



Mid-Chapter 24

I don't know how Johanna's still on her feet. She's only had about an hour of sleep since the Games started. Haymitch and I volunteer for the first watch because we're better rested, and because we want some time alone. The others go out immediately, although Finnick's sleep is restless. Every now and then I hear him murmuring Annie's name.

Haymitch and I sit on the damp sand, facing away from each other, my right shoulder and hip side by side to his. I watch the water as he watches the jungle, which is better for me. I'm still haunted by the voices of the jabberjays, which unfortunately the insects can't drown out. After a while, I lean softly against his shoulder. "I know that you're not telling me something," I say.

"Katniss," he says in a whisper, "I have a special alliance that includes you, but I have to keep the details a secret for a little bit longer, even from you. I think you'll understand when it is revealed. Who knows, it may not even happen."

I do understand how hard it is to keep a secret with hundreds of unseen cameras and microphones recording us. The Capitol viewers will be glued to their sets so they don't miss one wretched word. "Fine," I hiss unable to hide my frustration at more concealed intentions. "Keep your secret."

“I don’t know what kind of deal you think you’ve made with Peeta,” says Haymitch, “but you should know that he made me promises as well.” Of course, I know this, too. He told Haymitch they could keep me alive. What he doesn’t know is that I never made a deal to keep him alive. I only promised myself to go down fighting, to give President Snow his sacrifice and keep my family safe. “So I think we can assume he was lying to one of us.”

This gets my attention. I never thought of what kind of deals Peeta could arrange. Could he actually mess up my plans from outside the arena? I raise my head and meet Haymitch’s eyes. “Why are pointing out the obvious. Why are you saying this now?”

“Because I don’t want you forgetting how different our circumstances are. If you die, and I live, there’s no life for me at all back in District Twelve. I’ll just return to the bottle,” he says. “I haven’t been happy in a long time, and I will never be again.” I start to object, but he stops me with the raised palm of his hand. “It’s different for you. I’m not saying it wouldn’t be hard. But there are other people who’d make your life worth living.”

Haymitch pulls the chain with the gold disk from around his neck. He holds it in the moonlight so I can clearly see the mockingjay. Then his thumb slides along a catch that I didn’t notice before, and the disk pops open. It’s not solid, as I had thought,

but a locket. And within the locket are photos. On the right side, my mother and Prim, laughing. On the left, Peeta's photo, taken from the school's yearbook.

There is nothing in the world that could break me faster at this moment than these three faces. After what I heard this afternoon...it is the perfect weapon.

"Katniss, your family needs you," Haymitch says.

My family. My mother. My sister. My pretend cousin Gale. And of course, Peeta. But Haymitch's intention is clear. He is giving me his life in exchange for a second chance to please the Capitol, President Snow. To let me know I shouldn't ever have doubts about it. That I have to keep on trying. That's what Haymitch wants me to take from him.

I wait for him to mention the baby, to play to the cameras, but he doesn't. And that's how I know that none of this is part of the Games. That he is telling me the truth about what he feels.

"No one really needs me," he says, and there's no self-pity in his voice. It's true since all those he cared about were killed years ago, and he refused to open his heart to others, which would have put them unknowingly in danger. A handful of secret friends will mourn him. But they will get on.

I then realize when I look at Haymitch the one person who will be damaged beyond repair if I die. Peeta, who would inevitably turn into Haymitch. "I do," I say. "I need you, Haymitch. Like it or not,

you've become part of our family.”

He looks upset, takes a deep breath as if to begin a long argument, and that's no good, no good at all, because he'll start going on about Prim and my mother and everything and I'll just get frustrated and angry. So before he can talk, I stand and walk away.

I only take a few steps before I find myself staring at the moon. I miss Peeta and begin to long for that kiss I only felt once before. In the cave last year, when I was trying to get Haymitch to send us food. I kissed Peeta about a thousand times during those Games and after. But there was only one kiss that made me feel something stir deep inside. Only one that made me want more. But my head wound started bleeding and he made me lie down. I sigh as I fight back the tears, knowing that it can never be.

It's the first crack of the lightning storm—the bolt hitting the tree at midnight—that brings us to our senses. It rouses Finnick as well. He sits up with a sharp cry. I see his fingers digging into the sand as he reassures himself that whatever nightmare he inhabited wasn't real.

“I can't sleep anymore,” he says. “One of you should rest.” Oddly, he appears embarrassed from what we all too well experience, the torment of a victor's nightmare. “Or both of you. I can watch alone.”

Haymitch won't let him, though. “It's too dangerous,” he says. “I'm not tired. You lie down,

Katniss.” I don’t object because I do need to sleep if I’m to be of any use in the upcoming battles. As I lay down next to where the others are, Haymitch kneels down beside me and hands me the chain with the locket, then rests his hand over the spot where my baby would be. “You’re going to make a great mother, you know,” he says. He joins Finnick to continue his watch.

His reference to the baby signals that our time-out from the Games is over. That he knows the audience will be wondering why he hasn’t used the most persuasive argument in his arsenal. That sponsors must be manipulated.

But as I stretch out on the sand I wonder, could it be more? Like a reminder to me that I could still one day have kids? Well, if that was it, it was a mistake. Because for one thing, that’s never been part of my plan. And for another, what good would I be as a parent if I do wake in the middle of the night screaming.

As I drift off, I try to imagine that world, somewhere in the future, with no Games, no Capitol. A place like the meadow in the song I sang to Rue as she died. Where all the children could be safe.

When I wake, I have a brief, delicious feeling of happiness that is somehow connected with Peeta. Happiness, of course, is a complete absurdity at this point, since at the rate things are going, I'll be dead in a day. And that's the best-case scenario, if I'm able to eliminate the rest of the field, including myself, and get Haymitch crowned as the winner of the Quarter Quell. Hopefully my death will appease President Snow and thus save my family. Still, the sensation is so unexpected and sweet I cling to it, if only for a few moments. Before the gritty sand, the hot sun, and my itching skin demand a return to reality.

Everyone's already up and watching the descent of a parachute to the beach. I join them for another delivery of bread. It's identical to the one we received the night before. Ten small loafs of bread from District 3. That gives us fifteen in all. We each take one, leaving ten in reserve. No one says it, but ten will continue to divide up perfectly if we all live. Somehow, in the light of day, joking about who will be around to eat the rolls has lost its humor.

How long can we keep this alliance? I don't think anyone expected the number of tributes to drop so quickly. What if I am wrong about the others

protecting Haymitch? If things were simply coincidental, or it's all been a strategy to win our trust to make us easy prey, or I don't understand what's actually going on? Wait, there's no ifs about that. I *don't* understand what's going on. And if I don't, it's time for Haymitch and me to clear out of here despite what Haymitch thinks he has lined up.

I sit next to Haymitch on the sand to eat my bread. For some reason, it's difficult to look at him. Maybe it was all that honesty last night. Maybe it's knowing the brief amount of time we have left. And how we're working at such cross-purposes when it comes to who should survive these Games.

After we eat, I take his hand and tug him toward the water. "Come on. I'll teach you how to swim." I need to get him away from the others where we can discuss breaking away. It will be tricky, because once they realize we're severing the alliance, we'll be instant targets. Haymitch is reluctant to join me in the water, but the subtle wink of my eye convinces him to play along.

If I was really teaching him to swim, I'd make him take off the belt since it keeps him afloat, but what does it matter now? So I just show him the basic stroke and let him practice going back and forth in waist-high water. At first, I notice Johanna keeping a careful eye on us, but eventually she loses interest and goes to take a nap. Finnick's weaving a new net out of vines and Beetee is preoccupied with drawings that he has made in the sand. I know

the time has come.

While Haymitch has been swimming, I've discovered something. My remaining scabs are starting to peel off. By gently rubbing a handful of sand up and down my arm, I clean off the rest of the scales, revealing fresh new skin underneath. I stop Haymitch's practice, on the pretext of showing him how to rid himself of the itchy scabs, and as we scrub ourselves, I bring up our escape.

"Look, the pool is down to eight. I think it's time we took off," I say under my breath, although I doubt any of the tributes can hear me.

Haymitch nods, and I can see him considering my proposition, weighing if the odds will be in our favor. "Tell you what," he says. "Let's stick around until Brutus and Enobaria are dead. I think Beetee is trying to put together some kind of trap for them now. Then, I promise, we'll go."

I'm not entirely convinced. But if we leave now, we'll have two sets of adversaries after us. Maybe three, because who knows what Chaff's up to? Plus the clock to contend with. And then there's Beetee to think of. Johanna only brought him for me, and if we leave she'll surely kill him. Then I remember. I can't protect Beetee, too. There can only be one victor and it has to be Haymitch. I must accept this. I must make decisions based on his survival only.

"All right," I say. "We'll stay until the Careers are dead. But that's the end of it." I turn and wave to Finnick. "Hey, Finnick, come on in! We figured

out how to make you pretty again!”

The three of us scour all the scabs from our bodies, helping with the others' backs, and come out the same pink as the sky. We apply another round of medicine because the skin seems too delicate for the sunlight, but it doesn't look half as bad on smooth skin and will be good camouflage in the jungle.

Beetee calls us over, and it turns out that during all those hours of surveying and focused thought, he has indeed come up with a plan. “I think we'll all agree our next job is to kill Brutus and Enobarria,” he says mildly. “I doubt they'll attack us openly again, now that they're so outnumbered. We could track them down, I suppose, but it's dangerous, exhausting work.”

“Do you think they've figured out about the clock?” I ask.

“If they haven't, they'll figure it out soon enough. Perhaps not as specifically as we have. But they must know that at least some of the zones are wired for attacks and that they're reoccurring in a circular fashion. Also, the fact that our last fight was cut off by Gamemaker intervention will not have gone unnoticed by them. We know it was an attempt to disorient us, but they must be asking themselves why it was done, and this, too, may lead them to the realization that the arena's a clock,” says Beetee. “So I think our best bet will be setting our own trap.”

“Wait, let me get Johanna up,” says Finnick. “She’ll be rabid if she thinks she missed something this important.”

“Or not,” I mutter, since she’s always pretty much rabid, but I don’t stop him, because I’d be angry myself if I was excluded from a plan at this point.

When she’s joined us, Beetee shoos us all back a bit so he can have room to work in the sand. He swiftly draws a circle and divides it into twelve wedges. It’s the arena, not rendered in jittery strokes but in the smooth engineering lines of a man, whose mind focuses on every detail and on far more complex things. “If you were Brutus and Enobaria, knowing what you do now about the jungle, where would you feel safest?” Beetee asks. There’s nothing patronizing in his voice, and yet I can’t help thinking he reminds me of a schoolteacher about to ease children into a lesson. Perhaps it’s the age difference, or simply that Beetee is probably about a million times smarter than the rest of us.

“Where we are now. On the beach,” says Haymitch. “It’s the safest place.”

“So why aren’t they on the beach?” says Beetee.

“Because we’re here,” says Johanna impatiently.

“Exactly. We’re here, claiming the beach. Now where would you go?” says Beetee.

I think about the deadly jungle, the occupied beach. “I’d hide just at the edge of the jungle. So I

could escape if an attack came. And so I could spy on us.”

“Also to eat,” Finnick says. “The jungle’s full of strange creatures and plants. But by watching us, I’d know the seafood’s safe.”

Beetee smiles at us as if we’ve exceeded his expectations. “Yes, good. You do see. Now here’s what I propose: we use one of the hourly events as a trap. Which ones would be the quickest, most deadliest?”

“The lightning bolt that hits the tree,” I say.

“Yes. That would work well, but luring them close enough to the tree could put us in danger as well. Has anyone seen exactly how the lightning catches its victims?” asks Beetee.

There’s a long pause as we realize we hadn’t. It seems a bit fantastical to me, impossible even. But why? I’ve set thousands of snares. Isn’t this just a larger snare with a more scientific component? Could it work? How can we even question it, we tributes trained to gather fish and lumber and coal? What do we know about harnessing power from the sky?

Haymitch takes a stab at it. “Lighting seems unpredictable. It could take everyone in the section.”

“It could. We could investigate and see if the ground has been set up with a conduit substance that helps snare the victims. If there is, we could see how far from the tree it extends,” says Beetee.

“How do you know that there needs to be a conduit... thingy?” asks Johanna, clearly not convinced.

“Because electricity needs a ground, a path to travel,” says Beetee, pleased by Johanna’s ingenuity. “I doubt it’s natural lightning nor the tree a real tree. You know trees better than any of us, Johanna. It would be destroyed by now, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes,” she says glumly.

Haymitch pauses to make solid eye contact with Beetee. “I don’t think that we have time to investigate something this complex.”

“Ah, right. How about the poison fog?” Beetee suggests.

“They could out run it. And it would be too risky for us to ambush them near it,” says Finnick.

“The monkeys?” asks Beetee.

“Wild animals are too unpredictable, even if they were programmed by the Gamemakers,” I point out.

“Very true. The blood-rain would not work,” says Beetee.

“There are four unknown sectors,” I say.

“Perhaps we can carefully investigate them a sector behind and discover their traps?”

“We don’t have time,” says Haymitch. “It would be our luck to actually stumble into one of the traps.”

“That leaves the massive wave of saltwater,” says Beetee. “They can’t out run that. I’ve been

wanting to explore that sector.”

“Why?” asks Haymitch.

“My specialty was water engineering: pump houses, canals, and dams,” replies Beetee with a smile. “They’ve done a nice job constructing this arena with all the saltwater and atmospheric control. All the mechanics I’m most familiar with will be behind sector ten, or should I say under it.”

“We should leave now,” says Haymitch “But as we are allies and this will require all our efforts, the decision of whether or not to attempt it is up to you four.”

We *are* like schoolchildren. Completely unable to suggest ideas that are helpful. Most of which don’t even have anything to do with his actual plan except guard or fight.

I look at the others’ disconcerted faces. “Wait. How will we lure them off the beach, that is, if they follow us at all?” I ask. “Brutus and Enobaria are going to be extremely cautious since it’s just them, and possibly Chaff.”

“Because we have bait,” says Haymitch. “We’ve got the Mockingjay. If they are thinking like victors, they expect that killing the Mockingjay will break our alliance, simple divide and conquer. We’ll figure out the trap after we inspect the sector.”

Finnick looks at Johanna and raises his eyebrows. He will not go forward without her. “All right,” she says finally. “It’s better than hunting them down in the jungle randomly. And I doubt

they'll figure out our plan, since we can barely understand it ourselves."

Haymitch insists again that we leave now. Judging by the sun, it's almost eight in the morning. We'll have to leave our beach anyway before the wave comes. So we break camp and head into the jungle. Beetee is still too weak to hike up the slope completely on his own, so Finnick and Haymitch take turns helping him. I let Johanna lead because it's a pretty straight shot up to the force field since the rushing water has cleared much of the small or loose foliage, and I figure she can't get us too lost. Besides, I can do a lot more damage with a sheath of arrows than she can with two axes, so I'm the best one to bring up the rear.

The dense, muggy air and the early sunrises weigh on me. There's been no break from it since the Games began. I wish Peeta would stop sending us that District 3 bread and get us some more of that District 4 stuff, because I've sweated out buckets in the last two days, and even though I've had the fish, I'm craving salt. A piece of ice would be another good idea. Or a cold drink of water. I'm grateful for the fluid from the trees, but it's the same temperature as the seawater and the air and the other tributes and me. We're all just one big, warm stew.

As we near the top, Finnick suggests I take the lead. "Katniss can hear the force field," he explains to Beetee and Johanna.

“Hear it?” asks Beetee.

“Only with the ear the Capitol reconstructed,” I say. Guess who I’m not fooling with that story? Beetee. Because surely he remembers that he showed me how to spot a force field, and probably it’s impossible to hear force fields, anyway. But, for whatever reason, he doesn’t question my claim.

“Then by all means, let Katniss go first,” he says, pausing a moment to wipe the steam off his glasses. “Force fields are nothing to play around with.”

The identical lightning tree’s unmistakable as it towers so high above the others. I find a bunch of nuts and make everybody wait while I move slowly up the slope, tossing the nuts ahead of me. But I see the force field almost immediately, even before a nut hits it, because it’s only about fifteen yards away. My eyes, which are sweeping the greenery before me, catch sight of the rippled square high up and to my right. I throw a nut directly in front of me and hear it sizzle in confirmation.

“Just stay below the lightning tree,” I tell the others.

We divide up duties. Finnick guards Beetee while he examines the area, Johanna taps for water, Haymitch gathers nuts, and I hunt nearby. The tree rats don’t seem to have any fear of humans, so I take down three easily. I return to the others and clean my kill. Then I draw a line in the dirt a few feet from the force field as a reminder to keep back, and Haymitch and I settle down to roast nuts and sear

cubes of rat.

Beetee is still messing around near the force field, doing I don't know what, taking measurements and stomping on the ground. At one point he snaps off a sliver of bark, joins us, and throws it against the force field. It bounces back and lands on the ground, glowing. In a few moments it returns to its original color. "Well, that explains a lot," says Beetee. I look at Haymitch and can't help biting my lip to keep from laughing since it explains absolutely nothing to anyone but Beetee.

Haymitch tosses back a nut. "So what have you learned, Beetee?"

"The water has to come through the force field. There is probably a large holding tank that takes 12 hours to fill. I'm guessing that they lower the force field in this sector for a couple seconds as the water rushes in."

This grabs Haymitch's full attention. "Could we..."

"No. There's probably a wall of concrete behind it. We'd most likely get caught in the wave anyway."

"Beetee, what were you looking for when you were stomping about?" I ask.

"Something... mechanical," Beetee says discretely. "With the force of water, the earth should be bare in this area, free of vegetation. I have a hunch about this immediate area"

The sound of boisterous hissing begins to

emanate from the nine o'clock sector. The sound of it makes my skin crawl, making me thankful that we didn't explore it.

"I don't even want to know what is making that sound," I say. "We should gather the food."

"How big can a snake get?" asks Finnick.

Beetee stares off towards nine. "I remember on my victory tour when I visited District Eleven, the Mayor told me about some large four legged creatures that live in the swamps. He said they could easily snap up a human before they could flex a muscle."

The sound swells, as if alerted by our quiet words to the proximity of live flesh. Whatever is making that noise, I bet it could strip us to the bone in seconds.

"We should get out of here, anyway," says Johanna. "There's less than an hour before the wave comes."

We don't go that far, though. Only to the identical looking lightning tree in the eleven o'clock section. We have a picnic of sorts, squatting on the ground, eating our jungle food, waiting for the cacophony of water. At Beetee's request, I climb up into the canopy as the top of the hour approaches. I begin to tense since being this close to the wave, the force of water will be astounding. But the wave feels late. I'm about to call down to others to inquire when the sky suddenly turns from pink to its natural blue. I can now see outside the arena, which does me no

good since we appear to be below a ridge, affording me to see only sky outward. I wait for a minute and study the scattered clouds in the bright blue sky, before I swing down, and report my findings to the group. To my surprise, they seem to have been expecting the particular change.

“Do you think we can talk now?” Johanna asks Haymitch.

Haymitch surveys the area. “I don’t know why not. Even if they haven’t cut the power to the cameras and microphones, they certainly know by now.”

“What’s happening, Haymitch?” I take hold of his arm.

“The coup has begun, Katniss,” Finnick says excitedly.

“I don’t understand. Haymitch, what’s going on?” I face him directly, waiting for an explanation.

“Look, sweetheart, Katniss, I can only give you a quick explanation for now.” Haymitch gives a quick sweeping gesture to the others to give us some space, which means that he expects me to be upset. “We’ll tell you all of it once we’re safe. But for now, I can quickly tell you that many people have hated the government and desired change for a long time. The government is not about to relinquish their hold on power, as you have seen more clearly as a victor. For years we have been working to bring change, being ever careful not to ever speak of it in public, even using extreme caution in

private.”

“Katniss, like I said when we first met,” says Finnick, “I deal with secrets. Secrets that eventually grew into the coup you see today.”

“We finally arrived at our stage of planning,” continues Haymitch, “where we thought we were ready, but we were missing one thing.”

“What?” I inquire.

Haymitch presses his lips tight for a moment. “You.”

“Me? I’m nobody.” I begin to feel a panic well inside me, feeling as if the gigantic wave is about to hit me.

Haymitch takes hold of my shoulders. “You’re the Mockingjay, the symbol of the resistance.”

“I’m not part of any resistance!” I break free and take a step back. “I’m just a girl who survived the Hunger Games.”

“You’re the girl who woke the people of the Capitol to its cruelty. You’re the girl who is uniting the Districts. Because of you, people believe that change can happen.”

I begin pacing back and forth. The center of attention was something that I never enjoyed. To be the center of a revolution that I didn’t even know was happening was suffocating. “I don’t want to be part of any of this. They’ll punish my family, my friends.”

Haymitch tries to calm me by reaching out, but I avoid his touch.

Johanna crosses her arms. “You only have to stay alive long enough for the coup to stand. Once Snow and his cronies are gone, you’ll be able to go home in peace.”

I continue pacing in circles, trying to come to terms. “Will the war last long?”

Beetee tries to give me a comforting smile. “We are hoping that there will be no war. Everyone believes that once the government has been overthrown, the military, the Peacekeepers will comply with the new government.”

District Four believes in the revolution,” says Finnick. “Plutarch Heavensbee is only worried about Districts 1 and 2.”

I stop pacing and turn again to Haymitch. “The Head Gamemaker?”

“He’s leading the coup in the Capitol,” says Haymitch. “Their vast plan is to have everyone arrested within fifteen minutes. They’ve planned every second to the last detail. This coup has been in the works for years, more than a decade. Over time, they have been moving people up into positions of authority on the inside, making sure everyone was ready.”

“Inside, inside,” I’m just babbling now. “Peeta! What about Peeta?”

Haymitch takes a firm grip of my hands. “He’s safe. He’s with Effie.”

“How is Effie going to protect him?” I burst out.

“She was told of the coup,” says Haymitch in a

calming voice. “She agreed to inform Peeta of all the details once the games had started. They were to be hidden my members of the revolution once the coup began. I’m certain he’s safe.”

I break loose from Haymitch again. “You’re certain? You mean that you don’t know!”

“Um, guys?” calls out Johanna. “I know it’s important to get little Miss Mockingjay up to speed, but I think we need to get moving. Listen.”

We listen in silence to the sound of clicking as the volume and intensity increases. What makes everyone move in haste is the sound of the hissing, which has already spread into the ten o’clock sector.

“Without the power, all the creatures they’ve genetically created for the arena are loose to roam, completely uncontrollable,” says Beetee.

“And I bet they’re hungry,” adds Finnick.

Haymitch grabs his gear. “I officially declare the 75th Hungers Games over. Let’s get out of here.”

We head diagonally towards the now absent force field of ten o’clock, hoping to keep clear of all the living traps. When we reach the spot where the field was located, we begin to see a tall 30-foot concrete structure through thinning jungle.

“See,” points Beetee. “That is probably a large storage reservoir that has pumps and a quick release gate.”

“Do you think that wall goes all the way around the arena?” Haymitch asks.

“No. This is only the mouth where the water is to be released,” answers Beete. “We just need to go around it. I doubt it covers much of this sector.

We move to the right along the wall when Johanna reminds everyone of a specific danger. “Keep an eye out for Brutus and Enobarria. They are certain to still be in game mode.”

“Point taken.” says Haymitch.

The wall begins to bend away, allowing us to see over the ridge. The jungle starts to open onto a vast rocky landscape.

“As I expected, the arena is in the middle of nowhere,” says Beete. “We should easily find an access door to the underground facilities somewhere along the wall.”

We stare out at the endless inhabitable desert horizon contemplating our next move when we hear someone shout at us.

“Stop or I’ll shoot!” calls out a Peacekeeper.

To our right, we spot the man in a watchtower as he readies his machine gun. “Turn around and return to the arena!” he commands. “The force field is temporarily down and you are entering a shoot to kill zone. Turn around now!” shouts the Peacekeeper.

Haymitch holds his arms out to his sides, hiding his drawn knife behind his wrist. “Haven’t you heard? The games have been canceled,” replies Haymitch.

I spot more Peacekeepers running towards us along the ridge on our right and additional Peacekeepers on top of the concrete wall to our left, all of them armed. “Haymitch?” I call out.

“I see them.” Haymitch spurts out over his shoulder. He turns back to the watchtower. “Can you call your superior? I’m sure that you will find ___”

The machine gun fires above our heads, spraying the trees directly behind us. As we crouch for cover, water rains down upon us from the ruptured trees.

“Last warning! I will kill all of you!” shouts the Peacekeeper. The newly arrived Peacekeepers assemble into formations with raised rifles.

“Alright! We’re going!” calls out Haymitch with

raised arms.

We move swiftly back into the jungle and gather at our previous resting spot.

Finnick rests against a tree and casually surveys the area for other dangers. “What’s plan B?”

“It looks as if they could only cut the power to the arena. We could wait here until Plutarch Heavensbee can order them to stand down?”

“How long will that take?” asks Johanna.

Haymitch can only shrug with frustration.

“If it is going to take a while, we better return to the beach,” continues Johanna. “It will be much easier to defend ourselves if the arena’s mutations attack.”

“Better yet, the Cornucopia will offer the best protection,” adds Finnick.

With the jungle a major threat once again, we move swiftly towards the beach keeping our ears focused on mutations and our eyes for career tributes.

We pass half way and stop to tap a tree for water. The jungle has truly come alive with sounds. As Johanna quenches her thirst, Beetee calls to me to ready my bow when a large hiss comes from the shadows. Slithering out of the darkness, a six-foot lizard crawls out into the sunlight. Its red eyes making it clear that the Capitol had mutated it.

“What is it?” asks Johanna.

“I don’t know,” replies Haymitch. “Kill, it Katniss.”

The creature is short legged with thick lizard skin that worries me. It moves its head in short rapid movements. As I try to focus on my one shot, I begin to worry about its unfamiliarity. The creature bursts forward with incredible speed and an open mouth towards Beetee. Instinct takes over and I land an arrow in its throat, dropping it before Beetee.

“Nice shot,” he says nervously.

Johanna kicks it. “Do these things exist in the wild, not in mutation form?”

“I think they’re called dragons,” says Finnick.

I eye him. “Those only exist in bedtime stories, Finnick.”

“No these are Komodo, or something. They come from the east.”

Haymitch pats the thick skin of the creature.

“Let’s get out of here. We’re lucky only one attacked us. If it was more, with that speed, we wouldn’t have a chance.”

More hisses come from sector nine and louder clicks from sector eleven. We make for the beach faster than before, for Brutus and Enobaria do not frighten us as much as the jungle.

When we reach the beach, we all pause to catch our breath. Beetee sits against a tree for its shade as the others survey the surroundings.

“Is there another way out of the arena?”

Haymitch asks Beetee.

“Perhaps maintenance doors and hatches that are used to maintain the arena’s traps, but I’m certain

those all lie at the edges of the jungle,” answers Beetee.

“How about the way we came in, the lift plates?” questions Haymitch.

Beetee begins to clean his glasses. “I’m sure they’re locked, and without proper tools, we can’t break through. These weapons won’t be sufficient.”

“Then there are the explosives,” adds Johanna.

“Good point, Johanna. There no telling if they are still armed,” Beetee says.

I sit at the same tree as Beetee, but face the jungle to keep an eye out for danger. Mostly, I just want a tiny bit of solitude as I worry for Peeta. *Did the coup go smoothly?* I think. *Did war break out? Where did Effie take Peeta?*

Finnick brings Johanna some water. “They surely have arrested Snow by now,” says Finnick.

“Or killed him,” adds Johanna before chugging some water. “It would be best if they just kill him.”

“Wouldn’t that make the new leaders just as bad as the old?” asks Finnick.

“We can’t give him a show trial. That’s what he wants. It’s too dangerous,” says Johanna between more gulps of water.

“The new government is supposed to be just,” Beetee injects. “They’ve thought all this out before the coup. I have a good feeling about the future. What do you think, Katniss?”

I continue to stare out at the jungle. “I don’t know. I didn’t know about the coup until now. I

can't even think of tomorrow." No one responds as I've killed the mood as usual, and everyone returns to his or her own affairs.

Haymitch finally tells us that we have no choice but to wait for Plutarch Heavensbee to contact the Peacekeepers that guard the arena. We all agree that it would be safest to spend the night at the Cornucopia with all the dangers freely walking about. We tap another tree for water, followed by progressing down a spoke of sand to the center of the arena.

When we reach the Cornucopia, we spot a mass of white from the opposite spoke of sand. We quickly discern them to be Peacemakers.

"Looks as if Plutarch Heavensbee has come through after all," says Finnick.

I don't like it, for my instinct screams danger. The look Haymitch gives me confirms my suspicion. I notice an odd glint of light emanating from the group in white. Clear shields? The men are carrying large riot shields that will protect them nicely from arrows. "They have riot shields. Haymitch, they're not here to help us," I say.

"I think your right, sweetheart. They're marching in an odd formation, moving slow for Peacemakers," says Haymitch with focused eyes.

"I've never seen these goons march like this before," adds Johanna.

Finnick's eyes go from a squint to alarm. "Rifles! I see rifles."

“Dam!” curses Haymitch. “We have to run for the jungle. We’ll go back the way we came since the Cornucopia will provide cover just in case they decide to shoot at us. Go!”

We make good time to the beach and discover that the Peacekeepers did not pick up their pace. We move into the jungle just far enough to stay out of sight. A small number of boulders and fallen trees offer cover from bullets should they fire their rifles. Haymitch instructs Finnick and Johanna to watch our backs for any dangers that could come from the jungle as the rest of watch for the Peacekeeper’s next move.

“Now what?” I ask Haymitch.

“Wait and see. If they come towards us, we have no choice but to go deep into the jungle.”

“I suggest we head towards sector one, the blood-rain.” Beetee says. “With the power off, the rain and poison fog should not be a danger. They can’t be released without power.”

“And it will give us a large area to hide.” says Haymitch.

“Won’t the monkeys come our way from sector three?” I ask Beetee.

“They’re probably dispersing in all directions.” He replies.

“They’ll be less of a danger thinned out like that.” Haymitch says with his eyes sharply focused on the white mass. “I’m guessing that there are only a dozen Peacekeepers. If they don’t send more in,

we could easily hide in the jungle.”

A voice calls out from the mass of white through a portable megaphone. “Miss Everdeen, I’m so disappointed.” It’s President Snow! “You still refuse to play the game, still refusing to play your role.”

The shock of hearing President Snow strikes everyone. I can feel the blood drain from my face. Finnick and Johanna join us in search of the small white haired man in amongst the Peacekeepers.

“Haymitch, do you think the coup failed?” asks Finnick.

“I don’t know. This could be a trick.”

Halfway down the spoke of sand, the Peacekeepers stop to form a wall formation with their shields. The front row of men kneel with their shields up, and then we see President Snow. The small man waves his arm and two Peacekeepers move forward pushing a man in dark clothes.

“Miss Everdeen,” Snow continues, “someone would like to speak to you.”

Through the megaphone, my heart is ripped out when I hear him scream. “Katniss run!” It’s Peeta! He doesn’t get to say anything else as he is struck hard, the grunt reverberating through the megaphone.

“Peeta!” I wail. As soon as I step forward, Haymitch and Finnick drag me to the ground.

Haymitch takes hold of my chin to grab my attention. “Katniss, Katniss! If you go out there,

he'll kill both of you. If he doesn't have you, he'll keep Peeta alive until he catches you."

"We have to save Peeta," I spew out with my panic.

"We will. We just need to keep our heads," Haymitch says in a calming voice as he helps me to my knees.

Johanna slams the butt of her axe into the ground out of frustration. "We can't attack them on the sand bar. They shoot us as soon as we exit the jungle."

"Miss Everdeen, I'm not going to wait much longer," says President Snow. "Don't make me kill him before you two can say your last words to each other." His voice has a sadistic hiss that tightens the grip on my bow.

"Finnick, how fast can you swim?" Haymitch points to our right. "I want you to get to the nine o'clock sector as fast as possible. You can use the strip of sand as cover. I want you to—"

I gasp from the cold steal slid below my neck from behind. At the same time, a second blade comes from around the other side to form a scissors hold on my neck. Enobaria has me locked in a fatal knife grip. As she pulls me away from the others, blood begins to trickle down my neck as the blades rub on my skin. Haymitch and the others quickly surround the two of us.

"I die, she dies!" barks Enobaria.

"She dies, you die... slowly," says Johanna scornfully.

Enobaria chuckles. “Well then, let’s make sure nothing bad happens to the girl on fire.”

“Finnick, go!” commands Haymitch, sending Finnick unquestioning off into the jungle. Haymitch calmly approaches Enobaria and me. “The games are over, Enobaria. There is no need to kill anyone. There has been a change in the government. This is why the power is off.”

“They’re going to kill all of you. It’s certain.” Enobaria’s tight grip of sharp steel on my throat inevitably increases the flow of blood from my neck.

“And they’ll kill you,” says Johanna.

“Not if I hand over the Mockingjay,” scorns Enobaria. The return to the arena has pushed her sanity over the edge. “Did you know that one of President Snow’s men came to us careers? He told us that we would be rewarded for killing the Mockingjay.”

“What do you mean?” asks Haymitch.

Enobaria slowly turns us in a circle, eyeing the others. “He said that once Katniss was dead and when only the careers remained, we could begin faking our own deaths. We would be removed from the arena and given new identities. We could even live in the Capitol if we wanted.”

Haymitch sheaths his knife in an act of trust. “He was lying. They don’t make deals. They only take what they want and silence anyone who causes trouble.”

Enobaria thankfully stops turning. “You can’t stop him. Even if you remove Snow, the next guy will be the same, if not worse.”

“No,” reasons Haymitch. Most of the districts are on board with this change. We are all working together.”

“Shut up!” screams Enobaria. “I don’t believe any of you.”

“Miss Everdeen,” calls out President Snow through the megaphone. “Wouldn’t you like to speak to your husband, if we can call him that?”

“Come. Lover boy is waiting.” Enobaria forces me out of the jungle into the sunlight. “Don’t shoot! It’s me, Enobaria. I captured Katniss for you.”

“Ah, thank you, Enobaria. Bring her to me,” commands Snow through the megaphone.

“Do we still have an arrangement, Mr. President?” asks Enobaria.

“Of course, the rebels have failed with their treasonous attempt to overthrow the Capitol. We are in your gratitude,” says Snow warmly, but I still hear the hiss of a snake.

When Enobaria pushes me forward, the sky suddenly changes from blue, back into pink. The power has returned, and my heart sinks even further into despair as I interpret this as a failed coup.

Static briefly erupts from the overhead speakers, followed by the voice of Plutarch Heavensbee. “President Snow, you are under arrest. Your government has formally been deposed on order of

the will of the people, those of the Capitol and of the districts.”

Without amplification, I can hear Snow’s laughter. When he does lift the megaphone, his tone has become more serious. “Bring her to me, Enobaria. We have a hovercraft waiting. You can come with us.”

“No, Enobaria,” broadcasts Plutarch. “If you stop now, you will be granted amnesty and will be allowed to return home a free woman.”

Snow counters, “You’ll always be a tribute under him. I want you to be on my security team.”

Peeta calls out to me, but he’s silenced again by the Peacemakers. I’m bleeding steadily, but I try to remain calm to reason with Enobaria. “Snow is no longer in charge, they’ve done it. There will be no more games, no more senseless killing.”

The boom of the cannon jolts everyone. “Peeta!” I scream. He calls my name before he is struck silent again. *Was it a distraction to trick Snow?* I think.

“Let’s go, Mockingjay.” Enobaria pushes me forward, but I resist, realizing that if they capture me, Peeta and I will certainly die.

I push back until the sting of the knives at my throat becomes unbearable. “No! Listen to them. Snow is finished.” I nearly trip when Enobaria shoves me to the water’s edge near the spoke of sand.

Plutarch Heavensbee comes over the area sound

system sounding more urgent. “The cameras and microphones have been activated for all of Panem to see. Any act of violence will be recorded and used against you at trial. The Peacemakers assigned to the arena are receiving their new orders as I speak. Everyone inside the arena drop you weapons and stand down. The new authorities will arrive shortly to lead everyone out of the arena safely.”

Enobaria holds me in place and calls out down the strip of sand. “Can you send a couple Peacekeepers? She’s resisting, and I don’t want to accidentally kill her so close to her friends.”

Peeta screams my name and then grunts from their blows. I peculiarly notice that the sounds from the rifles reach my ears a split second after the bullets. Enobaria and I drop to the ground, shot by Snow’s peacekeepers.

I lay on the ground as the scent of blood fills my nostrils. I turn my head to see the formation of Peacekeepers now approaching. They carry a battered Peeta, his toes dragging in the sand. I want to reach out to Peeta, but I can barely move through the pain and exhaustion. Multiple bullet wounds have left me unable to sit up or roll over. I turn my head to see that Enobaria’s fatal wounds are worse than mine.”

“I’m sorry,” chokes out Enobaria. The gurgling of blood escaping from her lungs make it clear that she doesn’t have long. She extends her hand towards me.

When I meet her eyes, I realize that I don't hate her. She had no choice when it came to being tribute. For all the people of Panem, hate is taught, forced upon all with the instinct fear to fuel the resulting flames. Had we grown up together in a different time, we may have been friends. I reach out and take her hand. "I'm sorry too."

Enobaria looks past me at the approaching Peacekeepers. I turn my head to see them clearly for the first time, their faces old and hard, men with forgotten morals and past crimes that make efficient killing machines, binding them to President Snow and his fate.

President Snow's face comes into view. When he stares down at me, his puffy lips twist into a smile. "Miss Everdeen, all you had to do from the very beginning was to die in the arena, to be a proper sacrifice. And here you are after being shot, still living, still being difficult."

"I live to disappoint you, Mr. President."

My insolence gives Snow reason to laugh. "That you have. Thanks to you, I need to leave the country for a short while." Snow kneels next to me to whisper. "But don't worry, I'll be back and in control in time for your sister's senior year reaping."

I reach for my knife, but my hand moves so shakily slow that it causes Snow to smile once again as he stands. When I pull the knife, my fingers fumble, dropping it in the sand. I let my hand drop.

“Fighting to the end. How admirable, Katniss,” comments Snow. “And what about Enobaria?”

This is when I notice that Enobaria’s grip had long loosened. Her eyes now show an endless stare. Just as I let go of her hand, the cannon sounds for her.

“I see,” says Snow as he steps away from me. “We need to get to the hovercraft. Kill them both.”

I choke out Peeta’s name as the last remaining fear wells up in me. A Peacekeeper readies his gun on me as I stare at the unconscious body of the boy who gave me bread. I say my last words. “I love you, Peeta.”

As I take my last breath, a loud angry scream comes from the jungle. Chaff emerges with a dead Brutus slung over his shoulder as a shield. He is running directly towards us screaming a war cry to his certain death.

The startled Peacekeepers drop their shields and ready their rifles when Peeta suddenly jumps to life. His hands remain tied behind his back, but he uses his strength to bowl over many of the guards, knocking some into the water. I hear gun shots erupt as chaos breaks out around me.

An arrow lands in the leg of the Peacekeeper above me, causing him to fall backward. Their body armor only protects them from the waist up. Arrow after arrow finds a home in a leg or in the sand. I turn my head in search of Snow, hoping that an arrow finds a home in his chest, but I see two

dedicated Peacekeepers protecting him with their riot shields from projectiles.

This is when I spot Finnick emerging from the water. He had used the sandy spoke and his swimming skills to sneak in from behind. He is about to kill Snow with his trident when one of the Peacekeepers turns and deflects the deathblow with his shield. The guard pulls his handgun, but Finnick knocks it free from his hand.

More battle cries sound from the jungle, and I turn my head to see Haymitch, Johanna, and Beetee rush out onto the sands. Beetee stops promptly to shoot an arrow into the leg of a Peacekeeper. Johanna's axe bounces off the helmet of a Peacekeeper with such force that he falls unconscious from the blow.

Haymitch sprints towards me and leaps into the air, flying over me, crashing into the Peacekeeper who had intended to shoot me before he was shot in the leg by an arrow.

My fingers search for my dropped knife in the sand when I feel a hand on my wrist. President Snow has rushed in, retrieved my knife, and now holds the blade above me. The rage in his eyes is palpable, and saliva spatters from his mouth when he calls out. "I will have my sacrifice if it's the—" Snow inhales sharply unmoving for a moment before falling away from my view.

I see Haymitch standing before me with a knife covered in the President's blood. He leans over

Snow, showing him his bloody knife. “For Maysilee, for all of them.”

The arena suddenly becomes quiet, and Haymitch kneels next to me. He surveys the scene quickly. “They are surrendering! Don’t kill them if they surrender!” yells Haymitch. He takes my hand and eyes my wounds before looking into my eyes. “Hang on, Katniss. We’ll get you to a doctor immediately.”

“Save Peeta,” I say softly.

Johanna kneels near me opposite of Haymitch. Her reaction to the sight of my wounds speaks volumes. “You have more strength than anyone else I know, Katniss. Don’t give up.”

Plutarch's voice comes over the arena’s speakers. “A hovercraft will arrive shortly for the wounded.”

Several hands begin to press against my body. As the sky returns to a brilliant blue, the realization comes to me that I feel no pain. Voices continue to call to me, but I pay no attention. Knowing that my nightmares won’t be able to follow me, I smile and willfully drift unconscious.

“Katniss, Katniss... hey girl on fire,” the familiar voice whispers.

My eyes feel heavy, and I struggle to open them. Slowly they focus on the person before me, Cinna. I try to sit up at the sight of my friend, and I’m immediately greeted with pain throughout my body.

“Katniss, don’t try to sit up. You’re in the hospital post surgery,” he says, comforting my hand. “Post a few surgeries actually.”

“Cinna,” I whisper. “I was afraid that they killed you.” I labor to breath. Lifting my hand to touch his healing face takes considerable effort.

A woman appears at my bedside. “Hello Katniss, I’m Doctor Keller. Do you know where you are?”

“In a hospital, I’m guessing somewhere in the Capitol,” I say weakly.

“Yes. Do you remember what happened?” the doctor continues.

“I was shot in the arena.”

“Yes. We were able to repair all your injuries. You should make a full recovery,” says Dr. Keller.

I glance around room. Flowers sit on a dresser, some wilted. Cards are open and spread about in the dim room with drawn curtains. “How long have I been here?” I ask.

“Three weeks,” replies the doctor.

“Three weeks?” I turn to Cinna.

“You almost died.” he says. “Twice in fact.”

The doctor shines a pen light briefly in my eyes. “Besides the acute blood loss, you developed a serious systemic infection. Your spinal column was damaged by one of the bullets, which led to meningitis. Fortunately, your spinal nerve was unharmed. We had to induce a coma until the meningitis subsided. The repair to your vertebra went well. We used bone regeneration without the need of metal support.”

“Oh.” I voluntarily move my limbs gently in search of pain and deformities.

The doctor moves to the end of my bed and lifts the sheets, exposing my legs. “Can you wiggle your toes for me?”

I do without difficulty.

Dr. Keller then runs her fingers over my legs. “And can you feel this?”

“Yes.”

“Good, I truly believe that you will make a full recovery. It wasn’t easy, but you put up quite the fight, even in an unconscious state.”

I glance over at Cinna and find his warm smile comforting. “Peeta!” I gasp. “Where’s Peeta?”

The room answers me with cold silence. Cinna’s smile fades as his hand tightens around my own. The heaviness in his eyes tells me all.

“Nooo!” I wail. My sore body curls on its side with Cinna dropping to his knees beside me. “Not

Peeta, he was supposed to be safe. I was supposed to be Snow's sacrifice, not him."

Cinna combs my hair with his free hand. "They tried to save him, but his injuries were too severe."

The doctor steps behind Cinna. "He suffered too much blood loss along with damage to too many vital organs. We tried the best we could. I'm sorry for your loss."

I cry so hard I begin to grimace in pain from my surgeries. I feel as if I'm being torn inside out. As I continue to scream out, I feel a sharp sting in my arm. It doesn't take long for the calming warmth of medicine to settle my muscles and nerves. Left in a foggy haze, I hold tight onto Cinna's hand and let the grief wash over me.

After what felt like an eternity of initial grieving, I discover much later that Snow's personal Peacekeepers had arrested Peeta at Games Headquarters when he was in negotiations with the sponsors. When he protested, things quickly deteriorated to violence with Peeta being dragged out in cuffs.

I inquire about the other tributes and learn that Chaff had died from gunshot wounds along with Enobaria, which I unfortunately clearly remember. All the tributes were wounded in the final battle, but none had to stay long in the Hospital.

"Snow is dead?" I ask Cinna fearful that I had imagined the President's death.

"Yes, he's dead. Along with eight of his body

guards, four surrendered.”

“Did war break out?”

“No,” answers Cinna. “The only blood spilled was in the arena.”

“They didn’t punish District Twelve?” I continue.

“Katniss, there is no more District Twelve.” Cinna faintly smiles. “Your home is now called Appalachia. Moreover, they are no longer called districts. They are now referred to as States, all thirteen of them.”

“Thirteen?”

“They found that District Thirteen has been habitable for a while and that there is a small population scattered about the land. Many people from the other districts plan on migrating there.”

“Migrating?”

“All the fences are being taken down and the land opened for settling. Everyone is free to move freely around the country, free to work as they choose, and vote.”

“Vote?” I only repeat the words that seem foreign to me, foreign to people outside the Capitol.

“The new government is being constructed based on ancient documents that once ruled these lands years ago.” Cinna says. He stares at my face and pats my hand. “But you’re not interested right now are you?”

“Sorry, no,” I say.

“You rest. You need time to grieve. I forgot that

we've had weeks to grieve for the fallen." Cinna stands to leave.

"Cinna, Don't leave."

"I'll be right back. I'm going to call your mother and let her know that you're conscious and expected to make a full recovery," says Cinna pausing in the doorway.

"I wish she and Prim were here."

"We thought about bringing them here once the travel restrictions were lifted, but many are hesitant to travel outside their districts until the new government is fully functional."

When Cinna leaves, I immediately begin to cry. The nurse comes by and offers me some medicine to help me cope, but I refuse it. Now that the shock has worn off, I know that I can face this as I had my father's death.

I try to eat dinner, but only manage to swallow a bit of soup and some crackers, which easily fill my shrunken stomach. The doctor visits and comments that my body is recovering well and that I will be sent to physical therapy in a couple days to start rebuilding my muscle tone.

Later, the nurse attempts to find me some music to no avail. All the music of the Capitol is too busy for my tastes so I request silence. The medicine lingering in my system makes it easy for me to fall asleep, assisting me with my grief.

When Cinna returns, he holds the door open for a pair of guests: Haymitch and Portia. Their

handholding immediately grabs my attention. “So Haymitch, I see your heart is recovering,” This unexpected sight of Haymitch causes me to smile.

“Lucky for me he has a couple decades of pent up... kisses,” says Portia playfully as she takes a seat at the foot of my bed.

Haymitch unexpectedly blushes. “Well, the danger that comes from being my friend is no longer present.” He takes the chair next to my bed and takes my hand. “I’m so sorry, Katniss. We put you, Peeta, and Chaff all on the same hovercraft. There were plenty of emergency medical staff, some of whom were aware of the coup and were well prepared, but...”

My tears land on my hospital gown. “It’s not your fault. Snow was going to kill us all eventually. It’s a miracle that any of us survived.”

With a questionable look, Haymitch turns towards Cinna who nods with approval. “Your right,” says Haymitch. “They discovered that Snow had changed the rules. The original Quarter Quell did not involve past victors.”

“And now there will never be another Hunger Games,” insists Cinna.

“Thank goodness,” praises Portia.

“Cinna, what happened to you after the Peacekeepers attacked you?” I ask.

“They took me and Portia to holding cells,” he responds.

“Portia, I didn’t know that you were taken too,” I

say.

“I wasn’t ruffed up as bad as Cinna, but I thought for sure that I was going to die.”

“The Peacekeepers gloated that they were to kill us when our tribute died. Snow wanted us to watch,” Cinna says, wrapping a supportive arm across Portia’s shoulders.

Portia chokes out a chuckle. “I thought my heart stopped shortly after Haymitch’s when he walked into the force field.”

“So they let you go after Snow died?” I attempt to sit up in bed with the help of Haymitch.

“No, when the power went out in the arena, the Peacekeepers began preparing for our executions. That’s when he rescued us.” Cinna smiles knowing that I will never guess the identity.

“Who?”

“Darius.” he says.

I turn to Haymitch for conformation who nods in agreement. “How?” I demand, intrigued by this unexpected twist.

“I knew that the more friends we had,” says Haymitch, “the better chance we’d have. So I pointed out to Effie that the male Avox was Darius. If she needed help, I told her that she could probably trust him.”

“That was risky. You didn’t even tell Peeta or me about it.”

“Darius was a nice kid who stood up for Gail back home. After torture and the removal of his

tongue, I knew that he'd want to get back at Snow. When the prep teams reported to Effie that Cinna and Portia had gone missing on the first day, Effie contacted Darius for help."

"How did he know where to find the arena?" I ask.

Cinna moves to the open side of my bed. "He used to be a trained Peacekeeper, he even provided security for one of the previous Hunger Games. He collected a couple other former Peacekeepers that were Avoxes and stole some uniforms. They snuck onto a transport heading to the arena and made themselves inconspicuous below ground in the support structure. By chance, they were preparing an attack on the guards when the power went out. It actually helped them ambush the guards and free Portia and me. We hid beneath the arena until the Peacekeepers were relieved by those loyal to the new government."

I fall back onto my pillow. "I must thank Darius before I go home."

"You'll have plenty of time to thank him, sweetheart," says Haymitch. "He and the Avox girl from our floor are moving to District Twelve. Um, Appalachia I mean. I'm still not used to saying that."

"Someone please tell me that all the Avoxes have been freed," I plead openly.

"They have," answers Portia.

Emotionally spent, I shut my eyes to rest. When I open them again, I find the room darkened and

empty. The evening nurse comes in with a light snack and tells me that my friends will return in the morning. My mind races with thoughts, digesting all the news along with the grief. When the evening nurse thanks me for healing the country, I'm left speechless only able to return a smile, for I only intended to save Prim. Would I return things to the way they were to have Peeta back? I don't know.

The next morning, they begin physical therapy, but from my bed. They stretch my muscles to prepare me for the next day's therapy outside my room. The treatment was much more strenuous than I would have guessed.

As I wipe my upper body with a damp towel, I catch a hint of pink hair out of the corner of my eye that pulls back. I lean forward and recognize the visitor in the doorway. "Effie?"

Effie steps forward to reveal blood shot eyes and pressed lips. The grief strains her face.

"Oh Effie, come here and give me a hug."

She does and we both begin to cry. Once we compose ourselves, we order some hot chocolate and tea.

"I was supposed to protect him," chokes Effie.

"Don't, Effie. I won't let you blame yourself."

"I told Peeta to go with me into hiding," says Effie, "but he insistent on working with the sponsors. He needed to see that you were safe. They say President Snow became suspicious when Johanna, Beetee, and Wiress joined your group.

They came for Peeta just after your alliance became superior to that of the career's."

I pass another tissue to Effie. "Did they harm you, Effie?"

"No, Katniss. They acted as if I wasn't there."

Our hot drinks arrive, and we both begin to relax. Effie tells me of more of the changes in the Capitol. She tells me that most people are happy for the change, though, many are worried that the changes will make some things worse. She tells me of an opposing political party that wants things to return to the way things were, but experts believe that they have no chance in the upcoming elections.

"What are you going to do now that there are no more games?" I ask.

"Oh, I've been offered a position in the new government. They want me to be the liaison for Appalachia. The new government insists on clear communications to make sure the transition runs smoothly."

"That's wonderful, Effie."

"I don't know if I'll accept the position," says Effie.

"Why not?" I ask.

Tears flow from Effie's eyes. "Because I escorted their children to their deaths."

I take her hand. "It's not your fault."

"I drew their names, Katniss. I drew your sister's!"

"Stop it, Effie. You tried to save our lives

throughout the ordeal with training and guidance. They know that, and if they don't, I will make certain that everyone back home learns of it. If anyone says anything to you, they will have to answer to me."

"Thank you, Katniss. This means a lot to me." Effie finally smiles after blowing her nose.

"So, if you become liaison, will you be moving to District Twelve?"

"Um...no. Don't be mad at me. I'm a..." Effie's new sense of empathy makes me smile.

"You're a big city kind of girl," I conclude for her.

"But I intend to visit you every time I come to the area," says Effie.

"Sounds as if you've decide to take the job."

"Yes. I think it would be enjoyable," says Effie resolutely.

The next day, after my first full session of exhausting physical therapy, Cinna wheels me to a refreshing outdoor garden where Haymitch and Plutarch Heavensbee wait for me.

Plutarch kneels beside my wheelchair and expresses his condolences for the loss of Peeta. I thank him for his kindness and beg him to take a seat on the bench.

"Miss Everdeen, we will forever be in your debt," Plutarch says.

"I did not do anything. Peeta was the gifted one with the words," I sigh.

“Both of you woke up the collective conscious of the Capitol. I don’t think that we could have deposed Snow’s government otherwise.”

I shrug and take notice of the birdsong in the garden. I’m immediately reminded of Rue.

“Well,” Plutarch continues, “I don’t know how much others have told you about our first decree.”

“Not much. I’ve been fairly groggy the past couple of days.”

“The new government has outlawed the Hunger Games. You and the other surviving tributes will continue to receive winnings along with permanent possession of the victor’s house.”

“What about Peeta’s family?” I ask.

“Peeta’s family will receive his winnings. In fact, all surviving family members of fallen tributes will receive compensation.”

“Rue’s family?”

“Yes, all of them.”

This news does bring a natural smile to my face as if a great weight has been lifted off my shoulders. “Thank you.”

“No need to thank me. We will never truly be able to rectify our sins.”

The garden falls silent except for the birdsong.

Haymitch pats my leg. “How’s therapy coming along?”

“Good. Capitol health care is quite remarkable. Too bad we don’t have anything like this at home.”

“You will soon,” says Plutarch. “The whole

country is going to change, I promise.”

“Haymitch, last night I was going over our time in the arena and a nagging question puzzled me. Why did you have that old knife, the one Beetee found amongst all the new weapons in Cornucopia?” I ask.

“It was my knife from the arena 25 years ago, the one you often saw me sleep with back in our district. I asked Plutarch to sneak it in for good luck. I admit that I was also hoping to kill Snow with it.”

“And you did,” I sigh with relief.

“I did, yes.” Haymitch looks off at the horizon and smiles, only briefly.

“Plutarch,” I continue, “did you know that President Snow had come to the arena?”

“No. We had every detail planned except for Snow. That is why we had to use the bread.”

“The bread we received from the sponsors?” I recall.

“Yes. When we thought that we had Snow’s location pinpointed and the coup set, we forwarded the time of the coup in code by bread. District Three bread meant day three, and ten loafs meant 10 am.”

“Beetee tried to find us the safest way out of the arena to safety,” says Haymitch. “This is why we were at the force field at the time of the coup, so we could leave quickly.”

“But the Peacekeepers were not informed as

planned,” says Plutarch. “Considering that we avoided civil war, I’d say the coup was a rousing success.”

I lift my face to bath it in the sun as certain details in the arena flood my mind.

Plutarch looks to me and quickly tries to turn down his enthusiasm. “Katniss, I’m truly sorry that we lost any of the tributes. The games gave us our best opportunity. We knew that Snow’s obsession with you and the games would distract him. At the same time, your involvement, though unknown to you, increased public support for our cause.”

“Katniss, all this wasn’t in vain,” Haymitch says in an attempt to assure me. “Real change has come that will improve every one’s life.”

“I’m sure Peeta knew that he didn’t die for nothing,” I solemnly say. “He’d gladly give his life to help the people of the districts.”

My mind tries to comprehend all that has happened, but I know that I don’t feel what everyone else appears to feel.

Three more weeks passed before I became strong enough for discharged from the hospital. I thought that I was ready to leave after two weeks, but my medical team insisted on vetting the stability of the bone in my repaired spinal column. I was packed and ready by the time Cinna arrived to take me to the train station.

“Have they discharged you yet?” he asks.

“No. The doctor is giving my tests one more

glance before letting me go.” My hands feel clammy, which I subconsciously rub over my thighs.

“Katniss, are you worried about something?” asks Cinna.

“I’m worried about the crowds. This will be my first trip outside the hospital.”

“There won’t be any crowds,” he says. “There are none outside the hospital when I arrived, and there won’t be any at the train station.”

“How do you know?” I ask.

“Your trip today has not been announced.” Cinna takes my hand. “After they stabilized your wounds and were fairly certain that you’d live, Plutarch suggested that we update the people to help pacify them during the transition of government. Plutarch asked Haymitch to talk to them, but Haymitch deferred to me.”

“What did you say?”

“I told them that you were grateful for their concern and for their condolences for Peeta. I told the people that you weren’t even aware of the coup, you were only trying to survive, but you were happy that the games have come to a permanent end and that the future will be bright for all. I asked the crowd to give you your space and let you return to being Katniss, the girl before the reappings. How did I do?”

I squeeze his hand. “Perfect, but we both know that I will never be anything like that girl.”

“You may rediscover parts of that girl over time. Sometimes change brings one around full circle. Change happens to everybody. Even I’m thinking of a change,” says Cinna.

“In what way?” I ask.

“I think that District Twelve needs a little help in the fashion department. They will have their own style of course, but I could help them discover it. Working with earth tones colors would be a nice change from the Capitol’s flamboyant designs. I’m so tired of the Capitol.”

“Everyone hates their clothes in District Twelve, but I don’t think anyone can afford it.”

“They will. Sooner than later, Katniss. Change has come.”

“Then by all means move to *Appalachia*.” I say the name with quoting fingers and smile. “Everyone will be excited to have a legendary designer improving district fashion.”

“I hope so.” says Cinna.

“Are you coming with me on the train today?” I ask.

“No, I’ll move in a few weeks. Darius and Lavinia will be traveling with you.”

“Lavinia?”

“The girl Avox who served you and Peeta. She and Darius are getting married.”

I gasp. “Her name is Lavinia. I’ve so much wanted to sit and communicate with her. When are they getting married?”

“They haven’t picked a date. All I know is that they want to do it in Appalachia with you in attendance.”

“Of course, I’ll be there.”

“Darius wanted to travel today with you and Haymitch to give you support.”

“I do appreciate it.” I sigh. “I won’t truly relax until I’m home.”

Dr. Keller enters the room smiling. “I see my favorite patient is ready to leave.”

“Yes. What you’ve done for me is a miracle,” I say.

“It was mostly you, Katniss,” Says the doctor. “You’ve worked hard on your recovery. Speaking of, I want to go over some of your tests before you leave.”

Cinna stands to leave. “I’ll give you some privacy.”

“You can stay,” I tell Cinna.

“I’ll be right back, Katniss. I’m going to check on the transportation.”

After Cinna steps out, the doctor pulls up a chair and clasps her hands across her lap. “This won’t take long, there’s just one thing we need to discuss.”

I stare out the train admiring the landscape that I thought was certain to never drift before my eyes ever again. Darius and Lavinia sit with me in the dining car, and we pass hand written notes back and forth throughout the morning. The train car is quiet

since Haymitch and Portia have slept in.

I contemplate the change in atmosphere that I began to feel at the train station. I tried to discern if it was my imagination, or had things truly changed. There were no crowds as Cinna predicted, but the random person did recognize me. Most gave me a courteous nod. A couple even honored me by kissing their three middle fingers and saluting me, which I returned in kindness since I knew they were expressing their condolences for Peeta. Overall, the fury stirred up by the games has permanently dissipated.

Here on the train, I glance occasionally at Darius and Lavinia as they pass notes and practice communicating with their hands. Avoxes were prohibited from learning to communicate in any form, so now they learn from each other. When I realize that their futures will be full of optimism, I truly begin to feel the change. Not only has my nightmare ended, but so has the country's.

I step from the train and spot my family immediately. Prim and my mother hug me tight from each side.

"Katniss, you did it," beams Prim as she loosens her grip.

"I didn't do anything," I say. "Other people carefully planned the overthrow. I had no knowledge of it."

"No Katniss, you were the bravest. You showed everyone that they could be brave too." Prim hugs

me again so tight as if she's afraid to lose me that second.

"How are you feeling?" asks my mother.

"Good considering. Capitol medicine can perform miracles."

"Oh Katniss! Did Effie tell you about school?" asks Prim.

"Um, no," I respond.

"One of the first things the new government wants to do is improve schools. They are opening up summer programs to expose district children to various careers. I've been accepted to go to a health care summer school next year in the Capitol," says prim excitedly.

"Really. Do you want to go to the Capitol?"

"Oh yes, for summer school anyway. Effie is going to help me. And mom says it's ok."

I look at my mother who shrugs in agreement. I comb Prim's hair. "Should I start calling you Dr. Everdeen."

"Don't be silly," laughs Prim. "But who knows."

"Welcome home, sweetheart," booms Haymitch's voice from behind.

I turn to see him approaching on the train platform alone. "Where's Portia?" I ask.

"Back in the Capitol. When she discovered that our night life mostly consisted of spirited refreshments and string instruments by a bonfire, she got homesick."

"Sorry, Haymitch," I say.

“That’s ok. She may visit from time to time.”

Darius and Lavinia exit the train to hugs and greetings from my family.

Haymitch announces that he has a wedding present for the young couple who have decided to make Appalachia their home. The Mayor has arranged that they receive one of the empty victor’s houses in gratitude for risking their lives during the coup. Haymitch hands over the keys and takes Lavinia’s bags. “Come. I’ll escort you there and update you to the changes in the District.”

All of us begin to leave the platform when I see someone I was hoping to see as much as my family. Sitting patiently on a bench, the baker fumbles with a white paper package. Slowly he stands, and I literally drop everything and rush into his waiting arms.

“I’m so sorry!” I wail.

“No child, he would have given his life a million times over to make sure that you made it home.” Peeta’s father wipes my tears as my family joins us. “I’m certain that he was proud to be part of the overthrow.”

Prim gives the baker a big hug. “I’m so sorry that Peeta didn’t make it home.”

“Me too,” he says as he pats her back.

My hands clasp together over my stomach when I try to speak, but the words don’t come.

The baker smiles. “Don’t worry Katniss. Haymitch told me that the pregnancy was a ruse to

win over the crowd.”

“Um, originally.”

My mother gasps and throws her arms around me.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, the doctor discovered it before I left the hospital. She says that I’m seven weeks pregnant. She says it’s a boy.” Tears mixed with joy and sorrow fall from my cheeks. “I don’t know if I’m ready for this.”

The baker takes my hands with tears in his own eyes. “You’ll do fine.”

“I’ll need a lot of advice, grandpa.”

“Well, my first advice is to eat these cookies before Prim does,” he jests.

Prim tugs on my arm as she looks past me. “Hi, Gale.”

I turn to see his expression. He clearly has heard everything. For a long moment, no one speaks as the news sinks in further. I begin to ring my hands.

“Gale, please don’t be mad.”

He smiles and takes my hands. “I’m not mad, not one bit. I’m truly happy that you two found each other that you had each other for support. Never doubt it for one moment that I’m not happy for you. Catnip, I’m truly sorry that you lost him.”

I give Gale a long hug as the relief releases more of my tears.

“And if you ever need anyone to teach the little one how to set a snare or trap, let me know,” says Gale.

“You know I will,” I say.

“I’ll be the best friend the little guy will ever have.”

“You’re more than a friend. You’re family.”

As soon as Gale and I separate, Prim dives in between us for a shared hug.

Gale chuckles. “So Prim, how does *Uncle Gale* sound to you?”

“Like it always has,” she beams.

EPILOGUE

They play in the Meadow, the chubby toddler girl with the dark curly hair and brown eyes, and boy with blond curls and blue eyes. Peeta Jr. helps her to her feet after she stumbles. It took five, ten plus years for me to open my heart again, but when I did, Cinna was there waiting patiently. I always knew that it was not his true desire to bring fashion to Appalachia, though, he does love this land and its people.

I just know that I've been blessed to have my best friend here, sharing my life, blessed to have found another gentle, artistic man, who complements the hunter within me, understands me, and shields me from my nightmares.

Even though Cinna has ten years on me, Prim comments that I appear older than my husband. I smugly tell her that my wrinkles are those one often receives from having a little sister.

When we had little Rue, she seemed to have given back some of those lost years. I would have never have predicted how much of a better person her and Peeta Jr. would make me. They had indeed returned some part of my soul that I had lost in the arena.

The questions are just beginning. The arenas have been completely destroyed, the memorials built,

there are no more Hunger Games. But they teach about them at school, and the boy knows we played a role in them. The girl will know in a few years. How can I tell them about that world without frightening them to death? A place where Aunt Prim would not have been given a chance to go to medical school in the Capitol. Where people like Haymitch would not be allowed to start a farm. Where loving grandparents, like my mother and Peeta's father, would not live into retirement age due to the lack of food and health care.

When Uncle Gale comes over with his kids to play with Peeta Jr. and Rue, I'm often reminded of those times. The fierceness in Gale's eyes never completely went away. Marrying Madge did much to heal his own wounds, along with his duties as Sheriff. Luckily, he doesn't like to talk about those dark times, so when we break for lunch during our weekend hunting trips, we focus our discussions on work and kids.

Cinna says it will be okay. We have each other. I also have my journal that my mother suggested for me to write. For now, we can make them understand in a way that will make them braver. But one day I'll have to explain about my nightmares. Why they came. Why they won't ever really go away.

I'll tell them how I survive it. I'll tell them that on bad mornings, it feels impossible to take pleasure in anything because I'm afraid it could be

taken away. That's when I make a list in my head of every act of goodness I've seen someone do. It's like a game. Repetitive. Even a little tedious after more than ten years.

But there are much worse games to play.

THE END