

in the Capitol, but the time line had been extended now that the Academy students were involved. It had been decided that each mentor was to interview their tribute and would be given five minutes to present them to Panem on a live television program. If people had someone to root for, they might actually have an interest in watching the Hunger Games. If all went well, it would be prime-time viewing — the mentors might even be invited to comment on their tributes during the Games. Coriolanus promised himself that his five minutes would be the standout of the night.

Another hour crawled by and he was just about ready to give up, when a train whistle sounded deep in the tunnel. Those first few months of the war, the whistle had signaled his father's arrival from the battlefield. His father had felt that, as a munitions tycoon, military service enhanced his legitimacy in the family business. With an excellent head for strategy, nerves of steel, and a commanding presence, he'd quickly climbed the ranks. To publicly display their commitment to the Capitol cause, the Snow family would all travel to the station, Coriolanus in his velvet suit, to await the great man's return. Until the day the train brought only the news that a rebel bullet had found its mark. It was hard, in the Capitol, to find a spot that wasn't linked to a terrible memory, but this was particularly bad. He could not say he had felt great love for the remote, strict man, but he had certainly felt protected by him. His death was associated with a fear and a vulnerability that Coriolanus had never been able to shake off.

The whistle blew as the train sped into the station and screeched to a halt. It was a short train, only an engine and two cars. Coriolanus looked for a glimpse of his tribute in the windows before he realized the cars had none. They were designed not for passengers but for cargo. Heavy metal chains attached by old-fashioned padlocks secured the goods.

*The wrong train, he thought. Might as well go home.* But then a distinctly human cry came from one of the cargo cars and he remained in place.

He expected a rush of Peacekeepers, but the train sat ignored for twenty minutes before a few made their way to the rails. One of them exchanged words with an unseen engineer, and a set of keys was tossed out the window. The Peacekeeper took his time meandering down to the first car, flipping through the keys before he selected one, stuck it in the padlock, and gave it a twist. The lock and chains fell away, and he rolled back the heavy door. The car appeared empty. The Peacekeeper pulled out his baton and banged it against the doorframe. "All right, you lot, let's move!"

A tall boy with dark brown skin and patched burlap clothing appeared in the doorway. Coriolanus recognized him as Clemensia's tribute from District 11, rangy but muscular. A girl with similar coloring but a skeletal frame and a hacking cough joined him. Both of them were barefoot with their hands cuffed in front of their bodies. It was a five-foot drop to the ground, so they sat on the edge of the car before launching themselves awkwardly onto the platform. A small, pasty-faced girl in a striped dress and red scarf crawled to the door but seemed unable to figure out how to cover the distance to the ground. The Peacekeeper yanked her down and she landed hard, barely catching herself with her bound hands. Then he reached into the car and dragged out a boy who looked about ten years old but had to be at least twelve, and hauled him onto the platform as well.

By now the smell of the car, musty and heavy with manure, had reached Coriolanus. They were transporting the tributes in livestock cars, and not very clean ones at that. He wondered if they had been fed and let out for fresh air, or just locked in after their reappings. Accustomed as he was to viewing the tributes on-screen, he had not prepared himself properly for this encounter in the flesh, and a wave of pity and revulsion swept through him. They really were creatures out of another world. A hopeless, brutish world.

The Peacekeeper moved on to the second car and released the chains. The door slid open, revealing Jessup, the male District 12 tribute, squinting into the brightly lit station. Coriolanus felt a jolt run through him, and his body straightened in anticipation. Surely, she would be with him. Jessup hopped stiffly to the ground and turned back to the train.

Lucy Gray Baird stepped into the light, her cuffed hands half covering her eyes as they adjusted. Jessup reached up his arms, his wrists spread as wide as the chain on his restraints would allow, and she fell forward, letting him catch her by the waist and swing her to the ground in a surprisingly graceful move. She patted the boy's sleeve in thanks and tilted her head back to drink in the sunlight streaming into the station. Her fingers began combing through her curls, untangling the knots and picking out bits of straw.

Coriolanus's attention turned for a moment to the Peacekeepers, who were hollering threats into the train car. When he gazed back, Lucy Gray was staring directly at him. He started a bit but then remembered that he was the only one on the platform besides the Peacekeepers. The soldiers