



Heart of Grace

By

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Chapter 1

In a windowless room constructed of concrete walls, a mature woman with salt and pepper hair sat at a meager metal desk, reading from a computer tablet, as classical music played from small shelf speakers set upon empty bookshelves. Having read for lengthy period, the woman took time to rest her eyes, turning her tablet face down upon her charcoal grey trousers. She reached for her coffee cup and reluctantly sipped the stale drink, which had cooled hours prior. She next removed her smartphone from her blazer pocket to check for messages, setting her lifeline to the real world upon the barren desktop before stretching her neck and sighing.

Shortly after returning to her reading, she heard someone knock on the open door. Her eyes remained focus on the tablet when she said in a curt tone, “Yes.”

A younger man dressed in a well-fitted suit stood under doorway. “Dr. Galen?”

Without lifting her head, her eyes drifted up from her tablet. “Yes.”

“I’m Dr. Verus.” He paused for a response that did not come. “I’m here for the fellowship interview.”

With a faint smile, Dr. Galen set aside her tablet. “Ah, Dr. Verus, please come in and take a seat. For a moment, I thought you were from the government. I’ve had my fill with those people lately.”

The young man approached the desk and shook her hand. He looked around the room as he sat down on the cold metal chair in front of the desk. “They don’t give you much in creature comforts.”

“They only give me what I need.” The woman took another sip of cold coffee. Grimacing, she commented, “This is as nice as it ever gets.”

“Dr. Galen, thank you for granting me an interview. Did you

receive my portfolio?”

“Yes.” Dr. Galen clasped her hands together over her lap. “I hope it wasn’t too difficult finding your way here?”

The man held back his laughter as he smiled. “It was certainly an interesting journey. The Peacekeepers were kind enough guided me every step of the way. I have to admit that it was a longer trip than I had expected. Where are we?”

“They don’t tell me. The exact location is kept a secret until I’m no longer needed.”

“I see.” When the room fell silent, Dr. Verus could not help but fidget in the presence such a renowned surgeon. “It seems unusual to see candidates here, of all places.”

Rubbing her thumbs against the sides of her coffee cup, Dr. Galen stared at the oily sheen that had formed on the surface. “I always see my applicants here.”

“Really? Why if I may ask?” Clasping his restless hands together, he straightened in his chair.

Gnawing the inside of her lip, Dr. Galen carefully eyed her young candidate. “Because the Hunger Games are the perfect venue in finding my next surgical fellow.”

The young doctor appeared even more perplexed. “I don’t expect that there is much to do here for an experienced brain surgeon but to wait.”

“True.” Dr. Galen studied the young man's minimalist, but expensive, suit. “Why do you want to be my surgical fellow?”

The man grinned. “To learn from the best surgeon in the country. I apologize if my answer is overly blunt.”

“I prefer blunt and to the point answers. Why did you choose neurosurgery?”

The young doctor again shifted in his chair. “I became obsessed with repair of spinal trauma. The field of study sort of picked me after a friend of mine suffered a motorcycle accident.”

The woman swirled the coffee in her cup, watching the oil film reform on the surface. “What about the money and fame?”

“I won’t lie and say that I don’t think about it, but I actually don’t care. If I deserve success, it will come.” Glancing at his own attire, Dr. Verus removed a piece of lint from his slacks, dropping the white spec of cotton to the concrete floor. “I want to learn from you because you are the best, not because of your notoriety.”

Observing his mannerisms, Dr. Galen continued to study the chief resident that she had intentionally saved for last.

The man cleared his throat. “It must be an honor for you to be chosen as the game’s official coroner?”

“It’s not an honor; I volunteered.”

The resident’s brow furled. “They say that you were chosen.”

The senior doctor sipped her coffee. “All the rumors are wrong. I volunteered.”

“Oh, sorry for the misunderstanding.” The young man clasped his hands tighter as the room fell silent. “If you select me for understudy, I prom—”

“Stop.”

“Excuse me?”

“We can skip the pleasantries. We are both medical professionals.”

Dr. Verus shifted in his chair before casually crossing his legs. “Okay. Do you have any questions about my record?”

“No. I wouldn’t have invited you to the interview if I did.”

“Have you filled the position?”

Setting her coffee down, Dr. Galen leaned forward to rest her elbows on the desk. “No. You are my last candidate.”

“They say that you sometimes leave the slot vacant for the year if you don’t find the perfect chief resident.”

Dr. Galen grinned. “That rumor is true, but I’m not searching for the perfect chief resident.”

“What are you looking for?”

“A doctor,” said the woman just before her smartphone chimed. Dr. Galen glanced at her phone resting on the desk and frowned. “I’m looking for a doctor. Another tribute has died and will arrive in a few minutes. I have to prepare.” The doctor slid her smartphone into the front pocket of her blazer and stood.

The resident rose to his feet. “Do you want me to come back later?”

“No. I was actually hoping that we could continue this interview in the morgue.” Dr. Galen stepped around to the front of her desk. “Would you care to assist me?”

“Dr. Galen, I’d be honored.”

The senior doctor gestured to the door. “Come, let’s change our clothes.”

Having changed into surgical clothing, the two doctors passed through a set of double doors into a large windowless room lit by several strips of simple ceiling lights. A stainless steel autopsy table occupied the center of the makeshift morgue. Within arm’s reach of the table, a leaky faucet dripped into a stainless steel sink. In one corner, an assortment of medical equipment was stacked next to a large plastic drum of formaldehyde.

The chief resident circled the room. “Basic necessities again I see.”

The female doctor approached the table. “It was much worse when I first started years ago. I had to use most of my influences in the Capitol to get most of this.”

Noticing a second set of double doors, Dr. Verus gestured towards them. “What’s in there?”

Dr. Galen nodded for him to look.

He approached the doors and pushed forward. Stopping in his tracks beneath the doorframe, he counted seven pine coffins. “Oh, I

see.” He stepped back from the room and slowly turned around. “Is there cool storage?”

“No. I embalm them immediately and send them home. Each train has at least one cold storage car.”

“I see. Who will we be attending to?”

“Pandora Spiga from District Nine.” Dr. Galen leaned back against the table. “Are you familiar with these kids?”

“A little. I at least watch the interviews. She’s the girl with the long curly black hair that hung past her shoulders. She had the most charming smile.”

“I never see the interviews since I’m usually preparing things in the arenas, but your description matches her profile picture on my phone.”

Circling the room, Dr. Verus began to inspect the medical equipment. “How did she die?”

“Don’t know. I never watch any of it.”

The male doctor turned to his mentor. “Then why do you volunteer to be the coroner?”

“Many years ago, I learned that they would ship the fallen without any preparation or cleaning back to their districts in pine boxes. What the families received in the midst of summer only worsened their grief. Disgusting me further, I discovered that they use to have the Head Peacekeepers sign the death certificates. All this was unacceptable to me, so I began volunteering. I actually had to pay for the formaldehyde myself the first couple of years. The equipment I borrowed from my hospital.”

Dr. Verus crossed the room. “Did the Capitol object?”

“They did, but eventually they relented and began to provide the equipment after I hinted at making my fight public.”

Returning to the double doors to inspect the coffins, the young man paused and said, “These coffins are as cheap as they get. Surely tributes deserve better.”

Dr. Galen clenched her jaw as she shrugged. “Don’t call them tributes.”

“Excuse me?”

“They’re not tributes. They are victims.” Dr. Galen crossed her arms. “Even the winner of the games is a victim.”

Stepping away from the double doors, a perplexed Dr. Verus stared at his senior. “Um..”

The woman cleared her throat. “In this room, they are victims. When you and I are out in public, they are tributes.”

Hesitantly, the resident nodded. “Okay.”

Dr. Galen then crossed the room to open a small cabinet that contained various medical supplies. “And yes they deserve better. I did try to upgrade them to something of a sturdier construction for shipping, but a box is a box.”

“I take it that the Capitol prevented you?”

“Yes.” Dr. Galen removed a pair of surgical gloves from the cabinet and tucked them into a pocket. “President Snow called me directly. He said that the fallen tributes can only have simple pine coffins, but I can have my equipment and use of cold storage on the trains.”

Dr. Verus joined his senior at the cabinet to collect gloves and eye protection. “Cheap coffins seem odd considering the extravagance shown before the games.”

“It’s all part of the message that the Capitol wants to send to the districts.”

The main double doors burst open with a loud commotion, startling both doctors. Pushing a hospital stretcher, two Peacekeepers entered the morgue with a black body bag.

The guards rolled the stretcher along side the metal table and swiftly transferred the bag over. As quickly as they had arrived, the Peacekeepers exited with the stretcher without speaking a word.

Donning their surgical gloves, both doctors approach the table, one

on either side. They silently stare at the lifeless body bag.

Dr. Verus visually studied the black bag, finding the material worn and scratched with signs of repair. He found that the zipper handle had been replaced with a piece of wire attached to the mechanism. The young doctor then noticed that Dr. Galen stood still with eyes shut. Briefly studying his mentor, he cleared his throat with a gentle cough. “Are you praying, doctor?”

Dr. Galen’s eyes opened, her expression sullen. “What do you think?”

His eyes drifted away without answering.

“Help me remover her from the bag.” Dr. Galen pulled the zipper along the length of the bag, revealing a soiled young woman dressed in the uniform assigned to her before entering the arena. The doctor gently reached under the shoulders and lifted as Dr. Verus slid the bag free to the waist. Dr. Galen next positioned an arm under the torso whence the other doctor pulled the body bag towards the legs until free from the body.

The doctors surveyed the slightly malnourished female tribute.

Below the ribs, a large bloodstain covered the right chest, staining downward along the right trouser leg towards the knee. Just below the eye, a deep scratch on the girl’s face appeared to have been recently bleeding.

Dr. Verus briefly scanned the ceiling above the autopsy table. “Do you have a dictation device?”

“No. The Capitol only wants a death certificate.”

“Do you make an autopsy report?”

Dr. Galen sighed. “I create a brief report for my records, but I don’t think the government cares. They have never asked to see them.” The senior retrieved a small computer tablet from a small desk and held the device over the dead girl’s arm. “The tracking device implanted into her arm positively identifies her as Pandora Spiga.” After returning the computer tablet to the desk, Dr. Galen

took gentle hold of the girl's wrist and searched for a pulse. After a few seconds, the doctor removed a stethoscope from a front scrub pocket and placed the chest piece over the tribute's heart. Dropping the stethoscope back into her pocket, the doctor stepped back from the table. "I pronounce Miss Pandora Spiga officially dead. I will use the Hunger Games logs to mark the official time since the tracking devices record the exact time of cardiac arrest."

When Dr. Verus noticed the stillness of his colleague, her focus fixed on Pandora's face, the young doctor began to fidget. "Well... I'll start cutting free her clothes."

"Dr. Verus, how is a person measured?" Dr. Galen leaned forward, against the table. "This is my first question for you."

With a heavy brow, Dr. Verus gazed down upon the body. "I assume that we're not speaking length."

Dr. Galen's face remained unchanged. "Were not."

The resident glanced at the girl's face. "My first guess would be by her accomplishments, but I already know this answer to be incorrect." He looked up at Dr. Galen. "Does this question have one particular answer?"

"I have only one in mind, but there are many answers."

"But only one is the *correct* answer?"

Free of emotion, Dr. Galen continued to stare at her assistant.

"Well..." Dr. Verus took a step towards the head of the table.

"Here lies Pandora Spiga, a 16-year-old girl from District Nine, one of the *victims* of the 72nd Hunger Games."

The senior doctor nodded once in agreement.

"She may be too young to be measured. I know so little about her, and her television interview was brief—just like the other interviews during the run up to the games. I don't even know if she has brothers or sisters."

Dr. Galen solemnly stared at Pandora's face. "She has an older sister named Madison."

The young doctor gave an inquisitive expression.

“The newspaper has extensive bios for all of them. I read them all while I wait for the Games to start.” Dr. Galen stepped to the side of the room and began moving a rolling cart topped with a surgical tray closer to the autopsy table. She next removed two medical crash scissors and handed one pair to the chief resident.

When Dr. Verus observed his senior cutting free the jacket, he promptly moved to the legs and began cutting the laces on the boots. “Do their bios list everything, such as their favorite color?”

Cutting Pandora’s short along the sides, Dr. Galen replied, “Red. Her favorite color was red.”

After removing the boots and socks, Dr. Verus began cutting up the trouser legs. “Dr. Galen, may I take my time answering your question?”

“You may.”

After the doctors removed all the clothing and piled the soiled remnants to the side, Dr. Verus visually inspected the wound below the ribs. “Do you have to give an official cause of death?”

“No. The Capital automatically fills in the word *Tribute* as the cause of death. I do note the actual cause for my report.”

The male doctor leaned closer and pulled the skin apart just enough to measure the wound. “She was stabbed by a large blade. The blade must have severed a major artery judging from the blood loss.”

Dr. Galen lifted the surgical tray from the rolling table. “We need to tie off or repair the severed vessels for embalming. Do you mind doing it?”

Dr. Verus quickly straightened. “I can.”

“Good. Everything you need is on this tray. As you perform the repairs, I’ll set Pandora’s facial features.” Dr. Galen then stepped to the head of the table as the resident began preparing his surgical tray.

Before commencing repairs, he diagnosed the damage. “It was the

portal vein and the hepatic artery. The inferior vena cava suffered damage too. I'll repair them for the embalming."

"Thank you." Dr. Galen did a visual inspection of Pandora's mouth before fixing it shut. She next retrieved two eye caps and lifted the first eyelid, setting the cap in place. Upon lifting the second eyelid, the senior doctor became transfixed as she stared into Pandora's lifeless eye.

The chief resident noticed the silence and peered up. He leaned forward and glanced at Pandora's exposed iris. "That's a lovely shade of green."

Dr. Galen looked away briefly. "Um...yes. Green such as hers is a rarity." The senior physician proceeded to place the eye cap under the lid before assuring that Pandora's face looked at rest.

Dr. Verus continued with his repairs. "I suppose you don't have to do much about facial hair."

"The girls are too young, and I don't bother with the boys since I'm not a true mortician."

"What about the scratch on her left cheek? Do you ever try to hide or cover them?"

"No. We just clean them," replied Dr. Galen as she began inspecting Pandora's ears to make sure they were clear of debris.

"Why not? You clearly show these kids immense respect."

Slowly, Dr. Galen straightened her stance. "Dr. Verus, you already know why."

The chief resident stretched his back, deep in thought. He turned to his mentor. "Because covering the wounds is akin to lying. Doctors don't lie to the patients or to the families...or to the dead."

"Correct. We just clean them the best we can for their journey home. Unfortunately, this is all we can do."

Chapter 2

Returning to his work, Dr. Verus commenced to repairing the hepatic artery. “How do you handle the heavy workload at the beginning? How many were killed on the first day this year?”

Dr. Galen reached for a pair of pencil sized metal tubes from the rolling cart, setting them on the edge of the table before replying, “There were nine on the first day. I often bring assistants to help me during the first week. I can manage alone from then on.”

“Not to mention, the occasional help from fellowship candidates.” Keeping his eyes on his work, the chief resident grinned.

“Most don’t get as far as you have, Dr. Verus.”

“I’m still working on your question of how to measure a person. I’m ruling out wealth.” He glanced at his mentor for a clue, which she did not give.

Turning away, Dr Galen retrieved another rolling cart with a 12-liter embalming machine, positioned the cart to the right of Pandora’s head. The doctor next retrieved a scalpel and made two small incisions on the side of the neck. When she was through, the two pencil-sized tubes protruded securely from the neck, one from the carotid artery and the other from the jugular vein. “Are your repairs complete?”

“I’m closing the skin.”

“I’m hooking up the embalming tubes to the pump.”

Dr. Verus trimmed his last stitch and stepped back from the table. He witnessed his senior stroking the hair of the young woman.

“Um...I’m done, Dr Galen.”

Without looking away from Pandora’s face, the female doctor cleared her throat. “How are the dead raised? And with what body do they come?”

“What?” The resident’s brow rose with confusion at the new

question.

“That is your second question.”

“I haven’t answered your first.” Dr. Verus circled around the table for the surgical cart.

“Take your time. There is no rush here.”

The young doctor returned his surgical tools to the tray. “I’ve discussed this with many a patient. Do you have a particular answer in mind?”

“I do.”

The chief resident approached the front of the table and stared down at Pandora. “It all depends on one’s faith. People rise according to their beliefs. Is this the answer you are inquiring?”

“No, try again.” Dr. Galen met her junior’s stare. “I’ll start the pump.”

Dr. Galen moved to the front of the machine to confirm the connections and settings before flipping a switch that activated a pump with a low humming sound.

The male doctor inspected the jugular drain. “Do you ever have to use multi-point injections?”

“No. Their youth makes the embalming process quite easy. Sometimes severed limbs have to be processed separately. The mutilated I send for cremation.”

Clasping his hands together, Dr. Verus asked, “Should I begin the cavity embalming?”

“No. I prefer to wait to see if anything unexpected happens at the beginning. Unseen trauma usually reveals itself right away.” Stepping away from the table, Dr. Galen removed a blue towel from a cabinet and proceeded to cover Pandora’s torso with the blue modesty cloth.

Taking a seat on a folding chair, the chief resident crossed a leg over a knee. “Is that necessary?”

“I don’t want the Peacekeepers to gawk if they return.”

The resident nodded in agreement and began to stare at Pandora's face when something stood out. He approached the table and inspected the dead girl's chin. "There's an old two centimeter scar on her chin with dotted scars from three crude stitches. I wonder what happened."

Dr. Galen inspected the scar from the other side. "One year in September, she was helping the family harvest grain late into the night and barely got any sleep. Waiting in a line at school the next day, she fell asleep on her feet."

Eyeing his senior, Dr. Verus crossed his arms. "And how would you know that?"

"It was in her medical records." The doctor approached the small metal desk in the room and retrieved a computer tablet. "She was nine."

Dr. Verus's brow furled. "Why do you have her records? These...*victims* are not to receive any medical attention."

"One of them is. If there is a large battle at the end, where the victor becomes severely wounded, they may need to know the medical history in order to save him or her. There could be a drug allergy or a genetic medical condition that would affect their treatment."

The resident leaned against the table. "Don't the paramedics just fly them to the Capitol for treatment?"

"They do." Dr. Galen sat in a second folding chair near the autopsy table. "Once, I needed to accompany a mortally wounded victor whose intestines had spilled out. It was the second Quarter Quell. After the young man was stabilized in the Capitol, I flew back to take care of the fallen. They credited me for saving his life. The Capitol then realized the importance of having a doctor on site since they nearly lost their victor. They now gather the health histories of all the kids. The poorer districts do not have much documentation except for what comes from the schools and small town clinics. But

the Peacekeepers collect what they can and scan them into our medical database.”

“And I suppose that you read all the histories before the start of the Games?” The chief resident returned to his chair.

“I do,” replied Dr. Galen, glancing at her companion from the corner of her eye. “You must think that I’m too involved.”

He smiled. “I don’t assume why anyone does anything. I won’t even pretend to know how you feel.”

Dr. Galen returned his smile. “Very wise. How many times have you made that mistake with a patient?”

“Just the once, I believe. When you say ‘I know how you feel’ to the wrong patient, you never make that mistake again.” The chief resident eyed his colleague. “But I do see that you are deeply concerned.”

The senior doctor leant forward, resting her elbows on her knees. “I admit that I’m consumed with these kids, wishing that I could stop all of it. I volunteer to make sure they get the respect that they deserve once they fall. And someday when it happens, I will be at the ready if they need me.”

“Ready for what?”

“For the needed change, for the permanent end to the Hunger Games.”

Dr. Verus leant forward. “The Hunger Games are written into the Treaty of Treason. I don’t see anything changing.”

Dr. Galen sighed. “Everything changes eventually.” Closing her eyes, her head bowed as if carrying a heavy weight.

With clasped hands, the chief resident stared at the girl on the table. “Let’s hope so.”

The senior doctor slowly straightened and began rubbing her neck. She then took a deep breath through her nose as she rose from her chair. “Time we begin embalming the cavities. I will do the chest and stomach. Can you embalm the colon?”

Rising to his feet, the resident nodded. “Yes, of course.”

Retrieving aspirators and trocar needles from below the rolling cart, the doctors began their work by piercing the appropriate locations of Pandora’s abdomen. Once initial tasks were completed, the doctors took hypodermic needles and finished embalming the hard to reach places on the surfaces of the skin, which were few for the young Pandora.

With the embalming complete, the doctors washed the weeks of dirt from Pandora’s hair with a basin of water. They rinsed it a second time with clean water, drying the strands with towels.

Dr. Galen next removed a heavy plastic liter container from below the cart and set it on the table next to Pandora’s body. She removed the plastic screw cap, revealing a white cream.

The chief resident examined contents of the container. “Skin cream?”

“Mortician’s cream. I developed it especially for embalming. It helps preserve the skin past the funeral viewing. Apply it liberally.”

The doctors proceeded to take large handfuls of cream and spread it onto sections of Pandora’s body, rubbing the skin in a firm matter that aided the final act of the arterial embalming. As they turned Pandora alternately onto her sides, they bent her joints to counteract the rigor mortis, thoroughly applying the embalming skin cream to the entire surface of the body. As Dr. Galen finished rubbing cream into Pandora’s face, Dr. Verus made sure the cream reached in between the fingers and toes.

A three-centimeter scar found on Pandora’s left heel grabbed the young doctor’s attention. “Do her medical records mention this scar?”

A faint smile appeared on the senior doctor’s face. “Pandora was playing with friends at a swimming hole and cut her foot on a piece of glass. The school nurse repaired it.”

“Why didn’t she go to a doctor?”

“The school nurse is the town doctor. There are no medically trained physicians in her community.”

Dr. Verus paused his rubbing of skin cream. “Is the access to doctors this bad in all the districts?”

“It is,” replied Dr. Galen

“Perhaps we should be sending med students and residents to the districts for stints during their training.”

His senior gave a dismissive shrug. “That would never happen.”

“Why not?”

Dr. Galen raised her head. “The Capitol prefers its citizens to not knowing, and the last thing the Capitol would want is to have their best and brightest to become fully aware of the blight of the districts.”

“There must be thousands of Peacekeepers who know.”

Dr. Galen moved to the other side of the table. “Yes, but they return to their own deprived district, trained to keep silent with the knowledge that things could be much worse.”

With furled brow, Dr. Verus gently flexed Pandora’s legs. “The question isn’t ‘how are the dead raised’; it’s how will the living rise up?”

The physician eyed him coolly.

Moving to Pandora’s other side, the chief resident flexed the rigor mortis out of the other leg as he rubbed in the embalming cream.

“What else did her records say?”

Delayed by medical ethnicity, Dr. Galen bit her lip before saying in confidence to her medical colleague, “The school nurse documented a gravida in her record.”

The resident paused as he glanced at the young woman on the table. “She must not have delivered.”

“I agree, but I don’t know what happened. Except for the mandatory vaccines and the stitches, most of what happens to the people in the districts is never documented. Her records don’t say

much.” With a gentle sigh, Dr. Galen began flexing one of Pandora’s arms and said, “Most of what I have learned of these children comes from the newspaper. Sometimes there is the odd fact in the gambling section.”

Shifting the modesty cloth, the young doctor began applying lotion to the torso. “I never bet in the games. I just...became numb to them.”

“I gather information from wherever I can,” said Dr. Galen. When the physician squeezed Pandora’s upper arm, she remember another factoid. “The paper said that she could throw a fastball.”

Dr. Verus smiled. “That’s right. In her television interview, she mentioned that she loved baseball and that she would throw balls high up onto the roof of the barn. They would roll off randomly, which allowed her to practice catching pop ups. I remember that now...and her hair.”

Removing the modesty cloth completely, the female doctor joined the resident at applying cream to the torso. “We should turn her on to her sides again before finishing the front.”

Working in tandem, they treated the skin on Pandora’s back, after which, Dr. Galen finished the front torso.

As his senior repositioned the modesty cloth, Dr. Verus began whispering to himself. “How is a person measured?”

Dr. Galen had to restrain a grin.

Noticing her moment of levity, the young doctor asked, “Dr. Galen, did you have a special swimming hole as a kid?”

“No. I was busy collecting caryophyllaceae.”

The resident dug into his memory. “The wild flower?”

“Yes. I use to study the wildflowers in the nearby mountains, carnations being my favorite.”

“Is that what led you to medicine?”

“No.” Returning the cap to the large jar of cream, Dr. Galen glanced on Pandora’s face. “Once I started seeing past the veil of

innocence, I wanted to understand man's cruelty."

"Did you study psychology?"

"No. I saw that as trying to put reason to chaos. I wanted to study the brain in search of the link."

"What link?"

Dr. Galen looked into her colleague's eyes. "The link to our being. It's in the brain somewhere; otherwise, we're just biological computers bumping into each other. The human brain is more than a sophisticated computer. The answers we seek are all in there. And since it appears that we cannot find those eternal questions through conscious thought, I've decided to seek them out from the outside."

With growing respect, the young doctor smiled grew with Dr. Galen's explanation.

Seeing the resident's reaction, the doctor smiled sheepishly before changing the subject. "So, did you have a special swimming hole?"

Dr. Verus smile turned ominous.

Shaking her head, Dr. Galen said, "I withdraw my question. I don't want to know."

With arterial embalming completed, Dr. Galen began dismantling the machine. Dr. Verus removed the vascular tubes and began closing the small incisions in Pandora's neck. As the last stitch was trimmed, the senior retrieved a set of light blue cotton patient pajamas from the cabinet, setting them at Pandora's feet.

"We'll wipe her down once more, making sure we didn't miss anything before we dress her." Dr. Galen passed a white hand towel to her colleague.

Rubbing the pajama cloth between his fingers, Dr. Verus sneered disappointedly. "The fabric is cheap."

"I actually have to pay for them myself since the Capitol deems their dirty arena clothes sufficient. They are standard hospital issue." Dr. Galen turned to Pandora and began the final inspection, rubbing any excess lotion with the hand towel. "Besides, the

families back in the districts have their preferred funeral clothing.”

Dr. Verus began assisting his colleague with the final inspection. “We spoil them until the games start, and from that point on, nothing. It doesn’t seem right.”

Cleaning some excess cream from between Pandora’s fingers, the Dr. Galen eyed her junior. “The Capitol spoils the sacrificed. Once they’re dead, which they are as soon as they enter the arena, the Capitol has no more use of them.”

Preparing the pajamas, Dr. Verus clenched his jaw as he assisted with the dressing of the fallen tribute, no longer able to suppress his emotions as taught in medical school. When the two doctors finished, Pandora lay on the table as if asleep, at peace.

At peace herself, Dr. Galen turned to her junior and asked, “Dr. Verus, are you ready for your final question?”

The chief resident glared at her.

“You have plenty of time to answer the other two. You don’t even have to answer them in order.”

“Okay. What’s the next question?”

Dr. Galen flattened a turned up collar on Pandora’s pajama top before staring at the dead girl’s face. “What does everyone possess, rich or poor, that grows in value as we age?”

Twisting his mouth, the resident hesitantly spoke. “Something tells me that it’s not the obvious answer: time.”

Shrugging, Dr. Galen stepped away. “No rush. Come help me with the coffin.”

“Wait.” Dr. Verus studied the young woman on the table. “We’re missing something.”

Dr. Galen joined the resident at his side. “What?”

The younger stared at Pandora for several seconds before answering. “The hair.”

“We washed it during the embalming.”

“No.” Dr. Verus approached Pandora’s hair, rubbing some of her

long black strands between his fingers. “It’s not right. It’s not how I remember seeing it during her television interview. Her hair was so vibrant on the television.”

Moving to the head of the table, Dr. Galen inspected Pandora’s hair. “She was alive then. She had stylists.”

“No it’s not that. She valued her hair, and with what limited resources she possessed, she made it stand out.

“The prep teams make the hair stand out.”

“No. It was full of body and curls before she came to the Capitol. It stood out at her reaping. Can we bring in her prep team to treat her hair?”

“No. They are back in the Capitol. The Gamemakers would never allow it.”

Dr. Verus rubbed the strands between his fingers. “Let’s wash it again.”

Feeling her colleague’s urgency, Dr. Galen again stroked Pandora’s hair. “There are some higher quality hair products in the women’s locker room. I’ll collect what I can.”

“Dr. Galen, is fixing her hair a lie?”

The woman laid a comforting hand on the young doctor’s shoulder. “No. We’re just thoroughly washing it. You wrap her face and neck in towels so that we don’t get her skin wet.”

“Okay,” replied the resident, “And I’ll prepare the hot water.”

Dr. Galen returned with a couple bottles of hair product, a curling iron, and hair dryer. Using the computer tablet, Dr. Verus found images of Pandora to use as a style guide. With great care, the two doctors washed the tribute’s hair. They rinsed the strands with warm water and gently squeezed out the excess from the flattened curls with towels.

Under direct light, Dr. Verus inspected the rewashed hair. “The shine is back. At least we can give back this part of her to her family.” When the hair fell from his fingers, the man fell silent.

Taking notice of the silence, Dr. Galen asked, “Is there something wrong?”

“How are the dead raised? And with what body do they come?” The chief resident turned away from the table to face his mentor. “I thought that I had an answer for you, just now, but it slipped away.”

Reaching for an extension cord, Dr. Galen smiled as she plugged in the hair dryer. “It will come.”

Chapter 3

Returning to Pandora's hair, Dr. Verus felt as drawn to this girl as he would with his living patients—if not more. Straightening a long lock of hair well past her shoulders, he turned to Dr. Galen and said, “As for your first question, or should I say riddle, of how a person is measured, I could measure the actual length of this hair, but what would it tell me? Nothing.”

Smiling, Dr. Galen briefly met her junior's gaze before turning on the hair dryer, carefully tending to Pandora's hair.

They proceeded to finish the drying with towel and machine until the full volume had returned to Pandora's hair. As Dr. Verus combed the hair into uniform strands, Dr. Galen applied the curling iron. Together, the two medical professionals progressed until they had found the desired effect.

Stepping back, Dr. Verus smiled. “That's closer to what I remember of Pandora.”

“She must have loved her hair.” Dr. Galen unplugged the iron. “It would have needed a lot of maintenance.”

The young doctor's face became solemn as he continued to stare at the body. “Huh?”

“What?”

“We're still missing something?”

“I'm fairly certain that the embalming is complete. I've done enough of them.”

Dr. Verus shook his head. “Not that. My gut tells me that we are missing something significant.”

Circling the table, Dr. Galen visually glanced at Pandora with a confused look. “Like what?”

“I don't know.” The young doctor bit his lip.

“Take a break and go for a walk. Maybe it will come to you.”

We'll finish when you get back.”

The resident snapped his fingers. “What I’m trying to remember is in her interview. Did you watch hers?”

Dr. Galen subtly shook her head. “I only read their histories and bios. Watching the videos would make my work even more unbearable.”

“Would you mind if we pull up hers on the computer?”

The senior doctor hesitated, but said, “Go ahead, if your instincts think it’s important.”

“It is. I know it.” Dr. Verus took the computer tablet from the desk and promptly found Pandora’s interview with Caesar Flickerman. The doctor stood next to his colleague and pressed play.

On the video, Caesar and Pandora sit upon a stage before a large audience. Caesar appears relaxed as normal. With head upright and shoulders straight, Pandora wears a flowing red dress with her long curly black hair draping over her bare shoulders.

“The barn has to be a couple stories high,” says a jovial Caesar pats his knee. “I’m glad you didn’t hurt yourself. Pandora, they say you have quite the throwing arm.”

“I do. My father taught me how to throw a fastball.”

“Do you throw overhand?”

Caught up in the excitement of being center stage, Pandora skirts forward on her chair and smiles warmly at her host. “Is there any other way?”

“What about softball?”

“I’ve always preferred baseball. I have an old baseball glove that was passed down to me from my grandfather. I’d give anything to play catch with my father one more time.”

This heartfelt confession causes the audience to murmur.

Gently guiding the mood of the interview, Caesar promptly changes the subject. “So Pandora, what else do you enjoy doing in District Nine?”

“Well Caesar, when I’m not throwing like a boy, I make dolls like a girl with my grandma. We make them out of straw. My grandma can also make them out of cornhusks, but that’s more complicated.”

Dr. Galen moved closer to her colleague, peering closer at the tablet screen. “She had a rich voice. She sounds much older.”

Dr. Verus nodded. “True. She sounds...brave.”

On the video, Caesar rubs his chin. “I apologize for my ignorance, but what exactly is a straw doll?”

Pandora smirks and says, “I can show you.” She reaches into an inconspicuous pocket on the side of her dress and pulls out a small palm sized doll made of straw. She hands it to Caesar. “Since we are the grain district, we have plenty of straw to entertain ourselves with.”

Inspecting the trinket, Caesar smiles. “It’s lovely. I love how you used red thread to help hold the straw together.” Caesar holds up the doll for the viewers, and the camera promptly switches to a close up.

Pausing the video playback, Dr. Verus began studying the doll filling the computer tablet screen.

Taking the tablet from the resident, Dr. Galen also inspected the image, gnawing her lip with growing focus. She turned to the young doctor and said, “Someone once told me that the tributes are allowed to carry one item from home into the arena.” Passing the computer tablet to the resident, Dr. Galen crossed the room where Pandora’s dirty, bloody clothes lay.

She began searching the pants, tossing them to the side when she found nothing. The doctor next searched the jacket and froze when her hand felt something in the left breast pocket. She carefully removed her hand to reveal the straw doll displayed in the paused video. Motionless, she stared at the tiny effigy. When Dr. Galen flipped the doll over, she gasped and turned, hiding her face from her colleague. Her arms lowered to her sides as her shoulders drooped

forward; the woman inhaled deeply as she tried to keep her emotions checked.

Rushing to his mentor's side, Dr. Verus studied her face. "What's wrong?"

Without looking, Dr. Galen passed the doll to the resident. "The doll has a name."

Dr. Verus turned the doll over in his hand. He found that the torso had been wrapped with a strip of white cloth to form a small dress. Stitched in red thread across the cloth, tiny letters formed the word *Hope*. "It may not be a name. It could be a virtue."

"It doesn't matter." Dr. Galen approached the folding chairs and sat down with a great weight.

With care, the resident returned the doll to its owner, gently setting the straw figure upon Pandora's sternum. With a heavy heart, he returned to his seat next to his mentor. From an unspoken obligation, the young doctor continued the playback of Pandora's interview.

On the video, the camera pans out two show Caesar and Pandora in the shot. Caesar again studies the doll. "This is lovely. You make these with your grandmother?"

Pandora beams. "Yes, we make them all the time to give to the little kids in our community. We don't have much in toys in District Nine. Making these dolls with my grandma will always be one of my fondest memories."

"That is very noble of you, young lady."

"During the fall festival, my entire family will work together to create a straw man as big as an actual person to burn in the center of town. It's to celebrate the autumn equinox."

"Indeed. That sounds absolutely fantastic." Caesar hands the doll back to Pandora. "Please tell me that you never burn these precious little dolls."

"We don't. Most of us, including me, consider them good luck." Pandora glances at the doll in her hand, and her smile begins to fade.

Before Caesar can intervene, the buzzer sounds, signaling the end of the allotted time for the interview. Rising to his feet, the host says, “Well, please allow me to also wish you good luck. It was an absolute pleasure meeting you. Pandora Spiga, tribute from District Nine!” Hearing Caesar’s signature words, the audience begins to shower host and tribute with respectful applause.

Seeing the flushness in his colleague’s face, Dr. Verus promptly turned off the tablet computer. “Sorry if this has upset you.”

Focusing across the room at concrete wall, the Dr. Galen inhaled deeply and said, “No. Your instincts were right. Is that doll what you were trying to remember?”

The man nodded. “It is.”

“Then it’s good we found it.”

Motionless, the doctors sat quietly in reflection. With the only sound of a leaky faucet, the drips only appeared to grow louder as Dr. Galen’s breathing deepened. With a shared understanding, the doctors wrapped clasped their consoling hands together.

After their much-needed respite, Dr. Galen reluctantly rose out of her chair. Wiping her eyes, she asked, “Can you fetch a coffin for Pandora? There should be a cart in the storage room.”

“Sure.” Dr. Verus stood, but froze with a thought. He turned to Dr. Galen. “What does everyone possess, rich or poor, that grows in value as we age? Can this thing be stolen or taken away?”

With a faint smile, Dr. Galen replied, “For the sake of this riddle, no, but it can be lost.”

“Medically lost?”

Dr. Galen pursed her lips in an attempt to hide her smirk.

Hemming, the young doctor passed through the double door into the storage room. When he returned, with one of the pine coffins on a rolling cart, he found Dr. Galen standing by Pandora.

When he rolled the coffin alongside the table, he noticed how the top of the coffin was perfectly level with the autopsy table, how

everything had been streamlined with eerie precision. Realizing that most morgues were designed to process the dead efficiently, he removed the lid, thinking, *But this is different.*

From the cabinet, Dr. Galen fetched a white cotton sheet and began lining the coffin.

“The doll,” exclaimed the young doctor. The man snatched the straw toy from atop Pandora’s torso. “She mentioned that making these with her grandmother was one of her fondest mem...”

The female physician straightened as she studied her colleague’s blank gaze. “Yes?”

Dr. Verus smiled with relief. “Memories. Everyone has memories; the good ones grow in value as we age. They can only be lost by disease, or death.”

“Yes.”

Following a large sigh of relief, Dr. Verus said, “People are measured by the memories they leave behind in others.”

Nodding approvingly, Dr. Galen crossed her arms. “Yes. Those who are the most giving of themselves, spreading kindness, are the most fondly remembered.”

Dr. Verus bit his lip as he shook his head in wonder. With a growing smile, he said, “And how are the dead raised? And with what kind of body do they come? They rise in our memories. The dead continue live through us, the living.”

Taking the straw doll from the resident, Dr. Galen gently began rubbing her thumb across the stitching. “Yes. The dead will also rise again in the things that they loved doing.”

Dr. Verus leaned against the table and asked, “Are memories a special focus of your neurological work?”

“No. Just an observation.” The woman turned to Pandora. “Help me slide her in. I’ll take the feet.”

The young doctor stepped towards the head of the table when something caught his eye. “Wait. There’s a blood stain on the side of

her pajama bottoms, at the thigh.”

Glancing over the body, the senior physician shrugged. “A drop of blood must have gotten on the table. The stain is small; I wouldn’t worry about it. No one will notice.”

Dr. Verus’s face hardened. “No. She deserves clean pajamas. I’ll pay for new bottoms.”

Seeing the chief resident’s stern expression, Dr. Galen nodded. “Okay. There are more in the cabinet.”

After the doctors replaced the pajama bottoms, they carefully slid Pandora off the table into the coffin. When her body was in place and secured, they touched up her hair one last time.

Dr. Galen reached for the straw doll on the table and ran her thumb over the *Hope* lettering. “I should pin this to Pandora’s pajama top so it doesn’t get lost in transit.” The doctor retrieved a pin from the cabinet and began fastening the doll to the pajamas, over Pandora’s heart.

The young doctor mused openly, “The symbolism is inescapable.”

With a heavy brow, the senior doctor nodded. “Yes. I know.”

Moving to the foot of the coffin, Dr. Verus said, “I’ve always thought it odd that hope was trapped in Zeus’s box of evils.”

“First of all,” retorted Dr. Galen, crossing her arms. “Pandora’s box was actually a jar.”

The resident’s head bobbed in agreement as he began recalling his mythological studies.

“Second,” continued the senior doctor, “some saw hope as one of the evils trapped in the jar, seen more as a false hope. The Greeks thought it delusional to sit around and *hope* that something would turn out for the best, to sit around *hoping* that someone else would solve their problems. But others scholars have thought that the jar was full of good, a pantry of good fortune for humans, but when Pandora looked inside and let all the good escape this world, all that remained for humanity was hope.”

Dr. Verus rested his hands on his hips. “So, which hope are we returning today to District Nine with Pandora?”

Gnawing her lip, the Dr. Galen stared into the coffin. “I don’t know. I became a doctor to ease suffering. I became one of the best, and yet, I’m powerless to end the monstrous crime being committed above us right now in a manmade arena. I’m not the one to ask.”

The young doctor retrieved the coffin lid from the wall. “Whichever way you want to look at the myth, I believe that the hope within should match the rest of the contents. I choose to believe that we are sending back with Pandora the good variety of hope, to match the girl inside.” Gently, he set the lid into to place.

Pausing to dry her eyes, Dr. Galen reached under the coffin’s to retrieve a hammer and box of nails from the cart. “Could you?”

“Sure.” Accepting the hammer and nails, Dr. Verus began preparing for the final task.

Dr. Galen pulled out her smartphone and said, “I’ll inform the Peacekeepers that she’s ready to be flown to the Capitol.”

“Will her mentor be travelling with her, back to her district?”

“Don’t know. If they do, they’ll meet up with the coffin in the Capitol where it will be loaded onto the train.”

The young doctor easily tapped the first nail into the pinewood. “Do these cheap coffins survive the trip?”

“They do. I have followed up with a few of the coffins. Once on the train, the employees, mostly from District Six, look after the coffins. They take good care of the fallen.”

The man fastened another nail. “Good.”

When Dr. Verus finished with the last nail, Dr. Galen removed a black marker pen from her pocket and wrote in large printed letters across the coffin lid: *Pandora Spiga, District Nine.*

As they waited for Pandora’s coffin to be collect, the chief resident began wiping down the examination table, afterwards progressing to the other equipment. At the sink, the doctor poured the

blood down the drain, rinsing the container and sink clean. Together, in silence, the two doctors began preparing the room for the next inescapable victim.

When two Peacekeepers entered the room with a stretcher, Dr. Galen watched with a careful eye as the guards gently transferred the coffin onto the stretcher.

As the Peacekeepers began to exit, one turned to the senior physician and said, “Doc, I think that you’ll be busy tonight. The girl from District Seven has come out of hiding, and she’s lethal, nothing like she was during the pregame. She just took out a Career. You should be getting official word soon.”

The other Peacekeeper began pushing Pandora’s coffin through the double doors. “I’m betting on this Joanna girl. She clearly knew how to divide and conquer those two patrolling Careers. I bet the other isn’t going to make it back to their base camp. No way is he going to survive the night.”

His cohort followed behind and asked, “What do you want to wager on it?”

As the double doors flapped back and forth, quickly becoming still, Dr. Galen’s phone buzzed. Hesitating, she forced herself to read the message. “They’re right. A hovercraft picked up a body minutes ago. It will be here shortly.”

The chief resident turned to his mentor. “Dr. Galen, may I again assist you?”

The woman’s chin lifted slightly, as if a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. She smiled at the young doctor and said, “I’d appreciate that. I need the company.”

“We should grab some dinner first. I’ll buy to cover the pajama bottoms.”

“I’ll pass. The cafeteria food for the Peacekeepers is terrible. If you insist on buying me lunch, I’ll wait until September, when you can take me to a nice restaurant.”

With a confused look, Dr. Verus cleared his throat. “You're giving me the fellowship?”

“I am.”

“Because of the riddles?”

“No.” The corner of Dr. Galen's mouth twisted into a satisfied smile. “Pandora told me. She verified that you had the credentials I seek.”

Dr. Verus stared for a moment in astonishment before nodding in gratitude. “I'm honored. I promise you, and Pandora, to always do my best.”

“I know you will.” Dr. Galen shook the young doctor's hand. “I'll meet you down in the cafeteria. I have something to do.”

“Okay.”

When Dr. Verus departed the room, Dr. Galen approached a small red box hanging on the wall, one used to collect hazardous hospital waste. With a heavy brow, the doctor removed from her pocket a capped medical syringe partially filled with blood, blood she had used to stain Pandora's pajamas, and said in whisper, “I'm so sorry for what happened to you.”

Curling her fingers around the syringe, the doctor freely began to mourn. Gazing up at the ceiling with welling eyes, she said, “Thank you, dear child. Dr. Verus's benevolence was exactly what I had been seeking. He's a good doctor.”

With a heavy sigh, Dr. Galen finally dropped the syringe into the box. “Peace be with you, Pandora. May the gifts you've bestowed to this world never be forgotten.”