underwear down together and stepped out of them. His hard member stood out of him. I looked at with hunger, but didn’t see anything magnificent about its size.

“Is this the first dick you’ve seen?” He asked me.

“The first hard one other than my own; I’ve only had glances of the flaccid ones in the showers at the centre.” He took my hand and guided it to his manhood. I wrapped my hand around it and pulled the skin back. My eyes were fixated on it, and his were on me. It felt peculiar to sit fully clothes while Abel stood before me, bare. So I quickly undressed myself. He watched me with the same keenness as I pushed my own shorts and underwear down, and my hard member sprang from its restrictions. He raised his eyebrows at it.

“Shit” he said and laughed. “It’s huge” he said and continued his laughter. I didn’t laugh with him, just stood there and wondered whether that was good or not. He silenced himself when I didn’t join in.

“Is it ok?” I asked him and he nodded and laughed again.

“Well; you’ve beaten me in thickness that’s for sure” He said. He grabbed hold of it at the base and then used his hands to measure it. He wrapped both his long hands around it and then another half a hands length on top of it and he smiled. “And about the same length as mine. I’ve net met anyone bigger than me.” He laughed again. I guess even for someone like Abel, there are always first times for something. He pulled back my skin and slowly began to pump my throbbing member. I rested my head on his shoulder and softly moaned. It was the first time that I have ever been touched by another person. I was happy that Abel was the first to do so. He lined our penises next to each other, measuring them. I looked down at the comparison. I was clearly thicker, but he was the slightest bit longer. I guess I reignited his teenage concern for penis size, and now this revelation of my own size made me concerned of it.

“What do you want to do?” He asked. I raised an eyebrow at him. “I know I said I’d do all the work, but what do you want me to do?” I shrugged.

“I don’t care” I said and rubbed his still hard nipple and his eyelids fluttered and he smiled at me. “I just want you.” Somehow that gave him an answer and he told me to sit on the edge of the bed. I obeyed his command and he pushed my legs open and positioned himself between them. He wrapped one of his hands around my cock, his fingers spread out and pulled down the skin revealing its pink head. I didn’t question anything that he was doing, but his eyes remained attached to my member. Then he moved his head forward and licked the tip.

Uncontrollably, I moaned deeply and tightened my stomach at the feeling. He licked it again and I relished in the pleasure. It felt good, but I knew he was teasing me. I tensed my whole body and thrust my manhood into the air. It brushed his soft cheek, and the friction made me moan again. He wrapped a second hand around me, pulled my skin further down, and then took the whole of my head into his mouth. He sucked at it, then pulled it out of his mouth. I was biting my lip as I felt the cold air on the wet skin.

He kept but one hand on me and returned his mouth to my dick. This time he took more and sucked at it. His head moved up and down my cock and I unintentionally thrust deeper into his mouth. My deep moans bellowed in through the room and vibrated my whole body. I closed my eyes and fell back onto the bed. He wanked the areas that his mouth did not reach and his tongue, pressed against my shaft sent shivers through me every time it rubbed over the back of my cock’s head. I couldn’t stop myself from moaning. He took me in deeper and my glans ran along the roof of his mouth and into his throat. As it did I made a fisted my hands with the bed sheets strangled
between them and instinctively called his name.

He removed himself from my cock and coughed. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest and hear the blood rushing through my ears. My climax was edging, I wanted so much for the release. I didn’t take long after he returned his warm, wet mouth to me that I came.

“Abel! I – I’m gonna cum” I said through violent breaths. He took my throbbing member from his mouth and stroked the long length a few times and I let my orgasm out. My whole body tensed as it came out of me. Shots of white cum fell over my abs, onto the bed and down onto Abel’s hand.

When I finished I was in a state of euphoria. My whole body became elate and I felt as though a supernatural experience had come to me. Every part of me was more sensitive than it has ever been, so when Abel ran his fingers across my perineum and reattached his mouth to my extraordinarily sensitive cock, I whimpered and lost my breath. My slowly softening cock became a full erection again in the moment and I was ready for more. He wiped his hand in the bed sheets and on himself.

I moved back on the bed and Abel followed me, stalking his prey. Our eyes never broke contact until I pulled him into a kiss. His meaty taste was intermixed with the salty taste of the beads of sweat that ran down my face, landing on our warm lips.

“You want to carry on?” he asked me.

“More than anything” I said. He demanded that I lie on my stomach and I obeyed his command. As I had explored his body he explored mine. From the bottom of my legs up to my shoulders, he felt the curves of my body and the tightness and muscles of my back.

“You have such a nice ass” he told me. I turned my head around to look at him and smirked. He gave a mischievous smile back at me as he gently stroked it with the palm of his hand, just barely touching the soft skin. He spread my cheeks and looked at my pink hole. “I’ll be gently, don’t worry” he reassured me. I didn’t realise I was nervous until he said that and I may foot was shaking. I stopped it and he laughed. I turned my eyes back front, fixed on the black painted headboard. I waited in anticipation for the next move. There was a silence, then I felt his warm, wet tongue, wipe along my hole. He teased it like he did my cock and I shook now eagerness.

My legs were spread wide open and he ran his tongue from my perineum up my body. His tongue didn’t leave me until it reached my neck and he started to kiss at the sensitive skin. I bore my neck to him, tilting my head to the side.

“Abel, please” I whined out as he teased me. I wanted him to return to my ass and pleasure me there.

“Shhh. I’m going to make you feel so good” he whispered into my ear and licked it which sent a shiver through my whole body; another sensitive spot that he had found on me. He continued to lick my ear and bite my ear lobe. As he did this, his veiny hands wrapped underneath me and he squeezed my large pecs and rubbed my nipples with his long fingers.

My breathing was quick and heavy and yet again he got me calling his name between moans. Soon he himself grow too horny to keep this up and abandoned this teasing to finish the job he started. He flipped me onto my back and pulled me to the edge of the bed. I looked down at him kneeling on the floor. His eyes were wide and white with excitement; his cheeks a light pink colour. I looked down at my body damp and glistening with sweat. My nipples and the area around them were red; I imagined my face was too. It felt hot, and my sweaty fringe clung to my
He pushed my legs back into my chest and told me to keep them there. Then his tongue returned to my hole. This time it darted into it and licked around it with more force than before. It was pleasurable enough, but then I felt his fingers join it. Abel’s hands sexy; they were long and veiny and the fact that one of his long fingers was now inside of me was more erotic than the experience itself. He pushed and pulled his finger slowly, bending it as he pulled. A gorgeous feeling of delight that ran through my body.

“I need to loosen you up” he said. I gave an erotic sigh and hiss.

“Yeak ok” I replied, more concerned with the feeling he was providing. He added a second finger and immediately I felt my insides begin to stretch. After loosening me a bit, he left me unattended on the bed. He opened a draw and pulled out some body lotion in a clear tub. He rubbed some of it over his hands, and then coated his long cock in it.

“It acts like a lubricant and will make it easier” he said. He walked towards me with that same look in his eye, like I was a meal. He firstly rubbed some of the lotion around my whole then put his two fingers inside me again. He stretched me a bit more, then aligned his cock with me and pressed the head against my hole.

“Remember to keep relaxed” he reminded me and I tried to follow his advice. My head fell back onto the mattress and I took a deep breath and let it out as Abel pushed himself in me. He was right when he said there might be pain. Although I was initially fine, as more of him entered me there was a significant increase in tightness, then one moment of sharp pain made me cry out and he removed himself from me. I apologised to him, but he just hit my leg.

“Don’t apologise” he said.

“I don’t think I can take all of it” I said to him. He shook his head and gave me his creased smile.

“I didn’t expect you to. I haven’t made anyone do that.” He said to me with a wink. “I wasn’t going to go any further, so try to keep all you muscles relaxed and I’ll ease you into it.” He resumed his position and began to push himself back into me. My thoughts were occupied with disciplining myself to stay calm rather than trying to find any pleasure. He stopped putting any more in me, then started to pull out and push back in again. After a number of these movements, I found the tightness alleviate. He assumed a constant rhythm in his thrusts and soon I was finding the pleasures.

It felt so good that almost immediately I gave animalistic moans. They were an indication to Abel that I was okay, so he picked up the pace and began to put more of himself in me. When he started rolling his hips he hit something extraordinary in me and I cried out in erotic pleasure. He gave a quiet, breathy laugh and bit his lip. We had been fucking enough so that when he hit that spot again and my whole body tensed and I tightened around his member, there was no pain and he could continue to fuck me. When I did tighten he would give a subtle moan that reverberated his whole body and I felt it echo through me.

We switched positions so that we laid on our sides. Any pain that once lingered in me had transformed into pleasure and put me in a state of euphoria. We both moaned and whimpered at times. He slowed down and his motions became gentle and circular. They were still every bit as gratifying. He kissed and licked my ear lobe as his hips rotated into me and his hand wrapped around my manhood. As he flicked his wrist and hit that spot once more, I came again, releasing white ropes onto the bed. The small bit that splashed his thumb he ate. At first it perplexed me, but seeing him suck and lick his finger dry like he was savouring the taste of a meal, was insanely
erotic.

We returned to our original position, and he drove into me with quick, powerful insertions. It wasn’t long before he pulled himself out, wanked his dick and came over me. The streams of cum shot over my chest and abs. The moans he made were the loudest he had made and were mixed with heavy breaths and deep ‘fucks’. When he finished spilling his seed and caught his breath, he leaned down and gently kissed my lips.

“Well?” he said. It was the most enjoyable experience that I had to date. I kissed him back, but I wasn’t gently, I forced my tongue into his mouth, then I attacked his sweaty neck. “So you liked it” he said.

“I don’t know what to say” was my reply and he laughed.

“Glad to be of service” he said and kissed me on the lips again. “I’m going to need to shower again. Care to join me?” he said and I followed him into the bathroom with shaky legs. Now that the natural morphine that was the sexual pleasure had died out, I felt sore and my whole body was limp. Our bodies barely separated in the shower and he practically washed me.

Perhaps it was the post sex ecstasy that was talking, but before I left to go home I told him that I loved him. I didn’t think much about it, the words just fell from mouth naturally and I didn’t cringe at the words or immediately regret them. They didn’t startle him either; he smiled, showed me his creased cheeks and told me he loved me too.
I woke up with the sun as I usually did. I never closed my blinds and used the sunlight as my alarm; if I blocked it out I’d find myself sleeping most of the day away. Nobody else was awake, so I went downstairs in my underwear as I usually did while I had the chance to live freely (meaning almost naked). I grabbed an energy bar from the kitchen. They were made for the poor and malnourished to help them gain weight and give energy. I always had one before I went on a run to give me an energy boost in the morning. Usually I’d eat, get a drink and head out for my run with no breaks in between, but after I got changed, I stopped this time to ring Theo. I knew that he’d be awake. His strict parents woke him early for morning tutoring. They believed that the brain worked best in the morning – I often argued with Theo over it, but he was stubborn with such things. His intellectual superiority gave him an inflated ego in the regards to intellect.

I dialled his number and waited for him to pick up. When he did I jumped with excitement.

“THEO!”

“You’re sounding cheery this morning, Cato.” He said.

“You’ll never believe what happened to me last night” I said sat on the floor with my legs crossed to keep myself still.

“I don’t know, you set a new bench press record?” He uttered with a sarcastic tone.

“Not quite, but let’s just say I’m no longer a virgin.”

“No way! What was it like?” He asked me. Theo was one of the only straight men I knew who didn’t cower with homophobia at the mention of gay activity. It was part of the reason we were friends as I didn’t have to euphemise my words.

“It was unlike anything” was all that I said however. It was the best summary of the experience that I could give him.

“Well who was the lucky guy?” he interrogated. I hadn’t told him about my relationship with Abel. I had seen little of Theo since we began going out.

“My boyfriend” I replied.

“Sex and a boyfriend and you never told me?” He laughed. “C’mon, tell me! Who’d ya fuck?” he pestered.

“Abel Serrano.” There was silence on the other end. “Theo, you there?” I heard him cough.

“As in from school?”

“Yes”

“Who is a training Career like you.”

“Yes”

“As in Abel with the tattoos”
“Theo, what are you trying to get at?”

“As in Abel with the absolutely gorgeous face that everyone frenzies over.” His words stumbled over each other and were bitterly staccato.

“Do you have problem with him?” I asked him.

“As in that egotistical twat who is concerned for nothing but his damn appearance.”

“THEO” I scolded down the phone.

“I’m sorry, Cato but the guy is a complete arsehole.”

“You don’t even fucking know him!” I shouted in defence.

“And clearly neither do you if you are naïve enough to think he gives a shit about you. People like him aren’t worth people like you. He’s shallow and pathetic and you’re emotional and considerate. He thinks he can get through life on his looks alone. He’s going to be lost and alone when they go, trust me.”

“Abel doesn’t give one fuck about his own appearance.”

“Don’t give me that bullshit! You just have to look at the guy and see how self-absorbed he is”

“If you say one more bad thing about him I swear - ”

“You’ll what, Cato? You won’t hurt me or do anything to me. If you want to continue fooling yourself with this conception you’ve created that he cares about you then carry on, I’m not going to stop you, but don’t for one second think I want to be friends with someone who would give up his dignity and respect to be involved with shallow twats.”

“I can hear the fucking jealousy on your voice! You’re fucking disgusting, Theo. I never thought you would stoop so low as to speak so harshly about someone who you know nothing about. Your prejudice to the popular groups is blinding. He isn’t like the others. He’s not rude or arrogant! He is gentle, kind and considerate and I love him. When you leave school, popularity becomes irrelevant and you’ll be the one struggling to make it if this is how you treat people; with prejudice.”

“Listen to yourself, Cato. You don’t fucking love him! You just think he’s hot!”

“You’re a dick.” I spat down the phone.

“A dick who is done with this friendship” he finished and hung up the phone. I slammed the phone into the holder and clenched my fists in anger. I tried to catch a breath but it was like my rage had its hands around my neck and was stopping me from breathing. I couldn’t control it and threw a vase at the wall. It shattered into pieces and the flowers and the water that it was holding fell to the floor amongst shards of green glass.

“FUCK” I shouted at the top of my voice. I heard movement upstairs. I must have woken my parents up. I made my escape before they had the chance to scold me. I slammed the door as hard as I could and started my run. It calmed me somewhat, but I got scared. Scared because Theo was my only true friend, and now he had become an enemy to me. This kind of fear wasn’t good to me. His advice seemed irrelevant; perhaps that was due to spite. My run took me straight to the training centre. Aside from the caretaker who had unlocked the doors a short moment before I had arrived, I was alone.
I went to the weight room and started training. Today was biceps and shoulders. I finished my usual routine by the time Brutus arrived.

“Cato? I saw you signed in early today?”

“Just stepping up my game” I replied to humour him. It seemed to work as he beamed with delight. “I want to go heavier.”

“You’re not supposed to be bulking at the moment” he tried to advise me.

“I want to go heavier!” I shouted back. “And fuck biceps and shoulders, I’m doing it all” I said and started adding weights onto the bench press.

“Cato, take it easy or you’ll do permanent damage” he warned.

“Fine, then we won’t do it all, but I’m working on my fucking chest” I stubbornly shouted. I was being rude and bossy. I was starting to sound like some of the other careers, but my frustrations needed an outlet and my fears needed to be dealt with, so I did what I’ve always done best; I’ve channelled them into my physique.

I was on some sort of adrenaline high and lifting weights heavier than I had even attempted previously. Others showed up and just watched me with awe. Perhaps it was a delusion from the adrenaline, but I gathered a crowd who tried to follow in my determination to be bigger and better. They disgusted me.

I had been at the centre for hours. My muscles were beginning to get sore, but I was addicted to the pump. The blood was rushing through my body, stretching my muscles. I travelled from room to room. Brutus was happier than ever. He wasn’t harsh, but congratulated me with every new record I hit. I was harsh on myself that day and assumed Brutus’ domineering role.

Abel came by for his training. After spending so much time with me, Brutus turned his attentions to him, his second favourite. He tried to push Abel harder, spurred on by my own motivation but Abel did not reciprocate my own desires for improvement. Brutus stood behind him as he lifted some weights, his hands under his elbows for support should he require it. Abel was struggling to lift a weight. Brutus started to hit him on the chest.

“Anger! Rage! Let it take over. Feel the adrenaline!” he shouted into his ear. “Are you a fucking pussy, pretty boy? Or do you want to be like him over there” meaning myself. Abel grew frustrated with him and in a spit of rage threw the weights into the wall leaving two large holes. He looked at Brutus with disgust, but Brutus has achieved what he was aiming for. Abel made sure of that when he threw the weights, and he looked at him with a smug smile, proud of a monstrosity that he was making.

Abel left the room and looked deep into my eyes. He left in outrage with quick and long strides. He didn’t say anything, but I knew he wanted me to follow him. I jogged into the corridor and Abel was bent over, catching his breath.

“Are you ok?” I asked him.

“What the fuck was that all about? Anger! Rage! How about he just fuck off for once and leave us be.” Abel said. He shook his head and punched the wall. He made yet another hole in the walls of the centre. It hurt him and he cried out in pain. “Well he’s got what he wanted, because I’m fucking angry!” I felt guilty for causing this pain and frustration that was inside of him. But I didn’t feel guilty for my own ire. I didn’t want to feel pain, and without Abel by my side, my mind followed its conditioned response and channelled it and made it somatic. I pulled
him into a hug which he accepted immediately and hugged me tight.

“Why is he doing this to us? Doesn’t he know that we’re people” he muttered into my shoulder. I wanted to say that this was me, but our contact was calming him so I let it do that. I could feel his heartbeat in his chest begin to settle. When he was soothed enough he pried himself from my grip. That’s when Brutus came out to find us. He looked at the hall in the wall and Abel’s purpling knuckles.

“You’re becoming a real contender, pretty boy” he said and folded his arms and painted his face with a smug grin. I watched Abel’s eyebrows furrow and his jaw tense in fury. I thought that I should pacify the situation by taking Abel away from the true monster.

“I’ll take him to the Doctor to make sure he hasn’t broken anything” I said.

“OK. But then go home. You’ve done more than enough today. Relax and don’t damage yourself” he said to me. I nodded my head and grabbed Abel by the arm and started pulling through the corridor towards the Doctor.”

“What does he mean try not to damage yourself?” he asked me.

“Nothing” I said but I felt my stomach drop in guilt. I couldn’t lie to him. “I’ve been here since six” I said. Abel looked at me with confusion. I wasn’t guilty for that however, nor did I regret anything.

“Christ almighty, Cato. It’s half eleven! You’re telling me you’ve been here for over five hours.” I nodded. He punched my arm, but with his bad hand and it just hurt him more and he yelled in pain again. “What the fuck are you doing?” he asked me. I shook my head at him.

“We’ll discuss it later” I said and knocked on the door to the Doctor’s. There was a faint ‘come in’ on the other side.

“No. Let’s discuss it now.” I sighed at his determination.

“Theo, my friend; my only real friend. This morning I told him about us and he had some harsh things to say about it. Mostly about you. I just got really pissed off! It was early and nobody was around so I just came here and worked out my anger.”

“Did it work? Did you quell you anger?” he asked me.

“Some of it, but I’m still pretty pissed with him.” Abel looked to ground.

“Thank you for being honest, but don’t you fucking do this again.” He lowered his tone of voice so that others wouldn’t over hear us. “You’re giving into this whole career thing. Next time, speak to me instead of doing this.” I nodded in understanding. The door to the doctor’s office opened and Dr Anderson stood in the door way and sighed.

“Three times I told you to come in” he said.

He checked Abel’s hand for any damage. He concluded that nothing was broken but the bone was bruised. He wrapped his hand up and told him to rest it for a week. Abel actually sounded quite pleased with that. After we informed Brutus who didn’t respond with the same annoyance as he did when I had my injury, we went back to my house where I told him the whole Theo story. He comforted me and I felt some relief, but I still couldn’t shake my frustration with him. He had ignited a bitter anger in me that out-burned any passion that Abel created. Fear crept into my mind at the thought of Abel being relegated, but the fire ate up and burnt away that fear; its ashes blown away till nothing of it remained.
In the weeks that followed Theo’s departure from my life, not much had changed. My training was intense and I physicalized my frustrations. Abel and I trained together after his hand recovered. He was disappointed with me, however, for not taking his advice and easing up on the intensity of my regime. He constantly nagged me about it but then he would make comments on my appearance. One night after we laid together in my bed after having sex he felt my arms and told me I’m getting bigger.

“But you’re losing your abs” he said and rubbed them to balance out any compliment he may have given me so as not to condone my actions. He drew multiple drawings of me. Instead of taking photos I life modelled for him. One of them I kept. I stored it in my wardrobe in the small wooden box that until now contained only Finnick’s piece of cloth. With them I also had a few Polaroid pictures of Abel. One was of him, nude on my bed. Another was just of him at the lake and another of the two of us together.

This box of precious items was becoming more than a few trinkets. I was beginning to form an identity. I was beginning to break free of my career tribute status as each item was something important to me. They filled a hole in my life that my training filled for so long, but Theo had made a new hole in me that needed to be filled and it seemed that the hole was the perfect size and shape for one of the training centre’s ghosts to make a home of and perpetually haunt my soul.

I saw Theo in school often. I always looked at him as we walked past each other, or as we sat at opposite ends of the classroom. He never picked his eyes up to look at me. Abel told me of the stinking looks that he gave him, however. Once, he was a comfort that I sought, but now he sickened me.

I had beaten all my previous records at the centre. I was becoming the brutal monster that the Capitol wanted of me. When I walked through those doors, the ghost that inhabited me fought with myself and gave me a tunnel vision for inevitable damnation in the arena. My father had commented on my change in appearance once day when I came home.

“I see you’re preparing for decision day. You’re looking like a true Career tribute.” He said to me with a wide grin on his face stretching across his usually stern face. His own dreams were beginning to unfold. I was handing them to him on a plate. “Not only do you look bigger and stronger, you look domineering” he said to me. I ignored his words and thought that there may be others with the same odds as me to be chosen to volunteer for the upcoming games, and that there was a chance that I could lie the remainder of my life as every else did and live it with Abel. I turned my cheek against my forming resemblance to Brutus.

My mother was gleaming with delight whenever she saw me. She never commented on my appearance, but when she saw how pleased my father was, she herself became pleased. I started to understand her more then. She had no opinions of her own, but was a shadow of my father standing below him, mimicking every one of his movements; but it’s not simply copying, she was afraid of him. I saw that time she came home to find me curled on the floor. She was terrified of what might happen if my father had found me. She doesn’t copy him out of admiration or because she doesn’t know what else to do, she does it out of fear. I guess that’s why she was never chosen to volunteer; she held onto her fears.

Stage Three was weeks away. Brutus and the other trainers, along with the mayor of District 2 and those who fund the training centre, were watching us so that they may decide who
will be the tribute for the 74th Hunger Games. There was leak among the trainees as to who their eyes were on and who they were in favour of.

Abel and I went for training one day after school. As we made our way through the halls, one of the other boys spat at the floor in front of us. Immediately we began to question what we might have done to upset them. Our first instinct was that others had found out about our relationship and were not accepting of it. But then another pulled us into brotherly hug and said congratulations to us before he practically skipped down the corridor. That’s when one of the younger trainees came up to us. While we’re being monitored, the younger kids act as avoxes to the judges. One of them hangs around each room that overlook the training rooms. This particular boy was short and had short blonde hair in tight curls.

“I’ve been looking for you” he said with a smile on his face. He held his hands behind his back as he was told to stand when serving.

“What for?” Abel asked him.

“I’ve been in serving in the weights room. Brutus, Lyme, the mayor and a couple of others were in there discussing their favourites yesterday. All of them there said that it was ‘highly likely that it would be either Cato or Abel’ ” he recited to us. Neither Abel nor myself said anything at first, just processed the information. I was certain that I would be one of the candidates, but I had hoped som much that Abel wasn’t one of them.


“They didn’t say anything about you; I mean, it’s pretty obvious why they thought you” he turned his gaze towards Abel. “They said that they could turn you into the new Finnick Odair.” I looked at Abel who had tears brimming at his eyes. “Anyway, congratulations guys” the boy said and jogged away. Abel was about to cry, I could see, so I pulled him away into the bathrooms. I made sure that nobody was in there before either of us spoke.

“Abel” I said and touched his arm. A single tear ran down his face.

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean? How am I going to be the new Finnick Odair?” He asked me.

“I think they mean they can turn you into some sort of sex symbol.”

“Well I don’t want to be! I don’t want to be some object of sexual desire for Capitol scum!” he shouted. I pulled him into a hug and shushed him. “I don’t want to lose you” he said to me.

“And I don’t want to lose you” I replied. “But it seems like that it’s beyond our control.” He pried himself from me and wiped the tears from his cheeks.

“Then let’s run away” he said.

“Don’t be ridiculous” I said.

“I’m being serious. Let’s run away together and live somewhere they won’t find us”

“You know that no such place exists. And they’ll get us before we even have chance to leave the District.” He sighed.

“I know. I just…they’ve taken away enough my life…I don’t want them to take away any more of it.”
“Me too” I said to him. I realised then that no matter what happens, I’d be entering the arena as a tribute. I couldn’t let Abel be sucked into the life of a victor, no could I let him risk it in the arena. I decided that I had a duty to him to train harder than I have and be the one that is chosen to volunteer so that Abel’s life could be spared. If they still chose Abel, I’d have no choice but to volunteer in place of him by the time that the reaping came. No matter what happened, my fate was sealed.
When it was announced that myself and Clove would be the two tributes to volunteer for the 74th Hunger Games, a relief came over me for I knew that Abel would be spared from the torturous life that, upon my survival, was now my own. The largest hall in the training centre had its equipment pushed to the furthest walls and a large open space was created in the centre which we trainees filled. We huddled close together in front of the Trainers; Brutus and Lyme stood at front and spoke.

“Your training comes to a close today, with the exception of two” Brutus declared in his domineering voice; every syllable was harshly pronounced and his words bellowed through the room. Abel and I held hands, thankful of the close proximity of those that surrounded as our affectious displays were hidden from eyes that would deal with us brutally. When I heard my name roll of Brutus’ tongue, the room didn’t seem so crammed. It was though the people who swore in anger at my pronouncement were pushed with the equipment to the furthest reaches from me and I could breathe again. I relieved Abel’s hand in my own, releasing the tension of my grip. But he tightened his grip when he heard my name. His whole body tensed up.

In a typical Career tribute fashion, many of the boys stormed out of the room. Their arrogance and nativity, as well as their foolishness, were more present now than I had witnessed prior. Nobody should wish to be gloried for slaughtering innocent lives. Nobody should revel in the tyranny and corruptness of the Capitol. Their minds were putrefied by the shadow that President Snow cast over the Districts. Someone rubbed my back and squeezed my shoulder. I couldn’t decipher the gesture. I was undecided as to whether I should treat it as congratulation or sympathy. Whatever the gesture, it was intended to be kind and that was something very little experienced at the centre.

When Clove was declared the female tribute, the only sound was a single sob from amongst the crowd. I had not the slightest inclination as to who uttered the mournful noise. I wouldn’t expect it would be Clove; she had moments of kindness and generosity, but those qualities were dominated by selfishness and sadism. I had seen her train. When she threw her knives with ultimate precision, there was a psychopathic look in her eyes.

Everyone was dismissed bar ourselves. We were given a new schedule. I didn’t look at it until later, but Brutus warned me of the difficulties of the oncoming months; harder exercises and less nutrition, all to prepare us for the harsh conditions of the Games. We would ransack the cornucopia, like the Career pack does every year, but the Games have, in the past, gone on for months, and the supplies will only last so long. Walking out, Clove practically had a hop in her step. She couldn’t have omitted that sob. She was excited.

“Don’t underestimate me, Cato. I might be small, but I can take out just as many as you can” she said to me with a wink and walked down the corridor. I expected Abel to be waiting outside for me, but he wasn’t. I asked if anyone had seen him. Someone had told me he had gone upstairs. I searched the top floor till I found him looking out of one of the floor to ceiling windows that looked out over the District. His cheeks were pink, his eyes red. When he saw me he ran into
my arms and held onto me tight. His arms enveloped my whole body, constraining me,

“You have to win.” He said to me. I held his head in my hand and rested it on my shoulder.

“I don’t see that I have a choice” I said to him. Love does strange things to a person. I was so relieved that Abel was safe that I didn’t for a moment think about my own safety. There was a large possibility that I would die soon. Like a fist to my stomach, everything caught up to me. I thought of what it would do to Abel to lose me. Another fist punched me. Then the thought that had been travelling through my mind – *I was going to be a tribute* – suddenly became so real and terrifying. I pushed Abel away from me and started to throw up onto the floor. I felt like I was being kicked and punched and beaten emotionally. The feeling was so deep that I felt a physical pain as my emotions overwhelmed my whole body. The whole room rocked from side to side like a ship at sea. The corners of my sight were blackening. I fought hard to keep my consciousness. It felt like it was my first test; I had to survive this spontaneous emotional torture. It was Abel’s voice and his hand on my back helped keep me conscious and in reality.

Brutus made no exaggeration when he said that the new routine would be more intense. My calorie intake had been cut and nutrition was poor. I quickly became exhausted and sluggish. I purposely avoided exertion as much as I could outside of my schedule. When my workouts became harder I felt like my body would collapse in on itself. I felt weak. I was drained. My performance was low, but that was expected. If I wasn’t expected to get weaker then Brutus would have unleashed his wrath onto me by now.

Clove struggled even more than I did. Brutus pushed her hard and at times I was afraid that her small frame would break. But she was determined to become a victor. Even though she struggled, I could see that excitement still present in her. Abel and I were on a dry spell with sex. He always wanted to fuck, and so did I, but I physically couldn’t find the energy to do so, nor could I find enjoyment in it. I was more miserable than I had ever been.

After a few weeks it became too much and I abandoned my diet plan. There was no way my body could withstand the physical torment without some extra nutrition that could provide some sort of stability. I believed that I could not go into the Games feeling like a ship wrecked by a storm. The effect of the change was immediate. The colour returned to my skins. My hair thicker, my eyes brighter and I was able to hold a smile. After a few weeks I was back to my regular self. My diet wasn’t what it once was, but it was still more nutritional than the advised plan.

The reaping was just a few months away and I was handling the situation well; I had to. It seemed that out of the cards dealt, this was the best hand. But there was one day where I felt the reality of the situation crash over me like a giant wave. I was at Abel’s house. I had just had food with his parents, the only people, other than Theo, who knew of our relationship. Abel and I retired to his room and pleasured each other with our mouths. We didn’t have sex as his parents were home and we didn’t want to risk them hearing. Then when we were done, I kneeled on his bed, resting on the headboard and looked out the window. I was so comfortable being with him that I didn’t care in the slightest that I was naked and that people may see my shirtless figure peering out.

I watched the District live their lives. Abel’s house was on a slight hill and was the
highest houses around. Although much of my sight was blocked by the other houses, I could still see far across the District. At a glance everything seemed so happy. People walked contently at a glimpse. But upon close examination, my eyes caught a woman crying on the ground. I saw the homeless and armed peacekeepers patrolling the streets. People looked at them with fear. Most in District 2 had a good relationship with them. My father had always said to me that respect maintains a healthy relationship with them. They protected us from those who would commit harm and terror. When I was younger, I always thought that everyone respected the peacekeepers. When people would step aside to let them pass, or follow their sometimes ludicrous and unreasonable instructions without any hesitation, to me, that was always respect. But there was a point in my life that I realised that it wasn’t respect, but fear. It was very easy to mistake or merge the two but I thought then about how the two things couldn’t be any more different.

I grew sad when I realised how exempt I had been my whole life of their dominance. I was never bothered by the peacekeepers, nor them by me. Perhaps it was my ignorance or childish naivety that kept me out of trouble but still it was tragic that I could be easily hidden from them in a room, content if only for a moment, while others lived in constant fear. Pity was not an emotion that I should have been feeling. It can be the most deadly of things in the arena. I tried my best to consider myself lucky and not feel pitiful.

“Done” Abel said from his desk. Like me, he didn’t bother to put any clothes on. Neither of us would bother to be modest in front of each other. I turned around to him and he held up a drawing that he had just done. I had no clue how long I had been staring out of the window but it was longer than I had perceived. He had drawn my naked figure kneeling on the bed with my attention fixed out of the window. I held the drawing in my hand and looked at the incredible detail with profound analysis.

I couldn’t recognise myself.

“I look so different” I muttered staring at the foreign figure on the page. My waist was slimmer than it had been, but I was larger everywhere else. My arms, my shoulders, my back, my legs. They were all so much larger than they had been before. I had little concern with my physical appearance since I was chosen as tribute. How I looked mattered little in comparison to how much I could lift, or how far I could run without pause. There seemed other things that were more important. I realised then on how much of a scale the Games would change me.

“What are you on about?” he asked me.

“It feels so unfamiliar.” I said to him and sat on the bed.

“Well it’s the back of you. You don’t get much face time with that do you” he said to me and giggled. “Here, I’ll show you that you still look like you.” He retrieved his camera and told me to stand up straight. I did as he told and he took a photo of me. He told me turn to the side and I did and he took another. When the pictures developed I took a deep look at them, but they didn’t resemble myself.

“This…this isn’t me.” I said. I have been muscular as long as I can remember so perhaps the small changes were noticeable to me. But I was bigger and more ripped than I had ever though before and the difference to me was so profound. It wouldn’t have bothered me if it hadn’t made me look so terrifying. The affects reached beyond my torso; my face had become sharper and more chiselled. My cheeks had thinned out so that my jawline and cheekbones were sharper. I seemed to be littered with shadows from each crevice and peak in my face and my body. The shadows appeared sinister to me. I was unnatural.

“I look like a monster” I said to Abel with a sigh in my voice.

“No, no you don’t” he said and put his arm around me to comfort me. “You look beautiful” he said and kissed my cheek.
“I appreciate you saying that, but I wasn’t being self-deprecating. I was making an observation. The difference is there, Abel. It’s as plain as black and white.” I expected myself to be upset by it, but it made me feel nothing. My emotions were not present.

“Ok. Then you look different. There is a difference. You’re larger and more ripped. But that’s it. You may see yourself as a monster but I don’t. You’re more beautiful now than you ever before. Part of that is your physical appearance. Mostly though, it is because I am deeply in love with you, and with every day that you and I spend together, I think I fall in love with you even more.” I blushed heavily and let him kiss me. I relished in the taste of his lips.

“How come you always know what to say?” I asked him and rested my forehead against his.

“I guess we’re just a good match” he said and smiled. I looked into his bright eyes and fell more in love with him. I wanted to feel his presence forever and never lose him. The necessity of my survival in the games was more present in that moment as I realised I need him.
It came to my attention that, since my training began, my time with Abel had diminished and my attention was often diverted by the strict regime, despite not fully abiding by it. Abel had come by my house a couple of times looking for me; both times I was not there. He tried to contact me later in the day but he couldn’t get in touch with me. When I went to his house he was heavily concerned that I was ignoring him and he had believed he had done something wrong. I reassured him that it was not the case and that I was just busy. I felt immensely guilty for causing him the paranoia so I came to the conclusion that I had to put more into our relationship and make it special for him until before I left and quite possibly never return.

I made arrangements with Abel’s parents for them to stay over Abel’s grandparents’ for my day’s rest which I had one of every two weeks. They would also stay over the night so that Abel and I may have the whole house to ourselves. I was going to make the whole day about him. I wanted to surprise him with presents, take him up the mountain for a hike and paint with him up there.

I had gone to the market in the hopes to buy him a new sketchpad. To my surprise there was only a single stall that sold art supplies. The old woman who ran it was named Serena. The table was full, the items not neatly organised but placed wherever they could fit. I found a sketchpad, larger than his current one and according to Serena the quality was the best that you could get your hands on. The present, however, didn’t seem enough. A simple sketchpad could not replicate my love and show him his worth. So I bought him more; charcoal, watercolours, paintbrushes, pencils. I picked up everything that I thought he would use.

“Running up a hefty bill there” Serena joked. I laughed with her.

“It’s for someone special, so I’m sparing no expense.” She smiled with glee.

“I don’t get much business these days” she said with a glorious smile as her uncertain hands opened up a large brown paper bag. She carefully placed the items inside of it. “I know my customers” she said. Her sentences were broken apart with long pauses and deep breaths. It was a sign of her age. When she finished putting my items in a bag, she gazed over her stock on the stall and pushed a long grey hair that fell over her face behind her ear. Her eyes were scanning the items on the table for something. Her whole body jumped when she found what she was looking for. She picked up what looked like a small box of white pencils. “These are called blenders. The name is self-explanatory” she laughed and put them inside the bag. I tried to stop her.

“I don’t want those” I said to her. She shook her head.

“No no no. It’s on me” she said sincerely and smiled. “Abel stopped by not too long ago to say hello and he was eyeing these up.” I was perplexed. How did she know that my presents were for Abel?

“How did you - ” I started my sentence.

“Handsome men like you don’t tend to shop with me, that is, except for Abel. He told me he had a new boyfriend and I just put 2 and 2 together.”

“Well thank you” I said to her and gently touched her arm to show my affection and my gratitude.

“Tell Abel to stop by sometime soon. I have something very important that I want to ask
of him” she said to me. I nodded to her and told her that I would. We parted ways and I headed straight home.

Although I was happy with the presents, they were not enough to make this day into a magnificent experience for him. Whenever we had sex, I found that I was always the object of satisfaction. Everything he did was catered for my benefit, so I wanted to make it about him. I really wanted to pleasure him and please him in the way that he does to me. For that I needed advice. My first instinct was to seek out Theo for advice, but I could no longer do that. So I turned to the only place in the whole District that I knew of that could offer advice on gay sex: The Cold House.

As the sun was setting behind the large mountain, I made my way to the North-East borderline. The shadow of the mountain overtook me as I made my way there and by the time I reached it, everything was dark except for the little light provided by the pale blue neon sign that hung above the doorway that said “The Cold House”. I stood in the alley way that held its entrance and looked up at the dark building. The entire thing was a perfectly rectangular. The outside of it was covered with square, dark wood panels. They were all so perfectly aligned that the building seemed pristine. You wouldn’t think that it held a whore house or the District’s main gay hook up spot. The downstairs windows were large and slightly tinted so that the insides were only partially visible. The upstairs windows were long, thin and horizontal and completely tinted so that you could not see inside. There building was daunting and I stood for a full 5 minutes before I bolstered up the courage to enter.

I walked into the dim lit bar. It was reasonably quiet with just the soft mutter of peacekeepers talking in the corner. Nobody picked their eyes up when I entered except for the bartender. I walked firstly to him and took a seat on a red leather stool. The entire inside was decorated with dark wood furnishings and the seats were coated with a red leather. Behind the bar that ran across the entire length of the one side were shelves filled with alcohol. Bottle after bottle were aligned with different labels on them. The bartender was a short man with cropped blonde hair. He had a slim face and body. He had a plain white shirt on with the top two buttons undone to reveal a small amount of blonde chest hair. He had tucked the shirt in to a pair of black trousers.

“What can I get you?” he asked me. I could feel the blood racing through each part of my body. I bounced my leg nervously.

“Something to calm the nerves” I said to him. That must have translated to something strong as he reached out a shot glass from under the bar and filled it with a clear liquor. I quickly downed it. The liquid burned as it trickled down my throat. I paid for the drink and tried to mentally prepare myself. I hastily made my way through the door on that led to the staircase.

The infamous staircase was metal with small, spaced apart steps that spiralled up and down. I put my hand on the cold railing and cautiously took the steps down. They led straight to a small door that I had to not only crouch to fit through, but had to contort my whole body as my broad shoulder could not fit through.

The first thing I noticed when I got through the door was the smell. There was a damp smell that was poorly coated by the smell of scented candles. There was only one light in the whole room above the door. Round and squared tables were scattered about randomly, some yards away from each other, some just a foot apart. Each one had a candle on it. Unlike upstairs, when I entered, many people turned to look at me. A man sitting on a table just a few feet away was eyeing me up and down with eyes that burned my tight fitting clothes, perhaps an unwise outfit choice. I looked at him and he winked at me, before returning his attentions to the other man on his table.

“That is one fine body on him” he said to the other man who nodded in agreement, but
his eyes were fixated on me and my ‘fine body’.

There was much more chatter here than in the bar, but many people sat alone. I slowly made my way between the tables to find somewhere to sit alone. The faces in the room were ominously lit by the under-light of the candle. For many it highlighted the contours of their face and made highlighted their handsomeness, but for many, it made them appear sinister. I hadn’t been sat down long before another man came and sat on the same table with me. He was a handsome enough man with black hair and small features. I quickly turned him away. He seemed aggravated when I denied him myself. I could not believe that Abel used to visit this place so often. It was not a comfortable environment, at least not for me.

I tried to calm myself and scanned the room for someone who could help me. From a door emerged two men. One of them was short and not very appealing, but the other was tall and attractive. I recognised him as Neil from Abel’s books. He sat on a squared table by himself. I quickly approached him before anyone else would get to him or me.

“Hey” I said. “Mind if I sit?” I asked. He shook his head.

“Sorry. I’ll be leaving shortly.” He lit a cigarette and pushed his long hair back.

“No, umm. I just – I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions” I said. He paused for moment as if thinking, then nodded. I sat down quickly.

“I’m Cato” I introduced myself.

“You’re an attractive boy, Cato” he said to me. “I’m Neil” and he extended his hand. I took it and shook. “So what have you got to ask me?”

“I’m looking for advice…sex advice” I said awkwardly and quietly.

“No need to whisper it” he teasingly whispered. “As soon as you walk through that door sex is the only thing that exists here. But if you’re wondering how a gay man does it then, sorry to disappoint but I’m not in the mood for basic sex-ed.”

“No it’s not that. I know how sex works. My boyfriend was my first and I worry that I don’t satisfy him enough” I said with a confessional, as though admitting to a guilty crime.

“And you want to know what you can do to please him more?” I nodded. “That’s fair enough. So who is this boyfriend, maybe I know him.”

“Abel Serrano” I said. Neil gave a huge smile.

“No shit! How is he doing?” he asked me.

“He’s good” I said relieved at his sudden friendly demeanour.

“Well I guess you’ve come to the right guy. I know all of Abel’s desires” he said with a wink. I still felt incredibly awkward to be asking this but he picked up on it. “No need to feel embarrassed. You look like a wealthy lad. I don’t suppose your parents know you’re gay?” I shook my head. Homophobia was most rife in the North Quarter with the wealthiest families. Family lineage was profoundly important there.

“I’m going to be the next tribute” I said to him. His face dropped in sorrow. “I just…I want to make my time with Abel special, because I may not come back.” He put his hand on my own to comfort me.
“Don’t worry. You’ll have Abel screaming your name so loud that the whole district will hear” he giggled and I laughed too.

“So what does Abel like?” I asked him.

“Well. He always wants to kiss first, and not pathetically; passionately. It’s like his way of initiating the sex. He can’t do it, unless you kiss first. After that go straight for the nipples. He loves it when you tease his nipples.”

“I figured that out so far” I said and laughed.

“Good! There’s not much after that. Tease him if you want, everyone likes a bit of teasing. Next is to give it to him straight and hard” he told me. I gave him a perplexing look. “He likes it when you fuck him rough” he put frankly.

“I…I’ve never been the one doing the fucking” I said to him. Neil seemed quite surprised.

“You mean you bottom?” I nodded. “You actually let him fuck you with that pole between his legs.” I couldn’t help but laugh and he joined in too.

“He said it would be easier for a first time. And besides, there’s not much difference between our dicks” I said and smiled.

“Well aren’t you a luck fellow” he said, partially envious. “Well I always topped with Abel, he said he prefers to bottom so you’ll have to exchange roles if you really want to make him feel good.” I nodded in understanding. I was nervous about that, but I didn’t think it appropriate for topping advice so I just concluded that I would have to trust my instincts.

“Anything else?” I queried.

“Like I said, keep it rough. Grab his hair, bite him, and toss him about. Be forceful but know when to take it slow. And for the love of god, don’t stay in the same position and don’t keep the same movement. Nobody likes static fucking. Spin him around and roll your hips. You’ve got to explore him completely, inside and out. Do that and you’ll do great” He said to me with a friendly wink.

“Thank you” I said sincerely. “And other than the nipples, are there any other areas that he likes?”

“Nipples are the only one I know of, but don’t be afraid to try and find new areas. You’ll be surprised by some of the weird places that people like to be touched.” He stood from his seat and put the end of his cigarette out in an ash tray. He extended his strong hand once more and I gladly shook it.

“Thank you, again” I said to him.

“Glad to be of service” he replied. “I don’t know if you’re going to tell Abel about this, but if you do, tell him I was asking about him.” I nodded in reply and I started to make my way out.

As I was trying to reach the door a foul man approached me. He had long, greasy hair that was shoddily cut. His clothes were loose on him and he omitted a despicable odour. He put his hand on my chest to stop me from moving.

“Where you going, handsome?” he said to me.
“I’m leaving” I said. Immediately, I got angry with him. I tried not to and to remain as calm as I could, but it was difficult to repress my rage.

“Why so soon?” He asked me. He removed his hand from my chest but slipped it underneath my shirt. I pulled it out and grabbed his wrist, twisting it awkwardly.

“Don’t fucking touch me” I demanded, but he laughed like a maniac.

“Oh, I like it rough. I really like what you’ve got underneath there” he winked at me and my stomach churned in disgust. “Why don’t you stay? I could make you feel real good” he then forcibly stuck his free hand down my trousers and grabbed my cock in his hand. I gathered up all the force I could, pulled his hand from me and punched him in the face. He fell back onto a table, toppling it, sending the candle on it flying and the people sitting at it screaming. Blood began to pour from his nose. I fisted his shirt in both my hands and pulled him up. I wanted to say something to him but I felt abused and angry and I couldn’t find any words say. Instead I lifted him off the floor by the neck. He fought for his breath and his legs kicked in the air. He felt so puny in my grip. I thought about how easy it would be for me to kill. I could strangle him right here with my hand. If I wanted to survive in the arena, these are the type of things that I needed to be able to do. Killing this man would be pointless. I threw him into the wall and he fell hard to floor, unconscious. Everything in the room encircled the scene. One man spat on the unconscious man.

“It’s about fucking time” he said and returned to his table as though nothing had happened. I calmed my rage and squeezed for the final time out of the small door and left that place for good. But I didn’t feel guilty about my murderous thoughts. I didn’t feel anything about them. For now, they were just a part of me and they had to be. If I ever wanted to return to Abel, I had to embrace them.
Chapter 11

My day with Abel started off good. The first thing I did was cook him breakfast. Whenever my mother was annoyed at my father when we were younger, he would wake her up with breakfast. The gesture always seemed small to me as I believed he should have been doing more things for her anyway. But I thought that Abel might appreciate it. His parents left me alone with him while he was still in bed. I heard him stir upstairs and began cooking. The smells of the bacon and sausages travelled upstairs and pulled him down. He was wearing a pair of shorts and a scruffy tank top. When he saw that I was the one cooking, he gave me a perplexing look.

“Cato? What are you doing?” he said with his eyebrow raised.

“Good morning to you too” I said and cracked an egg into a frying pan.

“Do my parents know you’re doing this? Because my dad has a real problem with having a mess in the kitchen.” I looked around at the cracked egg shells, open packets and breadcrumbs that I had left over the place.

“Your parents won’t be home” I told him.

“Why? Where are they? This is slowly becoming creepy” he teased and I laughed.

“I arranged for us to have the house to ourselves for the day, and the night” I winked. Abel smiled contently.

“What’s the occasion?” He asked me.

“The occasion it is that I love you, and I want to make you feel special” I said and wrapped my arms around his waist. He wrapped his around my neck and kissed me.

“Well I fell pretty special right now” He said and kissed me again. He hopped away from me and got himself some milk from the fridge. “So when’s it going to be ready?” He asked me, looking over my shoulder at the cooking. I turned the hob off.

“Now” I said. He ate the food contently, although my cooking was perhaps questionable. Despite cooking for myself regularly, I never cared too much about the taste; the nutrition was always the main factor.

After we finished breakfast we cleaned up, then I gave him his presents. One by one he pulled them from the brown bag with a huge smile on his face.

“Cato, this is some really good stuff.” His reaction was more than I was hoping for. “But they’re also really expensive. You didn’t need to do this” he said.

“I felt like I did” I told him.

“This is a lot of money which you didn’t need to spend on me.” I told him that the money wasn’t important, and that I shouldn’t be concerned with such trivial things where he is involved. He seemed satisfied with my reply or perhaps defeated. He pulled me into a tight hug.

“Thank you” he said to me. I hugged him tightly back. Then he started to kiss my neck. “I know how I can repay you.” He kissed my neck and put his hand down my trousers, taking my cock in his hand. I immediately got hard.
“Actually, I have a request” I said. He looked at me. “I would like to top” I said. “Sometime” I added just to be more casual with it. Abel smiled at me and kissed me on the lips.

“Sometime? How does now sound?” he asked and I nodded. “You sure you want to?” He asked.

“Are you?” I replied and he giggled. He delved into my mouth and jumped up to wrap his legs around my waist. I kept him up with my hands on his firm ass. I started to carry him towards the stairs as he kissed me neck again.

“No” he said and put his hand out to the wall to stop me from taking him further. “If my parents won’t be home until tomorrow, then I want you to fuck me down here.”

“You want me to fuck you in the living room?” I asked. He nodded his head and bit his lip.

“It'll be hot” he said. I agreed to it and carried him to the beige sofa. I was about to lay him down gently, but then remembered what Neil told me, that Abel liked it rough, so instead I dropped him onto the soft cushions. He kicked me for doing so, but I quickly climbed on top of him, my knees either side of him, his head between my hands, entrapping him. I lowered myself like I was doing a push up to his pale lips and explored the taste of his tongue again. As we kissed, he undone my trousers and pulled my cock out of its restrictions and began stroking it. His other hand was firmly gripped to my waist.

Next was to attack his nipples. I stood up first and removed all of my clothes. He sat up and took my cock in his hand and was ready to pleasure me, but I wouldn’t let him. I hit his hand away and pushed him onto his back forcibly.

“Being rough are we?” he asked me. I sat on him to keep him down. I felt his hard erection underneath me.

“What is this top worth” I asked him holding the fabric of his tank top in my hand “Nothing, why?” he asked in return. I grabbed the collar of it and pulled, tearing the shirt straight down the middle. In one motion it ripped from top to bottom. Abel gasped, partially in shock, but there was a waver in his voice that told me that it was partially erotic. I pulled the broken fabric from him and as I done before, I took his pecs between both of my hands and squeezed them. He moaned out loud. This time, I was purposely doing it hard for his benefit. I took nipples between my lips and sucked harshly on them, swirling my tongue around the hardening pink skin. I felt the vibrations of his moans deep in his chest. His one hand was on the back of my head simply so that he would have somewhere to keep it. His other hand flailed as I pinched his nipples and sucked his nipples until they were raw.

I loved to pleasure him. Hearing him moan underneath me not only made me feel good, but it turned me on, a lot. Pleasuring him set off a euphoric flame between us that ignited all new levels of pleasure that I could never feel before and it kept burning and burning till the lust it made devoured us both and the only thoughts that lingered in our mind were how hot and sexy the other person was and how good it felt to fuck them.

His moans became too much for me to handle. I had an erection harder than I had ever felt before. It ached for more; to be pleasure and touched. I climbed off him and pulled his shorts down his long legs. His hard cock sprang free and laid on his ripped, tight stomach. The first thing he did was hold it in his hand and pull back the skin. He closed his eyes and bit his lip as he was finally free to touch himself. I wouldn’t let him do it for long though. I wanted to be his source of pleasure. I tightly grabbed onto his arm and pulled him off the sofa. He cursed as he fell to his
knees. But he looked up at me, naked, towering over him, large and dominant, dwarfing his
crouched figure on the ground. I looked into his eyes. They were wide and glistening with that
lustful glare he would always have when we have sex. This time time, though, they were also
puppy dog eyes, begging me to satisfy his deepest desires. I sat on the sofa with my legs open. I
held my large dick in my hand and watched him admire it.

“Suck” I demanded and he obeyed. He shuffled forward with an eager speed and
placed himself between my legs. He didn’t wait a single moment and allowed my member to
delve far into his mouth. His head moved up and down my throbbing shaft in quick moments. His
one hand rubbed my perineum like he knew I always liked. He got me cursing his name between
heavy breaths. I was the one now who could not keep my hands still. I needed to do something
with them and I was craving something rougher.

I held his head, still between my hands and began to thrust upwards into his wet and
warm mouth. I felt the head of cock rub against the insides of his mouth and the pleasure was
euphoric. My cock hit his throat and he made strange noises that turned my on. He wanked
himself as I fucked his mouth. I wasn’t being gentle either; I made sure that my cock was going
deep. Between his head working himself and my brutal treatment, Abel couldn’t retain his moans.
When he did I felt them deep in his throat and they reverberated through my cock causing
pleasurable vibrations that stired in my stomach. The sensation was phenomenal. I pulled myself
from his mouth. My cock was coated in his saliva which clung like string from his mouth to me
and slathered my huge dick. His cheeks were a deep red, his eyes watering slightly.

“Oh fucking hell, Cato” He said in a pleading tone. It was time for me to take this to a
new level. His long fringe that was usually pushed back had flopped over his forehead, covering
his one eye. I grabbed it in my hand and used it like a dog lead. I dragged him to the sofa and
made him lean on it with his ass high for me.

“You like this?” I asked him. I kept his hair in my hand and pulled his head back as I
rubbed the head of my cock through his crack.

“Fuck yes” he said with a slight whimpering tone. Abel had a tight, firm ass. It was
small and rounded and I liked how it made my cock look even larger. I let go of his hair and
kneed behind him. I spread his cheeks and took a look at his hole; pink and tight. I thought that
perhaps I would hurt him, but then again, he didn’t like to be gentle. If the pain would be too
much, he would inform me.

I gently caressed it with my finger. At the touch Abel raised his ass up a little further.
This was my sign to delve in. I salivaed my fingers then slowly I pushed one in. I added a second
finger shortly, then a third. His insides felt so tight around them. He contracted then relaxed
whenever I hit something that pleasured him. I had to lubricate him more so I took my fingers
from inside him, to his disappointment, and then coated his whole with my saliva. My tongue
darted around his pink, hairless hole. Abel wanked himself off as I did and took long deep breaths;
it was only going to get better. When I removed myself, the cold air hit Abel’s pink hole and must
have caused him some pleasure as he took one sharp breath. Then I thought it was time to get
rough again, so squeezed one of his cheeks with my hand. He thrusted his ass backwards against
me when I did. Then I took hard bit at the other and he uttered a whelp and a breathy ‘shit’ which
told me he liked it. I squeezed his cheeks more and nibbled at his smooth skin. His body shaking
as he wanked himself harder.

“You are making me unbelievably horny” he said. I wanted to keep teasing him before I
fucked him hard, so I returned my tongue to him. I ran it over his hole and gently licked his
perineum. He loudly moaned in desperation. “Just fuck me already” he said. But his begging only
urged me to postpone it further.
His entire body shivered as my hands ghostly traced up his side. My crotch was pressed against his ass, my cock between his cheeks, and my hands traced his skin till I found his nipples again. I nipped at the skin on his back leaving harsh teeth marks and I gently rubbed his nipples. He was still stroking himself. I wanted to stop him, let me be the source of all his pleasure, but he couldn’t keep himself from grabbing hold of it, so I let him continue. I squeezed his nipples harder and began to grind against his ass. With that I bit and licked his muscular back that had beads of sweat beginning to run down the ridge in the middle like a ravine.

I could hear the desperation in his breathing. He quietly whimpered out my name with a longing tone. It turned me unbelievable horny. I kept one hand on his nipple, and the other entangled itself in his hair. I pulled his head back again and bit his neck. When I did this I felt a shiver run through his whole body and the whole thing tensed beneath me. His moans were exceedingly intense. Then he came. White roped shots out onto the floor. Each shot made his whole body shake and each one was partnered with either an intense moan or my name. I abandoned his body and stood up. I circled it and watched him with my predatory eyes. His eyes were closed, his head pressed against the sofa. His breathing was heavy and his hand still wrapped around his dick. I looked down to the puddle and splatters of white cum.

“Someone’s made a mess” I said and tutted. He laughed with the remainder of his energy. He looked so wiped out. “You’re going to need your energy for this next bit” I said to him. Then I kneeled down behind him and slapped his ass, hard. He whined and cursed. It seemed to jolt him and give him some energy. I took my cock in my hand, spat on it to lubricate it and aligned it with his hole.

“You ready for this?” I asked him.

“Are you?” He sarcastically replied. I just laughed in reply. He relaxed his whole body to which I took as my sign to begin. I pushed the head of my cock into him. Immediately I felt his tightness. I wasn’t entirely sure how far I should put it in. I guess there would be an indication that he would give whenever it got too much. I pushed myself further and further into him. When I got halfway I stopped. I thought that that would do for now. Slowly I built up my momentum to a gentle thrust. But there was no excitement to that. As Neil had advised, I made sure that my motions weren’t static. I made sure that my thrusts had a little rise in them so that my cock bent and curved inside of him. Even though we had only just started, it seemed I had hit something good in him as my name had already began to escape his lips. It gave me the confidence I need to take things further.

I increased my pace and thrusted deeper into him. He was so tight that it was bringing me different pleasurable feelings; it was absolutely amazing. I couldn’t resist omitting my own moans as my cock explored him harder and deeper. My entire length was almost fully inside of him, and not once did he show any sign of pain, only pleasure.

I abandoned all cautions and began to fuck him even harder and faster. The response was colossal. He screamed in euphoria as I drilled him. I grabbed his hair and pulled his head back.

“FUCK ME, CATO” he shouted as I tugged at him and thrust into him. My hips rolled into his ass and my balls swung and slapped his cheeks. He really did love it rough, and so did I. My cock felt harder than it had ever been, and every sensual touch was magnified to extreme amounts of gratification. I removed myself from him and pulled him to his feet. I pushed him against the wall and began to harshly kiss his neck.

“You want it hard and rough?” I asked him. As I licked along his sharp jawline.

“Fuck yes” he said with his hand behind him, around my cock, aligning it to his hole. I
forcibly pushed myself into him and for a while I fucked him against the wall. My skin slapped against his, and he hit the wall time and time again. Both our bodies were coated in sweat, our hair soaked and dripping. The smell of sweat and sex was in the air. It was the best thing I had ever experienced. As I fucked him hard against the wall, I pinched his nipples and bit his neck. It drove him wild in ecstasy. We were both on such a high that it seemed like we would never come down from it. My whole body was shaking when I felt my climax coming. I pulled myself out and came onto his back. Huge amounts of white cum shot up his back. The cumshot was huge and shot up, some of it entangling itself in his hair. He also came, again, with me. This time his cum painted the grey wall that he was pressed to.

The whole room was spinning. The blood has rushed from out of my head and I was seeing spots. I had never felt something so amazing before. I thought that we would both be wiped out for a while, but we both stayed fully hard. Abel pushed himself from the wall and shoved his tongue down my throat and we necked each other.

“Don’t stop” he whispered in my ear. He started to wank me and lick side my ear. My knees quivered. Although I thought we would stop, it seemed that he didn’t want to, and as soon as I felt his tongue in my ear, all that I wanted was to feel his insides contracting around my cock again. I laid him on his back on the floor and fucked him again, harder than before. He took my total hard length and was yelling in ecstasy. This time we didn’t change position the entire time. Instead we just kissed each other and looked into each other’s eyes as we rode out our desires. I hit that spot in him so many times I couldn’t count. I had never heard him moan like this before, or call my name so many times. Abel was so gentle and kind that I would never have thought he would like something so brutal. But I never thought that I could enjoy pain like this either.

Abel scrammed and clawed my back as I almost completely removed myself from him and plunged back inside. His arms clung around me and I felt the skin on back peel off with his fingernails and blood trickle down me. It hurt, but when you’re entire body is filled with sexual sensations, the pain becomes pleasure and I loved it.

He came for the third time on himself. A smaller cumshot, as though he was just emptying what was left over in him. This time he didn’t moan so loud. I think he was too exhausted to. After he rode out his orgasm, he closed his eyes and seemed to go limp. He was still moaning, but now they were quiet, breathy growls. It was like he was drunk. His head was swaying from side to side. His eyelids fluttering. Shortly after, I came again, this one more intense than the first. I pulled myself out of him and bellowed as I released large volumes streams of white cum onto his stomach and chest. Our semen became intermixed on his torso. He opened his eyes and looked up at me. Sweat was dripping from my face onto him and beads of sweat ran down his face and body. At any other time we would think we looked a mess, but after that, we looked exactly how we should’ve looked.

He scooped up some of the cum on his body, both mine and his own, and he put in his mouth. I loved watching him eat it because he made it so erotic. The way his tongue flicked around them and he groaned at the taste. Then he pushed his hands through my hair and pulled me down to kiss him. Our tongues met each other and he passed the cum between us. It was a salty taste mixed with Abel’s meaty flavour. He ate the rest of the cum himself, then I liked his chiselled abs and protruding pecs to clean him and to taste the remnants of it myself. My arms were limp and I struggled to hold myself up. I collapsed next to him. He wrapped an arm around me and rested his head on my shoulder. We were both too exhausted to move.

“That was the best sex I’ve ever had” he told me. I looked at him in surprise.

“Really? Or are you just saying that to make me feel better?” I asked him.

“No, I really mean it. That…that was extraordinary. You made me cum three times!” he
said and laughed. “Where did you find it in you to do that?” He asked me.

“I don’t know. But, this brutal side to me that has been manufactured by my training, I’ve always been afraid of it. It’s been something that I have been either unconcerned with, afraid of or ashamed of. But now, I’ve found something good that it can be used for” I said.

“You mean for fucking me?” he asked with a smirk and I laughed.

“As ridiculous as that is, yes.”. He got up and attempted to pull me up with him, but I would not budge. “I don’t want to move.” I said to him.

“Can you at least move up to bed because I just really want to sleep after that” he said and laughed. I followed him up to his bed and we both fell asleep for a few hours underneath the covers, our hot, sweaty bodies entangled with one another. When I came down from my euphoria, I felt content and happy. I felt the effect of the after-sex hormones in my body and I felt connected to him. It was like some spiritual connection that bound us together.

I woke up and the first thing I saw was his bright eyes looking at me. My heart sank at the beauty of his face. I was so happy.

Having regained our energy, we both got dressed for me to take him up the mountain to draw. I packed a back pack of his stuff and refused to let him carry anything.

“I’m going to be your horse today” I said to him, referring to me carrying the luggage. He squeezed my ass.

“Then maybe I’ll ride you again later” he cheekily smirked. I cringed and so did he. The hike proved taxing and we both had to remain shirtless to keep ourselves cool. We climbed high enough up the mountain to be able to see the whole of the District. When we found a flat ledge, we stopped and looked at the beauty of it. There was just green fields of grass and blocks of buildings. We could see the lake and the town centre which was busy and bustling. From so high up, the whole District seemed beautiful.

“Amazing, isn’t it” I said. Abel agreed. I got out the stuff for Abel to draw. Thankfully, there was a large rock that shielded us from the wind. When I opened the bag, I saw that there were two sketchpads.

“Why did you pack two?” I asked him.

“I want you to draw with me” he said.

“I can’t draw for shit” I said. He shook his head.

“Doesn’t matter. I want to draw you infront of this lovely backdrop, and I want you to draw whatever you want.” I wish I could have drawn him, but I didn’t want to insult his appearance with my poor artistic abilities.

We were both silent as we drew our drawings. I briefly modelled for him with the backdrop behind me before I started my own. I thought that I would draw the view. I was initially happy with drawing, but then grew frustrated and ripped the page out and tossed it down the mountain. Abel giggled at me.

I started again, but still I could not do it. I then thought that if I couldn’t draw anything
good, I may aswell go with my original idea. So I drew Abel, sitting, drawing me. He finished before I did, as usual, his drawings were imacculately details and precise. I saw that he had been making use of the blenders that I had bought him. When I finished my own, I was too embarresed to show him. He pried the book from my hand and smiled contently at it.

“I love it” he said.

“It’s so shit” I replied.

“The quality of it doesn’t matter. I like that you chose draw me.” He said. We stopped drawing for the day and cuddled on the mountain, staring at the District, slowly becoming quieter as the evening was approaching. I told him that Seren wanted to speak to him. He asked me why, but I couldn’t give him any more information. Then I confessed to him of my Cold House trip. I told him that I went there for sex advice.

“You could’ve just asked me” he said but I argued my reasoning.

“If I had to ask you, then you would’ve expected it. It’s always better when it’s a surprise” I said to him.

“Well I guess you’re right, because that was extraordinary” he said and kissed my chest. I stroked his hair.

“I actually got the advice from Neil.” He looked at me with raised eyebrows. I told him more about my conversation with Neil. “He told me to tell you that he was asking about you.” Abel seemed to smile hapilly when I told him he looked healthy. Then the mood changed as I spoke of the man who touched me innapororiately. He looked deeply concerned by it and kept saying sorry for some reason.

“You didn’t do it” I said to him. “And I’m completely fine. Actually, the others there seemed happy about the whole thing. I don’t think he was a well received man.” Abel shook his head.

“I remember that guy being there when I used to go. He’s a pig” he told me and we laughed about it, the tensions quickly killed. I was quite surprised at how quickly we forgot about the whole issue. I guess that, when you’re with someone you love, you tend to forget about the problems and the bad stuff easier.

Evening was drawing and the blue sky was becoming orange. We packed our stuff and started our decent down the mountain. Close to the base, Abel stopped me.

“Cato, I want to speak to you about something” he said and sat on a rock.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Cato, I feel bad for you that I may be the only person who you will ever be intimate with.” The was a sighful discontent to his voice.

“Well don’t.” I told him. “Because I’m ok with it.”

“Yes but, you may not come back from the games, and I want you to experience life to it’s fullest.” He told me.

“So why can’t I do that with you?” I queried. I knelt down besides him and draped my arm over his shoulder.
“You know, sex doesn’t always have to be about love. It can just be about sex and nothing more. Purely physical”

“Where you going with this?”

“Cato, when you leave here in a few months, I don’t want you to feel restricted. If you get the opportunity to have sex with someone then take it.”

“What are you talking about? Do you realise how silly that sounds?”

“It’s not silly! I’m being serious. If you ever feel attracted to another person while you’re there – obviously not in the Games but during training - and you want to have sex with them then by all means do it. I am giving you permission to do so. No, I am asking you to do so because you need to be able to experience sex with more than one person. So I’m telling you now that you can, and you don’t have to feel guilty about it. And besides, you may learn something new that you could share with me.” I thought about it for a moment.

“So does this mean you want us to break up?” I asked him.

“NO” he shouted back in reply. “But, for the time that you go to the Capitol, I want this relationship to be open so that you can experience more from life.” I got what he was saying, and then it didn’t seem so odd.

“Ok” I said. Sarcastically I followed, “I’ll go through the torture of sex with someone just for you because I’m just that good of a boyfriend.”

“I still love you, Cato” he added.

“I know you do” I replied and we kissed.

When we got back to the house we ate food and cuddled on the sofa. We couldn’t resist each other’s touch, however, and again we fucked hard and rough. I really, really liked it rough.
Chapter 12

The day before the reaping that would claim my life was spent initially with my family. It seemed like something I had to do. I had never had a close relationship with them but had always felt that I belonged to them and it was necessary to believe. Since being with Abel I had felt as though I had alienated myself from them. In some sense, that was a good thing. I had become and more individual. But I couldn’t go into the Games feeling like I had no family to fight for or to return. A family in society is always seen as fundamental. My sister needed me more than any of them. The only female role model in her life is a woman who obeys and follows a man concerned only with his business and how others perceive him. Her older brother is slowly becoming a joke and a drunk and her father pays her no attention. Despite not being an immaculate role model to her, leaving her behind felt like abandonment.

Nerves and distress had kept me awake most of the night so I didn’t wake until the afternoon. I walked cautiously downstairs to the living room where I could hear my sister playing with her dolls. Her blonde hair was messy and knotted.

“How are you feeling, Naomi?” I asked her and sat on the sofa.

“I’m fine” she said, her attention divided mostly amongst her toys.

“Are you going to miss me when I’m in the Hunger Games?” I needed to feel like I mattered to more than just one person. She diverted her gaze to me and looked at me with her innocent blue eyes. She nodded. “I’m going to miss you too” I told her.

She asked “Are you going to win?” Her tone was the most serious that it had ever been. It was as if the realisation that I may never return to her was making its way into her mind. Death was something she had yet to understand but the possibility of mine was providing her the understanding. She wasn’t crying, but her eyes were wide with fear.

“I’m going to try to” I solemnly told her. It was all that I could say. My fate was out of my hands. I could fight as hard as I could but all it takes is one person with greater skills or fate on their side. Her tiny body hugged my own. I guess she sensed my empathy as even though I wasn’t a good brother to her, I would miss her.

I went into the kitchen to find my mother who slaved over the cooker. I didn’t make my presence known, my brother did. My looming departure had dawned on him also and he realised how detached we were from each other. We weren’t normal brothers. We fought, and that was normal but never did it feel like we had a real relationship.

I was just standing when he ran and jumped onto my back. The action startled me and I fell straight to ground with him on top of me. He was trying to form a brotherly bond and banter with me. It was so out of character however that I mistook the gesture and immediately pushed him off me. He travelled for a few feet before he hit the ground. My mother was screaming at us both. In anger I stood up and loomed over him, my shadow dominating his foetal figure.

“For fuck’s sake, Cato. I was just messing about” he said through gritted teeth. He rubbed the small of his back with his hand. I apologised and helped him up from the floor. His entire body was flung from the floor and he awkwardly struggled to find his feet.

“You two stop messing about!” My mother shouted. “And Lucius, your sister is in the other room. Watch that foul mouth of yours.” When she collected herself she smiled at me. “I made you some dinner” she said with a smile. She had made it for all of us to eat but made it
sound like it was all for me. She wanted to make me feel special and the gesture was nice. She had cooked a large turkey for us all to eat along with other various vegetables. I ate much more than everyone else. I thought that I could do with the extra protein.

The meal with my family was splendid for most of it. My brother and I conversed more than we had ever before. We spoke of nothing deeply intimate, just light conversation. That was enough though. Throughout the meal my mother asked questions of my training and whether I was prepared or not. I reassured her every doubt which in turn reassured my sister’s. My father, however, remained mostly silent.

Throughout the day we were visited by family members of whom my mother had told that I was going to be volunteering. It included my grandparent and my aunt who was the most kind and loving that she had ever been. I rarely saw them and it had been years without them visiting us or us visiting them. When my aunt saw me she hugged me and screamed my name as though no time had passed since our last meeting and like I was her best friend. She was my mother’s sister and was much younger than her. She was only in her late twenties but still had a teenage spirit about her.

“You’re so big” she said to me and squeezed my biceps. “So strong!” she shouted and guffawed. Her cheery laugh so contagious. My sister had no recollection of who she was and remained on her own in her room, playing by herself. My grandparents were calm and quiet when they visited. They shook everyone’s hands rather than hug any of us and sat at opposite end of the sofa from each other.

“Cato, darling. You’re so much bigger than the last time I saw you” my grandmother said with a pretentious eloquent tone.

“So I’ve heard” I replied and giggled. She didn’t laugh. Her face was stern and pouted as though she was expecting someone to take her photo.

“Good” my grandfather replied. His voice was loud and sounded so spontaneous. It was the only word he said the entire visit.

Their visit was nothing but awkward. They asked boring questions and showed no true interest in anything anyone had to say. I understood then why my father was so reserved and why he never truly interacted with any of us unless it was something of self-interest. He spoke little to his parents either. I think the visit was purely from politeness and also for them to retain social respect. If someone’s grandparents did not visit their grandson before he was sacrificed then their reputation would be challenged and would likely. But this way they weren’t cold hearted and I guess it’s also a conversation starter.

My brother and I made our escape from the room where time seemed to have stopped and went to my bedroom. We made fun of them with hushed voices.

“Lucius, what kind of things are into these days” I imitated my grandmother.

“Liquor” he replied.

“Good” I mimicked my grandfather. “And what have you been up to lately? Have you got a girlfriend?” I switched impression.

“No ma’am. All the women around here are far too good for me”

“Good” I shouted again. Lucius hit and shushed me. After some more mocking we heard them leave. They didn’t bother to say goodbye to any of us and my sister remained in her
room completely oblivious to their presence. My father had maintained his usual silence throughout the day. It was difficult for me to recall that it was less than a year ago that I defended him to my brother.

The sun was setting and the sky was scorched with orange and lilac. Like paint strokes the sky faded and swirled between the colours. It was so surreal and made me think of Abel and how he talked about the colours and their restrictions. It seemed like that evening there was a change in the order or nature and the colours broke free and spread wherever they pleased. As I walked down the stairs, there was a knock at the door. I opened it to Abel. We greeted each other with a hug.

“Who is it, Cato?” my mother called from the kitchen.

“It’s Abel” I said and closed the door behind him. We went straight to my bedroom.

“What are you doing here?” I asked him.

“I wanted to be with you. I know you were supposed to spend time with your family but I didn’t want to leave you alone with them for a whole day. You’ve ranted about them and I don’t want your last day here to be shit” he said. I nodded in understanding.

“It hasn’t been as bad as I thought it would be. My brother and I have gotten along and my aunt was enthusiastic to see me, which was nice. My parents haven’t been any different, however” I said and rolled my eyes.

“Don’t worry, I’m here to make up for that” he said with a smile. He went to kiss me but I stopped him to close my bedroom door tight. When we did, I kissed him sweetly. As my time with him was coming to an end, everything seemed to be much more pleasurable. Tasting his lips was like satisfying a craving that had been churning inside all day.

Just a kiss ignited a flare within me and all of a sudden I wanted to experience the intensity of every part of him. I wanted taste his skin, his cock, his cum. I wanted his hands on me and his tongue in my ear. I needed to feel this gift. My lips trailed their way to his neck like an uncontrollable instinct. I cupped his ass as my mouth like a vampire bit at his neck.

“Cato, you’re entire family is home” he said. However, he didn’t to stop me.

“Is that a problem for you?” I asked.

“No but - ”

“Then quit complaining and let me fuck you” I said and put my hands under his armpits and lifted him off the ground. He wrapped his legs around my waist. I went in to kiss him, but he put his hand over my mouth.

“What if they hear us?” He asked me. He pulled his hand from my mouth and I whispered in his ear

“So try not to be so noisy” I told him. He was wearing a button up black shirt and a couple of the buttons were left undone. I bit his jagged collarbone and he winced in pleasure. I couldn’t help but smile at him. I took him to my bed and laid him on it.

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“Can you be quiet and still be rough?” he asked me as he started undoing his own buttons.

“Can you?” I asked him and licked a trail down his body with each button that came
off, wetting more and more of him of his pale, soft skin. I had answered enough of his questions and he didn’t ask any more. If we got caught then we got caught. My body had reacted to seeing him and immediately filled me with a desire that stubbornly refused to be quelled until I had felt him writhe underneath me. When all of his buttons were undone, he took his shirt off and I took off mine. Teasing wasn’t on the agenda. I had to go straight in. I quickly and violently got rid of all the rest of both of our clothes and I pulled him under the bed sheets with me.

He knelt on his hands and knees and I held his long cock in my firm hand and began stroking it as he lowered his head to kiss me. As I stroked the shaft I felt it throb and pulse as the blood ran through it. He had a large vein on it that I felt his pulse run through. I put his cock next to mine and with both hands I wanked us. We both wanted to moan but to be as silent as we could we kissed each other to mute our voices.

I switched our places so that he laid with his back on my bed. I dipped my head under the sheets and retracted down his body, grabbing it with my hands. I flicked my thumbs over his nipples and he audibly moaned. In punishment I hit him.

“Sorry” he said. The best way to keep him quiet would have been to leave his nipples alone but when I rubbed them with my fingers and squeezed his pecs in my hand he flailed. It was exactly the reaction that I wanted. It was like the moans he was retaining were trying to find other ways to escape from his body. He relaxed when I took his cock into my mouth and let his chest go. I kept my hands on his small waist and moved my head up and down his shaft, slickening the hard member. He laid back with his hand on my head and guided my exploration on his cock.

His squirming showed me that these heightened senses that I had were shared by him. Every touch and every taste was magnificent. I played with his balls and took his cock deep into my mouth. He was involuntarily raising his hips off the bed, thrusting himself deeper into my mouth. He held his breath and came silently. His huge load shot into my mouth. As I emerged from underneath the sheets I swallowed, revelling in his taste of his white seed. He giggled and flashed me his creased cheeks. I kissed him on the cheek as I held his cock in my hand.

“Want more?” I asked him and kissed his neck. He whispered into my ear and my body quivered.

“Fuck me hard” he said and stuck his tongue in my ear. I played with his balls then gently rubbed his hole. He slickened his own fingers and pushed mine of the way. He lubricated himself and bit his lip as he pushed three fingers inside of himself then pulled them out again, and pushed them back in again.

“I want some of that” I told him and he smiled. With his other hand he reached underneath me and he did the same. His three, wet fingers pushed into my hole and he pleasured us both. As he did I rubbed my cock on his body to feel the friction against it. It was hot under the sheets and a fine layer of swear coated our skin. I came onto his chiselled body as he hit that spot inside of me that made me leave this world for a moment and enter euphoria. My eyelids fluttered and my whole body tensed as I released my orgasm onto his abs and chest. He had me feed him my cum, scooping it from his body to put it in his mouth. He sucked my fingers clean all while still finger ing us both.

When I was fully hard again he released me from his fingers and I slowly entered his stretched hole. Still, he was tight and the restriction around my length immediately got my head spinning. I didn’t think I needed to be rough. Being gentle at that moment would have been more than satisfying to us both. Still, however, I rammed my cock into him for the extra enjoyment. I rolled my hips into him, pushing most of my hard cock in. He whimpered and wined erotically.

The bed was creaking and without a doubt each thrust into him sent a bang that
reverberated through the floor boards. Maybe my family didn’t know we were having sex but
without a doubt they could hear that something was going on. The naughtiness of fucking while
someone could walk in at any moment turned me on even more. It felt so dirty and wild. My
brother, whose room was next to mine, without a doubt knew that we were fucking. It was so
public and so hot; especially when I took things rougher and Abel moaned and cursed loudly until
I put some of the bed sheets in his mouth to silence him. He laughed when I did and so did I.

We changed positions only once so that Abel sat on top of my and rode my cock until I orgasmed
again. He took himself off me and I wanked my dick until I shot a huge cum load over my own
body. He wanked himself until he came over me too. The experience felt God given. On our last
day together we were delivered with hypersensitivity. But also, the love that connected us like a
tether seemed to be stronger than ever before. It was like our close proximity made it concrete and
my whole body felt elate as we stared into each other’s eyes.

“You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen” I told him. He blushed.

“I feel the same way about you” He replied. I traced my fingers along his jagged arms and felt the
skin of his tattoos.

“You never finished telling me about your tattoos” I told him.

“You’re right” he said and presented them to me. “So this flower” he said, pointing to the blue and
pink one, “It’s a hydrangea. I read somewhere once that it symbolises perseverance. I believe that
in this world were living in, persevering is something we need to do. We must persist in the things
that we love, especially when everyone is trying to stop us and control us. Hydrangeas, however,
are usually all one colour. They are sometimes blue, sometimes pink, purple or white. I wanted to
intermix blue and pink petals to show both masculinity and femininity. Some people believe that
they should each be reserved for individual genders; I don’t. I have a feminine side and I have a
masculine side and I can’t imagine myself having one without the other. We need both to function.
With just one we could go insane.”

“You’ve really thought these through” I said.

“When you’re making something permanent on your body, you have to make sure that it has a
purpose.” He thought about things so much and there was a beauty to his fascination for the small
details. He finds meaning and purpose in everything. It’s why I loved him, because I like to think
that if a simple flower holds that much mean to him, then he has an infinite number of different
thoughts about me.

“What about the bird?” I asked.

“Birds symbolise freedom. They conquer the earth and conquer the skies. The bird is emerging
from clouds and is it does, it shines. I like to think that the bird is myself. I want to be free in open
skies. The Capitol are our clouds and were prevented from shining.”

“Why are the clouds green?”

“Grey clouds or white clouds are boring” was his reply and he laughed.

“And the wolf?” I turned his arm around to see the wolf howling at the moon.

“Wolves mean many different things. Intelligence, a connection with your instincts, a desire for
freedom. They often represent loyalty and friendliness. I’m not so vain to think that I am intelligent
but sometimes I like to think of myself as a wolf. A wolf howling at the moon, however,
symbolises that they’re seeking guidance for the right path. So to me, it shows me that I know that
I’m loyal and friendly but I’m not always independent and that at times it’s okay to seek guidance when your intelligence or your instincts aren’t enough. Stubbornness and pride are both unhealthy human traits. I am my own person, free and loyal but I know that I can’t survive on my own.” I rubbed my hands over the ink.

“That’s amazing” I told him and he shook his head.

“They’re tattoos and don’t deserve your awe” he said.

“Not them. You. I love how much things mean to you.” He smiled awkwardly.

“I’m thinking of getting another” he said. I raised my eyebrows at him.

“Of what and what for?”

“I want to get an Ivy plant. I was reading about them the other day. I want to get it in honour of us” he said. I was surprised and couldn’t imagine why he would do that.

“Why would you get a tattoo for me? Our relationship may not be forever” I told him. His pitch was low and his voice became quite. There was a sigh like a way to his voice.

“I know that but for a while it felt like it would be” he said.

“Why an ivy plant?” I questioned as I rubbed his arm. As I touched him it was like he emerged from a shell and his head raised up and his green eyes looked deep into my own.

“They represent fidelity and strong affectionate attachment. I realise that I may not have an eternity with you but you make time so trivial.”

“But isn’t the ivy leaf a phallic symbol?” I asked him. I knew this only because in one lesson at school when being taught what a phallic symbol was, the ivy plant came up as an example in a poem.

“Yes it is. So it represents our relationship and it’s a homage to your dick.” We both laughed hard.

“Don’t get a tattoo for that reason” I told him.

“But I like dick. Dick means a lot to me” he teased and I laughed hard again.

“Fine, get a tattoo if you want. At least it’s not my name. This way it can always find new meaning.” He kissed me on the cheek as to say thank you for my approval. “But I want one too” I said. His eyes widened in surprise.

“No you don’t” he said and I laughed.

“If I return, then I get to come back to you and the tattoo holds its meaning. The other outcome is that I die and it doesn’t really matter then.” At first he remained closed off to the idea but as he thought over it he became convinced.

“Then tonight we go and get tattoos” he said.

“Really” I asked with joyful expression.

“Yeah” he said. I pulled him into a hug.

“This is so great” I said and kissed him. We got dressed into our clothes. Abel wore all black. I liked when he did that because his light skin contrasted so much with the dark clothes and his
tattoos and his eyes seemed more vibrant.

“I want to tell my family about us” I said. Immediately a tense atmosphere dropped into the room. “It’s my last day and I’m getting a tattoo for you. I think it is about time that my family learned the truth.”

“But Cato. They won’t accept us.”

“That doesn’t matter. If they don’t like it then believe me, I’ll be cutting them off, not the other way round.” I was adamant that I wanted to. I wanted to be honest about my relationship.

“You really want to do this, don’t you?” he said. I nodded me head.

“My sister is going to grow up and learn the truth about my parents and how horrible they are. If I die then she should know that I was loved by someone and that I had someone special.”

“OK. Then let’s tell them but stop talking about your death. Think positive” he said. He took my hand in his and opened the door. I knocked on my brother’s door and told him to go downstairs and to get Naomi. Abel walked behind me and I guided him to the living room. My father was in there alone. I sat on the sofa with Abel by my side and called my mother in. We waited for a few minutes for everyone to gather. My father was concerned and uncomfortable.

“What’s this all about, Cato?” he asked me with a demanding tone.

“You’ll find out.” I said as I nervously crunched my knuckles. When everyone was in the room I started speaking with a quavering voice.

“I have something that I need to tell you all. It’s something that has been secret to many for a long time.” Nobody said anything, they just sat back and watched. Lucius seemed to have an expression of knowing about him, like he knew what I was about to do. I ran their names off my tongue and took deep breaths. Abel rubbed my back gentle to calm me. It did, just like in the training centre after I was announced as Career tribute. “I’m gay.”

As I said it I felt a pound to my chest. There was nothing there but the intensity of emotion hitting me. The pain vanished almost immediately and I was filled with relief. Speaking the truth felt so good. I looked at all their faces. My father seemed annoyed. My mother was mostly surprised. I think she was waiting for his reaction. My sister had no understanding of what gay meant.

“Abel is my boyfriend. We’ve been together for a while now.” My face was completely red and I was shaking, nevertheless it felt good to admit it to them. My sister shrugged her shoulders.

“I like Abel” she said and he smiled in delight. Then my father spoke for the first time.

“Don’t you smile fucking faggot” he said to him.

I stood and roared. “How dare you talk to him like that” I said with my bellowing voice. My mother trembled and my sister began to cry. Lucius smirked as I spat at the foul man.

“Lucius take your sister to her room” my mother said and Lucius obeyed, not because she told him to but because it was for my sister’s benefit. We all waited for her to be upstairs before we carried on speaking.

“Is this a joke?” my father asked.

“No. No it’s not a joke.” I said with my chest puffed out.
“You mean you’re telling me that my son is a cock sucking faggot.” I felt my blood boil under my skin.

“Yes. I’m a cock sucking faggot” I bit.

“Cato, please!” my mother shouted.

“Please what?”

“Don’t be so crude” she said.

“Is that all you have to say? Don’t be so crude? Your husband is hurling abuse at your own son and that’s all you have to say.”

“Cato you’re obviously confused.” She said. That pushed my anger to another level. I clenched my fist and punched the wall to the hall way. It was thin inner wall so my arm went straight through it. My father grabbed me by the shoulders and threw me to the ground.

“Disgrace” he muttered and retreating to his seat but I got up and tackled him. We both barged into the wooden display unit propped against the wall. The entire thing shattered and broke apart. Ornaments and wood came crashing onto us. I tasted blood and it sent me into a frenzy. I was ready to punch him underneath me but someone pulled me off him. It was Abel. Lucius was standing in the door way his face like stone.

“Cato, it’s not worth it!” Abel shouted at me. I had to close my right eye as blood was running into it from my head. My mother was crying and cuddling a towel that she always seemed to have in her hand. My father emerged from the broken cabinet. His face was bleeding in many places and he had shard of glass stuck in his skin.

“Do you love him?” my brother asked from the door way. I nodded my head and he smiled. That showed me his acceptance.

“Oh my god” my father said. I clenched my fists again but Abel held my arms to relax me. “You are not in love with him. You are fooling yourself if you think you could be in love with a boy.”

“You don’t know how I feel” I spat back. My father was going to reply but it was a like another thought came into his head then he had a look of disgust on his face.

“Oh my god. That’s what you were doing earlier? All that banging. You too were fucking weren’t you.” I couldn’t help but smirk as I saw the disgust on his foul face. I walked towards him with my chest puffed out. He was already shorter than me but his hunched figure made him seem even smaller.

“I fucked him good” I said and revelled in my father’s agonising expression.

“You are no son of mine” he replied.

“You are no father of mine. You never were” I said. He punched me hard in the face and I stumbled back. We got back into a fight. I punched him and felt a crack under my knuckles. Abel was trying to pull me away from him but he couldn’t gather the strength. I was seeing nothing but rage in my eyes. I could’ve killed him if I wanted but that wouldn’t accomplish anything. Where the wall was already weak from where I had punched it, I picked my father up and I ran him through it. Dust sputtered into the air and debris fell with his body to the ground. He was immediately unconscious.

“Cato, let’s just go!” Abel shouted me. I took deep breaths as I controlled my anger. I was
satisfied with what I had done. So very satisfied. It sounded psychopathic but I couldn’t help but revel in it. I had never felt so free than I had right then. My reaction was extreme, however, it felt necessary to pass on the message that I was my own person and that he did not control me. I had challenged a tyrant and won. Sometimes a violent action is what is needed. Abel held my bruised and bloody hand and led me to the door.

“Wait, I need to get something” I said. I ran upstairs as my mother screamed my father’s name trying to wake him up. I grabbed a bag and shoved a small amount of my clothes into it. Then from the bottom of my wardrobe I picked up the box holding my most prized items. I quickly ran down the stairs and made my escape from the house with Abel. Each step felt like I was getting closer and closer to freedom. The moon was shining before us. I looked up at it and I howled because I had been blessed with a sudden instinct and a path to follow that led to my desired freedom. That house and my parents were holding me back for a long time. They restricted me and caused me phenomenal anguish. Now I was individual, my own person. I wasn’t reliant on their support any longer. The truth is, I hadn’t been for a long time. But then it was official and I relied only on Abel. We were each other’s support. But those supports would only stand for the night before they were tore down by The 74th Annual Hunger Games.
I stayed at Abel’s house that night. When we got there I showered and his parents addressed my wounds. The cuts were minor. My father took the most damage. But my body ached as I felt bruises forming on them. Abel assured me that they weren’t noticeable and that he was sure that in the Capitol, they knew how to get rid of a black lip.

“Do you still want that tattoo?” he asked me. I said that I did. We quickly got dressed and went to Abel’s tattoo artist who lived on the North-west border. The man had silver hair and his arms were covered in black and white tattoos. He was a slim with skinny features but had a warm smile.

“I use a special kind of ink so that you don’t need to tend it. Once it’s done there is no need to look after it.” That was good news for me as I didn’t want to be training and tending a tattoo while in the Capitol.

We were both getting an ivy tattoos but we didn’t want them identical to each other. I got mine first. I expected there to be more pain than there was, especially with my raw skin. It was surprisingly manageable. It was even pleasurable. I had my tattoo on my hip. I got undressed and had my clothes over my privates for modesty while the needle turned me into a canvas. It was a single vine of ivy that curved and swirled from the top of my thigh to my hip, then across before stopping right before my Adonis Belt. In honour of Abel, however, I wanted to make it surreal so each leaf was a dark blue and the vine a deep purple. There was burning sensation that lingered when the needle left my skin but again, it was a pleasurable pain. I looked down at the immaculate finished product. It wasn’t huge and its location meant it was easily hidden. When I wore my jeans the top of it peered out above the waist line only slightly. I loved it and so did Abel.

Abel wanted his tattoo to be. His outdid mine by far but I could never imagine myself getting it as he had because it suited him so perfectly.

“I want this one to be the biggest tattoo I’ve had” he said to the artist.

“It'll cost you more.” He warned.

I offered to pay. It would be rude of me not to. And besides, money was futile to me now. Abel, however, did not permit me to view it until it was finished so he commanded me out of the room. While I waited I went to the bathroom and pulled down my trousers and underwear to stare at my tattoo. As I had traced my fingers over Abel’s ink, I traced over mine and it made me feel so close to him. It gave me such a warm feeling as I felt like we had this concrete bond that was now made permanent in the form of a tattoo.

When he was done he pulled me back into the bathroom to show me. He stripped completely naked and I was in awe of it and extremely flattered that this tattoo was in honour of us. Like mine it was vine. It started from his ankle then travelled up and around his entire right leg spiralling around it. When it reached his hip it travelled across the small of his back to the left side of his waist then it curved across his diaphragm to the centre of his chest. It manoeuvred across his left pec and to his shoulder before it swirled like a whirlpool in on itself and finished. Where his heart was, the green vine and its leaves morphed to a red before it returned to green as it departed his heart. Never before had I seen anything like it. It was beautiful.

“I think I’m the first person who can say that they’re covered in phallic symbols.” I laughed at him and approached his body carefully. I rubbed my fingers over his heart where the tattoo morphed.
“So this is to enforce that affectionate attraction” I said. He nodded his head. I lowered my head to kiss it.

“I can’t believe you done this” I said. He giggled.

“Do you like it?” he asked me.

“I like it a lot” I replied. He put his clothes back on and I paid the artist. Abel and I made our way back to his house. We both got undressed and cuddled naked with each other in his bed. We kept touching each other’s tattoos. This was my first decision free from my parents and I felt so good about it.

“Did it hurt?” he asked me.

“A bit but not much” I said.

“Well mine hurt like a bitch” he confessed and laughed with his creased cheeks. We didn’t have sex that night. For my last night in the District I didn’t want to and neither did he. I just wanted to hold him and lay with him. It was the appropriate thing to do. We drifted off asleep until the morning came and we were woken by the sound of hovercrafts and voices over speakers demanding everyone gather for the Reaping.

Everyone dressed smart for the Reaping. Knowing that the whole of the Capitol has its eyes on you makes you self-conscious so everyone tries to look their best. I wore a pair of slim fitting slacks that Abel claimed showed off my ‘perfect plump ass’. I had a white button up short sleeve shirt that I tucked into my slacks. Again, it was slim fitting to show off my physique. It fit tightly around my pecs and my shoulders. My biceps filled the sleeves. Brutus has demanded that I wear something to show off my strength. To appeal to the sponsors I had to show that I was strong. Without a doubt my clothes showed that.

Abel wore an all back outfit. I had told him to do so as it was when he looked best. He slickened his long fringe and combed it back. The short sides of his hair were cut shorter to accentuate his face. He looked really beautiful. If I we weren’t both filled with nerves and anxiety then I would have thrown him onto the bed and fucked him hard. He was also giving me an amatory stare with his green eyes. They reminded me of a cat but his refined appearance was so sexy that he looked more like a panther.

Before we left I stuffed into my pockets the Polaroids of him of us as well as one of his drawings of me and Finnick Odair’s cloth bracelet. We stood at the doorway to the house taking deep breaths as we mentally prepared ourselves for what was to happen next.

“I don’t want to do this” I admitted.

“You shouldn’t want to. I’d be surprised if you did” he said and gently rubbed my arms.

“I don’t want to leave you” I said and pulled him into a tight hug. I thought that my heart was beating fast but I could feel his racing pulse pounding in his chest. He was probably more nervous for me than I was for him.

“When we step out of this house, you and I are no longer boyfriends” he told me.

“When you return - ”

“If I return” I interrupted.
“Don’t say that, please” He said and he sniffled. I felt his tears wet my shoulder. “When you return then we get back together and we will stay together for as long as we can.”

“I like the sound of that” I said and was crying myself. There was another call over the speakers.

“I think we better go” he said and pulled his face off my shoulder. We kissed for one final time before we let go of each other and opened the door. I was now in the eyes of everyone and I have to be a true career tribute. I had to stand with my shoulders back and my chest out. I had to smile at people and look like I was prepared even though nothing can prepare you for the games.

We joined the queue to be catalogued. Every year they pricked our fingers and scanned our blood to know who we were and to tick us off the list. Anyone who didn’t show was hunted down. Rarely did that happen. Only once during my life had they had to find someone. Nobody knows what exactly happened when they did but they shot him and left the body there for his family to find.

Abel and I made our way to the other 18 year olds. The youngest were positioned at the front by the stage. The eldest were at the back. We were all encaged by barriers and peace keepers. I felt like a prisoner. I was a prisoner.

Everyone was aligned in perfectly straight lines. I was the tallest there and could see over the crowd to the front of the stage. On it was the mayor, the previous Victors and our District’s escort. Her name was Esmerelda and she was one of the majority in the Capitol; eccentrically outrageous. She wore a light blue dress that clung tightly to her little figure. Around her neck was a bright green fleecy scarf. She had curly brown hair that was shaved on the one side. Her skin tone was pale as though she was sun deprived. When everyone had gathered, she was given the go ahead to start. She walked forward on the stage and grabbed hold of the microphone, then in her ridiculous Capitol accent she began to speak.

“Hello ladies and Gentlemen” Esmerelda said. As she spoke her hands moved and swayed in bizarre gestures. “I am here today as District 2’s escort to randomly select one male and one female tribute to have the honour of partaking in the 74th annual Hunger Games.” All the cameras were facing her. When she finished her introductions they panned over all of us. I saw the camera pan over myself and Abel on the large screen that was built in the centre every year to air the Games. Both of us stood taller than the rest of the crowd so we couldn’t hide our faces. I felt myself blush.

“First, a message from the Capitol” she said and her hands gestured to the screen. The same film that they played every year was shown to us. War. Terrible War. When the film finished Esmerelda went immediately to a large glass bowl containing the names of every eligible girl in the District. Her hand dived straight in and swirled until it found the one it was looking for. In her tall heels she scurried back to the mic to read us all the name.

As was planned an unknown girl was chosen and Clove volunteered in her place. Clove practically skipped to the stage in pride and zeal. She stood there looking over us all with a smile on her lips.

“I’m stuck with a psycho bitch” I whispered to Abel. He audibly laughed and some people turned around to look at him. He silenced himself by biting his lip.

“And now the boys” Esmerelda said. She hastily made her way to the bowl that held mine and Abel’s names. I wanted her to take her steps slowly to give me more time at home with Abel. The camera panned over the boys while she walked. Again, I saw it pan to myself and
Abel. Be a career tribute I said to myself so I furrowed my brow and bit my lip as if in anticipation of what was next. She pulled out a name. Not just a name though; a person’s life and she held it in her hand. If her hand had moved only slightly in another direction then that would be another’s life she held. They’re death would be imminent. I started to hate her and the power she held.

She read out the name. “Jesse Stornwell” she said. The blacksmith’s son. He was a good kid, always kind and friendly. He walked to the stage less nervously than I expected. I guess he knew that there was someone to volunteer in his place. But I wanted to stay silent. I wanted to remain one part of a crowd and stay like that until it was over. I could be safe and be with Abel. It was a cowardly decision but one that I seriously contemplated.

Jesse stood on stage and Esmeralda prodded him and lifted his arms as the though examining him like a butcher examines a pig before slaughter. A wave of muttering passed over the crowd like wind over a field of grass. When it hit me it was like it formed from guilt that sunk into my heart. I couldn’t condemn this friendly boy to a sacrifice when I could take his place and have greater odds of survival. He was no fighter. Esmerelda seemed dissatisfied with the tribute and scammed back to the microphone.

“Are there any volunteers to take the place of Jesse.” Everything was silent as they waited for me. The silence was heavy on my heart. I tried to hold my breath and stay alive. I could imagine my father’s face as I refused to volunteer. Nobody knew that I had left home so to everyone else I was still his glorious son. If I didn’t he would have but one son. A prodigal drunk. It was a satisfying thought, to see him truly without me as his son to the people of the district, but I was better person than that.

“I volunteer!” I shouted. Heads turned and the crowd parted for me. I walked away from Abel and into the open aisle formed by a division between the boys and the girls. I looked at Esmeralda who smiled manically with a blood thirsty grin.

“Now that’s more like it” she said. She flicked her hand at Jesse to dismiss him. He walked off stage and I tried to look as confident and brooding as I could as I climbed onto it. My eyes immediately met Abel’s even though he was far in the distance. I held myself together as best as I could.

“And who may this very handsome boy be” she said with her eyes to the crowd and tilted the mic towards me.

“Cato Varenus” I said. My name boomed over the speakers. I felt like I wasn’t convincing enough as a career tribute because I had a numb pain in my chest. I had to make my non-existent excitement real. “And I am ready to fight” I said. A small number of people clapped and whooped. Those were the delusional. Among them I imagined was my mother and my father still trying to live a lie that I was their child. The small, visible cuts on my face must have made me seem more violent. It was a good start for sponsors who would see me already as a fighter. I was guided to stand next to Clove as Esmerelda closed the Reaping. We were guided by peacekeepers into the justice building.

I was guided to a small room devoid of furniture. I was all alone waiting for whoever would visit me. After a few minutes a peacekeeper brought Lucius and Naomi in. When the peacekeeper left I pulled them both into a hug.

“Mom and dad aren’t coming” Lucius said.

“I wouldn’t have let them in if they did” I confessed. I caressed my sister’s head. She grinned up at me.
“Look after her, Lucius. Be a good brother.” He gently nodded his head with discontent. This occurrence had opened his mind to his duties to our family. In just a few days he had matured beyond recognition. Finally, he was becoming an adult and was owning up to his responsibilities. It was present in the way he held himself. He wasn’t slouching, but stood strong with his shoulders back. His clothes were clean and the scent of alcohol was gone.

I crouched down to Naomi’s height to look her in the eye. “You’ve got to be strong while I’m away” I told her. She nodded her head.

“Will you be coming back?” she asked me. I sighed and had to pull my eyes from hers.

“I’ll try” I said with my eyes to the ground. She kissed me on the cheek and hugged my crouched figure. A peacekeeper knocked on the door to tell us our time was up. We only had a few minutes but it seemed to pass in a matter of seconds. He opened the door and grabbed them both by the shoulders. In just a blink they were physically pulled from the room and the door shut behind. They were gone. We didn’t get the chance to say our goodbyes.

Before I even had the chance to mourn losing them the door was opened. Abel ran into the room and threw his arms around me.

“I love you, Cato” he muttered through sobs into my shoulder. I rubbed his back to comfort him. I didn’t know what to do. Our relationship was so strong that I felt I couldn’t just say goodbye because that would be too formal and it wouldn’t be enough. Yet To say that I would survive and return would be a lie because I had no clue as to what would happen to me.

“I will see you again, won’t I?” he asked me.

“Abel - ” I started.

“Cato, just tell me you will see me again.” He knew that I might not but I think he needed some assurance that this wasn’t over for us.

“You will see me again” I told him. He smiled but his smile died quickly. It didn’t give the comfort he was looking for because he knew as much as me that from this moment on my future will be unpredictable. I was taking steps into darkness that got progressively darker. Which way I was going was a mystery to me. Each blind step I took from the moment I volunteered was either a step towards Abel or a step towards death and there was no way of knowing which of those it was.

I kissed his lips lightly and looked deep into his eyes. I stared at his face to embed in my mind his image. I thought of how horrid and sad it was that the last time that I might see my love would be of his tear stained face. With my thumb I wiped away his tears and felt his soft, freckled skin. Neither of us knew what to say or do. Goodbyes were notoriously difficult. We just looked at each other, preserving our memories and our love until we were separated before we were ready. Abel was my final visitor. As he was removed from the room I was removed also and guided to a car. It drove Clove and I to the train station. I was still trying to mourn my losses but in my ear was Esmeralda raving about our schedule and The Capitol lifestyle. Glorious foods awaited us. Balls and parties. Customary furnishings and designs. Clove was silent but loving every moment of this. I felt lost.

We were guided from the car to the train station by Peacekeepers who surrounded us and trapped us. Esmeralda walked onto the train first. I followed behind. The carriage we entered was the most lavish room that I had ever set sights upon.

The floor was lined with a soft, purple carpet and the walls papered with a grey, ornate
pattern that had stripes of gold running throughout it. The tables and chairs were made with a dark mahogany wood and the chairs cushioned with a purple material. Window after window flooded the room with natural light that shone off the shiny metal surfaces of the small tables next to each chair that had on them small vases with a single white rose in each. Everything in the room was expensive.

Running next to the table was a mahogany buffet table with a glass top. On it was a huge selection of food immaculately displayed. Next to them were crystal looking glass jugs that had red wine and brown liquor. Whiskey tumblers and wine glasses were displayed in a cabinet behind glass doors. Clove and I stood in awe of the room. For Esmerelda, this was every day. I wasn’t really listening to her. She said something about refreshments whenever we wanted. The whole thing was very overwhelming but still my emotions hadn’t caught up with me.

Brutus and Lyme boarded the train behind us with two other victors. Whether or not they would mentor us I didn’t know. It was always Brutus and Lyme who ran most of the training along with Serena. I only ever dealt with Brutus, however, who was always Brutal. I always noted how Lyme had a gentler and more sympathetic touch.

We all sat around the table. Our mentors grabbed pristine plates and collected food from the buffet. I didn’t have an appetite but Brutus placed a protein and carb rich meal plateful before me. “Eat, Cato.” He ordered. I picked some chicken and stared at it. I tried to eat but couldn’t find any pleasure in it so I put it down. Brutus leered at me. He shook his head and ripped into his food. It was comforting, however, when Lyme ran her hand over my shoulder and back as though to say it’s okay and not to worry because she was there to help. Clove was enjoying the food. I felt like we would both benefit by exchanging primary mentors. Psychopaths, surely, would understand each other better. They began going over the plan, but I had heard it all before. It was simple enough. Appear harsh and brutal to gain sponsors.

The train departed at a phenomenal speed. Trees flashed by the windows as stripes of green and brown against an overcast sky yet it hardly felt like we were moving. The food was beginning to look even less appetising and my stomach churned nervously. I dismissed myself from the table.

“Cato, come back here” Brutus demanded.

“I know all this stuff. If there’s anything new I need to know you can tell me later” I said. I walked towards the only door in the cabin which opened automatically as I approached it. On the other side was an avox who guided to my room. The room was more lavish than my own at home by far. I took off my shoes and socks and felt the soft carpet against my feet. I untucked my ridiculous shirt and began undoing the buttons. One of them refused to come undone and I got stressed and frustrated with it so pulled the shirt apart and ripped rest of them off. The buttons fell to the ground and the shirt came apart. I peeled it off my body and let it fall to the floor. There was an outfit hung in the wardrobe. It was exactly the same as mine only of better quality. I guess they wanted us to look as appealing as possible for when we arrived. I took off my trousers but left my underwear on to save my modesty from anyone who might walk in. I tucked myself underneath the bed sheets that soothed my skin. They were so soft that it was like a caress.

Everything was silent and it was the first moment I had with my thoughts although I wish I hadn’t had it because my emotions flooded my whole body. A cascade of anguish just made me feel numb like a sudden shadow cast by the clouds that makes you freeze and shiver. Then I felt an emotional punch.

The connection that Abel and I held broke. The tether that held us together in such close relations was being stretched as I was pulled away from him. It was pulled tight like a string and it felt like that string was being plucked and played. It was teasing and torment from the Capitol.
bragging their control over ever part of our lives. They wouldn’t even give us the pleasure of love. That tether was pulled too far and it snapped. I felt myself separate from Abel as the realisation of my aloneness came over me. I was in pain; physical and emotional, but I couldn’t do anything about it. I just had to sit in silence and feel the pain of losing someone I loved so dearly that it felt like they were the reason for my existence. No matter where I was or what I was doing I seemed to always know how he felt; when he was happy or upset but from that moment I couldn’t imagine what Abel was feeling. We had lost our connection, cut like string with a pair of scissors. We were separate people. We were alone.

I traced my hand over the tattoo to try and find him in it but all it did was bring me more anguish. There was no connections there. It was just ink on skin that had memories in them that would cause me only suffering.
Chapter 14

I laid in the bed for a few hours until the sun began to make its decline in the sky. I had sat in silence until then. There was a television hung on the wall so I turned it on. It broadcasted only things related to the Games. Caeser Flickerman’s large white grin was the first image that came on the screen. This year his hair and eyebrows were dyed a repulsive powder blue. Everything was so fake and synthetic in the Capitol. I sat as one by one the master of ceremonies summarised this year’s tributes with Claudius Templesmith. When I tuned in they were discussing a boy. Who it was I didn’t know.

“He’s a brute!” Caeser declared with an ecstatic tone. “To beat this one you really have to be an elite specimen” were his words. Claudius sat and nodded in agreement. They moved swiftly onto the next District; District 3. I realised that this brute they discussed was myself. I guess Caeser’s ‘warm’ words would prove an aid in the game for sponsors and for that I was grateful.

I sized up each contender as I had been trained to do. From what I saw there was not a mass of threats. District’s 5 girl had a cunning look about her. She may have had something up her sleeve that would prove a challenge. The boy from District 6, Jason, also appeared to be a contender along with the boy from District 8 who was tall although not muscular. Nevertheless in his disposition there was a determination that could not be ignored. District 11’s male tribute also appeared a threat. He was very tall and muscular. Thresh was his name. Based on first impressions, he seemed to be a rival of my own. I thought that perhaps a rivalry with him could prove to be highly detrimental to my survival and I thought that he would benefit as an ally. Those were the only threats that I saw based on first impressions other than the career tributes whom formed an alliance almost every year.

District 12, however, surprised me and I think everyone. A little girl was chosen as tribute but her sister volunteered in her place; Katniss Everdeen. She was a beautiful girl with dark hair and olive skin. For every reaping they showed, Caeser and Claudius spoke over it in commentary but for her they spoke not one word as the footage plays. As the young girl was chosen she screamed for Katniss who in turn ran out into the open to her sister. Some Peacekeepers stopped her and she then volunteered. A tall, handsome and muscular man took her sister away. It was immensely moving to watch. After it, Caeser and Claudius both gushed over how touching the whole thing was.

The male tribute was a boy named Peeta Mellark. He was of medium height and had ashy blonde hair that fell in waves over his forehead. His skin was pale. He had a stocky build that showed he was not malnourished like his counterpart in these Games. I found him oddly attractive even though he did not conform to the chiselled and muscular look that often defined male beauty. But I felt sorry for him as he walked with utter fear towards the stage. He could hardly speak. I had a feeling that him and Katniss both knew each other as they looked at each other in terror.

The next segment was a recap on previous games. I tried to watch it but could not. Watching people younger than I take the lives of innocents is torturous. I didn’t want to think about it or about how that would be me soon. I went to sleep instead. There was nothing else for me to do and the emotional stress made me exhausted.

In the morning when I woke I found myself in catharsis. I was free from the anguish that was inflicted upon me. I missed Abel still but having found that emotional release I found it easier to focus on what was next; the Games. I put some clothes on and walked into the carriage where the food was. Esmeralda and Lyme were both the only ones awake. Lyme sat at the table eating toast
from the breakfast buffet. I joined her rather than Esmeralda who sat on a chair with a diary, prowling over our routine.

“How you feeling, Cato?” Lyme asked me.

“Better than before now that I’ve had time to process everything.” I said. She rubbed the top of my hand with her warm hand.

“I know this is difficult but if you want to win you’re going to have to numb those emotions until this is all over” she said. I grabbed some toast myself and began to eat. It was peaceful for a few minutes before Brutus and Clove both came in and began piling plates of food with eggs and sausages. Again, Brutus placed a plateful in front of me.

“You need your protein” he said. He was my mentor and was there to help me in these Games. To ignore his advice would be foolish and having not eaten since before the reaping I was starved and my appetite had returned. Immediately Brutus began to talk about our schedule which attracted Esmeralda to the table.

“The first thing you’ll do is the tribute parade.” He said. He explained to us that it was the first opportunity to give the sponsors a proper impression of ourselves as they saw us in the flesh for the first times. Esmeralda unsurprisingly began to talk about beauty.

“You’ll each have your very own prep team who upon arrival in the Capitol will make you look as beautiful and appealing as you can be. You’re stylists are working on your costume as we speak.” She said with such a gleeful smile that I could not reciprocate. Being paraded like cattle at an auction wasn’t something I found appealing. “I’ve been in contact with them and they are working on something amazing for you both!” she boasted again. She was evidently a proud woman who took pride in her tributes. As the most successful District in terms of the Games it was clear why. For close to 20 years she has been the District’s escort. With such a success rate she has not forwarded into other grounds but revelled in the victories. In her entire time as escort, she had hardly changed.

“Did they tell what we’d be wearing?” I asked her. She shook her head.

“It’ll be a surprise!” She said with a delightful grin and a sparkle of excitement. You’d think after 20 years all this sadistic festivities would become quite tedious. I said no more and sat in silence and ate my food as the train to me ever closer to my death.

I was drinking a cup of coffee and thinking of Abel when through the window adjacent to me I saw the approaching city. There was a large expanse of water then, from the moment the land began, tall buildings began to jut from the ground. They progressively got taller the deeper into the city. They were all made from steel, glass and concrete. I walked to the window and stared in awe at the sheer size of it. It stretched as far as my eyesight would show. Between the towering buildings in the distance I saw grey mountain ranges tipped with white snow that encircled the Capitol. I thought then that even the citizens of the Capitol were trapped but then I realised that they own the mountains. Just like the mountain in District 2, these were their property and they utilised them for military purposes. Many of the peaks perhaps contained in them armies of peacekeepers and war machinery that, should they want to, could terrorise the entire nation of Panem.

Although I was in awe of the Capitol, I was also intimidated. The appearance didn’t hold back in boasting its wealth, power and dominance. President Snow was a greedy man who desired power and nothing more. But what is power if you cannot boast it? He certainly wastes no expense in asserting his command.
In a sudden flash everything went dark as we entered a tunnel. I stepped back from the window and looked to my mentors.

“Darlings, get ready” Esmerelda said and stood up as she felt the train’s speed deplete. With the palms of her hands she smoothed out the creases of her dress and she slapped her cheeks to bring a redness to the pale skin. A bright, white light flooded the cabin and through the glass the muffled sound of cheers could be heard. Clove and I both turned to the window and looked out into the train station. Masses of colour greeted us. Bright pinks, blues, greens and oranges; the whole spectrum of bright and eccentric colours assaulted my eyes. As they focused to the change in lighting I saw that each colour was in fact a person standing in a pristine white room.

They all cheered and waved at our train. They all had arrived to see us. That was such an abnormal experience for myself. I was uncomfortable with this amount of attention. They continued to whoop and cheer as I saw other trains curve around other platforms and come to a halt. They must have been some of the other tributes.

Esmerelda guided us first to an elevator. It was made entirely of white metal. As the elevator travelled up, a blue light travelled up black numbers on one of the wall. From -2, we went up to G. When we got out there was a pathway formed from peacekeepers to a black jeep. We climbed into the back of it and it drove us to wherever were needed to be next. A glass window was on either side of the walls of the jeep. Like prisoners in a cage, Clove and I looked out of it at the Capitol and absorbed their world.

We were enclosed in large streets by high buildings. People walked in their bright and peculiar clothing. Slick, shiny cars drove past us people congregated in groups sitting at benches or on tables, some drinking colourful drinks and laughing. I wondered how many of them were talking about me. How many of them were thinking of placing their bets on me? Perhaps none. The tribute parade would help them decide that.

We stopped outside what Esmeralda called the Remake Centre in which we would prepare for the Parade. We stepped out of the car and began our walk to the door. As we did I turned and looked down a long, wide and empty road that had the appearance of a stadium. It was formed by having raised seats stretching the length of it. At the end was a tall building with a huge balcony. The building was one of the tallest around. I hadn’t realised I had stopped to stare. Esmerelda sighed my name and urged me forward. As soon as we entered the centre a group of peacekeepers surrounded Clove and I individually and began to guide us away. Everyone else remained behind. I heard Esmerelda stress about how we had little time. I guess she wasn’t as good at her job. The sun was high in the sky and the tribute parade usually didn’t commence until it was dark. I guess I was naïve to think the beautification process would be a quick one.

Clove and I were both separated and taken to other elevators. Boys and girls were to get ready separately. Boys are assigned female stylists and girls male stylists so that we can be made as appealing as possible to the majority. My stylists name was Diana. I didn’t meet her at first but instead was taken to my prep team who were a bunch of typical Capitol twats. The peacekeepers told me which door to go through. I cautiously opened it and heard a high pitch male voice before I saw anything.

“He’s here!” he screeched. There were two men and a woman. One man’s skin was a deep orange colour which contrasted heavily with his silver eyes and hair. The other man’s skin was dark yet seemed fairly natural but his hair was a pure white and pulled back into a long pony tail that fell to the small of his back. The woman had tattoos on her face. From the edges of her eyes came colourful lines that swirled and bunched. I imagined that tattoos here were easily reversed unlike back home so as to keep up with the ever changing trends. Her hair was pink and styled into tight curls that exploded from her head like springs. Curly hair seemed to be one of the trends
for Capitol women at the time. I had barely shut the door when they grabbed hold of my arms and began to guide me forward. They introduced themselves as my prep team and each told me their names, Brenton, Damien and Aaliyah.

“Look at you, you’re a star!” Brenton exclaimed. He was the orange skinned one. I was much taller than all of them and found myself looking down upon them all. They’re first instruction was for me to take off my clothes and stand on the tiled area. I was uncomfortable with this but soon the whole of Panem would be watching me bathe so there wasn’t a point in saving my modesty. I took off all my clothes and handed them to Damien who discarded them immediately into a bin. I left my underwear on not expecting them to want me to take them off also.

“We’re going to need them too, darling” Damien said. His voice got higher at the end of his sentence like he was always asking a question.

“You serious?” I asked and they laughed.

“Well of course we are” Damien said. Aaliyah walked around to me and started tracing her long fingernails over my body. I tensed and stayed still like a statue when she did.

“We’re here to make you look fabulous. You’re not going to have any privacy in the arena, Cato.” I sighed and took off my underwear. Aaliyah took them to the bin while the men seemed perplexed by my manhood.

“Is there something wrong?” I asked them. Slowly they shook their heads.

“Nope. Absolutely nothing wrong whatsoever.” They began first by showering me. Apparently they thought me incapable of showering myself. I had lost count completely of how many situations had made me utterly uncomfortable at that point but two pairs of hands scrubbing my body with sponges and another holding a powerful showerhead over me was becoming normal to myself in this strange society. I forbid them, however, of cleaning my groin although Brenton tried to. I shouted at him for doing so. Being a career tribute came easier to me than I thought it might. It’s easy to lose your temper. Controlling it is the difficult thing. After I was bathed clean like an incapable child they told me that I had to be waxed.

“What for?” I asked them.

“Nobody likes a hairy man” Damien said. I disagreed but I wasn’t very hairy anyway and neither was Abel so my insight on the matter was very limited.

“You may not, but here, in the Capitol, people like men to be hairless” one of them added. I didn’t argue with them but still I thought it odd that I would need to be hairless. I was under the impression that my body was my own and that I wouldn’t be parading it. My naivety was showing through. I laid face up on table like a surgery patient and they applied wax and strips to my chest. I had little visible body hair on my torso. Between my pecs was a small patch of blonde hair and I had a thin, faint blonde treasure trail. But still they felt the need to wax my entire body. I screamed in pain the first time not expecting the treatment to be that painful. I guess it was naïve to think that ripping hair from my body would be painless experience. I was like a fish out of water and it made me feel so small that I couldn’t anticipate anything. They savagely rid my entire torso of its hair and I bit my lip to stop myself screaming anymore.

“We are going to do your groin now, just a heads up” one of them said. I raised my head from the table.

“What? Why?” I queried. I didn’t want them to be touching me.
Because that’s what we’re supposed to do” was the reply I earned. It was pointless me arguing back. It was more painful than the torso. They ripped out my pubic hair and it was excruciating. I couldn’t have bit lip without drawing blood so instead I let my screams loose. It seemed so futile to me, but they made my groin hairless apart from the smallest patch of hair at the base of my cock. Perhaps they left that purely out of courtesy, but then again, these people were making me fight to the death; was courtesy a concept they truly understood?

My legs were waxed hairless and then my arms and my armpits. My body was raw and pink but honestly there was a satisfying relief to it as the absence of pain felt like a gift. Once hairless I was given a sort of paper poncho that I was told to wear. They cut my hair to whatever style they thought fit. The sides were cut as short as the scissors allowed it to be and the top simply tied up. They told me they were making it seem professional, whatever that meant. After that they shaved my face and applied some kind of ointment that made my skin smooth and soft and free from any blemish. Damien went to my eyebrows with a tweezer but Aaliyah stopped him.

“Don’t touch those!” she exclaimed. She seemed genuinely panicked by this and I thought it frivolous. They finished they’re beautification by styling my hair and made me stand before them as they admired their own work. I felt utterly objectified as they stared at me in awe. I was just… me.

Without any word they left the room and didn’t return. It felt like a prison and without knowing what to do I just waited in there, trapped. I paced the room and tried to keep my sanity. Living within its shadow and remaining unchanged by it takes a lot of strength but being in the Capitol was another story. I was adamant that I wasn’t going to be sucked into the glory of victory. From the pockets of my trousers that they had throws in the bin I saved my precious items. I clutched Finnick’s cloth bracelet and stared at a picture of Abel. I needed the protection they gave me in order to remain myself.

After what felt like an hour my stylist came in. She was a tall, slender woman with blonde hair that was shaved to my own length. Perhaps she was attempting a new trend. Stylists, it seemed made the trends but didn’t buy into them. Behind her she dragged a clothing rail that had on it my costume hidden within black clothing bags.

“Cato, it’s lovely to meet you” she said in a legato voice that seemed to hang onto the vowel sounds longer than expected.

“Likewise” I replied. I was expecting some sort of gesture such as a handshake but nothing of the sort occurred. “My name is Diana and don’t you think my prep did a fa-a-abulous job on you” She said and grabbed my chin in her hand and turned my whole head as she analysed me with her squinted eyes. When she let go I just muttered a yes and turned to the mirror to see myself. To me I hadn’t changed. I was just looking at a hairless version of myself.

“Is that my costume?” I inquired and her entire face lit up and her white teeth gleamed at me.

“You’re going to love it!” She said and began to unzip the bags and pull them off. As she did, she spoke in fragmented sentences. “Now…Atticus and I…that’s Clove’s stylist…we wanted to show everyone this year that District 2 are winners! What with the highest success rate…so we’ve gone for gold…and we’ve gone for gladiator.” She had finished unpacking the outfit and it hung before me on clothes hangers. I was quite honestly surprised by it because there seemed to be very little to it. “I’m going to leave you to put this on, I trust you can do that?” She asked. Before I even answered she had departed and again I was on my own. I put the costume in distaste of it.

I felt as though the stylists had confused gladiator and Spartan as my outfit seemed to resemble more so the latter. I understood also as to why my hairlessness was required. I wore wearing a cloth skirt that was shiny gold. It was loose and fell halfway down my thigh. For underneath I was
given only a very skimpy brief that was closer to a thong than anything. I wore it as low as possible to hide as much leg as I could. Also, I had no shirt but a large belt that I assumed was to resemble a victory belt; also Golden. I wore that as high as possible to hide myself. My arms had only heavy, golden gauntlets that covered only partially my forearm. On my head, a golden circlet that resembled the hollow crown that was presented to the victor of the games every year; again, all gold. I stood staring at my utterly ridiculous reflection. I felt so exposed. Soon I’d be paraded around like cattle at an auction and I’d be objectified by more than just three stylists. I shortly had to embrace it, however, as I could not oppose this. There was only one costume and they wanted to make sure that it didn’t hide my strong shoulders, or my large pecs and all that shit. I was a servant to the Capitol, given the duty of entertainment. I thought that only meant in the arena but I was also being made into a sexual object for the lustful visual satisfaction. I was happy that I was made to do this and not Abel. This was something he often dealt with. I only had to experience it the once.

Diana came back in with two of what looked like two golden bracelets but she opened them and then closed them around my biceps.

“These will draw attention to these powerful arms of yours!” she said. When she was done she had me spin and model the costume for her. Her hands went straight to her mouth and she gasped. I thought something was wrong but she was actually happy. “You’re a picture. A picture! Those sponsors are going to see how strong you are you’ll be swimming in them! Swimming!” When she was happy it seemed she repeated words. Once she had ceased to be overwhelmed by her own handiwork she returned to her usually self where her body seemed to mimic the legato slurs of her voice. She signalled for me to follow her out of the room. I grabbed the photos and the bracelet and stuffed them in my belt.

As I walked to the elevator with her I tried to look tough and confident. I sucked my stomach in and tensed my abs for anyone who may see me. I pushed my shoulders back, held my chin high and puffed my chest. In the elevator I relieved myself from that but as the door opened to a huge room flowing with people and horses I physically prepared myself again and walked confidently to the chariot at which Brutus was at. Clove was already there when I arrived. Her outfit was very similar to my own, but her skirt fell lower and she had a breastplate that covered her entire torso. She seemed somewhat amused by my own attire.

Brutus explained to me that when on the chariot we both had to appear fierce and intimidating. He then lowered my belt and told me to show everyone my body. I wanted to protest but a career would brag not whine so I put on a cocky disposition and fell in love with.

I looked around the room at the competition. Thresh was more intimidating in person but he had such a loving disposition. His district partner was a young girl named Rue. He treated her like a younger sister. She looked nervous and he draped his arm around her shoulder and held her close to himself. Just next to them I saw District 12. Surprisingly, they weren’t dressed like coal miners but had skin tight black leotards on. I looked at Peeta. In person, he seemed even more attractive to me. The costume showed off his body well. He had a slim waist and broad shoulders and his body curved nicely. He was not muscular but stocky and I could see tell that he had nothing to be ashamed of underneath but rather to be something to be content with. I snapped myself from trance when I realised I was supposed to be intimidating. Nevertheless, I was somewhat thrilled when I saw him look back at me and eye my body up and down. Our eyes met only very briefly before he pulled his away and diverted his attention to his District partner.

I was inclined to believe that Peeta had an interest in me that I was more than willing to pursue. I recalled what Abel and I had agreed on, that while I was here I was free from our relationship. I found it funny though because I wasn’t free at all. I was imprisoned in the Capitol but being with Abel, that was what really made me feel free.
The entire room went into a sudden panic and we were all pushed onto our chariots as all our mentors reminded us of what to do. The doors opened slowly and the chariots began to move. District 1 left first. After they had gotten so far it was our turn. The cheers were insanely loud and once we were amongst it all I found it to be prodigious. Every seat that I had seen earlier was filled. We rode through what was like one long stadium as people cheered for us. I had completely forgotten about my exposed skin. My mind was occupied with the thoughts of having the correct posture and also with the screams of mad citizens. Hearing my own name be cheered was so bizarre. You would think it flattering but it just reminded me of the brutality of the games. These people cheering us and rooting for us; they didn’t care about us one bit, all that mattered to them was that we were able to kill. They cheered not for us but for themselves. They looked for a winning bet or for publicity as a sponsor.

I saw then that there were huge screens around the place that had the tributes’ images on them. I saw myself on one and it was then that I was reminded of my body. I furrowed my brows and scowled at the crowd to make myself seem menacing. I realised that that may have seemed stupid so I cockily smirked instead and turned my eyes from the crowds as if I was better than them. I had to have the arrogance of a career.

The screams of the crowds became ecstatic when District 12 came out on their chariots. Every single screen had on it both Katniss and Peeta with their hands held in the air and a long cape of fire spurting from their backs. After that I didn’t hear my name. I heard very little other than one giant wave of sound that was most probably a mix of ‘Katniss’ and ‘Peeta’ being cried. But I found it satisfying that Peeta was gaining this attention and that I was momentarily freed from it. District 12 was poor, very poor and this could truly help them.

As was done every year, the chariots stopped outside the training centre and from the enormous balcony President Snow gave a very brief speech. It was the same every year, but this time around he finished with a statement of honouring the tributes’ “sacrifice”; a statement I can only imagine was aimed at Katniss. I never once thought her a contender but it seems that the Capitol had fallen in love with her. Whether she had any real skills or not I couldn’t envision but I could tell that she had won the affections of many sponsors and truthfully, having support can be more vital to survival than fighting skills. That made her into a threat.

The horses pulled the chariots through a large door in the training centre and we all climbed out and greeted our mentors, stylists and escorts. They seemed thrilled enough with mine and Clove’s performances but there was a tension in the air that I could feel. District 12 had outshone everyone and I don’t think many were pleased. I found myself unconsciously staring at them. They were off to a great start. Peeta and I made eye contact again but this time we both held it. I think he knew that I was attracted to him also. He checked me out one more time and I checked him out. Undeniably, we both wanted each other. Katniss and Haymitch, their only mentor, both looked over at me. I think they noticed me staring but misinterpreted it as a hateful leer. Haymitch and their escort whisked them both away to the elevators. Still, I couldn’t stop my staring. Just before they left the room Peeta looked back at me one final time. I understood though that what was happening would not only make things interesting during my stay at the Capitol but come the games, make things more difficult.
Being from District 2, I stayed on the second floor of the training centre. Peeta would have been on floor 12; the penthouse. I was informed, however, that every floor had the exact same layout. The city view from the floor to ceiling windows was the only thing that changed. The room in which I took temporary residence were more lavish than any I had seen. The elevator led straight into a huge open plan room with ceilings as high as my own home back in District 2.

There was a living room there with a huge L shaped sofa placed with the intention of being directed towards the television embedded in the wall. Velvet curtains and shimmering, patterned wallpapers made the rooms appear royal but polished and new. The wallpaper, much like on the trains, had thin lines of gold running through the patterns. I believed it to be real gold. I wouldn’t put it past them to waste precious metals; they waste precious lives every year. Raised on a glass platform was a metal and glass dining table. Sitting on glass made it feel as though when you ate, you hovered in the air. Crystal chandeliers hung from the ceiling throughout the room. Soft, fur pillows were scattered on chairs and the sofas. Smooth, shiny rugs trailed along the floor at certain points. There was a glass staircase that led to a balcony that had a black floor but glass barricades. It over looked the living area. Upon the balcony were two doors which were mine and Clove’s rooms. Our mentors and Esmerelda would be living below us through a small corridor that led behind the wall that the TV was on. Clove and I were both in awe of the magnificence of the room. It was almost indescribable. Nobody else seemed to be effected by it, however. It made me self-conscious.

Much to my own and Clove’s annoyance, dinner was served the moment we arrived and Esmerelda demanded that we eat immediately out of courtesy for the chefs. Our food could have been warmed at any moment but it was part of Capitol etiquette that stood in place like an unspoken law. People adhered to the social customs more than the rules set out by their president. We both ate in our ridiculous costumes not being given the privilege of a comfortable clothes. It was not only uncomfortable to sit in but unnerving as both Diana and Atticus would stare at me. What they were staring at I couldn’t figure out. It would be acceptable and not narcissistic to think they would be staring at my exposed body, but I was more inclined to think that they were still admiring their own work, not that there was a lot to it.

The food was admittedly glorious. I had never seen such a selection before. Across the huge table was ham, chicken and lamb, carved for us by avoxes at the click of a finger. Vegetables I hadn’t even heard of before were laid out for us as well as modified versions of those I had heard. Not only did these people dye their skin purple and blue, but the potatoes too. I ate until I began to feel my stomach swell and I became self-conscious of my food baby and depleting abs. Such trivial things had never before bothered me. I hadn’t been in the Capitol for a whole day and already my physical appearance was becoming a primary concern of mine. I tried to be unfazed but unconsciously found myself tensing my abdominal muscles.

Dessert was served shortly after but I physically couldn’t eat any more so I instead took that as my opportunity to leave. I politely dismissed myself from the table and made my way to my room. Esmerelda reminded me to be back by ten to see the highlights of the parade. Clove remained behind, revelling in the expenses that showered her. As soon as I closed the door everything went silent. Only then was I able to process my thoughts and emotions.

Everything had been full throttle. Once alone I could feel my emotions and hear my breathing and feel the temperatures of the room I was in because up until that moment my mind was occupied with other thoughts. With the reclaiming of myself came all my feelings that were supressed by being a tribute and I wanted to jump back into that life even if it meant being paraded.
I was homesick. I missed Abel. I missed what it felt like to lay in his bed with him and feel the radiating warmth from his pale skin. I missed how it felt when he would run his long fingers gently over me. I yearned to see his creased cheeks whenever he smiled and to rub my thumb across his smooth face. I longed for the taste of his lips and his musky scent. I wanted to go running with him again and get into a race with him because I always beat him and I would tease him about it. I wanted to be confused and upset and have him console me because he always knew what to do and what to say. Abel was my home. He was my longing and I missed him so dearly.

I walked to the ginormous window in my room and looked out into the superficial city. I couldn’t see far and a building blocked most of my view, but the streets were huge and my eyes could still take in a lot. The streets were still full with the celebrations of the games. I formed a delusion for myself so that for a moment I could cope with everything. I imagined that the celebrations were for me. In a way, they were, but truthfully these people hadn’t the slightest understand of who I was. They celebrated people like me. They celebrated my abilities to kill along with every other tributes. And they celebrated death and their power and their dominance over the districts because that’s what the Hunger Games is all about; oppression, fear, sadism and power.

I pulled the curtains over the window and I stripped nude, leaving the costume in a pile in the corner of my room. I took a shower in the en-suite bathroom - a privilege I would never have had at home – which took ten minutes to figure out how to work. A whole display of buttons had various settings. Hot water and cold water. Shampoo and body wash. There was a shower head, but also jets from the walls and more above me that cascaded water like a waterfall. At one point as I fiddled with dials, every jet was blasting water at me and I struggled to even breathe. After a while I managed to change the setting so that only the jets above me showered me with water. I couldn’t figure out how to operate the shower head alone but that didn’t matter as the shower turned out to be surprisingly relaxing after the initial attack of water.

I dried myself with the softest towel. My costume had been removed when I got out of the shower and on the bed was laid a set of clothes for me to change into and a set of pyjamas. I never wore pyjamas however so I folded them and left them on the floor at the base of the bed. I put on the clothes which were just a black t-shirt and grey trousers that were very tight fitting yet comfortable. Watching the highlights of the parade was admittedly difficult because not only was I paraded, I was now being forced to watch it and relive it. Clove liked hearing people chant her name but I did not share that quality because I understood they were rooting for me to be the top killer. Getting to see Peeta again was nice, however. Everyone else in the room was outraged by District 12 stealing the limelight. They were all fools.

I went back to my room as soon as it was over and again stripped nude and crawled underneath the bed sheets. They enveloped so tightly and within moment I was asleep. Being a rough sleeper meant that whenever I woke I was in a different position to which I slept. Brutus came into my room and woke me up in the morning before training. I was deep in sleep and when was disorientated when I woke up. He was talking to me and but I wasn’t hearing what he was saying. He pulled open the curtains to let light into the room and I couldn’t see anything.

“And put some fucking clothes on” I caught him say and left the room. In my sleep I had removed the duvet from off my body. I was so embarrassed. I was completely naked and visible and had remained that way for the whole time he was in the room.

My first day of training was utterly plain. I’ve always enjoyed exercise but I didn’t find enjoyment in my training. Instead I felt as though I was revising the basic weaponry skills that I learned in the training centre when my own abilities had succeeded that which was being mentored to me. The
lead trainer had warned us not to ignore survival training and I wanted to learn more of that but Brutus had ordered me to show off my strength. Many tributes like to hide their abilities in training as tributes are kept together. It makes them less of a target. As a career tribute, however, I was already a target and it was my aim to intimidate everyone and induce fear. I wasn’t the kind of person to do that. But it was a persona that I had to wear. I was still wearing a costume.

I boasted my skills with a sword and a spear. Immediately people kept away from me. When us careers were training, every stood just a small amount further away from us than they did from the others. I had even intimidated Marvel. It seemed that his abilities were limited. He specialised with a spear like I with a sword but I was also skilled with spears and knives and other instruments. My diversity came as a threat to him and I found that he put up barriers with me. He was a skilled fighter. He was tall and clearly in shape. When with me he boasted of his abs. His narcissism would be his downfall. Throughout the day however his confidence diminished as I outperformed him often. I mean not to be narcissistic also but I was his superior. Taller, stronger, more diverse and, when I wore my costume, more brutal.

The display of my abilities however also for the benefit of the sponsors. Much like at the training centre at home, there was a room that overlooked the training room from which many important people observed, including Seneca Crane, the game maker, and others who I imagined were potential sponsors. In the time we were given on the first day I was satisfied that I performed correctly. I stayed mostly to weaponry, diverting only for a small session of weight training to exhibit my strength and a brief study in snares which was firstly, so that the sponsors could see that I wasn’t stupid and understood that survival takes more than strength, and secondly because it was in good sight of the camouflage station which Peeta was at. Perhaps that behaviour was slightly creepy but he was alluring. Something about him was drawing me to him and I wanted to walk down the path that was being laid out in front of me. I didn’t realise it at the time, but he offered a small piece of home that could help with my painful longing. I made a plan in my head as I made poorly made snares, as to how I would approach Peeta. It was inevitable that I would do it. I couldn’t stand by and admire him from a distance even though part of me felt like that was all that I could do.

I decided that I should try my best to be near him at all times, even if that simply means being in the same room. The only room we ever shared, however, was the training room. That meant that I would have to approach him in there but in a subtle way that won’t frighten him or cause suspicion to anyone else. So every day in training I would be within eye sight of him so that I could wait for him to be alone and I could approach him. A number of the tributes had left the training room and called quits, including Clove. I remained, waiting until Peeta left. When he eventually did I remained with just Marvel, the boy from District 8 and the boy from 10. I grew weary shortly after he left and I departed. That may have left a bad impression on the few sponsors that remained overlooking us and would give Marvel a delusional ego boost, but I was satisfied that I had displayed enough of my strength and skill to capture their interest of the sponsors and frighten those who needed to be.

With the exception of a couple of peacekeepers, the centre was seemingly empty. My footsteps seemed to echo. I saw that one of the elevators was closing and I quickly got in before it shut. The emptiness of the rooms was making me feel alone and into my mind my emotions began to become real again. I pushed the button for floor two and let out one, long breath. My heart jumped in surprise when a voice made it known that I wasn’t alone in the elevator.

“Hello, Cato” a male voice purred behind me. I turned quickly to the corner of the elevator and saw Finnick Odair with his hands behind his back and his one shoulder pressed against the wall.

“Hello, Finnick” I replied and nodded my head. I spoke to him then as I would to any other victor but I was pleasantly surprised when he pulled me into an embrace.
“You are so big!” he shouted. I was only nine when he last saw me. It seemed strange that someone would be so friendly and forward after such a long time and especially since I was perhaps twice the height I was back then. I didn’t hug him as I was too surprised. He separated himself from me and looked me in the eye. I was slightly on edge with what was happening but his eyes were so green, so wise and he smiled at me and his cheeks creased like Abel’s and then it was like the buildings of the Capitol melted around me and from them sprang the small stone houses of my Districts. Cherry blossom trees and cobbled streets were all around. Then I smiled back at him and the atmosphere completely changed. My anguish was gone and I was comfortable and safe in Finnick’s presence.

The elevator door opened to my floor and Finnick’s hand shot to the buttons and the door closed. “Let’s go to the roof. I want to talk” he said with a smooth voice that warmed my body. The roof was not particularly large but it looked out over the Capitol. Nothing was on it, just surrounded by a force field that prevented tributes from killing themselves.

“How are you feeling, Cato?” he asked me and rubbed my arm. I wasn’t okay and he knew that, he was once a tribute, but when I told him that I was good I wasn’t lying because I felt good with him. The comfort I used to feel from fumbling with a piece of cloth and retaining the memories were back with me. He walked like Abel; with confidence and good posture, either with his head tilted up slightly or facing the ground, watching footsteps.

“I pity people like you, forced into the games.” He said.

“Everyone who takes part in the games is forced into it” I replied. He smiled at me.

“You know what I mean. From the day your parents signed you up to the training centre you were in the Games.” We looked out at the city. The sun was still in the sky but it wouldn’t be long before it began to sink. There was a golden tinge to all the buildings from its warm rays. Ironically, it made the Capitol look beautiful.

“Weren’t you in a training centre?” I asked him. I held this man in such high esteem but I knew nothing about him. District 4 was a career district but the fact they did not work in the same way as my own District was unbeknown to myself.

“Districts 1 and 2 operate on the same system” he began. He took pauses between his sentences as though to keep you waiting. It was part of his flirtatious personality, always teasing, always keeping you on edge. “District 4 is the only other with a career system, but ours is different. Instead of being enrolled, teenagers volunteer themselves. As you know, I was 14 when I entered the games. I was a popular child and it gave me a bit of an ego. I thought that I could be a victor and claim glory. I was very naïve. Behind my father’s back I signed up and after school would train for the games. None of the previous victors teach, however. Instead they live as quiet of a life as they can. The games…they change you. I don’t mean to offend, but in District 4, we’re not as savage.” I laughed slightly and he looked at me with a perplexed smirk.

“It’s torturous in District 2” I said. It was meant to be a humorous reply and I laughed slightly, but that slipped into a realisation of my childhood and how utterly brutal it was. He continued to talk after that.

“I trained with a trident and grew obsessed with my fitness. Unhealthy for a child of my age, I know. The training gave me a testosterone boost and I grew taller and more muscular than the others my age. I would’ve stunted my growth if not for the supervision of the trainers. This meant I was chosen to volunteer. My father didn’t find out until the reaping but by the reaping I had tasted the games. I almost didn’t volunteer. Almost left someone else die in my place. After I did, everything got worse…” He was sad. I could hear it in his voice and his smile was a desperate smile that faded quickly. I wouldn’t have known what to do if Finnick didn’t remind me of Abel.
The normal social boundaries didn’t exist with our relationship and I gently put my hand on top of his for comfort. It worked. Like Abel did when I touched him, Finnick relaxed. He tried to change the subject quickly.

“Do you remember that piece of cloth you took off me when I looked after you?” He asked. I nodded and from my pocket I pulled it out with one of the photos of Abel wrapped inside of it. I had kept them with me during training for the support they gave. His face lit up when he saw it in amazement.

“I’ve always treasured it” I said. “It’s stupid, but it gave me support. I often liked to remember your visit. I enjoyed your presence. It gave me comfort because you were so comforting.”

“Am I still comforting?” he asked me.

“More than I remembered” I answered and he laughed. He took the cloth bracelet from my hand and examined it.

“My mother died when I was 8. She was executed by peacekeepers for taking home fish from work. It wasn’t the correct punishment for the crime but the head peacekeeper was laid back and when crimes like that happened, he let them be. We were poor. She was just trying to put food on our plates. After I came back from the games and I was moving into the Victor’s Village I found a box of her clothing. This is a strip from one of her t-shirts that I tied around my wrist always. I let you have it because it gave me support. You were in system and I had feared that you would end up a tribute so I thought that my mother could watch over you.” He held up his own wrist and on it was another cloth bracelet. It had been twisted and tied in a knot to have a better appearance of a bracelet. “I made another one after I went home. Cato, it’s amazing that you’ve kept it so long” He said and tied it back around my wrist. “And who is this?” He asked. Talking about Abel would usually have been painful, but Finnick’s homeliness made talking about Abel so easy because I didn’t miss him; it was like he was with me still.

For a long time I poured my heart out to Finnick and wouldn’t shut up about Abel. We spoke and spoke about him and his interest in my relationship was pleasant because the socialising made me feel human again.

“So, before you left. Did you say your goodbyes?” He asked me. I shook my head.

“We didn’t say goodbye, because if that moment was the end of us, we didn’t want it to be a sad goodbye that would haunt him forever. Before we left for the reaping we broke up but when he came to visit me before I departed for the Capitol he asked me to tell him that he would see me again. I told him he would, even though we can’t know it. But that…it felt like a better way to go about it than saying goodbye.” Finnick nodded in understanding.

“Do you miss him?” Finnick asked me. My silence was my reply. He cuddled up to me on the balcony and wrapped his arm around me. It was extremely comforting. “Why did you guys break up?” he asked.

“I hardly know you, Finnick. Why am I telling you all this?” I asked. He didn’t reply to me but I got the answer myself. “You remind me of him, you know. You share qualities, perhaps not many but enough to make it seem like he’s with me.

“When I met Abel, we both seemed to talk about anything and everything while we hardly knew each other. It was strange. I guess that’s why I’m telling you all this. I’m reliving that time” I said.

“You don’t have to answer any more of my questions if you don’t want to.” He said to me. I shook my head though.
“I was sexually inexperienced. Breaking up gives me opportunity to gain life experience should I return to him. It also means I get to experience more from life should I…should I die. But I think it was also for his benefit. He didn’t tell me this, it’s something that I’ve thought of since. If I die, it makes it easier for him to move on because our relationship would have already ended and the thought of me being with someone else, I think, will also make it easier for him to be with someone else.” Silence grew over us as the sun’s decline behind the mountains had almost concluded.

“I lost my virginity the night before the games. Another tribute had offered himself up to me and I agreed…I killed him the next day.” This time there was no quickly fading smile. There was no smile at all, just a frown.

“Himself?” I asked. Women threw themselves at Finnick daily and he always teases and flirts with them. I didn’t for a moment think that Finnick was gay. “You’re gay?” I asked him.

“No. Not gay. I believe that anyone can be attracted to anyone, regardless of gender. I like women and I like men.”

“So, you’re bisexual?” I queried. He shook his head.

“I am nothing. There is no need for labels. I like people and sometimes they have dicks and sometimes they have vaginas. I don’t see the point as trivial things like labels.” I understood what he meant, but I would always think of myself as homosexual. There were beautiful women but none made me feel anything romantic or sexual. “So…are you going have sex with anyone while you’re here?” He asked me.

“I don’t know” I replied. I wanted Peeta but I didn’t know whether what I imagined would happen would actually materialise. Even if the opportunity was there, I didn’t know if I would go ahead with it because my connection with Abel would perhaps overpower my desire for more. I told Finnick this and he just laughed.

“Sex can be just physical and completely devoid from attachment and emotion.”

“I know that” I said back. “But I’ve only ever been with Abel.”

“And you want to keep the memories you have with him pure. And he doesn’t know whether you have or haven’t been with anyone new.” He got it completely, and I nodded. “Cato, sex isn’t impure. It’s just an experience and what you have sex with another person will only taint what you’ve had with Abel if you think it too. In reality, it doesn’t.” The wise way he spoke reminded me of Abel. It was as though he was speaking to me. I was innocently oblivious to Finnick’s advancements and instead just thought he was offering me advice, not offering himself to me. I mulled what he said over in my mind. I wanted to have sex but I wanted Abel too.

Finnick was different to Abel. He was individual but he was also just like him. He looked similar, walked similar. Our relationship was similar but still he was slightly different; and he was new. Perhaps that was why, when he put his hand on my waist and kissed me, I kissed back. His taste was not like Abel’s, it was unique. He was flirtatious and his movements smooth and confident whereas Abel was firstly gentle, then rough. When we were speaking he reminded me of Abel, but when he kissed me he was someone else completely and that was why I didn’t feel guilty because it meant that I couldn’t get attached to him and I could be free. If I returned nothing would change because I would still love Abel the same way and if I died, I could die with the same memories I would have. Memories of Abel and me.
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