



Tragic Catastrophe

By

Stuart Pidasso

Revision 1

Published 2015

There is no claim to copyright. This is a fan fiction story with no revenue created from such.

Story edited by Stuart Pidasso (though he is not a professional editor, so occasional grammar mistakes may appear).

Cover Photo "Tamarac" Stuart Pidasso/Self Taken

Dedication

For No One.

Introduction

Simply put, this story rose up out of a online writing contest where we were asked to write a briefer version of the Hunger Games, as if we were the tributes. This story is my end result.

Chapter 1

“Dad, it’s time.” When I shook my father’s shoulder, the nauseating smell of last night’s campfire celebrations forced me to turn away. Normally, I would never dare wake him during one of his rare days off, but today was different. Warily, I shook him a second time.

“Dad, wake up.”

His hand swatted at me as if I was a mosquito. “Go away,” he said, scolding me with his deep, raspy voice.

“You told me to wake you 30 minutes before we had to go. It’s 10 a.m.”

An ominous groan emanated from my father as he reluctantly rolled onto his side. Shading his eyes from the light seeping through the ragged bedroom curtains, he squinted at me. “Thanks, son.”

Groaning, he rolled onto his back before covering his eyes with his pillow. “Do we have any eggs?”

“A couple,” I replied. “I’ll cook them for you.”

“Thanks.”

In the kitchen, as the single piece of toast rose from our dilapidated toaster, my father stumbled shirtless out the bedroom in a clean pair of work jeans. With a moist washcloth from the bathroom, he wiped his face a final time before washing behind his neck. He dropped the washcloth onto the corner of the table before taking his usual seat.

I set his breakfast plate before him. “We’re out of jam. Do you want butter?”

“Sure. Coffee?” he asked.

“We ran out last Friday. I didn’t have any money to go shopping this past weekend.”

He sighed heavily. “We can go shopping after the reaping.”

“Okay,” I said, taking a seat at the table.

Swallowing a bite of eggs, my father studied me. “Did you eat?”

“No,” I replied. “I’m too nervous to eat.”

“You’re always nervous,” he muttered, shoving his next bite of eggs into his mouth. Swallowing, he reached for his water glass. “I never allowed you to take tesserae, just as I promised your mother. You only have six entries in the lottery compared to the 40 plus that most of the seniors have; you have nothing to worry about.”

“I know, but it only takes one.”

“Argh!” he retorted with a sneer. “You worry like your mother.”

Silently staring off into the distance, I tried unsuccessfully to divert my thoughts to happier images of the future.

Once my father had finished breakfast, I took his plate to the sink and returned to the table with a sheet of paper to present to him.

“What’s this?” He snapped the paper out of my hand.

“It’s for summer school.” I shoved my fidgeting hands into my pockets. “My biology teacher recommended me for the forestry program. The jobs are few, but if I do well, I may get one of the apprentice openings after I graduate next year. I just need a parent’s signature.”

My father dropped the paper onto the table. “No.”

“Why?” I asked in a cautious tone.

“I arranged a summer job for you at the paper mill.” He reached for the washcloth and wiped his mouth.

“But, the summer program will get my foot in the door at the forestry service. My teacher says that I have a good chance at—”

“No. You’re going to work at the mill.”

“But, dad—”

“No!” His hand slammed down on the table, catapulting the salt and pepper shakers onto their sides.

Wringing my hands, I took a step back from the table. “Why don’t you like the foresters?”

With a deep breath, my father glared at me. “They’re weak and

useless, running around the forest with their little saplings, telling us what we can and cannot cut. All they do is get in our way.”

“If we didn’t have the foresters, you wouldn’t have trees to harvest.”

Face flush, my father pointed his finger at me. “You belong in the paper mill.”

Staring at the floor, I mumbled, “You just want me out sight of your friends.”

“Enough!” He stood from his chair. “Do you hear me?”

Glancing down at the paper on the table, I swallowed. “Yes, sir.”

“Go on now.” He gestured towards the door. “I’ll meet you in the square after the reaping.”

Feeling my face flush with anger, I snatched the paper from the table and rushed out the door.

When I reached the square located next to the Justice Building, most of the teenagers had already gathered and were chatting nervously in whispers. Around the square, worried parents and other relations began filling the remaining space.

To keep order, numerous Peacekeepers armed with black riot batons patrolled the crowd, their shiny white uniforms a constant reminder of the swift punishment that the slightest dissent could bring.

Signing in with the Capitol registers, I progressed to the row amongst the students that was reserved for 17-year-old boys and girls. I began searching for my friend Birch, noticing how glum everyone appeared, which was normal considering that the older students had their names entered significantly more than any of the first time 12-year-old’s.

Spotting me first, my friend waved me over. “Hey, Pahl.”

“Hey,” I said solemnly, surveying the square.

On the roof of the Justice Building, I spotted a television crew adjusting one of the many cameras that surround the decorated

square.

Birch motioned to the row of 18-year-olds before us. “Just think; next year, we’ll finally be in the front row.”

Biting my lip, I glanced over the senior class in silence.

Birch eyed me. “Is there something wrong? You’re more upset than usual.”

“My father won’t let me attend the summer forestry program.”

“That sucks,” commented Birch. “Why?”

“He has a summer job lined up for me at the paper mill. I get to spend the hot summer rotting in the stench of pulp.”

Dutch, a giant amongst the seniors, turned around. “You usually reek like the mill anyway, so you should fit right in.”

Birch and I tried to ignore him, but when Dutch’s friend turned to face us, we knew there was no escaping their ridicule.

Dutch tapped his friend on the shoulder. “It’s probably best not to let either of these two near an axe since they’d split their foot in two. At most, they could sweep up the twigs once the men were through.” Sneering, the senior waited for some sort of response, which rarely came from those who did not want a beating.

Despite the reddening of my face, I remained silent so not to provoke him further.

“What? Don’t you girls have a brainy comeback?” Chuckling, he crossed his bulky arms.

A veteran of his beatings, I bit my lip and focused on one of the decorated banners hung from the Justice Building.

One of the other seniors pointed at us, chuckling. “They look as if they’re about to wet their pants.”

Dutch guffawed. “You’re probably right. Maybe we should leave them alone; I’m in no mood today to get my boots wet.”

Bursting through the wall of students, a Peacekeeper jabbed a riot baton sorely into Dutch’s back, dropping the senior to his knees in pain. “No talking!” The guard held his baton high in the air for all to

see. “Silence, all of you!”

Frowning, Dutch climbed to his feet and promptly turned forward towards the Justice Building, as did everyone else.

Once the Peacekeeper returned to his post in front of the senior class, Birch leaned towards me and whispered, “And they say there’s no justice in this world.”

Unsuccessfully resisting the urge to smile, my insides suddenly began to twist when I caught Dutch glaring at me over his shoulder. *Oh crap, I thought. This jerk is going to haunt me until the day I die.*

On a temporary stage set up before the Justice Building, the mayor came into view, closely followed by District 7’s escort, Harmony, who was dressed in blazing Capitol purple with flamboyant hair to match. Lastly, Blight and Johanna, our two district victors, strutted onto the stage.

“There’s Johanna,” whispered Birch, ogling the victor. “What I wouldn’t give to go on a date with her.”

I leaned closer my friend to whisper. “Since winning last year’s games, she barely leaves Victor’s Village. And when she does, she scowls at everyone.”

“I know. Her scowling is what makes her so hot. Did you see the boots she bought with her winnings? They almost go up to her knee.”

Ignoring my friend, I watched everyone on the stage take a seat.

However, Birch remained focused on the female victor. “My brother sees her running in the forest every so often. He says that she exercises like a fanatic. If I had victor’s money, I’d veg out on my couch and get fat off pizza.”

“She’s the competitor type,” I whispered. “She probably just wants to stay in shape.”

The town clock chimed with a single tone, indicating that it was 11:30 a.m. On precise queue, the mayor rose from his chair and moved to a center stage microphone to begin reciting the history of

Panem—as required at each reaping.

As the mayor dawdled on, I found myself drowning in stress, wanting to throw up. My fidgeting hand swatted a mosquito on my neck. Glancing around the crowd, I began to notice the many swatting hands and whispered to my friend, “They forgot again to spray for mosquitoes.”

Birch swatted his arm. “Ya. The mosquitoes are having themselves a buffet today. It could be worse, at least it’s not winter.”

The harsh hush from a Peacekeeper cut through the stillness, and together, Birch and I turned our heads to find a riot baton pointed at us from the one who had just poked the senior. We promptly returned our focus to the mayor.

Finished with his speech, the gray-haired man next introduced Harmony before returning to his chair.

Brandishing her familiar stage performer’s smile, Harmony eagerly stepped up to the microphone as if receiving a standing ovation from the eerily silent crowd. “How is my favorite district this fine morning?”

Of the thousands of people packed into the square, only Johanna was heard as she sighed loudly, shaking her head.

“Can District Seven win two years in a row?” Placing her hands upon her hips, Harmony paused to look back at her two relatively young victors before flashing her enthusiastic smile towards the crowd. “I don’t see why not. There’s something special about this district, and I’m not talking about mosquitoes.”

Except for the occasional cough from old and infirm, the large mass of people remained silent.

“Well, it’s time we find out. Ladies.” Harmony strutted to one of two large glass bowls filled to the brim with folded white slips of paper. Plunging her hand into the girl’s bowl, the escort removed a single slip.

This was when—as he did every year—Birch began to mumble

inaudibly the names of all the girls that he did not want reaped—despite having zero chance at a date with any of them.

Personally, I wished that no girl’s name was about to be read—even those who have been mean to me.

Returning to the microphone, Harmony smiled luminously for the cameras as she unfolded the slip of paper. From the surrounding loudspeakers, Harmony’s voice boomed as she read aloud the name, “Maeverly Aspen.”

A woman in the surrounding crowd cried out as a collective gasp rose from students on the other side of the square. Ever so slowly, the surrounding teenagers began parting and the chosen girl began walking towards the stage.

When the traumatized girl reached open space, she began to stagger, triggering a female Peacekeeper to rush to her side. With assistance, Maeverly Aspen made her way up the steps towards Harmony, who then guided the girl center stage.

Wrapping an arm over Maeverly’s shoulder, a zealous Harmony leaned the microphone closer to their mouths. “Hello, sweetie. Aren’t you a doll.”

“Hello,” said Maeverly with a weakened voice.

“You’re dark hair is so lovely. It shines like mahogany.”

From below, Birch and I watched in confusion as the escort winked peculiarly at the camera.

Despite the amplified loudspeakers, Maeverly’s voice was barely audible when she forced out a simple, “Thank you.” Her pale face had reddened, and she began taking deep calming breaths.

“And now, in Hunger Games tradition, I ask the females before me: Do we have any volunteers who hunger for the honor of competing for District Seven?”

The town square remained motionless as none of the girls raised their hands.

Though I had never seen anyone volunteer, I began turning my

head, wishing that someone would. I knew that I would feel just as bad for her replacement, but at least the tragedy unfolding before me would be the conscious choice of the volunteer.

“No?” said Harmony, smiling fervently. “Very well.” The escort guided Maevery to the female tribute’s spot on the stage and promptly returned to the center microphone. “Let us now discover who will be accompanying Maevery to the Capitol.” Harmony strutted over to the boy’s glass bowl and picked a random slip of paper.

As with my prior reaping, my hands began to shake. I shut my eyes and focused on my breathing. Balling my hands into fists, I began to wonder if the fear would ever subside. *Will it ever end*, I thought, thinking more of life in general.

The sound of Harmony unfolding the paper emanated from the numerous loudspeakers that surrounded the square. After a short torturous pause, Harmony’s voice thundered over the space as she read aloud the name, “Dutch Fungee.”

Relief flooded my body as various gasps rose from the nearby teenagers. I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned to see Birch’s look of utter astonishment before he glanced up towards the sky, mouthing the words, *Thank you*.

Slowly, the kids parted as our lifelong tormentor began taking short steps towards the stage. A large Peacekeeper stepped up and began escorting Dutch forward onto the stairs, allowing the young man to climb up onto the platform on his own.

When the senior reached the top, Harmony gripped his arm and guided him to the microphone. “Well, look at you. With those muscles, I bet the trees shake in your presence.”

Wide eyed, Dutch’s face was drained of all its blood. When he opened his mouth, no words were spoken.

Ever the professional, Harmony did not let him suffer in silence and immediately addressed the crowd. “I ask the males before me: Do we have any volunteers who hunger for the honor of competing

for District Seven?”

In the silence that followed, I could not help but stare at the ashen face of Dutch. His fear was palpable, and to my consternation, I found myself pitying him, for even bullies were not immune to this world’s unquenchable thirst of worry and misery.

A blood-curdling scream erupted nearby, giving everyone a most frightful start—especially me. Then, almost in unison, my classmates turned to look at me. *Did I just scream?* I thought.

I turned to see Birch looking above my head and found my arm raised in the air. Stunned, I slowly lowered my hand, staring at my trembling fingers as dread flooded my body.

Chapter 2

Harmony's voice beamed from the loudspeakers, "How delightful, we have a volunteer."

As a path before me began to open for the stage, Birch gripped my arm. "Pahl, what are you doing?"

Harmony gestured towards the stairs. "Well, come up to the stage, darling."

Gripped by terror, I could not move.

Failing to step forward, a large Peacekeeper quickly took hold of my arm and began pulling me towards the stairs.

A dumbfounded Dutch was being escorted off the stage when we met at the base of the steps. When the senior staggered pass, we silently exchanged blank stares with each other.

Delivered to the escort, Harmony gently took my arm and swiftly guided me to center stage. She pulled the microphone closer. "I am so blessed to have such a courageous district. Tell me, darling; what is your name?"

My chin quivered when I spoke. "P-pahl."

"And your family name?"

"Calis."

"Pahl Calis. What a brave young man you are. If that war cry of yours is any precursor of what's to come, we may need a third victor's chair for the stage next year." Harmony gestured towards the two victors, both of whom appeared quite perplexed by my action.

I surveyed the crowd and found a sea of bewildered eyes focused on me. Birch had moved to the front, standing beside a pale-faced Dutch. To my right, outside the student's area, I found my father moving through the crowd towards the stage.

Harmony wrapped an arm over my shoulder. "Pahl, are you volunteering for a friend, or are you just that eager to fight for

District Seven?”

“I...I...” As panic tore through my body, I began to contemplate if I could run for the forest. I knew wholeheartedly that there was no diplomatic way off this stage by pleading that this was all a big mistake. I glanced at my father and was stunned at what awaited me: my father’s face had the unmistakable expression of pride. Before now, I had only seen him look at my mother in such a manner. Swallowing hard, I kept my focus on my father and said, “I’m volunteering for my father and all the loggers of District Seven.”

“Oh, how magnificent,” commented Harmony. “However, before I can officially proclaim this honor as yours, we need to see if anyone else is as brave as you. Gentlemen, do we have any other volunteers who would like to contest Pahl’s spot?”

Looking down at the silent crowd, I had the inescapable feeling that I stood atop a gallows. I reached up with a trembling hand to rub my neck, feeling for the imaginary noose.

“No?” commented Harmony with a raised brow. “Well then, ladies and gentlemen of Panem, I present you Maevery Aspen and Pahl Calis: the tributes of District Seven.”

As the mayor returned to the microphone to read the long, dull Treaty of Treason, I was led to the male tribute’s spot on the stage. Despite the loudspeakers, I heard very little of the mayor’s speech since the shock of the moment had dulled my senses. Time itself ceased to exist.

After the speech, I was motioned by the mayor to shake hands with Maevery at center stage. When I shook her hand, I looked into her eyes and recognized the hopeless look of fear staring back at me.

The anthem of Panem began to play, and we were then gestured to face the crowd.

At this point, I felt very close to being sick on stage, but when I looked to my father, I only became more perplexed. *Is he really proud of me?*

When the music finished, we found ourselves immediately escorted inside the Justice Building to specially prepared waiting rooms. In these elaborate reception rooms, we had an hour to say our goodbyes to friends and family.

Numbly, I stood unmoving in the room, exactly where the Peacekeeper had left me. The room was extravagant with fine furniture and art, but none of it had an effect on me as I began to hyperventilate. Desperate to undo my mistake, a cold sweat enveloped my body as I fought the urge to start smashing things.

Succumbing to panic, I first ran to the solitary window in the room and found it locked. Glancing outside, I judged the distance to the ground to be too great to attempt anything further, so I headed for the door. Just as I reached for the handle, I heard the lock turn.

The door opened, revealing my father.

I stepped backwards into the center of the room, unsure of what to expect. To my surprise, I found myself swiftly wrapped in father's brawny arms. Returning his hug, I tightened my grip around his waist, cautiously keeping my emotions in check.

My father patted my back before holding me out by my shoulders. "Everyone is quite impressed at what you have done. I am too, son." He released my shoulders. "Were you secretly planning this?"

I swallowed. "No, sir. It just sort of happened."

"I'm proud of you."

"You are?"

"Yes," he replied with a hint of a smile. "Sacrificing yourself to save one of our top young loggers is very noble."

"Oh." I began to feel unsteady and took a seat on the couch.

"Dutch's father stopped me in the crowd. He wanted me to tell you how grateful he is for you saving his son."

"Dutch would be a far more competitive tribute." I confessed with a shrug.

In an all too honest tone, my father commented, "No one from

District Seven has much of a chance against the Career districts.”

Knowing the answer to my question, I cleared my throat and asked anyway, “Dad, do you think that I have a chance?”

The corner of my father’s mouth pulled back into a terse sneer. He briefly pressed his lips together and said, “Sure, son. Perhaps you can perform the same trick that Johanna Mason pulled. She played a very convincing weakling.”

“Ya, but she turned out to be a natural killer. I’m not.”

My father shrugged off my comment. “That Annie girl who won wasn’t a killer. Not all victors are like Johanna. You’re smart like your mother. Anything can happen.”

Overcome by emotion, I sprung from the couch and hugged my father. “I’m so sorry!”

“Don’t, don’t.” Pushing me away, my father took a step backward. “We accept our fates and don’t complain. Buck up, son.”

With head bowed, I focused on my breathing. “Sorry, sir.”

After a long pause, my father cleared his throat. “I should go.”

I raised my head to see his welling eyes flit away. Looking up at this oak tree of a man, I watched his face redden just before he turned away. *Why now are you suppressing your emotions?* I thought. *Why is it so wrong?*

My father began sidestepping towards the door. “Your friend wants to say goodbye.”

I stepped forward. “Can’t you stay longer?”

“No.” His breathing deepened. “You should spend time with Birch. He’s going to miss you.”

My voice began quivering. “Just a few more minutes?”

“Don’t.” The sternness had returned to his voice.

I diverted my eyes to the floor. “Yes, sir.”

“That’s better.” Taking slow, deep breathes, he glanced about the room. “Well, I should let the others say goodbye.”

I said nothing, swallowing my grief.

“I just want to say again how proud I am.” My father stepped forward and offered me his hand. “Until you come home.”

Staring at his hand, I slowly raised my own and received a firm handshake. “Bye, dad.”

He nodded and then reached for the door. When my father departed, he did not look back, which left me even more dejected.

Shortly after, Birch entered the room, and as soon as the door closed, he turned to me. “What the hell, dude. What are you doing?”

Wiping my eyes, I shrugged. “I guess I’m going to the Capitol.”
“Why?”

“I don’t know.” Flopping down onto the couch, I said, “My hand seemed to subconsciously go up.”

“And that horrible scream? I nearly soiled myself.”

“I don’t even remember screaming. I must be going crazy.” I slumped forward, burying my face into the palms of my hands.

“I have to ask.” Birch joined me on the couch. “Are you going to try to win?”

“Yes, of course,” I replied, lifting my face to dry my eyes. “That is, if this year’s arena is favorable to survivalists.”

Forcing a smile, Birch taped my leg. “Let’s hope for a winter arena. You thrive in snow.”

I could only shrug in response.

“Pahl, what did your father say?”

My brow furled at the question. “He said that he was proud of me.”

“Really?”

“I think he cares more for Dutch, him being a logger and all.” I bunched my fists in anger and noticed their trembling. When I extended my fingers, my hands continued to shake.

Birch’s face flushed with emotion. As he struggled to steady himself, he cleared his throat. “Is there anything that I can do for you? Do you have any messages for anyone that you want me to

deliver?”

I thought over the question for a minute before I shook my head.

“There is no one to deliver any message to.”

“Should I tell Dutch to go to hell?” Birch forced a smile.

I smiled briefly at my friend’s suggestion. “No need. He’ll only take it out on you.”

“When you meet Caesar Flickerman, you can tell Dutch where to stick it on national television.”

Thinking that I could not feel any worse, the realization of the upcoming national television interview caused me to moan. “I forgot about the interview.”

“Sorry.” Birch said with an apologetic frown.

“That’s okay.” I fell back against the couch, sighing. “Maybe I will say something to the jerk.”

Unexpectedly, the Peacekeeper opened the door to say that Birch’s time was up.

I turned to the Peacekeeper. “Has it been an hour already?”

“You have one more visitor,” replied the guard.

I followed Birch to the door. “Who?”

Birch turned to me with his hand extended. “You know who. Did you really think that she wouldn’t come?”

When I shook his hand, we pulled each other close for a parting hug.

“Try to win,” he said, choking back tears. “I know that you don’t have a killer instinct, but try to outlast them. That is the least you can do.”

I nodded. “I will try. I promise.”

The Peacekeeper took Birch by the arm and pulled him from the room, leaving me to wipe my tears.

But before I could compose myself, she was standing in the doorway, tissues in hand. Mrs. Pavelko, my biology teacher, entered the room and swiftly closed the door.

Before she could speak, I collapsed into her arms, wailing, “What have I done!”

My teacher held me tight as we slumped to the floor. “Let it out. It’s okay.”

All at once, all the fear, anger, and grief came pouring out of me. I sobbed uncontrollably as my tears peppered her shoulder. There we remained when eventually, my sobbing reduced to stuttered gasps for air between intermittent wails.

Passing me a tissue, Mrs. Pavelko brushed my hair to the side. “Can you tell me what happened?”

“No,” I said, blowing my nose. “I don’t know why I did it.”

“Did something set you off?” Mrs. Pavelko passed me another tissue as she helped me off the floor.

“Nothing...everything...I don’t know.” I dabbed my eyes with a wad of tissues. “This morning, my father refused to sign my application for the forestry program.”

My teacher guided me towards the couch. “Did that warrant a trip to the Capitol?”

“No.” Now seated, I again blew my nose. “I think it was a combination of things that set me off.”

Mrs. Pavelko sighed. “I told you not to let Maple Johnson’s prank get under your skin. I warned you that she couldn’t be trusted.”

Taking a staggered breath, I accepted my teacher’s comforting hand into my own, gripping it firmly. “I didn’t let her flirting prank get to me, and I knew she was playing me for the fool when I gleefully walked into her trap. Like I said, I think it was a combination of things that caused me to raise my hand.” I forced a smile, but within seconds, my face scrunched up like a baby as I again began to sob.

Pulling me close, Mrs. Pavelko wrapped her arms tight around me and began rocking me gently.

Shorter than my first outburst, my nerves soon settled, and I blew my nose. “I can’t believe that I just threw my life away for nothing.”

“You may not realize it, but you did save a life today.” My teacher patted my hand. “Not everyone can say that.”

I huffed. “Too bad I didn’t save someone more deserving.”

“Maybe this near miss will change his ways, making him a better person.”

“I doubt that.” Wiping my eyes, I accepted more tissues from my teacher. “Though the odds are against me, I promised Birch that I would at least try to make it home. I also make this promise to you.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, but I want you to promise me something else.”

“What?”

Mrs. Pavelko gripped both my hands. “I want you to promise me to live these next few days to the fullest. Some people become paralyzed with fear when faced with their own mortality. Don’t become paralyzed. Don’t waste your remaining time struggling with anger or hate. Don’t turn yourself into a killer. Enjoy each remaining day as it comes. You are about to taste foods that most people in the districts never see. You will hear beautiful music and see magnificent art all about you. You have an opportunity to live more in the next week than anyone here in District Seven has in their entire life. Starting right now, cherish your remaining time.”

Covered in a cold sweat, my body shook uncontrollably as I struggled to speak. “I don’t want to die. I’m so scared.”

“So would I be if I was in your position, but you sealed your fate as soon as you raised your hand. It’s okay to be scared, but you have to accept things for what they are.”

I curled up on the couch, laying my head upon Mrs. Pavelko’s lap. Contemplating her advice, I closed my eyes and took respite in her maternal comforting. “I wonder if I’ll see my mother...when I...”

Sniffling from her emotions, Mrs. Pavelko began stroking my hair. “Perhaps.”

“If I do see her again, I bet she’ll tell me how grateful she was for

you coming to see me.” I gripped my teacher’s hand. “Thank you.”

She squeezed my hand in return. “I’m so sorry that I can’t help you.”

I felt my teacher’s tear fall upon my shoulder. “You have nothing to be sorry about. A wanting son couldn’t ask for anything more.” I sat up, keeping a firm hold on her hand. “I will attempt to follow your advice, and when the time comes, I’ll be...brave.”

“I’m sure you will,” she said, brushing my wetted cheek with her thumb.

The Peacekeeper opened the door. “Times up.”

With a firm grip on her hand, I escorted Mrs. Pavelko to the door. “Will you keep an eye on Birch? Afterwards I mean.”

“I will.” As tears flowed from her eyes, Mrs. Pavelko kissed me on the cheek. “Spend your last days *living*.”

Unable to speak, I nodded.

“Times up,” reaffirmed the guard as he gently pulled my biology teacher from the room.

Gripping her hand tighter, I felt it inevitably slip away just before the guard forcibly shut the door. Forsaken by my situation, this was when I accepted the tragic catastrophe of my actions. Soon, I would be leaving this room, and I wholeheartedly knew that I would be passing through death’s door.

Chapter 3

Shortly after my last visitor, the guard returned to inform me that I would soon be taken from the Justice Building to the train station. Allowed to use the bathroom, I looked into the mirror to find my eyes puffy and bloodshot. In the hope of relieving some of the puffiness, I began washing up with cold water, but there would be no hiding of my emotional state.

Maeverly and I were rushed into a car and driven the short distance to the train station. Being my first ride in a car, this should have been a memorable moment, but my mind drifted to a distant time when my father took me for a ride on a lumber truck. Mother could not hide her displeasure when I later mentioned bouncing through the forest in daddy's big truck, trucks that lacked basic seatbelts and often broke down. Mother was more than upset, she was furious, and I remember seeing my father sleeping in the living room for about a week. I thought it was the end of the world if she never forgave him, and now, it all seemed so trivial.

Not simply allowed onto the train, Harmony had to stop us as we boarded to allow the Capitol press the opportunity to film us. As the cameras flashed, Harmony annoyingly poked me in the back, telling me to smile. I ignored her and gripped the stair railing with white knuckles, for it took all that I had to hold back the tears.

When they finally ushered us inside the train, sealing the doors shut, Joanna Mason was found standing in the corridor with her arms crossed, glaring at me. "Please tell me that this is an act?"

I shook my head.

With an angry groan, she spun around, grumbling obscenities as she walked away.

"Oh, don't mind her; she's always like that," said Harmony. "Come to think of it, I don't think that I've actually seen her smile."

Shown to our compartments, Harmony told us that we had a couple hours until dinner. In the meantime, we were free to do whatever we want, wear whatever we want.

But when left alone, I just sat on the edge of my bed, numb to the world. Eventually, the world rushing past my compartment window grabbed my attention. I moved to the window and stared out at the endless prairie landscape. We had already exited the forest region and were gliding over the vast prairie located in the southern part of our district. The speed at which we floated over the rail astonished me since the train barely rocked. Magnets and counter acting hydraulics, I thought, recalling the science from a book in my beloved school library. “A place I will never see again,” I mumbled to myself.

Someone knocked on my door, and when I opened it, I found the tall male mentor standing before me.

“Hello, Pahl. I’m Blight.” He offered me his hand.

I shook it without hesitation. “Hi.”

“I thought it best to introduce myself sooner than later. Why don’t you come to the dining car? We can chat as we wait for dinner.” Resting his muscular shoulder against the doorframe, the experienced mentor stood there amiably, analyzing me. “The worse thing a tribute can do is sulk alone, but this is up to you.”

Sulking did sound preferable, but I remembered my teacher’s advice of not wasting my remaining time by shutting myself off. Reluctantly, I agreed to join him.

As we passed through the long train corridors in silence, I began to take my teacher’s words to heart and began to notice intrinsic details of the wood trim in the corridor. When we reached the dining car, I felt dumbstruck by the compartment’s extravagance. The decorations, including the furniture of the train, made the justice building look drab in comparison. Inexplicably, I began studying the ornamental engraving of an oak chair, trying to detect if a man or machine had

carved out the patterns.

Harmony looked up from a small folding mirror she was using to adjust her makeup. “Pahl darling, didn’t you find any clothes that you liked?”

I shrugged. “I didn’t look, miss.”

The escort giggled. “Call me Harmony, deary. I’ll pick something suitable for you to wear before we arrive in the Capitol tomorrow morning.”

“Pahl, can I get you some water?” asked Blight. “Perhaps some coffee?”

“I’m good.”

Blight took a seat on a long couch and gestured me to sit in a chair. “How are you holding up?”

The simple question caused my face to flush with emotion, so I answered truthfully. “I feel as if I’m going mad.”

Pressing his lips together, Blight nodded. “I remember feeling that way when I was picked.”

Joanna entered our compartment, having changed into clothes more comfortable. Passing a refreshment cart, she grabbed a bottle of water and plopped down onto the couch next to Blight. “Maeverly is on her way. She’s trying on clothes.”

“How’s her mental state?” ask Blight.

“About what you’d expect.”

“Oh!” interrupted Harmony, as if remembering something overly important. “Maeverly should wear something green. I think that’s her color.”

Ignoring Harmony, Johanna turned her attention to me. “Hey, moron; what’s with the death wish?”

Blight placed a hand on the mentor’s shoulder. “Johanna—”

“Ya ya, be more sensitive.” Brushing off his hand, the female victor’s eyes sharpened on me. “It’s hard to be sensitive amongst such stupidity.”

Harmony leaned towards me and said softly, "Sometimes a mentor's first Hunger Games can be a bit...stressful."

Blight frowned at Johanna before turning to me. "I apologize for Johanna. Apparently, she has forgotten my advice."

"No need for apologies," I said, meeting Johanna's glare. "She's correct. I had a death wish."

"Had?" retorted Johanna. "I'd say your wish is about to come true."

My faced began to feel warm. "I admit that it was a stupid impulse, a subconscious reaction, but I want to live. I will try to out survive everyone else."

Leaning forward with elbows resting on her knees, Johanna's mouth formed an all too truthful sneer. "You'll need more than survival skills to come out alive."

Unbeknownst to everyone in the room, survival skills were my only option. Unsure of how to convey it, I focused on the floor and swallowed hard as I searched for words.

Johanna's intuition gave her pause. But when I did not continue, she said, "You have something to say. What is it?"

With a deep breath, I lifted my gaze and said, "I'm a pacifist."

Clenching her jaw, Johanna lifted her arms in the air as she looked to the heavens. "Great!" Her arms dropped to her side with a heavy sigh. "This is just freaking great. Stop the train. I'll walk home since it looks as if I'm not needed."

Angered by her behavior, Blight rose to his feet and took hold of Johanna's wrist. When she stood to pull away, he only tightened his grip. "Stop it, Johanna. We help them no matter what, no matter their odds or beliefs."

After a long exchange of glares, the muscles of the two mentors relaxed, and Blight to release his grip.

Johanna slowly returned to couch and said, "Sorry, Pahl."

Returning to his seat, Blight forced a smile. "And thank you for

letting us know. We'll work that into our strategies."

Unable to suppress her opinion, Johanna huffed loudly as she refused to look at me.

Harmony reached for her teacup, completely unaffected by Johanna's theatrics. "Well, despite all this. I think the day has gone splendidly well. Did you catch my *mahogany* comment?"

"Yes," snapped Johanna. "What was that all about?"

"My dear friend Effie has this little quirk for Mahogany furniture. I slipped a good will salute to her since she has been so glum lately. Being District Twelve's escort is starting to take a toll on the poor girl. We now have this tradition that after each Hunger Games, we girls go furniture shopping."

Johanna eyed the escort. "You two could probably benefit from some good wood."

"Exactly," chimed Harmony.

Saving us from the escort's ramblings, Maevery entered the dining compartment, wearing a charming green dress. As Harmony praised her for her fashion sense, I took notice of her muscle tone. *She's a logger*, I concluded. *She probably knows how to swing an ax.* Johanna took notice too and appeared happy to have one potential tribute.

As we got to know one another, the Capitol attendants began delivering dinner in waves. In fact, they never stopped bringing dinner, for I had gorged myself before they had finished bringing all the courses. Only when my belly felt like it wanted to burst, did I slow down. But then, the chocolate desserts arrived.

After dinner, we moved to a different compartment to watch a replay of the reappings. I did not feel like watching, but Blight thought it best that we get an early feel for our competitors. The coverage began with the lower numbered districts, and I sat there dumbfounded as I watched many of the kids in the first four districts eagerly volunteer.

By the time they had finished replaying the first half of district reappings, my heart had sunk. When District 7's reaping replayed, the coverage focused on my blood-curdling scream, which sent me running to the nearest bathroom to throw up, where I would remain for some time.

Once they finished with District 12, we retired to our compartments. I swayed under my shower nozzle, finding the train's hot water therapeutic as I slowly increased the temperature, my body craving the heat. Repeatedly, my mind replayed the day's events, and only when my fingertips began to prune did I leave my shower sanctuary.

I crawled into bed and began staring at the bright moon outside my window. Not the least bit sleepy, I sat up with the need to propose a particular question to a certain person, something that I did not want the others to hear.

Throwing on pajama bottoms, a robe, and slippers, I stumbled through the dimly lit corridors of the train until I found Johanna's compartment. With a deep breath, I knocked on her door.

The door opened to reveal Johanna in her bathrobe, her hand clutching thick fabric together, her hair wet from showering. As soon as she recognized me, her eyes narrowed. "What?"

"I want to ask you something."

Eyeing me, she raised both her arms to lean against the doorframe. When she did, her bathrobe fell open, exposing her body.

My eyes drifted down for a brief second before I turned around with a gasp. "Sorry."

"Well," she said, "what do you want to ask me?"

"Um..." As my face reddened, I began wringing my hands when laughter erupted from Johanna. "You did that on purpose," I snapped, keeping my head turned away. "Didn't you?"

There was a pause before Johanna replied, "You can turn around now."

Hesitantly, I peaked over my shoulder to find her robe tied close.

“Why did you do that?”

“I was testing you. I wanted to know if you were a man or a gentleman. Now, I know, though it does neither of us any good. Civility will get you nowhere in the arena.”

“That wasn’t nice. Why didn’t you just ask?”

“I’m sorry.” Ever so slowly as she remained under the doorway, the corners of Johanna’s mouth turned up to form a mischievous grin.

“Are you a virgin?”

“What?” I could feel my face redden further. “No, if you must know.”

“Really?” Joanna crossed her arms. “Who was it?”

My frustration welling, I glanced in both directions to make sure that the train corridors were empty. “Willow Johnson. We grew up together. One day, she wanted to see what the fuss was all about, so she picked me.”

“Did you start dating?”

I glanced over my shoulders a second time. “No. She learned what she wanted and was done with me.”

“Did you like her?”

“Yes.”

“A lot?”

Frowning, I replied, “Yes.”

“Anyone else?”

“No.” I confessed. “Do we have to discuss this?”

“So, you’re civil and honest,” said Johanna, her grin fading.

“That’s too bad. Neither virtue is going to keep you alive.” Johanna then stepped back from her door and turned for a service cart.

“Come on in, *Sir Pahl*.” Filling a glass tumbler with ice, the victor poured a small amount of an amber colored liquid into the glass.

“Would you like a nightcap?”

I entered her compartment to find most of her Capitol provided

clothes strung about the floor. “No, thank you.”

“Are you a teetotaler too?”

“No. Not completely.”

Sipping her drink, she eyed me. “Why didn’t you find a new girl?”

“I don’t know. I figured that I’d meet someone special, eventually. I’ve never understood the rush to be an adult since most grownups are unhappy. It’s as if everything they do comes at a price.”

“True,” commented the victor. “It’s amazing how easy it is to ruin one’s life—even without trying.” Looking down at her glass, Johanna became lost in thought as she swirled the ice.

I shoved my hands into my pockets to stop myself from fidgeting. “Someone told me that you run regularly through the forest, that you exercise every day even though you don’t have to.”

“That’s true, but I’m not exercising.”

Confused, I stared at Johanna in silence.

“Like you said, everything has its price. Even being a victor.” Johanna took a large sip from her tumbler, grimacing as she swallowed the burning liquid. “Is this what you wanted to ask me?”

“No.” I began gnawing my lip unsure how to progress.

“Well, out with it. I want to get some sleep before I have to put up with those annoying Capitol people in the morning.”

Clearing my throat, I looked her in the eye and asked, “Can you teach me to be brave?”

Johanna stared at me.

“I know it’s impossible for me to win, but when I die, I want to be brave.”

The victor’s expression became austere as she set down her drink and crossed her arms. “You’ve already done the bravest thing possible by raising your hand to volunteer.”

“It was more foolish than brave,” I said, choking out the words.

“Funny how the two are often mistaken for one another. Bravery

happens before the actions starts. When you die, you simply die, brave or not.” Johanna crossed her compartment and opened her door. “Go get some sleep.”

Exiting her compartment, I paused outside her door and turned to her. “When you exposed yourself, what would have happened had I not been a gentleman?”

“Two Capitol attendants would be dragging your unconscious body back to your room.” With a smile, Johanna swiftly shut the door in my face.

Breakfast was a quiet affair with Johanna sleeping in. Blight, in the meantime, told us what to expect when we met our stylists. Thankfully, our mentor did not discuss Hunger Game strategies and instead told us to enjoy our first exposure to the Capitol. This sat well with me since it conformed with my teacher’s wish to enjoy my final days.

When the train exited a long mountainous tunnel, the glittering Capitol came into view. And despite us being a great distance from the city, its vast size filled the horizon. Reflecting the sun, the tall glass building sparkled with infinite colors that left me speechless. As we entered the suburbs, I almost forgot my predicament as the amazing skyscrapers filled the sky. Having seen the architectural designs only in Capitol propaganda, observing it close up only magnified my appreciation of the engineering required. The trees in district 7 were amazing, but they were created by nature. What I truly admired was built by humans, with science and hard work.

When the train pulled into the station, I began to notice the people for the first time. These people humored me with the ridiculous choice of bright colors and outlandish styles, but somehow, they did not seem out of place. Everything in the Capitol was art, creative expression that seemed to run free. I didn’t feel like a country boy visiting the city for the first time; I felt as if I had landed on Mars.

Chapter 4

“It burns.” Gripping the edges of my prep table, I gritted my teeth as the facial cream chemically reacted to my minimal facial hair.

“We’re almost there,” said the leader of my prep team. The outlandishly dressed older woman nodded to her younger assistant to proceed.

The young female leaned over the table and placed a cloth over my face, pressing the fabric firmly into my skin. “Tell me when the burning sensation ends.”

The nauseating cream forced its way into my nose, but slowly, the chemical burn began to subside, and my muscle began to relax. When I felt relatively pain free, I said, “The burning has stopped.”

“This shouldn’t hurt.” The young assistant peeled the fabric from the top of my cheeks down to my chin, taking all my facial hair with it. She was right; it did not hurt.

When I reached for my face, the young man on the prep team stopped me. “Wait,” he said. “Let me apply the neutralizing lotion. We don’t want you accidentally spreading the lysis cream to your scalp.” When he finished applying lotion to my face, the young man helped me to sit up.

I touched my face and marveled at its smoothness.

The leader of the prep team leaned in closer, touching my face with her thumb. “Very nice. You probably won’t ever have to shave again.” The woman grimaced at what she had said. “At least, until you return home as a victor.”

Confident of her remorse, I shrugged. “No worries.” Repositioning the small towel over my lap, I asked, “May I dress?”

“After your stylist sees you,” replied the leader.

The young assistant noticed my goose bumps and draped a towel over my shoulder.

“Thank you,” I said, shivering.

The young man then returned to grooming my toenails as the two women discussed possible options for my hair.

Trapped on this table with nothing else to do, I studied in awe the various tattoos and piercings of the three members of my prep team, constantly thinking to myself, *Why?* Their flamboyant hairstyles also made no sense, and I assumed that all this was the result of having too much free time.

A woman entered the room, causing my prep team to position themselves behind me.

As the woman approached, her warm stare stood out. Her tattoo free skin was the color of light cinnamon, and she possessed high cheekbones that amplified her smile. Her black shoulder-length hair was brushed tightly back, spreading out into natural curls behind her ears. Wearing a pantsuit made from a patchwork of various tropical colored fabric, her clothing seemed to brighten the room.

The prep team leader placed a hand on my shoulder. “He’s ready, my dear. We left his hair untouched as you ordered.”

The stylist’s eyes remained fixed on me when she said, “He’s a handsome young man.” The woman offered me her hand. “Hello, Pahl. My name is Bermuda. I will be your stylist.”

I shook her hand. “Hi.”

The young female assistant pointed to small reddish lump on my neck. “He has several of these blemishes. We can mask them, but they may still show up on camera.”

Bermuda inspected my skin, pressing her finger against one of the lumps. “Are these mosquito bites, Pahl?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Oh my,” gasped the prep team leader. “You have at least a dozen bites.”

“You get use to it,” I commented with a shrug.

“Don’t they itch?” asked the male.

“No.” I raised my arm to inspect a bite on the underside, which did itch. “Well, sometimes they do, but you learn to ignore it.”

Bermuda stepped over to one of the many cases brought in by the prep team and produced a small jar of cream. She approached me, dipping a finger into the opened jar. “Let’s try this.”

When she applied the cream, I felt a soothing coolness that relieved the itch almost immediately. “That actually feels good,” I said.

The assistant leaned closer. “The red lump is gone too. Bermuda, I can quickly apply the cream.”

Smiling warmly, the stylist shook her head. “That’s fine. I’ll take care of his bites. You three go have lunch.”

Once my prep team departed, Bermuda asked me to stand, circling me as she applied cream to all my mosquito bites.

Switching hands for cream application, I made sure to hold the towel before my waist.

“I just watched the replay of your reaping.” Bermuda dabbed her finger into the jar. “You’re a volunteer?”

Unable to confess the truth, I simply shrugged my reply.

“Interesting.” With my bites treated, the woman returned the jar to the case and then turned to face me. “Please set your towel on the table.”

I gripped my towel with both hands. “Um...why?”

I need to see you standing naturally. I can’t fit clothes to you with your shoulders hunched forward.”

“Can’t I put my underwear on first?”

Bermuda continued to smile at me. “I need to see you as you are. You’re a handsome lad. I’m not here to judge or ridicule you. It won’t take more than a minute.”

I gripped my towel tighter. “You’ll know what alterations to make to my clothing by looking at me?”

“Yes. I’m an artist. Would you question a painter about his brush

strokes?”

I stared at her, unmoving.

“Please? I’ll be quick.”

Gnawing my lip, I began to feel comforted by her charming mannerisms, her constant smile. I tossed the towel onto the prep table.

“Thank you. Stand up straight; stand natural.”

I watched the woman take slow steps as she circled me.

“Look forward please.”

When she reappeared from behind, she handed me a long bathrobe. “Thank you, Pahl. Are you hungry?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Come. Join me in the sitting room.”

Quickly donning my robe, I followed Bermuda into adjacent sitting room and began staring at the beautiful buildings seen through the giant floor to ceiling windows. Only when the table mechanically separated in two and was replaced by a second table beneath it did I look away from the city landscape. Spread out on the table a feast, grander than what I had experienced on the train.

Not wanting to repeat what happened while watching the replay of the reapings, when I vomited, I began sampling the food at a much slower pace. I noticed that my stylist was not eating. “Aren’t you hungry? This can’t all be for me.”

“I’m good,” she replied. “I had a big breakfast.”

Savoring a cheese roll, I admired her smile, how it appeared genuine. Her bone structure and skin tone made her face appear naturally glowing. Afraid to comment on her beauty, I focused on her clothing. “Did you design your own clothes?”

“Why yes. Do you like it?”

I nodded. “It’s...warm. The colors remind me of a summer beach. Like when my friend and I would go swimming in the forest.”

Bermuda tugged at the seam in her slacks. “I was inspired by

some of the small islands just off the coast of District Four.”

I next sampled a slice of honey-glazed ham. “What other forms of art do you enjoy?”

“Oh, painting, mostly water colors,” replied Bermuda. “I also dabble with clay sculpting. Do you like art?”

My chewing paused at the question. “I guess I do. I’ve notice so much since I arrived this morning. Even the architecture of the buildings is amazing. The only art we see in District Seven comes from nature.”

“I’m glad that you can take the time to admire the art around you.”

I began staring at the food at the table. “I promised my teacher that I would spend my last days living and not succumb to the dread.”

After a long pause, Bermuda asked, “You weren’t volunteering, were you.”

“No,” I replied, breathing deeply through my nose. I met my stylist’s gaze. “My mother is dead. I was denied a chance at secondary schooling.” Feeling my eyes well, I reached for my napkin and choked out the words, “I’m tired of being sad and lonely. The usual stuff.”

Bermuda scooted closer to me, wrapping her arm over my shoulders. “I want to help where I can. And since you are drawn to art, let us do something artistic for your chariot costume.”

“Aren’t the costumes made weeks ahead of time?” I asked.

“Most stylists make their costumes ahead of time, and I do have some costumes set aside if we need them; however, I find working under pressure to be inspiring.”

“Okay.” I bit into another cheese roll.

Looking into my eyes, the stylist’s smile seemed to grow. “What is the first thing that pops into your head when I say District Seven?”

“Mosquitoes.”

Bermuda laughed. “No, silly. Artistically, what comes to mind when you think of home?”

When I hesitated, she playfully snapped her fingers before my face. “First thing.”

“Autumn leaves,” I spouted.

“Keep cutting,” commanded Bermuda to the combined prep teams.

The young male designer wiped his brow. “I’m almost out of fabric. Do we have anymore?”

“No,” replied my prep team leader.

Maeverly and I stood facing each other as our prep teams worked frantically to make our impromptu chariot costumes. As part of the team cut various leaf shapes from a variety of autumn colored fabrics, the rest of the team used glue to attach the thin fabric leaves to our simple long sleeve shirts and full-length trousers.

Bermuda glanced at the clock on the wall. “We only have an hour to finish this.

The young man turned to the stylist. “I estimate that we need one more meter of fabric to cover them fully.”

Pausing for only a moment, Bermuda removed her designer jacket and tossed it to the man. “Cut the remaining pieces from my jacket.”

He rubbed the material between his fingers. “It’s too thick.”

“That won’t matter. We just need to cover the remaining spots.”

The man raised a scissors to the fabric, but let his hands fall. “I can’t cut this, Bermuda. It’s too beautiful. It’s some of your finest work.”

“For Pete’s sake.” Scowling at the man, Bermuda snatched the jacket from his hand and tore it in half before handing it back. “I can make another. Keep cutting.”

When a hand pressed a fabric leaf onto my cloth skullcap, I imagined the glue reaching my scalp. I turned to my stylist. “Will our clothes be glued to our bodies when this is done?”

“No,” replied Bermuda. “It’s a special glue that I once used during a recent fashion show. It’s safe.”

Looking to my district partner, she seemed to share my apprehension; nonetheless, we shared a smile. And despite the ridiculousness of the situation, I thought Maevery looked stunning. Unsure if it would be appropriate to comment, I kept the thought to myself as another fabric leaf was slapped onto my head.

With only a few minutes to spare, we stepped out of the elevators into a large staging room, accompanied by our stylists. Here, tributes and support teams gathered around horse drawn chariots as the tributes nervously prepared to be paraded around the city as part of the opening ceremony.

When we approached our chariot, Harmony turned and gasped. “Oh my. You two should certainly garnish some attention.

Johanna guffawed. “Did a unicorn throw up?”

Gnawing her lip, Harmony grinned as she recalled a distant memory. “Come to think of it, your costumes remind me of a calico cat I once had as a child.”

“We’re autumn leaves,” I declared.

Blight aided Maevery into the chariot. “I kind of like it. It’s something of a first for District Seven.”

Shaking her head, Johanna fed a sugar cube to one of our horses. “A first of something alright.”

“It’s perfect,” beamed Bermuda. “Once the chariot begins moving and the city winds start flowing through the leaves, it will be dazzling.”

I entered the chariot and began to notice the long stares. I took a long look at Maevery and had to admit that, close up, we looked a bit like calico cats. The only thing missing were our tails.

With no time to fret about our appearances, our chariot soon passed through the gates in a procession that began parading the city streets. Immediately, our fabric leaves began to flutter, and on a

nearby giant projection screen, our chariot stunningly appeared. I felt relieved to see that the fluttering did make us look like trees—not cats.

We passed through the streets as sweat ran down my back. I offered Maeverly my hand in support and felt comforted when she accepted it, finding her just as nervous with equally sweaty palms.

When our chariot turned a corner, we could see the city circle up ahead. At this point, we noticed a few of the leaves falling from our costumes. I turned my head and watched the thin fabric float through the air like wisps of smoke.

When we entered the city circle, many more leaves began to fall loose. In a steady stream, our fabric leaves started falling from our bodies, filling the air around the city circle, drifting slowly outwards over the crowds. As we made a second pass around the circle, we could see people vying to catch a leaf, a rare souvenir of their beloved Hunger Games. A few people even called out our names.

To my surprise, this made me smile. It was nice to hear my name spoken by someone who was not a bully—or a stern father.

By the time we stopped before the president's mansion, all the fabric leaves had fallen from our costume, leaving us in our dark brown shirts and trousers. When I looked up at one of the large projection screens, our images made my mouth fall agape. Before the prep teams had begun gluing the leaves to our clothes, they had sprayed our cloth skullcaps and the tops of our arms and shoulders with a white spray to simulate snow frost. From the view of the camera, the snow frosting gave us a haunted look. Not only did our costumes show a change of seasons, they hinted at something more ominous.

We retired for the day to our assigned floor in the Training Center.

After a quick tour of the premises, I went to my room to shower and rest before dinner.

Exiting the shower, I was pleased that all the glue residue had washed off. This should be no surprise since the glue was designed to release upon exposure to heat and moisture.

Fighting the need for sleep, I dressed in casual attire and joined the others at the dining table.

Johanna poked at her salad. "I owe you an apology, Bermuda. The costumes left quite an impression. Why didn't you do something like that for me last year?"

Bermuda's smile grew. "If I remember correctly, last year's female tribute had a quiet stubborn streak."

Skipping my salad, I began sampling all the succulent choices of meat. I was hungry, but I was more exhausted. Ignoring all the table conversations, I sat quietly throughout most of the meal, slowly working my way through a heavenly steak.

Blight asked, "Are you okay, Pahl?"

"Yes," I replied in a low tone. "It was a long day."

"Have some wine." Johanna raised her glass in a general toast before taking a sip.

"No, thank you."

"It's okay," said Johanna. "You don't have to worry about age restrictions. You can drink with the grownups."

"No, thank you," I repeated.

"I forgot," she continued sarcastically. "You don't like having fun. You're in no rush to grow up."

Tossing my napkin onto my plate, I stood up. "Drinking doesn't make you a grown up, acting responsibly does. You should try it sometime, Johanna."

The female victor eyed me with a smirk, holding her tongue.

I stormed from the table only to pause and turn at the edge of the dining room. "I apologize. Please excuse me, I'm tired and need

some rest.”

In my room, I was preparing for bed when someone a knocked on my door.

“Come in.”

Bermuda entered my room. “Hey there. I just wanted to say good night and to let you know that you did well on your first day.”

“I didn’t do much. The leaf thing was all you.”

“You gave me the idea. Perhaps after your training session tomorrow, we can enjoy some other art together.”

“Sure,” I said.

“Do you like music?” asked Bermuda.

“Yes. But all we have for music in District Seven is small live bands down at the market.”

“Here, let me find you something soothing on your bedside media player. You crawl into bed.” Bermuda stepped over to my nightstand and began touching the glass screen of a tablet that I mistook for a digital picture frame. Soft music consisting mostly of string instruments began playing from unseen speakers spread throughout the room. She dimmed my bedroom lights and took a seat in a bedside chair. “How’s this?”

“You don’t have to sit with me. I’m okay.”

“I know. I’m just enjoying some music with my new friend. If you want to talk, we can; otherwise, we can listen to some music.”

I smiled, appreciative of Bermuda companionship, but I had to admit that I did not feel like talking. Emotionally exhausted, I listened to the pleasing music and all too soon, drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 5

When I woke to the dawn twilight, Bermuda was nowhere to be seen. Assuming my stylist had returned to her own room, I visited the bathroom before glancing out my window at the still city. Since the entire floor remained quiet, I crawled back into bed grateful for the morning solitude. And despite the overwhelming dread, I somehow returned to sleep.

“Pahl,” said Blight as later woke. “You should eat something before training.”

Nodding, I sat up and immediately reached for my head, groaning in pain.

“Are you okay?” asked Blight.

“Headache,” I said, turning away from the sunlight. “Just a couple hours ago I felt fine.”

“Stress can have that effect. Come. We’ll find you some headache medicine.”

At the breakfast table, Harmony groggily searched her pillbox. “Here. Wait. Um...we don’t want you taking that one.”

Johanna forced open her eyes to glare at the escort. “Why don’t you leave the pills in their original bottles? That way they’ll be organized.”

“That, my dear,” mumbled Harmony, “is what my organizing pillbox is supposed to do.”

“Ya, I see how well it’s working. If you ever find the headache medicine, send some my way.”

Harmony sighed. “It’s not my fault that so many of the pills are white. Oh, here we are.” Harmony slid two white pain pills my way before passing two more to Johanna.

Johanna tossed them back without a second glance and chased them down with coffee. A flash of uncertainly spread across the

mentor's face. "Harmony, what if these aren't pain pills?"

"You'll still probably thank me," replied the escort with a wink.

Wondering what all those pills in Harmony's box could be for, I tossed the headache medicine into my mouth and took a large sip of coffee.

Maevery sat next to me and appeared wide-eyed and ready for training, having already dressed into the proper attire. She seemed to be on the same plane as Johanna and smiled when the mentor shared a look with her, as if saying to my district partner, *See what I have to put up with*. Maevery smiled as she returned to her breakfast.

Within twenty minutes, I began to feel my headache lessen as I worked through some eggs and sausage. I glanced up to see Bermuda approaching the breakfast table, wrapped in a bathrobe.

"Morning, everyone." Bermuda sat next to me. "Pahl, how did you sleep?"

"Fine. You?"

"As well as could be expected." Bermuda waved to one of the Avoxes. "Coffee, please."

Blight set his empty orange juice glass on the table. "Maevery, Pahl, before you go to training, you'll need to decide how you want to be coached. Do you want to be coached together or separately? Do you want to be coached by one or both of us? This is all for you to decide."

"Um..." Thinking over my wording, I glanced at Johanna.

The female victor sat back and crossed her arms. "Oh great. I suspect this isn't going to be good."

I turned to my district partner to first make a confession.

"Maevery, you should know that I'm a pacifist."

Reaching for a strip of bacon, she said, "I already know."

"You do? How?"

"Johanna warned me." Maevery smiled faintly. "In more colorful terms, that is. She said that I should know even if you decide to keep

it a secret.”

Glancing disapprovingly at Johanna, I asked Maevery, “You’re okay with me being a pacifist?”

“Ya, why not. Saves me from killing you.” Maevery seemed distant when as she looked at me, as if she was already in the arena.

“Okay,” I said, turning back to the table. With my first confession out of the way, my eyes began shifting between the two victors. I cleared my throat and said, “I don’t want to be coached by either of you.”

Sighing, Johanna began rubbing her brow. “I knew it.”

Blight eyed his partner. “Stay calm, Johanna.”

Johanna began rubbing her temples. “So, Tweedledum, do you plan on coaching yourself?”

I turned to my stylist and smiled. “I want Bermuda to coach me.” When I looked back across the table, I was met with blank stares. “I know that my odds are terrible. And since I’m a pacifist, I have no interest in learning how to fight and kill.” I looked to my stylist and said, “I want to learn how to live; I want to experience art, and only Bermuda can teach me these things.”

Bermuda reached for my hand and squeezed it. “I’d be honored to be your coach.”

Harmony raised a finger. “Um, is this legal?”

Blight shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“If Pahl doesn’t care,” injected Johanna, “then I don’t.”

Ignoring Johanna, I addressed Blight. “I want all your resources to be used to get Maevery home. She is braver and stronger than me. She has much better odds.” I next turned to my district partner. “Maevery, is this okay with you?”

“Yep,” replied Maevery, rather swiftly.

I smiled. “Do you want some time to think it over?”

“Nope. You die, and I live. I’m good with that.” Accepting me for what I am, she relaxed somewhat and shared a smile with me.

Johanna returned to her breakfast. “Works for me.”

“Pahl, are you sure this is what you want?” asked Blight.

I nodded. “Sorry that I’m a pacifist. I cannot even give my life fighting to help defend Maevery. At most, I could be human shield.”

“You could help search for food and water,” said Harmony. “You can even help her find shelter.”

“Perhaps.” I said with a sigh.

Blight sat back in his chair. “Plus, four eyes are better than two when it comes to remaining hidden.”

Finishing her orange juice, Johanna wiped her mouth with her napkin. “You’re all assuming that these two will be able to find each other once the gong sounds. We have no idea what the area will be.”

“True,” said Blight. After a moment of contemplation, he nodded. “Okay. If this is what everyone wants, we’ll focus on Maevery.”

Harmony turned to me. “Pahl, you still have to go to training. Attendance is mandatory.”

“Okay.” I shrugged. “I’ll go and learn all the survival skills.”

Bermuda stood from the table, placing a hand on my shoulder. “This will give me time to prepare for our first coaching session. When you get back this afternoon, we’ll begin.”

I smiled. “Sounds like a plan.”

After changing into casual gym clothing, I meet Maevery and Harmony at the elevator just before ten. We rode the elevators down to find ourselves in a giant underground gymnasium set up with numerous training stations, ranging from various combat and weapons training to survival scenarios. Bidding us good luck, Harmony left us with the head trainer, a tall athletic woman named Atala.

After a brief orientation and an explanation of the rules, we were released to train as we please. Maevery headed for combat training as I sought out the rope tying station.

I had fun with the ropes, proving my worth with tree oriented

knots. My father and I had little in common, but we had our moments when it came to the forest. He had taught me forest survival skills when I was younger, so knots and shelter came naturally to me here in the training center.

Oddly, the survivalist food station bored me. This activity was new to me, but still, identifying and tasting bland roots and bitter berries depressed me. I could not imagine spending any amount of time in some crazy arena with only food that cows would find bland. Since the Gamemakers could inject any sort of poison into similar looking vegetation, I did not see the point of lingering here and moved on.

Throughout the first day, I visited all the survival stations, keeping to myself. The little socializing I partook only occurred between the instructors and me—once I mastered a station. Being no good to anyone in regard to an alliance, I would say hello to my fellow tributes, but not much more. I wanted to keep to myself and not become anyone's albatross.

At lunch, I noticed Maevery sitting with the boy from District 9, so I found an empty table off to the side, not wanting to disrupt her strategy. Relishing my first ever hamburger, I watched how the Career Tributes chatted and laughed, none of them showing an ounce of fear. *They must feel some fear, I wondered. If they do, they hide it well.*

With the healthier diets and exercise of the Careers Tributes, even the females towered over the rest of us. Their strong athletic bodies and noticeable muscle tone gave them a superhuman appearance, which made the stand out even more than the male Careers.

My father always cheered for the female Careers once both District 7 tributes had died—of course. To him, these girls were like majestic tigers, dangerous and just as beautiful. Seeing them in person, I now had to admit that I too admired them.

With the training finished for the day, we were sent back to our

assigned floors in the Training Center. When I exit the elevator, Bermuda stood waiting for me. Folded over her arm, she held a set of bright and colorful clothes.

She smiled and said, “Are you ready for your first coaching session?”

“Yes,” I replied, returning her smile.

“Here.” She passed me the clothes. “Shower and then put these on. I have a table reserved for us downstairs in the Training Center restaurant.”

“Shouldn’t we eat here? I don’t want to cause problems.”

Bermuda wrapped an arm across my shoulders, guiding me to my room. “Don’t worry, I have many connections. If someone asks, just say you’re a new member of my prep team.”

Doubting that anyone would believe this, I shrugged and went to prepare.

In the restaurant, a server placed a plate of spaghetti topped with a breaded chicken breast before me. The same server set a more exotic plate containing shrimp before Bermuda.

When the server approached my empty wine glass, I raised my hand to stop the pouring. “I don’t drink.”

Bermuda pulled my hand down and looked to the server. “We would like to have the Sauvignon Blanc.”

With a cordial smile, the server filled both our glasses and departed.

I reached for my silverware. “You can have my wine.”

“The wine is for you; it’s part of your first art lesson.”

I stared at the glass. “Wine is art?”

“Yes. Besides the art of winemaking, the wine will help you appreciate the art found on your dinner plate.”

Glancing at my food, my head tilted in wonder. “Chicken is art?”

Bermuda looked into my eyes. “Cooking is art. It’s what the chef does to the food that is magic.”

My brow furled as I glanced back at the table. “What does getting drunk have to do with it?”

“You’re not going to get drunk. Sadly, most people don’t know how to drink alcohol. They just foolishly use it to dull their pains. When used correctly, wine is a flavor enhancer. Now, before you begin with your plate, take a small sip of wine to clean your palate, make sure to coat your mouth before you swallow.”

Doubtingly, I followed my stylist’s instructions and took a sip of wine, finding it palatable.

“I ordered you a simple dish to make this lesson easy. Now, sample your chicken and search out all the flavors.”

I sampled the chicken, finding it moist and flavorful with pleasant spicing. The marinara sauce was the most pleasing.

“Now sample your buttered vegetables.”

I did, finding them...buttery.

Smiling, Bermuda gestured to my plate. “Do it again, but this time, take a small sip of wine to clean your palate between bites.

I took a sip of wine and then sampled the chicken. I then took a small sip of wine and sampled my vegetables. When I let the vegetables coat my mouth, new flavors appeared: garlic, salt, pepper. My eyes widened.

“See.” Bermuda's smile grew. “Whenever you switch between foods on your plate, take a tiny sip of wine. It will help bring forth the flavors, letting you to better appreciate the chef’s art.”

I sipped the wine and then sampled the spaghetti. This was not simple noodles and marinara sauce: it was heaven. I could not even put into words what the slice of double chocolate lasagna cake did to me at the end of the meal.

For my next art lesson, Bermuda took me to the lounge located adjacent to the restaurant in the Training Center lobby. Here, she explained, mentors and sponsors drowned their sorrows during the games. On a distant stage, a man sang as he played a piano.

We sat in a quieter corner booth where Bermuda dazzled me with her knowledge of music. My stylist did not play any instruments, but she loved music and seemed quite knowledgeable. Between music sets, she would pull out a small electronic box to share with me a variety of music through tiny headphones.

A tall, elegant woman of a mature age approached our booth. When Bermuda noticed her, she cheered loudly as she jumped to her feet, kissing the woman on both cheeks. “Julia, how are you?”

“Well. And you?”

“Never better.” Bermuda gestured towards me. “This is my new friend Pahl.”

I looked into the woman’s commanding stare and felt myself shrink in her presence. “I’m a new member on Bermuda’s prep team.”

Julia smirked. “Sure you are.”

Bermuda returned to the booth and motioned Julia to join us. Scooting up next to me, Bermuda gripped my arm. “Pahl, this is Julia, she manages the Training Center. She’s the Seneschal that I told you about.”

“Did I just get you into trouble?” I asked.

Bermuda patted my hand. “We’re okay. Don’t fret.”

As the women chatted, I enjoyed the live music and began glancing about the room, taking in the lavish interior design. The more I glanced about, the more I pondered about the building itself, wondering what they did here during the remaining eleven months of the year.

I leaned forward and waited for a pause in the women’s conversation. “Julia, may I ask a question?”

Julia lifted her chin as her aloof eyes focused on me. “Sure, darling.”

“The Hunger Games only last a few weeks a year, usually less than a month. Does this building sit empty the rest of the year?”

The Seneschal smiled. “No. During the rest of the year, we rent

out the conference rooms on the main floor. The lounge and restaurant stay open all year.”

I asked, “What about the upper floors?”

The Seneschal’s smile became oddly mischievous. “We sometimes have VIP guests that use the rooms for short stays, but I’m not allowed to talk about that.”

Judging the look Julia gave me, I dropped the subject and said, “Thank you.”

Bermuda leaned against Julia. “Have you seen any Hunger-Maniacs tonight?”

One of Julia’s brows rose slowly. “I saw Tina a few minutes ago.”

Bermuda gave a slight nod.

The Seneschal rose to her feet. “It was a pleasure meeting you, Pahl. Good luck in the arena.”

“Thank you.” As soon as the Seneschal was out of earshot, I leaned towards Bermuda. “What’s a Hunger-Maniac?”

“Oh, that is what we call the...hmm, more obsessive fans of the Hunger Games. They are quite the enthusiastic crowd.”

“And who is Tina?”

“One of the many Hunger-Maniacs.” Bermuda could see the doubt in my eyes. “Don’t worry. You have nothing to fear except for their fan fiction. They’re nice people with good hearts. Here comes Tina now.”

From across the room, a young woman in her early twenties made a beeline for our booth, her eyes focused on me. When she approached, she glanced briefly at my stylist. “Hi, Bermuda.”

“Hello, Tina. I’d like to introduce you to—

“Pahl,” interrupted Tina in a cheery, excited tone. Her small pouty lips stretched into a grand smile as she stared at me. “You’re Pahl Calis. You’re...a volunteer!” The young woman brushed back her blonde shoulder length hair before gripping my arm. “Would you like

to dance with me?"

I leaned towards Bermuda and whispered, "I'm scared."

My stylist laughed. "Don't be silly."

Just then, the music stopped and the lights dimmed. From the surrounding speakers, music highlighted by brass horns began to play.

Tina gasped with excitement. "That's right; it's Thursday: salsa night. Now you have to dance with me."

"I don't know how to dance, and I'm not exactly sure what salsa is."

Tina pulled on my arm. "It's easy and fun."

"Umm." I gnawed my lip, looking to Bermuda for help.

My stylist leaned close to my ear. "Tina is smart and witty. You can trust her. Speaking as your art coach, I say, go learn how to dance. Go have some fun."

Sighing, I resigned to go dance with the Hunger-Maniac. As Tina pulled me away, I turned to Bermuda and said loudly, "If anything happens, I'm blaming you."

Bermuda raised her drink glass and winked at me.

Chapter 6

Snip.

I opened my eyes in search of the odd sound and found the morning sunlight leaking through my bedroom window. I closed my eyes to return to sleep when movement in my bed tugged at my sore dance muscles, causing me to groan.

“Sorry.”

Lifting my head, I found Tina sitting at the end of my bed, wearing one of the tee shirts taken from the dresser.

Tina began wrapping a rubber band around a clump of hair held in her hand.

I promptly sat up, touching the back of my head. “Is that my hair?”

Tina looked at me with a sheepish grin. “I wanted something to remember you by, just in case...you know.”

Finding the vacant spot near the back of my head, I slid closer to Tina to inspect her souvenir. “Did you have to take so much?”

In lieu of answering my question, she gently gripped my chin and kissed me. “I really hope you win,” she said. “I enjoyed meeting you.”

“And I you. Thank you for the salsa lesson. I had fun.” We stared at each other for another moment before I realized the inevitable.

“You have to go now; don’t you?”

She nodded. “I’ve got to go to work. My boss at the flower shop has been on me lately. I need to get back on her good graces.” Tina stood from the bed and began to dress.

The door to my bedroom swung open as Johanna entered unannounced. “Rise and shine sun...shine.” The victor shifted her eyes between Tina and me, her smile growing. “I didn’t know we had a guest.

I quickly made sure that I was covered by my sheets. “This is

Tina. Last night, she taught me salsa dancing.”

Johanna leaned against the doorframe. “Did she now?”

Pausing her search for her shoes, Tina straightened and smiled warmly at Johanna. “Hi. It’s an honor to meet such an esteemed victor.”

When Tina held out her hand, an amused Johanna reluctantly shook it, but said as she glanced at me, “The pleasure is all mine.”

Passing by my door, Blight noticed the commotion and stopped to investigate. “Is there something…” Blight looked at my guest and froze.

Pulling her own blouse over my tee shirt, Tina brushed her hair behind her ear as she smiled at the male mentor. “Hello, Blight.”

The mentor swallowed. “Hi, Tina.”

Johanna and I both turned and watched Blight’s face redden.

“Oh,” exclaimed Tina, having found her shoes. “I’m going to be late.” She approached and gave me a parting kiss on my cheek. “Good luck, Pahl. I hope to see you again.”

I grinned warmly as I watched her quickly exit past a nervous Blight and an unmoving Johanna partially blocking the door.

“Soooo,” began Johanna, turning towards her fellow mentor.

Blight turned at me and said, “Breakfast is ready.” And before I could thank him, he stepped away from the room.

A smiling Johanna clasped her hands behind her back as she strolled out the door. “This is going to be a good day. See you at breakfast.”

After a quick shower, I joined the others in the dining room.

Johanna looked up from her plate of pancakes. “Ahh, here comes our conquering fornicator.”

Frowning, Harmony looked up from her reading tablet. “Johanna, language. Not at the breakfast table, please.”

Filling my plate from the elaborate breakfast buffet, I took a seat at the table. “Morning everyone.”

Soon after, Bermuda stumbled out of her bedroom, wrapped in a bathrobe. Before taking her seat, she touched the back of my head. “That’s not too bad.”

I sneered warmly at my friend. “You knew she was going cut my hair; didn’t you?”

Bermuda shrugged. “I wasn’t going to deny the girl her trophy.” My stylist ran her fingers thusly through my hair. “I want to style your hair differently anyway. We’ll cut it today after your training.”

Johanna quizzically looked up from her coffee at her fellow mentor. “Blight, you changed your hairstyle unexpectedly last year. Did Tina also collect a trophy from you?”

Blight ignored her question and turned to a focused Maevery eating heartily next to me. “Today’s training should be just like yesterday’s. Johanna and I will be available tonight if you want to go over strategies.”

“That everybody,” said Johanna, smirking at Blight, “is what we call avoiding the question. Does your wife know?”

Harmony set down her coffee cup. “Bermuda, what did you and Pahl do last night?”

“Dinner and dancing,” Replied my stylist. “We also discussed art. If Pahl becomes victor, I hope he uses his winnings to bring some art back to District Seven.”

I grinned at her unrealistic optimism.

Spreading honey over a biscuit, Johann glanced at me with an approving smile. “So Pahl, did you have fun.”

“Ya.” I shrugged.

Johanna sat back in her chair as she continued to stare at me. “I shouldn’t ask.”

“Then don’t,” injected Blight.

“I can’t help it.” Taking a tentative breath, Johanna asked, “But?”

Feeling my cheeks warm, I sighed. “It would have been better had there been love.”

“Ahh, that’s sweet.” Harmony smiled at me. “You’re a romantic.”

Johanna cupped a hand over her lips. “I think I just threw up a little in my mouth.” She proceeded to shake her head and smiled

Reaching for the coffee, I gave Johanna a. “I did not go out looking to score last night,” I said. “It just sort of happened. I’m really not that kind of guy.”

Harmony sternly waved her finger between Bermuda and me. “Just be careful, you two. I don’t want you making the Capitol angry.”

“We’re fine,” said Bermuda. “We never left the Training Center, and Tina was just a chance happenstance.”

Feeling grateful, I looked at my stylist, reached for her hand, and gave it a light squeeze.

A firm hand shook me awake as I lay upon a soft training mat.

“What?” My eyes slow to focus, I found Atala, the head trainer, frowning at me.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“I’ve learned that the key to camouflage is to remain still.”

“Well, your snoring sort of defeats the purpose.”

Sitting up with a yawn, I let the leaves and branches tumble off me to the floor. “I snore?”

“You shouldn’t waste your training time,” said Atala.

I slowly rose to my feet. “Believe me, I’m not.”

Atala continued to give me a disapproving look.

“I will not kill my fellow tributes to save my own life. Plus, my father has already taught me many survival skills. The new ones I’ve been exposed to here, I’ve quickly mastered. I’m not wasting my time.”

Atala handed me a slip of paper.

“What’s this?”

“A pass. Your presence is requested upstairs. Return to training once complete.”

When I exited the elevator to my floor minutes later, I found Bermuda sitting in a nearby chair. She spotted me and rose, displaying a pair of scissors. “I thought that this would be a good time to fix your hair.”

“I can’t skip out on training?”

Bermuda shrugged. “It’s up to you. Do you want to go back down and sharpen your survival skills?”

I smiled. “No. Definitely not.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

In the remake center, Bermuda helped me lean back so that my neck rested comfortably in the shampoo sink. She turned on the water to let it warm as she searched for a shampoo. “Pahl, do you have a shampoo preference?”

“No, ma’am. I’ve never used anything other than the basic stuff they sell us in District Seven.”

“Okay. I think that I’ll go with a fresh air scent to keep it simple.”

As Bermuda wetted my hair with warm water, memories of my mother rushed back to me. She had been the only other person who had ever washed my hair, beside myself. I had to admit that having my hair washed by another human felt personal. Gazing at Bermuda’s never fading smile, I thought this moment to be very intimate, not in a sexual manner, but something shared between good friends.

Realizing that I would never experience this feeling again, a tear rolled over my cheek and fell into the sink. As another tear further dampened my cheek, I asked, “Can you take your time? There is no need to rush.”

With wet and solemn eyes, Bermuda simply nodded and progressed to run her fingers more slowly through my hair, our

conversations returning to happier times and other musing.

After a long drawn out wash, Bermuda applied something called conditioner to my hair before finishing with a very thorough rinsing. She next wrapped my head in a towel and sat me upright.

Before beginning her cut, my stylist turned on some music and then ordered us some fancy coffees. As we waited for our drinks to arrive, she explained to me the differences between a latte and an espresso. By the end, I was pleasantly surprised to be given a delicious mocha, my stylist understanding my preference for chocolate.

And only after we had consumed our coffees and shared more stories, Bermuda began cutting my hair.

We again discussed music as it continued to play from numerous hidden speakers throughout the room. Bermuda wanted me to experience as much as I could, so she would often pause my hair cut and play her favorite songs from various genres. And once we ran out of genres, which took a while, our conversations drifted to the weather, and I shared how it best to survive a blizzard if trapped outside. We discussed things as best friends would.

Without it having to be said, I was very grateful that it took most of the day to cut my hair—not to mention thankful for the third washing to remove the clippings.

With my hair cut completed, the late summer sunset was only few hours away when Bermuda unexpectedly took me to the underground parking of the Training Center. We exited the elevator and walked towards a waiting limousine. Standing by the vehicle, the Seneschal talked quietly to an older Peacekeeper.

“Julia, George,” called out Bermuda, “thank you so much for doing this.” My stylist kissed George on the cheek.

The Seneschal looked at me and smiled. “My pleasure.”

Completely bewildered, I asked “What are we doing?”

Bermuda wrapped an arm across my shoulders. “We’re going to

tour the city to see some of the other great architecture that you can't view from the Training Center. After that, we'll go to my favorite museum."

"Is this allowed?" I looked to the Seneschal.

"Not normally, but I have connections." The tall, graceful woman eyed me. "This is why George will be escorting you. Do you promise me to not try to escape?"

I swallowed. "I would never do anything that would hurt Bermuda."

"Good; I believe you," replied the Seneschal. The woman then gestured to the Peacekeeper. "My friend George knows this city as well as anyone. He even served as the head of security at the President's mansion at one point in his career. You should have no problems while in his care."

Bermuda reached for the Peacekeeper's arm and pulled us both into a line. "Only if he promises to have dinner with us. We haven't talked since the winter conferences."

Tugging on his white Peacekeeper uniform, George subtly shook his head. "I'm not dressed for dinner, and I'm required to stay in uniform during the Hunger Games."

"Posh," exclaimed Bermuda.

"How about pizza?" I suggested. "I've never had real pizza. We can even eat outside, somewhere nice. Can you do that, sir?"

With a nod, George smiled. "Works for me."

Bermuda shrugged. "A pizza picnic. How perfect. We'll pick up some beer and soda on the way."

The Peacekeeper opened the back passenger door to the limousine. "Bermuda, I like how both of you think."

My stylist brushed her fingers through my new hair. "Me too."

As the limousine pulled out of the Training Center, Bermuda presented me a wrapped gift from her purse.

I accepted the flat rectangle package, turning it slowly in my

hands. “What’s this?”

“Just a random gift. Open it.”

I unwrapped the gift to discover an old book—an actual book—of poems. Gnawing my lip, I quickly flipped through the book. “Um, I don’t think that I have time read this.”

“That is why I bought a poetry book. It’s a collection from various poets. It’s art that you can peruse during the duller moments in the Training Center. You can graze through it at your leisure.” Bermuda took the book from me and set it aside. “But for now, we have some architecture and pizza to enjoy.”

On day three of training, I watched from across the gymnasium as the Career Tributes tossed spears in a casual contest, laughing jovially as they challenged each other with farther and smaller targets. Their comradery impressed me since they would ultimately turn on one another once the rest of us were dead.

I folded up the sheet of paper I had been reading and focused on the girl from District 2 named Minerva. She could throw as well as the boys, and her stature almost matched theirs. She was fit, attractive, and lethal. With flowing long red hair and freckles, she was nothing less than perfect.

Shoving my folded paper into my pocket, I began crossing the gymnasium. As I approached the spear throwing area, the Careers began to turn and stare. They eyed me suspiciously when I stopped a few feet from Minerva.

Nervously, I grinned up at the girl and said, “Hello.”

“What can we do for you?” asked the boy from District 1, his tone unwelcoming.

“I have a question for Minerva.” I could not stop myself from smiling as the girl’s eyes narrowed on me.

Minerva crossed her arms. "What's your question?"

"May I kiss you?"

As her face became flush, her freckles seemed to disappear.

Behind her, laughter and whistles erupted from her fellow Careers.

Minerva did not laugh and began to scowl at me, placing her hands on her hips as her lips pressed tight together.

My own face reddening, I shoved my hands into my front pockets and shrugged. "Just one kiss is all I'm asking for."

Minerva glared back at her fellow Careers, hushing them, but it only resulted in louder cheering and whistles.

"Just one," I repeated. "Short and simple. I promise to keep my tongue to myself."

"Sure," she replied, "If you want get punched in the face."

Apparently catching her off guard, I stepped forward and kissed her. At first, her lips were firm, but they soon softened, seemingly welcoming me. As catcalls and hoots erupt around the gymnasium, I held onto the kiss as my hands came to rest on her hips. Eventually, our kiss ran its course, and our lips slowly part.

When I took a step back, I said, "Thank you."

"You're welcome," she replied. With incredible speed, Minerva threw her promised punch, landing her fist flatly against my nose.

The sound crouching cartilage rang in my ears as I cupped my face. My vision blurry, I dropped to my knees as blood poured copiously from my nose. I groaned loudly from the excruciating pain and began rocking on my knees.

"Break it up!" ordered Atala. "You lot, go practice at another station."

The shooting pain kept me bent over as I began using my shirt in a futile attempt to stymie the bleeding.

Atala knelt down beside me and placed a hand on my shoulder.

"Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

"Not exactly." Perhaps it was the accumulating stress, but a burst

of laughter erupted from me, only making the pain worse.

“Here, let me see.”

Feeling nauseous from the pain, I lifted my head for the head trainer, my eyes squinting under the bright gymnasium lights.

Atala inspected the damage and grimaced. “It’s broken. I’ll have a Peacekeeper take you downstairs to have the doctor set it. The doctor should have you back in time for your private session with the Gamemakers.”

“Okay. Thank you,” I said nasally.

“I’ve seen some crazy things here, but that takes the cake.” Atala signaled for Peacekeeper assistance. “Was it worth it?”

Despite the throbbing spread to my brain, I looked up at the trainer and smiled.

Atala shook her head, smiling faintly. “Only the young.”

As the Peacekeeper helped me to my feet, I stagger as the room spun around me. After a few seconds, I find my bearings and turn for the elevators.

As I am led away, Atala gripped my arm, sharing one last bit of advice, “From now on, stay away from the Careers, here and in the arena. Especially, the pretty ones.”

Chapter 7

I returned from the doctor in plenty of time for the skills demonstration. In the tribute dining room, I waited for my turn to go before the Gamemakers, resting forward on my elbows as I nursed a persistent headache.

“How bad is the pain?” asked Maevery.

Lightly touching my bandaged nose, I shrugged. “I need more painkillers. The doctor had this hand held device that shown a blue light that numbed my nose as he set it, but the effect only lasted minutes. He did give me some kind of injection, but it doesn’t seem to be doing much. He said that he’s not allowed to give me anything stronger that could last into the arena.”

“Are you well enough to go before the Gamemakers?”

“I have no choice.” I began rubbing my temples.

Minutes ago, we watched the girl from District 6 enter the gymnasium for her skills demonstration. My turn was next, and my head throbbed.

Maevery glanced up at the clock before turning to me. “Pahl, what are you going to do for your skills demonstration?”

“Don’t know. Bleed on their floor.”

“Be serious,” said Maevery, pressing her lips tight.

“I am.” I sat up to look at her. “I’m truly sorry that you didn’t end up with a better district partner.”

“It’s okay,” she said. “I have a plan. I just wish that you were trying harder.”

“I am, in my own way.” My eyes drifted to the floor.

Maevery returned to her clock watching.

Called to my skills demonstration, I entered the gymnasium and slowly walked to the spot before the Gamemaker’s observation balcony. Lost to what I should do to impress the people whose sole

purpose was to kill me, I stared with curiosity at the very people who had turned death into a spectacle. Gradually, I found myself irritated by their bored expressions. *Was this one of their duller moments in the Training Center*, I thought, giving myself an idea.

Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out the sheet of paper I had been studying all day and unfolded it. I cleared my throat and began to read aloud—with an unfortunately nasal voice:

How to Die
by Siegfried Sassoon

*Dark clouds are smouldering into red
While down the craters morning burns.
The dying soldier shifts his head
To watch the glory that returns;
He lifts his fingers toward the skies
Where holy brightness breaks in flame;
Radiance reflected in his eyes,
And on his lips a whispered name.*

*You'd think, to hear some people talk,
That lads go West with sobs and curses,
And sullen faces white as chalk,
Hankering for wreaths and tombs and hearses.
But they've been taught the way to do it
Like Christian soldiers; not with haste
And shuddering groans; but passing through it
With due regard for decent taste.*

Before I could begin reading the next poem, one of the Gamemakers stood. “What are you doing?”
“Reading poems.”

“Is that all you're going to do?”

I shrugged. “Yes. You might enjoy the next one.”

“No, we won't.”

“How do you know?” I asked. “These are all written by different authors.”

Vocal objections and moans broke out from the Gamemakers.

“You're dismissed,” said the Gamemaker with a hint of disappointed.

“I have two more poems. Don't I have fifteen minutes?”

The Gamemaker returned to his chair and said with a dismissing wave of his hand, “You can go.”

Unexpectedly, anger surged through me, and I began reading the next poem that I had carefully copied from the book given to me by Bermuda.

As grumblings again broke out in the balcony, the annoyed Gamemaker stood and called out to the guards. “Peacekeepers, remove him.”

With a guard on each arm, my heels squeaked across the floor as I was pulled away. And when I attempted to carry on with my reading, one of the Peacekeepers snatched the paper from my hands. The guards proceeded to drag me into the elevator and dump me onto the elevator floor, along with my sheet of hand-copied poems, the drop sending pain surging through my broken nose. As I writhed in pain, one of the Peacekeepers pressed the call button for level seven and exited behind his cohort, leaving me to return to my floor alone.

When the doors opened on my floor, Harmony, Blight, and Johanna rushed to the elevator, confused at what they heard. On the elevator floor, the trio found me lying on my back, laughing in mad hysterics.

“An eight?” exclaimed Johanna.

Staring at the number on the television, my broken nose began to throb as my pulsed quickened. I glanced about the sitting room, finding everyone's mouth agape as they looked at the screen in disbelief.

When Maevery's well-deserved training score eight next appeared on the screen, Bermuda gripped my hand and gave it a light squeeze.

We sat in silence until the last score appeared, for we needed to know the scores of the remaining tributes, but mostly, the shock of my score had left everyone dumbfounded. My pacifism had remained a secret, but still, they awarded me an eight despite my blatant disinterest in training. Quite evident, my score shocked Blight and Johanna.

With the broadcast of our training scores complete, Blight turned off the television as he fell back against the couch, the impact evident in his expression.

Johanna chuckled. "Wow, Pahl, you really must have pissed them off."

"What do you mean?" I asked, feeling a panic beginning to well inside me. "Why would they give me an eight?"

"To make you a prime target of the Careers," replied Blight.

"I'm not a threat to anyone. Maevery's eight is appropriate; not mine." My heart began to race from the implications. "Plus, the Gamemakers, they saw that I never touched a weapon in training."

Harmony reached into one of her dress pockets to produce her pillbox. "Maybe the Gamemakers really hate poetry. I know I do. You should have read something more cheery, or perhaps a dirty limerick. That sort seems to enjoy juvenile humor."

I gave the escort a perturbed look, declaring, "The poem I picked seemed relevant."

Johanna sipped from her tumbler glass. "I'd kill ya if you started reading poetry to me."

When Harmony opened her pillbox, I watched her fingers hover

above the tiny compartments of assorted pills. Rubbing my thighs, I asked, “Can I have one of those?”

Sitting up, Bermuda placed a hand on my shoulder. “Are you okay, Pahl?”

“I just need to relax. I didn’t expect this, to become a target.”

Bermuda exchanged a look with the escort. “Perhaps something for stress?”

Harmony nodded in agreement and found the appropriate pill. When she passed it to me, she said, “It will also help you sleep.” She then lowered her voice to a whisper. “Remember, you didn’t get it from me. Anything not over the counter is considered cheating by the Gamemakers.”

I nodded my understanding and promptly took the pill.

Bermuda rose to her feet and offered me her hand. “Come, you need a good night’s rest. I’ll read you to sleep. You can come to terms with your score tomorrow, with a rested brain.”

I accepted Bermuda’s hand and was led to my room where I promptly prepared for bed.

As I slipped under the covers, my stylist took a seat in a bedside chair, taking the reading tablet from my nightstand. She quickly found a story—her utmost favorite she declared—and began reading aloud a most soothing tale about a magical place called Wonderland.

Bermuda and I spent my final day relaxing and enjoying art, but that evening, I inescapably found myself center stage, before the cameras—and all of Panem—about to be interviewed on national television.

Without the need for pills, I found myself oddly calm before the large general audience. Perhaps suffering from denial, my moment before the cameras felt surreal and unthreatening. I began to stare at Caesar Flickerman's colorful outfit and dyed hair, feeling as if I had

stepped into a cartoon.

Caesar studied my face. “Pahl, it looks as if you had a little accident.”

Smiling, I point to my heavily bruised face and bandaged nose. “Is it noticeable?”

Looking to the crowd, Caesar guffawed. “My boy, you look brutal. Did you visit my plastic surgeon?”

“No, sir.” Gnawing my lip, I glanced over at Minerva. “The girl from District Two broke my nose.”

With *oohs* and *ahhs* rising from the audience, Caesar turned in his chair to see Minerva’s cheeks reddening below her furled brow. Chuckling, he turned back to me. “She looks as if she wants to break it again. What did you do?”

“Nothing,” I replied, grinning sheepishly. “I simply asked if I could kiss her.”

Caesar leaned forward, resting on elbow upon his knee. “And?”
“Well,” I continued. “She said yes...if I wanted to be punched in the face.”

Straightening in his chair, Caesar appeared naturally intrigued by my story. “And you kissed her anyway?”

Feeling Minerva’s fierce stare, I nodded as my smile grew.

“Ha! You are a brave lad.”

“Caesar, do you want to know a secret?”

The man scooted to the edge of seat, his words rolling off his tongue. “Do I? I live for secrets.”

“Her kiss was worth it.”

Oohs and *ahhs* erupted more loudly as Caesar smiled at the furious Minerva. The host then turned to the crowd and said, “Now I know why they call the guards Peacekeepers.”

As expected, the crowd hooted and hollered their approval.

Looking off to my side, I addressed the guards standing off camera and asked, “Can I have a Peacekeeper escort back to my room when

this is done?”

Caesar patted me on the shoulder. “My boy, you have a scorned woman on your hands. Peacekeepers may not be enough.”

Grinning with a new found confidence, I leaned towards my interviewer and boldly said, “Caesar, I have a fun prediction for the games.”

The man’s brow rose with delight. “Do tell.”

“I have the utmost respect for Minerva, and I must confess that I’m just having some harmless fun—well, mostly harmless.” Chuckling nervously, I adjusted myself in my chair. “I predict that at some point, I will share a slow dance with her in the arena.”

In synchronous, Caesar and I glanced over our shoulders to see Minerva, her arms crossed as she slowly shook her head.

“That is a bold prediction,” said Caesar, “but I’m going to wager against it.”

“It’s your money,” I replied with a smug grin, knowing that the bookies were already calculating the odds in the betting shops around the Capitol, if not also the illegal ones in the districts.

Leaning forward once again on his elbows, the Caesar eyed me with one arched brow. “Pahl, an eight. That is quite an impressive training score. Can you tell me how you attained it?”

Gnawing my lip, I glanced at Blight to see him subtly shake his head. “Um, my mentors have advised me not to say.”

“How about a hint?”

My lips pursed until they broke into a smile. “Sorry, but I think it was a first.”

The audience, along with Caesar, moaned their disappointment.

Chuckling, I said, “I didn’t do anything crazy like shoot an arrow at the Gamemakers.”

“Well then,” continued the host, “can you tell me your greatest strength?”

“I don’t have any strengths,” I said with a shrug.

“Nonsense. You scored an eight. There must be something special about you.”

“The only thing different about me is that I’m a p—.” Looking off stage, I could see Johanna, her words shouting in my head, *Don’t tell them your pacifist, moron.* “I’m a...pretty good identifier of trees.”

Feign disappoint spread across Caesar’s face. “Fine, keep your secret.” When he shifted in his chair, Caesar’s demeanor seemed to soften. “Pahl, we watched you volunteer at the reaping. You said that it was for your father and all the loggers of District Seven.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Was the guy you volunteered for a good friend?”

“Dutch? No. He’s my bully. He made my life hell for as long as I can remember.”

Taken aback, Caesar eyed me. “Then why did you volunteer?”

Searching for the words, my eyes drifted about the stage. Taking a deep breath, I said, “Because...he’s the kind of guy that gets the girl. I’m not. He’s the kind of guy who gets the good job, the perfect kids, everything. At most, I would end up with a wife who hates me, destined for a job that I would loath. I volunteered so that Dutch could live the life that I wanted, so that I could avoid the one destined for me.” Swallowing hard, I met Caesar’s gaze. “I have no regrets.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Before I left District Seven, my teacher, Mrs. Pavelko, advised me to soak up as much art and culture as I could during prep week, so I have. The food, the music, all the art has been amazing.”

A smile began to stretch across Caesar’s face. “I like your optimism, Pahl. What has been your favorite thing since arriving to the Capitol?”

I looked to the area set aside for stylists. “My new friend Bermuda. She has shared so much with me. I feel blessed for meeting her. Over the past week, she has taught me the true meaning

of art.”

Caesar’s chin rose when he asked, “And what is the true meaning of art?”

“Art is proof of the divine. Don’t get me wrong, there is some terrible art out there, but when it’s create for passion and enjoyment, it’s an artist’s search for...life. Whether it be words on a page, music, or a painting—even fine cuisine—when it comes down to it, art is love.”

The buzzer sounded, forcing the host to reveal his trademark parting smile. Reaching out to shake my hand, Caesar said, “I’d say we’ve all been blessed by you and your stylist, but sadly, we are out of time. Pahl, of District Seven, I wish you good luck.”

While the remaining tributes were interviewed, I occasionally caught the eye of Minerva. Her look would sometimes hint that I would not live long enough to make it into the arena, and at other times, I thought that she might be satisfied with punching me once more in the face. All said, by the time Caesar had finished interviewing the last tribute from District Twelve, Minerva’s expression had become more thoughtful, calculating.

The anthem played, and everyone rose to their feet. But as soon as the music faded and the lights over the television stage dimmed, the Peacekeepers began herding us towards the Training Center elevators.

I nervously proceeded towards the nearest elevator, searching for the girl from District 2. Minerva had disappeared into the crowd, so I began looking over my shoulders in the hope of avoiding a scene—and further injury to my face. To my consternation, the closest elevator car filled, leaving me before closing doors. When I turn to see if the neighboring car was available, I spotted Minerva waiting, her eyes sharply focused on me.

I waited for her to approach, to take her anger out on my face, but she just stood there staring through the crowd. I swallowed hard,

debating if I should apologize and to say how much I admired her. I wanted to tell her that I meant no ill will with my flirting on national television, which, in part, was for my father. Mostly, I wanted to confess the code by which I lived and to say good luck.

As I contemplated what I'd actually say, Minerva ignored the opening elevator door before her. She continued to stare at me as her fellow Careers shuffled around her. Then slowly, she began to smile. As her district partner called for her to enter the elevator, she simply stood there. Then, almost like a gift, Minerva surprised me with a friendly nod of her head. Her expression told me that she understood me completely—as if she could read my mind.

Our future encounter in the arena destined—and possibly understood, I returned her smile and bowed in respect.

Chapter 8

After the television interview, I showered and joined the others for our last dinner together. I picked at my food uninterestedly, having lost my appetite since breakfast. Harmony tried to start a conversation, but the mood had become too somber for anyone to relax—to think of anything else besides the games.

After deserts, we proceeded to the sitting room and watched the replay of our interviews.

I immediately began to wonder how many of us would be dead this time the next day. Feeling sick, I turned sideways on the couch so that I did not have to look at their faces and wishing that I could not hear their voices.

Seeing me struggle with the rebroadcast, Bermuda stood and offered me her hand. She led me to my bedroom and told me to prepare for bed. As I crawl beneath the sheets, Bermuda in the bedside chair. “Is there anything in particular that you want me to read or play?”

Unable to speak, I shook my head.

My friend’s face suddenly crunched up as she began to sob, her hands cupping her face as her emotions ran unchecked.

I leapt from the bed into her arms, and we slid to the floor as we sobbed in each other’s arms. With just a few hours remaining, we wept as a week’s worth of tensions poured out from us both.

I had accepted my fate the moment I had left the Justice Building back in my district—or thought I had, but the realization that I could be dead in less than 24 hours shook me with a violent shudder to my inner core.

As I wept, all the wonderful experiences of the past week started coming to me. I had fulfilled my promise to my teacher, spending my last days *living*—all due to my friend Bermuda. Wrapped in her

arms, I began to feel as if my stylist had descended from heaven to escort me from this world, to tell me that it was all right, that something grander awaited me on the other side. Though my friend never once spoke of an afterlife, it felt to me that her actions had prepared me for tomorrow.

As our grief exhausted itself, our tight embrace began to relax.

Bermuda reached for a nearby box of tissues, passing me a handful. “I apologize for breaking down just now.”

Much needed, I blew my nose. “There is no need to apologize.” Accepting more tissues, I dabbed my eyes. “Why do you do this? I mean, you don’t seem detached like the prep teams or escorts. The stress must be unbearable.”

“It is hard.” Bermuda also began dabbing her eyes. “But I want to do good in this world. I live for art and compassion, and I figure that no one needs compassion more than the victims of the Hunger Games.”

My breathing paused as I glanced towards the door. “You shouldn’t talk like that. I don’t want you to get in trouble.”

“For what? Calling you a victim?”

“Yes,” I replied in a hush tone. “I’ve heard that people have gone missing for less.”

A faint smile formed on Bermuda’s lips. “Those are just rumors spread by the government to keep people in line.”

“How do you know?” I asked

“Because the government has always been upfront with its cruelty. What could be worse than the Hunger Games? Look at the Peacekeepers: dressed in bright white patrolling out in the open so that everyone can see them. Panem hides nothing. There are no boogiemens lurking in the shadows. True monsters walk in the open.” Bermuda rose to her feet, pulling me off the floor with her. “Come; lie down and try to rest.”

When I crawled under my covers, Bermuda laid herself on top of

my blankets to caress me.

“Thank you,” I said, struggling to sound unafraid. “My teacher was right: I did live more in this one week than had I lived another 40 years back home. You helped me fulfill my promise.”

“I just wish that I could have shared more.”

On my bedside table, I reached for the media tablet that I had mastered over the past week. With a couple taps, classical music began playing from the various hidden speakers throughout my room.

“Is classical your favorite?” asked Bermuda.

“Yes. It helps me sleep. I’m not sure why, but silence now frightens me.”

“I’ve noticed that you often pick string compositions.”

I smiled. “String instruments remind me of windy days back home. I use to sit in the woods on the windiest of days just to listen to the wind as it surged through the tree canopy.”

Bermuda hugged me. “And now when I hear strings, I will always think of you.”

Reaching behind me, I waited for her hand to slip into mine.

With her free hand, Bermuda began running her fingers through my hair, asking, “What are you going to do when the games begin, when the gong sounds?”

“Don’t know. I thought about stepping off the platform early, but I don’t want to hurt anyone next to me with the explosion.”

“I thought you were going to out survive everyone?”

“Ya,” I replied, sniffing. “I still might, but the odds of that are so slim. Why starve myself in the elements for days or weeks when the inevitable is going to happen; besides, I’ve already out survived everyone.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s hard to describe.” I gnawed my lip, searching for the words. “During training, I noticed that everyone, except me, spent time in weapons training. They’ve accepted that they might have to kill—

even if only for self-defense. I will not accept this. If I do kill, part of me will die with that person; my humanity will die. Refusing to change in the hope of saving my own life is how I out survived everyone.” Remembering Johanna’s reaction to my confession of being a pacifist, I smiled. “Plus, I survived a week of Johanna. If that isn’t survival, I don’t know what is.”

Bermuda snickered into the back of my neck. “That is saying something.”

Our conversation falling silent, we lay in the dimmed room and listened to music as the minutes slipped away on the bedside clock.

When I awoke, I let out a frightful gasp as I sat up in my bed. I took deep breaths as I read 4 a.m. on the clock. Finding my bed empty, I assumed that Bermuda had returned to her room so not to disturb my sleep.

With only hours left to live in this world, sleeping seemed like a waste of my remaining time, but sleep was what I wanted most. I flopped down onto my back and waited for my heart to calm, the throbbing in my ears to subside. I focused on the classical music; but, sleep did not come. My anxiety grew with the realization that I would never sleep again, never to experience another lucid dream. My heart began to race with thoughts of all the other things that I would never do again.

I soon thought of Tina and how funny and kind she was, how she made me feel. Deciding that I might as well feel a part of that one more time, I reached down and shifted my underwear to the side. I remembered Tina; I thought of Willow Johnson; my mind drifted to girls who were only figments of my imagination. And yet, nothing happened. I felt...no physical emotions. Nothing stirred inside me. Giving up, I straightened my underwear with the acceptance that this part of me had already been taken away.

Curling on my side, I slid an arm under my pillow and began staring out the window. *I’m already dying*, I thought. The fact that

nothing happened from my lustful thoughts did not upset me. I felt relieved to be freed from this one cruelty of nature that tricks us into breeding. Unburdened by bodily hunger, my mind focused on meaningful thoughts, and soon after, I drifted off into a most blissful sleep.

Bermuda's hand shook me awake. "Pahl, it's time."

Though terror still had me in its grip, I calmly sat up, feeling rested. I lifted my hands to see that their faint tremor had increased to visible shakes.

"Put these on." Bermuda passed me a white cotton tee shirt and white cotton trousers. "You will formally dress under the arena. We must leave immediately. Maevery will follow in a separate hovercraft."

I nodded my understanding and quickly dressed. After a quick trip to the bathroom, I went to meet Bermuda at the elevator and was surprised to find Johanna Mason standing beside my stylist.

"I wanted to catch you before you go," said Johanna.

"Why?" I asked.

With a concerned look, Johanna took a deep breath. "I just wanted to say that I finally get you. Observing you this past week, I'd have to say that you are the strangest...and most hopeless person that I have ever met."

"Okay," I said with a shrug.

"But you are also," said Johanna, stepping forward to grip my shirt into her fist. "You are also the bravest person I have ever met."

"For a pacifist?"

"No. You don't have to be a warrior to be brave. Sometimes, all you have to do is to go your own way, to take the path less travelled and not be afraid of the consequences. This you have done."

“I doubt my father will see it that way.”

Releasing my shirt, Johanna gripped my chin to study my healing nose. “Let me guess; you got your nose all busted up just for your father. Didn’t you?” Smiling, the insightful victor released my chin.

With bunched lips, I shrug. “I thought he’d like it if I mixed it up a little before the games, even if it was with a girl.”

“I’m sure he did.” Johanna stepped closer towards me, her breath brushing my face. “When I get back to District Seven, I will make sure that your father understands your bravery. This, I promise. If he fails to comprehend, I’ll insist until he does.”

Knowing that Johanna would do just that, I smiled.

Then unexpectedly, Johanna kissed me. Not a peck on the cheek or a light kiss, she kissed me fully on the lips as her hands cupped my face.

Eyes wide, I held my breath as her lips press hard against mine. Without hesitation, I let myself become lost in the softness and warmth of her lips. When my eyes fell close, our tongues lightly touched as our mouths moved in accord. But all too soon, our kiss came to an end, and we slowly parted. Thought the moment brief, I had forgotten myself and my predicament, and for this, I felt truly grateful as a tear rolled down my cheek.

Johanna’s hands came to rest on my shoulders and then slid down my chest as she took a step back. With welling eyes and a forced smile, she said, “Do what you have to do, Pahl.”

I nodded. “Use everything on Maevery. Bring her home.”

“Okay.” Taking another step back, Johanna’s strained smile began to relax. “Tina was right.”

“About what?”

“You are a great kisser.”

Johanna’s comment left me confused, for I could not recall Johanna and Tina saying anything more than hello to each when they met. When Johanna turned to walk away, my puzzlement ended when I

spotted the small patch of hair missing from the back of her head. Watching Johanna disappear into a corridor, returning to her room, I smiled joyously, thankful to have met the spirited woman.

“Pahl,” said Bermuda, “our hovercraft is waiting.”

With my smile fading, I entered the elevator with Bermuda and took hold of her hand as we rode up to the roof to a waiting hovercraft.

When I stepped onto a descended ladder to climb up into the hovering vehicle, my body unexpectedly froze in place from some strange electric current that inflicted no pain. Unable to turn my head, I felt myself lifted into the hovercraft. Somewhat alarming, the electric restraint did not release me once I had been transported safely inside. Instead, an attendant with a very large needle approached me and painfully injected a tracker into my arm. When freed from the ladder, I immediately began rubbing the immense soreness from my arm as I nervously waited for Bermuda to come aboard.

As the hovercraft drifted over Capitol, someone escorted us to a compartment where breakfast had been set up. Here, I found that I was unable to eat and only sipped water at Bermuda’s assistance.

Gripping nervously a bottle of water, I watched the city pass below and realized of how much I would miss the Capitol. This completely surprised me since those slumbering below would soon be waking in anticipation of their beloved games. If it were not for my soon to be televised death, I would have openly loved these quirky people and their art, their awe-inspiring architecture, and their fine cuisine. I even saw myself living amongst them had fortune held different plans for me.

We travelled for several minutes, passing over various woodlands and prairie when the windows of the hovercraft suddenly blacked out. Bermuda took a seat beside me, telling me that we would soon land at the arena. She took hold of my hand, neither of us in the mood

for talking.

When the hovercraft landed, we descended the ladder into underground tunnels. Here, well below ground, Peacekeepers escorted Bermuda and I to a private room where I would dress, where I would enter the arena.

After a quick shower to remove the clammy sweat from my skin, I toweled off and wrapped myself. When I exited the small shower room, Bermuda stood before my assigned clothes, studying them: long underwear, a long sleeve shirt, large white boots, and white jacket with thick white trousers, and a pair of dense white gloves.

Bermuda passed me the long underwear and said, “The arena will apparently be cold.”

“How cold?”

Shrugging, Bermuda rubbed the white trouser fabric between her fingers. “Only the Gamemakers know.”

My hands trembled to the point that they had almost become useless but with Bermuda’s assistance, I dressed. I almost began to whimper, but somehow, I kept my emotions checked—not for me—for my friend. Finally, I donned my jacket with Bermuda attending to the zipper. I immediately felt warm and nauseous and proceeded to unzip the jacket.

With everything complete, Bermuda offered me a bottle of water. “You need to stay hydrated.”

“No, thank you.”

“You should at least take sips.”

My voice breaking, I confessed that I couldn’t before futilely wiping my fresh tears.

Bermuda took one of my trembling hands and guided me to a bench where we would wait for the announcement. She passed me a tissue. “Do you want to talk?”

I shrugged. “What’s left to talk about?”

“I don’t know,” said Bermuda. “What are you thinking about?”

“The unthinkable.”

My friend squeezed my hand. “I hope you try the survival route.”

“There is no knowing what I’ll do. I’m scared to death now.

When the gong sounds, I’ll be terrified out of my wits. I may just simply sit down on the ground and wait for the inevitable. Whatever I end up doing, I certain conscious thought won’t have anything to do with it.”

Bermuda lifted my hand to her face and kissed it. “I wish that I could do more to help you.”

“I do have one request.”

“Name it.” Bermuda tried to smile.

“There is a letter for my teacher back in the Training Center.

Please make sure she gets it. I left the envelope unsealed so that you can add anything you deem important. I tried to tell her all the fun and exciting thing we did in the Capitol.”

“I’ll make sure she gets it. Do you have any other messages that need delivering?”

My entire body trembled as I shook my head. “I am glad Johanna saw me off this morning. Whatever I wanted to say to my father, I’m sure she’ll say it. That’s good enough for him. My father and I were never that close, like I was with my mother.”

“Okay.” Bermuda patted my hand.

“I wonder if my mother is waiting for me.”

“You should think of surviving. Your mother would want you to try.” When I looked into Bermuda’s eyes, a tear rolled down her cheek.

“I can’t,” I said. “I’ve thought a lot about it over the past week. I just want this fear and dread to end. I just want to sleep.”

Bermuda did not respond, but after a long pause, she gasped softly before reaching into her pocket. “I almost forgot.” She pulled out one of the autumn fabric leaves from my opening ceremony costume. “Since you didn’t bring a token from home, I thought you like

something simple that you can easily carry.”

With a trembling hand, I took the leaf and rubbed the fabric between my fingers. “Thank you. It’s perfect.”

Unable to grip my own zipper, Bermuda reached over and assisted me, tucking the leaf into a chest pocket. “I hope it brings you luck.”

“Um... the book of poems you gave me, I left it at the Training Center. Please give it to the next guy. I hope he appreciates your care as much as I.”

Bermuda wiped a tear from her face. “Okay.”

“I need to pee.” Jumping to my feet, I raced to the bathroom to urinate. Since arriving, this counted as my third trip the toilet, which did nothing to elevate the feeling ensuing evacuation. As I stood helpless before the toilet, my hands tremble violently as I failed to urinate. Fumbling with the zipper, I closed the thick trousers and exited the bathroom. Before I could sit down, the announcement arrived, ordering the tributes to enter the launch tubes that would lift us into the arena.

Together, Bermuda and I walked to my circular platform where I gingerly stepped into the center of the circle. Facing each other, we gently pressed our heads together as we wiped tears from each other’s face.

My breathing began to labor. “I guess this is where we say goodbye.”

Shaking her head, Bermuda said, “I can’t. I’m sorry. I never say goodbye.”

“Okay.” I kiss her on the forehead. “I’ll see you on the other side then.”

Nodding, Bermuda repeated my words, her voice weakened to a whisper, “On the other side.”

A glass cylinder lowered around me, and when the glass touched the floor, the plate began to lift me up towards the arena.

Pressing our hands against the glass, we mouthed in turn the

words, *I love you.*

I knelt to one knee to counter the rising plate, to gaze on my friend for as long as possible, but inevitably, I passed through the ceiling and found myself in darkness. I staggered to my feet as I jammed my sweaty hands into my assigned gloves. My body surged with fear-induced adrenaline as I floated upward; however, most unexpectedly, my mind snapped into focus. I would survive this first day—and so would she. *She would survive*, I thought. *She had to.*

A faint light from above began to fill the tube. I reminded myself to study the landscape during the sixty seconds before the gong, not to hesitate when I ran from the opening bloodbath, not to let anything distract me. Determined to shun the violence, I rose into the arena with a racing heart—my soul at peace.

Chapter 9

When my head rose out of the launch tube, a searing white light blinded me, forcing me to shield my eyes. The wind swirled around my gloved hands, kissing my cheeks with the familiar sharp sting of a wind chill. *Could it be?* I thought. Though blinded, the scent and reflective sounds of the environment seemed familiar. *It's winter!*

Peering through my gloved fingers, I waited for my eyes to adjust to the glaring winter light. I assumed the sky to be overcast since the light lacked that faint twinkle that reflected off snow crystals, but never the less, the arena was bright from winter amplification.

Just below my platform, I was surprised to find ice, which explained the echoing sounds that were only now registering in my head. Squinting, I raised my hand a bit more to discover the girl from District 8 to my left. Looking to my right, I found my district partner adjusting to the light.

A pure winter arena, I thought again, *this changes everything.* With sixty seconds to adjust to the environment, I wisely remembered that I stood atop a bomb designed to kill me should I jump off too early. Shuddering with terror, I glanced frantically about and noticed a whale-sized metal glint in the distance: the glittering gold colored Cornucopia.

Between the Cornucopia and me were various weapons laying scattered over the ice, including other items for food and shelter, all of which accumulated into a denser collection of items nearer the opening of Cornucopia. However, none of these items interested me since winter was all I needed to stay alive.

Back in District 7, you either went outside and embraced our long winters or stayed inside like a grouch and waited for spring, bemoaning fall, for no one truly enjoyed our muggy summers. Ice flowed in my veins; I lived for this frozen wonderland that gave us

the opportunity to explore the forest free of biting insects. Winter also gave everyone a vast playground of snow forts and sledding, not to mention hockey—played in boots since no one could afford skates.

I turned away from the Cornucopia and surveyed the landscape. Circling the frozen lake, mountains filled the skyline as patches of forest dotted the land beneath a hazy winter atmosphere. Though difficult to see precisely, the silhouettes of the various trees revealed some pines, which meant shelter for woodland creatures—and possibly humans.

All too soon, the gong sounded. With care, I hopped down onto the ice and began moving towards the shoreline in slow, short steps, walking flat-footed and square on my heels—just as I would back home. Within a short distance, I was able to take quicker steps, using my growing momentum, making sure to keep my strides short and my feet flat.

Behind me, the various sounds of my fellow tributes echoed loudly across the frozen lake. A blood-curdling scream of a falling tribute shook me, forcing me to increase my pace and lengthen my stride. And as I neared the shoreline, the shrill cries of other dying tributes grew as the bloodbath reached fever pitch.

Driven by terror, I aimed for a path at the shoreline that appeared to be gradual upward, but when my feet reached the snow, I found myself tumbling forward, tripping on the crust of a snowdrift. Landing with soft thump into the drift, I sprung to my feet and began to high step through the snow in search of more solid footings.

I climbed with increasing speed as the snow thinned near the top of the embankment. As I began to move upright, another blood-curdling scream caused the muscles in my body to tighten. I spun around towards the lake. “Maeverry?”

I had abandoned Maeverry despite seeing her on the platform next to me, and this added betrayal to my cowardice. *What could I have done?* I thought to myself. *Nothing. I will not kill. I won't. I can't.*

I then realized that everyone back home was witnessing my disgraceful act. *It's not the first time district partners have turned on each other at the opening gong*, I thought to myself. *Plus, I did not exactly turn on her. She understands.* With a heavy sigh, all I could do was hope that everyone back home understood too and would forgive me.

A victorious war cry reverberated across the ice, sharpening my focus.

“Maevery,” I said aloud, “I’ll find you later, and do whatever I can to help...if anything...” Spoken with a heavy heart, those words were actually more for me—a promise—than for the strangers watching comfortably in their homes. I turned my back to the violence and headed for the mountains.

Instinctively, I headed for the shelter of trees until the increasing snow depth slowed me to a crawl. I changed my direction slightly to the left and headed for a long clearing between two patchworks of forests where I found the snow more manageable. Here, I began a steady jog over tufts of straw colored prairie grass that stuck out of the snow, exposed grass that dotted the clearing. Reaching the other side, I progressed up a gradual slope and towards a denser patchwork of trees.

My body had already become soaked in sweat by the time I reached higher ground. Unzipping my jacket, I pulled off my gloves to scoop a handful of snow into my mouth, which had become as dry as cotton. Looking back at the lake, the sounds had stopped and appeared still from the higher view. With our white winter clothing and hazy atmosphere, spotting fellow tributes from a distance would be difficult in this arena, if not impossible.

Scooping another mouthful of snow, I continued to move away from the lake, upward into the mountains. This time, when I entered the next clump of trees, I found the going much easier with snow depth being shallower. Inevitably, my physical exhaustion had

already begun to weigh on me, slowing my progress to a brisk walk. And with my slowing pace, the stiff winter breeze soon forced me to zip up my jacket and don my gloves—though sweat would continue to dampen my jacket and clothes.

After an hour or so, the cannon booms that announced deaths began sound for those who perished at the bloodbath at the Cornucopia—the only time cannon shouts were delayed in the Games. From this moment forward, any future death would be immediately followed by a cannon shot. I stopped counting at seven, the final number escaping me. Swallowing my anguish, I focused on the arena and my survival.

My winter experience in District 7 had taught me that most of my body heat would escape from my head, so I tightened my hood as I continued surveying my surroundings. I began to take notice of the many small tracks in the snow from squirrels and rabbits, taking notice of the occasional birdcall. The bird songs were unrecognizable, but their call seemed to come from many directions. Overall, there was plenty of wildlife in this arena.

Food being a low priority, I scooped more snow into my mouth to quell my never-ending thirst and began to mentally note the food sources for later. Much of the forest consisted of pine and fir trees, with clumps of deciduous trees, many of which had frozen buds on the ends of their branches, buds that I could eat. With the variety of forestation, I also had access to inner tree bark to eat if need be, which I hoped to avoid.

Rested, I continued to climb for a couple more hours when deeper snow began to impede me, but oddly, more food sources appeared. I spotted a wild raspberry bush—picked nearly clean by animals. Most astonishing, I came across a tree that produced nuts. If I had to guess, I thought the nuts to be walnut, or something related, perhaps created by the Gamemakers. Upon closer inspection, many of the remaining nuts had holes, indicating pests, but a few appeared edible.

I prepared to take a bite from one opened nut when I recalled

previous Hunger Games when the Gamemakers poisoned the fruits of the arena. Deciding to play it safe, I shoved the unbitten nut into my coat pocket and foraged for more not spoiled by pests. Having filled my pocket with these potential protein treasures, I again began ascending the gradual mountain in search of shelter.

Reaching a formidable wall of mountainside, I lingered amongst a clump of blue spruce pines as I deliberated my next path. High, to the left, the silhouette of a cave entrance could just be seen through the haze. If correct, this would make a perfect hiding spot where I could spend days—if not weeks—inside. However, the rock face appeared quite jagged and treacherous, perhaps impossible to reach. As I contemplated if the cave could be accessed from another direction, I heard a bristling sound behind me amongst the spruce trees.

Spinning around, I stumbled over my own feet and fell onto my backside. A branch on one of the spruce trees moved, and my legs began flailing in the snow as I attempted to flee. Rolling onto my hands and knees, I was about to sprint from the shelter of pine trees when appeared a white snowshoe rabbit chewing on vegetation.

Collapsing onto my elbows, I began to chuckle. *That should have given everyone watching a good laugh*, I thought. Then I thought of Maevery—and the others—none of whom I wished ill will towards, and my laughter quickly abated.

Remembering that I was in the midst of a sick game, I looked upon the rabbit with keener eyes. *Are you a mutt, a mutated animal created by the Gamemakers to have a venomous bite or a taste for human flesh?* If this rabbit had done anything thing out of the ordinary, I would have ran away screaming like a girl.

However, the white rabbit simply stared at me, motionless, and then, as if the animal had decided that I was no threat, returned to chewing on its food. This creature, free from genetic manipulation only wanted to carry on with its bland winter diet of needles,

branches, and stems.

With a nonthreatening distance between us, I calmly sat up to catch my breath, watching the hare carry on eating. The creature reminded me of myself by how it did not want to hurt anyone. And for the first time since entering the arena, I felt the return of my humanity.

Upon further study, this rabbit appeared large and well fed. Its large size, though not unheard of, meant that it ate well with limited predators. The rabbit gave me confidence that if it could feed well in this arena that I could do the same. *But what else are you eating?* I pondered.

When I rolled onto my knees to take a better look, the rabbit causally moved away under some pine branches. I slowly began to crawl forward on my hands and knees until I reached the tree where I found the rabbit sitting on the opposite side. The creature then took a couple more hops to put distance between us when I began to slide under the pine branches. I inched forward to the other side, stopping under a large blue spruce branch and discovered the rabbit a stone's throw away in a clearing, already waiting for me to make my next move.

I had no intentions of making another move. I felt quite content lying in the snow under the pine tree and said in a soft tone, "You have nothing to fear from me, Mr. White Rabbit." I huffed amusedly with the thought, *It hasn't been 24 hours, and I'm already talking to rabbits.*

Beginning to think again about shelter, the pine trees I had encountered sufficed for an emergency, and the winter uniform provided to us tributes would retain our warmth, making fire building less of a priority. The key question was: How cold would it get at night? To be safe, I needed better shelter.

From my current vantage point, I could again make out the silhouette of the cave entrance and thought if I had to make a fire, the flame would be hidden from inside the mouth of the cave; in addition,

the smoke would be hard to see high on the mountaintop through the winter haze. I just had to find a way up.

I let myself smile, thinking how odd that I had landed in the perfect arena. As a water arena was to a District 4 tribute, this arena favored District 7. This winter paradise of snow and patchwork forests was ideal for me—lest I forget the most important part: the environment was free from biting flies and mosquitoes. The mountains I had not experienced before, but I appreciated the view and did not find the gradual slopes leading to these steep parts too arduous to climb.

I happily returned my gaze to the hare. “Hey, Mr. White Rabbit, can you take me to Alice? It must be getting close to tea time?” Accepting that I had lost my mind, I let my mind wander, *I guess I’ll be the Mad Hatter at the party*. Chuckling, I called out again to my little friend, “At least, take me to a strawberry patch or someplace nice that has food.”

Needing to find a way up to the cave, I began crawling out from under the pine tree when the rabbit began to hop away across the clearing. Thinking of following the animal, I began to rise to my knees when the ground under the rabbit quietly exploded into a large shower of snow, the hare crying out in pain.

I dropped to my stomach and watched the snow thrown into the air slowly clear, revealing an insect looking creature of the size of a black bear. From my vantage point, the white rabbit became limp in the grip of sharp teeth as blood ran freely down the monster’s pointy jaw, dripping to the ground. Pressing my body into the snow, I could see that the creature had a protective exoskeleton, blue in tint, supported by four thin, serrated legs. *The Jabberwocky!* I thought, attaching the peculiar name instinctively to this perverse creature.

Tilting its head back, the genetically created mutation gulped down the rabbit in such a violent fashion that the snow beneath the monster turned red from the shower of blood. The mutt then let out a

short, loud shrill that hurt my ears and shook my body to its core.

As every muscle in my body trembled uncontrollably, the warm sensation of urine began to seep into my uniform down into the snow. Slowly, I pressed my torso deeper into the snow when from up above, a loud answering shrill of another creature rang out. When my eyes drifted up, I could make out the silhouette of the second creature at the mouth of the cave. A third short shrill drew my eyes to another spot on the mountain where another mutt, barely seen, scaled the vertical mountainside with incredible speed and agility.

Taking short breaths, I prayed that they had not noticed me. Slowly, I angled my face downward to hide the steam of my breath, hoping that my white uniform provide enough camouflage.

After a long terrifying minute, the blood-splattered creature began walking with ease over the snow to a clean, bloodless area within the same clearing. Vibrating its entire body, the monster next burrowed deep into the snow as if it were sinking into quicksand—any trace of its presence soon to be covered by fresh drifting snow.

Time passed burdensomely as I lay paralyzed in fear. Only when my urine soaked pants turned cold and began to itch did I also notice the cold sweat on my forehead. Hoping that I had gone unnoticed, I inched backward on my stomach, over my urine patch, and back under the pine tree. When out of sight of the clearing, I turned and crawled back to the sanctuary of pines where I leapt to my feet and began to run down the path from which I had come.

Crashing through some trees further down the mountain, my winter boots tripped on something hard, sending me tumbling down a snowy embankment through the fresh snow until I came to a rest on a broad ledge. Lying still on my back, I scanned the hillside above me for any movement of the insect looking muttations—my fellow tributes not even a conscious thought.

Feeling assured that the creatures had not followed, it dawned on me that the Gamemakers had made those monsters to hover about the

food sources. They needed to make finding food even more difficult with water being plentiful in the form of snow.

Taking further stock of the arena, I looked down through the foggy atmosphere on the frozen lake and assumed this the center of a vast, round arena. The stinging bite of the blustery winds on my sweaty brow reminded me to tighten my hood and contemplate the weather. *If the wind is Gamemaker generated, I wondered, do the surrounding force fields let wind and snow pass through?*

Studying the snowdrift patterns lower down the mountain, the shapes indicated that the wind travelled from right to left, circulating around the arena. And the frozen lake, along the nearest shoreline, had a small indent of land protruding into the ice. *If the Gamemakers controlled the entire environment, I began to speculate, the lake currents must also circulate in a gentle pattern.* This meant that the indent of land might be creating eddies near the shore under the surface, a formula for thin ice.

With darkness enveloping the arena, I had yet to find shelter. Having ruled out the caves, I climbed to my feet and considered again the base of a pine where I could dig a shallow foxhole if there were snow depth. With temperature and wind such an uncertainty, I decided against this. Gazing below, I thought hard about the safest and most practical place to hide until it struck me. *In plain sight!*

Chapter 10

Having decided on the best shelter, I descended the mountain until I reached a clearing several hundred yards from the frozen lake where the wind had formed hard, jagged patterns of snow amongst exposed dormant short grass. To aid in digging, I sought out a fallen branch amongst the trees and then entered the clearing. I glanced back to study my footsteps, ever watching for my fellow tributes—and muttations, and was pleased to discover minimal traces of my steps left behind on the hard pack snow.

Scanning forward, I picked a spot where the trees first disrupted the drifting snow, disruptions being a snow drift's catalyst. Before me, was a waist high drift that stretched across most of the tree line. With the wind to my back, I walked into the large snowdrift until its depth reached my thighs and then dropped to my knees. Using the stick as a loosening tool, I began burrowing into the drift—just as I would during my youth when my friend Birch and I built our snow forts.

Continuing to loosen with the stick, I pushed the snow behind me with my hands and feet, repeating the procedure until I had carved out a pocket inside the snowdrift big enough for one person. With the loose snow pushed into the entrance, I hope it and the ever continuing drifting snow would quickly hide my location and cover any footprints that I may have left behind.

Secured in my snow fort, I unzipped my jacket to allow the sweat to evaporate from my inner clothing, the sheltered air pocket being plenty warm. And from past experience, I did not worry about running out of oxygen since fresh air would continually seep through the snow.

From the lake, ice song created by the temperature fluctuations in the air and water filled the still air as the forces of nature gently

stretched and pulled on the surface ice, which caused harmless cracks to form. The cracks and twangs of the ice began to remind me of home when we would build bonfires on the ice where we would celebrate the darkest day of winter—the fire having no effect on the ice. I always appreciated how the ice song made for a nice accompaniment to the crackle of the fire.

After a few mouthfuls of snow to replace the water lost from winter exertion, I pulled my hood over my eyes and began to mourn the unknown fallen tributes that had entered the arena with me on this first day. Despite this grief, exhaustion and deprived sleep rendered me unconscious before the tears could begin to well in my eyes.

I woke sometime later from my deep slumber in the grip of a throbbing headache. Pulling off my gloves, I scooped a handful of snow from the wall of my snow cave and pressed it to my forehead. Above me, the faint light seeping through the snow indicated that the sun had risen.

Sitting up, I placed snow on the back of my neck and began massaging my sore muscles. My bladder next made its intentions known. With a frustrated moan, I began to contemplate where to urinate. Feeling certain that my previous day's tracks had been covered by drifting snow, I did not want to reveal my location by leaving my snow cave. I also did not want to spoil the inside of my new home. *Should I dig a hole? Would it smell?* None of this was a consideration when I was a kid. Going outside meant that I would have to find exposed dry grass to urinate on so not to leave any visible signs. I moaned again, wishing that I could shut off my brain and ignore my bladder.

Deciding to wait, I scooped snow into my dry mouth and closed my eyes, determined to wait it out until my bladder could not take it anymore.

A few minutes later, I exited my snow fort through a new tunnel that led out the other side, which in turn, allowed me to crawl safely

into the forest. Promptly finding a fir tree with exposed dormant grass at its base, I relieved myself.

My crisis averted, I snugged up my jacket and donned my gloves, for the temperatures had plummeted to deathly levels overnight. I began walking gingerly along the forest line curious of the view. Looking over the clearing at the lake, I found the arena deathly quiet except for the pine needle whispers of the surrounding trees, the brisk winter winds a steady constant. The cold air soothed my sinuses, so I took deep inhales as I continued to gaze out, taking stock of my situation.

Leaning against a fir tree, I realized that I had missed the display of those who had perished in the arena the previous day. To alert the tributes in the arena, there would have been loud music blasted as the Gamemakers projected images of the dead tributes high in the night sky. Furthermore, had anyone frozen to death during the night, the boom of the cannon should have woken me. Having not properly counted the bloodbath salvos and slept through the rest, I had missed a lot of vital intelligence.

Fearing being spotted, I decided to return to my snow cave. Brushing away my boot tracks with a small pine branch, I hoped that the drifting snow would do the rest to conceal me.

At first, I began lying on my back and pondered how long I could hide in my shelter and whether I could actually outlast everyone. I quickly progressed to counting my foraged nuts in the ambient light—still hesitant to take a bite in fear of poison. After counting the nuts a second time, I progressed to sticking them into the wall of my snow fort, forming shapes and patterns, pulling them down to create new decorations.

I quickly became frustrated from the incessant boredom, and my worries manifested themselves into unnerving horrors. *The Gamemakers won't let me remain here undisturbed until the end of the Games*, I thought, imagining the genetically created monsters

descending the mountain with their skinny, serrated legs punching through the roof of my snow fort in search of me.

Should I wait, or should I explore? Sitting up, I began rubbing my thighs nervously, wishing that Maevery would find me. I then recalled from school her preference for summer and that she often complained about our long winters while the rest of us lined up to borrow the limited number of ice skates owned by the school. *She won't find me*, I thought, succumbing to my anxiety.

It was true that I wanted Maevery to win. I told our mentors to put all their resources behind her. In any other arena, I would be useless—probably dead. Here in a winter arena, I felt more comfortable, where Maevery would not. Collecting the nuts into my pocket, my spirits suddenly began to rise, for I now had a purpose: I could actually be of help to Maevery.

Exiting my shelter, I slipped into the cover of the trees where I secured my winter clothing and made sure that nothing shiny would reflect light. Being a pacifist and not capable of fighting my way out of trouble, camouflage would be imperative if the others would suddenly appear.

I first patrolled around the edge of forest in search of any signs of life—human or mutation—and found none. Next, from the edge of the forest, I surveyed the frozen lake and found it shrouded in hazy winter overcast as the day before. Even the large gold colored Cornucopia barely penetrated the gloom. With little other clues to where Maevery may have gone, I decided to start at the beginning.

With much trepidation, I stepped out of the forest and headed for the frozen lake. I stumbled down the embankment and onto the ice where I paused. The Cornucopia's silhouette created a dark marker in the center of the skyline, but none of the metal surface shown through. Deciding to venture closer to the starting platforms, I decided that I would continue until the outline sharpened or the gold color came through. If a pack of Career Tributes had made the large

structure their home, they probably would not be able to see me in my white uniform from that distance—I hoped.

As I walked on, the thought of anyone sheltering in the cold metal structure designed with a large open end perplexed me; my snow fort was tropical in comparison. However, if Careers had claimed the structure for their base camp, they could be confident that they would not be attacked, which meant they could start a fire. With the nearest starting platform yards ahead of me, the Cornucopia stood out more distinctly through the haze, bringing me to a stop. My eyes searched for movement and thankfully detected no signs of life—though the good news did nothing to relieve my stress.

Turning slowly, I began studying the shoreline, concluding that I had drifted to the right of my original starting point from the day before. To the far left, the tiny peninsula of land seen from the mountain could be distinguished as well the clump of trees that I now called home. Rubbing my boot over the ice, the white hue of the frozen lake indicated a very safe thickness. With the bitter temperatures of the first two days, I assumed the ice to be at least 10 inches thick, strong enough to drive a car over, maybe even a small timber truck.

Walking towards shore, I intentionally began drifting to the left with the hope of discovering some sign of Maevery. I scoured the distant shoreline for heavy tracks through the deeper accumulated snow of the embankment, tracks not yet covered up by drifting snow.

But before I reached the shore, evidence of someone passing this way appeared in the form of frozen blood on the ice. Touching a blood spot with the tip of my boot, the blood broke apart into a tiny red slush. *Maevery could already be dead.* Having missed the display of dead tributes the night before, I worried that my difficult task may already be in vain. Walking more quickly towards shore, I struggled to keep myself from becoming emotional.

At the edge of the lake, the blood trail led me up the embankment

straight towards the nearest pine forest. Losing and rediscovering the blood trail several times, my search came to an end in the middle of a large number of spruce trees.

Unsure of what to do, I plopped down into a small snowdrift and bowed my head in defeat. *Johanna must be furious with me*, I thought, imaging the profanities she must be spewing at the television. *Maybe Maevery will find me...if she's still alive*. Deciding to return to my snow cave to wait out the Games, I rose to my feet and glanced about one last time.

Unexpectedly, faint bird song called out in the distance. Since sound travels farther in a winter environment, I decided to test the acoustics by saying with a soft voice, "Marco."

Faintly, a few of the birds replied, "Marco."

Their response told me that the mimicking birds were mockingjays, which the Gamemakers often inserted into the arenas to confuse tributes.

"Marco," I said again just a little bit louder to see if more would reply, but as I listened, movement from a nearby tree caused me to frightfully spin around.

A pine branch wavered as someone—or something stirred beneath it. Then came the familiar voice that said in a hushed, stern tone, "Shut up, you idiot!"

"Maevery?" I ran forward towards the tree, knelling to peer under the heavy snow laden branches.

"Keep your voice down," she said, giving me a stern look.

"Sorry." I lifted the branch so that she could crawl out and noticed how she grimaced in pain when the light of day revealed a bloodstain on her lower snow pants. "You're injured?"

"Yes. I don't think it's life threatening, but it hurts."

Judging the small size of her pine tree shelter consisting of dried leaves and other insulating foliage, I assumed she was alone. "Did your friend die?"

“We got separated, but I know he survived. They didn’t show his image last night.” Accepting my hand, Maevery rose slowly to her feet. “Didn’t you see the display?”

“No. I passed out in my snow cave from exhaustion.” I gestured to her tree shelter. “I was contemplating the trunk of a pine too before deciding on a snowdrift. I wasn’t sure how trained you were in winter survival.”

“I may dislike snow, but I am a District Seven girl.”

“Sorry that I ruined your hiding spot.”

Her pain evident, Maevery shifted her weight in search of relief. “That’s okay. I didn’t plan on staying here much longer.”

“Do you want to come to my snow cave? I found a very nice drift at the edge of a tree line. It will only take me a couple minutes to widen it for two.”

Shivering, Maevery accepted my invitation. “Okay, but I can’t move very fast.”

“That’s okay,” I replied with a smile. “I’m naturally slow.”

As we progressed through the arena, I kept peering over my shoulders. “I think we’re alone on this side of the lake. We can take our time...if we have to. I haven’t even seen any human tracks until I stumbled upon you.”

Needing a rest, Maevery paused and began testing her leg by gingerly shifting more weight on to it. “Maybe they all went up into the mountains.”

“I wouldn’t recommend anyone going up there.” I glanced up at the foggy mountaintops.

With a restrained groan, Maevery shifted her weight back to her good side. “Why not?”

“I bee lined it up there to get away from the opening blood bath. There are Jabberwockies up there.”

“Jabberwockies?”

“They’re muttations that I’ve never seen before. I just call them

Jabberwockies. They are fast and deadly, tall as black bears with four skinny serrated legs. They look sort of like giant praying mantis with a tinted ice-blue exoskeleton. I watched one devour Mister Rabbit.”

“Mister Rabbit?” Maevery’s eyes began surveying my head. “Did you crack your skull on the ice?”

“No.” I threw an arm around Maevery’s waist and gently urged her to keep moving. “I saw three Jabberwockies during my short time up there. They can scale the vertical sides of the mountains like spiders. From what I can deduce, the safest place in the arena is near the shoreline.”

“Did you slip on the ice and possible not remember that you hit your head?”

“No,” I replied, with a frown. “The mutts are real. I saw them”
“Okay.”

When Maevery stopped to snug up her zippers, I glanced at the lake. “Did you notice the ice?”

Maevery turned towards the frozen lake. “What about the ice?”

“It’s perfect. Except for some natural cracks, the lake froze perfectly smooth. They must have frozen the arena before they added the snow. What I’d give for a pair of ice skates right now.”

“Are you kidding me?”

Smiling, I shrugged. “Why not? No one would be able to catch me.”

“No. But I’m sure they wouldn’t have a problem shooting you with an arrow.”

“Oh.”

“Oh,” repeated Maevery, eyeing me. “Have you forgotten that other tributes are hunting us? Let’s get out of here before we are seen.”

I gestured at the bloodstain on her snow pants. “When we reach the snow cave, I’ll look at your wound and try to camouflage the

blood stain.”

“Just get me out of this bone chilling wind,” she muttered behind chattering teeth.

As we progressed slowly towards my snow cave, I recalled a first aid technique used by our loggers. “I could break off a large pine branch to use as an emergency sled. It would be easy to pull.”

“No, thank you. It will leave a large needle trail.”

“Oh, you’re right. If we had some plastic tarp, I could make a decent sled. With a couple pine branches for stabilizers, it would be quite functional—and comfortable. You’d be able to rest your leg, and we could use it to collect wood if we ever needed to build a fire.”

“Fire would be easy to spot in this arena.” Maevery’s foot slipped on something beneath the snow, and the pain forced her to stop, her weight pressing down on my shoulder.

“When I collected firewood back home, my dad used to say that, quote, ‘For a big pussy, I had the stamina of Babe the Blue Ox.’ For my dad, that’s quite a compliment.”

“Pahl.”

“Yes.”

“Shut up.”

Happy that I was no longer alone, I adjusted myself under Maevery’s arm and continued aiding her in silence, smiling unabashedly for the remainder of our trek.

When we reached the trees near my snow cave, Maevery unzipped her jacket, wiping the traces of sweat from her brow. “Do you even own ice skates?” she asked, taking a seat at the base of a birch tree.

“No,” I replied, searching for my snow loosening stick. “You know that only merchant kids own their own skates.”

“Can you skate?” asked Maevery before scooping snow into her mouth.

“Yes. I learned on the ones at school.”

With my loosening stick found, I entered my snow cave and got to work, sufficiently widening the cave in a matter of minutes.

Without needing my assistance, Maevery crawled inside, rolling onto her back on one side of the cave. She pulled back her hood and bunched it under her neck for a pillow. “Pahl, what were you thinking with that Marco bit? You know sound carries in the winter. You could have gotten yourself killed.”

“I didn’t know you were so close. I was actually talking to the birds, hopping they would reply with the word Polo.”

Maevery glared at me.

“I was. There are mockingjays in the arena.”

My exhausted district partner draped an arm over her eyes and sighed. “This is great; I’m stuck in a snow cave with a psychotic.”

“You don’t have to fear me. Remember, I’m a pacifist.”

“Gee, that makes it better.”

With a nervous smile, I positioned myself next to Maevery’s leg and took a deep breath. “Are you ready for me to inspect your wound?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.” Maevery took a deep, calming breath. “If you can, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t talk about Jabber-thingies or other monsters while you look at my wound.”

“Bandersnatches.”

“What?” Maevery peered at me from under her arm.

“If there are other monsters, they would be the Bandersnatches.”

“What do they look like?” she asked.

“I don’t know, but if we seen one, we’ll know.”

Maevery groaned. “I change my mind; let me die.”

“You’re grumpy when you’re wounded.”

With lightning speed, her fist struck my thigh, making a loud thump despite the padding in my snow pants.

Unable to mask the pain, I said with a whimper, “And strong.” As I rubbed my new bruise, I could not help but compare Maevery to

Johanna, both sweet when need to be, but ultimately fierce. This made me think of all the others I admired back home, which were all strong like my late mother. With a smile, I began to think how much I'd enjoy being bossed around by one of them if I were their husband. Feeling the throbbing in my leg, I began to think, *Then again, maybe not.*

Chapter 11

With ambient light seeping through the roof of the cave, I stretched the skin around Maevery's wound lightly, to her subtle groans, and discovered that the wound had already closed, forming a short one-inch line. Most importantly, the skin was free of inflammation. Cleaning the dried blood and sweat away with snow, I thought her prospects good. "You have a clean stab wound. There is no tearing and no debris. The weapon may have penetrated deep into the muscle, but the lack of a major hematoma tells me that no major arteries were nicked. You should make a full recovery, but you will be sore for a while."

"I can't afford to have a limp," said Maevery from beneath her forearm.

"Perhaps a sponsor will give you some Capitol medicine that will speed up your recovery." Sensing her despair, I kept silent as I dressed her wound so not to provoke her further.

Once I had cleaned her wound with melted snow and dressed the leg with torn strips of clothing from the edge of my thermal shirt, I scooted back to my side of the snow cave with the concern that Maevery's wounds were much deeper. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No," she replied. But moments later, it became apparent that she did want to say something, if not for me, for herself. "I killed the guy from District Eight."

"Oh," I said in a soft tone. I wanted to console her, but I knew words would not help in this instance.

As we sat in a solemn silence, my resolve to get Maevery home began to grow further. I remembered the nuts in my pocket and pulled out a handful. "I found these higher up the mountain, before I saw the muttations. I think the mutts were supposed to be guarding

them.”

Maeverly rolled onto an elbow. “How do they taste?”

“Don’t know. I don’t recall seeing these in our training. I’m worried that they may be poisoned.”

“How are we to find out if they are poisoned or not?”

Staring at the nuts in my hand, I took one and popped it in my mouth.

“Pahl!”

“I’ll be your taste tester,” I mumbled, trying to ignore the bitter taste. “We should know soon enough if these are poisoned.”

“Don’t be stupid.”

“What?” Meeting her stare, I tried not to react to the bitterness coating my mouth. “I may not be a fighter, but I can help you get home in other ways.”

Maeverly rolled onto her back. “Could you please stop talking like that?”

“Like what?” I forced down the bitter nut.

“Stop talking like a martyr. I don’t like it.”

“Oh.” I set the nuts down upon the snow. “But this is what we all agreed upon, isn’t it?”

“Yes. I just don’t like hearing it.”

To wash out the bitter taste, I scooped a handful of snow into my mouth. Taking a moment to consider my past word choices, I realized that I should apologize. “I never meant to sound like a martyr. I’m sorry.” I scooped even more snow into my mouth, recalling the moment of my volunteering at the reaping. “In the future, you can tell your grandkids about how your district partner saved two lives. I want to be remembered as someone who helped people; that’s all.”

“I’ll make sure people know of your kindness towards others, but I won’t be telling my grandkids.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“I don’t plan on having kids; they’d just end up in the games.”

“Well, don’t rule it out. I once told my late grandfather that I never wanted to be a dad, that I had nothing to teach anyone. You know what; granddad laughed at me, telling me that we don’t teach our children, our children teach us. He promised that I’d understand one day.”

With a sigh, Maevery closed her eyes, letting the subject drop.

After a while, I held up one of the nuts. “I’m not dead yet. Do you want some? I will confess that they don’t taste very good.”

Her disapproving stare warned me again about my word choices, but she nodded and accepted a handful.

Observing how her hands shook, I asked, “Can’t warm up?”

“My body isn’t adjusting to the arena quick enough.”

“We could reverse our jackets?” Waiting for her response, I shrugged, knowing that a fire was not an option. “Your leg would benefit from a long nap.”

After a few seconds of contemplation, Maevery nodded, and we removed our jackets to don them backwards as taught to us in District 7. We next lay on our sides, pressing our backs together before overlapping our jackets to form an impromptu sleeping bag.

Twisting my hood to the side to form a pillow, I asked, “Am I radiating enough heat for you?”

“I think so. You actually feel hot to me.” Maevery twisted her hood to the side. “Do you ever feel cold?”

“Not really. Sometimes the wind stings my face. If you had a choice, would you pick snow or mosquitoes?”

“Mosquitoes.”

“Really?”

“Ya,” she replied in her thick, District 7 accent.

As Maevery settled into a comfortable position, I felt compelled to ask an unpleasant question, “Who all died yesterday?”

“The boy from Twelve, the girl from Eleven, both from Eight, and

the girl from Two. There were more in the middle of the night that we'll see in the sky tonight."

My eyes drifted to the floor of our snow cave. "I thought Minerva would make it through the first day."

Maevery bit into another nut. "Were you really going to ask her for a dance?"

"Yes."

"She probably would have killed you."

"Well...that was the plan." My breathing deepened. "I figured that I was already dead, so I wanted to go out in the arms of a pretty girl."

Maevery chewed in silence until she asked, "And now?"

"Now, I find myself in a winter arena, in an environment that I thrive in. So I'm going to help my district partner...my friend get home."

"No more thoughts of...dancing?"

"No more thoughts of dancing. I promise."

"Good." She bit into a nut. "I'm going to hold you to that promise."

Flushed with emotion, I said in almost a whisper. "Thank you."

Minutes later, with her nuts consumed, Maevery succumbed to her exhaustion and fell asleep.

And as my friend's body temperature began to rise, so did my mental fortitude. I closed my teary eyes and concentrated on building a sled, but unavoidably, my thoughts drifted to the fallen redheaded girl from District 2, the girl most worthy of her name.

A couple hours into her nap, Maevery's body began to twitch as she mumbled the occasional word. Her vivid dream then began to make her movements more violent as her legs began kicking me. Her mumbled words grew louder as her head started to twitch.

Worried that we might butt heads, I placed my arm behind my head, contemplating if I should wake her, when she sat up with a gasp.

I sat up with my arms raised, ready to console her. “It’s okay, you were dreaming.”

Gasping for breath, Maevery only said one word. “Rye.”

“What about Rye?”

“We have to find him.” Maevery slid out of her jacket and began donning it properly. “He’s in danger.”

“It was just a dream.”

“Perhaps, but it may have been a sign he needs my help.” Maevery retrieved her knife and slid it into her belt. “Will you help me?”

“Yes, of course. How’s your core temperature? Have you warmed up?” I began reversing my jacket.

Staring at the ground, Maevery assessed her physical state my stretching her leg. “I’m warm again. Except for my sore leg, I’m good.”

“Okay,” I said with a supportive smile. “Let’s go find Rye.”

As we retraced our steps that afternoon, Maevery walked with a determined vigor, using the spear for support. Ignoring her leg wound, she carried her hunting knife at the ready as she led us to the section of lake where she first came ashore.

She glanced over the frozen lake, focusing in the direction of the starting platforms hidden by the winter haze. “Rye and I had a plan to grab the first available weapon and then proceed outward from the center until we were safe. He insisted that if we were to be separated that we should use my launch platform as reference point.” Maevery turned around to look up at the rising mountain. “He should be in this general direction.”

Recalling the confusing time when I entered the arena, I said, “That is, if either of you remember the correct platform.”

Maevery glared at me.

“I’m just saying it was mass confusion at the start. Does he have much winter experience?”

“No,” replied Maevery. “District Nine doesn’t experience our

winters, but they do get snow. Nothing like this.”

Glancing up at the mountain, I commented, “Then I doubt he carved out a snow cave or dug a fox hole under a pine. If I had to guess, he went up there to seek out an actual cave.”

“Then that is where we’ll go,” said Maevery.

“The Jabberwockies are waiting to ambush anyone who goes up the mountain.”

Maevery gave me a disapproving look. “We’re going up the mountain.”

“Okay, we’re going up the mountain,” I affirmed. “But may I suggest we travel by exposed ground and avoid as much snow as possible. The Jabberwockies like to hide under the deep snow.”

“You don’t have to go with me if you are afraid.”

Not wanting to admit how scared I actually was, I tried to think of a non-cowardly way to express my concerns. When Maevery turned away, I reached for her shoulder. “Maevery, it’s not just that. I don’t want you getting hurt; you should rest your leg. I promised Johanna and Blight that I would help my district partner if I could. This is what I’m going to do, whatever it entails. Okay?”

“Thank you.” With a faint smile, Maevery passed her spear to me. “Since you have already scouted the dangers higher up, you should lead the way.”

“Okay.” Using the spear as a walking stick, I began another stressful trek up the mountain. This time, I took a slower pace so Maevery would not strain her leg. But as we neared the vertical rock face closer to the top, I showed more signs of breaking than Maevery as the stress on my nerves rose to the surface.

Both of us needing rest, we sat amongst a small cluster of pines as we rehydrated our bodies with snow, ever searching for dangers. I thought the absence of human tracks to be a sign that we were searching the wrong area and worried that Maevery would still want to scourer this location, which would ultimately draw the attentions

of the muttations. The only consolation was that darkness would soon be upon us, forcing us to return to our snow cave without Rye. Though it pained me to think it, I would not have minded seeing Rye's face projected in the night sky had he perished this second day.

A blood-curdling scream resonated from the mountainside, bringing Maevery and me to our feet. When another scream of anguish bounced off the mountain, Maevery took off running towards the source. "That's Rye."

Grabbing the spear, I followed Maevery across a snow covered clearing as she ran towards the sound of a struggle. With each step, I worried that a Jabberwocky would suddenly appear. But I pressed forward after Maevery who had by then located the entrance to a cave.

When Maevery came to an abrupt halt, I slid to a stop beside her—terror immediately filling my body with what we found. In the opening of the cave, a large mutation with oily black fur and a long snapping tail mauled at a tribute struggling beneath it, Rye.

Maevery sprung forward, her hunting knife readied to be thrown. With me remaining at her side, she stopped with in a close range to the mutation and threw her heavy knife, striking the creature in the head with a loud thump. The weapon bounced into the air, landing in the snow behind the creature's back.

Though the knife had not stuck into mutation, the hard blow took its attention off Rye, revealing rat like eyes that sharpened on us.

Trembling in my boots, I debated how best to fend off the beast—whether to lunge for its heart or wave my spear tip continuously in the mutation's face—when Maevery ripped the spear out of my hands.

Crouching just as the mutation surged forward, Maevery planted the butt of the spear into the ground, catching the mutation in the chest with the spear tip, impaling the monster with its own weight as the beast tumbled over us, knocking Maevery and me to the ground.

Climbing to my feet, I stared fearfully at the hideous monster lying still in the snow. Designed to dwell and hunt in the close confines of the caves, this Gamespace creation of sinister claws and large rat like teeth would have been unbeatable in the darkness.

Maevery only paused long enough to make certain of the mutations demise before running to Rye's side. As she began tearing off strips of clothing to bandage his wounds, Rye joked with her that he had found dinner, at which she laughed with tears falling from her eyes.

Watched Maevery applying first aid, I thought Rye's wounds to be survivable if Maevery could apply snug enough bandages since none of the wounds appeared to be uncontrollable punctures. However, her friend would not be travelling without aid.

I caught wind of the mutation's horrendous smell and returned to the carcass for further inspection. When I pulled out the spear, the creature's blood poured out into the snow, appearing almost black in color and thinner than human blood. This only reaffirmed my rejection of salvaging any meat. *This must be the Bandersnatch*, I thought.

Fighting the urge to retch, I returned to the mouth of the cave and located Maevery's knife in the snow before returning to her side where she was tying the last bandage. As she brushed Rye's hair from his brow, I noticed a small, dark red stain forming over her shoulder. She unzipped her coat to discover that she had again escaped death with a simple flesh wound from the mutation's claws.

Having learned that the mountain caves were more dangerous than imagined, we wisely decided to return to my snow cave and began hobbling silently down the hillside towards the lake. Supporting Rye, I watched droplets of his blood drip harmlessly from a pooling blood patch in the sleeve of his jacket into the snow. Though the blood not frequent enough to leave a noticeable trail, our stumbling feet left snow tracks, large ones since our group now consisted of two wounded warriors and a feeble pacifist.

The odds have definitely not turned in our favor, I thought.

Unable to sleep inside the snow cave, my bare fingers scratched aimlessly at the snow beneath my chin. Scratching lightly—so not to wake Maevery and Rye, I struggled to ignore Rye’s painful groans that he made in his sleep.

When Maevery rolled over, I took the opportunity to touch her shoulder.

Her hand gripped her knife before her eyes had opened. Surveying the snow cave quickly, she gave me a questioning look. “What?”

“I can’t sleep,” I whispered. “I need to stretch my legs. I’ll go up the mountain and retrieve some more nuts and anything else I may stumble upon.”

“Aren’t you concerned about the muttations?”

“Yes, but I know to avoid the deep snow near the top. Plus I know where the creatures hide and what they look like.” Hearing another faint moan come from Rye, I paused to see if he had wakened. After a couple seconds of stillness, I said to Maevery, “I’ll be careful.”

Aware that it was too late to go back and recover meat from the dead muttation, Maevery agreed. She gripped her knife by the blade and offered the weapon to me.

“What is this for?” I asked.

“In case you stumble across someone. You could also set some rabbit snares along the way. You’ll need the knife if you snare one.” She watched for my response. “Please tell me that you’re not the type of pacifist that would refuse to kill a rabbit, even if starving?”

“No,” I lied. Wanting to escape her doubting look—and Rye’s moans, I reluctantly took the blade and tucked it into my belt before promptly leaving the snow cave.

The morning twilight hinted that sunrise was still a couple hours

away. Standing up behind a large tree, I visually inspected the area around our snow cave and found the landscape undisturbed as the drifting snow had covered most of our tracks. A foggy haze continued to hang over the arena, making it impossible to see the Cornucopia in the center of the frozen lake.

Not wanting to leave tracks that might lead to Maevery, I first traveled over the exposed tufts of grass to the lake. When I reached the ice, I even took the opportunity to explore around the inlet of land, near the shore.

Standing on the ice before the tip of the inlet, I estimated that a couple inches of snow had accumulated on the left side. I proceed to step onto this snow in the dim morning light, listening for any potential sharp crack that would precede a break in the ice. After a few steps towards shore, I stopped to dig my boot into the snow to study the ice beneath. Finding the ice color a darkening grey, I stepped further into the snow patch. Still several yards from shore, I began to feel the faintest bounce within a few steps—something undetectable by the inexperienced. With my foot, I cleared the snow away to find dark thinning ice, which confirmed my suspicion that the inlet disrupted the circular lake flow with underwater eddies.

Not wanting to press my luck, I retraced my steps to safer ice before proceeding up the mountain along my previous day's path. Halfway to my destination, I plopped down into a snow bank, exhausted, for the deciduous trees buds that I was consuming along the way proved insufficient for climbing mountains. Catching my breath, I fully unzipped my jacket to let the sweat evaporate and began consuming handfuls of snow.

The arena had brightened with the first rays of morning light. Enjoying the hazy scenery, I thought my current complacency peculiar despite being in the middle of a fight to the death competition. Mostly, I noticed how uncomfortable I felt around Rye. Having inspected his wounds, I was confident that he would survive—I

wanted him to survive—but the bond between him and Maevery was too strong. Something that powerful would have repercussions, leaving me to only hope that he shared the same intention: that Maevery should be the one who goes home as victor.

Pulling Maevery's knife from my belt, I turned the blade slowly in my hand to study the sharp and serrated edges. To me, the blade epitomized the cruelty heavily that outweighed kindness in this cold world. However, the blade did serve a purpose for those few honorable who choose to defend non-aggressors. *But where?* I wondered. *Not in Panem.* Since so few living things in this world died from old age, I had an urge to toss the blade down the mountainside. Instead, knowing that Maevery would want her blade returned, I tucked weapon back into my belt and did what most living things inevitably do: I climbed back onto my feet and staggered onward up hill.

Chapter 12

Partially zipping up my jacket, I continued climbing the gradual mountainside, scooping snow into my mouth along the way. When I stumbled upon the previously berry bush that had been picked clean, I took the time to scour the area for others. Intermixed with some nearby thorn bushes, I found a few remaining berries that were protected by the intermingling thorns bushes. Carefully, I worked my way along the bushes, picking what berries I could until my uppermost jacket pockets were full.

Brushing the snow from my winter pants, I paused to gaze upon the familiar mountainside. My eyes scoured the face as my peripheral vision searched for movement. A frightening faint shrill resonated over the mountain landscape, but I could not tell if the sound had come from one of those giant insect mutations or other woodland creature. Knowing that the shelter of the pine trees to be the safest location, I kept to the trees and took slow careful steps through the forest in search of the strange tree that produced nuts.

When I found the tree, most of my prior tracks had been covered by fresh snow—with the expectation of where I had crawled under the pines in pursuit of the rabbit. With the mutations foremost in my thoughts, I promptly began collecting nuts until my remaining pockets were full.

As I inspected my pockets, I was ensuring the wellness of the berries when I heard faint movement from beneath a pine tree. When I turned, a white horseshoe rabbit burst from underneath, running directly past me with lightning speed. With a yelp, I spun around just in time to watch it disappear under another pine.

Chuckling lightly at my own timidity, I dropped to my knees to peer under the branches. “Don’t worry Mister Rabbit; I’m not going to kill you like my friend Maevery wants. I only told her so to keep

her spirits up.” Looking past the trunk, the faint movement of the hare’s chest gave away his location. “Just don’t run out into the clearing. That’s where your friend was killed by the Jabberwocky.”

When further sound came from the tree behind me, I smiled. “Did you bring a friend, Mister Rabbit?”

I turned on all fours to discover a female tribute—the one with vibrant green eyes—emerging from between two pines. Jumping to my feet, I instinctively held out my hands, desperately trying to remember her name. *She’s District Four. A Career!*

With a spear held at the ready and a dead rabbit hanging from her belt, the girl began assessing my threat to her.

Raising my hands higher, I said with a stammering voice, “I’m unarmed.”

The girl’s focus sharpened on my waist.

I looked down to see the knife in my belt. “That’s not mine. It was lent to me.” Watching the girl tighten her grip on her spear, my knees began to shake. “You can have it, if you want.”

The girl said nothing as her expression of distrust gave her face a hard look. Her glare was not one of hatred, but I could tell that she saw me in the way of her going home.

With a slow hand, I pinched the handle of the knife with two fingers and pulled the blade from my belt. I dropped the weapon into the snow and took a few steps back.

Stepping forward to the knife, the girl picked up the weapon and tucked it into her belt. A hint of confusion came over her as she continued to study me.

“That’s all I have,” I said, slowly lifting my jacket with quivering hands. I turned in a circle to confirm no hidden weapons. “And I’m alone.”

The girl’s eyes shifted rapidly as she began searching the trees.

Releasing my jacket, I swallowed hard and said, “There is no else.”

Breaking her silence, she asked, “Why are you telling me this? Why are you surrendering?” As she spoke, she continued to glance over her shoulders with suspicion. “Are you trying to mess with my head?”

“No no no,” I pleaded. “I just don’t want to hurt anyone.” As I raised my arms into the air, her name came to me. “Valeria?” Receiving no reply, I kept my arms raised. “I’m Pahl from Seven.” “I know.”

Noticing the rabbit hanging from her belt, my breathing deepened, for I began to fear the worst. “I was just gathering nuts and berries. I apologize if I disturbed your hunt.” Finding it difficult to stand still, I gestured to the pine tree behind me. “The other rabbit is under that tree...if you’re interested.”

Valeria continued to eye me as her spear remained at the ready. Her sweat beaded under her hood caused the fir lining to stick to her forehead, the adrenaline causing her—and me—to exhale thick clouds into the cold winter air.

Have you had to kill? I wondered. Will I be your first?

Valeria glanced over her shoulder at the strange tree. “I found a similar tree elsewhere. Are the nuts safe to eat?”

“Yes.” I slowly removed a nut from my pocket and placed it in my mouth, the bitterness making me grimace. “They are very bitter, but safe otherwise. I’ve been eating them since day one.”

Gnawing her lip, her eyes narrowed as if deciding my fate.

Feeling as if I would soon urinate, I too had to make a decision of whether or not to beg for my life. “How have you been faring with the snow? Does it ever snow in District Four?”

Not replying, Valeria’s focus did not waiver.

With rising desperation, I asked, “What are you using for shelter?”

Her calm response told me everything when she said, “I’m sorry.”

I began stepping backward when Valeria approached. Tripping on something hard beneath the snow, I stumbled in a turning motion and

staggered forward on my hands and knees until I was on my feet running between the pines. Without hesitation, I entered the clearing where the muttation had ambushed the rabbit prior. With terror surging through me, I began high stepping through the deepening snow when—by chance—I looked over my shoulder just as Valeria released her spear. Falling into the snow, I watched the spear sail over me, the spear landing with a thud as it pierced the snow. I leapt to my feet and continued running with high steps, leaving the spear where it had landed.

Looking to my right, an un-scalable mountainside sheared upwards. To my left, a cliff of hazy skyline revealed how high up the mountain I had climbed. Before me, the clearing narrowed to form a narrow trail that continued up the mountain. I turned for the opening of the trail when the snow several yards ahead of me silently exploded, bringing me to an abrupt stop.

As the snow cleared, it revealed a muttation that stood a stone's throw away from me, blocking the trail. It let out a couple short hideous screeches, which received immediate replies by fellow muttations higher on the mountain.

I turned around and found a wide-eyed Valeria staring at the muttation blocking the trail. I began running towards her and shouted, "Go back through the trees!"

As I retraced my footsteps, two shadowy figures emerged on the rock face as they swiftly scaled down the vertical rock face like giant spiders. When the first one reached the snow, the creature floated over the white powder with its long, serrated legs and quickly blocked our escape route. The second muttation, having reached the snow, headed straight in our direction.

With all escape routes blocked, I staggered to a stop in the knee-deep snow. I turned around to find Valeria standing with her recovered spear ready to strike. As she pointed the weapon from one muttation to the next, I noticed how the creature's heads moved

swiftly in accord, following the shiny spear tip.

Instinctively, I began stepping away and said, “Don’t make sudden movements. If we move slowly, they’ll move slowly.”

“Don’t you mean we’ll die slowly!” Valeria began following my lead, stepping backwards.

The three mutations moved with teamwork precision, closing the gap as they herded us towards a cliff’s edge. With short painful screeches, they appeared to be passing instructions to one another—determining the best method of attack.

Reaching the edge first, I began to look for a way down. When I peered over, I found only sky. Leaning dangerously over, I failed to see bottom. “There’s no way down!”

“Come get your knife.” Valeria continued inching her way backward, her spear poised.

I ignored her request as I continued looking for a way down.

As the mutations tightened their half circle, desperation filled Valeria’s voice when she barked, “Take your knife from my belt!”

“And do what?” I retorted. “We can’t fight these things.”

One of the creatures let out a blood-curdling scream that caused me to cover my ears. When the piercing sound stopped, the three mutations then took another step forward, causing Valeria to stagger backward into me.

I quickly place a firm hand on her back to steady her. “Those things are genetically created killing machines. They can run on snow; they can climb; and they have and an armored exoskeleton. We can’t win in a fight.”

“Then what do you suggest?”

Securing my foothold, I looked back at the empty sky. “We do the one thing they can’t do. We fly.”

Valeria glanced over her shoulder. “What?”

“We jump and take our chances with the snow.”

“You’re insane,” she said, continuing to wave her spear at the

creatures. “Take your knife!”

“Our best chance is to jump.”

One of the muttations snapped at the spear tip and missed. When Valeria poked at the creature’s head, the spear tip deflected off the exoskeleton, leaving a faint vertical scratch on the muttations forehead. The creature’s serrated arms swept up in a scissor motion, shattering the spear into three pieces.

When a second creature lunged at Valeria, she jumped backward, pushing us both over the edge.

Tumbling end over end, my leg strike something hard as we fell. White and grey flashed before my eyes as I tumbled through the air. My body struck something hard before crashing onto a pine tree that deflected my fall into thigh deep snow. Despite the snow, I landed hard on my back, my breath knocked out of me.

Despite the muttations, the only thing that mattered at that moment was my next breath of air. Rolling onto my knees in the snow, I waited for air to fill my lungs. I sat up and looked to the heavens, praying for a single breath air as a new panic of suffocating to death surged through my body. Falling forward, I began to pound my chest in the hope of triggering a reaction. My strength fleeting, I rolled onto my side, thinking the worst, when my body intuitively inhaled a lung-full of cold mountain air.

Alive and breathing, I enjoyed a couple more deep breaths when I noticed my white jacket covered in red. Frantically I began inspecting my body for wounds and found red berry juice leaking from one of my pockets, which caused me to laugh hysterically.

The relief only lasted for a moment, for the terrifying muttations came to mind. I began scanning the mountainside, but for reasons unknown to me, they had not followed us down.

My body tingled from the adrenalin rush as I judged the fall to be about four stories. The section of the mountain where we fell past was not vertical, but almost. Studying the landscape further, I spotted

a couple small patches of disturbed snow and a pine tree that had all their branch snow knocked loose.

The escape from death made me forget that Valeria had intended to kill me. Smiling, I slowly rose to my feet in search of Valeria. Alarmed by the silence, I noticed a disruption in the snow a few yards away. As I approached, I could see her lying on her side, her top arm curled tight against her body. “Valeria?”

My fellow tribute opened her eyes, tears falling freely into the snow. Underneath her torso, the snow had turned red. She lifted her arm slightly to reveal my knife lodged into her side.

“No,” I gasped. Using my hands, I began clearing the snow around her. “How bad is your wound?”

“I’m done,” she said in a weakened tone, her face as white as the surrounding snow.

Brushing away more snow, the vast amount of blood beneath her made me feel sick. “Maybe...maybe...” Though my mind was racing, I failed to come up with a single idea that could help her.

“No. Nothing can be done.” Grimacing in pain, a new deluge of tears flowed over her cheeks.

Assuming her sponsors watching, I looked up to the sky and screamed, “Sending her a first aid kit! Valeria needs help!”

“Don’t bother,” she said, trying to lift her arm. “You know that they can’t help.”

With cold sweat enveloping my body, I balled my hands into fists. “There is that first aid substance, a goo, that they can pour into large open wounds. I once saw it in a first aid kit that a Peacekeeper showed to us in school.”

“Ya, but it only slows the bleeding.”

Residing to the truth, I began to feel tears run down my face. “I’m so sorry,” I said, my voice breaking. “It’s all my fault.”

“No it’s not,” she said in a weakening tone.

“Yes it is. This is all because of me.”

“No. You didn’t send me here.” Using her teeth, Valeria pulled a glove free and then extended her bare hand to me.

Pulling off both my gloves, I gripped her hand and wailed, “I’m sorry!”

Oddly, her pale face appeared calm. And though she did not have to, she gave me the greatest gift by saying, “It’s okay; I forgive you.”

I ultimately knew that her tragedy was not my fault, but her words washed over me, delivering an indescribable solace. I gripped her hand tighter. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

“Just stay with me.”

“I will.”

Valeria’s gaze turned up to the landscape. With the midday sun illuminating the arena, her vibrant green eyes glimmered brightly. Except for my grieving, the atmosphere was serene and peaceful. The snow sparkled like diamonds as wind passed through the nearby pines, releasing gentle whispers. Despite her labored breathing, Valeria appeared at peace.

“Are you afraid?” I asked.

“Yes,” she replied, swallowing hard. “But the fear is fading. It feels like I’m going to fall asleep.”

“I bet you wake up somewhere nice where all your friends are waiting—even those who have yet to leave this world. They will all be there with arms wide open.”

“That sounds nice.” Valeria closed her eyes. “Tell me more.”

“Well, on an ocean beach, surrounded by several warm bonfires, you will find a large table full of tea and desserts, everything your heart desires. Nearby, there will be musicians playing stringed instruments, which will give the air an even warmer feeling. Even the animals will come out to greet you. There will be a talking rabbit and a sleepy mouse. Most importantly, there will be a man in a silly hat who will be the master of ceremonies. The man is crazy, but don’t worry. He’s the good kind of crazy, the kind that leads to happy

surprises and unexpected thoughts. And as the sun dips behind the ocean, he will seat you at the head of the table, and everyone will toast your homecoming.”

A distant cannon boomed, causing me to shudder. The shot informed everyone in the arena—and those watching in their homes and apartments—that the electronic tracker injected into Valeria’s arm no longer detected a pulse.

With confusion, I looked down at her hand, thinking it still gripped my own, but when my grip relaxed, I discovered that all the tension had been mine. Sobbing like a child, I gently placed her limp hand on the snow as my body began to rock back and forth.

Once my sobbing reduced to simple tears, my quivering muscles slowly brought me to my feet. “I have to go,” I said. “They need to take you home.”

I positioned Valeria’s body at rest so that the hovercraft could easily scoop her up in its claw. Gazing one last time upon her lovely face, the sight of the knife protruding from her body upset me, for it did not belong. I gripped the handle and pulled it out—the sickening wet sound nearly making me retch. Not wanting any more senseless death, I also took the dead rabbit that was still attached to her belt. I stood, taking a deep, staggered breath, and began the long trek back to the snow cave.

With each step, my body aches from the fall grew. My feet staggered down the mountain, gravity doing most of the work. It was not long until I began to limp from unseen injuries, and my stiffening neck caused me to grimace each time I peered from under my sweat-stained hood. I unzipped my jacket to allow my body sweat to evaporate, unconcerned about the resulting wind chill on my damp clothing. As I progressed, a new soreness grew within my shoulder, and my brow became weighed down as I continued to grieve for the girl I never got to know.

Reaching the snow cave just before sunset, I dropped to my knees

at the entrance and announced my return. I made my announcement a second time and waited for Maevery's reply to make sure it would be safe to dig. She told me to enter, and I tunneled inside to find my two friends tending to their wounds.

When I produced the dead rabbit, Maevery looked surprised. Her expression turned to concern when they caught sight of the blood and berry juice on my jacket. Looking into my weary eyes, Maevery asked, "Pahl, did something bad happen?"

"No," I lied.

Chapter 13

Maevery continued to eye the blood on my jacket while Rye stared hungrily the dead rabbit. In less than four days, all of us had been scarred in some way in the arena. The hunger, cold, and stress had made each of us a bit lethargic—if anything, a bit less human.

Not wanting to see the dead creature, I gestured aimlessly at the carcass with a gloved hand. “It wandered out from the brush as I was collecting berries. No one is more surprised than me that I killed it.”

Rye sat up slowly, grimacing from his wounds. “What are you waiting for; start preparing it.”

Attempting to hide my unease, I forced myself to look at the dead rabbit and slowly drew the hunting knife.

Maevery raised her hand. “Don’t prepare it here. You’ll get blood all over our cave. Take it outside. Dispense of the remnants far away from the drift so not to attract animals to our spot.”

“Ah, right,” I said. “Will do.”

“And hurry,” added Rye. “You’ve finally woken my appetite.”

With a forced smile, I exited the cave to perform the gruesome task of skinning. Finding a sheltered spot free from the blustery winter winds, I knelt at the base of a tree and stared at rabbit before me. No longer hungry, the tip of knife wavered in my hand until tears burst from my eyes. I rocked on my knees as I wept for Valeria. Aware that sound traveled much farther in a winter landscape, I gasped between my breaths, covering my mouth in an attempt to stymie my wails.

After several minutes, I regained some composure; however, I remained bent over the rabbit, unable to do what was needed. As I continued to mourn silently, I heard soft footsteps behind me and did not need to look to know who had come.

Maeverly asked, "Do you even know how to skin a rabbit?"

"No."

My district partner knelt beside me, laying a comforting hand on my shoulder. "Here; let me help you since you were kind enough to bring us dinner."

"Okay." I handed Maeverly the knife. "Thank you."

Removing her gloves, Maeverly gripped the rabbit firmly by a hind leg and began cutting the skin around a joint. After doing the same to the second leg, she extended the cuts in the animal's hide towards the backside. She then gripped the legs with one hand and began peeling the hide from the body like a wet shirt.

The sight and sound of it made me turn away and retch dryly into the snow.

Maeverly paused the skinning and turned to me. "You didn't kill this rabbit; did you?"

"No." I rubbed my nose on the sleeve of my jacket. "Valeria did."

"Is that her blood on your jacket?"

"Yes. She stumbled upon me as I was gathering berries. When I ran, the muttations attacked and chased us off the edge of a cliff. She landed on my knife and was killed. The rabbit was hers; I took it."

Staring briefly at the skinned rabbit laying in the snow, Maeverly's eyes narrowed as she began combing the distant landscape. "What about the others?"

"What others?"

My district partner frowned at me. "Careers don't hunt alone."

"I didn't see any other tributes. I took my time coming back to the snow cave. I would have noticed them following me."

Maeverly returned her gaze outward. "No offense, but you're not a hunter. You may feel at home in the snow, but that is not enough. They probably watched you from a distance."

I rose up onto my knees to scan the mountainside. "Why haven't they attacked?"

“They may be waiting for use to fall asleep.”

“What do we do?”

“We eat. We need to eat. Then we’ll move to a new location in the dark.”

I wiped my nose again on my sleeve. “Sorry.”

Maeverly subtly shook her head. “You did nothing wrong. These things happen. It’s the Hunger Games after all.”

“Right.” My eyes returned to the sorry looking rabbit.

“Pahl, gather some exposed prairie grass and some twigs so we can properly cook the meat. Rye will help you start a small fire. He found a flint at the start of the games. I’ll finish preparing the rabbit.”

“Okay.” Rising to my feet, I pointed to the lake. “I spotted a good drift at the edge of an icy field about half a mile away. Rye should be able to travel there with no problem. The area has been severely windblown and should provide a hard surface that won’t leave footprints as we come and go.”

Maeverly’s look became sympathetic as her eyes met mine.

“Sounds like a good plan. We’ll check it out after we eat.”

Without further word, I did what Maeverly had asked and returned to the snow cave with an armful of grass and twigs. As Rye took out his flint, I careful pushed my hand up through the ceiling of the snow cave to create an exhaust hole for the brief fire we would need. Using a tiny amount of the twigs and grass, Rye easily started a small fire.

Clearing my throat, I commented, “Maeverly thinks we should move to a new snow cave after we eat. She thinks the Careers are waiting to ambush us in the middle of the night...that they may have followed me back to this area.”

“Okay,” said Rye appearing unconcerned. After a bit of silence, he continued, “I thought that cannon shot was for you.”

“It was for the girl from District Four”

“Oh. Did she wound you?”

I shook my head. “We were fleeing from mutations when we fell off a cliff into snow. She landed on a knife. My knife.”

Rye quietly added a couple twigs to the fire.

As I stared into the flames, I asked, “If the other Careers were nearby, why didn’t they help her? Why didn’t she call for them?”

Reclining against the snow cave, Rye shrugged. “Maybe she wanted the glory of taking you out herself. She was a Career after all. Perhaps, when the others got close enough, they knew that they couldn’t fight the mutations and decided to remain hidden. Who knows. We are playing an irrational game of murder. People do irrational things.”

“I suppose.” A stray piece of dried grass caught fire and began to burn like a fuse. Once the flame consumed the last bit, I looked up at Rye and asked, “How bad are your wounds?”

“Bad. I’ll need more than Capitol medicine to recover, not that I expect to receive any help from a sponsor.”

I looked up and waited for him to meet my gaze. “Maevery is the one going home, right?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” I said. “The snow puts the odds in her favor, but what are we going to do about the Careers? They can build large fires and let them burn throughout the night without fear of an attack. You’re wounded, and I’m..not much of a fighter.”

Smiling, Rye appeared oddly relaxed—as if resolved to his fate. Sounding equally at ease, he said, “All we can do is try. Perhaps the Gamemakers will surprise them. Maybe the cold will break their spirits. It takes more than fire to survive the cold after all. And maybe, fate will intervene. Never rule out fate.”

Admiring his optimism, I began to smile when a spearhead suddenly appeared before my face. Looking past the bloody tip, I saw the shaft protruding out of Rye’s side. Then, the weapon vanished as suddenly as it had appeared.

Rye rolled forward, gargling in pain when the spear reappeared out of the cave wall just above his shoulder, missing him and me. This time, before the spear could be withdrawn, Rye reached up and gripped the shaft with an agonizing scream. He held firm, preventing the weapon from being withdrawn.

I stood up, thrusting my body through the roof of the snow cave. “Maeverly, ambush! Someone has tunneled through the back of the cave.”

Behind me, Rye and the other tribute sprung up out of the snowdrift as they struggled with the spear. Rye grunted through his pain, twisting and turning in a violent struggle. As the other boy attempted to twist free his spear, his face appeared just long enough from beneath his hood for me to recognize him to be from District 6.

Maeverly let out a growl as she dropped the skinned rabbit and rushed forward with her knife. She leapt over the snowdrift and collided with boy from District 6. As they fell into the drift, the unmistakable sound of steel penetrating flesh were immediately drowned out by our attacker’s screams of horror.

I stood unmoving, paralyzed by my fear. I turned my head away and covered my ears, praying for a quick return of silence when I spotted four Careers rushing towards us. As the last remnants of hope slipped away, I let my hands drop with a simple curse.

The Careers rushed forward with a battle cry, their spears and long knives at the ready. I turned to find Maeverly at Rye’s side, supporting him as she poised a spear in her free hand, preparing a defense.

Thinking it best to be on Rye’s other side, I began struggling forward through the snow of our collapsed cave. Losing my balance in the drift, I glanced over my shoulder just in time to see a female career lunged at me with her long spear. I twisted out of the way, avoiding the spear as it tore through the edge of my winter jacket. Falling backward into the snow, I gripped the shaft, which resulted in

me pulling the girl on top of me. As the girl and I struggled, Maevery's spear plunged into the Career's neck, sending spurts of blood into the air. Immediately, the girl hunched forward and collapsed on top of me, lifeless.

Two other Careers leapt into the fray, crashing into Maevery. As I scrambled out from under the body, I heard Maevery scream out in pain as one of the tributes stuck a knife into her. I lunged forward and tackled one of her attackers. Unable to restrain the Career, he elbowed me freely in the chest. I tried to tighten my hold, finding Maevery lying wounded in the snow. She was looking up at me when her eyes suddenly widened. I instinctively twisted out of the way as a short sword meant for my head ripped through the face of the boy struggling in my grip, who immediately became still as he fell into the snow.

The frenzied Career from District 2 stood before me, unfazed by his killing of his ally. The boy saw me weaponless and then raised his sword to split my head in two when Rye rose out of the crumpled snowdrift to thrust a spear into the exposed side of the Career. The boy released a blood-curdling scream that seemed to resonate off the mountain before crumbling into the snow. Rye only had enough time to glance briefly at Maevery and smile before collapsing next to the Career he had just killed.

Writhing in pain, Maevery screamed out with grief as she rolled onto her back. Pressing her hand over her side wound, her long gasps condensed in the cold winter air, forming thick clouds of mist. Pressing her hand tighter over her wound, steaming blood flowed over her fingers.

The arena's cannons started to boom for the dead. After I counted five cannon shots, I quickly rose to my knees to see if Maevery and I were alone when I promptly spotted one other tribute, the boy from District 4, Glenn. He had circled around to prevent an escape, and now, his focus was on me.

Maeverly gripped my wrist. Her face had become pale, her eyes dull. “Run, Pahl. I cannot move; I’m done for.”

When the boy from District 4 started wading through the snowdrift, I whispered to Maeverly, “I’ll come back for you.”

Leaping to my feet, I began high stepping out of the entanglement of collapsed snow and bodies until my steps reached solid ground. Taking to a full sprint across an open stretch of prairie, I glance over my shoulder and found Glenn in pursuit. Turning for the lake, I leapt over the accumulated snow along the lakeshore and landed hard on the ice, tumbling into a long slide. Before coming stop, I rolled onto my feet and began shuffling over the ice as fast as my boots permitted. No sooner, I heard Glenn tumble behind me with his decent onto the ice.

I headed for the dark area of ice located near the tiny jut of land. As I approached the area, now veiled by early twilight, I began to feel the bounce of the ice—a faint, early warning tell known to those with winter experience. Below my feet, I could see in the dim winter light that the ice was not white, a sign of adequate thickness, but a dangerous dark grey. Sliding to a stop, even darker patches of ice could be seen sporadically around me. If it was day, one would realize that the darkness was actually the dark mirth below as seen through thin clear ice. From my prior observations of this lake, I knew well enough that the shape of the shoreline, and presumed circular current, produced eddies that thinned the ice from below the surface, creating a minefield of thin ice, in which I was now surrounded.

Also aware of dangers, Glenn approached slowly with his long knife. Each one of his steps, no matter how gentle, caused the ice to waver ever so faintly underneath me. As his hand nervously gripped the hilt of his blade, he slowly began to shuffle even closer.

I focused on the sheen of his knife as I moved away. With each gentle shuffle of my feet, I held my breath, listening for the crack that

would precede Glenn's breaking through the ice.

But he kept inching closer. His greater size and subsequent heavier weight should lead to him breaking before me, but the first sounds of stressed ice came from beneath me, forcing me to withdraw my latest step.

Stepping in a new direction, I took two more steps backward when I felt the ice give way. I instinctively extended my arms outward to prevent my head from submerging and cursed aloud as the needle like cold water swiftly seeped through my jacket and stung my body. The cold shock immediately compressed around my chest, forcing me to take shallow breaths as every inch of my body surrendered to the icy touch of water, rendering my winter clothing useless. Looking up, I found Glenn smirking with satisfaction.

His eyes repeatedly shifted from his current spot to where I had broken through. He slid his weight forward and immediately stopped when he heard the stress on the ice. Gingerly, Glenn shuffled back a few steps. "I can wait," he said with impertinence.

"I'm not getting out," I told him. "Unless you enjoy watching people die, you might as well leave me in peace."

"I know you're not getting out. I'm going to wait here until the cannon booms for you. I'll going to make sure that Valeria's killer gets what due to him."

My body began to shiver involuntarily from the cold. "I didn't kill her. I haven't killed anybody."

"Liar. I saw you kill her at the bottom of the mountain after you two fell."

"She fell onto the knife by accident."

"That's not what I saw."

I grimaced from the stinging cold, my breath becoming shallower. "I'm surprised you saw anything since you must have been hiding from the muttations."

"Shut up. Valera got ahead of us. She was excited about killing

her first rabbit. She was going after a second when you ambushed her.”

I shook my head. “There was no ambush. We accidently ran into each other, and soon after, we were chased by the muttations.”

“Liar.”

When I sighed, I found inhaling more difficult. I began to stare at the ice before me and said in a defeated tone. “Just let me die in peace. I don’t want to talk to you.”

“The quicker you die, the quicker I can go. So please, be my guest.”

I shut my eyes and began to imagine my father watching this catastrophe unfold back in District 7 with all the other lumberjacks. He had to be disappointed that his son fell victim to his own trap. I then hoped my teacher, Mrs. Pavelko, was not watching, for I wanted her last memories of me to be something more pleasant. Mostly, I wanted the intense fear currently tearing at my soul to lift so I could die in peace. Despite my trembling—be it from fear or from cold, a most peculiar sense of relief did start to come over me when I realized that I would not meet a violent end. *I’m just going to fall asleep, that’s all.* The trembling soon ceased as I welcomed the numbness delivered by the icy water.

Cursing aloud, Glenn said, “Why hasn’t the hovercraft showed up?”

Though my life was slipping away, the annoyance of his comment made me think, *I’m not dead yet, you bastard.* Ignoring him, I began to focus on pleasant thoughts of home: the forest and my friends. Having fully accepted my fate, I wondered if my spirit would be able to visit District 7 when the faint boom of a cannon echoed across the arena.

Chapter 14

Before the echoes of the cannon had finished rolling across winter landscape, Glenn said to himself with evident satisfaction, “Finally.”

Wanting to curse at him, I suddenly imagined Johanna screaming at me, *Don't move you idiot. He thinks you're dead.*

With this realization, a new hope—and adrenalin—flooded my body; however, I calculated that Glenn might wait for the hovercraft to remove my corpse, and the chances of me surviving in this water were diminishing by the second.

Just stay still, moron, my imaginary Johanna reminded me.

Glenn's boots began shuffling slowly away, backtracking from the thin ice. When he reached thicker ice, I heard his boots begin to step upon the surface as his pace quickened. I peered out one eye to find him moving swiftly towards shore, but was again disappointed when he stopped at the ridge to watch supposedly for the hovercraft that would remove my body.

Sorry, Johanna, I thought. I was just about to close my eye when someone appeared moving swiftly almost the trees, behind Glenn. The stealthy tribute lunged for Glenn who released a horrid scream as he immediately dropped to his knees and flopped forward onto his face. The boom of canon that followed only confirmed what I already knew. The swift moving tribute then picked up Glenn's knife and began moving inland, towards the location of our snow cave.

I closed eyes, waiting for inevitable, when my imaginary Johanna shouted once more, *Are you that stupid? You can get out now.*

“No,” I mumbled, my speech the first casualty of the hypothermia. I considered briefly the survival technique taught to me by my father and knew that exercising in these wet winter clothes until they were dry would be impossible. There was simply too much water soaked into the clothing and not enough time. I needed dry...clothes. *Glenn!*

“Glenn’s jacket,” I mumbled with widening eyes.

Knowing that the hovercraft could come at any moment and take his body—and his dry clothing—I sprung into action. Beneath the water, I kicked off my boots as I pulled off my gloves with my teeth. Though my fingers were crippled, I was able to grip the large zipper and open my jacket. I next undid enough of my winter pants to let them slip from my legs.

Adrenaline surged through me with the realization that I had one shot, one last chance at life. Kicking my legs, I attempted to pull my lightened body out of the water. When the ice broke beneath me, I tried again knowing that I needed every bit of luck. Kicking vigorously beneath the surface, I clawed at the ice, and when the ice held, I carefully turned my torso ninety degrees until my legs were out of the water. Cautiously, but swiftly, I rolled away from the hole over the hard ice. Soon back on steady ice, I rose painfully to my feet, dressed in wet thermal underwear and socks.

I ran forward with all the energy I could muster, but to my horror, the hovercraft appeared above Glenn’s body. At the brink of exhaustion, I ran onward, up the embankment into knee-deep snow. As I struggled on the ascent, the four-pronged claw of the hovercraft lowered and wrapped around Glenn. I began leaping through the snow and soon reached more solid ground. With Glenn’s body rising out of the snow, I sprung forward, wrapping my arms around his legs. My crippled hands struggled for a better grip until they locked around his belt. His body continued to rise, resulting in me dangling a few feet above ground. Whether by choice of the claw operator or fate, Glenn’s body mercifully slipped from the steel jaws.

The pair of us dropped into a heap into the snow, and I began stripping the winter clothing from Glenn’s body without hesitation. Ignoring the blood on his jacket and the hovercraft floating overhead, I quickly began donning his snow pants. I next brushed off the snow from my thermal soaks and slipped them into the winter boots. When

I shook the snow off the winter jacket, I found the jacket heavy with blood but knew it would still keep me alive. I zipped up everything snug and then slipped on his gloves.

Moving inland for the shelter of pine trees, I could hear the claw descending once again to pick up Glenn's body, but I did not stop to watch. Every step I took hurt. I hadn't been in the water long enough to suffer frost bite, but the early warning signs were evident. Hobbling through the pine trees, I wiggled my toes and stretched my fingers. I made sure the hood of the jacket covered my ears.

Upon reaching a secluded spot, I assessed my situation. Glenn's clothes were large for me, but they would do. Their size did allow me to wiggle my fingers and toes more freely. The pain also told me that I would recover. Following my survival training taught to me by my father, I exercised in place out of the wind. I moved my digits, counting them repeatedly between sets of pushups and jumping jacks. Though exhausted, I kept moving with the knowledge that this was the only thing that would raise my body core temperature and keep me alive.

When my fingers and toes began to itch, I knew my body temperature had returned to normal. I collapsed to the ground and began shoveling snow into my mouth as I scanned the landscape for any movement.

Was that the big guy from District Ten? I pondered, trying to ignore the blood in Glenn's jacket. The sticky wetness seemingly pressed into my back, and I would have to accept this deathly reminder since blood does not evaporate like sweat.

Recalling the direction the tribute headed after killing Glen, my focus turned towards the location of my snow cave. It also dawned on me that a hovercraft has yet to appear at that site; this hovercraft was what Glenn had been pondering. Someone was still alive at the snow cave, and now the boy from District 10 was heading there to investigate. *He had to be*, I thought. *There are only a couple*

tributes left.

The cannon boomed, startling me to my feet.

I began to guess at what might have happened: *Did Boy from Ten kill the last survivor, someone who may have been expecting Glenn to return to the scene? Did a Career ambush Ten?* Using both hands, I slapped my head and said aloud, “Think. Think. Focus you idiot.”

Hearing the faint buzz of a hovercraft, I noticed the faint flashing lights floating over the location of my snow cave, indicating that the last surviving tribute had left the area.

Are they coming back here? Am I the last tribute preventing them from going home? Hyperventilating, I turned in small circles as I tried to reign in my emotions.

My imaginary Johanna screamed in my head, *Hide, you idiot.*

Contemplating the possible snowdrifts and pines under which I could hide, I nearly began to weep at the idea of the arduous tasks of digging another shelter. My hunger and struggle with hyperthermia had left me spent. For the first time, I found myself craving that poor rabbit. *Food!*

I turned to the lake, to the Cornucopia. *It's unguarded, but is someone returning there now?* I began sprinting for the lake. When I reached the ice, I fell onto my stomach, but let the momentum carry me until I was back on my feet.

Though night had descended on the arena, the golden color of the large Cornucopia reflected the ambient winter light as it rose out of the hazy darkness. I slid to a stop at the entrance and found a sparse setting. There were almost no weapons to be found except for a few knives piled in a wood crate. At the mouth of the cylindrical cone, I discovered a shallow depression roughly hacked out of the ice: a failed attempt at ice fishing I presumed. Deeper inside, more wood crates had been stacked to form a wall, beside which a wood ax leaned against the cold metal wall. On the floor, behind the crate

wall, branches from pine trees had been layered for bedding.

My snow cave would be much warmer than this, I thought.

Pausing to scan the lake, I returned to the crates to look for food. When I found the crates empty, I tore apart the pine branch floor. As I pulled up the last branch, an object wrapped in a silver parachute rolled onto the ice. Unwrapping the nylon fabric, I nearly wept when I found bread. I took a large bite as I again searched through the pine branches. Further inspection produced a smaller wrapped object that turned out to be cheese that had frozen rock hard. To soften it, I tucked the cheese into an inside jacket pocket, to be consumed once I was somewhere safe.

With increased urgency, I thought it best to return to shore and the shelter of trees. I cautiously peered out of the Cornucopia in search of movement across the ice. As I debated which direction to run, the nightly anthem began to play, which startled me since the time was much later than imagined in the dimly lit winter landscape. The seal of the Capitol floated in the night sky in the spot where the faces of those who died today would soon be displayed. Waiting for the completion of the music, I postponed my dash for shore, thinking it useful to know if more than two tributes remained. More importantly, I wanted to learn who would be hunting me.

The sky went blank, and after a brief agonizing pause, the faces of those who had departed this world for new adventures began to appear high above me. In ascending order of district, I recognized Paramore and Sheen of District 1, Valeria and Glenn of District 4, Ricky of District 6, Maeverly's friend Rye from 9, and finally the boy from District 10, Gavin.

I fell to my knees with the realization that Maeverly was still alive. I was still alive. We were the final two tributes. *But you're hurt. I saw them stab you.* On the brink of tears, I began slapping the ice with my gloved hand as I said aloud, "You won. You won. You're going home"

Jumping to my feet, I considered running back to our collapsed snow cave, but hesitated since the prior hovercraft meant that Maevery had left that area. Contemplating where to search, I suddenly realized what had to be done to finish this nightmare. Retrieving the wood ax from the Cornucopia, I headed for shore.

Leaving the biggest and heaviest log on shore, I began pulling my pile of pine and deciduous branches over the ice. This pile also contained various logs and thick branches scavenged from the trees along the shore. The heap slid easily over the ice, and I soon reached the ring of launch pads in the lake's center where I began stacking the wood before the Cornucopia.

Reflecting off the ice brilliantly, the resulting bonfire stretched upward. The bonfire of dead wood and dried branches crackled with the occasional loud pop as the flames continued to climb into the windless night. It had taken three trips, but I had no doubt that my fire could be seen through the winter haze from anywhere in the arena.

Sitting on a dense pine branch to keep my sweaty body insulated from the ice. I soaked up the warmth of the fire and smiled free of fear—ignoring all other worries for the moment. After some time, while staring at the thin layer of water forming harmlessly under the fire, I heard Maevery's call from across the lake.

“Hey, idiot. How about giving your district partner a hand.”

Scrambling to my feet, I spotted Maevery's silhouette moving near the shoreline, limping heavily. I grabbed the pine that served as my cushion and rushed towards her.

When she spotted my approach, she sat down onto the ice with a hard thump, groaning loudly in pain. She somehow smiled when I slid to a stop at her side, asking me, “Do you think your fire is big enough?”

“I wanted you to see it. I thought it better than stumbling through the dark looking for you.”

Maeverly shook her head. “A fire a faction that size could be seen from the mountain. It’s going to attract muttations.”

“I wanted it warm.” Glancing towards the mountain, I shrugged. “Plus, there has never been a sign of mutts near shore. From what I saw of them, they were designed to roam the mountains, not the lake.”

“Well, we might as well use your little fire to cook this.” Maeverly lifted the rabbit.

“Is it still safe to eat?”

“Who cares. I’m starving.”

“I found bread and cheese in the Career camp. I saved you half. Come, get on the branch; I’ll pull you the rest of the way.”

Once Maeverly centered herself on the makeshift stretcher, I gripped the base of the branch and began dragging her towards the fire. “How bad are you hurt?”

“Bad. I was stabbed in the side. I’m surprised that I haven’t bled to death by now.”

“The knife must have missed all the major arteries.”

“Perhaps. If I don’t make it till morning, you’ll know why.”

“You’ll make it.”

After a long pause, Maeverly finally asked, “What happened to Glenn? Did you kill him?”

“No. I did try losing him in the thin ice near shore, over by the inlet of land, but I ended up falling through instead.”

Maeverly chuckled at the insanity, groaning from the pain of her laughter. “How did you get away?”

“I didn’t,” I replied. “I had closed my eyes and was waiting for the dark sleep to come when the cannon fired for someone else. Glenn thought it was for me, so he moved back onto shore to wait for the hovercraft to remove my body. Someone then snuck up and killed him. I think it was the boy from District Ten. When that guy took off towards the snow cave, I stripped off my wet and heavy winter gear and crawled out of the water. I ran for Glenn as the Hovercraft

appeared. I even had to fight with the claw until it dropped us to the ground. As you can see, I'm now wearing Glenn's winter clothing."

Maevery glanced over her shoulder. "Is that dark patch on the back of your jacket blood?"

"Yes." After a long pause in our conversation, I needed to ask, "What happened at the snow cave?"

"Everything became quiet after Glenn chased after you. But, I was paralyzed from the pain from my wound. I pressed my hand against it to slow the bleeding, but to be honest, I thought I was done for and crawled to Rye. I brushed the snow from his face. He looked as if he was sleeping."

When Maevery failed to continue, I asked in a consoling tone, "There were two cannon shots when I was at the lake. Who was the first shot for?"

"I think the guy from District One. He never moved again after Rye attacked him, but I thought I could see his faint breath. Must have taken some time to bleed out."

"The second cannon?"

Maevery voice softened. "The boy from Ten. You were right; he snuck up to investigate what had happened since the hovercraft had not removed any bodies. He must have known that one of us was still alive. He began spearing us one at a time as he searched for weapons and food. I buried my face in the snow to hide my breath and played dead as he worked his way closer."

"How did you defeat him?"

"I didn't," replied Maevery, her voice rough with emotion. "Rye did. Right before the boy was going to spear me, Rye's leg twitched involuntarily, probably from the onset of rigor mortis. Gavin spun around and speared Rye instead. This allowed me to lunge upward and stab him in the neck. When he tried to swing around to spear me, I drove my knife deeper, and he dropped like a wet towel. The cannon fired for him seconds later." Maevery became flush with

emotion. Wiping her tears, she said, “Even in death, Rye saved me.”

Reaching the bonfire, I pulled the make shift stretcher parallel to the fire. I knelt before Maevery and said, “No matter what happens; Rye will always be the true victor of the games.”

Maevery nodded as she said in a soft tone. “I agree.”

I retrieved the bread and handed it to Maevery, who immediately took a large bite. I then asked, “Where were you sheltering?”

With slight difficulty, Maevery swallowed her bit of bread and replied, “Not knowing if you or Glenn had survived, I simply knew that I had to hide. As you can see, I did not have the energy to run, so I hobbled into the clearing and walked over the exposed prairie grass to hide my tracks. I soon found a good pine tree to hide under. After I saw the faces in the sky and realizing that you were still alive, I passed out from exhaustion. I awoke later to the large fire in the center of the lake and knew it had to be you.”

I removed the softened cheese from my pocket and broke it in half. “Here; this is to celebrate District Seven’s victory.”

Maevery sniffed the cheese but failed to smile.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she said.

I tapped her leg. “You’re going home.”

“No I’m not. I’m getting weaker by the minute.”

“If you want to take me out right now, I won’t be mad. I won’t even try to save myself.”

Maevery brow furled before she struck me on the shoulder, hard. “Don’t say that. I couldn’t have asked for a more trusted and loyal district partner. I will never hurt you.”

Smiling, I began rubbing my shoulder. “You just did.”

“Shut up.”

“See, you’re perking up. The bleeding must have stopped. You just need food. We should throw the rabbit over the fire.”

Maevery unzipped her jacket and nimbly exposed her side to me.

Illuminated by the bonfire light, I could see a giant purple contusion, the discoloring stretching largely in all directions. Without needing to look closer, I could tell her wound was bad and still bleeding, though slowly. When I diverted my eyes, Maevery zipped up her jacket and said, “Find me a branch, and I’ll attach the rabbit.”

“Alright.”

As the gutted rabbit was prepared, Maevery looked at me as if she could read my mind. When I began refusing to meet her gaze, she said, “Don’t be a hero. Don’t think you can trick me into killing you. I’m not going to fight you. We let the arena decide who goes home. Do you understand?”

“Okay.” With a simple nod, I exchanged a smile with my friend and repeated her words. “We let the arena decide.”

Chapter 15

Maevery scooted closer to the bonfire and carefully placed the rabbit near the flames at the edge. “This should cook relatively quickly. Your fire is impressive for one person.”

“I tried. The yearly winter solstice fire on the lake is my favorite thing about our district. I like how that bonfire lights up the winter sky.”

Maevery gazed out across the ice. “Yours is lighting up this lake quite nicely.”

“Hmm. I have one more trip of wood. I found a nice log that should burn slow until the morning. I’ll fetch it after we eat.” The smell of the roasting rabbit caused my mouth to salivate, forcing me to pull out my cheese and take a nibble, chewing as slow as my hunger would permit.

Maevery followed suit as she brought out her cheese.

As the rabbit continued to roast, we sat in silence with nothing more to say. I was happy to have Maevery sitting next to me and did not worry at what might happen next. I stared at the flames and became lost in thought.

When Maevery repositioned the rabbit, she noticed my trance state and had to tap my shoulder to get my attention. “Hey, Pahl, are you okay?”

“Ya, sorry. I was just thinking about school.”

“Why. Are you worried about homework?”

I smiled. “No. I was just thinking about a book Mrs. Pavelko had lent me to read. It was about some ancient writer named Mark Twain. Have you heard of him?”

“No.”

“There was a quote in the book that I have never forgotten. Twain wrote: *The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why.* I’m not trying to sound morbid,

but sitting here at the end of our Hunger Games, I find it profound.”

With a thoughtful look, Maevery began to stare into the fire.

“Very.”

My gaze drifted up to the night sky, for I hoped to see a comet, my comet. Through the winter haze, only faint stars were to be found.

Soon after, the rabbit was deemed cooked by Maevery, and she proceeded to pass me meat since I was still too squeamish to pull off my own.

Mostly due to extreme hunger, I found the meat pleasing—even finger licking worthy. “This isn’t so bad, greasy though.”

“It will do.”

I began to smile with a sudden realization. “Since all of Panem is watching us right now, should we take the time to thank Blight and Johanna?”

“Why? I didn’t get any gifts. Did you?”

“No, but they did help us prepare and make District Seven this year’s winning district.”

Maevery’s district pride brought out her smile. She lifted a piece of rabbit into the air and thanked our mentors one at a time.

I raised a piece of meat and followed suit. “Thank you guys, and screw you sponsors.”

Though it clearly hurt, Maevery chuckled. “Maybe you shouldn’t cast off the sponsor so quickly.”

I shrugged. “What are they going to do? We’re at the finish line.”

“Who knows; the Gamemakers could send mutations down here. They might even be offended by your fire.”

Remembering how the Gamemakers refused to let me read the old poems at my private session, I began to sneer. “Screw them too. Their crappy games went too fast. They probably have tons of advertising that still hasn’t aired. I wouldn’t be surprised if they let us freeze for a couple more days just so they can broadcast the commercials.”

Touching her injured side, Maevery grimaced. “I’m not going to last days. I’ll be lucky to last until morning.”

My smile lessened. “Maybe someone will send you medicine.”

“Pahl, the wound is deep. They would have to send a miracle.”

“I’m sure they could send you something to buy you time. I don’t

know how Capitol medicine works, but there has to be something. Besides, you look well to me.”

Quietly, Maevery returned to her cheese; however, she was not eating like a hungry person should, for she nibbled her food ever so slowly, occasionally appearing nauseous.

I began to feel the urgency of my district partner’s situation. She was stable at the moment, but the slow bleed would eventually weaken her further—if not kill her. I stared briefly at the flames before rising to my feet. “I’m going to get the last log so we can have fire through to morning.”

“Should we sleep out here tonight?” She looked back at the Cornucopia ice box. “Maybe we should find shelter?”

“Na,” I replied. “It’s not windy, and we have plenty of heat; besides, we have no one left to hide from. We can never hide from the Gamemakers, so we might as well enjoy this bonfire.”

“Okay.” Maevery smiled, appearing contented.

I turned for shore and promptly headed for fallen log, whence it had been first discovered. Having shortened the length with the ax earlier, I carefully lifted the heavy section of wood onto my shoulders, its length matching my height. I began treading through the snow towards the lake, but as I began to descend the embankment, I dropped the heavy log when my feet slipped. With a sweaty brow and trembling hands, I unzipped my jacket and opened the top of my snow pants before proceeding to heave the heavy log back onto my shoulders. I then carefully turned for the bonfire in the distance, shuffling my boots over the ice

With no warning, the ice gave away beneath me, the added weight on my shoulders driving me down like a hammered nail. My fall through the ice happened so swiftly that my head dunked briefly beneath the water. Resurfacing under the log, the shock of the cold squeezed my chest as the icy water rapidly flooded my clothing. Groaning from the needle like pain, I was debating my next course of action when I realized that I was stuck under the log, the branches forming a cage around me. I pushed on the wood to find it lodged into the ice directly over the hole. Pressing my body against the edge of the ice, I found the ice too thick to carve out a larger opening. I was trapped. Realizing the situation, I called out to Maevery. With a

growing panic, I continued to push on the log to no avail and began hollering continually for my district partner.

Maeverly voice echoed across the ice as she approached slowly. “Pahl?”

“Here. I broke through the ice.” Led by my words, I watched as Maeverly tuned in my direction, but when the surface of the ice began to bounce faintly, I called out, “Maeverly stop. You're on the thin ice.”

“What happened?”

“I screwed up.” With hypothermia already setting in, my words were beginning to slur. “I thought I was clear of this thin patch.”

“I’ll come around the other side.”

“No. The ice is too thin. Go see if you can find a rope in the Cornucopia.”

Maeverly glared at me, for she knew that she would find no rope; she knew what I had done.

With increased slurring, I fumbled to speak when I said, “Tell my dad sorry.”

“No.” Her displeasure quite clear, Maeverly surprised me when she began limping forward towards me.

“The ice!”

“Shut up. I’m lighter than you, and I’m not carrying a heavy log.”

I stared wide-eyed at the faintly bouncing ice surface as Maeverly approached undeterred. When she knelt before me, the ice creaked in several directions. “It’s going to break,” I pleaded.

“Maybe I can hook my jacket around one of the larger branches and roll the log off you.”

“You’ll just get us both killed for my stupidity. Save yourself.”

“No!” barked Maeverly as she rose to her feet. “I’m getting you out.” She began unzipping her jacket when her hand stopped, her entire body suspended. Staring towards shore, terror filled my friend’s eyes.

“What is it?” I mumbled.

An ear piercing scream told me everything, for the Gamemakers had sent the muttations down the mountain.

“Run, Maeverly!”

Fueled by adrenalin, Maeverly ignored her injuries and turned to

run.

Turning my head in search of the muttations, I found the log blocking my peripheral view. Frozen to the ice ledge, I could not peer over nor turn—despite the adrenaline now flooding my body. Indiscriminate winter showed mercy to none, and she was tightening her grip on me by the second.

When I began to hear the sound of ice picks scraping ice, I knew unmistakably that the muttations had reached the lake—that a violent end did await me. My body shook violently from fear and cold as I released a guttural scream of hopelessness. Unable to do anything, I closed my eyes with the expectation of the inevitable when I heard the serrated legs step over me. To my horror, I opened my eyes to find two muttations stepping past me in pursuit of Maevery.

“No! Attack me! Attack me!” I tried to shout. My fear was immediately replaced with rage, but it was too late. I could not free myself from the freezing water; I could not do anything to help Maevery.

As the muttations pursued my district partner over the ice, their light, agile bodies would occasionally stagger, for their legs—designed to scale jagged mountains—were evidently inept at walking across smooth ice. Though their handicap on ice was a benefit to Maevery, she was wounded, and the muttations moved well enough that they would eventually catch her.

Furious at myself, *guilt* promptly replaced my fear as I watched with dread the silhouettes circling around the bonfire, wondering how long my friend could continue outrunning the muttations.

Maevery’s shadow seemed to weave amongst the mutation’s larger silhouettes, keeping just out of reach of their serrated arms. As her grunts of exertion echoed across the ice, she somehow struck one of the muttations, the creature’s shrill filling the night air as it tumbled over with one less leg. However, the creature soon found its way onto its three remaining legs, its head snapping aggressively at my district partner.

Tears flowed over my cheeks as I feared for my friend. I tried to scream, but the cold had reduced my voice to a pathetic wheeze that sounded more like grieving. I could do nothing for Maevery...except

die.

Despite my weakened muscles, I attempted to push against the ice and found that my jacket had fused to the ice. Though drowning myself appeared impossible, I knew that the cold was already killing me; I only had to let it. With a calming sigh, I looked up at the night's sky one last time. With faint stars peering through the haze, I closed my eyes and let my body become lax. The icy pain had already numbed my body, so when I mentally let go, a tranquil peace enveloped me. Slipping into an eternal slumber, my hearing faded into silence when I heard for the last time the faint boom of the cannon.

A female voice called from the darkness. "Pahl? Pahl?"

A white light became evident before me. Wondering if I had arrived, a cold hardness began to creep into my consciousness.

The woman spoke again, "Pahl, can you hear me?"

"Mom?"

"Pahl, you have to wake up now."

"What?" The white light grew in intensity until my world became blinding. I turned my head away as my eyes flitted open. Leaning over me, I found an mature female in surgical scrubs.

The woman gently took hold of my chin. "You have to listen to me. We have no time."

My eyes drifted around a room of sparse walls constructed of unpainted concrete. Beside me, on a small rolling table, a small machine sat with a pair of rubber hoses leading from it. "Where am I?"

"You are under the arena. The hovercraft picked you up after your heart stopped. The Peacekeepers brought you to me to...clean you up."

"Maevery?" I tried to sit up, but my muscles did not respond as they should.

The woman placed a hand upon my chest. "She's going to be okay. They are flying her back to the Capitol for medical treatment."

“She won?”

“Yes.”

“But I’m not dead.”

The woman leaned over to me. “The Gamemakers think you are. Your heart stopped long enough to sound the cannon. I suspect it started and stopped randomly until they wheeled you in here. My duties always begin with confirming a tribute’s death by stethoscope and wrist pulse. When I heard the faint beat of your heart, I immediately gave you an epinephrine injection.”

I noticed the induced flutter of my heart as my brain digested the information. When I turned to inspect the other side of the room, a pine coffin leaning against the wall greeted me. I turned to the woman. “Who are you?”

I’m Dr. Galen. I’m the coroner of the Hunger Games.

Again I tried to sit up only to be held down by the doctor.

“Shhhhh. I’m your friend. I’m going to get you out of here.”

My head began to spin. “I’m dead. This cannot be happening.”

“It is happening. And if you want to get out of here alive, you will do what I say. What is your name? Can you tell me where you are?”

“Um...my name is Pahl Calis. I’m from District Seven. I just died in the Hunger Games. I thought did.” With the room continuing to spin, I rubbed my face with both my hands and next discovered a small square bandage on my arm. Traces of smeared blood had dried around the bandage.

The doctor pointed to a small metal tray containing a scalpel and tiny pill shaped gadget. “After the epinephrine injection, I cut the tracker from your arm. I was rushed, so there may be a scar.” The doctor then shined a penlight in my eyes, commenting on my good pupil response before hurriedly retrieving a syringe. “I don’t believe you suffered any frostbite, but I’m going to give you a precautionary shot to counter any capillary effects you might have suffered.”

“You cannot treat frostbite with a shot.”

“We can in the Capitol.” The doctor inserted a biting needle into my arm, the sting growing in intensity as she pushed down the plunger.

I had been shivering uncontrollably on the cold metal table, but the injection quickly began working its magic as medicated warmth

spread from my arm to my heart, and back out to my fingers and toes.

Just as I was beginning to calm, heavy footsteps out in the hall caused the doctor to lean close to my ear. She whispered, "It's a Peacekeeper. Play dead if you want to live."

I closed my eyes just as the Peacekeeper entered the room through a set of double doors. "Sorry to interrupt, doc, but I've been ordered to verify that the tribute is dead. The boys upstairs say that the computers may have detected something with the tracker."

The doctor retrieved my bloody tracker from the metal tray. "My fault. I wanted to see what the current trackers look like so I cut this boy's out. The computers must have detected the pulse in my fingers."

"Oh. Okay. So, he's dead."

"He's dead. Would you like to see his heart? I can cut him open if you like."

"Ewe. Show some respect, doc. I kind of liked the kid. Had he lived, I would have made a fortune on my side bet."

"Sorry for your loss," said the doctor.

"Maybe next year. I'll tell the Gamemakers that he's confirmed dead. Give us a holler once you've box him up."

"Will do," replied the doctor. Once the double doors became still, Dr. Galen took hold of my hand. "It's safe. How are you feeling?"

My eyes sprung open as I inhaled deeply. "I think that I'm going to have a nervous breakdown."

"I wouldn't blame you if you do."

"Can I sit up?"

"You shouldn't in case someone comes back."

Glancing at the double doors, I whispered. "How are you going to get me out of here?"

The doctor nodded towards the coffin. "It will get you back to the Capitol. From there, I'll find you somewhere safe to hide."

I stared fearfully at the coffin. "Does this happen often?"

The doctor smiled nervously. "No. Never. I'm not even certain I can get you back to the Capitol, but I have escorted other coffins, the final ones, back to the Capitol. There is no security in regards to dead tributes, so I'm fairly confident that I can divert your coffin

somewhere safe to let you out.”

At a loss for words, I stared at the woman.

“I’m your friend,” she said. “And I’m not alone. There are others that can help you.”

“Can’t I hide out here?”

“Here in the mountains? It will be extremely hard to survive on your own.”

“I’m from District Seven. I can survive in the forest.”

“This isn’t District Seven,” retorted the doctor, squeezing my hand. “I think you should come back with me where I and my friends can help you. Maybe we could set you up with a new life, a new identity, I don’t know. We will try; that is all I can promise, but it is up to you. Unfortunately, you must decide in the next few minutes. I’m afraid that the Peacekeepers will expect my call to collect your coffin within the hour.”

Overwhelmed with uncertainty and doubt, I wanted to leap from the metal table and run. I nervously looked about the room until my eyes focused on machine with two rubber hoses. “What’s that for?”

“It’s an embalming machine,” replied the coroner. “It removes your blood and replaces it with formaldehyde.”

My head continued to spin, unable to comprehend what was happening. Feeling very much lost and alone, I began to sob. I pounded the table feebly with my fist, expelling the fear and death of the arena with hushed wails and endless tears.

As the doctor consoled me, she whispered in my ear, “How about you come back with me. Let me help you.”

With no one else to turn to, I continued to sob in the arms of a stranger, nodding my consent.

Chapter 16

Once I regained my composure, Dr. Galen moved to a cabinet to collect an off-white set of plain pajamas. When she handed me the cheap clothing, she said, “You’ll wear these. All the tributes sent home in coffins are dressed in plain attire. You’ll have to play the part of corpse until I can let you out of the coffin.”

When I sat up, much of my clothing fell away from my body, having been cut along the sides.

The doctor pointed to large hospital scissors on a near table. “The uniforms are simply cut off for easy removal. I had cut yours before discovering your pulse.”

“Oh, okay.” With trembling hands, I peeled off my remaining clothes down to my underwear, which I held in place with my hands. “Do you have underwear?”

“Sorry, no. You’ll have to go without until I get you Capitol clothes.”

As I donned the frightening thin pajamas, Dr. Galen moved the light pine coffin onto a stretcher before removing the lid. She took a simple white sheet and began lining the box. When satisfied with the fabric placement, the doctor gestured for me to crawl inside. “You won’t be in here for more than a couple hours.”

Gingerly, I crawled into the coffin and sat down. Ever so slowly, I reclined. My hands shook as I crossed them over my chest.

“You can move quietly to keep your circulation flowing, but if they open your coffin for inspection, leave your arms at your sides”

“Ah, right.” I raised a hand when the doctor reached for the lid. “How about air?”

“These are cheap coffins, you need not worry.” The doctor observed me for a moment, and then changing her mind, she set the lid aside against the wall. “Let me give you a sedative.” Crossing

the room, she opened a black bag resting beside a sink and retrieved a medical dispenser that I recognized from the Training Center from when I had broken nose reset. The device contained the most common medicines, all of which could be easily changed within with the touch of a button. “This medicine will give you a sense of peace and prevent you from panicking. You shouldn’t fall asleep, which is best since we cannot risk you snoring. Moreover, you should make you feel warm, which will prevent goose bumps should you get cold. You will also become very tranquil. This will help you play dead should someone open the lid.”

“Okay.” I pulled aside my pajama top to expose my shoulder only to see the doctor hesitate.

“Do you need to pee?” she asked.

Somehow, the words awoke my bladder. “Now that you’ve mentioned it, yes.”

The doctor’s eyes shifted to the double doors and then back to me. “It’s too risky to use the restroom across the hall. Use the sink.”

After urinating into a large metal sink, I returned to the coffin to receive my injection; after which, I readjusted my pajamas and laid back into the coffin. Almost immediately, the feeling of calmness washed over me.

The doctor set the coffin lid into place. Peering inside once more, she noticed my reaction to the medicine. “Um, try not to smile so much.”

I pulled on my face. “This drug is wonderful.”

“That’s why so many are addicted to it. Now, play dead.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

In my dark confines, I flinched as the doctor began hammering the first nail into the lid. After a dozen or so loud nails, I heard her call up to the Peacekeepers that I was ready to be collected. Though the medicine effective, the drug’s effects lessened greatly once the Peacekeepers wheeled me out of the room, even less so when I was

roughly deposited into the cargo hold of the hovercraft.

An agonizing hour later, the hovercraft landed—presumably in the Capitol, and by this time, my hands were again trembling as the Peacekeepers clumsily transferred my coffin to a rolling cart. Soon after, I heard Dr. Galen as she convinced the Peacekeepers to let her transport me the rest of the way to the train, informing the guards that she had special instructions for the train conductor. The peacekeepers were hesitant, but eventually submitted to her authority once she started using doctor speak and threatening the Peacekeepers that they'd be responsible if something should go wrong with my corpse.

As Dr. Galen pushed my coffin, I began to hear the train announcements spew out from speakers along the train platform, but I could also hear automobile traffic.

As the coffin came to a stop, the doctor whispered into the pine box, “I have a friend coming with a hearse to pick you up. It will just be a few more minutes.”

I did not last a few more minutes, for the drugs, the stress, and the exhaustion had finally taken their toll. Unavoidably, I passed out.

When I awoke in the coffin, I found that the lid had been removed. I sat up to discover a tiny room littered with cardboard boxes and plastic storage containers. Amongst the clutter, Dr. Galen paced nervously under a single light.

The doctor noticed me and approached. “How are you?”

“Okay. Where are we?”

“In a storage shed that I lease.” The doctor reached for a folded set of clothes from atop a box. “I found you some clothes.”

With the medicine still in my system, I dizzily crawled out of the coffin with the help of the doctor and began changing my attire.

“What happens next?”

“I contacted a friend. He’s coming to meet us now. He should have some ideas on how to relocate you.”

Once I had dressed, the doctor handed me a couple bottles of water and paper bag that contained a simple sandwich from a takeout restaurant. My appetite awoke at the smell of the bread, and I swiftly ate—despite the doctor’s warnings to take it slow.

As began emptying the second bottle of water, the door to the storage unit rose. Out of blinding sunlight, the shadow of a man appeared as the door lowered behind him. He had a bulging stomach that stretched his worn clothing, which seemed to fit one size too small. In the dim light of the storage unit, his face looked vaguely familiar.

The man’s brow knitted with confusion as he returned my stare. “That’s impossible.” He turned to the doctor. “How?”

“The icy water slowed his heart, which tricked the tracker’s sensors. I believe his heart actually stopped for several seconds at a time. From what I can deduce, no brain damage has occurred.”

Rubbing his jaw, the man nervously shifted his weight several times before staggering forward. He brushed his unkempt bangs to the side to study me closer. He turned to the doctor and asked, “How did you get him out of the arena?”

Dr. Galen pointed to the coffin. “I diverted it from the train station and had a friend deliver it here.”

Gnawing his lip, the man took a deep breath as his hands came to rest on his hips. “Um, sweetheart, they are going to look inside the coffin when it arrives in District Seven.”

The woman frowned at the man. “I gave the train conductor an urn full of ashes, teeth, and bone fragments, a cremated John Doe from my hospital. The conductor didn’t think twice since I cremate those tributes who are mutilated. I even included a note of condolences declaring that the cremation was necessary due to vascular damage

that prevented prompt embalming, that time prevented an alternative method since he was the last tribute to die.”

“They could still do DNA verification.”

“In the districts?” The doctor shook her head. “Only the Capitol would ask for this, and they have no more interest in the lad.” Dr. Galen glanced my way. “No offense, Pahl.”

“None taken.” I returned my gaze to the man, still unable to recall his name.

The paunchy man approached the woman. “Okay. So why am I here? I missed my train. There will be questions when I show up at the station later.”

“Tell them that you were drunk, that you overslept.”

“That’s what I tell them every year.”

“So you have nothing to worry about.” The doctor bit her lip as she readied her idea. “I was hoping that you could help me relocate the lad? Give him a new identity.”

“What? Everyone will notice him in District Twelve. We don’t have enough people that would allow him blend in. Even our inattentive Peacekeepers will notice.”

Dr. Galen released a long sigh as she began expanding her idea. “How about Eight or Eleven? They have larger populations.”

“Have you ever been to Eleven, doc? I wouldn’t send my enemies there. Eight might work, but getting the kid there will be next to impossible.”

The man’s name finally popped into my head, causing me to gasp. “You’re Haymitch Abernathy.”

“Yes,” said the man with a spurious smile. “Sorry that I don’t have a prize for you.”

My eyes began to shift between the sophisticated doctor and drunk. “Are you two a couple?”

The woman smiled. “No. Just friends.”

When I continued to eye the two suspiciously, the swaying man

pulled up his shirt to reveal a set of scars that ran across his copious abdomen. “Who do you think put my guts back inside? Had this doctor not been at the arena to stop my hemorrhaging, the second Quarter Quell would not have had a victor.”

Though his scars explained the friendship, the situation continued to nag me, which the two adults easily sensed.

The doctor shared a look with Haymitch before saying to him, “Just what he needs to know, no more.”

Haymitch shrugged. “It will be our heads if they catch him.”

The doctor to my side and took my hand. “Haymitch and I belong to an organization that wishes for change in the government. We would like see the government be more inclusive of the districts, let the districts be self-governing. Moreover, we want to end the Hunger Games. All this requires immense secrecy.”

“I won’t tell anyone. I swear.”

The doctor smiled as she gave my hand a friendly squeeze. “I know.” She slowly turned to Haymitch. “Okay, how do we get him to District Eight?”

Haymitch shifted his gaze between the doctor and me, appearing even more perplexed. “I have no idea. We have people inside the rail system, a conductor I think. You could message the organization and inform them that you have person in need of secret transport. They must have a protocol for situations like this.”

As the adults thought openly for a solution, it occurred to me that I had no interest in going District 8—not that I had anything against the district. Realizing that I had cheated death—and the Hunger Games, I began to smile since I had not taken a life as the government had expected of me. My hands were clean, and my destiny my own.

Haymitch tapped my shoulder. “Hey, sunshine. What are you smiling about?”

“I want to stay in the Capitol.”

“What? These people just tried to kill you for entertainment.”

I shrugged. “No one is perfect. Besides, I like the city, especially at night with all the lights. And the food.” The more I thought about it, the more I smiled. “Think about it; there is no better spot to hide than right under their noses.”

As the adults stood silent, contemplating my suggestion, I added, “I can blend in if given a chance.”

Haymitch shook his head. “You’re a hero. You’d be spotted as soon as you walk out of here.”

“I’m a hero?”

The man huffed at my question. “You and Maevery were fan favorites. Your father cannot stop praising you whenever the press interviews him. He said that he could not have wished for a better son.”

My brow furled at the idea. “Really? Are you sure you’re not talking about Maevery’s dad?”

“Nope. Everyone in District Seven is singing your praises for your loyalty towards Maevery.”

“Even after my disastrous ending.”

Haymitch eyed me knowingly. “Yes, even after *that*, ending.”

“You weren’t fooled; were you?”

Haymitch shook his head. “It fooled the audience, and that is all that matters.”

“I did it for Maevery.”

Placing a hand on my shoulder, Haymitch smiled at me. “Very few could ever be as selfless as you. And that is why you cannot stay in the Capitol.”

Dr. Galen eyes brightened as she turned to me. She gripped my chin and began studying my profile. “I have a plastic surgeon friend who could give him a new face. He owes me a big favor.”

Haymitch stepped back to study my face. “Can he fix his ears?”

Touching my ears, I asked, “What’s wrong with them?”

“Nothing, sport,” replied Haymitch. “They’re perfect.”

The doctor grabbed one of my hands and turned it upward. “His finger prints could be distorted; even his vocal cords could be altered to change his voice.”

“What about his genetic markers?” asked Haymitch. “If he ever has to provide a genetic sample, the computer database will detect him.”

“Even genetic markers can be manipulated. It just takes longer.”

Haymitch began to pace in the small room. “What will he do for work? He has no school history.”

The doctor stood silent in thought when she snapped her fingers. “He’s from the suburbs, orphaned, and raised on a horse ranch outside the Capitol, hence his rural accent. He had a troubled past, but has now righted himself and wants to go back to school to be a....”

When the adults turned to me, I said without hesitation, “Architect.”

The doctor smiled. “That’s a lofty goal. Are you willing to go to university?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Haymitch appeared doubting. “He has a district education. Can he pass the entrance exams?”

The doctor smile grew as the plan solidified in her head. “He survived the Hunger Games. He can do anything he wants. Pahl, are you willing to attend refresher courses that would prepare you for university?”

“Yes. Do think I could minor in literature?”

“You can do whatever you like.” The doctor turned to her friend. “What say you, Haymitch?”

“If they catch him, it will cost you your life.”

“I know.” When the doctor looked at me, her expression reminded me of my mother. “If anyone is worth the risk, Pahl is.”

Haymitch sighed.

“Away,” continued the doctor, “isn’t this what we signed up for.” The doctor removed a small necklace from around her neck and passed it to me. On the end, there was a tiny charm made from a blue crystal.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Poison. If you are ever discovered, all you have to do is bite the crystal. You will be dead in an instant.”

A chill ran through my body. Looking up from crystal, I gazed at the two people risking their lives for me. I closed my hand around the charm. “I will not let either of you down.”

“I know.” The woman turned to Haymitch. “I have the plastic surgeon, and I even know the man who breeds and maintains the horses for the chariot rides at the opening ceremonies. Pahl will be able recoup at his horse ranch after surgery as he prepares for university. We just need someone who can get him an official Capitol identity.”

Gnawing his lip, Haymitch’s displeasure remained. With a reluctant sigh, he said, “I might be able to propose this idea to my other contact. We can see what he thinks.”

“But?” asked Dr. Galen.

“I think the lad will have to spend rest of his life in the woods. Perhaps he could travel out past Twelve.”

“I know where you are referring,” said the doctor. “From what I’ve heard, things aren’t all that great.”

“You mean District Thirteen?” I asked. “Isn’t the land still radioactive from the war?”

Haymitch eyed me, but did not answer my question. He looked to his friend and said, “I’ll ask my contact. We let him decide since he too will be risking his life in this little endeavor.”

Dr. Galen looked to me. When I gave her my supportive nod, she said, “Okay, Haymitch; we’ll wait and see what your contact thinks.”

Epitaph

I awoke in my bed to find a youngish looking man quietly reading from a tablet in guest chair at the foot of my bed. The stranger wore earth tone colored clothing in the minimalist style, his hair close-cropped.

A nurse entered and promptly noticed that I had awakened. “Hey there, Stuart. How do you feel?”

I touched the medicated bandages covering my face. “Just a little sore.” The sound of my new voice gave me pause. “Um. Nothing terrible.”

“Good,” said the nurse. “I’ll let the doctor know.” When the man rose from the guest chair and moved to my bedside, my nurse smiled at him for a moment before saying to me, “Your cousin was telling me that you plan on going to university for architecture.”

“Yes,” I replied, glancing up at my cousin—whom I had never met before. “I look forward to getting back to school.”

“You should,” said the nurse. “My younger brother is studying engineering there. He loves it.”

Staring at my *cousin*, I could not help but wonder how this couth man could possibly know Haymitch Abernathy.

The nurse glanced at a computer monitor that displayed my vitals above my bed. “Everything looks good. I have to finish my rounds, but I’ll be back in a bit with your lunch, if you are able to eat. We’ll keep the first two meals simple, but you can have ice cream if you want.”

“Ice cream? Yes, please.”

“Alright. I’ll make sure they send up a small bowl.”

I raised a hand with one vital request. “No nuts, please.”

“Are you allergic to them?”

“No. I just ate too many before coming here. I don’t want to eat

nuts ever again.”

“I’ll inform the kitchen.” The nurse smiled as she turned to leave only to pause under the doorway with a thought. “Oh, just now, I was going over your medical records and noticed that there are no before pictures of your face on file. The doctors often keep before and after pictures of facial procedures. Do you recall if the doctor took before pictures?”

“Um...no.” Inhaling deeply, I felt reassured by my cousin’s relaxed demeanor. “I can send him one from home if he needs it.”

“No biggy. I’ll just mentioned it to the surgeon and let him decide. I’ll see you in a bit.”

Once my nurse departed, my cousin slid the visitor chair closer to my bedside and sat down with legs crossed. He smiled and said, “Don’t worry about the photo.”

“I’m not.”

“How are you doing?”

Gently touching my face again, I replied, “Just a little sore.”

The man tapped his temple. “I meant up here.”

I glanced at the closed door to my hospital room. “I’m okay, considering.”

“Most victors need consoling after their games.”

“I’m not a victor.”

“I disagree.” The man removed my blue crystal necklace from his breast pocket, casually placing the pendant in my hand. “Here; you don’t want to lose this. I found it on the nightstand and didn’t want someone unaware swiping it.”

Accepting the charm, I wrapped the chain loosely around my hand. “Do you have one of these?”

My cousin held up his hand to reveal a similar blue crystal set flush in a simple gold ring. Folding his hands in his lap, the man looked up at my name on the computer monitor. “Why did you pick the name Stuart Picasso?”

The sound of my new name made me smile; however, my tender face made me groan in turn. “Um, my best friend in school once joked that if he was a spy, that Stu Pidasso would be his undercover name.”

“I see.”

“Do you think that I could ever contact him, or perhaps my stylist? Not right now, of course, but in a year or two?”

“No,” replied my cousin. “You know it would only guarantee their deaths.”

Understanding this to be true, I sighed. “It was nice seeing on the TV how my father welcomed Maevery at the train station when she arrived back home. It was also nice seeing Maevery consoling Birch and Mrs. Pavelko. I hope they become friends.”

“Your father is quite proud of you.”

“Proud of his dead son. I would have never seen that pride had I not lost my mind and volunteered for the games.”

“He’s proud of you none the less. You should accept it.”

I let myself smile, for I had accepted it. With welling eyes, I took a calming breath and said softly, “Rest in peace, Pahl Calis.”

“And long live Stuart,” added my *cousin* with a simple smile.

Since I would never see Dr. Galen again, I realized that this man sitting next to me was currently my only friend. I cupped my hands in my lap and asked, “What do I call you?”

With somewhat a surprised look, the man straightened in his chair. “I apologize; I seem to have forgotten my manners.” The man leaned forward with an outstretched hand. “My friends call me Cinna.”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to everyone at Fanfiction.net.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stuart Pidasso would like to say that he's *no one*.