



Pahl and Gage

By
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Pahl stared at the struggling fish in his hands, his hunger such, that he thought that he could eat the creature raw. The 17-year-old tribute carefully shuffled through the knee-deep water towards the nearest set of rocks on the river's edge. Remembering how the previous male tribute had killed the trout, he shifted his grip and raised the fish high in the air before the same boulder.

When the sun glistened off the fish's scales, it revealed the trout's many-colors, making him hesitate and lower his arms. Struggling to keep his grip, Pahl studied the dull eyes and gasping mouth of the fish. As he loosened his grip, he began admiring the fish's beauty, studying it from head to tail. He took stock of the small life held in his hands and sighed. He returned his gaze to the eyes for another moment before slowly lowering the fish to the river. The trout easily slipped from his hands and disappeared into the rush of water.

"That has to be the most pathetic thing that I have ever witnessed!"

Startled, Pahl spun around to see Gage, a 17-year-old female tribute, standing at the river's edge with a drawn knife.

The male tribute nervously wiped his hands across his jacket. "Are you going to kill me?"

"I should." She pointed her knife towards his head. "Aren't you hungry?"

"I'm starving."

She began to shuffle her feet in frustration as her hands came to rest on her hips, the sun reflecting off the steel blade. "I've been scanning these rivers since the start of the games, and I have yet to see a fish. Why on earth would you let the fish go when there are so few?"

His cold, numb feet stepped nimbly towards the riverbank. "I'm not going to win. Killing it would be a waste."

"It's just a fish."

"Not to me." Pahl shrugged.

"I can't believe that you're still alive."

A brief smile flashed across his face. "Me too. I thought for sure that I would have died on the first day." He stepped out of the water before his fellow tribute. "So, are you going to kill me?"

She lifted the knife, touching the tip of the blade to his throat. Gage's lips pressed together.

"Please, be quick about it. I don't want my family to watch me suffer for any longer

than is needed on television.” Pahl’s eyes closed as his breath began to deepen.

Gage could see the boy’s body tremble as her muscles tensed with unease. She spun away. “Ahhhg! I’m not going to kill you.”

The male tribute opened his eyes to see her walk away and take a seat on a fallen log in the middle of a small clearing near the river. He inhaled deeply. “Thank you.”

She tossed her knife, sticking it into the ground between her feet. “Oh shut up.”

“Sorry.” Pahl took a seat on the free end of the log. “If I had known that you were watching, I would have offered you the fish.”

“I’m not angry about your idiocy. I’m angry at my own impending death.”

Leaning on his knees, Pahl clasps his hands together. “You might outlast them.”

“No, only those with the instinct to kill win, and I’m not a killer.” She leaned forward onto her knees, bowing her head.

“You’re like me.”

“No!” She straightened. “I’m not a pacifist. I’ll at least put up a fight when they come for me.”

“Sorry.” Pahl sat still in the hope of not angering his guest further.

As Gage leant over from exhaustion, Pahl took the opportunity to focus on the sounds of the forest. With so many other tributes out to kill him, his keen hearing and camouflage skills had kept him alive, allowing him to avoid any contact with any other tribute until today when the sound of rushing water masked his guest. Today the winds were light, unmasking more sounds from the dense forest next to the river that he now called home. He quickly surveyed the area over his shoulders for what his ears might miss.

He glanced at his visitor and could feel the exhaustion that seemed to pull on her face since the weeks apparently took a larger toll on her. Pahl retrieved from his pocket some nuts and held them out for her. “Here, I found a tree that has these. They’re not ripe, and lack any flavor, but they do the job if you can ignore the somewhat bitter after taste.”

Gage took them slowly from his hand. “Thanks.”

“I’m Pahl. Pahl Calis.”

“I know.” The corner of her mouth pulled back, sneering as her brow furled.

“Gage, right?”

“Yah.” She began chewing on the first nut. “This is like chewing on cardboard. Do the Gamemakers always have to be this cruel?”

“I suppose they do. When did you realize that anything sweet in the arena was poisonous?”

“When my district partner bit into an apple. You?”

“I had my suspicions immediately since the fruits and berries that I was seeing were not at the edible plant station during training. I knew for certain when I saw the guy from District Ten casually pull off some berries over there by the rocks to eat while the fish that he had just caught cooked. It was not a quick death.”

Gage took a small bite from the second nut. “Were you two allies?”

“No. I was hiding in the trees. I learned to trap the trout in the shallow rock pool by spying on him.”

“Did he teach you how to release it too?”

Pahl sighed as he resisted the urge to defend himself. “Your last name is Brunel, right?”

“Yah.” Gage popped the remaining partial nut into her mouth. “So you’ve been hiding here this whole time?”

“Yep. This forest arena is perfect for me.” Pahl swept his arm towards the trees over his right shoulder. “There are plenty of wondrous pines in which to get lost.”

“Aren’t they hard to climb?”

“You stay on the ground next to the trunk. The dead grass and fallen leaves provide enough protection from the cold at night. How have you’ve been staying warm at night?”

Gage pointed to the edge of the clearing where Pahl spotted a small backpack and sleeping bag. “I took the sleeping bag from my district partner when he died from the poison apple. The pack I picked up while I was running from the Cornucopia at the start of the games.”

“I didn’t grab anything at the start. I just turned and ran.” Pahl bit a nut in half.

“Smartest thing to do. I only grabbed the pack since it was relatively close. I spotted my district partner soon after, and we took off together.”

As the horrible sounds of tributes dying came rushing back into his thoughts, Pahl began to fidget with his hands. “I took off without my district partner. We did have a backup plan to meet up in any forests located close to water, if there were any forests, or water. We would have never guessed that we would find ourselves in such a lush, widespread forest with rivers. She’s still alive, but not near this stream. I’ve searched along both of rivers on this side of the arena without any luck.”

After popping another nut into her mouth, Gage brushed back her blonde hair. “At least they gave us plenty of water despite the lack of food. How many streams pass through the arena?”

“Not sure. I only know of the two, and neither appear to empty into a lake. There can’t be many more since the arena is smaller than normal. It can’t be more than a few miles squared.”

Her eyes heavy, Gage hunched over and fell silent as she finished her last bite.

With pressed lips, Pahl stared at her out of the corner of his eye. “I’ll be right back.” He moved to the edge of the clearing and slowly entered the forest. Just a few yards in, he lowered to his knees and crawled under a large conifer tree that had been his home since the start of the games. He retrieved a small pack along with two water flasks before returning to clearing. He sat on the ground before the female tribute and held out a flask for her to take.

She took the flask. “Did you get the pack off of the District Ten tribute?”

“Yes.”

“Did you warn him about the poison berries?”

“No.” Pahl watched her open the flask as she waited for more of an explanation. “I may be a pacifist, but I don’t want to die. Hard to tell how someone will react.” He began to feel uneasy from her stare. “I didn’t poison the water. Do you want me to take a sip to prove it?”

Gage’s mouth formed a small smirk as she sipped from the flask. “I very much doubt that a pacifist who would let dinner swim away would poison a water flask.”

“I did purify the water with iodine. Not sure if I should bother since I’ve been drinking straight from the river since the beginning.”

“Thanks. If it hasn’t hurt you by now...” Gage was staring down at his now open pack. “That’s quite the knife. Shouldn’t it be strapped to your hip?”

He held up a large hunting knife. “I only use it to dig for roots.”

“You could use it to scare away someone who's trying to kill you.”

Pahl smiled. “No one is going to run from me.”

“That’s right.” Gage shook her head. “Why on earth did you announce to everyone that you were a pacifist?”

“I still am.”

“Shut up.” She sipped from the flask. “Why make yourself the easiest target?”

Returning the knife to the pack, Pahl made himself more comfortable on the ground. “I don’t know. I think that I had accepted my fate and just wanted to be me. Besides, Caesar Flickerman made the television interview so relaxed; it just came out. I don’t think it was a secret.”

“Everyone was wondering why the Gamemakers didn’t give you the lowest score possible?” Gage sipped more water.

“I showed my camouflage skills during my private session. I told them that I could disappear into trees. Since they must have known the topography of the arena awaiting us, they gave me a three.”

Gage glared at her fellow tribute for a long pause. “At the start of the games, I thought that you’d step off your platform early to blow yourself up or lay down in the middle of the Cornucopia as a sacrifice.”

“I want to live; I’m just not going to kill to do it.”

A huff escaped from Gage as she stared off into the distance.

Pahl removed a small bundle of cloth from his pack and proceeded to unwrap a half-loaf of bread. When the bread became exposed to the fresh air, the fragrant scent immediately grabbed Gage’s attention, causing her to sit up. He broke the bread in half and offered her one of the pieces. “Here, I’ve been tearing off small chunks for the past couple days. It came with the pack.”

“Cheese bread.” With a hesitant hand, Gage took it. “Why are you being nice to me?”

“Just returning the kindness.” Looking away, Pahl bit into the bread.

“I haven’t been nice to you.”

“You’re not killing me. I consider that a nice gesture.”

Gage took a long sniff of her treat before taking a bite. She moaned from the

explosion of cheesy goodness of real food that had been absent for the past couple of weeks. "I don't deserve this. District Ten bread is the best of all of the districts."

"I'm happy that I could share it with you. I did not think that I would ever get to sit down and talk to anyone ever again. This is nice. Maybe we could form an alliance?"

Laughter erupted from Gage. "More like a suicide pact."

Pahl smiled through pursed lips.

Her nose wrinkled with regret. "Sorry."

"No, you're right." He shook his head. "I'm probably more of a danger to you, being who I am." The male tribute positioned himself against the log and began to watch the trees sway in the light breeze.

Gage tried to pace her eating, but soon she found her hands empty of food. She unzipped her jacket and slid down to the ground, leaning against the log. "Is it safe to stay in one spot for so long?"

"Not sure. I'm wondering if it's a dead spot that the cameras can't see."

"I doubt that there are any dead spots. Didn't you say that a tribute died here?"

"Yes."

"They came for his body?"

"Yes."

"Then they know and see everything." Gage ran her fingers through her hair with a slow deep breath. "It's nice here. I just wish that I could properly wash my hair."

Pahl turned his body towards Gage. "Why would they let me linger here? They never let tributes linger."

"They probably think that it would be funny to see a pacifist come in second to last. If there was only one other tribute left, I'm sure that they would flush you out to see if you are truly a pacifist."

"They think I'm bluffing? Do you think I'm bluffing?"

"I think you're an idiot."

"Funny, that's what my mentor said."

Gage draped her arms over her knees. "Did you tell your mentor that you weren't going to try?"

"I never said that I wasn't going to try."

"I didn't see you in weapon training."

Pahl crossed his ankles and stared out across the river. "I spent all my training at the survival stations. My plan was to out survive everyone. It happened a couple years ago for that Annie girl from District Four."

"The odds are very slim for that happening again, especially with your open pacifism."

"I want to live no matter how slim the chance. I just want to do the right thing."

Gage bit her lip, waiting. "Which is...?"

Pahl's gaze fell to the grass at his side. "Not hurt anyone and die bravely, if I can."

"You truly are an idiot."

"Perhaps." He looked up at the female tribute with a faint grin. "You don't seem to

be the killing type.”

“I’m not. I’m the surviving type who’ll fight back.” Gage began picking at the grass. “There are other incentives too. The rewards for being the last survivor could bring relief to my family and friends. Don’t you want to try to survive in the name of your family?”

Nervously scanning the forest surroundings over his shoulders, Pahl faintly shrugged. “I do. I will try as long as I don’t have to kill. I promised this to my mother, and she told me that she was proud of me.”

Gage pulled her knees up tight. “What did your father say?”

“He um...admitted to me that he never quite understood me, but he too was proud of me. He told me to follow my heart. He said that he was honored to have such a thoughtful son.”

“Thoughtful? Is that Districts Seven’s way of saying stupid?”

Pahl frowned. “All right, you’ve made your point.”

“Well, I’m not done pointing it out how insane it all is.”

“If you want me to leave, just say so. I’ll find a different hiding spot.”

Flicking strands of grass into the light breeze, Gage crossed her arms and gazed across the river. Pahl, red faced, fell silent with eyes directed towards the treetops. Listening together to the river, neither tribute got up to leave.

The sun gradually centered overhead, and the radiant warmth caused each tribute to shed their jacket. The afternoon winds increased, causing the leaves to rustle louder and the branches to sway more. Unbeknownst to the other, each tribute secretly basked in the other’s unthreatening companionship, for they were both mentally and physically exhausted from simply surviving.

“Sorry.” Gage briefly turned to look at Pahl. “I’ve been lashing out ever since....”

“That’s okay. The games take their toll on everyone.” Pahl passed one of two remaining nuts to Gage.

She rolled it in her hands. “Thanks again.”

“These are the last. We can go gather more nuts at sunset. The tree is in a middle of a field, which is too dangerous to visit during the day. That is, if you want to come with me?”

“Sure. I’ll go with you.” She bit into the nut.

“We can dig up some roots. They taste even worse than the nuts, but they provide additional nutrition. They’ve kept me relatively well for the past couple weeks.”

“Okay.” Gage began inspecting the nut in her hand.

Pahl studied Gage’s slow movements. “Did I say something that has upset you?”

“No. I’m just remembering my reaping day when I said goodbye to everyone, three long weeks ago. It feels like an eternity.”

“What did your parents say to you?” Pahl bit into his last nut.

“They weren’t there.” Gage turned her face away.

Pahl stopped chewing. “Are they alive?”

“They are, but my dad is away working on one of the northern train lines,

performing summer maintenance. My mother came to see me off, but she wasn't really there."

Shifting his body against the log, Pahl struggled to understand. "I'm sorry. I don't —"

"My mom's a morphling addict."

Pahl slowly sat back. "Oh."

"Do you know what my mom asked me during our private session before they took me away? She asked if I had any money stashed away, as if I would have any money. She was more concerned about her next fix than losing her youngest daughter."

Unsure of what to say, the male tribute began to fidget. "Sorry."

"It is what it is. At least, my older brother and sister came to say goodbye."

Pahl took a long sip of water. "Did they let you call your father on a government phone or something?"

"Not possible." A faint smile almost slipped past her frown. "Since so many parents are away on reaping day performing summer maintenance on the railroad in the far-reaching districts, our district created a special day in early spring that we call Resolution Day. On this day, parents and reaping eligible children spend the entire day together, pretending that it is their last day together. My mom was high as usual, but my younger brother and I had a wonderful day with our father."

"That sounds wonderful." Pahl began to relax. "What does everyone normally do?"

"The day is spent doing fun activities, but at night after a nice dinner, we pretend to say our goodbyes. We sometimes confess to mistakes, tell each other that we love them, and resolve any differences we may have with others in the family."

"Are parents gone a lot in District Six?"

"In the summer, yes. During the other seasons, families spend a lot more time together with railroad maintenance closer to home. I was fortunate that my father performed overhauls to the train engines and railcars in the off-season. He was home a lot in the winter"

"Resolution Day sounds nice. Perhaps every district should participate." Pahl surveyed their surroundings again, listening to the sounds coming from the trees before focusing again on his guest. "Did you get to say anything to your mom on reaping day?"

"No, I was too furious at the time. But I've had a couple weeks to think about it and would like to say something now since I know the cameras are watching us."

Pahl pulled up his legs tight as he glanced over his shoulders a second time. "Are you sure? Let sleeping dogs lie and all that."

Gage smiled. "I just want to say that I forgive my mother."

Surprised, Pahl turned to face her. "Really?"

"Yes, I'm a bit p.o.'d about her being high, but the morphling is what turned her into a zombie. And if someday, she manages to sober up and watch this, I want her to know that I forgive her. I hope that she can find natural happiness once again."

“Do people ever break their morphling addiction?”

“Very few. Most die from starvation since they cannot afford food and morphling. If by miracle she does come clean, I want her to know that I don’t hate her.” Gage lifted her face to the sunlight and slowly exhaled.

“See. I knew that you had a good heart.”

Gage smiled, glancing at him from the corner of her eye. “Bull. You are only saying that because I didn’t kill you.”

“Well if I could choose a winner of this year’s games, I hope it’s you.”

“Did I ever say that you’re an idiot?”

“Yes. You’ve made that quite clear.” Pahl matched her in smile. “Come, let’s gather roots. By the time we’re done gathering them, it will be dark enough to cross the field to collect nuts.”

“Okay.”

“And if we leave now, I’ll have enough light to show you something special.”

“What?”

Pahl helped Gage to her feet. “You’ll see.”

Moving from shadow to shadow through the forest, the pair made nearly a sound.

When they would stop to look for signs of danger, they fought the urge to talk to one another between sips of water. They continued to fight the urge while walking, understanding that any careless action gave the advantage to the hunters, which they were not.

Arriving at the location of the roots, Pahl paused to assess the area. Only after a minute of silence, did he remove his pack and pull out his knife. “I don’t think that they pass through this part of the forest often. I’ve never seen their tracks this deep in, but they could hear us from the clearing over the ridge, so continue to speak softly.”

Gage nodded, and Pahl began to show her the plant that provided the nutrient root. He dug out the first root and showed her the parts to trim. After brushing the plain white root free of dirt, he dropped it into his pack.

Pahl kept his voice at a whisper. “Pile the trimmings here. I’ll dump them away from this spot when we are done so that the Careers don’t stumble upon our food source. We only need ten or twelve to share between us. If we are lucky, we will find some wild carrots near the edge of the clearing. They taste like candy compared to this bitter root.”

Sighing, Gage reluctantly followed Pahl’s lead and collected a few roots, finishing with the harvesting of a couple wild carrots that Pahl pointed out to her.

After disposing the remains from the trimming, Pahl guided Gage deeper into the forest along an animal trail. After a few minutes’ walk, he stopped and smiled. He spoke softly as he surveyed the area. “Here, this is what I wanted to show you.”

“What?”

His eyes drifted upward. “The trees.”

Gage looked up and around with no change in expression. “Yep, they’re trees alright.”

“They’re elms. Look how big they are. My grandmother told me that the elms became sick a long time ago, and their number shrunk. It was rare for them to become this big after the disease.” Pahl spun slowly admiring the vast canopy. “I bet some of them are pushing eighty feet in height. Aren’t they beautiful?”

“They’re trees.”

Pahl grinned uncontrollably as he held up a guiding arm in praise. “Look at the crooked twisted branches. There is nothing else quite like an elm. Other trees don’t have branches that form such curvaceous angles.”

“Curvaceous?”

“It’s clear that ghosts have made these elms their home since the spirits have inevitably caused those unique angles in the branches. The larger trees are the preferred place from where they can sing during a summer gale and howl during the most ferocious blizzards. And between the wind storms that give them their voice, the more playful ghosts keep an ever watchful eye for the next opportunity for mischief.”

Gage gave him the look. “Ghosts?”

“Yes, ghosts. Each time a ghost finds a home amongst the branches, it causes the branch to embrace the energy, bending the limb as it grows, giving the mighty trees their distinctive look. Elms are an apparition’s favorite tree.”

“I think that you’ve been living off roots for far too long.”

“These elms are heaven on earth. The view from up there must be magnificent.”

Pahl’s smile faded as his face became demure. “This is where I’m going to live when I die.”

Biting her lip, Gage crossed her arms. “Not funny.”

“I’m not trying to be. Don’t you feel all the life around you? It just doesn’t go away when it changes from one form to the other.” Pahl took a deep breath and patted the bark of an elm. “This is why I elected to work in the paper mill back home. The bad smells of the mill bother me much less than the harvesting of the trees.”

“I suppose that you hear the trees scream when they cut them down?”

“No, harvesting is just not my thing. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not even against logging.”

Gage dropped her arms to her sides. “What? After all that other crap you spued out, you don’t mind logging?”

“Controlled harvesting can be good for a forest. We have been logging for a long time in District Seven, and the forests are thriving. I actually enjoyed going out to help with the seedlings every year. Even felt a bit of pride when I saw a giant roll of paper get loaded for transport.”

Gage tucked her hands into her pockets. “So I probably did my homework on paper that you made?”

“Perhaps. I bet you got straight A’s.”

“I wish. You’re talking to an average, right down the middle student: C’s all the way.

Pahl smiled. “There are a couple paper mills spread across our large district. Your family probably maintained the rail that let us transport everything.” Pahl gestured in the direction they needed to travel. “Have you had to work on the tracks? It must be back breaking”

Gage followed at his side. “No. But with my mom slowly succumbing to the morphling, I sometimes work on bridge maintenance in the summer so that we could eat. They often have us of high school age paint the bridges and other infrastructures. I was going to try to find work on the high speed rail as a stewardess after graduating school.”

“What would you be doing right now back in District Six if you hadn’t been picked for the games.”

“Probably watching my replacement kill you.”

Smiling, Pahl stopped at the edge of the forest where it opened onto grassland. “No doubt you would.” The male tribute began to study the small prairie beyond, paying close attention to the tree and adjacent brush located on a bulge of land in the center of the clearing. “The tree is up there. It will be dark enough in a few minutes. The lowest point of the field is on this side, and there is a convenient animal path that will cover our tracks.”

Squinting to pick up the faint trail carved in the prairie grass, Gage zipped up her jacket. “Will we need to crawl?”

“No. It is low enough that we will remain hidden from view from the other side if we hunch over. There is considerable risk going into the open here. The Gamemakers clearly planted these trees to be used as traps.”

Gage took a deep breath. “I’ll go. We need food.”

“Okay. We can leave our packs here since they will only increase our profile crossing the field. Besides, we will only have enough time to fill our jacket pockets before it gets too dark.” Pahl took off his pack and made himself comfortable on the ground with Gage doing the same.

As both tributes held-up for pending nightfall, the apprehension of the simple task incited each to remember their first day of the games. When Pahl’s hands began to shake, he tucked them into his coat pockets. Gage’s mouth began to feel dry, forcing her to sip water. Each looked at the other and saw their reflection in tight solemn faces.

Pahl’s hands fumbled as he removed the cap to his water flask. “I don’t remember walking up to the stage.”

“At the television interview?”

“At the reaping. I remember hearing my name called. I vaguely remember how my entire body went numb, but I don’t remember actually walking up to the stage.”

Gage turned away to stare out at the field. “No, I remember walking up to the stage. I was so full of rage that I remember everything. I wanted to scream. I don’t

know why I didn't."

Remembering his experience on reaping day, Pahl hesitated with his next question.

"Did you cry?"

"Of course I did. It wasn't until I was on the train. You?"

"When my mom came to say good bye."

Gage bit her lip. "I don't want to talk about reaping day. Let's talk about something happy."

"Okay. Like what?"

"The food." Gage crossed her legs and smiled. "Did you have the ice cream?"

"Hmm. Of course. I ate myself sick every day. However, by the end of training, I had completely lost my appetite. I couldn't keep anything down, and my mentor had to force me to eat."

"Oh." Gage turned away with pursed lips.

Taking notice of her reaction, Pahl swiped his hand through the grass out of frustration. "Sorry."

"No, it's not your fault. The negative heavily outweighs the positive. Not much that we can do about it." Gage stared out at the tree. "Do you think it's dark enough?"

"Ya. Follow me and stay low." Pahl got up and stepped carefully out of the forest into the animal trail. With Gage in tow, he moved silent and swift, stepping carefully towards the tree. When they reached the center, Pahl quickly canvassed the surrounding prairie for movement. "Try to stay on this side of the tree. If the Careers are watching this tree, they are probably spying from the other side of the prairie. Once, I stumbled upon one of their empty lookouts on the other side. We just need to fill our jacket pockets to have a few days' supply of protein."

"Okay." Gage could see that much of the low hanging nuts had been picked, but there would still be enough to fill her pockets.

The pair moved slow and sure amongst the base of the tree, gathering nuts from the dried grass and low-level branches.

When they had nearly filled their pockets, Pahl turned, alerted by his attentive hearing. Gage took notice and instinctively froze. Both could hear the sound of footsteps approaching from the other side of the tree.

Gage drew her knife as Pahl pulled her low to the ground. Following his lead, she hid with him in the adjacent brush. Lying together in the shadows, their outline resembled a fallen log overgrown by wild vegetation.

Pahl gestured that she should pull her arms tight under her upper body. He took hold of her tensed hand that gripped the knife and guided it beneath the dried grass to camouflage the shiny steal. He lowered his voice to a faint whisper. "We are deadwood. Don't even move your head until their gone."

A male and female Career Tribute approached the tree, stopping at the trunk. With only tiny shifts in the Career's feet, an eerie silence filled the air. The scent of their sweaty, well-fed bodies drifted into the brush.

"Are these animal or human tracks?" The male voice spoke in a normal tone.

“Not sure.” The female spoke sounding frustrated. “How long are we going to hang out here?”

“Don’t know. These last three can’t stay hidden forever.”

“Hopefully the Gamemakers will flush them out for us.”

Gage began to pull her knife from under the dried grass when Pahl put his trembling hand over her own. Without turning his head, he looked into her eye and mouthed the words: *No, please.*

The male Career Tribute yawned aloud. “These rats have buried themselves deep into holes somewhere. Either the Gamemakers will have to force them out, or we’ll just have to be more patient and wait for the hunger to cause them to make a mistake.”

“I’m sick of waiting.” The female tribute picked a couple nuts from the tree.

“Maybe we should take the opportunity to eliminate the other two.”

“One or more of them took out two of us a couple days ago.”

The female Career huffed. “I still think those two got into a fight. One killed the other but the survivor bled out before making it back to base camp. They hated each other even in training.”

“Perhaps.”

“Those three remaining weaklings are no threat to us, even if they outnumbered us. We should take out my partner now.”

“No!” The male Career’s voice echoed through the brush. “We stick to the plan and wait until the last weakling before we eliminate the other two. Are you sure that you can take out your district partner?”

“I’m sure. He still lets his guard down when he’s alone with me. It won’t be a problem.”

Gage felt Pahl’s trembling for it overshadowed her own. By the full moonlight that leaked into the deepest parts of the brush, she could see the sweat forming on his brow. She let go of the handle of the knife. Slowly, she wrapped her fingers around the back of Pahl’s hand and squeezed gently, which he returned in acknowledgement.

The female Career Tribute spat. “These nuts are disgusting. Do you think they’re eating these?”

The male Career Tribute chuckled. “Don’t know, don’t care. I’ll stick to the bread from our sponsors.”

“Have we ever checked out that clump of tall trees over there?” The female began pacing in circles as she continued to spit out remnants of the nut.

“I don’t know. There are so many in this arena. We can investigate tomorrow after ___”

A cannon booms, signaling a death in the arena.

The female stopped in her tracks. “Ah, they must have found one of them. It came from near base camp.”

“Let’s go check it out. I have no interest in spending the night here.” The male tribute began walking. “We’ll come back here tomorrow and hunt.”

As the pair of Career Tributes departed, Pahl’s breathing started to labor. Turning

his head away from Gage, he started to sob into the grass.

Gage began to rub his back in gentle circles. "I know. Me too." She combed a couple dried leaves from his hair. "Me too."

Stretching out onto his stomach, Pahl buried his face in his arms and quietly wept with Gage continuing to console him.

After several minutes, Gage crawled out of the brush and surveyed the area before returning to Pahl's side. She rested on her knees and leant over his ear, whispering. "They're gone."

Pahl said nothing, keeping his head down, turned away.

"You kept your cool and didn't panic. That was impressive."

He said nothing.

"I wasn't going to ambush them with my knife; that would be foolish. I just wanted it ready in case. I was just as scared as you. Couldn't you feel me trembling?"

He remained silent.

"I don't think any less of you." Gage rubbed his back.

Wiping his nose, Pahl raised his head. "I'm an idiot."

"Perhaps a small one." Gage smiled, tapping his shoulder with her fist. "You're no less than a man for being frightened."

Pahl raised himself up onto his elbows. "I bet many think that I'm the farthest thing possible from being a man."

Gage stretched out onto her stomach next to Pahl. "Well, they're not here in the arena are they? We all have to face this in our own way."

"My great-uncle was the best of men. He taught me what it means to be one, and he was the gentlest soul that I have ever known."

Gage bit a nut in half and passed a half to her friend. "What did he teach you?"

"Killing or risking your life has absolutely nothing to do with manhood. Real men go to work and not complain. They play with their children every day. Being a man means being there for those who depend on you, listening to their concerns, and being patient. That's what I wanted to be."

Gage pressed her shoulder against his. "And so you are."

For the next hour, as Pahl composed himself, Gage stared out across the prairie from the safety of the brush. Her thoughts returned to her father since Pahl's description fitted him. Her father so hated to be away during the long summer months doing rail maintenance, but the family needed to eat. She and her siblings understood his sacrifice.

However, her mother had no worthy description. They always had to hide money from her; still, her mother had less respectable means of income to feed her morphling addiction. As fate would have it: they saw their mother every day, but she was never really there.

"Sorry if I brought you down." It was Pahl's turn to push against his friend's shoulder.

"No, I was just thinking of home. Are you feeling better?"

“Yes. It’s odd though.”

“What?”

“Every time that I become this frightened, I come out of it thinking that I’ve never truly lived, that I’ve missed out on something.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know.” He shook his head, staring out at the prairie.

“We are young.”

The male tribute released a drawn out sigh. “I’m not naive about the world, I..” He looked down at the ground briefly, collecting his thoughts. “I’ve experienced what there is to experience, but I feel as if I’ve let too many of those special moments slip by. I don’t know; it’s hard to explain.”

Gage patted his hand and smiled. “I get it. I actually understand you this time.”

Night had arrived with the full moon illuminating the prairie. The light breeze of the day had become still as the night temperatures dropped, forcing the pair to zip up their jackets in the brush. Having pulled their hoods over their faces in defense from the rugged mosquitoes, the two tributes pressed their bodies close together to conserve their heat.

Peering from beneath her hood, Gage stared up at the moon. “I think that I’m going slightly mad. For the first time in my life, I am imagining what it would be like to dance on the moon. It must be awfully cold up there. Do ghosts feel hot or cold?”

“I think that ghosts are always comfortable being free of material burdens. You can take any form you like. Become the wind if you want.”

“That would be nice.” She turned onto her side, propping her head upon her palm. “I’m so going to have fun when my games are over. I will become the wind and dance around this world. I’m going to mess everyone’s hair, stir the waters, and lift eagles high into the sky.”

“Will you come visit me in my giant elm trees?”

“Sure.” Gage smiled. “If you promise to dance with me through a field of sunflowers.”

“Deal.”

Gage sat up. “Are we going back to your campsite? I don’t want to sleep here.”

“It does seem as if all the mosquitoes have found us. We first need to collect our packs. With the Careers returning to their base camp, we can probably move quicker on our return.” Pahl slowly rose to his knees. “Ready?”

Gage took his hand. “Ready.”

Upon their return to the campsite, the pair quickly washed their food in the river.

Since twilight was the safest time for a fire, it was too late to roast them over an open flame to blunt the vegetables' bitterness, so they stored the roots for tomorrow and divided their bounty of nuts.

Taking turns keeping lookout at the edge of the campsite, each took the opportunity to wash off the day's sweat from exposable skin in the brisk water. Lastly, they replenished their water flasks.

Pahl crawled under his pine tree to stow his pack out of sight. He called out to Gage. "There's plenty of room to store your gear."

"I'm going to sleep out here under the full moon."

"Isn't that dangerous?"

"I'm tired of sleeping in shadows."

Unsure of his response, Pahl sat quietly for a few seconds. "Okay. Good night."

"Good night." Gage removed her boots and jacket, before crawling into her sleeping bag that lay amongst the open in the soft grass.

Pulling his jacket zippers tight, Pahl gathered the leaves and dried grass around his body at the base of the large pine tree. He could still see Gage in her sleeping bag through the drooping pine branches.

After staring at the moon for several minutes, Gage turned onto her side. "What do you miss most from home that's not food or family?"

The male tribute lowered his voice to a whisper. "Pyewacket."

"What?"

"Pyewacket." He continued to whisper.

"I can't hear you. Speak up. You're not making sense."

He rose to his elbows as he continued to speak with a soft voice. "You are going to get us killed."

"Speak up."

Pahl reluctantly raised his voice. "Move under here, and we can talk."

"You move out here."

"I can't move my bedding. You move under here."

"No."

"Suit yourself." Pahl laid himself down.

"Did you say *my hatchet*?" The female tribute smiled as the two tributes exchanged glaring stares.

Pahl came out from under the tree and sat next to her. "Pyewacket my dog."

"That's a strange name for him."

"It's a *her*." The male tribute sighed, remembering how he made his brother promise to care for the animal. He hoped that his brother was checking her for ticks every day and brushing her every night as instructed. His brother had to catch the ticks early. The brushing would help with the summer heat. Pahl trusted his brother and knew that everyone would enamor Pyewacket in his stead. *Did she know that I'm not coming back?* he thought.

"What kind of dog is she?"

“Um, what did you say?”

“What kind of dog is she?”

“Oh, a Husky. Huskies are a common dog in our district. They provide early warning against the dangerous animals in the woods in the summer, and they help us travel in the winter.” Pahl smiled as the fond memories returned.

Gage rested her head upon the upright palm of her hand. “Is she a sled dog?”

“Yes. I raised Pyewacket from a puppy. We have four other dogs, all males. It’s enough to pull a small sled to get around in the winter. If we need to pull a larger sled, we pooled our dogs with our neighbor’s team.”

“There is only one female? Lucky girl.”

Pahl smiled. “Pyewacket is our lead dog. You cannot have a male lead the team: they’re too stupid. They will only follow a female.”

Gage lowered her head onto her upper arm and draped her free hand over her head. “So if you want to go anywhere, you need a strong female to lead the pack? Hmm, that sounds familiar.”

“The chasing part at least.” Pahl closed his zippers and dug his hands deep into his pockets. “The air is cool tonight. The quick washing in the river has frozen me to the bone.”

“The breeze is coming off the river making it chillier. Crawl into my sleeping bag. It’s plenty big.” Gage lifted the unzipped flap. “We can talk safely into the night.”

Biting his lip, Pahl’s gaze drifted towards the forest. “I don’t know.”

Gage huffed as she dropped her hand. “Hey idiot. You know those moments that you were complaining about slipping away. This is one of those moments.”

Pahl kept his focus on the trees as he failed to hold back his grin.

“Take off your boots and jacket. You’ll be safe from the mosquitoes in here.”

Fumbling with his jacket zippers, Pahl kicked off his boots and crawled into the sleeping bag next to Gage. “So, what do you want to talk about?”

“Anything. Just make me forget that the others are hunting us.”

“Okay.” Pahl clasped his hands together with his two index fingers extended over his lips. He turned his head to face her. “What do you miss most from home that’s not family or food?”

“That’s easy. Music.”

“Did you enjoy the Capitol’s music?”

“Not at all. Electric music lacks soul and feeling. Music has to be from strings and physical drums. Every Saturday in the spring and fall, my town would gather in the center square for music. The workers would bring back large bales of crushed cardboard from the week’s work and burn them for light and ambiance. It was wonderful. Plus there is lots of dancing.”

“Is the music loud enough?” Pahl rolled onto his side.

“It is. My grandfather built the town stage using basic acoustic science passed down over decades. A properly designed wood soundstage sends the music floating over the crowd naturally if designed correctly. True singers don’t need an amplifier.”

Her eyes became heavy as she gnawed her lip. "I'll miss it."

"You may survive this."

Gage's eyes drifted away. "Perhaps."

Staring at her face in the moonlight, he smiled. "I enjoyed your television interview."

"You were paying attention?"

"Yes, of course. I noticed you on the first day." Pahl shrugged as his eyes flitted away. "I don't recall any other tributes of past games donating their bodies to science. It was brazen in its own way. Force them to look at the end result and all that."

"I barely remember it myself since I was so nervous. I didn't relax until we were back on our floor in the Training Center. I only remember your interview since you publicly announce your pacifism, making you the least dangerous tribute in history."

Pahl smiled. "I remember yours because of your laugh."

Covering her mouth, she shook her head. "I hate my laugh, and I never meant to do so in the open like that. Caesar is far too good of an interviewer."

"Well it was nice of you to tell your family to celebrate your life no matter what happens. And for what's it worth, I like your laugh." Pahl flinched when her leg rubbed against his own.

Gage lowered her hand from her mouth. "I noticed you too."

"When?"

"At the opening ceremonies, before the chariot ride."

Pahl felt his face flush. "Why didn't you approach me?"

"Why didn't you approach me?"

His flush feeling quickly faded into that far too familiar feeling of disappointment. Pahl forced a smile. "Well, I'm an equal opportunist."

Gage also felt the loss as she silently stared at him.

The male tribute extended his hand before her and smiled. "It's never too late. I'm so very glad to have met you."

The female tribute shook his hand and smiled. "I'm so very glad too."

Her smile vanished when she spotted the tiniest threat of danger. "A blood sucker is about to get you."

On the back of Pahl's hand, a mosquito had landed above the soft fleshy spot near the thumb. The insect buried its proboscis into his skin and started to fill with blood. Pahl slowly moved his hand to see it more clearly in the light of the full moon.

Gage raised her hand to swat it.

"Don't." Pahl spoke calmly. "Let her feed."

The female tribute held her hand in the air. "Why?"

"One of us should survive this arena. She has her own Hunger Games that she has to play, which incidentally we too are participants."

Staring at Pahl out of the corner of her eye, Gage smirked. "Which district is that mosquito from?"

“She’s not playing our games. We are participants in her Hunger Games.”

Gage rolled her eyes. “Now I know that you suffer arena madness.”

“Look at our world. Every living thing competes to survive, forcing many to destroy or smother others living things every day. Trees compete for the sunlight as their branches entwine, causing the loser to become stunted. Even their roots stretch and fight for the sources of water. Never ending, predators and prey consume one another on this planet. Look at all the wars, the impoverished, and our wasteful consumption. Humans are just the top predator. Our omnipotence leads us to think that we are not participants in God’s games, but we most certainly are.” Pahl trained his eyes back to the mosquito. “I bet God finds these worldly games as amusing as the Capitol does with their own.”

Now frowning, Gage cleared her throat. “I somehow doubt that God created this world for the purpose of entertainment.”

“Why create a mouse when it’s certain to die a fearful death in the mouth of a snake, or a deer that will be pulled down by a wolf pack?”

“Perhaps God created this world as a riddle for humans to figure out.”

“If we haven’t figured it by now....” It was Pahl’s turn to smirk.

“Tell me, do you eat meat?”

“Yes.” He smiled biting his lip. “And yes, I know this makes me a hypocrite.”

“I thought so.” Gage laid her head onto her bent arm and sighed.

“If I had to kill the cow for the meat, I’d definitely be a vegetarian. To be honest, I do not like participating in the universe’s games either. There is no place for people like me who just want to coexist.” The male tribute stared off into the shadows, focusing on the soft sounds of the forest.

Gage cleared her throat. “Well, that insect isn’t a cow. It’s just a pest.” Her hand again began to rise.

Pahl looked at her. “Don’t, please.”

“It’s going to explode soon if it doesn’t stop feeding.”

“Let her feed. She needs the blood meal for her eggs.”

“That’s disgusting. And how do you know it’s a she?”

“Only the females feed on blood.”

“Where’s the male?”

Pahl smiled. “Off resting, sipping nectar, waiting for the females to signal the need to mate.”

“Wow. Again, that sounds familiar. I’m starting to notice a certain trend in nature?”

“That in most species, the males are the more attractive of the pair?”

“Maybe I should swat you instead.” Gage gently retracted her hand.

The mosquito, now sporting a full blood sack much larger than her body, flew off in a slow labored manner, coming to a rest soon after on the nearby fallen log. The tributes could just make out the insect’s silhouette in the bright moonlight.

Gage rolled onto her elbows. “Why make herself an easy target by drinking so

much? She can barely fly. She can't be that hungry."

"It's not hunger." Pahl lifted himself onto his elbows. "It's all about reproduction. The desire is so strong that she is willing to risk a certain death from instinctive swatting to collect the blood meal."

"Sticking things into dangerous places despite the risk sounds more like a male trait." Gage smiled. "But once again, the female assumes all the risk."

Pahl struggled to hold back his laughter. "I suppose so. I'm sure the males are very appreciative."

"Har har. How long will it take her to fly home in that condition?"

"She won't fly to her spawning location in that state. She's resting on the log so that she can excrete all the fluids, keeping the essential nutrients. She'll reduce down to her normal size in about 45 minutes and then fly off normally."

"How do you know all this about mosquitoes?"

"It's taught in school. We have to watch for mosquito borne diseases since we work in the forests. I expect that your school has a lot of education about trains, bridges, and rail construction."

"It does. What does the male mosquito look like?"

"Like the female, but the body is a tiny bit smaller. The hips aren't as wide." Pahl bit his lip.

"Shut up. I hope your hand itches."

Pahl rubbed the spot where the mosquito had fed. "It won't. I'm used to it."

As Pahl stared at the insect, Gage made an observation. "You actually care that the mosquito makes it home."

"I guess that I do."

"Why? Are you a twisted romantic?"

He clasped his hands together as he continued to focus on the mosquito's silhouette. "Perhaps she will lay her 200 or so eggs with her female progeny laying just as many eggs. Those thousands of mosquitoes may find their way to a farm where hungry chickens will have themselves a great feast since mosquitoes are a favorite food. It is conceivable that those chickens will turn all that protein consumed into eggs that will feed a family. And possibly, a woman pregnant with child will consume those eggs, passing the needed nutrients to her baby. Imagine that baby growing up to be a fine young woman who unfortunately ends up as a tribute in the Hunger Games, which have also reaped a boy who was grateful for the existence of that girl since she has given him the greatest day of his life."

The female tribute's face became wry, briefly turning away. "You...we were both terrified earlier when the Careers almost stumbled upon us. How could this be your greatest day?"

"When you consoled me. You didn't have to, but you did."

"Being this hungry and scared, you can't call this your greatest day."

He shrugged. "You need distress to understand compassion; sometimes you need to feel weak to know when you are strong. Your compassion was the greatest gift ever

given to me.”

Feeling flush, Gage fell silent and turned away.

The tributes began to listen to the sounds of the night. Small animals unseen shuffled through the old grass and decomposing leaves as a gentle breeze gently stirred the trees. On and on, they listened to the river run over assorted rocks. Even the sound of crickets had a friendly tone that night. Unnoticed, the mosquito departed as the peaceful night bestowed a much-needed serenity to all.

The Capitol anthem began playing, and the pair of tributes stared up at the sky to see who had died when the cannon boomed at sunset. When they saw the face of a Career Tribute, both raised their heads in shock.

Pahl began rubbing his chin. “I thought for certain that it was my district partner.”

Gage smiled. “Perhaps the Careers are frustrated and have started turning on each other. There might have been a disagreement that led to a fight.”

“Perhaps. Either way, it’s a good day for us.”

She rolled onto her side and rested her head onto the palm of her hand. “It has been a good day hasn’t it.” Staring at him, Gage fell silent.

Returning her stare, Pahl smiled. He continued to stare at her in the moonlight as she had become statuesque. Biting his lip, he continued to watch her hold her pose. He licked his lips, inching towards her before pulling his face away. Gage did not flinch with only movement coming from her eyelids. Pahl again began to lean in, stopping half way. He studied her face and fixated on her lips. He leaned in more before retracting slightly. When her mouth twitched, revealing a hint of a smile, he beamed and gave her a quick kiss on the lips.

Her pursed lips broke into a full smile. “I was wondering when you would stop being *passive*.”

“So you approve?”

“Do you want to kiss me?”

“More than I want to breathe.” He focused on her eyes.

“Do you need me to say it?”

“I do. I have a thing for approval.” His smile exemplified his joy.

“Okay then. I want you to kiss me, idiot.”

Pahl gnawed on his lip. “Can you show me how to live?”

“With the time we have left? I’ll try.”

“Is there a lot to learn?”

“No.” She pushed him onto his back, letting her long hair shroud his face. “You just need to open your mind to a tiny secret.”

From his supine position, his eyes darted about the treetops. “What about the cameras?”

Gage surveyed the trees, letting the world see her smile. Her eyes drifted down to meet his. “Do you care?”

“I only care about you.”

“And I you. So if you truly want to live, you first have to let go of all your

worries.”

“That’s easy. The reaping left me with only death to worry about.”

She recalled hearing her name booming out of the loudspeakers on reaping day, but she held onto her smile, realizing that what mattered most could never be taken from her. She brushed her hair to one side. “Me too.”

Pahl ran his fingers over her forearms. “In an instant, I learned that possessions have no value. In a flash, I realized what really mattered. Did you experience this?”

With the lightest touch of her fingers, she began to trace the highlights of his face. “Yes. It’s an odd sensation isn’t it?”

“A strange kind of freedom seems to come from it.” He brushed her hair.

“A solemn freedom, a total freedom.” She planted a slow, delicate kiss on his lips before pulling away to caress one side of his face. “Glad we don’t have to waste much time on step one.”

He entwined his hand with hers. “What’s the next step?”

She leaned in and whispered into his ear, which brought a smile to his lips and a tear to his eye. She then kissed him longer, less delicately.

The moon drifted across the night’s sky as the two tributes surrendered to each other, sharing their lives with complete trust. Few words passed between them as they cherished the comfort of each other’s arms. Exhausted, they ignored the need to rest. With their bodies entwined, they found a serenity denied to most.

Pahl began to run his fingers up and down her back in slow, gentle strokes. “I think that we’ve won.”

“Won what?”

“The Hunger Games.”

“Oh, you think so? They would never allow two tributes to share the victor’s crown.”

“Too late. They put us in this arena, expecting us to experience fear, to embrace hate, and to kill one another. We’ve won. They can never take away.”

Gage listened to his heart. “Perhaps, but if there is a true winner, it’s you. You stuck to your principles.”

“So have you. Have you killed anyone?”

“No, but I was prepared to. I still might in my own defense if the Careers show up.”

“It’s common to become aggressive in threatening situations. Traumatic events change everyone.”

“Not you, these games brought out the best in you.” She lifted her head and smiled. “So don’t argue with me, you’re the sole winner.”

He shared her smile. “Okay. What do I win?”

Her lip quivered as she laid her head on his chest. “My ghost.” Her breath deepened as she choked back tears. “Please keep it safe and warm.”

His breathing staggered. “I will. Will you do the same for mine?”

“I will.” As she listened to his heart begin to steady, Gage arrived at a difficult

decision. She looked up and wiped away one of his tears. “And when you feel lonely, I will rouse the winds to comb my ethereal fingers through your hair, reminding you of me.” She reached up and brushed back his hair. “If you become bored, I will stir the leaves, creating a natural wind chime, the gift of music.” She playfully tugged on his earlobe. “And when you feel my breath blow across your ear, remember what I whispered to you.” With gentle hands, she turned his face towards hers and kissed him.

“I will never forget.” Pahl held her tighter and pressed his lips to her forehead. “And when you see the light of the sunset dance off rippling water, remember the joy you gave me and relive the sensation.” He clasped her hand. “If you start to feel depressed, look to the largest of birds soaring in the sky, for that is the never ending admiration I feel towards you.” He lifted her chin to see her smile. “And when you feel the sun on your face, remember that my soul now belongs to you.”

Resting her eyes, she let her thoughts roam. “Do you think as ghosts that we can actually go anywhere, do anything?”

“Don’t know why not. We will be free from fear, unrestrained from consumption. There will be nothing that we can’t do.” Pahl ran his fingers through her long hair. “Why?”

“I have always wanted to stroll through a large field of grain. I’m fascinated by farmland.”

“Really?”

“Ya. Last summer when they sent me to paint infrastructures by boxcar, I became mesmerized by vastness of the farms when we drifted past them on the rail.”

“You had to ride in boxcars?”

“Even though District Six builds and maintains the rail system, we are not allowed to ride in the passenger cars. We turn the boxcars into sleeping compartments in which we live until the maintenance job is complete. Despite only being able to travel at a fifth of the speed of mag-rail, the view from boxcars is actually more enjoyable since the added time lets you take in the surroundings. Farmland along the tracks always seemed so peaceful. It all seems so magical and full of life.”

“We’ll see everything and more.”

Gage tightened her grip on Pahl’s hand. “I’d like that.”

With their foreheads pressed together, the tributes closed their eyes, but neither could sleep.

Well past sunrise, the tributes began collecting their gear. Pahl used a fallen branch to freshen the pressed grass as Gage stowed her sleeping bag.

The male tribute surveyed his work. “I don’t think that I can cover our tracks completely if the Careers should stroll through. It will take a few days for this area to look normal again.”

Gage stood with her back to him as she put on her jacket.

Pahl brushed the grass again with the branch. "I know of a couple other spots that usually escape Career Tribute patrols."

Starring off into the trees, the female tribute donned her pack. "It's time that I leave."

"I know. I'll grab my pack." Pahl tossed the fallen branch to the edge of the clearing.

"No." She faced him, revealing the tears in her eyes.

With a sudden tight feeling in his chest, Pahl froze where he stood.

"I'm leaving without you."

Pahl choked on his next question. "Why?"

The words seemed to burst from her mouth. "Because I don't want to see you die!"

Gage took a deep, forced breath. "And I most certainly don't want you to see me die."

Unable to speak, tears began to run down Pahl's cheek.

"So you see. We have to part now before it's too late."

The male tribute could only force out one word through a wail. "No!"

When she stepped toward him, he dropped to his knees and wrapped his arms around her. "You have to let me have this." She combed his hair. "You have to let me go."

He tightened his hold on to her.

"Please, Pahl. This arena does not have any major environmental threats that will take out the Careers for us. Besides, only one tribute will be allowed to leave this arena alive. You know that parting now would be best." She reached down and lifted his chin. "Please."

As his eyes finally met hers, his hands loosened and slid to her hips, but he still could not speak.

The female tribute dropped to her knees and took hold of his hands. "Please let me have this. I don't want us to see each other die. You must let me go. This is for the best."

Pahl nodded.

Gage whispered something into his ear, which only brought more tears to his eyes. She stood and slowly took a step back, their fingers slipping apart.

He wiped his nose on his sleeve as she continued to step backwards.

"Close your eyes now and focus on the sound of the wind blowing through the trees above us." She forced a smile. "Remember to listen to the wind, for it will tell you when we will be reunited." Gage paused for a moment as their eyes locked on one another. "Close them now, please."

The male tribute closed his eyes and soon after heard the limbs of the pines brush against Gage's jacket. When he opened them to see her gone, Pahl fell back onto his heels and wept.

With the sun centered overhead, Pahl reluctantly dragged himself back to the fallen log near the river. He removed his jacket, letting it lay where it fell in the tall grass, and sat before the fallen log numb to the world.

Later, when the sun was setting on the horizon, a cannon boomed, signaling a death in the arena.

Without knowing the identity of the fallen, the male tribute sobbed as he collapsed against the fallen log. Approximately an hour later, another cannon boomed, and Pahl began to struggle more with his despair. *Did they kill Gage and his district partner in such close succession?*

He assumed that the next cannon boom would be for him.

Darkness filled the arena, and the anthem began to play. To his surprise, the first tribute displayed in the night sky was not Gage. The first image was that of a male Career Tribute. The brief relief vanished in an instant when Gage's image appeared soon after, filling him with unimaginable grief. His gaze remained locked on to that part of the sky well after Gage's image had vanished.

He began to wonder if she had killed a Career in self-defense. She was much braver than he was, that he knew, but her fighting skills were nothing close to those of a Career Tribute. Pahl could not help but to empathize her fear and hoped that she did not have to suffer. That numb sensation which accompanies random trivial thoughts began to fill him, diverting his grief.

He zipped up his jacket and pulled up his hood, covering all his exposed skin in defense of the mosquitoes. He would not sleep under the pine tree this night, for he no longer cared. He curled up on his side and pulled the tall grass to the opening of his hood to act as a screen. Emotionally exhausted, he quickly drifted off to sleep.

The morning light did not wake the male tribute; a pounding headache tore him from sleep. He sat up and opened his flask with shaking hands to find it empty of water. He threw a couple nuts into his mouth and began chewing hurriedly. He even consumed part of a root, ignoring its raw bitterness as he consumed untreated water from the river's edge.

The shakes were subsiding when he spotted something moving. From his position atop the riverbank rocks, he could see another fish approaching. A large trout causally moved upstream through the rocks and shallow water. Pahl wondered if the same trout from the day before had returned since the rivers were so sparse of fish.

He focused on the trout as it drifted towards him. The hunger dulled all his other senses as he kept his eyes trained. As the creature came close to the shallow rock pool below him, the tribute sprung high into the air, landing well beyond the fish in the shallow water. The trout jumped in the opposite direction over the rocks into the shallow pool. Before the fish could find its way out, Pahl successfully blocked the

narrow passage just as he had the day before with his previous catch.

The fish jumped again, landing on top of the rocks where Pahl took hold of the creature. He held the fish tight as he lifted the creature into the air. With a bit of luck, his hunger had won again.

Breathing hard and shaking from the lack of food, the male tribute surrendered to his survival instincts. Shuffling towards shore, Pahl headed for the rocks where he would smash the fish's head. He positioned his feet and firmly held the fish before the boulder.

As he stared at the trout, the winds began to surge, causing the leaves to rustle and the pines to whisper. Pahl took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of the pines. Another gust of wind rushed through the trees and across his sweaty brow. He lifted the fish high above him, and the winds surged again. The male tribute felt the brisk wind on his face and paused when the air rustled in his ear. He could now see the grandest trees swaying high above him.

Lowering the fish, he turned his face to the sunlight. He felt the wind brush his lips and his eyes began to well. When the next gust of air whispered in his ear, he slowly exhaled and smiled. "I will keep my promise and stay true. Thank you."

Staring into the eyes of the trout, Pahl waded back into the river. "You're not meant for me." He positioned his hands under the struggling fish and studied it one last time. "Do you experience fear? I'm sorry if you do." Before he could lower his hands into the water, the fish broke free and disappeared into the flowing water.

Wiping away his tears, the male tribute straightened, smiling from his reawakening.

The male tribute tossed another bland nut into his mouth and exited the river.

Moving inland to collect his pack, every muscle in his body tensed with alarm when he saw a figure walk out from the shadows of the trees. He forced down the remnants of the nut. "Where have you been hiding?"

"The eastside of the arena by a different river." Her voiced sounded strong and assured

He stepped forward to meet her in the middle of the clearing. "I never made it that far east. I did not know that there were more than two rivers. Sorry we got split up."

She stopped before the fallen log. "Not a problem. I just hid in the shadows until now."

"Me too. I cannot believe that we have lasted this long. There are only two Careers remaining."

"I know."

With the winds gusting around him, Pahl clasped his hands together. "Miss Mason, you don't know how happy I am to see you."

His district partner remained silent as she quickly surveyed the campsite.

Pahl pulled out another nut from his jacket pocket. "I just spent a day with Gage from District Six. She...was a wonderful person. She wanted to finish the games alone, so we split up yesterday."

"Ya, she seemed nice. She told me where to find you."

“Really? So you saw her yesterday?”

Pahl’s district partner briefly bit her lip, clearing her throat. “Ya. She made me promise.”

“Promise what?” Pahl realized that his district partner had yet to smile. The rigidity of her face gave him concern. She was not the nervous girl who rode with him on the train. This was not his meek friend from the Training Center. A feral wolf stood before him. Trepidation flooded his body, causing his heart to race.

Her eyes would no longer meet Pahl’s as she began visually inspecting his body, ending her focus on his empty hands.

Pahl noticed that she stood at an angle with her arm hung down along her side, her hand hidden from view. He swallowed hard. “Joanna?”