Away From All the Fears and All the Faults You've Left Behind

by deathmallow

Summary

The war is over, Snow is dead, and that leaves the thirteen districts of Panem and their people to face the task of reconstruction and making a future beyond the Games. And rebuilding and finding a new identity, for a nation, a district, or a person, never comes without a struggle. UA.
Rated M for thematic elements including language and references to sexuality, drug abuse both consensual and forced, alcoholism, war, miscarriage and fertility issues, violence, murder, child abuse, the Games, prostitution, sexual slavery and rape/noncon situations, physical and psychological torture, suicide, depression, etc. Most of these will be references to past situations and generally non-explicit.

This is an AU sequel for my CF/MJ fic "Hope In the Darkness That I Will See the Light", and picks up only a few weeks after that one ended. Reading that fic will give you a lot of context for events in this one, though I'm doing my sincere best to explain enough context within this story to make it a standalone entry so the daunting task of tackling a 304K ficmonster doesn't need to prevent anyone from stepping right in here. Just keep in mind it's an AU resulting from Haymitch being in the Quell arena rather than Peeta and you ought to do OK.

Basic division of the parts of this story is as follows, to be updated with the story:
Part I (District Twelve): Ch 1-4
  Interlude: Ch 5
Part II (District Two): Ch 6-9
  Interlude: Ch 10
Part III (District Five): Ch 11-12
  Interlude: Ch 13
Part IV (District Thirteen): Ch 14-17
  Interlude: Ch 18
Part V (District Nine): Ch 19-20
  Interlude: Ch 21
Part VI (District Four): Ch 22-26
  Interlude: Ch 27
Part VII (District Fourteen): Ch 28-32
  Interlude: Ch 33
Part VIII (District Eleven): Ch 34-35
Interlude: Ch 36
Part IX (District One): Ch 37-38
Interlude: Ch 39
Part X (District Seven): Ch 40-42
Interlude: Ch 43
Part XI (District Six): Ch 44-45
Interlude: Ch 46
Part XII (District Ten): Ch 47-49
Part XIII (District Eight): Ch 50-51
Part XIV: (District Three): Ch 52-53
Part XV: (Shenandoah Territory): Ch 54-56
Epilogue: Ch 57

I do not own the Hunger Games trilogy or its characters. Just borrowing 'em for a while, that's all. ;)

For any readers that aren't AO3 members and are stuck in invitation queue hell, if you'd like to be put on the email update list for this story, please drop me a line at deathmallow@gmail.com and I'll be sure to keep you in the loop.
The actual hour on the clock didn’t matter much, because it was still full dark when Haymitch woke up suddenly to the sound of Johanna letting out a cry of terror, one he knew all too well meant she’d jolted awake in a cold sweat. It was almost February now, two weeks gone by since they’d come back to District Twelve from the Capitol after Brocade Paylor’s election. He and Johanna had been sharing a bed long enough now for him to know there were the nights when both of them slept soundly, untroubled by memories or nightmares or fears. Compared to even last fall back in Thirteen, those already happened more often. Maybe they’d become even more frequent as time went on until the bad nights were far outnumbered.

But that was neither here nor there for the present because obviously this was going to be one of the bad nights. Backing off, he gave her a few moments to wake up more fully, hearing her panicked breathing and knowing better than to have her come to awareness with him too close to her or holding her. Two trips through the arena, years of Snow whoring them out, six weeks of being tortured in the Capitol, and fighting a war meant that for both of them still, being held onto by someone in the dark might instinctively be seen as an attack, not an attempt to comfort.

Once he thought she’d had long enough to be able to hear something besides her own harsh breath and her heart pounding in her ears, he queried, “Hanna?” The old name she’d told him that her family used to call her, a name they’d kept private between the two of them. Hearing it usually helped her place where she was and who was there beside her all the quicker than the more common “Jo” would.

“Yeah,” the flat reply came after a moment’s pause, and he heard the faint rustle of the covers as she relaxed and tried to settle back down again.

He didn’t ask her whether she wanted to talk about it or tell him what she’d dreamed. She never did either when he was the one that woke up screaming. If she wanted to say, she would, but he wasn’t about to pry.

Now that she was actually awake, he moved back closer to her, and when she curled up against him, the warmth of her welcome against the bitter cold, he knew she was fully aware and not lost in whatever nightmare had been running through her head. “Still here,” he told her quietly, putting an arm around her. He wouldn’t say It’ll be OK because it wouldn’t, not really, not after everything. Neither of them was the sort to resort to sweet and gentle words anyway, especially not when they were obviously thinly veiled white lies. But that, the words they’d said to each other through the air vent in the Detention Center to let the other know they were still alive and at least a little sane, was maybe all that really needed to be said anyhow. I’m not going anywhere, you’re not alone.

He waited and stayed awake until he felt the tension ease from her and heard her breathing turn to the deep, even rhythm of sleep. She gave a soft snore and he couldn’t help a little smirk at that, amused by it, but closed his eyes and soon went back to sleep himself.

In the morning, he didn’t say anything about it. She was there for him when it was a bad night for him, and he was there for her. That was how it worked, no need to talk about it at length. The wedding song for Twelve said as much—committing to be there in good times as well as bad. She’d told him Seven pretty much had the same.

Besides, their days were always busy enough to not waste time staring and mumbling at each other about it. Even Victor’s Village in Twelve wasn’t exactly soft living. That wasn’t a judgment, only simple fact. The one blessing was that the water pipes had been buried deep enough, and apparently
were insulated enough, to have withstood the Capitol firebombs that rained down last July immediately after he and Plutarch Heavensbee sprung Katniss from the Quarter Quell arena.

So they had running water, at least, and the convenience of being able to use indoor bathrooms rather than having to try to fuck around with digging a privy back in the middle of January when they arrived. Of course, all they had readily available was cold water. The water heater was yet another thing that ran on electricity, and the power had even been out last summer when Snow dragged him back here to take a forced tour of the death and devastation. The Capitol camera crew had gasoline-powered generators then to let them shoot the newsreel footage and Haymitch’s interview. No such luck now; Brocade had much more essential uses for the country’s limited gasoline supply than the comfort of four citizens of Panem, and he could hardly blame her for that.

So any kind of cooking, heating water for bathing, or the like, required going out into the forest and chopping wood to fire up the stove. Well, just one more instance where having a wife who was more than handy with an axe was useful, not to mention one who knew what kinds of woods burned best, longest, or when still green.

All four of them had grown used to relying on lanterns and candles for light, and a fire downstairs in the fireplace to keep warm in the evenings before bed. After all, for himself, Katniss, and Johanna, that was how their childhoods had been. Even Peeta had endured some of it too in the inevitable blackouts when the electricity failed. He remembered those times too, sitting here in this house with a lantern, willing it to last with a fierce intensity so he wouldn’t be left alone in the dark.

Leaving the warmth of their bed was always something he didn’t look forward to, but it had to be done. Shivering and quickly cleaning up with the cold water on hand and getting dressed in a hurry, they were on their way to Katniss’ house where Peeta had also taken up living, trudging through the cleared path in the snow. No sense wasting wood by lighting two stoves for each meal, so they alternated that duty and all ate together at meals. In a way that was actually comforting, to sit down with all four of them so regularly, as a family, rather than keep to two houses, close but separate.

Katniss answered the door and Johanna swept by her, singing out cheerfully as she stomped the snow off her boots, “Morning, Kittycat, you might want to put on a scarf. Or tell Hotbuns to get less enthusiastic with the hickeys.” Haymitch tried to keep a straight face at the sight of the vivid bruise on the side of Katniss’ throat.

Katniss scowled, and Johanna told Haymitch in a mock-whisper that was obviously meant for Katniss to overhear it, “Hell, it’s a good thing I’m not naked, imagine them seeing all those marks you put there with that beard....” She ran a playful finger down his cheek, because both he, and Peeta as he peeked his head into the hallway and waved good morning before heading back to the kitchen, were sporting some stubble. No point in shaving daily, especially not when it was a shave in freezing water.

As usual, a faint choking noise came from Katniss at the thought of Haymitch having sex, and she said with an irritated sigh, “Are you two gonna come help with breakfast or mess with me?”

“Breakfast,” Haymitch said readily.

“Mess with you,” Johanna said at the same time. She looked over at him and raised an eyebrow.

“What? I’m hungry.” He grinned and said with mock innocence, “Worked up a real appetite, you know.” He couldn’t resist it. “Mess with Katniss” was too damn easy, and she knew they meant it affectionately anyway. Considering even Peeta was chuckling from the kitchen, Katniss once again realized she was outnumbered, sighed, shook her head, and gestured them towards the kitchen.
At the very least, the winter snow meant that keeping food locked up in the old groundskeepers’ shed served neatly to keep things cold in lieu of having a working refrigerator. So while they were having to carefully ration things like butter and the bread Peeta had baked last week, they weren’t entirely without small comforts like that. Though Peeta was the first one to bring up, as they were sitting and tucking into the hot food with relief, “I was doing inventory again this morning. It’s still two weeks until the next hovercraft and we’re burning through our supplies too fast.”

“I know,” he said. Considering everyone across Panem was probably tightening their belts some this winter with food in shorter supply, they could hardly expect special privileges there.

“The snares just aren’t getting quite enough, and we can’t find any plants to gather,” Katniss continued glumly, taking a sip of coffee. “So we keep on having to use that stuff as our primary supply rather than supplements.” Given that he, Katniss, and Johanna knew a good bit about snares, and even Peeta was somewhat competent after their Quell training last year, they’d hurried to set up a trapline out in the forest during their wood-gathering expeditions.

She was right, though. The occasional rabbit or the like wasn’t much to prevent them from relying on those Capitol-sent supplies, and as he met her eyes across the table, he knew the notion of dependency on anyone, of therefore owing someone, even a woman as generally benevolent as Brocade Paylor, sat as ill with her as with him. “I wish I had my bow,” Katniss said in frustration. “The one I had to leave back in the Capitol sewers.” The fancy bow they’d made her in Thirteen, left behind because there was no way to conceal it up on the Capitol streets. “Or even one of my old ones. Game will be scarcer in winter, but I’d still get something more than the snares.”

“You don’t have any of ‘em?” Johanna asked, sounding surprised.

“No, Gale,” only a moment of hesitation at the name of her best friend, dead in the attack on the Capitol, dead defending Katniss and Peeta down in the sewers from a mutt attack, “took the couple bows he and I used regularly after the firebombing to help him feed the refugees while they were heading north. Those bows, they’re still back in Thirteen and I’m not gonna ask someone to spend hovercraft fuel sending ‘em.” Not to mention asking any favors from Thirteen while they were still settling things in their own district was going to be a touchy proposition considering the four of them had been among the victors that denounced Coin in a propo to the entire nation. When he’d talked to Plutarch last week, the newly-appointed Secretary of Communications had told him that Coin had been arrested for crimes against the people.

“So can’t you make a new one?”

“My father, he knew how,” Katniss said with a sigh of frustration, “but he died before I got to learn. Unless Haymitch knows…”

“Not really,” he said almost apologetically. “Burt did a good job so we always had him make the bows when I was a kid.” Burt made the bows, Haymitch handled making the equipment for snares, sticking with what they were best at.

“Well, that’s that, I suppose,” Peeta said. “We’ll just have to make do as best we can and hope the snares produce better.” It wasn’t that they were badly placed; even his rusty skills had sharpened up pretty quick. Simply that there wasn’t all that much to catch out there this time of year, so Katniss was right—increasing their chances with a bow would definitely help. Better than a gun too, because the noise of that would start to spook the already-scarce game, and besides, they didn’t have a rifle anyway.

“Even a rough bow in the hands of a good archer, though,” he pointed out, “is better than nothing.”
Katniss was good enough she’d probably learn to compensate quickly.

“You’re forgetting something,” Johanna said, sitting back in her chair. They all obligingly glanced her way, waiting to be enlightened. She put down her mug of coffee and said, “Oh, hey, I come from the lumber and carpentry district, kiddies. Maybe I know a few things about working and shaping wood?”

She had a good point there, and hearing it was a definite relief. Katniss’ expression pretty much said the same. “So you can make one?”

“I know the general ideas, yeah, but it’d be better if I had a good prototype to work from. We couldn’t make bows in Seven.” No, he imagined not, given that the woods were swarming with Peacekeepers while the people of Seven were busy at their summer lumbering camps. Apparently they looked the other way on kids setting snares, but something so obvious as a weapon couldn’t have been condoned.

“There might be some out there that just got left hidden over the years,” Katniss said hesitantly. “My daddy’s old bows, or the ones I used when I was a little kid that I outgrew.”

“Fine,” Peeta said. “Then Haymitch and I will run the trapline today and you two can check to see if you can find any of those old bows. And even if Katniss gets a bow, at least I can keep doing the snares,” he said with a sheepish look, all of them knowing full well how noisy his footsteps were naturally, and the artificial leg didn’t help either.

Finishing up the meal and making their way back to the house to layer up, Johanna joked to him while she was buttoning up her coat, “So, plans for the evening after dinner? A nice hot fire, maybe a nice game of chess?”

“Do you know how to play chess?” he asked curiously.

She gave him a look of vague irritation out of her brown eyes. “Lots of long cold winter evenings indoors when I was a kid. So yes, I can play. Besides, I saw you had a set in the parlor. Nice pieces, but that carving isn’t Seven style, so we didn’t make it—you got it from One?”

“Nope. I got the wood from One,” because if he was going to have to order wood for carving since collecting it in the forest was prohibited, he figured he might as well make it nice stuff, “but I made it.” He shrugged slightly. It wasn’t like he’d decided to become a lousy drunk overnight. At first it had been keeping busy to fill the awful, empty hours. Then eventually it became keeping busy and drinking. Finally it turned to just pure drinking. But in the years before that he’d done his share of things, and making that chess set had been one of them.

It had only ever seen use after Katniss and Peeta won their Games and they started to visit, and last winter he’d used a chess game over the telephone to tell Plutarch the rebellion was ready to go. Stupid, really. Putting in all that effort towards making a chess set, when year after year he never had company seemed like one more futile act in a life that had been full of them.

Seeing her slightly surprised expression he said wryly, “Well, I always was handy with a knife.” There came a point where he figured if he was going to have it nearby him all the damn time anyway he might as well do something productive with it.

“Not bad for an amateur,” she said, though she was smiling as she did it. That chess set was about the only thing he’d ever successfully finished carving. That and one pendant, its interlaced spirals carved out of simple pine, that Hazelle gave back to him last year before he went into the arena a second time. The same pendant he’d once made and given to her sister, back when he was young
and stupidly in love with Briar Wainwright. He’d looked at it last summer and seen that it really was laborious and somewhat amateur work, unlike Johanna’s joke now, but she’d worn it proudly all the same, for that last year of her life. He’d tried to give it back to Hazelle but he’d found that she’d left it here after he left for the Quell last summer, and he didn’t have the heart to send it back to her in Thirteen. Besides, it was the one piece he had left of Briar.

Obviously Johanna hadn’t seen that pendant, still tucked away in the nightstand drawer. Odd, considering she’d been through most of the drawers in the process of unpacking her own things. Though why the sudden thought of her digging in that particular drawer caused that momentary spark of panic made no sense—really, it was her bedroom as much as his, her house too now. But the notion of her seeing it and having to answer questions wasn’t pleasant. She’d known he’d had a girl then; he’d made no secret of that, but being confronted with the evidence of it nearly twenty-six years later probably couldn’t end well.

But clearly nothing like that weighed down Johanna’s mind as she grinned and said, “So maybe I’ll let you do some of the carving on that kitchen table.” They already had plans to honor Seven tradition where the couple made a piece of furniture for their new home. The materials for it were due on the next hovercraft and they both agreed, it’d be a good way to pass some of the long winter days.

“Good to know I’ve got official approval,” he said, putting Briar and the past from his mind and thinking instead of Johanna and the present, that kitchen table to make and the trapline to go check this afternoon. Thinking about the present was a hell of a lot more pleasant than the past, or even the immediate future.

Life right now was hard work, when even small tasks like shaving or brewing coffee meant extra work compared to when it had been just turning on a faucet or the stove. Constantly chopping and carrying wood from the forest, setting and checking the traps and skinning the game, heating water all the damn time for any number of chores from taking an actual bath to doing laundry by hand to scrubbing floors to cooking, melting chunks of beeswax and dipping fresh candles, helping Peeta out on his weekly baking day—all of it meant he’d found quickly that every day was full of something to do in the ordinary tasks of making a living here in Twelve. It was a constant flow of mental and physical exertion and sometimes he didn’t even know where the hours went before it was suddenly time for dinner and the sun was going down. Even if he’d had more than a couple bottles of liquor in the house, he’d have been too busy to need the distraction of drinking.

These days, just like Katniss, Peeta, and Johanna, every night he climbed the stairs and went to bed tired. Despite that, every night he found he wasn’t too weary, though, to make love with Johanna, because after how awkwardly they’d started out in Thirteen, coming back from years of being so shut off from everyone, to be able now to feel so close to her was something that still carried a sense of profound wonder to it.

He’d known plenty about giving pleasure to the patrons forced upon him, even knew what a friendly fuck had been like, but night by night he was still learning more of what it was like to be with a woman he loved, and with Johanna in particular. He knew how to touch her now, what made her laugh from ticklishness and what made her grumble in irritation and tell him to hurry up and what made her gasp incoherently in pleasure. He knew the feel of her body, the feel of her scarred skin and her short hair when he touched her, and the how her own hands on him felt. He knew the look of her now by sunlight, by candlelight, by firelight, by moonlight, and how her brown eyes looked at him. He knew the sounds she made and he reveled in them, especially when it was the sound of his own name.

He knew too what it a subtler but no less keen pleasure it was like to lie there peacefully afterwards
curled up together, keeping each other warm, and be able to talk about the little things: plans for the
next day, colors to repaint the rooms that hadn’t been done in twenty years, whether they could bribe
Peeta to put some cookies on the baking list. Bicker a little bit sometimes too, because that was how
things went for them, and seeing that even with this kind of intimacy they could still keep up with
each other in terms of words and wit definitely satisfied.

He knew what it was like to go to sleep and know if the nightmares came, he wouldn’t face them
alone. He wouldn’t have to constantly reach for a bottle of white liquor to try to knock himself out
even to get to sleep as the sun was finally coming up. In short, he was learning new things each
day and felt smarter and thus stronger than he’d ever been.

The days were busy and the nights weren’t lonely, which meant he was probably the happiest he’d
been since he was a kid, before his name got pulled from the reaping ball the first time. He was
trying to not let that scare him shitless with the occasional stab of irrational fear that somehow he
would inevitably lose that. Sometimes he succeeded better than others.

All of that, though, was better than the near future. For right now they were four people living a
demanding but still somewhat idyllic existence after the ordeals they’d been through. Once spring
arrived, things would change. With the spring thaw, the carnage throughout the district would be
revealed again, whereas to this point by unspoken agreement they never took a path through the
snow-covered ruins. There would be thousands and thousands of dead to be dealt with and to mourn,
and they’d have to think about the future of their entire district since Twelve, as it had been, didn’t
exist any longer.

Beyond that, he and Johanna had to go see the damage done to the other districts in their official
assessment for the government and while he was glad they could do some good and he was looking
forward to seeing old friends and seeing more of Panem, he also knew that wouldn’t be the easiest
task. At the same time there was the matter of Ash and Heike to investigate; their younger siblings
Snow had secretly kept alive as final pieces of leverage to ensure good behavior by signing off on
their being sent to Two and brainwashed with tracker jacker venom into obedience and becoming
Peacekeepers. That little secret had been something Snow confided to them the night before he
committed suicide by poison to escape his execution, as one last twist of the knife. Not knowing
where their siblings were now, whether they were even still alive, and who and what they were if
they were was still something that held more than its share of anxiety from how unknown its
outcome would be.

Selfish as it was in some ways, he thought, wrapping his scarf around his neck and looking over at
Johanna, up against the burdens that were ahead, sometimes he almost wished spring would never
come.

~~~~~~~~~~

They’d poked at every damn log out in the woods in hopes of finding a cache of weapons there, and
Johanna was getting convinced Katniss had forgotten where they actually were, if she ever knew to
begin. “You sure you know where to look?” she asked bluntly, because wasting her time when it
was cold enough to freeze her ass off wasn’t high on her list of priorities. Besides, unlike with
Haymitch, she wasn’t going to end up cuddling with Kittycat here to keep warm. In spite of herself
she ended up smirking a bit, remembering the cold zone of the arena and how much she and
Haymitch bitched at each other while they were showing off for the cameras. No clue back then it
could ever lead to something like this. Living in District Twelve—sh*t, when she was a kid that idea
would have been considered a joke, because while Seven was one of the poorer districts by far,
Twelve really was scraping the bottom of the barrel. Funny how three of the people she cared about
most were here now, her closest family, even if she wasn’t ready to admit that fact too often or too
“It’s kind of hard to navigate when these are caches I haven’t been to in six years and all the markers are underneath the snow,” Katniss snapped irritably.

“Yeah, fine. Let’s give it another hour and give up, huh? I’ll make do if need be.” She might have to engage in some trial and error on bow-making in that case, but even her worst efforts, informed as they were by a Seven citizen’s understanding of how wood worked, would likely be better than whatever Katniss would slap together. Already she was musing in her head what kind of wood to use. Light but strong, flexible: yew would likely be best but she hadn’t seen any yew trees here in Twelve, and they were rare in Seven anyway. Walnut, hickory—there were some options to be had.

Katniss crouched down in front of yet another snow-dusted rock pile and carefully poked a gloved hand into a crevice at the base. “Ah!” she exclaimed happily, pulling out an oilcloth-wrapped bundle. “Got something here!”

Brushing off the top of the boulders for her, Johanna indicated she ought to see it down and they could see what goodies they had here. Putting it down and undoing the folds of the cloth, Katniss hunched over it, sort of blocking Johanna’s view. “Got some arrows in here, that’s good, and they look decent, because getting new feathers for fletching right now could be harder.” Yeah, given the geese had flown south, Katniss was right on that score. “Um,” she pulled out what looked mostly like a stick to Johanna’s eyes, which must be an unstrung bow. “This is one from when I was a kid. I think this is one from the fall before my pa died. It might be a little small now but I could probably use it until you make something better.”

“No matter the size on it,” she said, shrugging. “I can scale up, no big deal. It’ll still give me the idea of what I’m working with.” It looked like today had been something of a success, so that had her well pleased.

“One more in here,” and Katniss drew out another bowstave, one much longer than the beechwood one sized for a pre-teen girl, and one that had Johanna inhaling sharply at the sight of it.

“Where did you get that?” she demanded, her voice maybe a bit harsher than she had intended, but she couldn’t help it. The instinctive fear and even something like dread at seeing anyone out in the districts carrying a chunk of that wood around was there.

“It was my pa’s favorite,” Katniss said, though her face said she’d heard the alarm in Johanna’s voice. “He used it all the time.”

“Yeah, because that’ll make a damn nice bow.” The properties of that particular wood would be really fine for a hunting bow.

“Johanna, seriously, what’s got you so freaked out?”

“That’s pure blackspire,” she said. “The winter I was thirteen, one of the sweep-up boys at the mill pocketed a piece of it to carve something for his girl.” Pocketing the unusable odds and ends to take home for carving was generally overlooked, especially if the more benevolent Peacekeepers were on duty. But not in that case. “Stupid bastard, like she could have ever shown it off anyway. That piece, and it was about as big as your thumb, got a fourteen-year-old boy beheaded the next day in front of the Justice Building.” She still remembered it. The Peacekeeper holding the axe had looked sick to do it, and botched it so badly one of the lumberjacks finally grabbed the axe and finished the job, and got twenty stripes himself for his mercy. “There’s some particular rare woods in Seven that are grown only to get sent to One for Capitol buyers, either as raw lumber or as finished products, and they always watch us like hawks while we fell the trees and while we mill the wood and while the
carpenters and carvers turn it into something. And stealing any piece of them is punished by execution. Mahogany. Cardinalwood. Ghostwood.” She nodded towards the bow in Katniss’ hand. “Blackspire.”

Staring at the bow in her hand like it was a burning brand, Katniss mumbled, “I just figured it was some wood from higher up in the mountains where we never went.” She shook her head, sounding puzzled. “But how would he have gotten his hands on it?”

How an ordinary clodhopper of a coal miner had a bow made out of a recognizable pure luxury wood from another district was a damn good question indeed. Though thinking about that conversation about chess this morning with Haymitch, about that carefully hand-carved chess set made out of blackspire and ghostwood, it became readily apparent to Johanna just how it had probably happened. “I don’t know, who could your father have possibly known in District Twelve with both the clout and the cash to order a nice chunk of blackspire from One?”

Thankfully, Katniss might be annoying sometimes, but she wasn’t an idiot. “Haymitch,” she said.

“Got it in one,” Johanna said. “He must have given to your dad as a present.” Back when Haymitch was still a kid himself and he was still friends with Katniss’ father, because there was no way in hell Burt Everdeen had been able to front the money himself. Obviously at sixteen or seventeen Haymitch had been too shortsighted to realize that his fancy present for his friend meant that if Burt was caught with it, Haymitch was readily implicating himself. But then, before her own friends drifted away when the gulf of becoming the bitch with the axe and the terrible secrets of what a victor’s life was really like opened up between them, she’d been giddy and stupid about all the nice things she could suddenly buy them too.

“Oh,” Katniss said faintly, now staring at it in an entirely different way, as if she wasn’t sure quite what to do with it. Carefully, she wrapped up the blackspire bow, the child’s bow, and the arrows. “Well, I can’t use that one. It’s too long and the draw’s probably still too powerful for me to manage. But at least we got what we came for.”

“Speaking of gifts,” trying to knock that dazed and confused look off Katniss’ face and trying to keep her from moping about memories of her dead father and his favorite hunting bow, “Hotbuns has a birthday coming up, right?”

“February 21st, yeah,” Katniss confirmed.

“And Haymitch is April and you’re May.” She didn’t remember the exact dates. She was the odd one out with her birthday in August. Doing the math quickly, obviously the coal miners got randy during the summer. She laughed in spite of herself, seeing just another way Twelve was unfamiliar to her. “Most kids are born in the late summer and fall back home in Seven.” She’d almost said back home because this place hadn’t yet settled in as home in all her instincts. At Katniss’ questioning look she gave her a wicked grin and said, “C’mon, you know plenty now about how to keep warm on a winter night.” Before Katniss could splutter indignantly, she switched tacks back and asked, “So what are you getting him?” Eighteen wasn’t as big a birthday for a victor, and the Games were over now anyway, but it would be his first birthday with Katniss as his girlfriend for real, so that had to count for something.

“I was thinking maybe some more paints?” she said, though a tone of doubt was in her voice.

“Kittycat. Seriously. Paints? Take it from me. You want something special. Give him a blowjob. It’s a gift a man’s never gonna complain about receiving for more than one birthday.”

There was that strangled goose noise again. “But…”
"What, you need advice?" she asked, enjoying this far too much. "Be more than happy to provide." She was on the verge of pushing Katniss’ lingering prudishness even further and quipping that hell, even Haymitch could give her some solid advice on giving blowjobs. But at the last moment she held back the words, because suddenly it wasn’t all that funny given that it was different with Haymitch than with her. She’d been forced sometimes, true, and her skin still crawled to remember them, but she’d done it willingly other times with Finnick, even after they couldn’t claim it was in the name of training in order to keep her patrons happy. For Haymitch it had always been out of pure necessity and duress.

Shit. She really must love the snarky bastard to pass up an opportunity like that to render Katniss speechless. For her part, Katniss didn’t reply to the offer, but recovered enough to say, “I’m kind of afraid to ask what your idea of a great New Year’s gift will be.”

“Ask me again in December,” she said with a smirk.

“Maybe I need to give him a clean house next door for his birthday,” Katniss said bluntly. “All his family’s things are still there and I don’t think he’s ready to deal with them yet.” Well, that neatly killed the merry mood, but Johanna understood. No wonder Peeta had moved in with Katniss. Johanna herself still had a house full of things in Seven she hadn’t dealt with yet.

“Anything he’d want to keep?” she asked, equally frank. “If not, the three of us could pitch in and get it done.”

“I don’t think so.” She sighed, tying up the oilcloth again and picking it up. “They weren’t that close, you know, except Peeta and his dad. But he still...”

“He’s mourning them but he’s not exactly missing them.” Not the way Katniss did her father, not the way Johanna did for her mom and dad and Bern, and had for Heike for years.

“Yeah. And I think he feels guilty that he doesn’t.”

Talking feelings and the like wasn’t her strong suit, and she knew it wasn’t for Katniss either. But putting it out in the open like that, sheared of fancy words or attempts to soft-peddle it, somehow made it something they both could handle. “We’ll bury them in the spring and clean out the house and then he can start to move on. You’re his family now.”

“You and Haymitch too,” Katniss said, and Johanna couldn’t help but still kind of feel a stupid warm glow at that notion of belonging.

“We’re his guardians, after all,” she said dryly, dismissing it because she didn’t want Katniss getting mushy about it. “And it sounds like his mother was a prize bitch and neither of his brothers was that close to him either.” At Katniss’ questioning look, she shrugged and said, “He doesn’t mention much in the way of personal memories,” and given what a warm person Peeta was it would be natural for him to do it if he had them, “and neither of them volunteered for him, did they?”

“Farl was already too old, but Bannick—Nick,” Katniss’ voice faltered. “Look, not everyone has to be like me and Prim, OK? I mean, volunteers aside from the Career districts are so rare, that’s why everyone was so amazed when I did it...” Johanna knew that Prim, still with Perulla Everdeen in the Capitol busy recovering slowly from a shot to the spine that had paralyzed her, was constantly in Katniss’ thoughts. At Johanna’s silence at that, she finally ventured, “You’d have volunteered for your little sister, wouldn’t you.” It was a statement, not a question.

“For Heike? Yeah. And Haymitch would have for Ash.” She was certain of that. Maybe, in a way, it would have been better to deliberately volunteer for Heike, thirteen and gentle and clumsy. Better
than hearing her own name called and losing herself to mindless terror until it almost killed her in the arena. Maybe then she would have been the heroine rather than the villain the Capitol expected her to be. Maybe then she wouldn’t have become the person she had. But given how it had turned out in the end, what good things she had now, she couldn’t be as angry and bitter about it as she’d been for years.

“You’ll find them,” Katniss said quietly. “I’m sure of it.”

That’s kind of what I’m hoping for and what I’m afraid of, she thought, but didn’t say as they trekked their way out of the woods as the later afternoon shadows were starting to fall from the sun sinking.

When they got back to Katniss and Peeta’s house, she spared a glance at Peeta’s house next door and figured she’d mention it to Haymitch. Though when they stepped inside, she yelled, “We found it,” and sauntered into the kitchen to see Peeta plucking a wild turkey and Haymitch sitting at the table attending to some bloody gouges in his left hand. “Oho, is that a turkey?”

“Good to see you too, darlin’,” Haymitch said sarcastically, “and yes, my hand’s fine.”

“Then why are you whining?” she said with a snort. She knew he wouldn’t want her fussing over it anyway. If it was serious, he’d tell her. It looked more like surface scratches anyway.

“We caught him in one of the snares,” Peeta said. “It’s too late to start roasting him today, but he’ll make for a great dinner tomorrow.”

“Yeah, fine, send him home with us,” Johanna said. It was their day tomorrow to heat the stove.

“Well, save some of the wing and tail feathers,” Katniss said, coming up behind her, “because we’ll need them for fletching arrows.” She stared at Haymitch. “Uh, what happened to you? You didn’t get that from a turkey.”

“Brilliant as ever, sweetheart.” He nudged the game bag on the floor with his foot. There was a yowl, and Haymitch grumbled, “Shut up, you foul bastard,” and reached down and loosened the drawstring. A blur of dirty, mustard-yellow fur sprang out, hissing all the while.

“Buttercup!” Katniss stared at the ugly, smelly, burr-spangled and bedraggled cat that perversely twined itself around her legs, continuing his yowling. “But he was staying with Hazelle in Thirteen after we left for the attack on the Capitol.”

“Yeah, well, obviously he escaped and made his way here. Ended up caught in one of my cloverleafs. Clawed me when I tried to get him out, too, the ingrate.” He held up his bandaged hand, explaining the injury. “So much for all the times I slipped him tidbits when you had me over for dinner.”

“You were feeding him?” Katniss said with disbelief.

“Is it really that hard to believe I might feel some kinship to an ornery asshole like him?” Haymitch said sweetly. Johanna couldn’t resist a snicker at that. “Anyway, you might want to let Prim know you have the thing here next time your ma calls.”

Katniss gave a snort of amusement. Buttercup kept up his insistent mewls. “She’s not here, stupid cat,” she told him. Suddenly she thrust the blackspire bow towards Haymitch, putting it down on the table with more force than necessary. “Here. Looks like you’re going hunting with me. You’d better not be terrible at it.”
The expression on Haymitch’s face said pretty obviously that he recognized the bow on sight, and that told Johanna that he was indeed responsible for it being here in the first place. “Well, well.” He raised a dark eyebrow at her and said with a smirk, “Give that mangy bastard a bath. He needs it before he stinks up the house.”

“Aw, isn’t that touching,” she said wryly, though she was glad neither of those two made a big fuss out of what it actually meant that Haymitch bothered to rescue Katniss’ cat and she gave him the bow that he’d given her father years ago. Following the situation enough to realize that Haymitch was probably going to be spending the rest of the afternoon practicing archery and Katniss on cleaning up the cat, she looked over at Peeta and said, “So, Hotbuns, looks like they’re leaving you and me cooking tonight.”

Peeta shrugged and mouthed with a smile and a roll of his eyes, “Seam people,” to her, to which she just laughed, reaching for the potatoes on the counter to start preparing them.
“This is cozy, you know,” Johanna said to Peeta wryly while she kneaded the bread dough on the counter with a little more enthusiasm than it probably required. “You, me, and our big tough hunters out in the woods while we sensitive types stay home and bake…” Katniss and Haymitch had set out early today with their bows to go see what they could hunt down. She didn’t resent it, not really. They all had their thing. When it came to gathering edible plants and making snares, she could still handily kick Katniss’ ass, because the girl had focused so much on her archery.

Peeta grinned over at her, and she saw he had a streak of grease shining on his cheek from where he’d been buttering the pans and wiped at his face. “But see, we’re warm and dry and they’re cold and wet,” he nodded to the glum, drizzly late March weather outside the kitchen window, “so we’re sensitive but we’re also smart.”

“You’ll still be sympathetic when she comes home cold and grouchy.” That was how Peeta was, after all.

“You’ll still be sympathetic when she comes home cold and grouchy.” That was how Peeta was, after all.

“Of course. And you’ll tell him to get some dry clothes on, that he’s an idiot and if he gets pneumonia it’s his own damn fault. Which, coming from you, is pretty much the same thing as being sympathetic.”

So maybe he knew her a little too well. “You missed the part where I’ll offer to warm him up if he behaves,” she said with a smirk. “Only if Katniss is there to overhear, because otherwise it’s no fun for you,” he countered. That proved handily Peeta knew her a little too well, but being read like that didn’t bother her like it would have before. In a way, it was enjoyable being around someone else besides Haymitch who could almost keep up with her verbally. He didn’t have the sarcastic edge at it that she and Haymitch had, though—Katniss provided that handily—so it wasn’t quite the same, and that was just fine by her. But in some ways Peeta reminded her a bit of her older brother Bern—well-meaning, funny, and even gentle without somehow becoming a pushover.

Having a baking day with him wasn’t really much of a chore, and besides, he did little kindnesses like making some of the dark, malty bread from Seven for her. “Yeah, sadly, we all know that ‘Mess With Peeta’ is a lost cause.”

“Living with two older brothers,” he said with a flash of humor, though there was the second of hesitation after he said it and the flicker of remembered pain as he recalled that no, he didn’t have two older brothers any longer.

Spring thaw had started, and the rains had washed away most of the snow. It hadn’t warmed up enough for the corpses down the hill to start to thaw, and begin to rot and stink. Frankly, Johanna thought once that happened she’d be glad to be out of Twelve because there was no way in hell the smell wouldn’t be in the air for miles. The cleanup crews would be starting soon, though, so maybe they’d have most of it done before the weather got too warm.

Turning away from the subject of his family because that was just waiting to explode in a bad way, given the way his eyes strayed again towards the window as if he was now thinking about the ruins of his family’s bakery, she said a little too hurriedly, “So, uh, Haymitch’s birthday’s coming up in a few weeks?” What a smooth transition that had been. She probably hadn’t done one that awkward in talking to a boy since she was sixteen.
“April 4th, right? I didn’t do anything for it last year,” Peeta said with a crestfallen, guilty look. “I didn’t know and I admit, it was only a couple of weeks after they read the card anyway, so my mind was on training and the rebellion and the whole thing with Katniss and me…”

“I doubt he has hurt feelings about that,” she said dryly. To be honest she doubted Haymitch had much remembered either. If he had, he’d probably just sarcastically told himself dying in the arena at forty-one was no damn different than forty. If he hadn’t bothered to tell the kids when his birthday was, obviously he didn’t want them making a big deal about it. “Anyway, yeah. Since Snow’s dead and we’re all not facing imminent death this year that probably calls for some cake?”

“Done,” Peeta said. She went back to her kneading. “Johanna.” She looked up at him. “I kind of need to know something about a cake so I can make it?”

“Make it with booze and he’ll be all over it,” she said with a smirk. Though to be fair to him, the whole winter she’d only seen him touch the bottles of white lightning a few times, and only for a drink or two with her.

Peeta rewarded that with more of a laugh than it probably deserved, though the patient way he kept waiting for some kind of answer had her relenting more than Katniss’ stubborn insistence would have. “He really likes blueberry. I know that.” A few weeks ago she’d found out exactly what lengths that man was willing to go to for the last of their blueberry jam. She had to say, he’d more than earned it, though he’d enjoyed himself plenty as well.

“What’s his favorite color anyway?”

“Blue.” Same as her own favorite, which made some things more convenient. “I only know that from talking paint,” she felt oddly compelled to defend her having that knowledge. “Reminds me, at dinner, you wanna do me a favor and agree with me if I say the kitchen would look really good in green? You’re the arty one who knows paints and all, maybe he’ll listen to you.”

Peeta glanced around at the yellow paint on the walls now. “What’s wrong with the yellow? Aside from the fact it ain’t pretty now, because it really needs a fresh coat, I’ll admit.” It had dulled to more of an ivory, and the curtains were also pretty faded by time and sunlight. “But it must have been a nice sunny yellow when it was new. It might be more cheerful to see that color in winter than green would be.”

“It’s been here forever,” she said bluntly. “And we’ve redone some of the place but he’s balking at the rest.” Some things she could understand, like leaving some of the upstairs bedrooms they didn’t need alone, for now. But they used the kitchen all the damn time, and was it so much to ask that since it was their house now rather than just his, she might like the kitchen where they were cooking to be hers too rather than carrying the stamp of whatever his decorating choices, or more likely his mother’s, had been twenty-five years ago? They’d already replaced the kitchen table, scarred with knife marks and liquor-stained, with the cherry wood one that they’d carefully made together these last long winter months, carved with a combination of the interlaced spiral designs of Twelve and the maple and oak leaf design of her family from Seven, and they were finishing up the chairs to match. If he was willing to replace the furniture, spend so much time carefully making a table with her and obviously enjoying it, what was the big deal about the paint?

Even the furniture was a point of contention sometimes. He’d been more than happy to replace his old bed with the one she’d brought from Seven, made by her grandparents as their own piece of wedding furniture. But when she’d talked about ditching the old green couch in the parlor, the fabric almost worn through in spots and smelling faintly of liquor like he’d either spilled on it or breathed drunken fumes into it for years, he’d gotten his back up enough like Katniss’ demon cat that she’d have sworn he was going to hiss and claw at her.
Nobody told her being married meant surviving war and torture and helping each other start the long road back from being completely fucked up, only to end up arguing about stupid shit like whether or not they could paint the kitchen or if they were going to keep a beat-up old couch. It would have seemed totally ridiculous if she wasn’t right in the middle of it.

Peeta grabbed a tray of biscuits from the wood-fired oven, the blast of heat hitting her directly, and put them down before he answered, “Katniss gets like that too. Because, you know, I want it to be our place together rather than me just hanging out in her house.” She should have figured that Peeta, being the one who’d moved into a house Katniss had established as her own, would understand some of where she was coming from here. “But I try to change something and she gets pissed off. It took me a while to figure it out. Everything’s changing, you see? The war’s over, Twelve is never going to be what it was, and nobody knows what Panem’s going to become. She used to go back to her house in the Seam, you know.”

“Because it was familiar.” She’d done that sometimes too, gone back to the old house back down in the winter town where she’d grown up because she could still feel the remnants of her old happy life there, until a newlywed couple got assigned to it by the Justice Building. She’d felt almost backstabbed by that happening.

A nod from Peeta, as he reached for the bread dough Johanna had been kneading. “She can’t do that now. And then I come in trying to change things in the house here. Look, you see it with Haymitch, I bet. We all have to change, because of the way the world is now, and because we’re with someone and that means thinking beyond ourselves.” He shook his head. “They just don’t want to lose everything from before, that’s all.”

“It’s not like he was happy then,” she said irritably, “and hell, you know that better than me. You actually got to see what he was like when he was away from the Games.” She could well imagine, though, and Katniss and Peeta hadn’t exactly hid it from her. Neither had Haymitch himself, for that matter, being brutally honest about it. Somehow Peeta got her talking about this crap the way the head doctor hadn’t. Maybe it was because she actually liked him, so she didn’t find his openness to be annoying or condescending or fake.

“No, and Katniss wasn’t always happy either, but at least she knew how things worked and who she was. I think it’s the same for Haymitch. He had a lot of time to be stuck in a rut and now it’s trying to figure out how to move on.”

“It’s not like I’m trying to get rid of something his mom actually made.” She wouldn’t ask that of him, knowing how little he had left of her. The woman had made some beautiful quilts; Johanna would readily give her that. Raised a pretty good son too, essentially doing it by herself, and that was perhaps an even more admirable legacy. “You’re telling me to be patient,” she said grudgingly, recognizing it but not exactly liking it.

“Pretty much. It’s still his house too, and I’m trying to remember that with Katniss. I can’t expect her to change everything in it. I imagine he’ll come around to more changes eventually, though. With the house and otherwise. He’s come pretty far already.”

He had at that. “Yellow kitchen?” she said with a sigh, accepting it, and accepting the fresh, hot biscuit with a drizzle of honey that he handed her, sending up curls of steam. He was right anyway, yellow probably would be more cheerful to look at on lousy days.

“Yellow kitchen,” he confirmed with a nod. “But definitely, get new curtains.”

“I’ll let him keep the stupid couch but we’re getting new fabric to redo the covering,” she said defiantly, slapping down another hunk of dough with authority and dusting it with flour. Insisting on
that much seemed only fair. “I’ll even let it still be green.”

“From what I saw, that couch was pretty much his bed most nights. Well, more like mornings,” Peeta corrected himself. “He was usually asleep there or at the kitchen table.”

“Well, you know now from experience, he always slept on a couch in Mentor Central,” she said, sighing tiredly at the memory from several years of Games of him curled up on that one particular couch, Twelve’s sole mentor and thus unable to go back to the Training Center and sleep in an actual bed, “so maybe that makes some sense.” She wouldn’t have been surprised if he’d slept on the couch in the Twelve apartments some nights. That realization of its link to the past, remembering how utterly fucking possessive he got about that Mentor Central couch and how it was just the same now about the worn old green couch, kind of really made her want even more to get rid of the thing and try to make him stop clinging to any echo of the Games, but she’d drop it. For now, anyway. Trying to turn away from that depressing thought, she licked at the honey before it dripped from the biscuit onto her fingers and groused, “Tell me, oh wise Hotbuns, since you’re on a roll here with the head doctor shit, why is it you and I are crazy enough to stick with two stubborn Seam idiots who can’t let go of things?” She smirked. “Aside from the fantastic sex?”

Unfortunately, she was discovering, Peeta had a bad habit of answering a question that she’d tossed out there more as a quip with something like total sincerity. “Because they’ve both had it tough and they learned to hide a lot away thanks to that, but when they do open up, when you see what’s underneath the grumbling and the glowering, and you know that’s real, that you’re seeing the real them?” He paused, blue eyes glanced away from her almost shyly and went on, choosing his words carefully as if trying to even figure it out in his own mind, “And maybe they show some of it to other people, but only you get to be close enough to see all of it. You can’t tell me that you don’t feel so incredibly loved, knowing that someone like that who’s been hurt badly actually now trusts you that much, and it makes you want to give them everything right back, because you love them and you know they’ll keep it safe and not take it lightly.”

She knew she was staring at him, speechless at the intensity and vulnerability behind those words, when he recovered enough to give her a sheepish grin and say as sort of a peace offering, “Well, and the sex is pretty great too?”

“Shit, Peeta,” she muttered. “Do you do this whole ‘Hey, let’s be devastatingly honest here’ thing to her on a regular basis?” Because damn him anyway, he was right. No question, she enjoyed being around Haymitch and his snark and his grumbling. But the times they got beyond that, put aside the armor, she felt that rush that came from knowing it could happen with each other, that they wouldn’t abuse the trust that let them show each other their vulnerabilities.

So she knew now that sarcastic, cynical Haymitch had a definite streak of earnestness and even gentleness in him, that he felt things deeper and was hurt more easily than he let on. It was rarely in his words—or hers, for that matter, since neither of them was exactly comfortable with the idea of just saying a thing—but it was there in his expression, the look in his grey eyes, and the way he touched her and held her, and she’d finally learned how to read it. The way he gave her that let her answer it with the best and brightest in her own self; the softer side that she’d stuffed down deep, hidden away after the arena.

“I like being honest now that I have the chance. Just because I don’t talk in monosyllables or sarcasm doesn’t mean I don’t understand what it’s like to have to hide behind a mask too,” he pointed out. “Growing up with my ma, I learned to lie about my black eyes and broken arms and say I was just clumsy. I learned to be nice and never get angry because it only led to trouble.” He let out a self-deprecating little laugh. “I fell in love with my dream of a girl I barely said five words to over the next eleven years and I was so ready to go die for the idea of love, just to prove to myself it existed
and I could do something worthwhile with my life. All of Panem loved it, but you know, the reality of it sounds kind of pathetic now.”

Oh, hell. Here he was flaying himself open like this in front of her, and she really didn’t know what to say to someone who just put it out there like that. Although come to think of it, she did know something of what it was like to be the pathetic, unloved one. She’d fallen in love with Finnick because he was beautiful and he was kind to her and he was young and scared too, and she was so desperately miserable and alone that she’d needed to believe in something besides the shitty life she was living, both in the Capitol and back home. She’d been desperate and naïve and she’d turned a growing friendship and mutual comfort into some kind of grand romance in her mind because she might be seen as a vicious bitch and she was being forced to f**k a lot of people including some pretty creative sadists, but if Finnick loved her, it would somehow still be OK.

Having him tell her about Annie had been devastating and it shattered her pretty illusions, showed her that all along while she’d been spinning fantasies in her head, he’d been only a good friend to her. She’d confused friendship and sex for love. She could imagine for Peeta, finding out Katniss had faked the whole thing to help keep him alive had been every bit as hard to take. So for the sake of that, for how honest he was being, even if it still made her bristle a little bit instinctively, she tried. “But you both got past that. You actually fell in love with the reality of our sweet little pain in the ass rather than your dream girl, so more power to you.” Just like eventually, she’d fallen in love with the reality of Haymitch rather than her fantasy of Finnick. She arched an eyebrow. “Hopefully you’re honest enough now to admit you want to strangle her occasionally.”

He gave another of those sheepish smiles and laughed. “Haymitch told me last spring when I was really in love with someone I’d understand how I could like them and still want to kill them sometimes. I didn’t get it then, but yeah, he was right. I know she’s got her faults and she pisses me off some days, but I love her anyway.” He said after another moment, “I’d still die for her if I had to. But it would be for her now. That first time, that was really more about making me feel worthwhile.”

“Oh, you’ve got it bad,” she mocked him gently. “But letting her get you pissed off, that’s excellent progress. Aurelius would be so proud.”

“He probably would. Hand me the eggs, would you?” He nodded to the bowl of eggs sitting near her. “And that dough you’ve got needs to be rolled out.” He handed her the rolling pin and said jokingly, “I promise I’ll watch what I say while you’ve got that.”

From something about the way he said it, she suddenly wondered if his mom had ever beaten him with a rolling pin and had the thought that it was depressingly likely. She wanted to say something reassuring about that but the words wouldn’t come and she had the vindictive thought that never mind what Haymitch said and what Peeta thought, maybe Jinny Mellark actually deserved to get left for the buzzards. To cover that up she blurted awkwardly, “So, planning to re-open a bakery once things get built up again?” Smooth move, reminding him about his dead family.

“Maybe,” he said, and for all he’d said he wasn’t the type to be monosyllabic or grunting, that came pretty close. “There’s a lot about the future with Katniss and me I’m not sure about yet.”

“Ah?” Rolling out the dough, she gave him a faint noise of encouragement, figuring she’d politely let him ramble about whatever it was. Apparently this was stuff he wasn’t comfortable talking about with Katniss, and maybe it was Haymitch being Seam too that he didn’t talk to the other man around Twelve about it and instead wanted another outside perspective.

“Well, last week we were talking about going to Four to meet up with you and Haymitch and see Finnick and Annie, and how their baby will be born by then, and I mentioned having kids and…” He trailed off awkwardly.
She’d stepped right into that one, and there was a moment of something like panic where she wished she could take that little sound of encouragement back and cut off his getting going, however rude it would be. “You’re only eighteen,” she said, trying to keep the harsh edge from her voice and hoping she succeeded, “and the whole district is a mess still. No need to rush.”

“I know that! We haven’t even had our toasting, so I only wanted to talk about what she thought about it,” he protested. “But she changed the subject in a big hurry.”

She kept rolling the dough out, though she sort of wished she was kneading again because the force of that would be better for dealing with the damn emotions that came bubbling up.

Thinking about Finnick and Annie’s kid, and how their visit to Four meant they’d see the new baby, didn’t help. Well, even if they’d been scheduled by Brocade to visit Four earlier, a very pregnant Annie would have had much the same effect. It would be one more obvious instance where lovely, kind Annie had managed to get it right on the first try while Johanna had bumbled along and fucked it up.

Peeta didn’t know, of course. Both she and Haymitch made damn sure that the only people that knew were the two of them and a few medical staff. Hell, even she wouldn’t have known herself that she’d miscarried if the nurse hadn’t told her, because she was only about a month along. At the time the rage at Coin had been a comfort, the heat of fury sustaining her at finding out she authorized secretly injecting young women immigrating to Thirteen with fertility drugs instead of contraceptives in an attempt to boost the population.

Coin would answer for that at her trial, so now in the calm without the anger, there was only the bleakness. At the time she’d still been upset but known it was better to not have a kid anyway, since she and Haymitch weren’t any kind of certain thing then. But that was gone now too, they were married and on pretty solid ground with each other, and she could admit, if only to herself, that if the baby still existed, she’d definitely have wanted it. Maybe they weren’t the best people to be parents to a baby—being Peeta’s guardians was something totally different—but still they’d have tried.

They hadn’t talked about it since the night she told him, because it was much too raw to deal with then on top of everything else. But the longer things went on, the heavier it got and the harder it was to see how she could simply bring it up again. What were they going to say anyway? Too bad, very sad, shit had happened. The only thing worth discussing now would be whether he ever wanted a kid, and whether they felt like they could consciously make that choice given how fucked up they both were. She knew he’d been furious with Coin, but he hadn’t said anything about the miscarriage. Just another of those instances where Haymitch was keeping his feelings on something hidden, and he was impossible to read.

So every month they both faithfully took care of another contraceptive injection and nothing more was said about it. It wasn’t like she thought about the baby on a daily basis; it probably helped there were no little kids or the like running around Twelve as a reminder.

But occasionally it would cross her mind. Every month when she got her period precisely on schedule thanks to the injection, she couldn’t help but think about it, thinking about the fact she would have been two, three, four months along now and what it would have meant for her, for Haymitch, for the house here. Poor Haymitch probably just thought that she was a particularly moody bitch at that time of the month and she could tell he quietly tried to deal with it and go easy on her.

“You know how she and Haymitch are about things. She’ll talk about it when she’s ready,” she said, though in her mind she wasn’t sure when that would ever occur in Haymitch’s case.
Haymitch still was no fan of cold rain, if he was to be perfectly honest. By now he could manage a shower perfectly well without flipping out, and a good part of his objection to the rain was the sheer misery of being wet and cold and feeling the damp of it seep into his joints. His old waxed canvas coat and leather boots kept the worst of the water out but he was wet and cold and tired anyway. His trousers were pretty damp. His hands were cold and his fingers were getting stiff from it. But along with that low level of discomfort, the cool rain falling on his head meant there was that faint edge right there too of remembering cold water thrown on him before the electrical wires were applied, or to wake him up after he fell unconscious. He kept it at bay but it still existed at the back of his mind.

“All right,” he said, seeing Katniss skip nimbly over a log ahead, turning up his coat collar, “think it’s about time to call it a day.” It wasn’t the best result for having been out for hours: two rabbits and a grouse. Unfortunately, March had been day after day of constantly pissing down rain so there hadn’t been that many good hunting days. It meant that they just had to push it all the harder, but it would be getting dark soon and he was in no mood to be stumbling around the woods then.

“I could have sworn that was a deer trail,” Katniss protested.

“It wasn’t. I told you that.” She readily admitted in most cases he had the better eye for spotting game and tracking, just like he’d freely admit she was still a better shot than him, but she’d stubbornly insisted today. He’d humored her because otherwise it was wandering around aimlessly hoping to stumble across something.

She turned and looked at him irritably as he climbed over the log himself. “We don’t have much to bring back. And one deer would feed us for—”

“Sweetheart, if I find a deer trail I will happily tell you, but I can’t make the fucking thing just materialize. Cut our losses for today and try again later. We’ve got enough for the moment.”

“Do you hate venison or something?” she insisted stubbornly. “You never seem too eager to find a deer.”

Well, that was an interesting question. He hadn’t eaten venison in years, and he realized with some reluctance it was all tangled up in his mind with other memories. The first hunt Burt had done with the same blackspire bow that was now slung over Haymitch’s shoulder. The way he’d blithely managed to lie his way out of Peacekeepers questioning him and Burt coming back to the Seam with eighty pounds of meat, and a good thing too, because that same day Fog had hanged Lorna Hawthorne for poaching. Fog, who’d apparently fathered him and Ash both, and who had bargained with Snow for Ash’s life.

He remembered that deer too for other reasons—the feel of blood on his fingers as he cut its throat, the feel of its guts in his hands, panting and puking behind a tree. “No. I ain’t picky enough to turn down good meat when it’s there.” He was Seam enough that the mentality of it came back easily in these leaner times, despite years of softer living. “If you shoot a deer, though, I’ll help you skin it and butcher it and all, even carry most of it back. But you’re gutting the damn thing yourself.”

She studied him with careful eyes, arms folded over her chest. Burt’s old leather hunting jacket hung loose on her smaller frame. She didn’t ask the obvious question, because apparently she had gotten smart enough to reason things out herself. “Oh,” she said finally, obviously realizing having held in his own intestines in the arena, the guts of something as big as a deer felt a little too eerily familiar. “Yeah, fine, I get it.” She sighed, disappointment sharp in the sound. “It’s going to be too dark to see anything to shoot soon. Let’s head back.”
At least he hadn’t had to argue with her about it too much. “We didn’t run the traps today.” The trapline was set up more to the north from where they’d been tracking. “You ought to take Peeta out tomorrow and do that.” He said it casually, not letting on that it was anything important.

“I figured you and I would do it.”

“Johanna and I have plans already.”

“I don’t mind running traps with Peeta but at least you can bring a bow along,” she argued, dark brows drawing together in irritation. “And when we’re not catching much, every chance we get, we should take—that’s more important than repainting walls or whatever you two have planned.”

If it mattered less, he would have happily told her that he and Johanna planned to spend the entire day naked and getting up to all kinds of naughty, filthy things because that would neatly shut her up. But given what was planned for tomorrow, and the realization that spring was coming quickly, he found the thread of his temper broke and he snapped at her, “For once, can you just fucking well do what I tell you, Katniss?”

She never really had, not from the moment she’d tried to stab his hand on that train.

He expected a mulish, You’re not my father! from her, and like he needed a reminder about Burt Everdeen with her wearing his coat and his bow on Haymitch’s shoulder. Like he needed any reminder at all about any dead people in Twelve considering that yesterday when he’d dared to venture down the hill to check, he’d seen that the melting snows had exposed the bodies left unburied since last summer.

Apparently hearing genuine anger in his voice rather than just his usual snark or irritation when she was being a brat caught her attention. Rather than arguing with him about it, her voice went softer and she asked, as if she didn’t really want to know but felt compelled to find out, “What are you planning, Haymitch?”

Somehow it was more difficult to say something given he couldn’t just snap it at her, so he said carefully, even a little evasively, “Johanna and I went down the hill yesterday to check it out. I talked to Brocade last night. She’ll start sending cleanup crews here by the end of the week.”

She went silent for a while, leaning back against a tree as she mulled that over. But apparently the way they could figure each other out without spelling it out explicitly was still in force.

“And you two are going to check out the bakery tomorrow.”

“That’s the plan.” He was oddly relieved she hadn’t made him say it. The thought of it was bad enough, given that the images of the corpses he’d seen last July were burned hard into his mind, and the thoughts of his old house back in the Seam all those years ago. “I told Peeta we’d bury them if we could.” He wasn’t going to leave them for the impersonal hands of the cleanup crew if he could help it. He’d promised.

“And you don’t want him there looking.”

“No. And I don’t want you there seeing it either and having that between you two,” he said bluntly. Trying to hide it from Peeta would be hard, and the boy would always know she’d seen it. “So just take him on the trapline tomorrow and don’t tell him.”

“What if you don’t find them tomorrow?” she asked, and it was a relief to see she’d accepted the reality and they were actually talking about it matter-of-factly, like a pair of adults.

“Then you get clever enough to find some way to keep him distracted the next day. Have him show
you how to make cakes, make him practice archery again, screw him senseless, I don’t really care. Just keep him from going down the hill.”

This was how it worked between the two of them, the same way it had before the Quell. That understanding was there between them that they were going to do the best they could to protect Peeta. Then it had been the claim that he was the best of them, which was still probably true, but by this point they could maybe admit it was simply that they didn’t want to see him hurt.

In Haymitch’s mind, nobody ought to be forced to endure looking for the mutilated remains of their own family if there was any way around it. He’d been spared that horror, as had Johanna. The fact that the deaths in the arena and caring for bodies down in the tribute morgue meant they could well imagine how their families must have looked didn’t change the fact that they had never actually seen the bodies and thus there was still something of a welcome veil of never knowing for certain drawn over the matter, blurring its details. He and Johanna talked about it and had agreed that hard as it would be, they’d take care of it in order to give Peeta that last small bit of grace. “OK,” she said finally, nodding to him, Seam grey eyes luminous in the late afternoon sun. Then after a faint hesitation she added, “Thanks.”

He brushed that off with a dismissive gesture. “How’s he holding up about it?” he asked carefully.

“He doesn’t talk about them much. Like I told Johanna, I think he feels bad he doesn’t miss them more, except for his pa.” She took the lead, feet moving quietly through the forest on the trail back towards Victor’s Village. He followed behind, a little less graceful thanks to his bigger size and his age, but he’d still been surprised on starting hunting with her that old instincts came back to him and he remembered how to move swiftly and silently. He wondered some days if having him here carried echoes of hunting with her father for her like it did for him—maybe her dead friend Gale too, for that matter.

“Then all the better to get it done so he can let it go and move on,” he said grimly, remembering Peeta’s anguish last fall at Finnick’s wedding at how guilty he felt that his family was still lying there in the rubble, unburied.

“He’s trying to move on in some ways,” she said, as he picked up the bag with the rabbits and the grouse from where they’d stashed it to keep moving and slung it over his shoulder. “He was asking me about having kids the other day.” The way she said it, almost spat it, Peeta might have done better to suggest something really sexually perverted.

Now it was his turn to figure it out off of a few spare words, but he thought he followed it well enough. He didn’t much like the subject, that was a given, but unfortunately she’d brought it up and it would be better to casually let it go a little bit until she got what advice she obviously wanted, and then hope she dropped it. “And is that a ‘not now’ you’re looking at, or a ‘not ever’?”

“Well, you’re only seventeen. Don’t feel you have to be in a rush to repopulate the district here,” he said, deliberately flippant, giving her a half-shrug. He sort of wanted to tell her that talking to Johanna about this might be a better idea, but fuck knew what Johanna thought about having kids. She never gave him any hint about it, whether or not what Coin had done put her off the idea entirely.

Besides, he got it. Katniss was asking him because he was Seam, came from the same place as she had. Mostly she was asking because he was the man who’d put aside any hopes of marriage and children for two and a half decades, knowing it wasn’t safe, unwilling to put others at risk by letting
himself have those things. Since the war had ended he’d taken enough of a leap of faith to get married to Johanna, and she’d likewise let Peeta into her life. If he could now tell her he was considering having kids that would be a sign the world was safe enough for her to do the same.

He couldn’t give her that reassurance, though. He wasn’t surprised when, not given him moving to say something, she awkwardly probed at it with a, “Uh, have you and Johanna...?”

“I’m almost forty-two, sweetheart, that’s an age most Seam men are hoping to stick it out a few more years and see a first grandkid before they croak.”

She didn’t let him get away with deflecting the question like that. Damn. “You didn’t mine coal for twenty years and you aren’t drinking obsessively now, so you’re not exactly on death’s door.”

“Aw, thanks. Nice to know you’re concerned for my health. You don’t have to worry about Jo and me plugging you with kids anytime soon.” He relented enough to give her that much, but he couldn’t say that no, they hadn’t talked about it, and frankly he had no idea when they might, if ever.

He sometimes thought about the kid they might have had, despite how he tried not to, but he’d always been pretty good at punishing himself. He couldn’t help it. Talked to Finnick on the phone and heard him crow proudly about decorating the nursery or how he could feel the baby’s kicks when he touched Annie’s belly, looked at the empty bedrooms in the house and thought about what they could use them for, studied that fresh piss-yellow injection he and Johanna took each month to make sure a little accidental bundle of joy wasn’t in the cards. The thought worked its way in at times like that, making him want to reach for the liquor bottle at least a little. Because having that one moment of hearing the news and having it ripped away in the same instant, having it all be the result of one woman’s cold manipulations to boot, and knowing it was probably all he’d ever know about being a father, was a glum thing to have rattling around his head.

But aside from a blunt, If you want kids, it’s probably a good idea to get on that before I get old enough to likely end up dead while the kid’s still in kindergarten, there wasn’t much way he could see to bring it up to Johanna. He had the feeling it was her way of letting him know she didn’t want kids without being aggressively blunt about it. Sparing his feelings or something? The longer it went the more it seemed like it was simply something that was going to be left alone. That would be OK in the end because having her was far more than he’d have imagined was possible for him, so he thought he would be content with that. It would simply take a little time to get foolish and impractical dreams settled and locked away neatly; he knew that from experience.

“You’re young and things are still pretty up in the air with Panem.” Considering they were still hunting hard for their food a lot of days, bringing a baby into that wasn’t the wisest idea anyway. “No reason to let him push you into a decision, sweetheart,” he said, finally trying to give her something in the way of useful advice. “But at least let him know if it’s for sure whether it's 'maybe later' or 'never.'” Might as well see those two have it be crystal clear between them.

“You think the new Panem’s going to be all right?”

He wished he could tell her that it would be everything they hoped it would, that of course kids would always have enough to eat and there would be every opportunity for them to have a great life and chase their dreams. Truth was, he didn’t know that for sure. But he knew a few things for certain. “No more Hunger Games. No more deliberately starving the districts to control us while the Capitol feasts away and thinks we’re not quite human enough to matter. So yeah, I’d say that’s a pretty damn good start. It’s a hell of a lot better world than we were born into.” Any child Katniss had would never have a life like hers, or Haymitch’s, a life full of the need to go hunting from an early age to put food on the table, take out tesserae, risk every Reaping Day in fear, and either die in the arena or come out of it alive but no longer a child. Katniss would never have to watch her child
die on television to the cheers of the Capitol. “It’s worth putting some faith in it.” Taffeta had told him that once, and it was faith in that new Panem that was going to have him going around to all the districts, trying to help get them back on their feet.

If he could help build a better country where people like Finnick and Annie, and Katniss and Peeta, could feel safe to raise a pack of disgustingly adorable children, he thought that wasn’t a bad legacy. Better than his being Twelve’s embarrassment for all those years. “Anyway. Enough of this stuff, yeah? Let’s get back, have some coffee and warm up, and find out just how much they’ve been gossiping behind our backs.” He’d try to forget for tonight what tomorrow was going to be like.
They left the sad, soggy, muddy, canvas-wrapped bundle in the front hallway of the house in the Village closest to the path down the hill, where it would be safe overnight. They’d built the coffin there the night before. Johanna might have said that precaution wasn’t necessary except for the fact that she’d seen the buzzards feasting on some half-rotted corpses in the rubble, and seen a glimpse of something else out of the corner of her eye slinking around, also searching for a meal. She’d seen that in the months Twelve had been abandoned that animals had been at the burned bodies, and despite having seen the worst of the mutts in the arena and the worst of people killed by predators in Seven, it still made her stomach churn. The kerchief over her nose cut down some of the lingering smells, though it must have truly been hell last summer, but nothing could kill the sight. She’d told him last night she suspected one coffin would be enough, but she wasn’t too happy to be proved right.

She’d taken a second before they headed inside their house, exhausted and filthy and soaked to the skin, to kick their wet clothes, shed on the front porch and ruined with mud and soot and damp ash and the sour-sweet stink of mustiness and decay, off into the bushes where they’d be safely hidden. Peeta and Katniss were hosting dinner at their house in a couple of hours. They could get the clothes later or tomorrow and burn them or bury them or whatever.

He murmured something about lighting a fire, while she lit a lantern and turned on the shower in the downstairs bathroom. There was still no hot water and thus the shower was about the same temperature as the chilly rain. It didn’t matter. Neither of them was in a mood to wait long enough to heat the water for a bath, not when the need to scrub the smell and feel of death off of them, teeth chattering the whole while, was so urgent it was almost a frenzied compulsion.

Naked and damp and shuddering in the unheated house, she hurried upstairs and dug through the closet, grabbing a spare quilt and then heading back down.

She found him away from the fire, looking out the window with the curtain half-drawn back, and she knew that particular view looked towards the path back down the hill. His hands braced on the window frame, his back to her, the firelight played over his bare skin. She could see some of his scars, the thinnest knife cuts already fading to ghostly silver traces, but others were still stark raised, pink lines. She knew them all, even the ones she couldn’t see right now, knew the sight and the feel of them. She knew his body and its many scars that were so very like her own; with time now she was better coming to know his mind. She didn’t like what it implied that he’d turned away from the comfortable warmth of the fire to go gaze into the bleakness of the abyss.

He stood there with the air of wariness and dread like a man facing his own private hell. The lines of his body were drawn so tense she had the thought that he looked like the shivers racking him might somehow snap him in two. Then she realized, chagrined at her own slowness, maybe the tremors weren’t entirely from the cold.

Stepping up behind him, it was pure instinct that she wrapped her arms around him, breasts pressed against his back, her chilled skin against his. He startled badly as she did it, a sound coming from his throat that was half-gasp, half-growl, turning to confront her. Too late she recognized it might have been a bad idea to grab him from behind, and she let go and backed off, instinctively ducking and saying, “Easy, just me.” Instead of giving a panicked elbow to her face, she saw the flicker of recognition cross his face.

She could see his eyes, the silver-grey of them suddenly too bright in the firelight with the light
shining off the tears there. He dashed the back of his hand roughly over his eyes and made a low sound in his throat, muttering thickly, almost embarrassed, “Never mind it, I’ll be all right for tomorrow.”

Tomorrow, for the funeral, she realized, because he wouldn’t allow himself to break down in public. He would be the strong one there, for Peeta’s sake as well as for some of his own pride.

Nearly eight thousand dead, and they had recovered four of them. *Maybe* four. It was so hard to tell when the jumbled remains they had uncovered in the rubble of bakery, burned and rotted and ravaged by animals, were barely recognizable as human any longer, let alone four distinct bodies. They would bury them all together, only one coffin needed. If there was any actual kind of afterlife, like her ancestors had apparently believed in the days before the Capitol abolished any formal religion, she’d trust to that to sort it out.

She knew she would have bad dreams off of it, just more for her collection. The sight and smells brought back too many unpleasant images of what her family must have been like, ravaged and torn apart by forest cats after being shot and left to rot in the summer sun. For Haymitch, it had to be far worse. She wondered if it was for the memory of the boy who’d buried the burned bodies of his family and the girl he had loved that he had so nearly wept in grief, or as the man who had lost his entire district. She suspected it was some of both.

The night Snow told them about Ash and Heike, they’d both been nearly wild with shock and despair. He was recovering more quickly than he had then. Even now, she could see he was rapidly regaining some composure, that the tears might have gathered but he wasn’t going to give in and let them fall. The catch in his breath was evening out. He had living here but staying solitary, not a part of Twelve’s community and its rhythms, for so many years. These dead still belonged to him in a way they didn’t belong to her, and so it hit him all the harder. But while he knew them, he hadn’t been close to them. He had begun the rift when he stepped away from them for their safety but over the years, they had rejected him as a failure and an embarrassment. So the deaths were almost unfathomable in scope, but still somewhat distant, more the concept of *his people* rather than specific names and friends.

It had been a shitty existence for him all those years but in that moment she was almost grateful. That distance was perhaps the only saving grace, the only thing that kept the loss from being so staggering he couldn’t be expected to bear it. No wonder he had refused to let Peeta go dig for his family and got Katniss to go with him too in the guise of keeping Peeta away. They were younger and softer and hadn’t been outcasts. The loss would cut deeper.

Sighing, she stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him, and the quilt with it. “C’mere, get your ass near the fire before you get pneumonia.” Not gentle words, but she knew him well enough to know that if she tried soft and sweet on him right now, he’d prefer she treat him more normally.

They settled down by the fire, the warmth of the flames and the quilt and each other gradually stopping the shivering. He hadn’t broken down, but she knew he’d pushed himself too hard for a man still grappling with more than his share of nightmares.

“It’s…not as bad as it was last summer,” he murmured, still sounding a little bit dazed, half-lost in his own thoughts. Yeah, she could imagine how it must have been seeing it only a few days after it happened. She still remembered how bleak his voice had been through that air vent, telling her Twelve had been obliterated.

*Oh, not as bad as that. It’s still pretty fucking horrific.* “Why do you do this shit to yourself?” She realized too late she’d muttered it aloud.
“Someone had to take care of it,” he said, and the answer was so calm and so oblivious that she almost wanted to yell at him. “And I wasn’t going to let it be Peeta.”

“So why does it have to be you?” she said, raising herself up on an elbow and looking down at him. Some days she thought the man didn’t have the good sense of a damn goose that he couldn’t seem to avoid rushing in to situations almost guaranteed to cause him pain or suffering. Hadn’t he been hurt enough already?

“Because, Jo,” Haymitch said, and now there was a spark of that contrariness in his face, telling her that he was winding up for a potential argument. Good. That meant he was more himself again. “I owe him. I always will.” The flash of steel in his eyes at the last bit and the tense look on his face told her that there was some weight behind that statement.

That whole Seam-debt thing, Peeta had called it, with a faint air of an outsider’s frustration that she found she shared, the way Katniss and Haymitch moved easily in that shared mentality and left anyone not born and raised to it trying to figure it out. “Care to clue in a stupid Seven gal?” she said with excessive patience.

“I wrote him off,” he said bluntly in reply. “She knows it, he knows it, and I know it. Fuck, everyone in Mentor Central knew it. I tried to save her, put all the sponsorship money on her, and I cut him loose to go get himself killed however it would happen.”

“Yeah, with his urging you on to do it,” she said, resisting the urge to roll her eyes because even if she thought it was ridiculous, the intensity of it told her this mattered to him and she shouldn’t so lightly dismiss it. That didn’t mean she wasn’t going to try to convince him he was being an idiot. “And yeah, everyone in Mentor Central knew it. Because we all did it. Every fucking year, Haymitch.” She’d done it with Blight, each summer, picked one of the tributes they thought had the better chance of survival and banked all their hopes on him or her, turning their efforts away from the weaker of the two. That was how the Games worked for the dark horse districts. It was how it had to be if there was any hope of bringing one kid home alive. “You did the impossible, you idiot. You played the Gamemakers like you play that damn fiddle of yours. You brought both of them back alive.”

He looked up at her, eyes level and clear as he told her, “I know. But you never had to look a kid in the eyes with both of you knowing he was lying in the mud dying by inches because he wasn’t the chosen one. It wasn’t like I was the one that saved him in the end. Cost him his leg by not getting it treated earlier.”

“No lack of effort on your part that you didn’t get him that medicine,” she pointed out dryly. “I seem to remember you throwing a real fit because the Gamemakers made it pointless by throwing that feast.” He’d obviously been at the end of his rope, after putting away the booze and enduring days and days of keeping up the frantic pace of trying to watch two tributes and also go work the sponsors at every possible opportunity. It got to the point where all of the lame duck mentors were offering to keep an eye on Katniss and Peeta for a couple hours so he could go meet a sponsor or catch a nap. Her shifts, as she remembered it, had mostly been while they were cuddled up in that cave sleeping—boring and uneventful.

She would never tell him, but all of them with their tributes out of it early had stepped forward then because yeah, Katniss was inspiring and all, but at that point they really didn’t give a shit one way or another about her. They did it for him, because he had been there for them in the past. Because, for once, they wanted him to be the one to bring a kid home.

When he came back from a frenzy of fundraising, almost entirely sober, they knew he’d been working it hard to get the medication for Peeta’s infection. He’d dialed up the parachutiers only to
find that after the Gamemakers had announced the feast, they’d priced that single precious syringe so far out of his reach he could never hope to buy it, he’d ended up swearing and breaking several chairs in helpless fury. They’d simply let him do it, despite seeing the mentor aides standing there wincing at the cleaning they’d have to do. They all knew the reality. The Gamemakers wanted to force the drama of Katniss risking her life for that medicine, and so all of Haymitch’s efforts had pretty much just been pissed down the drain. Even Brutus, still a good Capitol minion then with both his own tributes alive, had muttered something about it being unfair. “Did you have to sell yourself to anyone for that money?” she asked him, not beating around the bush with euphemisms. It would have been too personal to ask him that back then. It wasn’t now.

When he laughed, it startled her to realize that hearing him laugh genuinely of late, it had been a while since she’d heard that familiar sound, caustic and sharp and bitter. “You don’t do flattery, so that must be selective memory as to me back then.” Considering she’d liked Haymitch as a friend but wouldn’t have considered him insanely desirable, he probably had a point. “No. I even went to some old patrons, sure, to try to talk them out of their wallets. But shit, you know they didn’t want to fuck a fat, drunk, washed-up forty-year-old as part of that deal.” But she knew some of them would have wanted him last year, slimmed-down, sober, sharp, and forty-one.

“If they did, would you have done it?”

Something like pain flickered across his face, breaking through the veneer of amused sarcasm he’d quickly flung up. “You have to ask? Yeah. Of course.” He didn’t have to say I was well broken in already to whoring, it wouldn’t have mattered.

No, she hadn’t had to ask. She’d known. But she wanted him to say it for his own sake. To her mind that willingness to push himself to the edge, and even to endure shame and humiliation once again if it would have clinched the deal, simply to save a boy that wasn’t even his own kin made him a better man than the one being buried tomorrow, who’d stood by and let his wife kick the shit out of his own son. She knew better than to say it to either him or Peeta, though. Tact didn’t come easy to her but on a few points she’d managed. “So you hustle your ass off to earn sponsorship money, you would have sold your own damn body if it helped, you talk the Gamemakers into an unprecedented rule change. Still not seeing how you let Peeta down. Hell, you shoved him out of the way for the Quell and put yourself in it, planning to die, just to make sure he survived. So after that, do you really owe him?”

“So put it as,” Haymitch frowned thoughtfully, trying to think of something that framed it better. His voice lowered as he said, with a fierce edge, “I promised him I would help him take care of burying them, doing it proper. You and I at least had that for our people. He should too, rather than having them tossed in a common grave with all the others. Besides…I’ve lied to him before.”

Necessary lies, she was sure, but all the same, Snow’s defense lawyer had gotten him to admit to being a liar during the trial. His abilities to deceive and manipulate, well-trained in his years as a victor, had saved his ass and others too, saved his tributes and started a successful rebellion. But she could sense in him, in this world without the need to lie and cheat simply to survive, the craving to become a man with honor, with integrity. One who could give his word and have it regarded as solid. He’d promised Peeta, because he cared for him, and he would keep his word. “You’re not going to go on some quest to bury them all, are you?” she asked, and she wasn’t kidding.

“There’s close to eight thousand of them,” he said with a slow sigh. “I can’t, but hell, ideally I should do it. After all, it’s my fau—”

She knew what he would say. Knew him and his guilt too well, had heard him pleading with the ghosts of Twelve’s dead in his cell. She wanted to lash out and snap him out of those self-forged
shackles, because seeing him determined to flay himself like this was no easy thing for her to bear. Yeah, well, she’d known he had his issues. Nobody drank most of the way to oblivion and death out of being happy. “No,” she said, interrupting him, trying to keep her voice even as she did it. “That’s all in your head, Haymitch. It’s just the venom talking, that and Snow.” Because she was sure that snake bastard was behind the idea being planted in Haymitch’s head. Why else would he have dragged his prize rebel prisoner on a tour of the place if not to rub Haymitch’s face in his supposed screw-up? The venom would have only made him more paranoid about it with the hallucinations.

“He called me in on their Tour. Told me to keep them both in line and make sure Katniss didn’t screw it up, or as I knew from experience, there would be consequences,” he murmured, looking away from her. “I didn’t take it seriously enough. I thought, you know, it would be their families. I had Plutarch ready to send a team to retrieve ‘em from Twelve if at all possible. I didn’t think it would be that fast, and be the entire district.”

“Then that’s on Snow. Not you. He dropped the bombs.”

“I know that. But you want to look at me and try to tell me you don’t still feel it in your gut about your ma, your daddy, your brother? That you should have done differently somehow, not taken the Capitol so lightly?” He was right, she’d acknowledge it. Gut instinct wasn’t rational, and the lingering shadow of doubt and guilt was still there sometimes. “Maybe it ain’t directly my fault, but yeah, I helped cause it by underestimating Snow. And I led an awful lot of people to dying last year. Including more than a few of our friends.”

How she could want to smack him and hug him at the same time never failed to amaze her, but somehow it happened. She didn’t reach out and touch him, though, not yet. “You forget I was in that damn meeting you held. Give us due credit. We were all victors.” Weak people didn’t survive the arena. “We weren’t a bunch of gullible little lambs that you tricked into sacrificing our lives. We knew we were all going to die anyway but you at least offered us a chance to die for something worthwhile. You asked, that’s all. Volunteers only, you said. So we volunteered.” They had gone into it with clear minds—all right, maybe people like Max had been a little less than clear but still pretty sane—but not duped or coerced or forced. He simply asked, as their friend. As his friends, they agreed.

She sighed, shook her head, and tried to think of where to go next on this. “So what do you want, Haymitch? Absolution? Because I can tell you things aren’t your fault but is it going to do a damn bit of good unless you actually decide you believe it? I’m really not into beating my head against a brick wall for fun.”

He pondered that a good while, the fire playing over the solemn, thoughtful expression on his face. “Absolution? No. Nobody can say a few words and make it all better. Look. I made a rebellion that turned into a war. Sure, it was a necessary war and Panem’s going to turn out a hell of a lot better for it. But a lot of people died. A lot of people right now that survived are cold and hungry and scared. I helped make that situation so I don’t get to turn away from what I created and say ‘We won, so tough shit that it’s hard right now, it’s not my fucking problem to deal with it.’”

“Some would have.” She thought about Coin, willing to claw her way to power over the suffering of others. Even others, like Katniss’ friend Gale, saw only the fierce bloodlust of the actual fight rather than the pain and frailties left in its aftermath. He was a better man than he wanted to give himself credit for that he actually thought about things like that. “So maybe it’s a good thing Brocade gave us this job.”

“Time to face reality. Don’t get me wrong,” he said. “These last few months…” A half-smile from him, the slightest bit self-conscious and therefore she knew it was entirely sincere, told her plenty
about what they’d meant to him. They’d meant plenty to her too. She hadn’t been kidding when she told Brocade they both needed some time off before plunging back into the fray, time to heal and be away from everything. But spring was here and he was right, there were realities that couldn’t easily be ignored.

“Yeah.”

“But you’re right. It’s a good opportunity to fix some things for the whole country.”

“So you’re talking about redemption.” Not absolution at all with how easy that would be, but not drowning himself in damnation with no escape. At least he had a clear plan here of how to go about feeling like he’d paid what he owed, his path to becoming a better man. “Where does your responsibility stop?” she asked, wanting to be clear, because the idea of the next twenty years of living with him guiltily atoning wasn’t a pleasant thought. Even worse, she could see the notion of him doing something stupid and getting himself killed. “When does it finally balance? I mean, do you have to rebuild every fucking district yourself with a hammer and nails, or what?”

She got a quick laugh for that and was both pleased that he could see it as funny and irritated because she hadn’t actually meant it as a joke. “For that I’d need a woman who knows a thing or two about lumber,” he teased her lightly. But then his tone turned more serious. “When I finish this tour of the districts and I’ve done my part to help them on their way,” he said, grey eyes meeting hers. “I promise.”

Thinking it over, she decided she could accept that. They were doing this anyway to help the districts out, to help Brocade, and hopefully to find out about Ash and Heike. If in the bargain Haymitch’s conscience shed some of its burden that was even better. “Good. Remember it.”

“I will.” He looked at her curiously, reaching out and tucked a fold of the quilt around her shoulder from where it was starting to slip loose. “So aside from Heike, why are you taking this whole trip?”

Another of those half-smiles as he said, “You’re no gullible little lamb getting led around by me, after all.”

She gave a snort of irritation. “So maybe you’re not the only one who’s looking for a change in life. Being a complete bitch day in and day out is a demanding job, you know.” Being known best for a supposed streak of vicious cunning was one thing when it was forced on her, but now that the Capitol had fallen, she was tired of imagining the rest of her life with people flinching like she’d bury an axe in their skulls as soon as look at them. She’d changed enough already to let other people into her life. Changed enough that unlike before, when she might have been one of those people too wrapped up in her own losses and saying, So what, it’s their problem to deal with it, not mine, she actually gave a damn now. She couldn’t go back to the sixteen-year-old, soft and innocent, who’d gone to the arena. Too much time and too much pain prevented it. She would have to decide who she wanted to be now, and trying to step away from some of the worst of that image was a daunting task. She’d figured this trip might help that, challenge her to become better still.

Obviously he didn’t need further explanation, because he stretched up enough to kiss her softly in response, and that said more than words might have done. She answered that, enjoying the feel of it, of being warm and calm, and not alone and loved and most of all, still alive. Poor bastards down the hill. The thought of it intruded and she knew closing her eyes wouldn’t help because the images were seared into her consciousness.

No better way to answer death than with feeling totally alive, and with the grief still at the edge of his consciousness from the look on his face, he needed to forget as much as her. She kissed him harder, hand trailing down beneath the quilt. She’d taken him in hand and with a few light strokes felt the ready first twitches of response against her fingers, and reveled in the sound of his swift, shaky intake
of breath at it, but then his hand came down to cover hers and stop her. She couldn’t quite help a momentary embarrassment as she let go—the right to not be in the mood and be able to say “no” was precious to them both, and she wouldn’t take that from him for anything. But being rebuffed was something that she was still learning to not take as an actual rejection. “Later,” he told her, softening the blow with how he touched her face and looked at her. His smile was now that familiar cocky smirk as he said, “Since I aim to keep you up all night.”

Reading between the lines was getting easier for her. If they both were afraid of what dreams they might have tonight, no better way to handle it than staying awake and comforting each other as best they could. “We’ve got dinner to think about,” she agreed, remembering that, though she didn’t have much appetite. Neither was she looking forward to going over there and trying to keep a pleasant face around Peeta, still oblivious. But they’d do it anyway. “So get dressed. I’ll close up the fire.” The embers would still be there when they got back from dinner, ready to be fanned to life again.

She’d do that on the way upstairs. But, quilt still around her shoulders, grabbing the still-burning lantern from the bathroom, she padded to the telephone and dialed Brocade Paylor first. Brocade answered, sounding harried as usual. “Hey. It’s Johanna Ma—Johanna Abernathy.” She was still getting used to thinking of herself with that last name. “You’re busy, I get it, so I’ll make it short. If you can, try to keep people from Twelve from being on the cleanup crews. At least the earliest ones dealing with bodies. It’s not gonna help them to see this.” Haymitch was tougher than most and he’d still almost broken down tonight. People who thought coming back as early as possible and helping with the cleanup would probably just end up scarred for life for their trouble. Better to leave it to people from outside Twelve who wouldn’t look at those sad remains and imagine the faces of friends or family there, and be haunted by it.

“I’ll do my best,” Brocade promised, and Johanna actually believed it. “I was encouraging people from out-of-district to join the crews anyway since Twelve will need some new settlers.” She chuckled over the phone. “Guess you were the first and set the trend, huh?”

“Guess so,” she said, not in the mood for a prolonged conversation and thankful that Brocade seemed too busy for chitchat. “Thanks.” She hung up the phone and turned to see Haymitch standing there in the doorway of the kitchen. Out of the lantern’s light, the dim shadows of dusk made his expression impossible to read well, but obviously he’d overheard the phone call.

So maybe right now I’m attempting, say, an hour a day where I’m actually trying to be a hundred percent a good person and all that shit, she almost said. But she held her tongue. She didn’t need to defend it. Neither did she need him to try to reassure her that she was a good person. Like she’d told him, she needed to earn it and believe it for herself, not simply hear it said and have it fix everything. Besides, he didn’t need to say it. He’d proved it, since he knew her flaws and he’d been there for her anyway when she was anything but lovable. Instead she just waited to see what he’d do.

He came over to her, though he didn’t say anything right away or touch her. He reached behind her and picked up the phone, dialed it, and she heard him say, voice not giving a hint of the tired expression on his face, “Yeah, Peeta? Johanna and I aren’t gonna make it for dinner. Just feeling a bit sick.” Peeta obviously said something because Haymitch gave an irritated grumble and said, “Oh, shut up.” More talk from Peeta. “No, we’ll be OK. I swear we won’t starve. Fine. If you insist. Yeah, ‘night.” Obviously he’d come to the same conclusion as her: food and carefully keeping up appearances really didn’t appeal tonight so much as the idea of staying in and being with each other. He hung up the phone and looked at her and said with some chagrin, “Looks like I still lie to him some.”

“More like just not telling him everything.” Saying they felt sick was true enough—heartbroken definitely counted. “And I think you get a pass on that anyway.” Letting Peeta have one last peaceful
night rather than a sleepless, grieving one was a kindness. She thought that was well worth a little omission of information. Hopefully Katniss could handle it, but right now that wasn’t her concern.

He pushed the quilt from her shoulders, and she let it fall to the floor as he stepped forward and wrapped his arms around her, feeling the shock at the contrast of both the cool air and his warm skin suddenly against her. Reaching up, she turned his face to her and kissed him, smelling only him and the soap they’d scrubbed with, no scent of death or rot. There were nights she reveled in their lovemaking being playful and seeing how laughter made him seem younger, like the man he should have been all those years. Sometimes it was hot, all passion and urgency. Other times were a bit rough, full of dirty talk and dares, all the while fiercely asserting their claim on each other. They were even getting to the point of it being something soft and tender and all the finer for it. That wasn’t the case right now. This was one of the ones where I need you wasn’t simply about desire. It all hurt too damn much tonight. There wouldn’t be jokes or naughty whispers.

But they’d said it: in bad times as well as good, they’d be there for each other, keep each other safe and sane. He would turn to her rather than the alcohol and she’d turn to him rather than some stranger, and they’d be stronger for it.

In that rose garden, he’d snapped at Snow that he’d been forced to kneel down often enough in his life. He’d also put it to her bluntly later, Agreed that we’ll never try to order each other to beg for anything in bed? He did this because he wanted to, though, and she felt the affection in how he slowly kissed and touched his way down her body, that intense focus of his turned all on her. She threaded her fingers into his hair; let him nudge her legs apart, giving a small kiss to her inner thigh. Despite how demanding and bossy as she’d been with Capitol assholes, it was generally just straight-up fucking. Not like she wanted to give them the satisfaction of going down on her knees for a Capitol man, or woman, but it was easier to imagine doing that than to feel the sheer vulnerability of giving over this much control, of simply accepting that someone wanted to do this for her.

Even with Haymitch it was still both thrilling and terrifying, because he knew her so damn well. Tonight that thought was far more of a comfort than any kind of unease. His hand was on her hip holding her steady and with the way he looked up at her and then the touch of his tongue, as clever at this as with his words, making her moan and her knees go a little bit weak, her other hand went behind her to brace up on the table they’d made together. The horrors and the lingering guilt were real, but in that moment the tenderness and the trust was even more real.

They told Peeta at breakfast. Well, Katniss told him. Haymitch was bone-tired and sort of trying to not fall asleep into the potato hash before the coffee really could kick in and wake him up. Digging through rubble yesterday, staying up most of the night with Johanna, and then trudging to the cemetery to dig a grave all before daylight, all made him physically tired. The psychological weariness of the reality of what remained of District Twelve was draining in its own way too.

Peeta took it bravely, and excused himself. Katniss made to follow him but Johanna grabbed her wrist and said, “Let him have a minute first.” If she hadn’t found him last night, he could glumly admit he might have given in to the tears himself, and he thought that Peeta really needed to let go and give in more than he had. Katniss gave him a minute or two and then hurried to find him. When they came back to the table ten minutes later his eyes were red-rimmed but he was composed.

The coffin was fairly plain, a quick job done with the tools on hand. Johanna had taken enough time to give it the small personal touch of carving a sheaf of wheat into the lid, for a baker and his family. Peeta touched it, traced the design, looked up and told her, “Thank you for that.” Johanna just nodded in reply, not offering any wisecrack or the like. None of them said anything about the grim
reality of the remains of four people only needing one coffin, but even for the sake of Peeta, he and Johanna couldn’t dig four proper graves by hand.

Johanna was even more exhausted than him, since even if she was strong for a woman, the physical toil had taken more out of her. So it was him and Peeta that took the ropes to lower the coffin carefully down. The muddy ground from the thaw and the rain had made the digging easier this morning, but trying to brace against the weight and not slip wasn’t easy.

When that was done, Peeta stepped back and Katniss slipped her arm around his waist, holding him tightly. She was obviously thinking of Peeta first here, and they ought to be buried by Twelve custom, which Johanna obviously couldn’t know. He’d been to too many funerals in his life, even before he stopped being invited to them. The words of the song were seared into his brain. Like he’d told Plutarch snarkily, he was probably more inspired by funerals than weddings, because he’d experienced far more of the former.

He was tired of the funeral song. One of his earliest flickers of memory was standing graveside with his ma holding his hand while they buried his father, or at least the man he’d believed held that distinction. About all he remembered was the fear of that yawning black pit, the feeling of terrified confusion, and the sound of singing. He wasn’t sure anyone in Twelve actually found much comfort in those words, pretty much observing that a hard, harsh life was finally over. In this case, a life ended badly to boot.

So instead he found himself singing another song, one from his grandfather’s music journal. They’d apparently sung this one during the First Uprising, and once he’d tried the song on his fiddle, he realized he’d heard some of the oldsters defiantly humming a few bars of the tune at funerals when he was young.

Sing a song, mockingjay, sing me a song
Remember the ones that now are gone,
Miles deep in the coal-black mine we die,
Dreamin’ of coal-black wings in the sky,
Can’t cage a song sung in the trees,
Can’t cage a soul longing to be free,
Sing me a song, and remember this,
We’ll see the day come we all can live.

They’d seen that day come and maybe it didn’t bring Peeta’s kin back, but at least it was a little more hopeful than “They’re dead and not hurting anymore.” Katniss shot him a look of something like confusion. He heard the whistle of a mockingjay nearby testing out the new song, and managed to not smile at it. Can’t cage a song indeed.

The damp clots of mud clattered heavily down on the coffin lid as Peeta threw in the first shovelful, and he saw Peeta flinch at the sound. Stepping forward and taking the shovel from him, trying to ignore his already-blistered palms, he finished the job as the rest of them watched in respectful silence.

“I’ll walk him back,” he murmured to Katniss. Surprisingly, she didn’t object, moving over to Johanna. He sort of wanted to get out of the cemetery himself, and up the hill back to the Village; he had too many people buried here himself and he didn’t want to start thinking about them today when the grief was already still too close.

The two of them headed up the hill and he surreptitiously tried to scrape some of the mud off his boots, but given it was a muddy path, it was pointless. He wished he had something profound to say, some kind of essential truth to impart that would ease things.
The truth was simply that he’d stood where Peeta had, burying his family, and had to deal with it. He was still dealing with it. For twenty-five years, inside he had remained that scarred, lost sixteen-year-old boy the Capitol had stripped of everything that mattered and the last of his childhood and his innocence, but wouldn’t allow him to ever escape the shadow of the arena. He was almost forty-two and it was a hell of a late start but he was finally getting the chance to leave the boy behind, finish growing up and choose the kind of man he wanted to be.

“They’ll never be there now,” he said finally. “When you’re still trying to cope with the arena. When you have questions about life. When you marry Katniss. When you maybe have kids. You’ve got no blood kin left to rely on and losing that, it makes you grow up too fast, become a man before your time.” Though the arena, and the war, would have done plenty towards that end anyway. Peeta wasn’t the scared boy who Effie had clucked about him weeping in the car on the way to the train.

Peeta inhaled sharply, as if trying to steady himself. “I know they weren’t the best family, but…”

“They were still yours,” he spared Peeta having to say it. “And your pa was proud that he knew you’d be a better man than him. That’s probably what any father would hope for.” In his case, in turning out better than either Phineas Fog or Blair Abernathy wasn’t saying all that much.

Liam Mellark never let him pay for bread now, at least while his wife wasn’t watching. Considering Haymitch had money to burn and had left Liam’s son to die in the arena that left him with that uncomfortable Seam sense of debt that even white liquor couldn’t quite kill. Back when he had liquor, anyway, before Peeta dumped it all out.

“Peeta says the training for the Quarter Quell is going well,” Liam said carefully, wrapping up the warm loaf of bread.

“Uh-huh,” he said dismissively, not really wanting to talk about that subject. “Let me have some of the sugar cookies too, and will you just let me pay for the fucking things?” The younger Everdeen girl was fond of them and Perulla had insisted he come over for dinner tonight. Katniss would scowl, as usual. He didn’t mention that, knowing Liam and Perulla’s history. Besides, if he knew they were for his old girlfriend’s daughter, Liam would definitely never let him pay. “And some cheese buns.” Between the lack of liquor and the training, he was surprised how he was constantly hungry these days. He felt like it was back when he was a kid, hungry all the time. His food bill had skyrocketed. Though it was still much less than buying booze would have been. “And what you really wanna know is: will I let him die this time? We talked about it. Don’t let it get around town since the Capitol will want the reaping to be a big thing, but he’s not going in the arena.”

Liam let out a slow, relieved breath. “Thank you,” he murmured softly, closing the glass display case. “He’s a good boy. He’ll be a good man.” Haymitch made a faint noise of acknowledgment, eyeing the bread again and debating whether he ought to get more. After the morning training he felt like he could devour an entire loaf with his teeth and his bare hands before even leaving the bakery. “Better than me,” Liam said finally to Haymitch’s back as he was staring at a blueberry-cinnamon loaf with probably far more lust than he’d showed for a woman in over a decade.

“That too,” he said, turning and pointing at the bread. “And yeah, I know he will.” No point denying it. He knew Liam hated how, with one mistake made in a moment of weakness when he was depressed over losing Perulla, he’d ended up doing the right thing by a woman and it led to a hellish marriage. He knew the man was ashamed how he was too weak, too beaten down by his guilt and how he felt he deserved it, to defend his children against the wife who never had wanted them.

Liam had never told him that. But he didn’t have to say anything, and Haymitch had the feeling the baker understood him and his own guilt in turn. Those that were inescapably drowning in self-loathing recognized their own kind.
Of course, after hearing that Haymitch was going to go off and die for his kid, the man still didn’t let him pay.

Liam had been a weak man, but he’d loved his son, and Haymitch knew that as Peeta got older, more sure of himself as a man in his own right, he’d probably see the matter clearer. He’d come to terms better with the good and bad of his father.

They were at Katniss’ house now, and Haymitch put a hand on his shoulder for a second to stop him from climbing the porch. The advice gleaned from years of his own sorrow came quickly now. “Don’t make yourself clean out the house alone, and don’t do it right away. Visit ‘em, and I’ll make sure to order a proper marker when Jo and I go to Two, but don’t linger there too much. Try to remember the good stuff and not how they died. Keep yourself busy. Don’t go try to help the cleanup crews, it’s just going to fuck with your head. And if it gets too bad, go break something or whatever, but don’t start drinking.”

He added, softer now, “But you’ll never be alone. We’ll all be here. You won’t ever have to worry you’ll be like me.”

“I could do a lot worse than turning out like a man who had no reason to do it but still gave it everything he had to save my life twice,” Peeta said, and wasn’t that just like him, to think of the best in Haymitch even as Haymitch himself automatically turned to the worst. He sighed, feeling oddly flustered at the compliment and the faith implied in it. Peeta gave him a slight, sad smile and said, “Thanks for looking after them for me,” before he headed inside, grief obviously still weighing heavy on his shoulders but not unbearable. They were buried now and he could start to try to heal.

Yeah, better to admit that Johanna was right. If he felt the pull of owing Peeta over the first arena, Peeta obviously felt he owed him in return, and he ought to accept that things between them were even. Though he suspected Peeta still wouldn’t ever let him pay for bread either.
District Twelve: Four

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The soil was dark and cool and damp between his fingers as he and Johanna helped push it back over the roots of the sapling. He thought momentarily of burying Peeta’s family a few weeks ago, but he managed to put it aside from his mind. That had no place in this kind of moment. Giving the earth one last pat down, he pushed up off the ground, getting to his feet and dusting off his hands. His black trousers didn’t show the dirt that must have been on his knees but he could feel where the damp had seeped through.

Johanna, on her feet now too, crossed her arms over her chest and surveyed the two apple trees with satisfaction. “So, do we sing or what?” he asked, smiling to himself as she brushed a lock of hair off her forehead that had come loose from her blue kerchief, looking at the smudges of dirt on her face.

“No, we’d crack open a keg of beer and drink,” Johanna said, looking over at him with a smirk. “After a little while then everyone around us would be singing. Really bawdy stuff too.”

“Ask Peeta. I don’t think Katniss will sing bawdy songs for you,” he teased. “But we’d need the whole keg of beer to not wince at his singing.” They’d finally planted those trees to observe Seven’s wedding customs—apples meant shade and food both, nicely practical. That was after spending most of the day out in the backyard planting a vegetable garden. Tomatoes, carrots, peppers, and the like, seeds planted in the ground ready to grow. Though admittedly it would be mostly Katniss and Peeta reaping the benefit of that this year, considering both he and Johanna were going to be away so much.

There was still something satisfying about it, though, this particular little freedom, given that gardens had been forbidden by the Capitol. Independently growing food would be a step towards getting away from the shackles of reliance on wages and tesserae that were tightly controlled by the Capitol.

Right now there was only overturned black soil and the border of wildflowers that Johanna had put there after she’d gathered the plants with Peeta yesterday out in the woods. It was something unusually sentimental for her, so he teased her as he came up behind her, putting his arms around her, “What, is that so I always have flowers to bring you and no excuses?”

She chuckled wryly, saying, “Don’t bother. Cut flowers just die too damn fast. Deliberately slowly killing something just so you can put it where you want it and stare at it for a while? Kind of depressing.” Kind of like the Games, he thought, imagining she made that connection herself. Well, that practicality was more like her, but it made even less sense of the matter. She made a soft noise in her throat and finally said, “We couldn’t have gardens either. But my mom, she’d try to bring a plant or two from lumber camp sometimes. Plant it in a jar in the house. Mostly it was herbs or the like, but there were a few flowers. She’d say,” Johanna’s voice went a little softer, remembering her mother, “it was a little something, just for pretty. And that sometimes we all need that.”

Her fingers tightened in his, and he didn’t have to say that he knew she still missed them. He could imagine Petra Mason with her flowerpots. Instead he tried to lighten her mood by saying, “Well, my ma would probably say I ought to be damn glad to have some fresh vegetables so I’d better shut up and eat ‘em.” He could practically hear her voice still, and his throat felt oddly tight at the memory. Johanna’s answering laugh was a little shaky. They stood there, looking over the garden and finally he asked, “Do you want to bring them here? Or at least put up a stone in the cemetery?” They were already ordering the headstone for the Mellarks when they went to Two, it would be no hardship to
order one for the Masons. At least it would give her a place for them. He wished in that moment that he could have known them. They must have been really something to raise a woman like Johanna.

She was silent for a good long while before she finally said, almost too soft to hear at first, “No. They’re a part of Seven. I don’t want to dig them up, and a stone here wouldn’t belong to them either. We planted a tree instead, at the memorial grove, one with a tag with their names. So we’d have something living to visit to remember them, instead of dead stone.”

Put like that it sounded like possibly a better idea than staring bleakly at polished granite. Unfortunately they didn’t have any kind of memorial grove here. “If you want a tree for them here, we should do that.” Because there was always that vague nagging concern that she herself didn’t feel like she belonged sometimes, moving to a place like this, and he wouldn’t ask her to give up everything she was, not for him.

“Thanks,” she said softly, turning to him, brushing her fingers over his jaw and then back, threading them through his hair. He knew she might have a few stray smudges of dirt on her hands but he didn’t really care. Dirt washed off. Feeling this from her was far more important. “You might need a haircut soon since you know we’re gonna end up on the newscasts,” she murmured, leaning in closer to him. “Back to shaving regularly too. Too bad. Looks good on you.”

True enough. It had been over eight months now since the guards had shaved their heads in the Detention Center as part of the Capitol’s execution rituals. It hadn’t gotten nearly to the length yet the stylists had kept it to so many years, down to his jaw, but he’d admit the tufts and curls of his hair would probably be getting sort of shaggy soon and thus longer than he’d like. Wryly, he was thankful she didn’t mention him dyeing out the few strands of grey that had finally showed up, but then, she wasn’t Capitol. He thought sometimes he could see a thread or two of grey in her hair too among the mingled autumn brown and copper and bronze, which he could well understand after everything they’d endured. “I’m not letting you give me a haircut,” he said, chuckling. “You forget I’ve seen your efforts on yourself.” Every year on Reaping Day recaps, she was on stage with her hair looking like she’d just hacked it with a knife.

She rolled her eyes and said, “Yeah, and you were always too lazy to bother.” They both knew he hadn’t given a shit and let his hair grow out every year, and they knew why she’d roughly cut off whatever growth she’d had in her hair since the last Games. It forced the stylist to even it out before she met the sponsors, and keep it trimmed like she wanted, short spikes that weren’t long enough to be grabbed. She’d had beautiful long hair as a tribute, he remembered, and she’d found out quickly enough once they put her on the circuit what a burden that could be with the ones who played rough.

He reached up and tugged at the knot of her kerchief, working it loose and pulling the blue cotton free from her hair, burying his fingers in the silky, short waves of it. She was growing it out now and he could imagine what it would be like in a year, but even now that she trusted him enough with that said plenty. Leaning in, he kissed her, thinking of the trees now in their backyard, the flowers bordering the garden, the kitchen furniture they’d made together, the bed and dresser upstairs that she’d brought from Seven, the fresh paint and new curtains and different fabric on the furniture.

Things were changing here, day by day. While it was harder than he’d thought to let some things go, once the changes were made he was surprised he was happy to see them, to make this house a place where this new Haymitch belonged and she did too, rather than the place for the drunk hermit he’d been and his many ghosts.

It had always been a house. But finally, it was starting to feel like home, and he desperately hoped it was for her too, that she felt she could belong here rather than a stranger trying to fit in.

Someone’s throat cleared and he heard Katniss’ voice, “Are you two coming to dinner or are you
going to be otherwise occupied?"

“Shut up, Kittycat, we just got married,” Johanna said, breaking off the kiss but keeping hold of him, grinning up at him.

“Again?” Katniss said incredulously, and he looked over and saw she was leaning her arms on the waist-high brick wall separating his backyard from hers. “Isn’t this like the fourth time?”

“Yeah, we’ll be there,” he said, putting an end to the two women bantering with each other. “C’mon, let’s get washed up.” He stooped down to pick up her kerchief, handing it to her.

“It’s only the third time,” she grumbled playfully as she headed up the steps into the house. “The Capitol paperwork, and the ways for Twelve and Seven. I mean, everyone else gets married twice with the paperwork and the actual shit that matters, so that’s not unreasonable, for fuck’s sake. It’s not like we’re getting married by every single district custom.”

“Why, you want to?” he said glibly. “I mean, we know about Two and Four for sure. And I’ve heard some about Eight. The couple, they tie their two hands together with a strip of cloth and they have all kinds of talk about weaving lives together. Very poetic and all.”

She turned and gave him a look that suddenly made him wish dinner wasn’t quite so soon and they had time to head upstairs. “No, that’s OK, I feel pretty married now.” Amidst the more lustful thoughts he realized what she had said with some surprise and pleasure, that for her it finally felt real. But then, he hadn’t really felt married until the toasting. She must have been waiting for this, for spring to come so planting those trees was possible. “But,” she said, turning on the sink so they could scrub their hands and faces, nudging him playfully with her hip as he moved to stand beside her, “I seem to remember we had a pretty thorough list of how each district would probably have sex.”

He remembered that bit of banter one morning in the shower before training, scrubbing off that stupid purple schedule ink, though it took him a moment to remember some of the ideas they’d jokingly tossed back and forth. “I don’t think we ever came up with Eight, though.”

She gave him a smirk. “Given their wedding customs? Tie ‘em to the bedposts, of course.”

That she could even joke about that now, that he could laugh about it, said plenty that they were still coming back from that very dark place where they’d endured things like being tied down. Although joking about things like that and actually setting out to do it were two different things. “It’s a good list,” he said, grabbing a dish towel and drying off, handing one to her to do the same. “Well-thought out.” Both of them seemed to be on the verge of that awkward lack of anything good to say, because the next rational step would be issuing the challenge to actually try that list out.

“And we’re going around to all the districts anyway. So I mean, if you wanted to, we could…” Her eyes were looking somewhere in the region of his shoulder rather than his face. He’d come a long way from the point where he would have been content to never have anyone touch him for the rest of his life, but he wasn’t sure he was ready for some of that and the reminders it might bring up. When he didn’t immediately answer she eventually scowled and muttered, “Never mind, stupid idea.”

“Not stupid. Just…” Not easy. What was mildly kinky stuff for ordinary people was a veritable minefield for them. It felt a bit like the countdown—step off the plate a little too quickly without thinking, and it would be a real fucking mess.

“I’m tired of them still owning me,” she said bluntly, tossing the towel on the counter. He knew what she meant. It didn’t even have to be related to sex, or something like the bloody business of hunting.
It could be something simple that was said or done bringing up an echo of something from back then.

“I know.” They were fears that had to be met and confronted. He was tired too of feeling like a piece of his soul would never be his own because it belonged back in that past. “We’ll try, OK?” Might as well; they were already trying to manage some other things on this trip about moving beyond all the shit they’d endured. Mostly by this point he was confident that there was no need to worry; if they didn’t get it right the first time, if it was too much, they could try again later.

“OK,” she said, and her fingers were gentle on his cheek as she passed by him, though her voice was back to normal as she said, “But let’s get next door before she starts huddling in a corner whimpering and imagining we skipped dinner and went right to dessert.”

Though when they went next door, walking into the kitchen, he saw the kids had a cake on the counter, and from their eager grins he knew what was up. At least from their own experiences, they knew better than to do something really stupid like dim the lights and leap out at him yelling, “Surprise!” Yeah, it’d be a real surprise, all right, when he instinctively tried to fight them off.

He’d known it was his birthday, of course. He just hadn’t mentioned it, figuring it was no big deal. Birthdays were kid stuff, and the only ones that had really mattered in Panem for decades were being twelve and able to get those first tesserae, and turning nineteen and being safe from reaping and finally unable to claim any more tesserae. “I’m forty-two, damn it,” he groused, “that’s not something to actually celebrate.”

“Hey, it’s a lot better than being dead,” Katniss said, raising an eyebrow at him.

“Well, aren’t you a fucking ray of sunshine, sweetheart,” he said, though he knew she was right, and he was smiling reluctantly in acknowledgment of it.

Damn kids. He should have figured they’d pull something like this. He looked over at the cake sitting there. It was Peeta’s work, of course, the care obvious in every bit of the frosting. “There’s blueberry filling,” Johanna must have told Peeta about that, “and I used almond liqueur in the cake,” Peeta said. He saw the smirk passing between Peeta and Katniss, the very obvious joke about booze being in the cake. “The alcohol cooked out, though. Sorry, Haymitch.”

“Very funny,” he said dryly, seeing even Johanna was amused by it, leaning against the wall and grinning at him. “None of you deserves any cake.”

He’d never had a birthday cake before. Growing up, there was no money for store-bought treats, either from the Mellark bakery or the Donner sweet-shop. For their birthdays he and Ash usually would get an extra bit of jam for their tesserae biscuits, maybe a bit of cream if the hunting and the trading on the Hob had been particularly good, or if Fog had been unusually generous to his ma.

After they died, he hadn’t wanted to go buy himself a cake when he turned seventeen and his friends still couldn’t afford it. Soon enough nobody in Twelve cared and his birthday wasn’t during the Games when some of the other victors might have done something. Last year they’d all been so busy training for the Quell that even he hadn’t realized it was his birthday until it was almost midnight. He’d finished off that blueberry-cinnamon bread and went to bed, not particularly troubled that he expected it to be his last birthday.

He looked again at the cake, looked back at the three of them who’d made it a point to remember his birthday. “Thanks,” he said gruffly, because anything more than that would embarrass all four of them.

“Yeah, you get your birthday present later,” Johanna told him, and he was pretty sure he thought he
saw Katniss wincing at that. What the hell that was about, he didn’t know, though he had the feeling “Mess with Katniss” probably played a role, as it usually did. Whatever it was, he was amused.

Dinner was excellent, as usual. Haymitch and the cat kept up their usual act, which pretty much meant hissing on Buttercup’s part and insults on Haymitch’s part, and the moment the cat was out of sight under the table he was slipping Buttercup some scraps of chicken. He looked over at Johanna and she might not be beaming openly, not with others there to see, but she looked pleased, trading quips with Peeta and prodding Katniss.

He wasn’t exactly shocked to realize that as Peeta dished out the cake that he was happy, but more than that, he would say he was actually content. That was far stronger than a single moment of satisfaction, quickly lost. He had lost one family and lost himself for so long, but maybe now he could get it right.

Going out into the woods one last time, he and Katniss had bagged a good haul that day. With the snow gone and restoration of the electricity a distant and forlorn hope, it had meant a lot of smoking and salting and canning and the over the last few weeks, since the ready refrigeration of the cold temperatures was no longer an option. But he was confident he and Johanna were leaving Katniss and Peeta well-stocked for the months they’d be gone and unable to contribute to the food gathering efforts. “I mean it though,” he said, pulling an arrow from the duck carefully, because even wasting an arrow meant labor to produce another one. “We’re leaving you and Peeta the numbers of all the other victors and you’ve got our schedule. If any shit goes wrong, call ’em up and they’ll get us.”

“OK,” Katniss said, giving him a wry look. “Seriously, Peeta and I survived the arena, I think we can manage…so don’t send us any parachutes or whatever.”

He laughed at that. “Not even with lamb stew, huh?” After Peeta’s medicine was beyond his budget, he’d spent pretty much the entire load of sponsorship money on that one basket of food. Figured he’d give them a good meal to have some energy for the end, and yeah, maybe there had been a small element towards the Gamemakers of *Fuck you, I’ll give them an actual feast.* But at least now when she kissed Peeta it was honest. Watching her awkwardly play her role on screen, he’d known it was saving her life but still tried to not feel like he was turning her into a whore.

“No, your aim’s a little low,” she said in response with a scowl, poking a finger at the arrow wound, whereas of course her duck was a clean, perfect shot. The fact that she was asserting herself with one of the few things she obviously knew she did better than him made him smile in spite of himself.

“Sure, sweetheart,” he said with a shrug, willing to concede the point. At his age, after everything he’d endured physically, the fact he could fire a bow with any kind of accuracy at all was something he’d count as a blessing.

Out in the woods now, after several months of constant hunting and trapping and gathering, he had stopped feeling that unnerving urge to keep looking over his shoulder and keep a hand on the hilt of the knife at his belt. The squirrels were just squirrels, grey and noisy. The butterflies were harmless. There would be no candy-pink birds.

He wouldn’t say he would be happy to wander the woods alone yet, but with Johanna or Katniss or Peeta, they were comfortable and familiar, no hidden menace lurking beneath the tranquility. They were again the woods of his childhood and sometimes he felt like he could close his eyes and hear Burt singing, Jonas hollering for them to come help with the deadfall, or even Briar talking about the various plants.
He’d thought about them lately. The destruction of the Seam made his mind go there sometimes. His birthday a few days ago had prompted it too, because not a one of them had reached this age. But somehow it carried less sheer pain now and more of a wistful kind of memory. He was thinking before he left it might be time to turn the page, as best he could. It wouldn’t be a clean break but it would be something.

As they sat there on a log in the woods in companionable silence, plucking and cleaning the ducks, stuffing the down feathers into a bag to keep, he heard a mockingjay above their heads caroling the notes of “Sing For Me, Mockingjay.” Katniss glanced up at it, grey eyes intent, and he looked up to see it there among the leaves. Then she looked over at him and said, “I’m done with being the Mockingjay, Haymitch. I don’t need her anymore. I don’t want to be her.”

“Mm,” he acknowledged. Only right that after all that, she should want to simply be Katniss again, to try to recover as much as she could of the girl she’d been before the arena as she became a woman, rather than basing it on being some symbol of hope to a nation. “Nobody can honestly say you haven’t earned that.” If anyone tried to say she hadn’t, to hell with them.

“I’m thinking that Maysilee should have her pin back.” Considering where his own thoughts had been just a few moments ago regarding the dead, sometimes it was damn scary how the girl could seem to know exactly what he was thinking.

It worked both ways, though. He didn’t have to ask if she wanted him there for that. If she didn’t she’d have waited until tomorrow when he was gone to just go do it herself rather than telling him like this. Besides, he was all bound up in the legacy of that mockingjay pin too. He’d been the one that took the pin from Maysilee the first time and carried it home to her parents, and the one who’d brought home the next girl to wear it, kept her alive through a rebellion and then a war. In a way, he was as glad of the thought of laying that to rest as she was. He didn’t need the Mockingjay either; he needed Katniss in his life as that sometimes annoying—what? Niece? Foster daughter? Whatever she was, she was family. “Then let’s take care of that when we get back.”

They said they were going for a walk before dinner and Peeta and Johanna didn’t question it. Though from the look on Johanna’s face, she seemed to recognize he was taking care of some kind of business. Of course, they didn’t see him sling a shovel over his shoulder on the way out the door. Going down the hill, he could see the crews at work in the distance, loading down another wagon to take to the open scar in the Meadow that was now the grave for Twelve’s people. He heard Katniss breathing a bit hard as she saw it.

He’d met with the foreman, Royce from Six, when he’d arrived a couple of weeks ago. Apparently far to the west, they were prone to some devastating earthquakes, and so they were grimly familiar with the idea of combing through rubble. They even had brought some machinery to help with the job, built in Six’s factories. Royce obviously knew his business and after discussing the plan of action with him, Haymitch had seen that quickly enough and pretty much wished him luck at it. Along the way he’d gotten a couple remarks on the status of things in Six, though he preferred to actually see it for himself.

At the cemetery, they slipped into the area fenced off for Twelve’s tributes. The stark white marble markers stood in neat rows. Even the first two, now nearly seventy-five years old, were still clean and bright and unweathered because it had been part of the Capitol’s tactics to keep the markers polished and the inscriptions sharp to keep the memory painfully fresh. One hundred and forty-six children were buried here, in rows of twenty-four. Six complete rows, plus two more starkly beginning a seventh for the two he’d lost in the 73rd, Jimmie and Fern. Forty-six had died during his tenure as Twelve’s mentor. Three more died in the arena the year of the Second Quell. A good dozen more he had known to some degree or another from when he was growing up.
He led Katniss to the marker, near the start of the fifth row, without even having to glance at the stones to locate it. He knew the names all too well, even the ones before his time. It said only “Maysilee Donner, reaped as District Twelve tribute in the 50th Hunger Games.” No birthdate and date of death, no personal inscription. There was only the stark, arrogant proclamation of what she had died for, what price her young life had supposedly paid.

Taking the shovel from his shoulder, he dug down into the soil by Maysilee’s marker. Not to place it in her coffin, there was no need for that. But he dug a good two feet down so it would be safely buried and not uncovered by rain or the like. Katniss crouched and placed the pin into the hole with careful hands, almost reverently.

She didn’t say anything aloud to him, simply bowed her head. What thoughts she had, she was communing privately with the girl in that grave, the aunt of the girl who’d given her that pin. For his part, he would wait a few moments here.

But standing there, remembering Maysilee, remembering how it had been with her, he realized something that had troubled him for years, the shame plaguing him over feeling like he’d betrayed Briar on national television by feeling something for Maysilee. Hazelle had wondered, true, but she’d told him last year that it seemed like simply one kiss on the cheek between two scared kids. She’d been right. He had felt intensely for Maysilee, cared for her, came to the point where he trusted her with his life in that place. It had been a unique bond of friendship forged by being in that kind of ordeal together. He could see the possibility that perhaps the person he would have been after the Games might have come to love her. But he hadn’t been in love with her before she died, not the way he’d loved Briar. Not the way he loved Johanna now, and having been through living hell with her too, he could see the difference all the clearer. It eased the old, tight knot of guilt to finally understand that and be able to step away some from the confused, muddled mind of the teenager he’d been.

“You want some time alone here?” Katniss said, and the sound of something living broke through his introspection sharply, startling him a little. He looked up to see she’d finished whatever words he had for Maysilee.

“Yeah, that’d be good,” he said, handing her the shovel. It was fitting she be the one to bury the Mockingjay. She carefully filled in the hole and patted it down, then turned to leave with one last glance towards Maysilee’s headstone. He saw her take a moment at her pa’s worn wooden marker, arms crossed over her chest. He intended to order a headstone there also, but maybe he ought to see if she wanted to put a tree up for him too. It seemed more peaceful than granite, given he imagined Burt had always been more at home out among the trees than when he was miles deep breaking unforgiving rock.

“Well, Maysilee,” he said, looking down at the marker, the stark black letters against the white marble, “she’s a pain sometimes, but she’s really something anyway. She wore that pin well, and we finally did it. Now we’re free.” He looked around, though why he thought anyone would overhear, he didn’t know. But he added, softer, “Thanks for saving my ass in there. And for being the one with enough guts to walk away so it didn’t come down to us two. It probably would have gotten better with you the one who made it out alive, but…at least I finally made it happen.”

When he looked up, she was there, as he knew she’d be. He knew also, in the perfectly rational part of his mind, that these ghosts were just lingering effects of the tracker jacker venom. He’d seen so many of them when he was in that cell, crazy and hallucinating, that sometimes they still popped up now when he thought about a dead person, despite the venom having worn off months ago. It was something he was simply learning to live with, and to hope that maybe in time it would lessen.
This time was different too, as he looked at her. He usually saw her gory with the blood that had gushed from her throat wounds. This time, though, her fair skin and her blond hair were unstained. She wasn’t wearing that tribute uniform either as she always was, though he saw her wearing the mockingjay pin. She looked back at him without that accusatory stare he was used to seeing in his ghosts. Maybe she was even smiling, a little bit.

When he was a kid, they’d had a game where they dared to call the names of dead people in the cemetery after dark because the legend was their ghost might appear. He’d done that then as a stupid kid playing a silly game. He’d done it once more after the 51st Games, praying his own dead might appear and somehow forgive him for how he had let them down and let them die. He was pretty damn drunk that night, which hadn’t taken much when he was seventeen, but they never showed and he took that as a sign that of course they still blamed him.

 Apparently he’d needed being overdosed on tracker jacker venom to make his ghosts appear here, not alcohol. It seemed to him that from how Maysilee appeared, lovely and peaceful and with no trace of the Games about her, she forgave him for not being able to save her, for screwing up the rebellion for so long. Even as he knew it was mostly his own mind producing that image, that this was him trying to forgive himself for that failure and let the guilt go, he knew he needed to see this anyway so he could believe it.

She touched her fingers to her lips and held them out to him and he returned the gesture. When he looked back she was gone and somehow he knew in his heart that he wouldn’t see her again.

His eyes moved down the row. “Larkspur.” The slim merchie girl with her kind face unmarked by axe cuts was suddenly there, stepping into his vision. “Dean.” A small Seam boy with a shy smile took his place by her side. “Josie.” Seam eyes and skin but dark blond hair that said her ma had either been with a merchant or a Peacekeeper, and she’d been defensive about it. “Willem.” Tall, buck teeth, and a gentle heart.

He called their names, all forty-six of them. He looked at them, Seam and merchie, tiny twelve-year-olds all the way to eighteen-year-olds on the verge of adulthood, boys and girls whose lives and futures had been stolen from them. But not, he finally acknowledged, by him. “I didn’t manage to keep you alive. Some of you,” he looked apologetically towards the last dozen or so, “I couldn’t even stand to go through the motions any longer. Wouldn’t have made any difference in the end, but I should have tried anyway, if only so you saw it.” He’d lost so many tributes by then, but all those last few knew was they had only their one life to lose and their mentor pretty much wrote them off. They must have died feeling particularly alone and forsaken. “I couldn’t have saved any of you.” Had he ever really admitted that before? “But the Games are over now, and the ones who made them paid for it. And I promise you won’t be forgotten.” Not what he knew of the people they’d been, nor what they had been put through before they died.

They left him, fading into the spring twilight. He felt strangely lighter. No, he wasn’t going to kid himself that this would suddenly fix everything and he’d be perfectly fine, but at least some of the burden had been lifted and he could start to try to move past it.

Leaving the tribute section, he closed the gate behind him, but he wasn’t ready to leave the cemetery just yet. Jonas’ wooden marker was closest, so he stopped there first. “Your oldest lost his way somewhere. Gale. Maybe it was losing you, maybe it was the war, maybe he was bitter about losing his girl Madge or having Katniss turn to Peeta. But none of us were all that smart when we were young.” Although at least most nineteen-year-olds hadn’t had the power to needlessly end thousands of lives out of a feeling of pure vengeance. “A lot of it was probably Coin encouraging him to head down that path. He might have grown out of it in time. I don’t know. He died bravely, at least, fighting for what he believed in. Rory’s a real good kid, Vick’s a know-it-all pain—yeah, I know I
was too—and Posy’s a sweetheart. Haze…she still misses you, of course, but she’s strong.” He sighed and added quietly, “So do I, Joe. Wish it had been different all those years for you and me, close as we were once.” Especially given how they probably would have been brothers by marriage, if Briar had lived. “But even if she stays in Thirteen I’ll look after ‘em as best I can. They’ll be all right.”

Burt was next. “She’ll be a hell of a woman, Katniss. Prim will too. Not the same way, of course.” Prim’s strength was of a different kind, the quiet and resolute sort that let her bear all that punishing rehabilitation with courage and grace. “You had two good kids there, one of ‘em who made us all believe again. Even me. That’s being a hell of a father. Don’t know I can match up to that, but…I’ll keep an eye on her. Perulla too. There’s a reason she left Liam Mellark for you and for the Seam. Seems you made her believe again too. So maybe you gave Katniss something else besides your looks, your singing voice, and being a total fucking show-off with a bow.” He smiled wryly and added, “Glad you liked the bow that much, by the way. Sorry I never got to see you use it again. I missed those days all the time.”

With that done, he moved away from the crude wooden boards, worn or even splintered with time, marking where the miners were buried, or in some cases memorialized when there was no body, into the section with stone markers.

Seeing his brother’s name carved in the stone was an odd feeling given that he now knew Ash wasn’t dead. But his ma was definitely gone. “You always did say me becoming a good man and bringing a good woman home was all you needed to make me happy. They keep trying to tell me I’m actually good, so,” he shrugged, “I’m working on listening to that. Trying being better too. As for the good woman, I left it a long time. But yeah, you’d like Johanna, I know it.” He laughed and shook his head. “Hell, you’d probably both be ganging up on me and you’d be telling her every embarrassing story you have about me. But…maybe it’s a better thing you weren’t here to see how bad I got, or know they were whoring me out.” She’d have understood it all too well from her own experience and he could imagine how it would have broken her heart, how tough it had been to see what a broken mess the arena gave back to her.

He’d needed her then, boy that he still was. But he had family now of his own to turn to rather than only memories. “If I turned out all right, that’s thanks to you. Your life was always a lot worse than you deserved and I never got the chance to give you better than that, but you did the best you could with it. So, thanks, Ma. And I know you telling me someday I’d be tall…well, that was obviously total bullshit.” Considering the Capitol had to give him some growth drugs to even get him to five ten. “But that’s OK, you knew I needed to hear it.”

The small woman with her curly dark hair laughed as he said that, looking at him with affection. He smiled back at her.

Memories from when he was really little were dim; mostly brief images and impressions and feelings rather than clear remembrances. From when he was four and a half, he had a few memories of his ma getting strangely fat, and then there was that day he’d been sent to the neighbors to play and then stay there overnight.

After he came back home, he seemed to vaguely remember while looking down at the red-faced blanket-wrapped bundle that he got to hold, curiously poking it in the side and hearing the snuffling whine that resulted, that he’d asked in childish disappointment if he could have a dog instead of a brother.

Another woman there, probably the midwife, had laughed. But his ma had knelt down in front of where he was sitting in the chair holding Ash. This much he remembered utterly clearly, her pale and
exhausted face, but her silver-grey eyes were intent on him. She’d told him, “It’s an important thing, to be an older brother. And I’m going to need you to be his brother and to help me look after Ash because he’s going to need you too, just like he needs me.” She’d reached out and touched his cheek and suddenly he felt better because all the attention wasn’t on the baby and he knew she still loved him and that she realized she was still his ma and that he needed her too. “Can you do that for me, Haymitch?”

He’d felt suddenly so grown up, being trusted with something important, and looked down at Ash totally differently. Suddenly Ash was his responsibility now, rather than just a strange, whimpering little interloper. After that it had always been like that.

He looked at the ghost of Magnolia Abernathy and said, more soberly, “I remember. I’ll find out what happened to Ash, bring him home if I can. I swear.” He bid her goodbye, and though there would always be the wistful longing because she would never meet Johanna or see any children he and Johanna might ever have, it didn’t ravage him like it had before.

There was one more stop to make. He’d argued with the Wainwrights about his wanting to order a headstone. She was their daughter, they’d argued, and not even his fiancée yet, even if they all knew he’d have asked her someday, so they would bury her and they couldn’t accept him handling it. Standing there he’d felt in some way they knew it was his fault and they blamed him and wanted to keep his dirty Capitol-bought headstone off her grave. Now he thought perhaps they’d had suspicions but it was more Seam debt that led them to refuse. So she’d been buried under a wooden marker that long ago had faded and worn down, the letters barely legible now. It didn’t matter. He would have known the location even without any marker.

He reached into his pocket and wound the leather thong of that wooden pendant around his fingers and looked at Briar, leaning against the stone wall and looking back at him with her Seam eyes. He could still remember the feel of her skin, the taste of her lips, how her hair smelled, as if it were yesterday. “I felt like the luckiest guy then. I mean, we all knew Jonas was taller and better-looking and Burt was sweeter, but somehow, you picked me. The prickly little bastard.” He grinned sheepishly. “No, I wasn’t above enjoying them envying me. But if you’d been with either of them, Bri…well, it ain’t fair, you dying like that.” Though he could imagine her saying with a chuckle And if you actually believe life’s fair, Hay, I’ve got a nice mansion in District Eight to sell you. “At least you know I killed the old bastard who ordered you dead. Sort of.” More like he and Johanna let Snow commit suicide by providing poison and giving him the option to take it, but it seemed like justice. “Don’t worry about Haze’s kids, I’ll help look after them.”

In some ways, this was the hardest one. He’d been tied so close to Briar, loved her so much. So letting go of the guilt of all those ruined hopes that she’d never gotten to see come to pass simply because she had chosen him and he’d pissed off Snow was difficult because they clung to him all the harder. Her death was no random draw of the reaping ball, no accident in the mine. It was revenge for Haymitch’s own actions. But having Johanna insistently make him see the destruction of Twelve wasn’t his fault had given him some perspective here.

Letting her go too was hard. She was his first love, the girl he had once thought he’d marry, the only woman he’d ever let himself love until recently. Perhaps the arena would have changed him too much, but he thought that she’d been stronger than to give in like that. She’d somehow loved a small, snarky, wiseass brat. Chances were she would have found a way to love the damaged Haymitch that came back from the Capitol. That chance had been robbed from her, but not by him.

“Got no idea why, but I’ve been lucky twice now with someone actually managing to love me when I wasn’t much of anything. So, thank you for that. Always.”
Carefully he dug a hole there, as he and Katniss had at Maysilee’s grave, and placed the pendant in it, and smoothed the dirt back over it. He and Katniss had indeed thought similarly. She’d wanted to bury the Mockingjay. He’d buried that pendant he’d made Briar, and with it, finally tried to let go of that sixteen-year-old boy. That meant letting go of the girl that boy had loved.

The guilt of thinking of Johanna, of trying to reconcile having fallen in love and even married with what he felt for Briar, had been no easy task. But eventually he’d realized this wasn’t the arena. It didn’t have to be one or the other, and loving one didn’t mean betraying the other. He would never stop loving her, as the first love of the boy he had been. With certainty he knew he would always miss Briar because nobody could touch someone, heart and soul, that deeply and not leave a lasting scar in their absence. But he could finally stop mourning her and grieving for the life they might have had. The man he’d become loved Johanna, wholly and completely, and his future was with her. His dead would always be with him as memories, but he felt his ties to the living people he claimed as his own: the woman he loved, the family he had found, the friends he had. That pull of the present and the future was finally growing stronger than the past.

He looked one last time at Briar, and gave her the Twelve farewell as he had the others. Instead, she touched all five fingers to her lips and then held her hand up. *One last kiss goodbye.* Yeah, that was right. He returned that gesture himself and looked away, blinking furiously, and like with the others, he knew she wouldn’t be there when he looked back.

As he walked through the gate of the cemetery he saw the familiar figure waiting for him a little ways away, sitting on her haunches with her back braced against an old oak tree with the bark a bit singed by the fires. The tree would survive, though. He went over to Johanna and she got to her feet. “Katniss tell you I stayed down here?” he asked.

She looked at him, eyes searching his face. “Yeah. I figured you might need it.” She suddenly looked a bit awkward. “Uh, you wanna walk back by yourself?” Apparently she was worrying she had intruded somehow in waiting for him. Probably just making sure he didn’t take it in mind to do something stupid like stay overnight down there.

“No,” he said, meaning it. “Let’s go home. We’ve got,” and somehow he felt his heart lightened enough to chirp at her in joking imitation of Effie, “a big, big, big day tomorrow!” The hovercraft would be arriving to drop supplies for Katniss and Peeta and the cleanup crews, and to take them to Two.

They would finish the official write-up of conditions in Twelve tonight, since “absolute devastation needing total resettlement” wasn’t that descriptive. It was a long list: burying the bodies, new houses, new buildings for businesses and the like, reconnection of the electrical supply, clearing the train tracks and station, recruiting lots of new immigrants, clearing out the rubble and ash. They also needed a new industry, because his suspicions had been confirmed when they’d tried to hike the miles to the mine entrance. They couldn’t get anywhere near it because of the overwhelming heat and the fumes. He knew coal, once lit, could burn underground for centuries so the mine was effectively permanently closed. Panem would either need to find a new coal mine, or hopefully, stop fucking well killing so many people to mine it in the first place.

“Shut up,” she groaned, “and if I ever catch you wearing a pink wig and lip paint I swear I’m taking pictures first and then I’m divorcing you.” He laughed at that, putting an arm around her shoulders as they walked up the path towards Victor’s Village.

Chapter End Notes
End of Part I: District Twelve
Interlude: Five

Being assigned to District One, for a Peacekeeper, was generally considered a pretty soft billet. Although they all spent at least their first two duty tours in the six outlying districts as junior officers, so ten years of that was more than enough to appreciate the easier conditions seniority brought. Though Theodosius Law would admit, quietly, he had found some fond memories of Nine and Seven, even before he moved to Six and now to One for his last five-year hitch. He could still appreciate a few comforts. He was thirty-seven now, after all, and so the winter felt a little colder and the mornings started a little slower than when he was twenty-one.

The first couple of years here had been simplicity itself. To be honest, things in One almost ran themselves, at least from the perspective of the Peacekeepers. The artisans really didn’t need much supervision in their workshops. Prosperous as they generally were they had no cause to steal materials or finished products, and anyway, who could they sell them to? Shipments to the Capitol went on schedule and with quotas filled. Shipments of raw materials came in from other districts: silks and the like from Eight, wood from Seven, spirits for ageing, and the like, and those went to the appropriate workshops. No fuss, no mess. Everybody was pretty happy, and frankly he liked it that way. He didn’t really enjoy cracking down, even if it was necessary to keep order and discipline.

That easygoing scenario which he’d counted on cheerfully enduring until his retirement in a year and a half had somehow gone to shit in the last couple of months. It was tough getting reliable news from other districts, except what the Head deigned to let them hear, but the rumor was that things were running tight in some other districts and quotas weren’t being met. So in the Capitol there had been something of a panic due to the shortages, and they went frantic to buy up those things and hoard them against a possible lack of supply.

Unfortunately for One, that meant the money that would have normally bought their luxury goods was already spoken for by other things. Demand had plummeted dangerously. It seemed like more workshops were becoming shuttered and dark each day. Their duties gradually turned back into old reminders of the low-tech districts—enrolling hungry kids for tesserae and distributing the grain, dealing with an explosion of cases of theft.

Sighing tiredly as he looked over yet another incident report about someone stealing bread and wondering what the fuck the world was coming to, there was a knock on his door in the December evening. Gladly dropping the report on his desk, he went to answer it. He expected it to be Myrina, coming over for dinner like they’d planned. It wasn’t her. Not someone he recognized, but the girl was half Rina’s age, all platinum blond curls and wide brown eyes and carefully applied lip and eye paint. Her pink cheeks might have been paint too, or just the cold. She was shivering, though her good wool coat should have kept her warm in the weather.

“Yes?” he said patiently. “Do you have something to report?” Why she wouldn’t have reported that to the duty officer down at HQ rather than coming here to his house, he didn’t know.

She shivered harder, and she licked her lips and grabbed the edges of the coat, pulling them apart so he could see the dress she was wearing underneath. It was fine sky-blue silk and lace he’d bet was hand-woven, obviously carefully hand-tailored to fit to her girlish curves. Probably her best dress. She babbled frantically through teeth chattering from cold and what he was recognizing was something like terror, “Please, sir, my name's Brandy and if you could…if you wanted, for tonight… I’d be good company. I…I’m still a virgin, and…so you’d be the first…”

He stared at her, knocked totally speechless. How old was she? Sixteen or seventeen, he thought, barely past the age of legal consent. Trying desperately to sell her body for a few pitiful coins to buy
food, and she was terrified at the thought.

There had been times he’d had girls, and women, knock on his door before, back in Nine and Seven and even a couple times in Six. But they’d always been more, well, practiced about it, making their offer pretty matter-of-factly. Probably because it wasn’t the first time they’d done it.

Every time, he turned them down. “No, I just…” he said, turning to his white winter uniform jacket hanging on the hook on the wall, graced with the bars of a three-tour veteran and his various rank chevrons. He fumbled in the pocket, pulled out his wallet, and handed her some money. He didn’t even bother to count it, shoving it towards her. “Take it, kid. Go home.” Oddly he felt almost as panicked as her—he wanted her gone.

She didn’t thank him or argue. She just grabbed the money, turned and ran as quickly as she could in her high heels, as if she’d been spared a particular kind of torture. He slammed the door behind her, harder than the situation probably warranted, and headed back to the desk, pointedly ignoring that duty report.

Slouching in the chair and staring up at the ceiling, he honestly felt like shit about the whole thing. Sure, there were others in the Corps that saw no problem with it. Theo had come to be known among the Corps as a man with a pretty rational mind. He knew the Code of Conduct and knew how to apply it to keep things fair and consistent. He’d figured out, back in Nine, when it simply made sense to look the other way a bit and let the close-up workers at the mill take the leftovers from the day’s production, the half-bags of flour and the like, which would have gotten thrown out anyway. Over time he’d gotten used to being asked for advice on things by other Peacekeepers. So he trusted he could see something of the reasoning behind the matter. A simple business transaction, after all, and the woman, or man in some cases, was well-paid for it by the Peacekeeper, whether male or female. Plus it did avoid some of the complications that could result from screwing a coworker. He’d seen over the years how that could go sour.

The thing that always stopped him was this: he barely remembered where he came from. He knew the facts. He was originally from Twelve. His old name had been Alister Campbell. Obviously he’d had a Peacekeeper for a father, given his grey eyes, olive skin, and dark brown hair, and his being brought to the Peacehome after he was orphaned at age eleven. He’d had one older brother, Dougless, killed in the accident that also killed his mother and gave Theo a head injury that left him bereft of most of that old life. He had the facts, but not really any of the memories.

But now and again, a snippet of that old life would surface. It could be something someone said or did, a particular sight that tugged at his mind, or even no reason at all. Even though he knew he wasn’t Alister any longer and he ought to let it go, he clung to them as something precious as all of One’s gold and gems. A few were good moments, like Dougless laughing and rumpling his hair and feeling so damn proud of something he’d managed to do to win his brother’s approval, though he had no idea what. All he had was a jumble of moments, incomplete and without context. It was like flicking through a stack of photographs taken at random intervals rather than watching a movie with a complete story and movement and sound. He usually felt like he was viewing a stranger’s life.

But one that stayed with him vividly was waking up to the sound of his mother crying. He couldn’t remember her singing him a lullaby, but he remembered that.

”Stay here, runt,” his brother hissed, shoving him back down as he got out of their bed, the warmth dissipating as he threw the covers back. Of course the moment Doug wasn’t looking, he followed silently, standing in the shadows at the top of the stairs as Doug went to Ma in the kitchen and she realized he was awake and wiped a hand across her eyes. “Ma?” His voice, rough and impatient with Alister, was suddenly boyish and uncertain. “The traps weren’t good today, Ma, but I’ll look
again tomorrow. And…in six weeks I can go get tesserae for us three. You won’t have to go back to Peacekeeper’s Row. I’ll do better, I promise.” Doug’s voice wavered and his strong, tough big brother sounded like he was trying not to cry too.

Watching from the shadows he didn’t know what his ma did on Peacekeeper’s Row that made her come home crying sometimes, but it scared him that it hurt her that bad, and made his brother sound so upset too. She grabbed Doug and hugged him and said fiercely, “This ain’t your fault, baby. You don’t blame yourself, you hear me?”

The memory stopped there abruptly. The kid he’d been hadn’t understood what was going on. But when the buried memory surfaced one night in the Peacehome, he’d understood, all right. His mother had traded sex for money, to his father and maybe others too.

Ostensibly simple business, both sides gained something from it, and he would have been pretty undemanding and straightforward about it. But every time a woman came to his door offering to keep him company, no matter how nonchalant she seemed, he couldn’t help but wonder if she would have gone home and wept afterwards where her kids or her parents or her husband couldn’t hear.

Faced with that, or the potential headaches of sleeping with coworkers, he’d decided it was more worth his while to just generally try to keep his trousers zipped and not be stupid.

Of course, as another knock sounded and this time it was Myrina, when it came to her that ideal didn’t count. She was only on her third tour, so he’d have to wait for her anyway. But the trouble was figuring out what he’d do when his fourth tour was done. While Peacekeepers got a pension it wasn’t enough to live off. It was a fact of life that those with families back in Two tended to get the first crack at instructor positions and the like at training camps near their home villages so they could maintain their ties to family. The Capitol-born Peacekeepers were usually happy to complete their sentence or clear their debt and then forget they’d ever been associated with the uniform. But usually the rootless Peacehome orphans, both the Two natives and the Laws from the other districts, were left to find their own way at the twenty-year mark. A lot of Peacekeeper lifers, those who signed up for a fifth tour and beyond, were Peacehome raised—many of those who successfully tested and trained to become Gameskeepers and Heads were too, for that matter.

He wasn’t that fond of the Games, he admitted guiltily to himself, which he knew was a failing for someone growing up in Two with its fierce pride in its tributes and victors. While he could see himself sitting the exams for promotion to Head—he’d demonstrated leadership, knew the Code of Conduct—that wouldn’t be a solution either. Heads couldn’t marry. He’d have to find something that let him leave the Corps with a reliable job, because he was determined to be able to marry a woman that he loved. But that was still a few years in the future so he tried to not think about it at the moment.

She made it easy enough to put that aside. Taking off her hat and her winter jacket, hanging them beside his, she shivered and said, “Seems to get colder every year here.”

“That’s just the sun in your blood from Four,” he said jokingly, giving her a kiss, looking at the tan skin and freckles and pale green eyes that proclaimed that heritage in her. It had to be in her blood since it couldn’t be a childhood of growing up in the balmy climate down south. Myrina was a Law too, but she’d essentially been raised in the cool mountain climate of Two since she’d been brought there from Four when she was only a few months old. They’d definitely overlapped some years at the Peacehome because of that, but with hundreds of kids running around the place and a six-year gap between the two of them, their paths just hadn’t exactly crossed until they had met here in One.

“Better sun than fish slime,” she said with a shrug and a grin, smoothing a few snowflakes from her sleek dark brown hair. Like all female Peacekeepers she had to keep it cropped to shoulder length
and then neatly pinned up. He took a particular pleasure in pulling those pins out the nights she stayed here, or when he went to her place, and seeing it down. A few months into the relationship, the Head had wryly reminded the two of them to tone it down a bit. Being engaged was all right, but they couldn’t openly talk about that or let it show, especially around the locals, and it had better never interfere with their duties. They’d agreed and remembered that ever since.

“Better than coal,” he agreed wryly. Most of them never knew who their Peacekeeper fathers—or mothers, in some cases—were. That was part of the rules. But at least, they’d cared enough to not condemn a child of theirs to the local orphanage and a lousy life in the district industry. They’d escaped that fate and the job they had instead, as they’d often been reminded at the Peacehome, had honor and dignity, given a life of proud service rather than simply being an unwanted burden.

“You OK?” she asked as they sat down to eat. Perceptive as she was about him by now, she’d readily picked up on his unease.

“Nothing I can help,” he said with a weary shrug of his shoulders. “Just the way it’s gone to hell around here. I had a girl knock on the door tonight trying to get me to buy her, poor kid.”

“Shit,” she said, shaking her head. “You expect some of that out in the rural districts where they’re the poorest and it’s depressing, but…” Not here. Not in One, her expression said.

She’d awkwardly trailed off because what was there to say? There was nothing they could actually do about it. All a Peacekeeper could do was go out and try to uphold the law, not change the way things were. That was up to the politicians in the Capitol. That muted the evening some, though, and if he were honest it had muted the last weeks here in general. When he gently turned Myrina down on the idea of sex, because it would be too muddled in his mind with that girl’s desperation, but asked her to spend the night anyway, he was grateful he had someone who cared enough to stay by him tonight even when he was being frustrated and moody. In that, he was a lucky man.

Five days later, Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark came to District One on their Victory Tour. The entire population turned out in the square, dressed in their best and with even those with now-underfed bodies bundled up in their fine but bulky winter coats. Only the thinness in some faces betrayed that it wasn’t business as usual here, because the attitude in general was as if it was simply another day and One was prosperous as usual.

He’d watched them last year in the Games with something of a stirring of excitement, a helpless, secret spark of pride that, despite his loyalties to Two and the impressive tributes they always sent, finally a kid from the district where he was born might win. OK, that and the fact he was recently in love himself certainly helped him sympathize with their love story too.

Today, standing at the edge of the square with Twelve’s victors standing on that stage, he was actually a bit disappointed, at least with Katniss. The Girl on Fire who’d captivated Panem might as well have been a wind-up toy built in Three, mechanically offering a few emotionless words to the families of Marvel Ketterick and Glimmer Northfield, both of whom she’d killed herself. Looking at the families, he honestly felt more moved by their stoic dignity in this moment, grieving and with their district suffering, than by the girl on stage, headed next to the Capitol and its affection and accolades.

Peeta at least showed some spark. He talked about the few days he’d spent with the Career pack, shared a personal reminisce or two about Marvel and Glimmer. Although he was smart enough to keep it toned down since he seemed to realize even his charm and good nature couldn’t hide the fact that his friendly words aside, they all knew he’d used them, and the Two tributes, Cato and Clove, to his own ends. That was playing the Games well, perhaps, but it didn’t mean the people of One had to like it, especially this year when a victor’s Parcel Days would have been so useful.
The mood was ugly enough and Mayor Roseby seemed to pick up on it, hastening things along to get things towards the formal dinner. He was sure some people in the square resented the rich food being put before two children who’d helped kill One’s kids when they couldn’t even feed their own children tonight, but they would agree for the need to keep up appearances.

Perhaps it was the fact that he’d really wanted to instinctively like those two kids that left him so curiously disappointed by how flat they seemed. Maybe it was the fact that the local mood affected him more than he admitted it ought sometimes. When One tributes had won while he was in previous districts it hadn’t caused him much thought. But while he was in Nine on his first tour, he’d been pretty well pleased for them and their happiness when Rye Laaksonen won. Same story with Seven for Johanna Mason on his second tour, even if she was frankly a little terrifying.

Though being let down today by Twelve’s new victors shouldn’t be that unusual an idea. After all, Haymitch Abernathy had been successfully disappointing everyone for years now, even if he’d pulled it together masterfully this past summer. Keeping an eye on the crowd but not anticipating any kind of demonstration or trouble, he saw the man himself, bundled up in a heavy overcoat, over by the stage talking intently to Chantilly and Niello Dumas. According to the Capitol celebrity gossips, Haymitch and Chantilly had been involved back when they were young, so perhaps he was just taking the chance to say hello to an ex-girlfriend. Hopefully he was halfway sober in order to do it.

He thought he saw the girl again, Brandy with her platinum blond hair peeking out from beneath a knitted cap, but she was gone before he could be sure. The fact he saw a boy stealthily lifting the wallet of one of the master artisans more readily caught his attention.

“Dad’s workshop’s been shut down for weeks now and I’ve got two sisters to feed,” he said defensively, green eyes flashing with both shame and anger, “and Master Garristown can definitely spare the cash, his place is still open.”

Resisting the urge to rub his temples at the headache coming on, Theo pointed out, “Yeah, OK, kid, but that doesn’t give you the right to just waltz in and take whatever you want from whoever you want. If everyone did that it’d be a real mess.” Laws existed for a reason, to protect the people. Otherwise, it would be cue the riots and the anarchy, threatening everything civilization stood for.

“So what the fuck am I supposed to do? Great, I’m a journeyman carpet weaver, but there are no jobs here in One. I get to clean up only one evening a week for a glasswright because she’s got six others for the rest of the week so we all bring home a little something. It’s not enough and I’m the only one able to claim tesserae and we’re already taking that out. What’s your answer, Peacekeeper,” Barnett squinted at Theo’s nametag, “Law, apparent genius that you are?”

He should definitely run the kid in for stealing the wallet. He could throw in a charge while he was at it of blatant disrespecting a Peacekeeper’s authority. But the defiant challenge of What’s your answer? stuck in his brain, and the desperation lying just beneath the surface of his challenge. Sighing, he stuffed the wallet in his uniform pocket and said, “You’re not gonna help your family either if I drag you to headquarter in cuffs and throw you in a holding cell. So beat it before I change my mind.”

It wasn’t a good answer, considering the kid’s family was left still hard up when it came to making ends meet. But it was the only one he had, and Electrum seemed to realize his luck in avoiding an arrest as he fled. He watched the boy go, thinking troublesome thoughts like the fact it wasn’t One’s fault that things were so rough now, that the Capitol had stopped buying their products, and he could understand that desperation. He must have felt it as a boy, growing up in the poorest district of Panem. Sometimes he had flickers of remembering being cold and hungry and sometimes afraid. But
he had to uphold the law as best he could and if he started overlooking every theft because he felt sorry for someone, it would be chaos and violence before long.

Glumly, though, he tried to think if there was some possible course between fiercely cracking down because it was the law, and lazily letting it all slide because people were desperate. There seemed to be no middle ground. Either way people were going to suffer for it, but suffering eventually could become an excuse, not a mitigating explanation. If he quietly condoned theft today, what happened when someone breaking in to steal food or valuables actually killed someone in order to get away with the robbery? Hardship was no reason to take a life. He’d had to enforce the law before sometimes when he didn’t like it, when it didn’t seem to make much sense, simply because it was the law and therefore it was for protecting people and preventing much greater evils.

Things had been tough sometimes for people in Seven and Nine. In Six the morphling abuse had always bothered him but he’d been told to not ask too many questions whenever he ran yet another senseless junkie in to HQ to detox overnight in a cell. But then he’d usually been told he asked too damn many questions and to just go do his fucking job. But in each case in those districts there was the steadiness of it being a long-standing and even accepted reality. People had learned how to cope with it and things stayed pretty peaceful. Here in One, the abrupt shift struck all the harder. It still sat ill with him, like he was seeing a disaster unfold in front of his eyes and he was helpless to do anything. He was supposed to help protect people, for fuck’s sake. On his way back to HQ he knocked on Carat Garristown’s door and returned his “lost” wallet, “dropped” in the square and “handed in” by a concerned citizen. When Garristown tried to give him a reward, he shook it off, saying, “Just the messenger. But if you want to reward the finder, give it to Electrum Barnett. Journeyman weaver, he told me, so if you ask the guild they could probably tell you where to find him.” It eased his conscience at least a little to imagine Garristown followed through on that, even if rewarding theft was probably an idiotic idea.

Katniss and Peeta, along with Haymitch and the rest of the Victory Tour entourage, left the next morning for the Capitol. A few days later, he watched the television with vague disinterest as the Capitol audiences screamed with delirious joy as Peeta proposed to the woman he loved and she accepted him. They’d probably get married before the Quarter Quell. Maybe even during it, to provide even more spectacle to the heightened drama of a Quell. Lucky Katniss and Peeta, able to marry when they chose. He wondered if Electrum was stealing someone else’s wallet tonight. He wondered if that platinum-haired girl was warming the bed of one of his fellow Corps members.

A week later, Leander Law, the Head, started calling all the Peacekeepers in One into his office according to their duty squads. “I’ve got lots of squads to get through so let’s make this brief,” he said, looking up at Theo and the seven other Peacekeepers on his squad. One of them was Myrina. “Things are in an uproar around Panem, and I don’t mean just here. There’s been an uprising in Eight.” Murmurs of shock greeted that news, and Theo caught the eyes of his friend Actaeon. An uprising? It was unheard of, not since the Dark Days. “The rebels have captured several strategic points in the district, including Peacekeeper HQ. A lot of your brothers and sisters in the Corps have died already there in the fighting, and I’ll be honest, there are some rumors of some actually being executed by the rebels.”

That brought the danger and the horror home all the sharper. It was bad enough to think of being killed during the fighting, but to be captured and then deliberately executed by a bunch of rebels was even worse. He looked away from the Head, thinking of what kind of fury and hatred that spoke of towards Peacekeepers. It hit like a slap to the face. It was the sort of nightmare he’d seen eventually coming to pass here in One, but it had already happened elsewhere.

“Fucking savages,” Ferric Wayon growled angrily. He had a younger sister in the Corps in Eight, Theo remembered with a sudden swell of sympathy for him.
He thought there was a trace of pity on the Head’s face too, but then he was all business again. “I don’t think I have to tell you how important it is that we root this rebellion out before it gets a chance to spread even further and get more people killed.”

No, he didn’t, and they all waited for what came next. “There’s also a shake-up coming in Twelve. Apparently Head Cray has been unsatisfactory in some way and he’s being replaced. They’re going to want a lot of new blood there too.” Which Theo dryly understood to mean that somehow, Cray had been found to be corrupt and they wanted to get rid of him and as many of his cronies as possible. “Obviously,” he glanced at Actaeon with his caramel skin and brown hair, “you can’t go to Eight as a duty station. And you,” he looked at Theo, “can’t go to Twelve.”

Rules were rules. Any Peacehome orphan who didn’t come originally from Two could never be assigned to their birth district. It was as much a kindness for the Peacekeeper’s peace of mind as in the name of efficiency. Sending any of them to enforce rules for people who could see from their coloring or features that a Peacekeeper was of their own blood and who might even remember who that Peacekeeper had been as a child in their past existence, was a scenario that was better simply avoided. Right now in particular he wasn’t sure looking into grey eyes like his own and trying to crack down on the people of Twelve was a good idea. “Yes, sir,” he acknowledged, hearing Actaeon echo him.

“In particular we can afford to reduce our forces here with fewer workshops to watch. Half of the Corps here is staying. Half of you are being temporarily seconded until this shit is handled. Yeah, I know, you’re senior officers and you’ve earned your way here to One, but it’s urgent. It’s duty. I expect you to not piss and moan about it. Most of you are going to Eight, so be ready to go into battle.” Ferric was one of the names he listed as staying, and Theo could only think that was probably a good idea. District Eight would be far too personal for him right now, and Ferric arguing angrily to get sent there only seemed to further cement Head Law’s resolve.

Myrina was going to Twelve, along with Actaeon. He was going to Eight along with Thalaea Thistledown, who’d been promised as a child to the Corps to pay her Capitol parents’ debts of honor. “You stay a minute,” Head Law said, gesturing for him to stay a moment as they saluted and turned to go.

“Yes, sir,” he acknowledged, falling back into a relaxed at-ease.

Head Law shoved aside a stack of personnel folders, having officially signed the transfer orders already. Theo was sure he’d be making the entry in the log soon enough recording where each of his Peacekeepers had been. “You’re on your fourth tour. You’re good at it. You’re smart. You’re level-headed. So I expect you to help take the lead in a squad once you get to Eight, just as you do here.” He raised an eyebrow. “You also really overthink things sometimes. There’s a difference between our duties as enforcers of the law and as Panem’s soldiers. Be prepared to pull that squad together and make them ready to fight in a hurry.”

“Yes, sir,” he acknowledged. He was right, after all. The leisure of learning and debating things was for peacetime. War was all about survival, about instinct and reaction.

“Dismissed.” With that, he saluted and headed home to pack his things. It didn’t take long, and he went over to Myrina’s as soon as he was done. He didn’t say anything to her about how she was heading back to the place of his own birth. Twelve was something abstract. He had ceased to belong to them when his family died. Home was the Corps now. He was only glad she was heading to a place that, however much it might be looked down upon as the worst and least prestigious duty station in Panem that a Peacekeeper could have, would at least be safe compared to Eight.

She didn’t say anything to him either about him going to Eight, though her fingers were a little
unsteady as she unbuttoned his uniform tunic. He kissed her, trying to shut out the morning as long as he could.

At dawn, all of the Peacekeepers being seconded out met the hovercraft. “Look after her, huh?” he said to Actaeon, the most he’d allow himself to express any concern, even to a good friend. “But not too close. Don’t want you stealing my girl.”

Actaeon grinned at him. “Careful, Theo. I hear the winters are long and cold and boring in Twelve. Might be she’ll turn to a good-looking guy like me to keep her warm and happy.”

“Oh, you wish,” Myrina said, smacking Actaeon on the shoulder with a snort of amusement. He gave her only a quick embrace, just the same as he did to other friends on their squad. The real farewells had been said and done in the still of the night, and so they both strictly obeyed the rule of not flaunting their relationship publicly.

With that done, he turned to Thalaea and nodded towards where the hovercraft bound for Eight was waiting. “Well, let’s go.”
Somehow, Haymitch wasn’t too surprised when the hovercraft took a detour and stopped briefly in the Capitol, and he saw the familiar silver-streaked brown hair and twinkling blue eyes step aboard. “Plutarch,” he said, finding enough resolve within himself to suppress the sigh he wanted to let loose. “All right, what’s the propo?”

“Oh, fantastic,” Johanna muttered. They’d sort of known this was coming, but sometimes, he really hated being smart enough to foresee things and then get proven right on them.

“Well, it sounds like you’ve got it all figured out,” Plutarch said with a shrug.

“I thought being schemers was what Haymitch and me are generally known for?” Johanna said dryly, sitting back in her seat and crossing her arms over her chest. “It’s the first stop on the grand—what the fuck are you even calling it? Panem Rebuilding Tour?”

“Reconstruction,” Plutarch corrected, sitting down beside Johanna. “‘Rebuilding’ implies simply fixing something, a house or the like. Reconstruction is bigger than that. It’s remaking something from the ground up…”

“And we know all about Remake, don’t we, Plutarch?” Johanna said, and Haymitch saw that Plutarch’s eyes fell to the visible line of scarring across the fingers of her right hand where he knew Brutus’ sword had sliced her at the initial melee at the Cornucopia when she and Blight were trying to gather up Beetee and Wiress. She’d been damn lucky to be quick enough to avoid a full-force blow and not lose those fingers. Damn lucky too she’d been able to use the hand for the rest of the Games, since apparently Brutus’ hit had still broken several of her fingers, but she was toughened against pain. Those scars she had kept, as she had all the others since.

Plutarch didn’t back down, though, which was somewhat surprising. “This isn’t about erasing the past and pretending it didn’t exist, Johanna. It’s about making a new future so we don’t make the same mistakes again.”

“Play nice, you two,” he said, shaking his head and not really in the mood to hear Plutarch’s high-flown dreams of a perfect Panem right now, or Johanna baiting him about it to cover her own irritation with him barging in like this. “So, propo.”

“It’ll do people good to see you and Johanna out and about on this trip. They’ll know that no matter how bad things may be, the government intends to help them back on their feet. Besides, they’ll be glad to see you both, heroes as you are.”

He glanced over at Johanna and in her smirk read his own thought: Glad to see us? That’ll be an interesting change. “And you were planning on filming what, precisely?”

“Oh, everything we can, of course. From the moment you touch down. People are starved for news and for something new to watch.”

“Not gonna happen.” He said it with assurance. The thought of a camera crew following him and Johanna around all the damn time was annoying enough. It was made worse by the prospect of them filming while they were in the business of trying to find out about Heike and Ash. Right now, the secret practice of sending orphans to Two to become Peacekeepers was a volatile bomb he wanted to keep under wraps, especially given their own siblings’ involvement in it.

“The people have the right to—“
“The people have the right to kiss my ass. And I’ve actually got an ass again, Plutarch, so there’s ample space for kissing,” Johanna cut in. “Wanna see?”

“It’s a very nice ass too,” he told her, enjoying seeing Plutarch’s vague discomfort.

“Thank you, honeybear,” she said with a smirk, realizing that once again he’d stepped in to join her efforts. Well, he was hardly going to support Plutarch on this.

He could see how this would go, though. They’d argue about it, all three of them stubbornly dragging their heels. They’d refuse to be filmed and Plutarch would either have the camera crew just follow them around anyway, or else possibly have Brocade call them up and ask them politely to play nice in the interest of the greater good. They’d spend as much time resenting that as doing anything useful.

Sometimes in chess, a sacrifice or two had to be made for the bigger win. He and Plutarch both knew a thing or two about that game—hell, they’d used it as code last year to discuss the rebellion—and most likely, politics and diplomacy was no different. “You film us arriving and leaving. That’s enough for people to know we’re alive and we’re there and give a damn.” He smiled at Plutarch. “King’s pawn to E4. Your move?”

Plutarch gave an appreciative laugh. “I know better than to play chess against you, Haymitch. Your game’s improved too much from when you were a kid. Arriving, leaving, while at important functions, and you agree to an interview or two.”

“Arriving, leaving, distance shots of shaking hands with really important people or visiting really important sites, and we’ll interview if we feel like there’s anything actually important for us to say to the public,” he countered. “It’s not like you want to film hours and hours of us talking to people anyway. You’re looking for a few reassuring images.”

Johanna, tension eased, leaned forward in her seat. “Not like people really need or want to hear the gritty details of how bad things are in other districts either.” Obviously she’d caught on to his tactic.

The fact was, they’d wryly agreed, they couldn’t escape some publicity. Unfortunately they’d all become too prominent for that, and he was under no illusions that even Katniss and Peeta’s privacy would be under siege once Twelve was in any fit shape for camera crews to visit. They could spend all their time trying to run from it and make the onslaught all the worse or they could turn and face it directly, demanding the thing happen on their own terms. If they didn’t agree to some camera opportunities, the vultures would be happy to surprise them with cameras when they least wanted them. “And if we say no cameras right then, we fucking well mean it,” Johanna continued, eyes intent on Plutarch. “Some things are private. We’ve earned that and it’s gonna stay that way.”

“Fair enough,” Plutarch agreed, obviously mollified by the two of them not fighting him every step of the way. Though the way his gaze didn’t waver told Haymitch that if he felt like the two of them were pulling the “Go to hell” card on the camera crew too often, they’d hear about it.

“And Katniss and Peeta get left alone. Entirely. No camera crews, no calls from you asking them to appear on camera.”

“The country could really use some inspi—” Plutarch protested, obviously seeing an intended opportunity being yanked away.

“I don’t give a fuck, Plutarch. They’re two teenagers who need time and privacy. They deserve it. I hear that your dogs have been sniffing around them, Johanna and I start making things very difficult. Clear?”
“Clear,” Plutarch said with a sigh, seeing that half a loaf willingly offered was going to be a lot better than crumbs fought for tooth and nail. “Very well. Your preps will be waiting in Two, and Brutus and Enobaria will be there to greet you too.” He made it clear that a prep team was part of his own demands.

So it was that a few hours later in Two he found himself being whisked away from the hovercraft for prep before “officially” arriving. Johanna was led away by two of them, the younger woman from Katniss’ old team with her green skin, and the orange-haired young man—Octavia and Flavius, he recalled. She shot him a long-suffering look and he shrugged helplessly.

That left him with the older woman, Venia, with her formerly aqua hair now liberally sprinkled with grey but her gold tattoos still bright. The man—more of a boy, really—with her, he didn’t recognize. “You are?” he asked bluntly, eyeing the slit-pupiled eyes with a poison green iris, and suppressing an instinctive shudder. They were reptile eyes, though with none of the cold reptilian stare that he remembered from someone like Snow who had been a snake despite his physically still-human eyes.

“Catullus,” he said, beaming at Haymitch with teeth dyed artificially to a shade that was too white. “Venia’s my aunt. It’s an honor!”

“We’ll see,” he said noncommittally.

“Minimal prep,” Venia assured him, and he appreciated her being a voice of reassurance on the matter. “That’s why there’s only two of us, and Johanna has two.”

“No waxing, Venia,” he said dryly. “Don’t even suggest it.” She’d never been his prep. Last year he’d had the male tribute’s team, of course. But as the Twelve female’s team were the only preps left in Panem, obviously they’d been roped into this.

“Not much we can do about your hair,” Catullus sighed, “it’s at that length where it’s too short to be your old style. But that bit of grey definitely ought to be dyed out. You need to deal with that beard desperately too, you look like a barbarian from the districts. And that,” suddenly he brushed a finger over the scar by his right eye where Enobaria almost took out his eye, “should be covered up, but it should be easy though!”

The dictation of how he needed to look to be deemed a human being rather than a barbarian, and most of all the casual touch that asserted Catullus’ claim over his body and the right to treat it as he would, set Haymitch sharply on edge. Worst of all was how cheerfully and thoughtlessly he did all of it. The words Get your fucking hand off me before I rip it off and shove it up your ass were barely suppressed. Venia must have seen something in his face because she said brusquely, “Catullus, let me handle this. Why don’t you go get us all a drink?”

With that, Catullus left. “Trim the hair because it’s getting too long,” he said, controlling his temper with an effort, “and I’m not dyeing it. Or shaving. Or covering up the scar.” The notion of asserting himself by pretty much telling the kid to go fuck himself on every Capitol assumption he’d made satiated some of his anger. “I am a fucking barbarian from the districts,” he told her, and I’m damn well proud of it. “And I’m not going to deny that.”

Venia was silent for a long moment. Then her eyes, a refreshingly normal pale green even if they were bracketed by those golden tattoos, met his. That she had allowed herself to have greying hair and thus accepted her own ageing told him plenty about the changes in her, though. “Apologies that he upset you,” she said. “He’s excited to be involved in prep work, and really excited to be working with someone like you. He wants to make you look your best, he’s young, and he doesn’t always think about what he says.”
Actual apology from a Capitol citizen was more than he’d expected—the only one he’d ever gotten was from Effie last winter—so he covered his surprise at it. He did notice that unlike Effie, she didn’t openly say that Catullus was wrong, that the Capitol mindset was wrong. She only apologized that he was upset about it. Small steps, he thought with a sigh. Again, half a loaf freely offered was better than arguing over crumbs. “He’s young, but he’ll have to learn that Capitol ideals aren’t the rule any longer if he wants to have a future dealing with anyone who’s not Capitol-bred,” he said simply. “And he’ll have to do it too if he wants to stay on this job and not get fired. I won’t see any Capitol people suffer unjustly, you know that, but I’m damn well not going to let them keep treating me, or anyone else, as a fucking district slave to be taken for granted. Not anymore.”

On that, he wouldn’t compromise. He wouldn’t grit his teeth and smile and take oblivious, dehumanizing Capitol shit as he had for years because he was helpless to do otherwise. Looking at a Capitol woman and openly issuing challenge like that, asserting a demand for respect, made something within him still shiver in warning, expecting dire consequences. But the moment passed. I’m right, he thought, steeling himself to continue to believe it, making that his armor again the fearful need to apologize himself, to assuage any displeasure in a Capitol citizen. I’m damn well right.

Venia looked taken aback for a moment as if, even if she was one of the more enlightened ones, she’d expected him to hold his tongue or else dismiss Catullus as simply a foolish boy and somehow make the situation all right by underplaying it. “I’ll do my best to keep him in line,” she said simply. She looked him over. “OK, cut the hair a bit. No hair dye, no cover-up on your scar. Can we at least trim the beard?” she asked awkwardly.

Recognizing she was stepping back and trying to do it with some grace, he tried to do the same and let the matter go at that. He squinted at himself in the mirror, scratched his chin a little. “All right, I'll shave, it's kind of itchy,” he admitted. He hadn’t shaved in a while, or cut his hair, so while he didn’t want to go full Capitol on demand, a little tidying up before going on camera wouldn’t hurt. He’d trust that she wouldn’t go crazy and start trying to carve shapes in it like Seneca Crane’s. “But yeah, cut the hair. Thanks.” He grinned and joked, “Johanna’s actually kind of fond of the hair being shorter, so…I’d sooner keep it.” At his thanks and the humor, she nodded at that, posture easing and giving him a knowing smile in return.

“Cinna’s sent clothes for you and Johanna, of course.” Venia shrugged. “It saves us from having to deal with what might be available, and let’s face it, you should look good on camera for official events like this. People need to see it.”

Knowing Cinna’s fierce sense of organization, that probably meant much like the Victory Tour, there was an entire wardrobe labeled neatly with the district and occasion. District Four, dinner. District Three, arrival. He couldn’t help but smile a little bit at it. Yeah, Cinna would say, and Taffeta would agree, that he would want to present an image with his clothes during this trip. Sighing mentally, he bid farewell to his comfortable, casual jeans and the like that he’d been living in for months.

Catullus came back with coffee, which he accepted with some gratitude, and generally shut his mouth, which was accepted with even more gratitude. An hour later he was well-groomed and dressed in a suit and tie. Venia had sighed a bit over minor alterations needed from his measurements from last winter—the constant physical labor every day in Twelve meant his shoulders and arms showed it. Octavia and Flavius had apparently done their work on Johanna as well, because her short flyaway waves had been tamed a bit and she was wearing a dress of an embroidered powdery green that accentuated the hints of green in her eyes. “I think I terrified the preps,” she said softly to him as she slipped her arm through his, walking towards where Flavius gestured them to meet the welcome party.
“I think I did too.” He adjusted the tie to loosen it just a fraction. Ever since his torture team had enjoyed prepping him for his hanging with some short periods of strangling him, anything too constricting around his throat was an uncomfortable reminder.

“You look good, though. Didn’t let them talk you into shaving, huh?” He grinned at her, but then the cameras were there, waiting for them like Brutus and Enobaria were.

Brutus caught up to him first, clasping his forearm in that old Two greeting. “Still alive, huh?”

“I’m too much of a pain in the ass to die,” he said with a laugh.

“Fangless,” Johanna said, giving Enobaria a handshake and a smirk.

“Stumpy,” Enobaria returned equally, a small smile on her lips as she looked at Johanna. He suppressed a smile itself—it did fit. Johanna was an ex-lumberjack and five inches shorter.

“Nice job, Enobaria, you finally came up with a good one and it only took you all winter,” Johanna said cheerfully.

“Pressing concerns took my time.”

“Once you’re done rubbing elbows with the mayor and all, come to our place for dinner?” Brutus suggested. “You’ll be staying in Victor’s Village anyway.” He supposed it made sense. A house in the Village was a little more private than something like being guests at the mayor’s home given it was a much lengthier stay than overnight or the like. Plus, they both were victors and with Brutus and Enobaria there as friends, it was logical.

Still, this was District Two. Nineteen victors to their credit, which meant every house in the Village had been occupied at one time or another. “Whose house are we assigned to?” he asked carefully, hoping it wasn’t someone who’d died last year during the Rebellion, regardless of what side they’d fought on.

“Sedullus Rache,” Enobaria answered him, and he was conscious of the cameras filming them, four victors making friendly conversation. “14th Games. Neither of you ever met him that I know of. He didn’t go to the Capitol much. Died about ten years ago. It’s been our ‘distinguished guest’ house for a while.”

“Thanks,” Johanna told her with some sincerity, banter between the two of them dropped. Her hand grasped his for a moment, squeezing and then letting go, telling him she knew his thoughts were with hers on this. They both had enough ghosts already. To stay in the house of someone he maybe had known, someone like Lyme or Hannibal or Albinus or Hadria, someone who had died so recently, would have been hard enough. An unfamiliar older victor who had succumbed to an unremarkable natural death years ago was easier to deal with for them both.

Then it sunk in that Brutus and Enobaria were living in the same house. He’d known they were fierce friends, and convenient lovers, but it seemed it had turned to something more than that over the long winter. Maybe for him it had been losing Lyme in the war—he knew both of them long ago had lost their chance in the shadow of shame over Capitol indifference with things never risked and thus never grasped. Perhaps that had made Brutus more conscious of the need to really live while he could. “All right, we’ll be there.”

“Good,” Brutus said with a grin, giving Haymitch one last clap on the shoulder that fell hard enough that he wryly wondered if it would bruise. Tall and strong as he was, Brutus sometimes didn’t seem to realize his own strength. “All right, fuck off and go make nice with the mayor.”
Mayor Tertullia Sangus and her husband Lentulus were next in line. She was a short but formidable woman, probably close to fifty. He was already familiar with her from Katniss and Peeta’s Victory Tour when they’d been her dinner guests, and he imagined Johanna had met her on her own Tour nine years ago. But Capitol-enforced parties and speeches were a far different animal from a situation like this. “We look forward to discussing the future of District Two with you both starting tomorrow,” she said. Her face betrayed nothing of how frustrated or stressed she might be, and thus how monumental the task was here. Considering that the losses at Eagle Mountain—or “The Nut” as Plutarch had nicknamed it—had been high, and many of her citizens had been Peacekeepers who might well have been killed in the war, he could imagine Two was hurting.

He’d count on getting some more out of Brutus and Enobaria tonight. Forewarned was forearmed, after all. Shaking hands with various other officials and trying to remember their titles, he was relieved when the cameras shut off and he and Johanna were free to go to the Village.

The houses of Victors’ Mountain in Two were perched on a lofty clifftop placed on the likewise named Victors’ Mountain, with a grand view of the village below and the imposing Justice Building. If any of the victors had been at home during the bombing of Eagle Mountain they would have had a great view of it across the valley, though he doubted they had been. For well or ill, Two’s victors would have fought. He didn’t much want to ask Brutus or Enobaria who had been on what side. For them too it might be something of an unhealed wound that their district had torn itself in two like it had.

He glanced at the rubble and ruin of Eagle Mountain, looking like a giant fist had descended from the sky and pounded the mountain and collapsed it. Beetee had done his job well. Minimal and necessary casualties, and far fewer than some of the soldiers from Thirteen had been calling for, Gale Hawthorne leading the charge. But it still meant some people were forever buried within. It must have been a hard sight to see every time Brutus and Enobaria left the Mountain to head down into the valley. He wondered if people from Two looked at the sight like people in Twelve had looked at the mines, knowing it was a tomb for some of their own neighbors.

For a moment it was hard to breathe and he didn’t think it was all the thinner air of these mountains, higher than the ones back home. “Tell me again we did the right thing,” he said, looking at the destroyed mountain.

“We did. And we’re doing the right thing helping them out of the shit they’re in.” As wise as answer as he could have hoped for, and he slipped his arm around her shoulders as they headed for Brutus’ house. Pretty easy to tell as it was the only one with the lights on.

Dinner passed uneventfully, though the sight of electric lights was still hard to get used to after so many months without. The kitchen was painted a cool, pale blue he doubted spoke of Brutus’ taste, since Brutus tended to run towards practical dark colors in everything. Apparently Enobaria was putting her mark on things too, just as Johanna had. They talked of small things, none of them wanting to really probe at still-aching wounds. But the time finally came to bite the bullet on it.

“So what’s the situation?” he asked Brutus bluntly. “I’ll hope the mayor’s straight with Johanna and me but I’d hear it from you two also.”

“Electricity’s spotty sometimes,” Enobaria said, scraping the last of the stew out of her bowl. “Supplies are too. Obviously Eagle Mountain’s a total fucking loss.”

That was all fine and well, but considering Two had been a district virtually caught in civil war, it wasn’t answering the important questions. “The loyalists you were chasing down last fall?” That was the reason they had left Thirteen and Squad 22.
Brutus grimaced a bit. “A few of them, holed up fuck knows where deep in the mountains. A lot of them surrendered already over the winter. It’s popping a couple of annoying pimples, Haymitch. We’ll find them or they’ll starve themselves to death out there determined to hold out. But no big threat. Not any longer.”

“And?” There was still that air of hesitation.

“And what?” Enobaria said defensively.

“Your people want help or not?” Johanna said bluntly.

For a moment they were all bristling, the ready aggression of a victor coming forward, and seeing it that part of him forged in the hell of the arena was already instinctively reading the situation. Brutus had six inches and probably fifty pounds on him, Enobaria five inches and thirty pounds on Johanna. Not a prolonged battle then, not unless they wanted it to go badly for them. The weapons right at hand were only eating utensils, chairs and the like. Nothing too favorable. His hand was still instinctively wrapping tighter around his knife, ready to fight. Nine months ago they’d been trying to kill each other in the arena. Maybe some things didn’t change easily.

The moment hung there, all of them waiting to see what would happen, and then he realized it and said, “Shit. Enough.”

Johanna put down the fork she’d been clutching, reached for the last biscuit and said, “Fine, but if anyone tries to take this from me, they get the fucking fork in their hand.” That more than anything seemed to defuse the tension, and a few nervous bursts of laughter answered it.

“Baria,” Brutus said, looking over at Enobaria who was still looking at them with a conflicted look on her face. “It’s fine. They’re our friends.”

With that he understood it was something about her being fiercely willing to protect Brutus, though he couldn’t figure out what it is.

There must have been a confused look on his own face because Brutus sighed, leaned back in his chair, and looked glumly like he’d rather discuss anything but the topic at hand. “It’s my brother,” Brutus said. “Quintus.”

“Peacekeeper, yeah?” He remembered Brutus had told him that a few months ago when he and Johanna had been explaining about Ash and Heike.

“Yeah.” Brutus’ face had regained its usual calm stoicism. “My older brother. He put in his twenty years and then he got a job as an instructor at the training camp by Wolf’shead Pass. He’s still there. With his wife, and no trainees now, wondering what’s going to happen to him and to our entire district.” His blue eyes lifted and met Haymitch’s. “It’s not just my brother.”

“Almost every family in Two has at least one member in the Corps,” Enobaria told them, folding her hands and putting them on the table. “That’s thousands and thousands of people.”

“You have one in it?” Johanna asked her.

“My sister Illythia. Word is she died during the fighting for Granite Pass,” Enobaria said, a flicker of grief on her expression. Granite Pass had been the last furious battle in Two to regain the access route to let the rebel forces move on the Capitol. Brutus and Enobaria had fought in that action and there had been a lot of casualties. He noticed she didn’t say what side Illythia Reska had fought on. He decided to not ask. “A lot of families are in mourning. Privately, in quite a few cases. It’s not considered…proper now to openly grieve for someone who loyally wore the white until the end and...
died in Capitol service.

“The worse end falls on the ones who survived,” Brutus picked up where Enobaria fell silent. “Rebel or loyalist alike. They came back home out of a job, since no district is probably in a hurry to readmit Peacekeepers, and they saw the trials this winter and spring of some of their fellow Peacekeepers. They saw them condemned to execution.”

Haymitch had heard what some of them had been condemned for. He couldn’t exactly shed a tear for their fates. If Romulus Thread hadn’t been an apparent casualty of the bombing in Twelve, he had little doubt the man would have been on trial for his life along with the rest. Brutus held up a hand, anticipating the obvious protest and stifling it. “I’m not saying it wasn’t deserved. The things they did shamed the uniform and some of their fellows would openly say that. But they’re nervous. It was our people from Two as Peacekeepers, out in the districts as the hands enforcing Capitol will. It was the Peacekeepers who stood against rebel forces. And they wonder—with the reckoning at hand, are they all going to be put on trial next?”

“Right now, that means a lot of Two has no future they can count upon and they’re scared shitless. They’re back in their home villages hoping nobody will ask too many questions. Mayor Sangus will want to know what way President Paylor is leaning on the matter,” Enobaria told them. “She’s just not going to be comfortable enough to ask it directly.”

“And you are?” Johanna asked her.

“We know you both in a way she doesn’t,” Enobaria said it with the assurance of believing it true. “Besides,” she pointed out, dark eyes suddenly fierce, “it’s a question with some self-interest to you both. You’re in the shit with the rest of us, aren’t you? If your siblings are still alive, this affects you too.”

“Fuck,” Johanna cursed softly, glancing his way with an expression that was mingled concern and irritation. Because, he realized, Enobaria was right. If Ash and Heike were out there, their fate was tied to whatever happened to other Peacekeepers from Two.

“So where are they now?”

“A lot of them are back in their home villages waiting to see what happens.” Brutus sighed, looking reluctant what to say next. “Some of them may be out in the districts pretending they never wore the uniform.”

“Won’t help them in the long run. Any time official ID is needed, they’re screwed,” Johanna said. That was true. The Peacekeeper database may have been wiped by the Capitol, or perhaps by Peacekeeper officials, but they couldn’t hide their absence from the database any time they had a finger stick for official identification confirmation. Anyone with a brain would soon know that “Identity not found” meant a Peacekeeper in hiding.

“Word is there’s some Peacekeepers gone renegade out in the borderlands trying to set up a place to live apart from Panem. Others here, well, there’s some that are calling for declaring independence…”

“Seceding,” Haymitch said flatly, not liking the prospect of it. Though it struck him that was probably what the Capitol had called the districts declaring their own independence so he regretted the remark almost instantly.

“Can you blame them?” Brutus said defiantly. “They’re frightened because there’s a hell of a lot of ill will out there and they don’t exactly feel like Panem’s welcoming Two with open arms here. Do we still belong in this country or not? You’ve got to get Paylor to settle the Peacekeeper question first
—are we expecting prosecution or not for a big portion of our surviving population? Everything else about rebuilding Two pales in comparison."

“You want me to just say we’ll let everyone off the hook?” Haymitch said. “Come on, Brutus. You ever listen to Chaff talk about things in Eleven and how harsh Peacekeepers kept it?” Eleven had easily been the worst, from what he had heard. “You want me to tell you what it was like in Twelve under Romulus fucking Thread who took personal pleasure in his job because I killed his brother in the arena? Don’t people have some right to see justice done?”

“No justice, perhaps. Revenge, no. Wasn’t it you calling for reason when it came to the Capitol and trying to make the difference clear? Apply that in this case and figure out any conditions for prosecution versus amnesty,” Brutus said bluntly, “and make them clear, or else chances are Panem might lose District Two entirely before the government approves us being the nation’s pariahs.”

They all sat there in silence for a good minute. “At least you’re being honest about it,” Johanna said finally.

“Sorry,” Enobaria said. “We figured you’d rather have the truth.” She cleared her throat. “And we figured we could trust you with it.”

“Thanks for that,” he said with a sigh. If nothing else, knowing the situation and its reality was a better thing, even if it was a hard truth to swallow. An anxious, defensive district on the verge of secession wasn’t exactly an easy thing to confront, let alone as the first stop on this journey. He’d much rather that this had been a matter of fixing the district having no electricity rather than confronting moral quandaries like this. “Jo and I are gonna think on that tonight, maybe try to talk to Brocade in the morning. We don’t meet with Sangus until lunchtime anyway.”

“Thanks for dinner,” Johanna told them, getting to her feet and pushing in her chair.

Brutus gave a half-smile. “Always welcome back every night, you know that. I’ve got the ‘Splendor’ films if you’re interested too. You might need some distraction in the evenings.”

The peace offering, and Brutus carefully testing if the friendship was still sound, made him smile a little in spite of himself. “Yeah, we might take you up on that.” It had to be solid, didn’t it? Only a friend could have the balls to bring up something like this, hard as it was, disagree about it, and place trust that it wouldn’t be used to harm his other friends and neighbors.

“We won’t watch ‘Splendor in the Mines’, if it would bother you,” Enobaria said quietly. He realized she offered that for him, because that Twelve depicted so idealistically in the film, the district of the miners, was gone forever and it might be a painful reminder of that fact. But Two, while not annihilated, was facing something of the same—facing a past that was gone and having to find its future. They’d no longer be the district of Capitol loyalists and Peacekeepers.

“Nah,” he said, shaking his head, “we ought to watch it. It’s still probably as damn ridiculous as it was the first time I saw it. So, dinner and a movie tomorrow night?” They agreed on that and bid each other good night.

Walking over to Sedullus’ house, inhaling the crisp night air, Johanna was the one who spoke up first. “They’re right. We’re involved in this too, so we’d damn well better see it through.”

“There’s a difference between those who did what the Capitol and their Heads commanded, and those who were cruel in their own right.” Though even in the case of the former it was sometimes a blurry thing. Still, given that he had killed in the arena to survive, that innocents had fallen by his own hand, he couldn’t as readily condemn people for feeling forced to do things because if they
didn’t it would have meant their own execution. “What would you do if Heike was one of the ones who actually enjoyed it?” he asked her bluntly. “The whippings, the torture?”

“What would you do if it was Ash?” she asked equally bluntly. “He’d almost put in his full twenty years. Heike had less than five. Lots more opportunity for him to have gone astray.”

“I know that,” he said, leaning his hands on the porch railing and looking up towards the starlit sky with something close to despair. “You don’t think I wonder that? Every single day?” Every day he was a little bit terrified that his smart, sweet little brother had been forged into a monster. “Even if he stuck to his orders, he must have done things I wish to hell he hadn’t.” He tried to not think about that too much, but the reality was hard to deny. He was deluding himself if he wanted to pretend that in all those years Ash had probably never had a hand in an execution for poaching or theft of food or the like.

She waited, saying nothing but slipping her hand into his. “I’d do what you would,” he said, confident that she would. “They may have been hijacked, but they’ve still made their own choices. If Ash became one of the ones who deserve to die for what they did, I’d condemn the man who did those things…and I’d mourn the brother I lost all those years ago.” He had spent more than half his life mourning that little boy. If Ash was truly gone, he would have to accept it.

“Then we know what to do.” There was no pleasure in her voice when she said it, only the resignation of pursuing a necessary course. “We’ll get Brocade on it. In the morning.” She stretched up and kissed his cheek. “C’mon, let’s get upstairs to bed,” she told him, voice more of a firm statement rather than a seductive whisper.

She was right. It cut too deep because it was so personal. Shutting it out for now and turning to each other, rather than tossing and turning all night over it, was the right course. They could confront it anew in the morning with clearer minds.

Someone had obviously prepared the house, airing it out and dusting the furniture and putting fresh linens on the bed. He didn’t doubt that their things, both the things from Twelve and whatever Cinna had sent for them as wardrobe, had probably been unpacked already too. The thought of someone else’s hands on his things bothered him a bit but he put it aside. He turned on the bedside lamp as Johanna turned off the light switch. “So easy,” she said, flicking it back on and then off again with a shake of her head. “I got so used to the lanterns and the candles.”

He moved towards her, wrapping his arms around her. “Think I’ll almost miss those nights. The days too.” The gentle glow of candlelight on her skin was something to behold, but he didn’t mean just that. Things had been so simple in Twelve over the winter, so free of complications. It hadn’t taken long for this trip to test them already, and he didn’t doubt it was only the trust of friendship from Enobaria and Brutus that had let them get right to the heart of the dilemma.

“Still here,” she murmured in his ear, fingers moving to undo his tie, and as ever, that was all that need be said.
The insistent chime of the doorbell early in the morning, dawn’s rays barely peering through the curtains, woke Haymitch, and he groaned, figuring it had to be important for someone to be at the door at this hour and that persistent about it. Rolling over, hearing Johanna mumble about throwing an axe at whomever it was, and putting on a bathrobe, he padded down the stairs to answer the door. Brutus stood there. “Well, go on and get dressed,” he said, and it wasn’t a request.

Haymitch yawned, rubbing his bleary eyes. “I’m forty-two, Brutus. Come back in a few hours. I don’t fucking well do perky and energetic early in the morning.” Not that he ever really had, considering that for his entire adult life he’d pretty much made a habit of getting to sleep around noon when it was finally safely broad daylight out.

“Yeah, and I’m forty-three and I’m already awake and moving,” Brutus argued, stuffing his hands in his sweatshirt pockets and looking totally awake and at ease. Meanwhile, in his bathrobe, Haymitch suppressed a shiver at the crisp early morning air and thought grouchily that he hated looking at all off-kilter in front of someone who was obviously fine and dandy.

“Are you going to hold ‘I’m a year older than you’ over me for the rest of our lives?” Somehow he could imagine it, with mingled humor and irritation. So that was Brutus’ idea of general inspiration —you can do it, you’re a year younger than me, so move your ass.

“Probably. So, are you standing here arguing with me or getting dressed?”

“This better be good,” he grumbled, waving a hand irritably for Brutus to stay put. “Five minutes.” Heading back upstairs he got dressed quickly, figuring from Brutus’ own attire that casual was just fine.

Of course, once he had his boots on and was ready to go, Brutus was totally clammed up as they hiked a trail away from the Village higher up Victor’s Mountain. Haymitch glanced into the distance towards the jagged, bare peaks of rock wreathed by clouds, touched by the pastel hues of dawn as the sun was rising above the mountains. This place was beautiful in its own way. But those mountains were lifeless and so it was a remote, alien beauty for him. It didn’t move him in the way the sudden pang of longing for the life and familiarity of the tree-covered misty mountains of home did. Favoring trees rather than stark rock—might be Johanna’s influence.

But looking over at Brutus, he could see the other man was watching the dawn with the peaceful satisfaction of a man comfortable with the world and his place in it, a man utterly at home.

“I come up here every morning to think. To train too,” Brutus said, stretching his shoulders out as if he was preparing to do just that.

“War’s over and done, Brutus,” he observed dryly. “You can stop training, you know.”

“War’s done but it doesn’t change what I am,” Brutus returned sharply. “Or what you are, for that matter.”

“And what’s that?” he said, perching himself on a rock and folding his arms over his chest. As usual with someone scoffing, Don’t you know what you are?, the train of his thoughts took a familiar route and started at Miserable, ran steadily along the tracks to call in at Drunk, Has-Been, and Useless, took a stop at Embarrassment to take on a lot more baggage, and finally settled down for a good long
stay in the rather bleak territory of Worthless. The habits of years didn’t change easily.

Brutus turned and studied him with that pale blue gaze. “You’re not an idiot so obviously you’re aware after your Games you had something of an…admiration here in Two. Ever think about that?”

“You people like a good fight, I was the smartass brat who unexpectedly killed two of your tributes. Pretty self-explanatory.”

“There’ve been big talkers in the arena before, and smart kids, and unless they’re friggin’ geniuses like Beetee, they don’t last until the end,” Brutus pointed out. “And some other tributes, well, they’ve gotten lucky and gotten the jump on a Two tribute and made the kill. No, with you…look, I watched those Games, OK? I was a cadet going into my final year. I can tell you what I would have thought, if I was Remus Thread.”

“And what, exactly, would that have been?” Aside from wishing he’d been in the Games next year like he should have, and thinking about his girl Aurelia right there by his side and how he really wouldn’t want to be the one to kill her?

That look changed and there was nothing soft or friendly in Brutus’ eyes suddenly, all calculating, impartial assessment. “I’d be thinking, here’s one of the Twelve boys. Got a seven and he’s lasted over a week already so he’s not going to piss himself and cry. But this year, we’ve got twelve Careers in here and probably four or five others all with higher scores than him. So he’s, say, mid-level threat at best. He’s a smartass so he probably got that seven by his brains. But he’s all alone. He’s small. We’ve got three of us and probably any one of us could take him. He’ll probably go down easy.”

“I didn’t.”

“You didn’t,” Brutus readily agreed. “You just grabbed that knife and fought because you realized that was the one chance you had.” He gave a diffident half-shrug. “Not that you were that great, mind. It was pretty obvious your technique was wild and barely trained.” Haymitch barely suppressed an almost nervous burst of laughter at the casual insult. “But you moved fast enough you had the element of surprise for a few moments, and more than that, you fought. No hesitation, nothing held back. Three on one, all of them trained and better fighters than you, and you ran headlong into it. Now why was that?”

“Well, begging for mercy never got anyone anywhere in the arena,” he said dryly, not quite understanding why Brutus was rehashing old memories like this and not exactly liking it. “And I was a fast runner but I wasn’t going to get away from all three of them. Besides, in the arena you have to fight eventually. I figured hell with it, I have to fight this out, so might as well get to it.” He hadn’t expected to walk away. He still wouldn’t have, with the overwhelming surge that grief and rage gave to Aurelia, if not for Maysilee.

“And you were fighting to get back home,” Brutus said, strangely almost gentle about it. “I saw that with the interviews. You gave it everything and you were the one who walked away.” If Brutus talked about Ash’s interview, which Haymitch had never been able to watch, even after last winter, he would seriously want to punch the man in the face. “So, go forward to the 74th Games. You’ve got two kids that we all see you’re getting more attached to the idea of them surviving the more times goes on. Me, I’ve got two. Not the best I’ve put in the arena, but…” Brutus smiled, and shook his head. “You jumped right in there too. Sponsors, Gamemakers, political bigwigs. You fought for those two then with everything you had. You did last year too, matter of fact—you think anyone’s ever going to figure out you didn’t start masterminding a nationwide rebellion until you would have otherwise been forced to accept Katniss and Peeta were going to die in the arena?”
“Brute,” Haymitch said, his tone a warning. Just because the man was right didn’t mean he wanted to hear it. The truth in that case was an uncomfortable thing, given that people considered him heroic or whatever for kicking off an uprising, and perhaps even a dangerous truth because of it. All right, fine, there had been plenty that was selfish about his timing on the rebellion. All winter long when it was all about idealism and a hopeful future for the entire nation, he’d held Katniss back. Only when he’d have had to watch her and probably Peeta die, knowing if they did he’d probably finally just go beyond the fence like Nualla Clearly intending to die out there, did he bring the force of his mind and his will towards the problem. Brutus was right. He’d set out to save two kids’ lives for the second time, and he’d done it by starting a rebellion. He didn’t know if Johanna had figured that out yet—that part of his atonement was setting things right, making amends for the thousands who had died because he had been so determined to save two lives.

“You gave that everything too. Put yourself in the arena willing to die for it, rallied most of the other victors around you. Damn near killed Enobaria when you thought she and I had killed Katniss and you went berserk on her. Damn near killed yourself too.”

“She’d have had me anyway in another thirty seconds.” Obviously Brutus had seen the tape of his knife fight with Enobaria, since he hadn’t been right there seeing it when it happened. He wasn’t kidding himself. She was better trained and ten years younger than him. He wouldn’t have lasted in the end.

“True, but the way you were going she was going to be dead in a few seconds anyway if I hadn’t come along to stop you. Then you tried to get Snow to execute you so you wouldn’t be used as a pawn.” Brutus shook his head. “Now here you are on some quest to find your brother and Johanna’s sister and repair the districts while you’re at it. And you know what? I wouldn’t bet against you. You think you’re going to just live some quiet little life in Twelve? You’re a warrior. You only lost your way so badly those years when you had no choice but to submit, over and over.”

Maybe he had a bit of a point there. The helplessness, the inability to do anything but suffer and lose, had been what did him in over the years, slowly devouring him. “We all saw what happened with Two when it’s just a matter of living for the enjoyment of a fight,” he said, shaking his head. The loyal minions of Two, so admiring of the pure nature of a fight that they didn’t even give a damn that they fought for no reason at all rather than Capitol entertainment.

“Yeah, and it was you that made me and Baria both think about what we fought for, and why, and that the honor of the Capitol wasn’t worth it. That’s why you win, Haymitch. You always fight for what you love.” He chuckled slowly. “Even if that means something small like hollering at Boggs and demanding Johanna get another chance at the final exam on the Block.” Haymitch tried to suppress a wince at Brutus’ obvious amusement, realizing Brutus must have been arriving at Command when that happened and he hadn’t even noticed, so keyed up by concern over Johanna. “When your heart’s in it as well as your head, you’re apparently pretty damn well unbeatable. Accept that you’re a fighter. You’ve got that in common with your kids back in Twelve, right?”

Brutus apparently saw things, at least related to battle, with eagle-sharp eyes. He thought of Katniss, who’d fought for Prim, and Peeta, who’d fought for Katniss, both of them willing to die for it. What’s this? Have I actually got a pair of fighters this year? he’d drawled drunkenly at the two of them. They’d been fighters, and they sparked the passion in him to win, to bring both of them home alive, to put in the hours and the charm and the lies and the risks it had taken to make the unprecedented thing happen. He’d been desperate and utterly terrified to fail when he’d begun to hope, but at the same time, the further he pushed the thing, he’d felt sharper and more alive than he had in years, a sort of odd enjoyment at the tightly-strung tension of confronting the challenge before him, of fighting and seeing how he was gaining ground by it.

“So I’m a warrior. And?” Interesting thoughts and all, and maybe Brutus had a point to it, though he
didn’t see what exactly the end payoff of this little chat was supposed to be.

“So you use it,” Brutus said with a snort of exasperation. “A sword’s a fucking sword, Haymitch, it’s not meant to get hammered out into a plow. It’s meant to be ready for when it’s needed again. So after this whole Panem Reconstruction thing, if another fight comes, be ready and embrace that. You’re not meant to go pretend you’re happy just growing turnips and all you want to do is forget it ever happened.” Brutus gave a grunt of disdainful amusement. “We can’t ever forget, after all. We have the scars and the memories and the damn newscasters chasing us.”

He gave a sharp, sarcastic bark of laughter at that. “Ain’t that the truth.” The memories might dim a bit and come less frequently but they would never leave him, and he saw the scars on his body every day. The newscasters; well, that was unfortunately true also. “So why’s it matter to you so much, me accepting that or whatever?”

Brutus gave another of those small rolls of his shoulders that passed for a shrug. “I know what it is to live and be judged as nothing,” he said, glancing at Haymitch and then away again. “We’re lucky. We survived. Realized we could fight a good fight for a good cause.” A slight smile touched his lips. “Became something a woman could love.” Hearing the warmth hinted at in his words, Haymitch realized that yeah, the man was solidly in love with Enobaria.

“True enough,” he acknowledged with a sigh, remembering ten years or so gone, when he and Brutus were realizing they were finally waving goodbye to the last of their youth and that was it, that the men they had become, awkward and disgraceful, would be the men they were likely to be for the rest of their lives. They would always go home to their districts and instinctively cringe. Sure, they were still making fun of all those inane Capitol romance movies with harsh words and harsh shots of alcohol. But right there beneath it all was the rage and hurt of, Stupid fuckers, don’t know how lucky they are that love is such an easy right for them that it’s just a lark to giggle and sigh at.

“But the old ways are still there, aren’t they? Old habits. Old thoughts. They sneak back in.” Brutus said it carefully, almost reluctantly, but with the weary air of confidence in the truth of it. His voice went lower, barely more than a murmur over the morning breeze. “Some days…I think I’m still waiting for it to all come apart.”

“Brutus…” Seeing the man admit something like that, raw and painful as it was, was hard enough. But the fact he’d hit the mark as surely as one of Katniss’ arrows made it all the worse. The self-doubt crept its way in sometimes, the fear that someday, Johanna would call it quits and it wouldn’t be her fault because he’d always known she could—and should—do better.

“Ah, well,” Brutus said with a nervous chuckle that told Haymitch he was self-conscious about having said as much as he did. “She finally asked me a couple months ago if we were just fucking around or if I ever intended more than that. Put up or shut up moment, you know? Next thing I know, she’s moving in.” He blew out a slow breath and said, “Because I let Lyme go. If I lost Baria, that would be my fault. And so I realized this—this is something worth fighting for. To be worthy of her, to not be who I was.”

“It’s not a thing you can win with swords, Brute,” Haymitch pointed out. That was the hellish thing. It was nothing standing right in front of him that could be attacked with fists or weapons and killed. It was more like trying to contain that corrosive poison mist he’d seen on the Quell tape, the stuff that had killed Lamina. It was there and would always be there inside him, and it slowly ate away at the walls he had made to contain it. If he didn’t tend to that, constantly struggle to keep his shields against it strong, eventually it would work its way out, start eating him alive again and destroying him.

“No. But it’s a fight all the same. And I wasn’t raised to give surrender and I won’t. She’s something
I’ll fight for.” He hesitated and then said, “I asked her to marry me. Last week.”

He’d proposed to Johanna while he’d been caught up in the whirl of emotions about Coin and the baby. She’d confronted him, demanded to know if all they had was a few weeks of careful sex in Thirteen. Somewhere in there, he had realized he didn’t want to lose her to his own fear, and though he never said it outright, he was grateful to her for confronting him and making him face it, telling him, If I said you had the right to ask?, because he would have never felt himself worthy to offer it without that. Apparently Enobarbia Reska had done the same for Brutus a few months ago, and in time it had developed into enough for Brutus to take that final step. “Congratulations,” he said, his grin at that actually sincere. “Just couldn’t stand to let a Twelve upstart show you up, huh?”

Brutus gave a grunt of amusement. “That, and you and Johanna are here, and you’re the closest friends we have…” He cleared his throat. “It’s in three days. I know you’re busy and all.”

Piecing it together, he figured out Brutus was asking him to be at the wedding. It wasn’t hard to remember how touched he’d been that Katniss and Peeta had put the toasting together for him and Johanna a few months ago. There were so few of them left that to have someone close at the wedding had meant more than could be easily expressed. “Be honored by it,” he managed. “I’ll make time. I’m sure Jo will too.”

“I’m sure she and Baria are probably plotting right now how they’re gonna get the upper hand on us for the rest of their lives.”

He laughed. “Yeah, probably.” He reached out and clapped Brutus on the shoulder. “That’s all right. You and me, we’ll stick together too. And we won’t just roll over for them.” He loved her, but that didn’t mean he’d submit and let her have her way in everything. Besides, he was pretty sure she’d hate that. She wanted to win it in a fair fight, prove herself against him. “You know they don’t want that anyway. Too boring.”

“You’re a born fighter too, and Johanna is something you love. You fought hard to get this far away from who you were. So I don’t want to see you in five years with her long gone and you back on the bottle.” There it was, finally, and he understood, even if Brutus had meandered around a good bit in making his way there.

Looking at Brutus, he thought the other man needed to see it in him too, that determination to stand and fight and be a good man, to steel his resolve even further. For him, having someone else on that path who understood the doubt and the struggle to not relapse back into the past would be invaluable. He held out his hand. “Allies, then,” he said quietly.

Of course Brutus grabbed his forearm instead, Two-style. “Battle-brothers,” he corrected Haymitch with another of those slight smiles of his. Letting go, he fished in a crevice in the rock and pulled out two solid wood staffs. The tension in him evaporated, replaced by a confident ease as he apparently got on more familiar turf. “And since you’re a warrior, regularly continuing training, even in peacetime, to be ready for a fight is good,” he said, tossing one to Haymitch. Unprepared for it, he still managed to only fumble one and caught the staff before it hit the ground. “Besides,” Brutus said, smirking over at him, “no sense in letting you get lazy and fat again.”

For that Haymitch’s first blow was a stinging swat right across the knuckles of Brutus’ right hand. As Brutus let go with a grunt of pain, the tip of the staff was inside his guard and up under his chin. “Big men get so overconfident. They never learn,” he scoffed with a smirk of his own, “shut the fuck up and hit first while the other guy’s still mouthing off.”

“You did that in that clearing,” Brutus said carefully, pushing the tip of the staff aside and rubbing his jaw. “The girl said something…”
“Esca,” he said roughly. He’d never forget the name of the first person he’d killed, the Four girl with her tan skin and bright blue eyes. “And she said it looked like it wasn’t my lucky day…” Right about then was when he’d stabbed her, any words to end her thought lost in a grunt of pain and surprise. He hadn’t had to watch the life fading from her eyes, at least, because he was too busy trying to get his knife free and turn to fight the Two boy—Remus. “You still remember your first kill in the Games?” he asked. It wasn’t an offhand question. He remembered all those years ago, eighteen-year-old Brutus promising awkwardly and gruffly, I won’t forget.

“Dean. He was your boy that year,” Brutus said without hesitation. His lips pressed tightly together. “He yelled for his mother.”

He’d heard it over his headphones up in Mentor Central; that terrified wail from a boy knowing he was going to die that had haunted his nightmares for weeks. He still heard it sometimes, although now Dean wasn’t the only voice screaming for a mother that had stuck in his mind. “He wouldn’t have lasted,” he said, shaking his head and sighing. “You made it quick for him, at least. That’s as merciful as the Games let any of us be.” That was how it was. He didn’t blame Brutus for Dean. Brutus didn’t blame him for Remus and the path that had sent him, the distant second best boy of his year, to the Games and the disdain of his district.

A nod from Brutus at that, leaning on his staff as if it was needed support rather than a weapon. “You want to head back down?” he said, nodding downhill back towards the Village.

The past had come back and it stood there like a physical presence. So I’ll fight and I’ll tell it to fuck off, he thought. With a bit of effort, he gave Brutus a nonchalant smile, taking a ready stance. “Nah. C’mon. You haven’t even scored a point on me yet.”

Brutus answered with a grin of anticipation at that. “First to ten strikes and then down for breakfast?” Trust Brutus to think of food, he thought to himself with a laugh.

~~~~~~~~~~

She’d figured her turn was coming next once Brutus marched Haymitch off for whatever purpose. So when the doorbell rang, she answered it and said to Enobaria without preamble, “No, I’m not going hiking in the fucking mountains this early. I’ve got coffee ready.” Simply pushing a button on a coffeemaker rather than boiling water and brewing and filtering had been a giddy kind of glee, like a kid at New Year’s. “You want some or not?”

“Thanks,” Enobaria said, heading for the kitchen, with that lithe, alert walk she had that had always made Johanna think a little bit of a stalking forest cat moving through the trees. The fang-tips had only cemented the impression of a predatory animal even further, so seeing her with normal human teeth again certainly helped. Seating herself at the table, she accepted the mug of coffee Johanna slid across to her and proceeded to dump enough sugar in it to probably turn it into sludge.

“Never knew you had a sweet tooth,” she commented, guiltily realizing she was dumping a fair amount of sugar in her own coffee.

Enobaria shrugged diffidently. “That? It would have been too soft. The people in the Capitol always preferred seeing me eat meat, and the rarer the better.” Yeah, Johanna remembered that. There was a half-suppressed shudder from Enobaria that she caught.

“Thanks,” Enobaria said, heading for the kitchen, with that lithe, alert walk she had that had always made Johanna think a little bit of a stalking forest cat moving through the trees. The fang-tips had only cemented the impression of a predatory animal even further, so seeing her with normal human teeth again certainly helped. Seating herself at the table, she accepted the mug of coffee Johanna slid across to her and proceeded to dump enough sugar in it to probably turn it into sludge.

“Never knew you had a sweet tooth,” she commented, guiltily realizing she was dumping a fair amount of sugar in her own coffee.

Enobaria shrugged diffidently. “That? It would have been too soft. The people in the Capitol always preferred seeing me eat meat, and the rarer the better.” Yeah, Johanna remembered that. There was a half-suppressed shudder from Enobaria that she caught.

She raised an eyebrow and asked, “More of a ‘well done’ kind of a girl on your steak?”

“Yeah.” That made sense. She could imagine taste of blood and meat in Enobaria’s mouth as she tore out the Four boy’s throat, and why the rare meat they liked to see her eat after that would have
been sickening. She’d been eleven at the time, up for reaping starting the next year, and she’d had nightmares after Enobaria’s pretty violent win, terrified she’d be picked the next year and be eaten alive by some savage tribute from Two. It hadn’t panned out like that. She’d killed Nemesianus, the Two boy from her year, in the arena. He was her final kill. No blood in her mouth, no, but the close-up axe kills of several days meant blood was sprayed all over her. It had soaked in her clothes and in her hair, still long back then. She’d hated the coppery smell of blood ever since. “But they didn’t like you eating sweets either.”

“Nope.” The vicious little bitch with an axe eating cake? It wouldn't have fit with the image they forced on her. “They do like their savage women in the Capitol as bloodthirsty as possible.”

“Probably because all they had there was a bunch of soft, silly little overdressed and overpainted twits,” Enobaria said with a snort of irritation.

“Think that covers the men too,” she said dryly. “Especially the ‘little’ part where it counts, right?” Both of them had been whored out, after all. Enobaria had endured more than her share of Capitol men.

Enobaria gave an appreciating bark of laughter at that grinned and said, “Be right back.” Johanna shrugged as if to say, By all means, and Enobaria returned within a couple minutes with a covered plate, putting it down on the table. She must have gone back to the house she and Brutus shared to get it.

She lifted the dishtowel and cracked up, taking a cookie, seeing the rebelliousness in that little gesture. “Fuck ‘em,” she said, raising it as a toast of sorts, and taking a bite.

“Fuck ‘em,” Enobaria echoed neatly, taking a cookie herself with a smirk of satisfaction.

“So, this is nice and all. You, me, coffee, eating fuck-‘em-all cookies—hey, can I have the recipe?”

“You gonna label that recipe as ‘Fuck ‘Em All Cookies’?”

“Yes.” She grinned fiercely. “I’ll even give it to Peeta.” Though Peeta, diplomatic as he was, would probably call them something politely boring. Dark Chocolate and Black Walnut Cookies or whatever. She’d tell Haymitch, though, and she could imagine he’d get a kick out of it.

“Then by all means.”

“So, what, the idiots we’re with went to go thump their chests or whatever and be manly. Maybe tackle some bears?” Enobaria snickered at that. “Looks like we womenfolk get to keep each other company.”

“Going to insult me again for old times’ sake?” Enobaria said, sitting back in her chair and taking another bite of a cookie.

She gave a snort of amusement at that. “Wanna speculate just how many men were probably jerking off at you and me at the Cornucopia with the sight of two domineering bitches trying to kill each other?”

Enobaria didn’t seem to have a ready comeback for that, and it took her a moment to realize that had been when Katniss’ arrow took out Cashmere and Johanna had ducked Gloss’ hookblades to bury her axe in his chest. They were some of the few friends she could remember Enobaria having—she and Finnick had been next closest to them in age, and as a Career Finnick might have been expected to gravitate towards those three. But instead the two of them stuck together. “Sorry ‘bout Cash and Gloss,” she said. If she’d lost Finnick, or Haymitch, in the arena, it would have cut her as deeply.
“Not your fault,” Enobaria said with a sigh. “And to answer your question, probably a lot of them. Still got the scar from it.” She’d wounded Enobaria on her left leg.

“Yeah, me too.” A neat slice on her right arm, though it faded in prominence among the dozens of other scars she’d gotten in the following weeks down in that cell. She held up her right hand and showed off the scar there. “Got the nice one from your boyfriend too.”

“He’s got the one on his shoulder from you, so that’s even. Fiancé, actually.”

“Haymitch has—” She knew full well the scars on Haymitch’s body from his last frenzied fight with Enobaria, and imagined that Enobaria still had her share from that too. But the last bit there hit her full stop. “Finally got him to come around, eh?”

Enobaria grinned in satisfaction, tucking a lock of her dark brown hair, growing out as Johanna’s was after being shaved, behind her ear. It was still a little weird seeing her with such a normal human smile compared to baring those gold-tipped fangs. “Yep. I realized eventually he wasn’t going to be the one to speak up.” She shook her head and gave Johanna a wry look. “No easy thing, a man who feels like he’s got nothing to offer you, huh?”

“Are we actually having a girly conversation here, Fangless?”

“Figured you’d be the one who knows what I’m talking about, Stumpy. But you were gutsy enough that you fought for Haymitch, didn’t you? You didn’t with Finnick.”

Mentioning Finnick set her bristling instinctively. “You don’t know the first fucking thing—”

“Oh, bullshit. I was right there seeing it every summer. You kept waiting and waiting for Finnick to say something to you.” She scowled and stared into her coffee cup like something was written in it. She had, she’d admit it. She’d been young and stupid and totally inexperienced in love because she’d always been the girl that boys liked as a friend. She’d been too scared to say something and force him to say something because maybe deep down she’d known Finnick was sweet enough that if he’d loved her already, he would have told her. So she’d waited on him, waited even after Annie, hoping stupidly that he’d get bored with her and come back to her. It was only seeing the two of them together before the Quell, and in Thirteen, how strongly the two of them were bound together, that she realized she’d lost him to Annelle Cresta. Or more like, never really had him, because he’d never loved her, not the way she’d wanted him to love her. He loved her intensely, but as his best friend. That was it. The sex had simply been mutual comfort against the unbearable.

“So maybe I learned my lesson,” she said defensively, feeling the sting of embarrassment. But she could still remember that night on the rooftop of the Training Center, even if she’d gone on the offensive and demanded to know if she mattered to him more than Katniss and Peeta and a bottle of liquor, if there was an us when it came to them. She’d felt her heart in her throat when she’d asked, waiting for him to say, You’re my friend, Johanna, to live that same nightmare again. But deep down she’d known he wouldn’t readily say anything of his own volition. Haymitch wasn’t Finnick, whose heart opened so quickly, who could say things so easily. She’d also suspected if she kept silent and she let him go back to Twelve, he would fall back into the old ruts and never imagine having anything more than what they’d had. “Problem with that?”

“Far from it. It means you took control of your own fate there. Good example, too, I thought about that over the winter. Figured he’d let go of Lyme years ago, really, so it wasn’t that holding him back. And if you were gutsy enough to tell the man you loved him and you don’t give a shit if he felt unworthy of you, no excuse for me.” She gave a self-conscious little smirk. “I am from Two, after all. We embrace the fight.”
“Crazy bastards that you are, yes. So, that means we actually get to see the whole swordfight thing, huh?” she said with a chuckle. “Or what, does he just let you be on top that night because you’re the big, tough, domineering woman and he’s the man that worships at your feet?”

Enobaria’s smile was like a cat up to its whiskers in cream. “You still always have to be on top, Johanna, or have you actually found a man that can keep up with you?” Something in her expression went sharp, almost brittle, flickers of half-remembered pain there. “Or better yet, got to a point yet where you don’t have to be in control?” She didn’t say To be safe at the end, but Johanna heard it loud and clear anyway.

She remembered that last night in Thirteen, impulsively pulling Haymitch over her with the thought of Don’t want to die in the Capitol without knowing if I can do this again. She’d done it with a sense of trepidation, trying to not feel trapped, shutting out the flickers of memory of the men who’d pinned her down and fucked her mercilessly, hands all too often on her wrists or her throat. He’d looked shocked, but he’d accepted that she didn’t want to be coddled or second-guessed. She’d known deep in her bones that if she told him to stop, he would have.

Their wedding night, maybe it had been overwhelming circumstances that finally did it, but it felt like both of them finally had let go and started to let go of the fear. Finally she was confident enough in herself as a woman again that his weight and strength and sheer maleness was something arousing rather than an implicit threat to be kept under her thumb. He might have been on top but that didn’t matter, she’d had plenty of power in how she’d been able to make him respond to her.

“Sure,” she said, but she didn’t want to let the moment get too awkward and vulnerable, so she added with a casual smirk, “but it’s a hell of a lot of fun when I am.” Fun, now, to be the one calling the shots in bed, a source of pleasure and real power rather than something she’d desperately needed so she didn’t ever feel like that terrified, helpless girl again.

An acknowledging smile from Enobaria told her plenty. “The wedding’s in three days. I’m sure Brute’s asking Haymitch about it.” Those dark eyes studied her. “You’re about the only friend I have left.”

Oh really? We’re friends? she wanted to scoff instinctively, not liking being suddenly claimed like that, that old need to assert herself and be the one to control what was going on rearing its ugly head. The moment passed, though. “I’ll be there,” she said. She was surprised to see some kind of tension in Enobaria relax, and realized what it must have cost her to extend that hand of friendship. Sure, Haymitch and Brutus were pals. But that didn’t mean the two of them had to get along, and for years the two of them had hissed at each other like wet cats, Johanna’s defiance and Enobaria’s compliance when it came to the Capitol being the crux of the matter.

They were on the same side now and they’d endured a lot of the same things. Friend. She tried out the word in her head. She’d never really had a female friend, always played much better with the boys. She had Katniss, sure, although that whole thing was complicated by being family now, with its close ties of obligation as much as love. Katniss was more like having a little sister. “Friend” was something different entirely, and realizing that offer had been made, she felt stupidly grateful for it. “Didn’t waste time putting the wedding together once he proposed, huh?”

Enobaria grinned. “We figured we’d do it while you two were here anyway.” She winked then. “Besides, that’ll mean we’ll have been safely married for months before the kid arrives.” She said it with a sense of pride and something almost like wonder.

Her eyes flew to Enobaria’s stomach. Nothing showing yet beneath her loose shirt, which meant she was yet in the early months, but Johanna felt like she’d been punched in the gut. I’d be, what, five and a half months along now, definitely showing it, she thought, unable to help herself.
“Congratulations,” she said, hearing the dull flatness of her own voice.

Something went tight and pained in Enobaria’s expression like she’d just been slapped. She wished she could be good enough to step forward and be the one to bridge that gulf, suddenly made so soon after that friendship was offered, but she couldn’t. It hurt too fucking much still. Finally Enobaria was the one that spoke up. “Is that why you told me about Coin and the fertility drugs, Johanna? I figured you and Haymitch were probably sleeping together for a little while. Things were…different between you two after Finnick and Annie’s wedding.”

Things had been different, sure, because they’d had a close brush after Finnick’s wedding. After that she hadn’t quite been able to undo it, be able to think of him as just her annoying bastard of a friend rather than a potential lover, because she’d seen a glimpse behind the mask. But they hadn’t started sleeping together until right after Brutus and Enobaria left. “No, not that long,” she said, reaching for the last of her coffee as much to have something to do to help steady herself as anything. “Just a few weeks before we left for the Capitol. But…thanks to Coin, it was long enough to do the job.” She couldn’t quite look at her as she said, “I lost the kid when they had to give me drugs to help fight my burns, and the nurse told me about it when she told me about the clomiphen. She assumed I’d been dosing myself to get pregnant. I didn’t know before that.”

“Shit. Want me to try and get you, what, ten minutes alone with Coin? Victors still have some privileges, you know.” Strangely, that offer touched her more than cooing in sympathy would have. Maybe Enobaria knew her well enough to realize that.

“No. She’s not worth me going to jail for killing her.” Although she’d admit that if she could get away with it there were still times she wanted to do it, at least for a moment. “She’ll answer for it at her trial.” She and Haymitch had sworn out affidavits already for that. Hopefully they wouldn’t have to testify. “For that and plenty of other things.”

“He knows?”

“He knows.” We just don’t talk about it. In some ways it was a relief to be able to talk about it now with Enobaria, to talk about it with someone. “Just don’t let it get around, huh?”

“Lips are sealed,” she promised, and Johanna actually believed it. Those brown eyes carefully studied her again, and Enobaria hesitated before saying, “For what it’s worth, I think you’d have done a good job. You’re a fighter. You’d protect that kid with everything you’ve got.”

She glanced down, throat suddenly tight. “Thanks,” she said thickly.

A few more moments, and Enobaria reached over and laid her hand over Johanna’s, her raw-honey skin dark against the light gold of Johanna’s, her raw-honey skin dark against the light gold of Johanna’s, her raw-honey skin dark against the light gold of Johanna’s, her raw-honey skin dark against the light gold of Johanna’s, her raw-honey skin dark against the light gold of Johanna’s, her raw-honey skin dark against the light gold of Johanna’s, hesitating as if waiting to see if Johanna would flinch or pull back. “She’ll pay, and you’ll live a good life because you’re strong enough to do that. That’s the best revenge we can have on them, right?”

“Right.” She smiled and reached out, picked up another cookie. “Fuck ‘em all,” she said again.

“Fuck ‘em all,” Enobaria agreed.

Brutus and Haymitch came back in time for breakfast, and with a brief call to Paylor to get her considering the Peacekeeper question, it was Brutus who suggested they kill a few hours with one of the Splendor films. “In honor of you, Johanna,” he said with a grin, “‘Splendor in the Forest’ comes first.”

“I’ll have to practice my Seven yodel to summon my little animal friends to save my beloved,” she
cracked.

“Ah, shit, no summoning squirrels,” Haymitch groaned, and all of them snickered at him for it, because they all knew about his vendetta against them thanks to his arena. She knew by now he considered eating squirrel stew a fitting revenge to be undertaken as often as possible. She settled down beside him on the couch, tucking her legs under her and leaning on his shoulder with his arm going around her as Brutus started the tape.

It didn’t take for Haymitch to launch right into sarcastically ripping apart Loretta’s “Happy Working Song”. *My axe toils for a better tomorrow, except tomorrow never comes…* Surprisingly enough, Brutus seemed to cheerfully join in providing lyrics mocking the Capitol, and from the pleased smirk on Haymitch’s face at it, that was something new. She couldn’t imagine Haymitch would have been able to do that around Brutus before either. Though given the two of them knew the song well enough to think quickly enough to trade lines with Haymitch, he probably knew the damn thing by heart. Granted, she’d probably seen the movie a good dozen times herself since the Capitol was fond of reruns of the whole series.

“I think they’ve seen this a few too many times,” she told Enobaria, raising her voice to carry over the two men singing, Brutus a little off-key but not less enthusiastic for it.

“They’ve had extra years to do it,” she said back with a grin.

“Fucking idiot, that’s an oak,” she snapped at Lars who was yammering on about the beautiful maple wood that the tree would provide for beautiful, lasting furniture for so many couples out there, Loretta! Maybe even us, someday! “And like we’d ever buy that mass-produced shit we had to manufacture.”

“She’s pretty scrawny for a lumberjack, I always thought,” Brutus said, eyeing Loretta. “I mean, she’s no wider than an axe handle, and I figured those things are actually pretty solid and heavy.”

“Hey, Capitol fat-suction surgery does that to you,” Johanna said wryly. “And no, she wouldn’t be able to lift a real axe, let alone use it all day long.” She might be short herself, but she wasn’t tiny and skinny. The demands of working out in the woods had made her strong. “That’s gotta be a stunt prop she’s using.”

“Y’know, every time I see this movie, I’m pretty sure that’s a bunch of poison ivy they’re on,” Haymitch said, as Lars and Loretta settled down for their first big love scene.

“They’re having sex and you’re looking at the plants?” she said jokingly.

“That’s really lousy sex,” he said. “So yeah, looking at the plants is more interesting.”

“It’s not pay-to-view,” Brutus pointed out. “They can’t get too explicit.”

“Explicit nothin’, it’s just shitty acting.” Haymitch gave an irritated snort, probably viewing it as someone who’d had to act constantly, including when it came to sex, and make it utterly convincing. Wryly, Johanna was inclined to agree. She’d had to play her role plenty of times live, and even make some pay-to-views herself. She knew he had, and Enobaria must have as well. Their acting in those had clearly been better than this.

“But even if she can’t swing an actual axe that’s not a stunt prop, she’s so enthusiastic at handling wood though,” Enobaria joked as Loretta was gasping about how big and strong lumbering work had made Lars.

“She definitely loves to handle Lars’ wood.” She snickered. “And when we get to ‘Splendor in the
Mine’, you know Senga wants Fergall to…hm…explore her mine.” Haymitch started laughing at that, his shoulder shaking beneath her cheek at the force of it. Smirking to herself, she made a mental note to use that one on him at some point.

Brutus said with a low chuckle, “I think they’re naturals at this, Haymitch.”

“Ladies, I admire your abilities,” Haymitch drawled.

“So, I’m curious, when did he have enough time to get his trousers back on to confront a dozen bears with only an axe? I’m pretty sure his chest is oiled too, by the way. That’s more than just sweat.”

“He didn’t have enough time. But they’ll pretend he did…you really want to watch a naked guy running around swinging an axe, Brutus?”

“C’mon, Haymitch, we all got to watch a naked girl running around swinging an axe.”

“Ah, fuck you, Enobaria. I did swinging an axe and then I did naked later. Not together.” The axe had been the arena. The naked thing had been because of the whoring. But then she relaxed, realizing it had been only teasing. “The combination would have been too much for everyone to handle,” she snarked, earning some laughs for her trouble.

In a few hours she and Haymitch would be meeting with the mayor to start dealing with Two’s problems and the whole thorny Peacekeeper question. She knew Heike was still out there somewhere too, caught up in that trap. But for now, she was busy watching the worst movie about District Seven ever created. Curled up on the couch like this with Haymitch, with Brutus and Enobaria likewise on the other couch, she was in good company where the warmth and friendship and laughter made everything else seem a bit more bearable.
Things went easier with Mayor Sangus having pretty much sauntered in and presenting her with the fact they knew the trouble that had set Two off-balance, and had already passed it on to President Paylor. Spared from having to show the vulnerability of openly admitting whatever fears and trepidations Sangus had about it, the tension seemed to ease somewhat and everyone in Two suddenly grew rather more cooperative as word of They’re on our side apparently got around. Or at the very least, They’re not looking to blame everything on us.

Though Haymitch admitted the fact Brocade didn’t have a quick answer might not be exactly promising. He imagined she was arguing it with her new government and trying to come to an acceptable decision on it that would be fair, just as she had in running the War Crimes Council trials. He just impatiently hoped the wheels would get greased enough to give some kind of answer soon, perhaps before leaving Two, because dealing with the occasional electricity problem and the loss of the military complex in Eagle Mountain wasn’t much against a people who were stoically trying to hide their fear that they would be held accountable for being the hand that carried out the Capitol’s orders.

Bluntly, he’d told Brocade, “The reality is, we gave the Capitol mercy. So we actively tackle the Peacekeeper issue and find some way to include Two in as equals at the table, or they’re gonna walk away from Panem rather than accept being the ones that get scorned and spit on and watch hundreds or thousands of their own go to trial. And believe me, they’ll fight if we try to keep them as part of this nation by force.” An entire district born and raised with persistence and combat and honor as their touchstones wasn’t something he was too eager to start another war over. “We got Two into the rebellion by winning them over with reason, not by defeating them in combat.”

“You sure you don’t want my job?” she’d said, half-jokingly, half-wearily over the phone to him. But she’d thanked him and said she’d take it to her councilors. There would be long days ahead too, touring devastated villages, trying to deal with the awkwardly humbled fierce pride of the ex-Peacekeepers who now lived dependent upon the provisions and goodwill of the Panem government for survival. If he was of a crueler mindset he might find delicious irony in that, given that most of the other districts had been paralyzed, helpless captives of the Capitol that kept them in line by fear and threatened starvation, Two was now experiencing that firsthand. But there had been enough suffering, enough death. Hopelessness and despair didn’t look good on anyone, especially when it would fall upon children.

For the Peacekeepers, their supposed lives of duty had been flung back in their faces as the districts had all pretty much expressed they had no interest in letting a trained Peacekeeper force back within their borders. What the hell those districts were intending to do about, well, keeping the peace, that was going to be a headache he and Johanna would deal with as they made the rounds. Unfortunately, much as Peeta and others would probably like to believe everyone could just behave and get along, Haymitch knew better.

That was for tomorrow and after. Today, he let himself be absorbed in a wedding. Enobaria wore a dress of a rich crimson that complimented her dark coloring and stood out brightly in the dark, stately granite and dark wood of the Justice Building. Brutus wore the same shade on his vest and it almost clashed with his auburn hair, but Haymitch had the feeling the man didn’t give a damn about that right now. Red, vibrant as fresh blood—figured that would signify in a wedding here. He tried to not
think of the deep, dark red of the uniforms Two wore in the arena, not to think of these two last year facing off with him and his allies at the Cornucopia, how they’d nearly killed each other. That had no place in this day.

He noticed, both amused and oddly touched, that the district vows included swearing to defend each other, to fight for each other. There was no wedding song, but Two had its own little ceremony as the couple headed home. As they left the office, he formed up with a few other men that he didn’t recognize—friends or family, with the women on the other side. They’d handed him a sword that he’d been left clutching throughout the wedding, feeling vaguely like an idiot as opposed to the Two natives who’d probably been training with swords since they could walk. The tall, dark man on the end barked with authority, “Form the arch!” as if this was the battlefield rather than a wedding.

Johanna grinned over at him, standing opposite, and he touched the tip of his sword to hers, as did the other pairs along the line. Arm in arm, the bride and groom walked out the front door of the Justice Building and down the steps through the sword arch, and some of them gave something that sounded like a fierce war cry as Brutus and Enobaria passed. So that passed for well-wishes. He was pretty sure throwing a handful of rice like they apparently did in Eleven might cause less fear in innocent bystanders.

That done, they all headed up Victor’s Mountain for the celebration. Johanna slipped an arm around his waist for a second and quipped, “Well, nobody’s dead or bleeding yet here. Is that a dull wedding for Two?”

He couldn’t help but snicker at that, though his ears perked as he heard the wailing sound of pipes being prepared for playing. Twelve had become more a place of the fiddle at gatherings, but one or two oldsters were—all right, had been was more likely by now, he admitted glumly—players of the pipes. Admittedly he associated them more with funerals than weddings, so it would be interesting to see them played here, lively and joyful. “Ah, sounds like they’re killing a cat. Or a goose. Never mind,” Johanna muttered, though the way she said it with a grin told him she was only teasing.

They watched the dancing a bit, people weaving in and out of complicated patterns with ease, the newlyweds easily visible by the red only they were wearing today. Johanna went to go get drinks, though he warned her, “It’s probably gonna be that sour wine they love to drink here.” Halfway to vinegar, to his mind, but for Brutus’ sake he’d drink a glass of it.

The commander of the sword arch found him, and Haymitch reflected wryly that unfortunately, he’d met few men in Two that were shorter than him. This wasn’t one of them—he towered a good half foot higher. “I’ll give the sword back, promise,” he said with a nonchalant air. “Knife’s more my weapon anyway, right? Or maybe smacking someone over the head with a liquor bottle.”

That got him the barest twitch of the man’s lips in response, which he knew was pretty much like an open guffaw from any other district. “Brute says you’re looking into some Peacekeeper records?”

“Yeah,” he said, sitting down on the bench. “What of it?” One thing he appreciated about people in District Two; they preferred it straight up and without bullshit. It saved a hell of a lot of time and hassle by getting right to the point.

Dark eyes looked him up and down carefully. He had the sense the man seemed familiar from somewhere, though damned if he could say. He’d run into more than his share of Two fighters during the rebellion, especially during that final push into the Capitol. “So he speaks highly of you. And apparently you’re one of the few people to stick with him throughout the years.”

“We disgraces have to stick together,” he said easily. Better to say it himself and rob it of its sting.
Man-Mountain sighed, lips pressed tightly together, and nodded. He sat down beside Haymitch. “I think sometimes it would have been easier if he’d placed lower in the tournament,” he muttered, sounding both wistful and irritated at the same time.

Thankfully, over the years, Haymitch actually had a damn clue what he was talking about. The annual tournament of seventeen-year-old tribute cadets to determine which of them would place first and get intensified training for the next year to prepare for the arena. But the Second Quell, that had messed things up. “He was second. Ain’t bad.”

“Distant second to Remus Thread,” his new friend said with a matter-of-fact tone. “He was first to admit it. And the second place from the eighteenes, well, he was no great shakes, so of course they took Remus instead as the second tribute. The Quell calling for two more tributes fucked up a lot of plans.”

He couldn’t help a bark of incredulous laughter. “Tell me about it, friend. I was the second boy reaped from Twelve, after all.” If things had proceeded as normal that year, Dylan Wynngard would have been the Twelve male tribute, and Haymitch would have gone on his merry way to live a hard but fairly normal Seam life.

“Last tribute reaped, last standing,” came the cool response.

“Well, that’s a rarity,” he retorted. Only two male Twelve victors in the entire history of the Games proved that being the last tribute called in the Reapings was no positive omen.

“You and Peeta—“

He smirked. “Actually, If we’re getting technical, ‘last reaped, last standing’ never happened. I wasn’t exactly standing so much as on the ground trying not to die from shock before Sapphire died from an axe in her skull. As for Peeta, well, he was trying to not bleed to death and leaning on Katniss.” Besides, he and all of Panem knew if it came down to Katniss or Peeta, the girl would have been the one to make it out alive. “So, me and Brute, well, we have that in common too, the Quell messing up some plans…”

“Even if he wasn’t best of his year, if he’d gotten a good win that would still have been enough, though…”

“Any way you make it alive out of the arena is a good way,” he pointed out sarcastically. “He survived.” He wasn’t in the mood to hash out old wounds right now, especially when he didn’t see the point.

“And I’m thankful for that,” came the fierce reply. “I love my brother, all right? My good opinion isn’t the same as the rest of the district, or the Capitol, and twenty-four years of him being miserable is no simple thing, damn it!”

Brother. The other shoe dropped. “Quintus Allamand, I’m assuming.” He studied the man, seeing only a slight resemblance.

“Correct.” Obviously understanding the scrutiny, Quintus said, “I take after our father. He takes after our mother.”

“Ah. So, out of curiosity, what would have happened if he came in, say, third?”

“Same as me,” Quintus shrugged. “I was fourth in the tournament my year. You go to train as a Peacekeeper, but with higher status for having endured cadet training.”
“And your year was?” he asked, out of curiosity. “After all, might have been better for you to not be in the arena that year. There was a good run in the Forties there without many victories from One, Two, or Four.” He’d been the tail end of that, really. The group of them, the dark horses, had been so beloved by the Capitol starved for the novelty of fascinating victors. Victors…mostly forced whores too, of course. The Capitol’s adoration always came with a price. At least they’d had each other. Though it hurt to remember now, because of the group that had drawn him in and befriended him and propped him up that first year, Clover and Chantilly had survived, but Angus and Blight had both died in the arena. Chaff and Wiress too, their bodies never sold for sheer lack of interest in the imperfect, a maimed boy and a half-crazy girl, but they’d been his friends all the same.

“48.”

“Ah. Albinus,” he said, feigning cheerful reminiscing. “So maybe you would have come out alive. Although Albie, well, he never liked to talk about his Games much.” Albinus, on the whole, had been a quiet man who kept to himself and rarely came to the Capitol after his first few years, recognizing he was considered rather forgettable by its people. Winning thanks to simply surviving a Gamemaker-spawned tornado was as mundane and underwhelming to Two and the Capitol both as Brutus’ win due to so many deaths from freezing cold. It crossed his mind to wonder where and when Albinus had died, but he didn’t want to ask.

“Maybe wouldn’t have meant so much in the end. The Capitol was far more impressed with those victors in those years not from the usual districts.”

He smiled bleakly. “Well, any victor knows you only live because the Capitol likes—it that way.” Sponsorships, or the lack of it, assured that much. “Wouldn’t surprise me if they gave the odds a direct nudge here and there.” He’d seen it happen plenty behind the scenes since, where a particular favorite might have some help from the Command Center. Finally it struck him—48th Games, whereas Brutus had been the 51st. “You’re the older brother, huh?” he said, the smile turning a little more genuine now. The awkward but bristling protectiveness made far more sense now.

“As are you. And your brother’s a Peacekeeper.” Quintus settled down, relaxing a bit more, hands resting lightly on his knees. “As is her sister,” he nodded to Johanna, over across the way talking to the woman handling the food, and he couldn’t help but grin as she casually swiped what looked like a meat pie and continued whatever story she’d been telling, pie still clutched in her wildly gesticulating hand.

“Yep, that’s about the shape of it.” Recalling that Brutus said Quintus had been a Peacekeeper, and then an instructor at a training camp for Peacekeepers, he got right down to business. “You run into either of them?”

“Saw their pictures from when they were kids. I can say for sure Johanna’s sister—Heike, yeah?—didn’t come through my camp for her training when she was eighteen, but there’s eight training camps throughout the district. And I don’t recognize your brother from my district tours.” He gave a resigned grunt. “Although, hell, you don’t know shit about anywhere but Twelve where it’s one small central area and the Peacekeepers are all there. It’s different in some places. I mean, you’re assigned somewhere like Nine with the farm collectives all spread out, you don’t even meet most of the Peacekeepers assigned to other areas of the district except for a quick nod when everyone’s at the district center on Reaping Day and Victory Tour Day.”

He admitted he was a little disappointed, but why should he have expected it to be easy? “Thanks for looking anyway.”

“It had to have been the Capitol that wiped the database, because that was kept up there. We always
keep paper records. Relying on technology,” a snort from Quintus made his opinion of that patently clear, “fails too fucking much without one of those brainiacs from Three around to maintain and update the thing all the time. So the files should be there, but you’ll have to go search them physically. If you can get a name at the Peacehome for ‘em, that’ll probably tell you what camp they got sent to. From there you can probably get an initial assignment for Heike since she was on her first tour. For your brother…long paper trail, I’m afraid. If he’s on his fourth tour, though, you ought to be searching One through Six.” At Haymitch’s questioning look he explained, “After the first ten years in the uniform, senior Peacekeepers tend to get assigned the, ah, more central districts, if they’re not total screw-ups.”

“So the files should be there, but you’ll have to go search them. If you can get a name at the Peacehome for ‘em, that’ll probably tell you what camp they got sent to. From there you can probably get an initial assignment for Heike since she was on her first tour. For your brother…long paper trail, I’m afraid. If he’s on his fourth tour, though, you ought to be searching One through Six.” At Haymitch’s questioning look he explained, “After the first ten years in the uniform, senior Peacekeepers tend to get assigned the, ah, more central districts, if they’re not total screw-ups.”

“Nicer districts.” He said it bluntly, happier at the idea of being honest that Quintus trying to be soft. Coming from the district that had long been the butt of national jokes meant it didn’t affect him all that much.

“Pretty much.”

“So where were you, out of curiosity?”

Another of those faint smiles, and seeing it again, Haymitch could see the resemblance now between the brothers in that expression. “Actually, I got sent to Twelve first. I was there from New Year’s of 49 to the very end of 53.”

Doing the mental math on that was no hardship. He laughed, almost in chagrin, as he realized Quintus had been there both before and after his own victory in the Games. “Well, you missed out on some of my better years, then.” When he’d left, Haymitch had been only nineteen, slowly on his way down the drain but far from the bleak, broken man he’d been at forty. He hadn’t lost it all at once, nothing dramatic that he could look back upon and say there had been an overt breaking point. It simply left from him year by year in a slow bleed until there was nothing. “Hey,” he grinned and nudged Quintus with an elbow, “you there when I got flogged during the Dulcet years?”

“He said it bluntly, happier at the idea of being honest that Quintus trying to be soft. Coming from the district that had long been the butt of national jokes meant it didn’t affect him all that much.

“Pretty much.”

“So where were you, out of curiosity?”

Another of those faint smiles, and seeing it again, Haymitch could see the resemblance now between the brothers in that expression. “Actually, I got sent to Twelve first. I was there from New Year’s of 49 to the very end of 53.”

Doing the mental math on that was no hardship. He laughed, almost in chagrin, as he realized Quintus had been there both before and after his own victory in the Games. “Well, you missed out on some of my better years, then.” When he’d left, Haymitch had been only nineteen, slowly on his way down the drain but far from the bleak, broken man he’d been at forty. He hadn’t lost it all at once, nothing dramatic that he could look back upon and say there had been an overt breaking point. It simply left from him year by year in a slow bleed until there was nothing. “Hey,” he grinned and nudged Quintus with an elbow, “you there when I got flogged during the Dulcet years?”

“He ought to know better than to provoke him but somehow that little revelation unsettled him enough to do it, lashing out in pure instinct. Those years…the things Quintus had been there to see, the things he might have done, burned suddenly like the flames and the cigarettes his Peacekeeper guards had used on him in the Detention Center.

“Yes,” Quintus said tersely. “You’re really damn lucky you didn’t get hanged.”

“Fuck that,” he said. “I hit one of your colleagues who was groping a girl who obviously wasn’t sixteen yet.”

“I didn’t say you weren’t necessarily in the right, I just said you were damn lucky you didn’t get hanged,” Quintus corrected him sharply. “You think wearing the white’s all fun and games, Abernathy? We’re as bound by the law as the people in the districts. If we didn’t do our job and follow our orders and it was made obvious, we were transferred out and broken in rank. That was if we were lucky, if we had a Head who was willing to show some compassion. If not, if we had someone like Dulcet, we ended up an Avox or tied to a flogging post.” He was silent. “Or tied to that same post and shot by five of our own comrades if the Head felt like calling it treason rather than dereliction of duty.”

He was on the verge of calling that bullshit, complaining that a Peacekeeper was utterly powerless, but then he thought of Darius, lying on the winter-frosted stones of the square, bleeding from his head wound. Shoved aside and knocked unconscious by a Head hellbent on dealing out a punishment, and then taken to have his tongue ripped out.

“So it all depended on the Head,” he said finally. “The things you did.”
Quintus nodded, apparently relieved the point had been made. “Someone like Dulcet, we all treaded lightly and shut out mouths. Fog, well, of course you remember Fog. He was a different story. He was content to pretty much let things run smooth and quiet, at least until his last few years. I imagine something about Twelve came to President Snow’s attention and he told Head Fog he’d better shape up and crack down more, or else.”

Another of those almost painful laughs burst from his throat, well imagining exactly why Fog had cracked down. Coriolanus Snow always had been so very good at twisting the knife and bleeding someone in his power for all it was worth. In saving Ash’s life, Fog had effectively delivered his own fate, and thereby all of Twelve, right into Snow’s hands. It was something he both hated and owed Fog for and that was an uneasy thing. “Oh, I remember Fog, all right.”

“And you got away with publicly defying him the day he hanged a girl for poaching by going and cutting her down. You see the difference with him and Dulcet?”

“That girl was…” he half-snarled, remembering Lorna Hawthorne still with a particular agony.

“Young and probably doing what she had to do, I know,” Quintus snapped back. “You want to blame me for everything that went wrong in your district?”

He stared at him, and the words suddenly rose to his lips, the dread and anger that had been lurking right there since Quintus had said he’d been in Twelve, and when. “Tell me you weren’t there the day my ma and my girlfriend were shot, and they faked my brother’s death.” Because if Quintus fucking Allamand had been there, brother to Brutus or not, festive laughter at a wedding around him or not, Haymitch was going to tear him apart. “Tell me, and don’t you fucking lie!”

“Quin, c’mon, go easy on him,” Brutus called over to the two of them with a laugh, obviously seeing the two of them arguing. Though as Haymitch looked over at him, Brutus’ brows puckered in concern, seeing the tension there, and he made as if to come over and make sure it was all right. Haymitch waved him off. Let the man enjoy the day with his wife. Besides, trying to take on Brutus in hand-to-hand sparring in Thirteen had been tough enough. He was really in no mood to possibly engage both very large Allamands in mortal combat. Two might admire how he fought, but even with the frenzy of rage he wasn’t giving good odds on taking down both Brutus and Quintus down.

“I wasn’t.” Quintus told him defiantly. “I don’t know who was there, either. They never said a word to any of us about it. We had the feeling it was no accident, but nobody ever talked, and in that case we knew better than to ask. And whoever was there, they did what they had to do.”

“Shooting an unarmed woman and girl. Very brave,” he said mockingly, his heart twisting in agony, trying to not envision the scene that must have taken place in that old Seam house that day. He’d imagined it enough in his nightmares.

“You’ve killed to survive too.” Quintus’ eyes raked him up and down mercilessly. “You had some power as a victor too, at least compared to the average citizen. But you probably kept your mouth shut on plenty of injustices because you were smart enough to know that speaking up without the power to act would just end up causing far more trouble than good.”

The man had a point, though he was reluctant to admit it. Considering he’d just been talking with Brutus the other day about how he’d kept restraint on starting the rebellion until it was for personal rather than moral reasons, he hardly had the right to object too hard. There was a difference between being unable to act, and being obliged to act and thereby harm others, but truth was, he’d made the choice and killed innocent kids in the arena to preserve his own life. He was many things, had many flaws, but damned if he’d be a hypocrite. Still, given what he knew about Two, how hard it had been to turn Brutus and Enobaria to begin, how Peacekeepers had been loyal to the end, he was
suspicious. “And you want me to believe none of you followed your orders eagerly, totally believing they were in the right?” The fact some Peacekeepers had been executed for atrocities pretty neatly disproved that.

“I’m not saying that.” Quintus gave an irritated, huffing sigh. “We all grew up believing in the rightness and the superiority of the Capitol, and us as their closest allies.” Servants. Slaves. Haymitch thought with a mental snort. “So plenty of Peacekeepers don’t think much about it—the Capitol said it, we did it. Especially the new ones. Being out in the districts, though, seeing it all up close, it’s easier for some of us to…doubt, at least a little. That’s why they moved us along every five years. Couldn’t get too attached that way, you see?”

He saw, all right. The Capitol had been very careful to keep things rigged just so to prevent the disaster of the districts seizing their own power. “So it’s a matter of risking letting the guilty go free or risking punishing the innocent.” Or at least, he thought, the relatively innocent. But nobody’s hands came out of the war all that clean, had they? It all depended how harshly the judgment on Peacekeepers fell. Personally, thinking that enough had died and suffered, perhaps it was better to come down on the side of mercy. It would be easier to have delayed justice and hopefully prosecute one of the bastards later if new evidence came forward rather than face having condemned someone unfairly. But at the same time, the right of those in the districts to demand justice was there all the same. It would be no simple matter, determining the guilty.

“Pretty much,” Quintus admitted. Looking out at the crowd at the wedding, laughing and dancing and competing in tests of strength and drinking and the like, he wondered how many of them had worn that Peacekeeper uniform mere months before. He suspected nobody here would openly volunteer that information if he asked, not without having some shape of the government’s intentions. Two citizens might be brave and almost insanely loyal, but they generally weren’t idiots.

“I’ll talk to Brocade about the thing,” he replied with an irritated grunt, stretching out his legs and leaning back against the table. He wasn’t going to say what he would tell her. He intended there would be no promises made that he might fail to keep. “So where else were you, by the way, so I know where it’s less likely I’ll find records of Ash?”

“Twelve—and he’d never have been assigned there, by the way. Too awkward for a Peacehome orphan if they went back to their home district and were recognized. Then I was in Eight, Four, and Two.” Quintus hesitated, fingers flexing as he clenched them into loose fists in an almost nervous gesture. “You do realize he’s not really Ash anymore?”

“Snow explained that,” he said almost boredly. “He was renamed and everything, apparently that’s standard.” In the case of Ash and Heike it would have been absolutely essential to cover up what had been done. “Of course, I really hope fucking up children’s minds with tracker jacker venom ain’t standard procedure.”

“I can’t say what goes on the Peacehome,” Quintus admitted, though his dark eyes betrayed a flicker of something that might have been a troubled concern. “What I mean is he’s not that person you knew. He left Twelve as a little kid who was your brother. Who he is now…Abernathy. Haymitch. Listen to me. He’s a grown man. He’s a veteran Peacekeeper. That he hasn’t been arrested or executed for failing in his duties means he’s almost inevitably done things you won’t much like. He may have fought on the other side of the rebellion. He may not have much use for the kid he was. A lot of the Laws really don’t. You ready to take on all of that and accept what it means and who he is now?” He nodded over to Johanna. “Her too with her sister, for that matter? Though it’s likely to be tougher in your case with more years gone by.”

That was hard truth, but truth anyway. It was like the bite of those golden squirrels, innocuous at first
and slowly growing into a searing pain that couldn’t be ignored. He’d known it, but he hadn’t wanted to face it. Stubbornly, in his mind, Ash had been grown up from that gangly, smart but shy kid who’d hugged him so hard at the train station when Haymitch came back alive. To accept that Ash might truly be lost was something he’d told himself over and over in that rational part of his consciousness, bracing himself against it, but still, something in his soul murmured hopefully, *He can’t be entirely gone, he’s your brother.* Surely something about a bond that deep ought to survive even Capitol mindfuckery. “I know that,” he acknowledged wearily. “But let’s say, you and me, that when you were sixteen that Brutus supposedly died and you find he’s actually been, oh, why not…a coal miner out in Twelve all this time. You willing to just let it go at that?”

“I’m not that much of a coward,” Quintus snapped, though the way his eyes went to his little brother, currently joyfully making an idiot of himself out dancing, and the sudden softness about his eyes and his mouth spoke volumes.

“Neither am I,” he said in return, and as the other man’s gaze flicked over to him and a smile of acknowledgment crossed his lips, he saw that as at least in this one thing, he and Quintus seemed to understand each other. No matter how old a man got, being an older brother and defending younger siblings was a thing that didn’t simply wear away. “If he wants nothing to do with me and with the person he was, that’s fine.” It wasn’t, not really, it would be a wound he wasn’t sure that he could bear to put in so much effort and hope, and simply find out that Ash Abernathy really had died so many years ago. But he was hardly going to admit that openly. “But at least he’ll have a choice,” and he couldn’t help the tone of defiance in his voice. “That’s more than he was given then.” After a moment’s realization, he added, quieter, “More than any of us really had.” Obedience or death had apparently been Two’s fate, just the same as any other district, though their orders had been far more insidious.

“If I can help you and Johanna on it,” and the offer was unhesitating, “just call Brutus and he’ll pass it on to me.”

“Thanks,” he said, appreciating the offer and the kindness of it. *Brother,* he thought, *he thought to wherever Ash might be right now, half hope and half despair, whatever you did all these years to keep yourself alive, we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.* Hopefully Heike wasn’t lost to Johanna either, but he would glumly admit that Ash had been younger and been gone far longer besides, so the odds weren’t nearly as good.

Lost in heavy thoughts, he was grateful when Brutus came over just then, clapping a hand on Haymitch’s shoulder. “I’d tell you to stop hiding over here and go dance with your wife, damn it, but it looks like she’s busy.” Haymitch’s eyes went to where Johanna was standing with a little crowd around her and conducting what looked like some instruction in the finer points of axe throwing. Well, either that or she was maybe fulfilling some kind of a bet.

He cracked up, unable to help it, as she threw, suddenly a blur of motion, her arm snapping into a perfect throw that split the wood of the target post neatly. Some cheers and whistles greeted that. “She’s got local fans now, outstanding. Your wife included,” he nodded to Enobaria, standing there watching and cheering Johanna on.

“Quin’s wife too,” Brutus said with a low chuckle, nodding towards a short, brown-haired woman standing beside Enobaria. "Quin led the wedding dance, barely, but I'm pretty sure Lyra wears the pants."

He watched, figuring whatever it was, Johanna had it well in hand. Four more throws from Johanna, the last a finger’s width off center but still on target, and his wife jabbed a finger at a slim, blond man and hollered triumphantly, “And that’s five. Next keg’s on you, pal, everyone heard it. Still wanna
talk down about District Seven, huh?"

Blondie gave a chagrined smile as another cheer went up and Johanna thrust a fist in the air in a sign of victory. “Thank you, I’ll be here all week,” she quipped and gave a half-bow, heading for the drinks table.

He made his way to her side, seeing the grin she gave him as she pressed a cup of wine into his hands. “This shit really is terrible,” she murmured. “But this is fun.” Taking a sip of the wine, suppressing a wince at the thin, sour taste of it and thinking wryly that he wouldn’t easily be tempted to have enough to get drunk off it, he agreed with her on both counts.

Caught up in the mood of the crowd, able to forget the frailties and uncertainties of their own future as people and as a district, it was easy enough to allow his own cares to slowly slip to the back of his mind. While he appreciated Quintus’ honesty and all, because he was here to listen to local perspective anyway and get the real story of conditions in the districts, it was no simple thing. “Nice wedding,” he said softly. Maybe theirs had been quieter, both the paperwork in the Capitol and the district traditions, but he didn’t regret that.

Someone teasingly called for the newlyweds to have their dance, and he was on the verge of asking if they hadn’t been doing that already. Though from what he saw, most of the dances here were made for groups, so perhaps like in Twelve, the first dance as a couple was considered something special. The guests cleared a place, and Brutus and Enobaria took the center, Brutus shrugging off his jacket. Enobaria’s dress proved to actually be a skirt and bodice, since she shimmed her way out of the skirt to reveal she was wearing closely fitted dark trousers underneath, getting some appreciative whistles along the way. It was only when the slim rapiers were brought out and handed to the bride and groom by Quintus and a woman he’d wager was another of Enobaria’s sisters, that he understood, remembering Johanna had told him about this as a Two tradition.

“Marks!” the Reska sister called, and after a flourishing salute with the blades to each other, suddenly both Enobaria and Brutus were all business, stances ready and tense, all stillness and poise and grace for a moment. Then Enobaria made the first move, just a flick of her blade against his, and Brutus readily answered it back in kind without hesitation, with the singing note of steel on steel.

“Real swords?” he muttered to Johanna, keeping his eyes as Brutus’ next move was neatly countered by Enobaria.

“They’d probably consider it an insult to use practice blades,” she said, shaking her head and laughing a bit.

It was insane in its way, but slowly he came to see that the rhythm of attack and parry, the back and forth of it, each of them alternately leading and then responding, was a dance in its own way. Maybe a dance of blades was the only fitting thing for these people and their pride in their martial prowess. Easily recalling Brutus talking to him on this same rocky ledge, it had seemed so damn simple for him—fighting spirit and skill simply was a virtue, not a thing to be wrestled with and agonized over as Haymitch had.

Faster and faster they went; moves more rapid and more intricate, sometimes with pauses at the end of an attack pass to wait for a response. He’d seen tributes from Two fight in the arena, yes, but they were children grimly fighting to the death. Two seasoned, experienced adults fighting not for survival but for the joy of it was something else different entirely. From the grins and looks they were giving, obviously blind to anything but the two of them, he suspected both Brutus and Enobaria were showing off for each other, testing each other too to the limit, and enjoying the hell out of it. It seemed like each time they managed another pass and found they both could rise to the challenge that it was a pleasure to know it. But then, hadn’t he found something like that with Johanna with
their words, that keen anticipation and then the satisfaction in seeing that her mind and her tongue,
and her will too for that matter, could keep up with his? She could match him, step for step, and each
time he tested that anew and found it still was sound, it made him love her all the more.

So quickly the blades flew now that the moves blurred, flowing rapidly from one into another
without those pauses now for the flirtatious looks and approving smiles. This was a final earnest
frenzy, and he couldn’t help but give a choked laugh as Johanna leaned in to whisper jokingly, “Tell
me you’re not thinking it’s basically like public sex with swords? I mean, they look about ready to
drag each other to bed right now anyway.”

“Should we try it?” he murmured back with a smirk. They had teased each other about trying the
whole fight-slash-sex thing in honor of Two, though maybe not with actual weapons. He’d slept
with a knife for enough years he was in no mood to muddle that up with sleeping with his wife.

“First blood!” Quintus yelled suddenly, as both Brutus and Enobaria abruptly broke off the attack
and stood there, panting and recovering, staring at each other intently. He would admit he could see
more than a little similarity in that ritual to a fairly intense bout of making love. The thought was all at
once oddly arousing, making his blood beat faster. Yet it was also somewhat uncomfortable—so
much of his life had been stripped from him for voracious public consumption, so he and Johanna
treasured the right of privacy fiercely now, particularly when it came to sex. If he sparred with her
like this, it would be for their eyes alone.

Haymitch scanned quickly to see who’d scored the hit. That was a scratch on Brutus’ chin, and a
small cut on Enobaria’s arm too below her sleeve. The precision of their bladework was keen enough
that even with as hard as they’d gone at it, the touches scored were the merest brush, precisely
placed. “A draw,” Brutus announced with obvious pleasure, handing off his sword. Recalling that
this little ritual was supposed to determine who had the upper hand in the marriage, Haymitch was
inclined to agree that it was probably a better thing they’d shown equal prowess, neither of them
fearing being inferior.

“So we stand even,” Enobaria agreed, getting rid of her own blade, eyes sparkling and her grin
broad. From the mood of the crowd, that apparently pleased most everyone.

“So who’s on top tonight?” Johanna joked softly to him. “Do they trade off?”

“Probably.” As the couple headed down the path for their house, sent on their way with bawdy jokes
about a second bout of swordplay, he shook his head. “Want to wrestle for it ourselves?” He would
tell her about what Quintus had said, what it implied for them both for their siblings. They’d check in
with Brocade with whatever new thoughts on the Two situation they had to offer. They would start
touring the villages tomorrow and go to the Peacehome sometime next week with Sangus’ authority
to check the files.

Her hand slipped into his. “Later,” she said. Her eyes were steady and calm as she looked at him.
“We’ve got years for that, if need be. People were chattering at me some today about Peacekeepers,
looks like Quintus was talking your ear off too. Things to discuss first, right? Both about Ash and
Heike, and the whole situation here.”

“Work first, play later,” he agreed, resisting the urge to kiss her, fierce and fine as she was. Keen a
joy as it was to make love with her it was an even better thing to realize he’d married a woman who
could determinedly turn to what was necessary first before allowing the abandon of that private
world with just the two of them, and not complain about it. “You want to get some more thoughts so
long as we’ve got plenty of people here?” Chuckling, he nodded to a group of people clustered
around a table, stabbing the table with the knife, patterns of it woven in between their spread fingers.
“Ah, five-finger fillet.” He could remember the days of the group of young victor-whores, how he’d
been an ace at them turning it into a drinking game. He’d been good with a knife even in those days, and back then his hands were steady enough to play the game. But they were steady again now. “Let me go see what tongues I can loosen up, huh?” Playing alongside the locals, proving some kind of prowess first, would probably go further here in Two than trying to simply pry the answers out of them.

“Don’t come crying to me if you lose a finger,” she said with a snort of amusement. “And try to not fuck up your wedding ring too badly by stabbing it either. It’s probably a bad omen.”

“Try to not chop any limbs showing off with those axes,” he teased her in return. “Well, not human ones anyway.” She snickered and shoved him towards the table, turning back towards the targets where some of the others were trying throwing axes and the like. He might not live this kind of life himself, not fully, but there were aspects of it he could understand already. Mostly, he suspected that if they were to find Ash or Heike or both, this familiarity of Two would be essential to understanding who their siblings had likely become, and it would be better to be prepared.

Chapter End Notes

AFAF updates might be a bit slower than usual for a little while, as I'm moving and starting a new job which will likely take up a lot of my time for the next few months. There'll still hopefully be regular updates, but probably not quite as frequent as the weekly additions I've been keeping up with to this point. Thanks for all the reviews and encouragement so far, and don't worry, I'm not abandoning the fic!
Chaydell Falls roared its way over boulders and ledges and small cliffs of river-slicked granite, tumbling in fits and starts down to the valley below. Standing there, glancing at it, Johanna wondered with a sort of wry glum curiosity if any district child ever taken to the Peacehome, perched on the cliff and towering high above the valley, had felt the oppressive weight of that inescapable future and chosen instead to dash themselves upon the granite rocks of the falls rather than endure the imposing granite walls of the Peacehome.

Really depressing thoughts—almost as bad as Haymitch at his most grim and bleak back in the day. Usually when confronted with something so unbearably hopeless she didn’t get blue, she got angry, and so she winced and tried to put it from her mind. Still, the bleakness of it, of wondering about the generations of kids that had shed an old life here and instead mentally accepted the Peacekeeper white as the method of their survival, clung to her with chill fingers like the sharp spring winds roaring through the peaks. Maybe it was in knowing that Ash had been saved by having Peacekeeper blood, and that Haymitch had been a Peacekeeper’s son himself, so things could have been very different. He’d been an orphan at sixteen anyway, but a victor which set him apart from the usual course of things, gave him some odd status of legal independence even as a minor. If his Games hadn’t happened and his mom had died while he wasn’t yet of age, would the Head in Twelve have claimed both his sons and sent them here? Would he rather have done that than have them endure the local community home, just two more lost kids in a dirt-poor district that could barely feed those kids that were loved and protected by family, let alone those left entirely alone? He could have been one of these kids here. Ash had been.

She glanced over at him, his face unreadable right now as they walked the path up to the Peacehome. Trying to envision him with his messy dark curls cropped short and wearing that white uniform with its gold buttons, she suppressed a shiver as it worked its way down her spine. She had a funny urge to grab his arm and tell him, Look at me, watch those fine grey eyes of his and see that the Haymitch she knew was there. But she could have ended up here herself. He’d told her Cray, the old Twelve Head, had said even pure district-blooded kids ended up here sometimes if the community homes were desperately overcrowded. There had been bad winters in Seven when she was young, some rough summers too out at the logging camps. She thought about kids she’d known of whose parents had died, who she’d never really seen again at winter school. She’d assumed they’d died too. Maybe she’d been wrong. There was a thin separation between fates sometimes, the matter of a single thing breaking one way or another and setting a path. She could have been here too, same as Heike.

Would she have rather died than see herself become something so foreign and in some ways so unthinkable? Her fingers clenched, making a fist or perhaps a reflex of wanting to clutch an axe that wasn’t there, to fight an enemy that wasn’t a physical thing anyway. She thought not. In the arena she’d finally turned killer to stay alive, then endured being sold again and again when some nights she’d thought with crushing fury and sorrow that it would be so much easier to be dead than endure. She’d taken stupid risks sometimes but she’d still tenaciously clung to her existence, the young woman that was simply unloved and feared. Sheer dogged pragmatism, rather than pride or idealism, had characterized her life. She probably would have taken the white, and done the best she could with it. Panem had been no kind place for fools and uncompromising idealists, because the latter pretty much implied the former. We do what we have to do, Haymitch told her wearily over drinks those years ago, eyes bloodshot and tired and looking about a thousand years old. We take our licks for it later.
Still, as he reached for the doorbell, she couldn’t help but be glad that apparently she and Haymitch were the two victors troublesome enough to have had this inflicted on their families. The rest had all fallen in line and she would never blame them for it, for protecting their own at whatever cost to themselves. Somehow she had a suspicion that if Katniss hadn’t been seen as so prominent a threat to Snow as to warrant elimination rather than being put on a tight leash, little Primrose Everdeen might have had a “fatal accident” and found herself at this place. “Hi,” she said brightly as a middle-aged woman with her autumn copper hair neatly pinned up answered the door. “So, we’re conducting a survey—what’s your satisfaction with the former Panem government and what improvements would you like to see within your district? All answers are confidential.”

“Jo,” Haymitch muttered, but she could hear the laugh in his voice and felt relieved at it, because it had jolted him out of whatever thoughts had them in their grip. He still moped too much sometimes. She couldn’t exactly blame him today, with the weight of the answers they might find, but it unsettled her when he was like that. He was too much like he used to be, back when he numbed everything with liquor. She sometimes dreaded finding the day it was all too much and what ties she had to him wouldn’t be enough to bring him back. “We’re here to check out the place, see how things are.”

“Why is that?” There was polite interest and maybe just a faint note of suspicion in her voice.

“Your district’s barely started recovering from a months-long civil war where, given the number of dead, I imagine this place is damn well full to overflowing. Besides, orphans usually feel the crunch early when things aren’t going well. Particularly when their future career path just got shut down,” Haymitch said bluntly.

“We are pretty full, unfortunately,” Matron Ironjaw said, though she didn’t show any of the usual human signs of weariness or sigh in exasperation or anything like that. She started it matter-of-factly. “It’s not been easy, this past winter.”

“I can imagine. So we’ll see what we can do about that. No reason for kids to suffer, yeah? And right, there’s this.” He handed over the authorization letter from Mayor Sangus explaining that she and Haymitch were to have full cooperation and access to Peacekeeper records.

She read the letter and folded it neatly, handing it back. “That appears in order. May I ask for what purpose?”

“What’s your name anyway?” Johanna interjected. She smirked. “Feels a little less like an interrogation on your part and an invasion on ours if we all have introductions, right? So hey, I’m Johanna Abernathy, this is my husband Haymitch—you may have seen us on television a few times…”

“Aurinia Xiphios,” she said finally, nodding. Shit, it was awkward working with someone who wouldn’t react by laughing or getting pissed off. That Two stoic reserve was a brick wall. “My husband Marcus and I run the place. He’s down to meet the train on a supply run. So again, you’ve got access here, but can I ask why?”

“Two district orphans that were living here were my sister,” she said. “His brother too,” nodding to Haymitch. “Snow faked their deaths and brought them here. We need names to keep following the trail there.”

Now there was finally a flicker of something real in her face. “I don’t know,” she said fiercely. “Any kid that gets sent here, they process at HQ near Misty Peak first. Paperwork ascertaining their status all in order, initial assessment testing done, immunizations they probably didn’t get out in the districts, all of it.” She gave a helpless shrug. “We just don’t have time for all of that here even
normally, and since last year, I don’t even have records on almost any of the new arrivals. We usually have several hundred kids here at any given time of all ages, from newborns to eighteens ready to go to training camp. Right now, the staff’s trying to handle close to eight hundred. Some of those kids, I still don’t even know their names because they’re injured or traumatized enough to not speak.”

The crack in the dam of her formidable reserve was more than enough. She was obviously a woman at wit’s end, trying to keep things together. Peacekeeper or not, in the chaos after the war she was trying to keep vulnerable kids alive and warm and fed, and for that Johanna was inclined to cut her some slack on that point at least. “You usually know the kids that come through here?”

“I try.” A wry smile answered her. “It helps to know who’s here and who’s got issues and who’s prone to making trouble.” She glanced at Haymitch. “Don’t think I’ve been here long enough to see your brother come through. Your sister, though…”

“Henrika Mason,” Johanna prompted her, excitement fluttering suddenly in her chest. “But we called her ‘Heike’.”

“I don’t bother with their district names. That’s in the past and most of them are happy enough to leave it behind. It can’t help them to cling to it.” For that some of the goodwill definitely receded. Aurinia finally let out that very human sigh, pushed the door open wider and said, “You might as well come in and see the place, right? For your report and all. Have some coffee and then I’ll let you go through the records.”

It was a depressing tour, to say the least. They’d managed to keep the heat on, so that helped at least. But the place was overcrowded, stuffed to the brim with kids, the helpless human flotsam left behind by the prolonged and fierce fighting for control of District Two that had killed so many. Seeing the stacks of neatly folded blankets in the large dining hall, the high, large windows flooding it with light, she was pretty sure that kids were sleeping on the floor there in the evening, probably for lack of enough beds.

The kids peered at them as she and Haymitch passed by, children of all ages with wide eyes that were usually wary or hopeful, sometimes a bit of both at once. Eyes of that deep blue she’d seen sometimes from Six, sea-green from Four like Finnick’s. A lump formed in her throat as she saw a little boy with auburn hair and the Seven brown-hazel eyes that were so much like her own, like Heike’s. She had a glimpse of a girl with grey eyes against olive skin, so much like Haymitch, though her bright red hair wasn’t like Twelve.

But their clothes, though shabby and sometimes with knobby wrists and ankles poking out where they’d been outgrown, looked clean and mended and cared for, and though some of them currently looked a little hungry, they didn’t have the pulled-thin, starved look she’d associated with orphans back home. She didn’t doubt Two ran the place with strict discipline, and probably formerly with an intolerance for any criticism of the Capitol, and the forced life as a Peacekeeper was no picnic, but at least they were cared for. Granted, to have formerly had the supplies to care well for even orphaned kids came purely from the favoritism the Capitol had showed to Two. But how even running thin on supplies and overrun with kids, how the Xiphioses had still apparently done the best they can with it spoke to at least some kind of conscience. Maybe it was strict duty, maybe it was actual concern for the kids, but they hadn’t taken the easy way out and beaten and starved a bunch of vulnerable kids nobody would have cared much about.

Watching those faces and how their eyes lingered on her and Haymitch, hungry for far more than food, hungry for the security of a future currently so hopelessly unknown, she hurried after Aurelia’s brisk footsteps, cheeks burning hot.
Sitting down in the administrative office, shabby and with stacks of paper on every horizontal surface, she accepted a battered tin mug of coffee. “So, your sister,” Aurinia said, perched on the arm of her chair. “Marc and I, we’ve been here close to twenty years. Took over from the Dulcets.” She thought she heard a faint strangled noise coming from Haymitch at that but didn’t want to risk turning to him to ask what the problem was. “She came here when?”

“67, summer. During the Games. Fourteen, dark auburn hair, eyes like mine.” She sipped the coffee, feeling the scald and burn of it on her tongue, almost grateful for that.

“Purebred Seven,” Aurinia mused. “We got some of those, sure.” Another of those faintly wry smiles, and Johanna tried to not want to ask if she had any right now, to not give in to the immediate impulse they be returned home where they belonged. “We got all types, of course. Orphaned, you’re screwed, doesn’t much matter who your parents were or what district. Most of them were just glad to go somewhere they were actually wanted.” That was a depressing thought to her mind, but for a scared kid facing the community home, a place where they were warm and fed and told they were still worth something and had a future would be the security that was so desperately needed, wouldn’t it? Maybe they hadn’t needed to use tracker jacker venom on the rest to make them compliant.

“She wouldn’t have come in under Heike Mason, of course,” Haymitch said. “That would have set off too many alarms. I imagine Snow got all the potential stumbling blocks figured out on Ash—my brother, that is.”

“Snow said they used tracker jacker venom on them. To make ‘em forget their old lives.” To mold them into happy little Two citizens also, no doubt. “Too dangerous for them to talk about that to people, right?”

A soft murmur answered her, only half-heard. “Kallanthe.”

“Pardon?” Haymitch drawled, finishing his coffee and balancing the empty cup on the arm of his own chair.

“Kallanthe,” Aurinia repeated, though she was looking at Johanna as she said it. “I think that might be her. The age fits—she was an older girl—the hair color too. I think she had the accent, until she lost most of it after a few years. I can’t say I really remember her eye color, but with so many kids coming through year after year…” She broke off, realizing she was starting to ramble a bit. “Anyway. Thing is, she came here from HQ with a pretty hefty case of amnesia. Barely remembered anything about her old life. They told me she was a klutz who took a tumble off the training bars and hit her head.” She gave a faint sound of irritation. “Assessment injuries happened sometimes, but that was one of the worst. And she was clumsy, I’ll admit that, so it made sense. Broke more than her share of dishes on kitchen duty, but she was a good kid aside from that. She settled in well enough. Maybe even better than most for not having to let go of her old reality.”

*Kallanthe.* She tried the name in her mind, tried to shape it to fit Heike’s face and her voice and even yes, her awkward clumsiness. This woman had known her, and the surge of jealousy and even rage that she’d had some of Heike’s lost years denied to Johanna and couldn’t say more than that she’d been a fairly good kid prone to breaking dishes was almost overwhelming for a minute. She felt a light touch from Haymitch on her wrist, as if trying to bring her back to reality, and it helped. “Might as well confirm it with the records,” she said hoarsely, not sure she could stand to sit there much longer.

Led down to the room with rows of battered metal filing cabinets, Aurinia explained, “By year and then by month of intake, and the names are in alphabetical order. So that narrows it down for you, at least, and you can pull Kallanthe directly and make sure it’s her.” She hesitated a moment and then
Haymitch led the way down the aisle, scanning the cabinets in the harsh overhead lights. She wondered if that, and the cinderblock walls, reminded him of the Detention Center as it did for her. It didn’t help, looking at all those cabinets, knowing each file was a child who had been molded and turned into a tool of the Capitol. She hadn’t asked upstairs because she didn’t want to end up causing a fight and getting their asses thrown out, but she had the feeling the problem children, the ones who didn’t take to their new life and its security with gratitude, would have been relentlessly disciplined until they fell in line. Perhaps not cruelly, perhaps so, but they wouldn’t have stood for it, as loyal as Two had been. Seeing the training in Thirteen, how demanding it was even on young kids, gave her some sense for what they must have endured here in the Peacehome. So the chill in her bones wasn’t entirely from the temperature.

She saw Haymitch bypassed the records for the kids taken in during the year of the Second Quell. “Ash?” she asked him, jerking a thumb towards it as he paused and turned on his heel.

She saw the flicker of hope and eagerness and trepidation in how he eyed the cabinet, but he shook his head. “We’ve got a likely name already on Heike, probably would be easier to find her file, and then look for his?”

He’d willingly give her that gift; patiently put aside his own anxieties and fears on this thing that mattered so much long enough to make sure she got an answer first. In that moment she loved him almost too damn much. Moving towards him, her fingers grasped the lapels of his coat. She glanced up at his face and told him, quietly but firmly, “Ash first. You’ve waited a lot longer.” At least she’d had almost a year with her family after the Games before they were taken from her, and she’d lived without them for almost nine years now. But he’d been alone almost as long as she’d been alive. It had been nearly twenty-six years for him, and he’d had his family ripped away from him as he was still fresh from the arena, trying to find a way to feel human again. He hadn’t even had two weeks with them. Her own ordeal was tough, but she could wait another hour, if need be.

He didn’t kiss her, not in this place. But the light suddenly in his eyes, the way he looked at her with such affection and gratitude, and his gruffly said, “Thanks, darlin’,” warmed her just the same. His hand brushed her face, gently and just for a moment, and then he dropped it, turning towards the files.

Finding the files for August of 50, it appeared that had been a bad month. Several dozen kids had come in then, but at least it was a limited number. The fact that when she opened the first file jacket, for Scamander Law, a picture in the upper right of the greeted her helped somewhat, though the burly blond boy in it was definitely seventeen or eighteen, old enough to be leaving the Peacehome. Scanning the form, she saw that was exactly what it was: the closing of Scamander’s file. He had graduated with mixed marks, Average all the way to Superior, and been assigned to Havenford training camp in the summer of 62. Flipping to the next sheet, the intake form, she saw another picture of the same boy at age six, small and skinny. Apparently Scamander Law had once been Obsidian Danforth of District One. There were grades for his initial assessments at Peacekeeper Headquarters, remarks on health, and the like. “Termination of Custodial Right” had been signed over by Peacekeeper Titus Abelaird, maybe Obsidian’s birth father, maybe just the Peacekeeper who’d taken him from the community home in One.

Putting down the file, she closed the jacket on it and tried to put the picture of that six-year-old kid from her mind, that open and vulnerable young face. She tried to not wonder what sort of man Scamander Law had become in over the thirteen years before the rebellion and whether he was still alive now.
The next file, for a Cordelia Yarborough, was obviously a girl and not a district orphan anyway, to judge from her having a surname that wasn’t “Law”, so she didn’t even bother with it and what about it might trouble her mind, setting it on top of Scamander’s. Haymitch, kneeling there beside her, was thumbing through another file hastily and muttering to himself, obviously not finding what he was seeking.

She reached for the next file—Theodosius Law. Flipping it open, she looked at the picture and knew, with a bone-deep certainty. She’d seen pictures of Haymitch as a new mentor at seventeen and eighteen, so the comparison was easy. The eyes were like his—a handsome silver grey, surrounded by thick, dark lashes. She could see the similarity too in the arch of brows, the cheekbones. The hair was definitely brown rather than black and the curl of it was tamer than Haymitch’s. Not close enough to be twins by any means, but enough for her easily to see the resemblance to the man she woke up with every morning, whose face was now familiar to her as her own. “Got him,” she said, her voice sounding like barely more than a whisper to her ears.

His hand was on the file instantly and from the way he clutched it, he looked on the verge of ripping it away from her. But then she could see he relaxed after a moment, though she let go of the file and let him place it down between them on the floor. Her hand sought his, fingers interlacing, and he held on tightly. “That’s Ash,” he confirmed, his voice all mingled wonder and pain and hope.

“Sent to Icewind Peak Camp,” she said, reading further down on the exit form. “Outstanding in Law and Custom, huh?”

“He always was a smart little bastard,” Haymitch said, sounding on the verge of both laughter and tears. “Always wanted to know a thing just to know it, and well, me, I wanted to know it to see what I could do with it.”

Carefully she reached out and flipped to the intake page. “Fog signed for him,” Haymitch noted, and Johanna’s eyes went to the neat signature of Phineas Fog. “No surprise, considering he was the one running the cover-up.”

“Alister Campbell”, she read Ash’s supposed former name. “Born in District Twelve, October 18th of 38.”

“Well, at least the prick gave them his actual birthdate,” Haymitch muttered. “Oh, hey, ain’t that a surprise.” His finger tapped the section for remarks on Health and Disposition. “Traumatic amnesia resulting from a head injury in an accident that killed his family, huh? Traumatic amnesia resulting from a fucking syringe, more like.”

“They could hardly admit that without exposing the whole cover-up for a kid who was supposedly dead,” she pointed out.

“I know that, just don’t expect me to like it,” he snapped.

“Not like I enjoy it either, Haymitch, it happened to her too.” But she could understand it somewhat. Hearing what Aurinia Xiphios had said, having it made all too concrete that Heike had been caught up in a web of lies, made it all inescapable and real. For Haymitch, seeing it on paper here was obviously having the same effect.

They read through the file, page by page, and she could feel Haymitch greedily soaking in every bit of information about his brother, even if it was just the sparse, dry details given in that file. Assessment marks, records of a broken arm when he was fifteen, remarks on his tenacity even if he wasn’t the biggest or strongest cadet in his class.
When he finally reached out and closed the file, she thought that now he knew who Ash had been up to age eighteen, but even that was almost twenty years ago. Still, it was a step forward, wasn’t it? *Theodosius Law, Icewind Peak Camp, we can trace him from there.* She saw how his hand lingered on the file, reluctant to let go of this small piece of his brother, that picture that was more recent than anything he had back in Twelve. “Bring the file,” she said. “I think they can spare it.”

He gave her a faint smile and got to his feet. “Heike now,” he said firmly, not allowing himself to give in to whimsy or sentimentality, even if she would have given him as much time as he needed to take it all in. “Let’s go have a look.”

Finding Heike’s file was easier. Aurinia had remembered correctly, since pulling the folder for Kallanthe Law, she flipped it open and saw the picture of Heike at eighteen, auburn hair darker and less frizzy, and some of her freckles had faded, maybe from lacking those long summers of days out in the woods. Studying her face, the calm, steady gaze in those woodland brown eyes, she realized anew with a feeling like a punch to the gut that Heike had gone and grown up without her, and she had no idea who this person, Kallanthe Law, even was.

“She went to Burnt Tree Camp,” Haymitch noted, his voice oddly soft, but he must know what she was feeling right now.

She read through the rest slowly. They’d called her Hannalore Gunderssen when they sent her here. Her family died in a logging accident, so the claim went. Minerva Law, whom Johanna remembered had been the Head at that time, had signed “Hannalore” over as a ward of District Seven. She wondered if Snow had needed to actually threaten her, or if the bastard had just commanded and Law had obeyed.

*Kallanthe is pleasant to all around her, but lacks assertiveness.* That had been Heike, all right—gentle and never wanting to cause trouble for anyone. That meant she was the exact wrong sort to be a Peacekeeper, really.

She sat there staring at the file. “They’re survivors,” she said finally. “They made it through this place and not remembering anything. That’s no easy task.” To suddenly wake up one morning and remember virtually nothing was a horror she could barely even imagine. To lose everything, all of who she was and had been, to have to rely on sparse bare facts gleaned from files given nobody around to tell her about memories of herself, was an unthinkable challenge.

“If nothing else,” he said, as his hand squeezed hers, “living in Two will have made them damn tough.” The unspoken hope hung there between them, frail and tentative. They might have been strong enough to make it through the rebellion and the war alive. *They’re our blood,* she thought. *We made it through the worst they could throw at us.*

Gathering up the two files, she suggested, “Why don’t we get the hell out of here?”

He got up and dusted off his trousers briskly. “I have one more to look for, if you’re OK staying.”

“Who’s that?” she asked in confusion.

“I don’t know exactly when he came here, but I’ve got the name for the file. Darius Law,” he told her. She remembered Darius. Or rather, she remembered Haymitch telling her about him, back in that cell. He’d only told her that they’d killed Darius in front of him, slowly. He’d never been willing to say more about what had happened. Perhaps then it was as much the audience listening in as anything that caused his reticence, but by the time they were both rescued and could talk about it, he had already locked it away and wouldn’t speak of it. She knew that he carried the weight of Darius all the same. Obviously now he wanted to know who the boy had been. “If you want to go, I’ll catch
“No,” she said, holding up a hand and cutting him off. “Let’s find it.”

This was the toughest search, given there were about twenty years of files to go through, and even reading the name tabs took a while. “Got it,” Haymitch called finally, holding up yet another folder, slightly yellowed by age. Ash’s had been yellower still. She wondered what secrets the oldest files might hold, from the earliest years after the First Uprising. Hostage children of rebels? War orphans stolen away to serve the Capitol?

“Rodderick Vicheron,” he said as Johanna came over, seeing the picture of a tiny boy who couldn’t have been much more than three or four years old, with straight flame red hair and wide brown eyes. He looked at the camera with a confused expression, maybe wondering what had happened in his life to tear it all apart. Probably just a week or two prior he’d had a mother or a father. “He was from Five. Thought that might be the case, from his looks, but…I wanted to know for sure who he was.” What his true name was, he didn’t say, but she heard it all the same.

He flipped back to the first page, the exit form, and now she finally saw the picture of Darius Law, an eighteen-year-old boy with a long nose and mischief in those brown eyes, a boy who couldn’t keep the hint of a smile off his face, even for an official picture like this. “He looks like he was trouble,” she said.

“He was. Flirting with all the girls—if any local girl was sleeping with him I doubt money was involved. Telling me that white liquor was better used as paint remover and I was better used as something besides a doorstop at the Hob,” he said with a tight, rough laugh. “But he tried to stand up to Thread. He was a good kid.” A moment’s pause and he corrected himself, “A good man. He deserved better than he got.”

She slipped an arm around him and held on to him until he closed the file, bringing it with them too. “I’ll see it done right for him. We’re going to Five next anyway,” he said, half to himself. She wouldn’t argue with that. Whatever lifted the weight of any of his dead from his shoulders was something she would help with where she could.

Leaving all those files and the eyes of all those kids behind them, it felt like a shadow over things. “We should keep an eye on the community homes in all the districts.” It would be far too easy for kids left without parents to slip through the cracks in the turbulence after the war.

“We saw that pretty clearly here. I didn’t even think there were that many.” He gave a low, quiet sigh, kicking at a rock on the path. “I imagine it’ll be rough other places too where the fighting was pretty intense after the rebellion. Four. Three. Seven.” She realized he was probably right. Luoma hadn’t mentioned anything about the community home last winter when she’d been in Seven for helping out with the election for president, but she’d really only asked about things like buildings and food supply and the like. She hadn’t even thought to ask about orphaned kids or the like.

“Probably Eight too because they had the screws put to them early, maybe Eleven too,” she said. The thought Panem was raising a heavily orphaned generation now wasn’t easy to accept.

“Freedom comes with a price,” he said softly. “Looks like it falls down heavy on the innocent too. Saw that in Twelve. And if there’s orphans that have it worst off, there’s also gotta be plenty of kids who have it bad too because they lost their ma or their daddy.” He’d know that firsthand, having grown up without a father and taking on the burden of it far too young.

“Well, we’ll put it to Brocade’s attention. They won’t be overlooked, at least.”
Back at Victor’s Mountain, it was almost ridiculously easy from there. Figuring it would be easier to
draw Quintus Allamand’s offer of assistance in and have him speak to former colleagues to get them
to pull the files, Haymitch dialed him up, gave him the names and the training camps.

Two hours later, the phone rang at Brutus and Enobaria’s house, where they were gathered up for
dinner. The newlyweds, being from Two, weren’t hanging all over each other, but Johanna saw
some of the looks they exchanged. Brutus grabbed the phone. “Shut up, Quin,” he growled, looking
flustered.

She nudged Haymitch and said, “Ah, the honeymoon jokes! Look at the fun we missed.”

“I’m sure Finnick provided plenty,” he muttered back with a quick smile.

He had, at that, considering she’d given him plenty herself right after he married Annie and the way
he was always looking at her and holding her hand. Mostly friendly teasing, but part of it had been to
cover her own sense of loss at finally accepting she’d never have him, and the faint tension of things
left unresolved with Haymitch.

“Yeah, they’re here,” Brutus said, holding the phone out. Given she was closer to the phone than
Haymitch, she popped to her feet and grabbed it.

“Hey,” she said cheerfully, “and I was just about to suggest a nice naked dinner here. You and Lyra
wanna come over?” She was pretty sure she heard Enobaria chuckling in amusement behind her.

A grunt of amusement answered her, a sound the Allamand brothers apparently had in common.
“Hello, Johanna,” he said. “Lyra says hello too.”

She’d liked Lyra, actually. A small woman but a fierce one who didn’t put up with shit, and one she
had the feeling slightly held the upper hand over Quintus. “Likewise,” she returned. “So any luck?”

“I got ‘em to pull the records. Looks like Kallanthe—Heike, sorry,” he corrected himself hastily, and
she liked him better for it, “went to Ten for her first tour, and Ash went to Nine.”

They weren’t due for their visit to Ten for a good while yet, she thought with a resigned sigh. There
were a good number of other stops on the itinerary first. So it looked like it would be more waiting
for answers when it came to Heike. But they’d be in Nine soon, and they’d have to check the records
in Five and other places anyway just in case that had been Ash’s last assignment. “Thanks for
making the calls.”

“Good luck to you both. Enjoy your dinner. Naked or otherwise. Give Brute some hell for me, will
you?” She snickered and hung up the phone, resolving to tease Brutus and Enobaria unmercifully
throughout dinner anyway, Quintus’ request or not.

Back at their house later, Haymitch kicked off his shoes the second they were inside the door, a habit
of his that by now she just smirked at. Sprawling out on the couch, he folded his hands behind
his head and said thoughtfully, “Might be districts worse off physically, but I think Two’s gonna
have a bad time of it.”

“It’s harder to come back from being broken down than being injured,” she pointed out, slipping off
her own shoes and sitting beside him. His arm went around her, drawing her down against his side.
“And they were in so deep with the Capitol they don’t know what way’s up right now.”

“Or if we’ll let them out of the hole they dug,” he pointed out with grim humor. “Those kids,
though…shit.” He sighed. “I’d say they ought to get sent back to their home districts but if things are
a mess there, they might be better off where they are for now. At least they’re not gonna be forced
into Peacekeeper training and they’re cared for.”

“Might be wise. But once things have settled they ought to be able to choose whether they want to go back or not.”

Seeing his concern about the kids, how he’d immediately made the leap of logic that there might be others at risk in other districts, she thought with a sort of fond exasperation, There he goes again, *seeing another problem he thinks he's somehow caused and trying to set the whole world right.* Though close on its heels was the stray thought, *He’d be a good dad.*

Guiltily she was afraid for a moment something of that thought showed on her face and he’d see it, but quickly realized that was irrational. So long as he stayed off the liquor, it was probably true. He might not be the most openly gentle or warm kind of man to most people he didn't know well, but the side he showed her, to Katniss and Peeta, to Finnick, said plenty about his ability to love. He’d cared for his tributes, more than a lot of the mentors. She’d seen him down in the tribute morgue, obviously trying to be sober for this one thing, trying to prepare their bodies to go back home to the families who’d loathe him for failing. She’d seen that others usually went over to help him through it, seeing his shaking hands and the grief and guilt he couldn’t easily hide down there like he tried to do up in Mentor Central.

He’d cared for the dead tributes. He would have done anything for Katniss and Peeta. He’d lied for them, bled for them, would have died for them, and she accepted easily now that they were his family, and hers, as much as if they had blood ties. She had to think he’d love his own kid no less fiercely than that. Somehow it felt wrong to bring it up now, though, given the memory of those faces this afternoon, children without loved ones left to protect them.

Lying there, comfortable and at least at some kind of peace given the secure knowledge they would be there for each other, it was a while before she spoke up again. “At least we made progress on it.” Whether she meant making inroads in District Two and its problems and fears, or hunting for Ash and Heike, she wasn’t sure—probably a bit of both.

His breath stirred lightly in her hair, and his hand caressed her back softly, tracing the line of her spine from shoulder blades to hips. “It’s a start. Brocade’s gonna have to take the reins from here.”

Deciding what to do about the Peacekeepers and their culpability under the law, figuring out what to do with a district of warriors that the other districts probably generally mistrusted and wanted to see stripped of their former way of life—she was glad it wasn’t going to be their headache to resolve it in the end. “And we’ll keep looking. We’ll get to Ten soon enough for Heike.” No guarantee her sister would still be there, of course, and chances are unless she’d turned rebel immediately and gained the trust of the locals by it that she wasn’t. But it would be the next step, at least.

“Still glad you weren’t elected,” she said, grasping his other hand in hers, stroking her thumb over it, feeling the scars and calluses there, the warm metal of his wedding ring. She had the feeling that if he had, she’d never see him again because he’d lose himself so utterly in the job that he’d have no time for himself, let alone for her. For well or ill, seemed like Haymitch almost never did anything halfway.

“Me too,” he answered softly. “Hopefully things will be easier in Five.”
After Head Cornelius Van Horn telephoned all the duty posts in Ten with transfer orders, including the pig collective Kallanthe was assigned to, that was about all there was to say about it. She was heading to District Twelve tomorrow. Things had been pretty quiet in Ten for the last few months—back right after the Victory Tour there had been an uproar with quite a few Peacekeepers getting pulled to go to Eight to fight the uprising there, and a handful of replacements sent to Twelve. It had settled back down after that and Ten made it pretty clear they weren’t interested in throwing their own little rebellion party.

But it was March now and with Eight safely pacified, apparently Twelve was deemed enough of an existing threat to send reinforcements to keep a powderkeg from going off. Or at least, that was the whispered rumor in the duty post as they all compared notes. Not that they all deluded themselves they knew exactly what the hell was going on. They were all junior Peacekeepers, a bunch of first tour greenies for the most part, so shutting up and keeping their noses out of trouble was pretty much the rule of thumb.

Kallanthe in particular was hoping it was just a bit of a show of force in Twelve and things would settle down on their own. The reports from Eight were grim enough, and well, she hadn’t looked forward to combat.

She’d made it through training by sheer cussed determination because as an orphan, it was pretty much do or die. Maybe it was because she was an older kid when she got sent to Two, and being a klutz didn’t help, but she’d had to work at the training and the mindset furiously. When the time came for kicking ass and taking names, she found herself a bit reluctant.

She’d had to pass the training, had to do the best she could as a Peacekeeper. Her family was dead, her assessment accident meant she didn’t even remember them too well, and she didn’t have a life waiting for her back in Seven, even assuming they’d have been willing to spend the effort and money to send a washout Peacekeeper cadet back there. At fourteen she’d been forced to suck it up and accept that this was her life now and the world was tough for an orphan girl. Nobody was going to do her any favors or go easy on her. She was on her own.

It turned out OK for the most part. There were different roles among the Peacekeepers and Head Van Horn had been good at seeing that and choosing those who best filled each part. There were those that could play the tough for the problem citizens, those who were just assholes with their authority, those that were good with the legal aspects, those that were good with administration, and those that could just efficiently convince a drunk idiot or a bunch of rowdy boys to get their sorry asses home before they caused enough trouble to warrant actual intervention. Kally was usually lumped in with the lattermost group. “Peacemakers”, her good friend Naevia Girardoux liked to joke.

Naevia was coming to Twelve too, and that was a relief. They’d somehow come together in the Peacehome, the gawky new girl from Seven and the quiet girl from a Peacekeeper mother in Six who’d been there ever since she was born. Getting assigned to Ten together had been such a relief.

“Can you handle any extra-hands calls tonight?” Naevia asked her, black eyes solemn. “I mean, if it’s an emergency, of course I’ll be there, but…”

Kally understood. Naevia wanted to spend at least part of this last night in Ten with Euskal, one of the farm shift bosses. That was the trouble with a Peacekeeper taking on a district lover, part of the reason they were encouraged to keep it casual with the locals. It would be five years together, at the very most, before transfer to another duty station. Naevia would have had to say goodbye eventually.
and accept she’d almost inevitably never see him again, because there was virtually no chance she’d ever return to Ten.

But sometimes the heart wanted what it wanted so powerfully that it would clash with the rules. She’d caught a few glimpses of the two of them together, even if they were being largely discreet, and she didn’t doubt if Naevia had been born to Ten, the two of them would have been married already. Now and again the rules bent first under the force of emotion. Love had gotten two kids out of the arena alive this year rather than the traditional one—the two tributes from her new duty station, for that matter. But that wouldn’t be the case here. Kally just hoped it wouldn’t be tough for Naevia to constantly hear about Katniss and Peeta and their love story and know that in her case, the rules had been as unyielding as iron.

Still, she felt like Naevia was the lucky one in some ways because to feel something so deep as that had to be worth the price. She knew pretty much nothing about romance, and well, her experience of good old basic lust had been Albus, a friend of hers at the Peacehome before she went to Burnt Tree Camp. He’d teased her that being sent to training as a virgin would be a tragedy. Looking back she realized glumly that it had hit on her feelings of self-consciousness about her maturity and about fitting in, with his jokes about, *C’mon, Kally, we’re in the Corps for twenty years, enough with being district kids and saving it for the wedding night!* It didn't help she’d kind of had a crush on him at that point, because he’d been her friend. It had made her stupid and weak.

The whole thing had been a terrible idea. Even during the sex, she hadn’t enjoyed it. It had been awkward and anxious, and all too brief. It didn’t help she heard later that Albus was bragging about getting her in bed to the other male Peacekeeper cadets, and saying that she wasn't that good anyway. She should have broken his nose for that. But she’d never been the confrontational one. That was for people in their class like Helena and Daxos. That had been her older sister, Ingeborg. A name, a fleeting impression of beautiful hair she’d desperately envied back when she was little Hannalore from Seven, feeling safe and protected around Inge, and around her older brother Max too. That was about all that remained. It didn’t matter. They weren’t around to protect her any longer, were they?

She should have punched Al for being an ass, but she hadn’t. She’d ducked her head in shame and embarrassment, regretted ever sleeping with him, and been utterly relieved when he got sent to Twelve rather than Ten. Then she realized it and scowled. He had been in Twelve, might still be for that matter. Oh, fuck.

Admittedly after three years of hogs, if she went a good six months without eating another piece of pork, she might not be too unhappy about that. Stopping at various points throughout Ten, they collected an even dozen Peacekeepers transferring to Twelve. The hovercraft ride east was uneventful, and aside from a few murmurs about what they might find once they were on the ground, they were all pretty subdued. Nobody wanted it to turn into a repeat of the things they had heard about in Eight from the Head.

Immediately, they made their way to HQ to report in to Head Thread. Romulus Thread, as Kally understood it, was from an old, proud Two family with a long history in the service. She was pretty sure Thread blood had been in the tribute cadets and possibly even the arena at some point too; that tended to be the case with the traditional Peacekeeper families.

Thread eyed them all with his dark eyes, glancing up at them from over his desk. “I run a tight operation,” he informed them crisply. “This district has apparently suffered from shamefully lax mismanagement.” They’d all heard through the grapevine that Head Cray had been deposed around the time of the quashed Eight rebellion. “As a consequence, certain citizens here have apparently been laboring under the impression that the laws of our country are mere suggestions. We’ve been
doing our best to correct that. It has been somewhat difficult a lesson to get across. I expect you all to do your part in that.”

“Yes, sir,” they said, and she didn’t think she was imagining that they all seemed to be in a hurry to get away from Thread’s intense stare. Obviously he was a man who followed his duty to the letter and the last exact dot and cross of it.

She met the rest of her duty squad in short order as they were assigned to go make their rounds. Apparently they were getting thrown right in the fire. Naevia came with her there, again to her relief. Actaeon and Myrina were both transfers from One, and Faustus was a third-tour from Five. Hard luck there, especially Actaeon and Myrina—they’d been taken from what must have been a cushy billet earned by hard work and seniority and sent out here to the absolute ass end of Panem. Virgil had been sent from Seven, and she tried to suppress a moment of wanting to ask him eagerly about that place she could barely remember. The last two had been originally assigned to Twelve, and remained there even after whatever purges of Cray’s incompetents had been enacted. Purnia, and joy of joys, Albus.

“How dare he anyway? After how he treated her? She tried to think of what Helena would say, what Inge might have done, rather than stand there with her mouth flapping like a fish on one of Four’s boats. This place was awkward enough with the bad feeling that she was going to be required to enforce discipline harshly without Albus fucking Law making her look bad in front of her new compatriots by running his mouth again. “Yeah, not nearly long enough,” she said finally, and even as she felt a bit like a bitch for it she also felt a thrill of illicit victory at the stunned look on his face, that this time he was the one left all fish-mouthed.

“Uh, is this going to be a problem?” Virgil asked, looking between the two of them cautiously.

“Not at all.” _Act like of course you can handle it and nine times out of ten they won’t question you_, Naevia had always advised her when Kallanthe was mumbling and bumbling her way through things at the Peacehome. Apparently it worked in this case.

“OK, good,” Myrina said, green eyes alight with a fierce amusement. “So, new kids, welcome.” Her expression sobered. “Things here aren’t easy. I was in Ten my second rotation. So I know Head Van Horn runs things smart but easygoing. It’s a lot different here.”

“There’s floggings and time in the stocks on a regular basis,” Actaeon said bluntly. “We haven’t gone much more than a week or so without another hanging since Rina and I got here.”

“Good news is,” Purnia said quietly, “Head Thread already has his preferred enforcement team for carrying out punishments.” By which Kallanthe pretty much understood it was the ones already proven to not flinch and risk putting a crack in the solid front of enforcement and discipline that Twelve apparently so desperately needed. “But be tight on your reports. If you let things slide, it’s going to be noticed.”

“Head Thread doesn’t tolerate _opinions_ of what the law means,” finally Albus spoke up, though it seemed like he was addressing someone invisible between herself and Naevia, considering his eyes didn’t meet either of theirs. “Let’s get that straight. His first day here he caught one of the young guys with a turkey he’d stabbed through the fence with a stick. See, Cray would have bought the damn bird from him. Thread went a hundred percent by the Code of Conduct, and strung him up for a flogging.”
Purnia’s blue eyes turned grim. “When Da—one of the Peacekeepers tried to protest—Thread arrested him. Not just for insubordination. Actual treason.” She shook her head. “They sent him to the Capitol for it.” That meant he’d probably become an Avox. Kallanthe tried not to flinch. “He whipped that boy half to death,” she murmured, still looking upset about it. “I know he had to prove the point that things around here had to change, but…”

“So the best you can with it,” Actaeon advised tiredly. “Be vigilant. That’s all any of us can do.”

It wasn’t just the bitter winter that shivered its way down her spine. Winters had been cold in the mountains of Two, and she vaguely remembered bone-chilling cold in Seven sometimes. But seeing that even the other Peacekeepers were sort of afraid of their Head, given how swiftly and harshly he’d punished one of their own, made her ill at ease.

She was relieved when Myrina picked her as a partner to walk rounds, because she’d been half afraid Albus was going to jump on the opportunity. Bundling up in thick wool winter coats and the fur-lined hat and lined gloves, they headed out into the late afternoon. Passing the town square and seeing a lonely figure still hanging from the gallows, twisting in the breeze, she suppressed another shiver and tried not to make her steps swifter to get away from the sight. “Get used to it, Kallanthe,” Myrina told her softly. “We all have. The locals have too.” With a glance, she saw that the people scurrying to and fro didn’t even glance up at whoever had been executed. Only the woman in the stocks, with a forced view of the gallows, seemed to notice. “Ripper’s back in business, I see,” Myrina said dryly. “She sells black market liquor,” she explained to Kallanthe’s puzzled look. “So, public drunks get locked up in the stocks. That’s assuming they’re not violent and don’t do something stupid while they’re sloshed. That’s a whole different story.”

“Uh,” she said, pointing at a bobbing and weaving figure making its way across the square, obviously drunk.

“Ah, shit,” Myrina muttered, leaning back against what, to judge from the signs, was the alley between the butcher’s and the sweet-shop. She pinched the bridge of her nose as if she suddenly had a headache coming on. “Well, that’s the one exception to that rule. That’s Haymitch Abernathy.”

The infamous drunk victor of Twelve, though pulling off the neat trick of mentoring two beloved victors last year had certainly rehabilitated his reputation some that she could tell. “I’d have figured him for stopping the alcohol with how impressive a job he did last Games.” It wasn’t like he hadn’t proved a point and earned back some of the Capitol’s affection by it.

“Yeah, well,” Myrina said with a snort of something that might have been frustration, amusement, or both, “he didn’t. And victor discipline is a tricky business. That’s something that goes only through the Head, just so you know. I doubt you’ve had to deal with it since I don’t remember Ten victors ever giving a peep while I was there.” Wyandot Ingersoll, Angus Wahlstrom, and Sandy Marchand were all pretty private but well-behaved, from what Kally could tell. With as spread out as Ten was, she hadn’t seen them that often, only glimpses on Reaping Day and the like. Twelve, being one tight little population center, was an oddity to her. “But Haymitch doesn’t tend to cause problems, mind. Just gets his load on and then wanders back to Victor’s Village to sleep it off.”

“Katniss and Peeta?” she asked, watching the bundled-up figure of Haymitch making his way back towards the hill that apparently led to the Village. He’d been practically a legend in Two, to hear tell about it, a viciously talented fighter. But that was back even before she was born. Things had changed a lot since then.

“Peeta’s no bother at all. Katniss, we all got a warning to make sure she’s not out in the woods—nobody’s actually dumb enough to believe she learned that much archery inside the fence, right? But she’s caused no trouble.”
A snowball suddenly hit Haymitch’s back with a wet and heavy thump. He gave a grunt of surprise, or pain, but compared to how she’d have expected him to bellow curses or lash out, he didn’t do anything of the sort. Shoulders hunched inside his coat, he gave the impression of nothing so much as a man who was doing his very best to simply disappear. She had a funny feeling seeing it, given she’d tried to do the same plenty when she was young.

A pack of local boys appeared to be the culprits. She glanced over at Myrina, wondering if enforcing discipline and order held through to the point of dealing with something like this. “All of you!” came a shrill voice, the thick Twelve accent hard for her to decipher immediately, and a young girl came marching over to the boys, blond braids bouncing from beneath her pink knitted cap. “That’s enough!”

“Second Hawthorne son, aren’t you?” Apparently given that interruption Haymitch had stopped trying to impersonate a turtle, and brushing his shaggy hair from his face, his eyes had fallen on the boys, picking out the culprit.

There was another sound of indignation from the girl, as she apparently recognized the kid who’d thrown the snowball. “Rory Hawthorne, you ought to be ashamed! He gave your ma a job!”

“I’m not gonna be glad she’s reduced to cleaning up after a drunk loser to keep us fed,” Rory scowled.

“Much worse ways out there to make a living, though,” and Haymitch gave a dark, caustic chuckle. “Nice arm, boy,” he added with a smirk after a moment. “Throw a knife half that well and you might live till, oh, the fifth day in the arena?” Rory flinched.

“Pick on him again, Rory, and I’ll tell your ma,” the girl threatened, and seeing her face, the determination there, Kallanthe thought she finally recognized Primrose Everdeen, the girl who was saved by her sister last summer. “He saved Katniss, he tried to help Gale, so don’t you be mean to him.”

Rory and his friends beat a hasty retreat. Apparently she and Myrina still hadn’t been noticed because Haymitch leaned on the wall and told the girl, “Oughtn’t to have done that, girl. Might be as he needs to blow off some steam, and better done on me than some others.”

“They’ve got no right to pick on you,” she said fiercely.

“Kiddo, I’ve been getting things thrown at me by kids since you before were just a glint in your daddy’s eye. Least it wasn’t a mule turd or a chunk of coal. And there wasn’t a rock in the damn thing.” How he could sound so nonchalant about it was beyond her. Maybe it was the drinking. A victor, even a rather faded one, ought to command some respect. Allowing local children to treat him like that seemed unthinkable.

“It’s not right,” Primrose insisted, as if she could make the whole world right by sheer conviction.

“Look. I take two kids to the Capitol every year and bring back two corpses,” Haymitch told her bluntly. “They lash out like that because they hate me and they’re terrified and they damn well ought to be. I’m probably the bogeyman parents threaten them with.” He said it matter-of-factly, but the words were depressing.

“But not last year.” Primrose tugged her scarf tighter around her neck.

“No. Not last year. But this year, with the Quell? Suppose it’s not much significance to me, really,
being as they’ll want Peeta to take my place in that mentor chair. But no repeat performance of last year or last Quell, girl. Twelve likely ain’t winning this one.” Given their poor track record on the whole, Kallanthe wryly had to agree with that assessment. “So pray they don’t pull your name, that’s all.”

“Well,” Primrose said, “all right, I will. But if I did get picked, I know you, Katniss, and Peeta would do everything you could. That’s all I could ask. That’s all anyone could ask, right?”

Haymitch stared down at her, weaving slightly on his feet. Just watching him was making Kallanthe dizzy. She wondered if they hadn’t noticed her and Myrina, or if they were just overlooking them as if they didn’t matter. She'd gotten used to getting that feeling sometimes back in Ten, as if she was just part of the wall rather than a person. “You’re your ma’s daughter, no question. And the day the world finally lets you down, Prim, it’s gonna be a true fucking tragedy.” With that, he wobbled his way back up the hill, though Kallanthe noticed that Primrose trailed him carefully, as if making sure he made it home all right.

“What the hell kind of district is this?” she asked Myrina, shaking her head, as they left the alley. Though What kind of man just lets children abuse him like that? was left unspoken, because Haymitch had answered it himself, in some sense. For a victor he apparently didn’t think much of the privilege and respect it gave him.

“One on the edge,” Myrina said with a sigh.

“Do we need to report that?” she asked reluctantly. Because it seemed patently ridiculous, but she was the new arrival here, and given how paranoid the other Peacekeepers seemed, she ought to at least make sure. As for what Haymitch had said, there was nothing in it that was rebellious or alarming, but the hint of anger and weariness about the Games had been there, hadn’t it?

Myrina clucked her tongue thoughtfully. “I don’t think so,” she said, though carefully. “Though Haymitch, he’s a representative of the Capitol and the Games, really, and disrespecting him so openly is treading a dangerous line. Not that the adults didn’t have choice words for him too, from what I hear, but sounds like they shut up a good bit after last year.”

“They’re a bunch of kids barely of reaping age,” she said softly, shaking her head. “Surely there’s some better way…” Some way to talk sense into them, if need be, rather than filing a formal report about some snowballs.

“Kallanthe,” Myrina told her, shaking her head with a wry, almost sad smile, “I’m not arguing that in this instance, but remember, do your job and be ready to speak up about things, or you may be the next to lose your tongue for lack of using it when it counted.”

It was a kindly meant reminder, but it was a hard slap of reality anyway. “Got it,” she said, feeling her cheeks flush with embarrassment that she’d been trying to argue with both the Head’s orders and a woman who probably had ten years’ seniority on her as well as several months more experience here reading the situation. “I’m sorry, ma’am,” she said, offering the proper deference to the rank and wisdom of a senior officer.

Myrina waved it off, as they passed the bakery and the smell of fresh bread made her mouth water. “It’s a rough assignment but we do the best we can.” She gave a soft groan. “Even if it’s so damn cold here I want to never leave HQ.”

“You’ve got at least one parent from Four, right?” she guessed. “From your eyes?”

“I’m a Law, yeah. And it was my mother.”
“Well, that’s just your blood being accustomed to warmer climates, right?” she offered cheerfully, wanting to like Myrina, wanting Myrina to like her. This place and the chill of both the weather and the feeling would be so much easier to bear if only she felt like she had friends to rely upon.

Myrina gave a low, throaty chuckle at that as they headed up the hill to Victor’s Village to continue the duty round. “You and Theo both say that. My fiancé,” she explained, and there was a sudden wistful softness in her voice. “He got sent to Eight when the rebellion there began.”

“You must be…” Worried out of your mind. Proud of him.”

“I just hope he’s OK. News from Eight hasn’t exactly been forthcoming, and Head Thread isn’t much one to share.”

“No, I can imagine that,” she murmured. He was their Head and so of course they had to follow his orders, but compared to the laid-back style of Van Horn, it was a big change to come somewhere so rigidly controlled. Still, if it was necessary, if the threat of rebellion was serious, better that way than seeing more Peacekeepers die in putting down an uprising. “Hopefully this will all die down soon and you’ll see him.”

From the faint smile on Myrina’s face at that, and how she talked about Theo afterwards, Kallanthe knew with relief that yes, she’d made a friend.

The next weeks were hard, though. Reporting things she’d rather have overlooked or dealt with unofficially felt counterproductive, but she knew it was expected to keep Twelve in check. Though to be honest she got more of a feel of terror and weariness from the population than a simmering outrage. But who knew what they could be hiding? Eight had apparently given no warning. Besides, there was always the fear that a fellow Corps member could report her if she was less than vigilant in her duties, and the thought of a young Peacekeeper who’d tried to argue for mercy and ended up an Avox haunted her thoughts then.

She was filing paperwork on yet another drunk in the stocks while Katniss Everdeen’s wedding gown modeling special was on. “I’m sure she’s a good kid and all, but right now I fucking hate her, just a little,” Naevia said glumly. “She actually gets to marry the man she loves. Hell, the Capitol would riot if she didn’t get to do it.”

“Trust me, Nevvy, I know the feeling,” Myrina answered, leaning her chin on her hand. “But you’re already wearing white, you two,” Actaeon joked. “What more could you want, really?”

“Oh, shut the fuck up, Teon,” Myrina said, throwing a crumpled up ball of paper at his head. “You’re my friend, and Theo’s too, but like you know the first thing about romance. With you, it’s the cock talking, not the heart.”

Albus chuckled from the corner where he had himself draped into a chair of his own, brown hair with its reddish cast drying in the warmth of the fire. “Stuff it,” Kallanthe snapped at him, feeling uncomfortably again like he was making fun of the fact she’d been stupid enough to let him talk her into sex. She wasn’t eighteen any longer and she wasn’t that naïve now thanks in good part to him.

“What is it with you two anyway?” Purnia asked in confusion, finishing stripping off the last of her own winter gear after coming in with Albus. “Did he kill your do—“

“Never mind it,” she muttered, not wanting to discuss it and not feeling rude enough to tell Purnia it was none of her damn business.

“Check that out,” Faustus said, waving a hand towards the television. “Looks like the fashion show’s
over and they’re reading the Quell card.”

“Shit, I remember the last one,” Actaeon said, sitting forward in his chair with a frown creasing his face. “The double reaping and all. I was so glad I was too young still. That was when I was still a kid in Eight.”

Kally hadn’t even been born then, let alone old enough to remember, so this was a new experience for her. Watching as President Snow delicately drew out the yellowed envelope and cracked open its flaking seal, she felt like all of Panem was waiting with baited breath. No matter. Whatever twist this Quell held, Two’s tributes would be well prepared for it, even if dark horses had won both previous Quells. As for Seven, well, it would take a lot of luck for them to win. Johanna Mason was their last victor and Kallanthe was sure that now people were wary of a ringer from Seven faking incompetence.

There was a moment of remembered terror, though, the nauseating fear of *She’s going to die please don’t let her die*, and she must have watched those Games, as she’d watched others, seeing Seven’s tributes often fall early and gruesomely. Seven’s kids might have some training with an axe and some woodland survival skills, but they were often smaller in stature and in terrain other than a forest, they were hopeless. She probably had figured Johanna for a quick exit too and been relieved to see someone from her own district defy the odds.

Snow’s precise tones read the card for all of Panem to hear. “As a reminder to the rebels that even the strongest among them cannot overcome the power of the Capitol, the male and female tributes will be reaped from the existing pool of victors.”

That rendered them all speechless for a good few seconds, staring at each other. “Does the math of that even work out?” Virgil wondered.

“I think it does,” Albus piped up. “I can’t think of a district that doesn’t have at least one male and one female. I mean, some of them are in rough shape—like, say, Woof’s the only man from Eight and he’s old as dirt, sorry Actaeon….”

Actaeon gave a short, dismissive shrug that they all knew meant that Eight and what it held in his past didn’t hold much significance for him any longer. They’d all left behind their pasts at the Peacehome. It had just been a lot easier for Kally given that she couldn’t remember it. “It’s a bit of a shame, really,” Purnia said tersely. “Sending the likes of Woof back in.”

“But that’s the price of the rebellion,” Myrina said bleakly, possibly thinking even now of Theo in Eight and hoping another rebellion hadn’t cost her the man she loved. “It’s what the Treaty of the Treason said. The terms of the Games are set, the districts just comply.”

“There’s only one female victor here in Twelve,” Faustus spoke up thoughtfully. “Katniss is going back in no matter what.” He was right, and it seemed particularly cruel given they’d just been discussing how lucky she was to be getting married to Peeta.

“So’s Johanna from Seven,” she added, feeling oddly compelled to do so, probably given the victor from her childhood district had been on her mind just a few moments ago.

“Yeah, but they won’t care as much about Johanna,” Virgil pointed out. “Besides, Johanna’s kind of screwed. She can’t fake them out this time. But they’re really not going to like Katniss being sent in there when she was just showing off her wedding dress fifteen minutes ago.”

“But that’s the price of the rebellion,” she said, trying to hide the peevishness from her tone because she really didn’t want to start a fight. If they were going to argue it was a bit of a shame to send
Woof and Katniss in, wasn’t it also a shame for Johanna and anyone else, really? They’d survived the arena once as the price of district rebellion. It seemed like that ought to be enough. “No matter how it upsets them they can’t afford to make an exception for her or anyone else unless they’re willing to let all the victors off the hook, and that effectively cancels the Games and undermines the whole thing, doesn’t it?”

“You’re right, it does. So, Katniss and either Peeta or Haymitch,” Actaeon mused. “Peeta’s going to be the stronger fighter, and I imagine he’d give everything to protect Katniss…”

“Nah. If Haymitch has any fucking sense he’ll volunteer,” Naevia said. “They already don’t much love him here. If he goes in he can maybe help keep Katniss alive. I doubt it’ll be a double win this year, and if Peeta goes in and dies to defend Katniss, Haymitch might as well end himself in that case.”

Remembering how bleak the man sounded the day she had arrived, not wanting to dwell on it because of the uncomfortable feeling of it, she said hastily, “So, who from Two, do you guys think?”

“We’ve got a nice pool to choose from there, and almost any of them would defend Two’s honor pretty well,” Purnia answered her. “I like Lyme’s odds if she’s chosen. It wasn’t all her fault her last opponents got mauled by that mutt. Her fighting before that was impressive.”

“Enobaria would definitely be allowed to go back in before Lyme,” Albus argued fiercely. “I mean, we’ve all seen replays of her Games, do I need to say more?”

Debating the merits of Two’s victors, knowing they’d send the best they had to represent their district, it wasn’t too bad. Much easier to swallow than thoughts of places where only one male or female tribute would be available, regardless of their condition.

Two days later, out on rounds, she and Myrina spotted the three victors out running laps around the Meadow. Katniss was keeping pace, Peeta looked like his artificial leg was paining him, and Haymitch was most definitely bringing up the rear and laboring hard for it. This time she didn’t even ask Myrina whether they ought to report it. They wasted no time presenting themselves in Head Thread’s office once their duty shift was done.

“It looks like they’re training, sir,” she told him. “Running, at least this morning.”

Thread gave a low chuckle, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “Even Abernathy was running?”

Somehow the sight and sound of the harsh Head who had calmly flogged and hanged people to enforce discipline and order with barely a flicker of expression now given over to laughter was a little bizarre.

“Yes, sir,” Myrina supplied. “When we came back it looked like they were working on some hand-to-hand combat, though.”

“Carry on then,” Thread said, with a dismissive wave of his hand.

“We should allow them to continue with this training?” Myrina said carefully, obviously looking to specifically clarify. “The rules of the Games specify…”

“We all know those rules are broken all the time in One, Two, and Four,” Thread cut her off neatly, glancing out the window towards the Meadow. “It offers a much better Games for it, really. Does better honor to the Capitol that way. If the Capitol specifies the need for a spectacular victors-only Games, then by all means, let the victors train to better enable it. It does their own first Games and those they defeated then no credit to see any of them go down in a pathetic manner at the starting
gong.” Kally saw a faint twitch of his lips that might have almost been a smile. “Besides, I imagine between an overrated girl who everyone now knows is a one-trick pony with weapons, a cripple with no concern for his own life, and a lazy drunk old fatass, those three need all the help they can get. Pass word around that their training isn’t to be disturbed unless an imminent threat is posed by it. And in that case, I want to hear about it.”

She declined to point out that last year, Peeta and Katniss had pretty much held their own against the Career tributes. Thread might be a peculiarly good mood but she wasn’t going to push her luck by any means. “All right, thank you, sir.” She noticed Myrina also wasted no time escaping the office as quickly as possible.
District Five: Eleven

She remembered from her Tour that the district center of Five had been a glittering thing, not in the same way like things in One, but an airy thing of glass and thin steel framework. It was so unlike the comfortably familiar wood buildings back in Seven, or the solid and imposing stone of Two. Gemma Waltz, the Seven escort, had explained to her brightly that Five’s center was a marvel because it was engineered to help collect solar energy by all those glass and silver panels. Enduring it all by that point, she hadn’t much listened.

The buildings hadn’t changed in nine and a half years, although here and there a patchwork of blue tarps or canvas or even a sheet of plywood covered over a busted panel, like an ugly bruise. The hot dry desert sun off the red sand and bluffs in the distance, heat haze shimmering like water, was at least different enough from the wringing-wet humidity of the jungle arena that it didn’t cause too many uncomfortable reminders. She’d still rather get inside for some shade as quickly as possible.

The usual meet and greet happened when they exited the hovercraft. Laurence Talbot had fallen to Finnick’s trident at the Cornucopia and Lamina Rosencoff had apparently been killed by the poison fog at the two o’clock section of the arena. Greer Noyes, the other pair of eyes up in Mentor Central, had died during the rebellion. So now the only living Five victor was Dazen Connington, survivor of the 41st Games, far more Haymitch’s contemporary than her own. That alone was setting her a little on edge.

She shook hands and murmured greetings and accepted their gratitude that she and Haymitch were here. All the while, she was thinking at least a few vicious thoughts that a year ago, not a fucking one of them aside from Dazen would have given a damn if either one of them lived or died, the vicious bitch and the drunk disgrace that they were. A year gone by, a war won, and they were celebrities again, fawned over and welcomed with eagerness. It was like the abrupt shift from being a district nobody reaped as a tribute to being a victor, all fake and full of hypocrisy.

In some ways she didn’t want to be here because of that, but that wasn’t all. She wanted to be back in Twelve chopping wood and yanking Katniss’ chain and joking with Peeta. She wanted to repaint that upstairs bedroom they hadn’t gotten to yet. She wanted to wake up in the bed her grandparents had made, beneath his mother’s quilt, see the early morning sunlight on his skin and his unruly raven-black hair. She wanted to learn how to use a stupid bow and how to bake fancy pastries, for fuck’s sake. It was a simple life, a comfortable life, one that she loved fiercely and was confident she wouldn’t screw up. The four of them had made something good together, something that she loved and had hungered for all those lonely years. But leaving Twelve had meant putting that security aside, venturing into the unknown. Part of her, alone and isolated for so long, was a little alarmed at how big this was compared to that, and that she couldn’t face the challenge of finding herself again and moving forward on an epic national stage rather than the quiet peace of Twelve with a few people she trusted.

These people in Five, and those in Two for that matter, looked to her like she had the answers and the ear of the president and they desperately wanted that. If she fucked up it would be huge and public, and she wasn’t like Haymitch. She wanted to see Panem well off, sure, but she didn’t necessarily feel the calling—or maybe the debt—that he did towards making it happen so closely and firsthand, these huge things, lofty matters of laws and ideals and whatever. Far as she was concerned, building houses and growing food was far more important than all that, and that was something she understood, something she could touch. But she had said she would do it, so she would. There was Heike to consider too.
Besides, it wasn’t like the idyll in Twelve would have lasted. They wouldn’t be the only four people there forever. There would have been others to move in, people who didn’t know her and who’d meet her and judge her and expect things anyway, so she’d have had to deal with it in the end. But after having been so disengaged from the world, trying to find her role in it again, the place that fit her when she didn’t even fully know the shape she took, was no small thing. I’m no coward, she reminded herself, though her teeth might have been gritted more than smiling during some of those handshakes. Not since the arena.

So after Plutarch’s little dog-and-pony-and-cameras show was over, and they could pack it in for the rest of the day and tackle the matter anew in the morning, she was relieved to head to Victors’ Mesa. Third district and I’m about ready to break cameras, she thought with weary humor, marching down the path to the Mesa, seeing the large windmills turning lazily in the distance.

Unlike in Two where all the houses had been owned by someone at least once, she was pretty sure none of Five’s own five victors had ever owned the one she and Haymitch were assigned to occupy while they were here. It was clean and comfortable and had the impersonal Capitol stamp all over it that she remembered from when she’d moved into her own house in Seven, the lack of any sign of something real and human ever existing there. It made her think all the more wistfully of home, because it was the exact same layout, but it was a pale copy at best. At least the house in Two had felt like someone’s home, even if not theirs.

They went to go pay a more personal call on Dazen at his house, without the cameras to bear witness. Stepping inside, seeing the personal touches, the old chairs with ugly flowers, the little brown dog who imperiously announced who owned the place with a rumble of warning, set her immediately far more at ease. It was comfortable and a bit shabby and therefore, in its way, honest.

Dazen himself seemed a bit like that too. He wasn’t much to look at, really. He had the red hair that was most common in Five of all the districts, and being in his early fifties, he was definitely balding a bit in back like someone had shaved a neat circle out. His cream-and-coffee skin was still mostly unlined, but he had a riot of freckles across his nose and cheeks. His eyes were a shade that could simply be described as a warm but fairly unremarkable brown.

All in all, he was no handsome man, though she was sure the Capitol had polished him up enough to find at least a few buyers for him when he was young and new and novel. For victors that weren’t Careers expected to produce spectacular wins and whose simple survival thus automatically made them objects of interest, unless they were irredeemably ugly beyond Capitol polish or even cosmetic surgery, or too badly maimed, chances were they’d endure at least a year or two on the circuit before the interest died down.

“I’ll make some coffee,” Dazen offered as he gestured the two of them to the kitchen table. Coffee, when it was blazingly hot outside, but she decided she wouldn’t chew him out about it. She had the sense, looking at him, that he was glad of the company. It must have been a long winter and spring as the only victor left. Cedrus and Blight might not have been close to her, but at least she’d never been entirely alone in her own district, unlike Haymitch then, unlike Dazen now.

Haymitch seemed to pick up on that easily enough, from the furrowed brow and thoughtful expression that told her that brain was at work again, all right. Arm draped over the back of his chair, he called lazily to Dazen, puttering around in the kitchen, “So Brutus and Enobaria just got married.”

“About time,” Dazen called back. “He and Lyme both messed it up royally, and we all saw how he never felt like he was good enough for Enobaria either. Idiot.”

“No regrets, Daze?” Haymitch said jokingly. “I mean, we all had you and Baria figured as a great match. Our two biters and all.” She hadn’t seen Dazen’s entire Games, of course, but Haymitch
probably had as a little kid, and she’d seen clips. With that reminder, she recalled that he’d won by biting hard on the hand of a Career about to end him and pouncing on the knife faster than his opponent. In typical Capitol fashion, a sort of gruesome moment like that had been gleefully brought up as often as possible.

Dazen gave a snort of derision and amusement, putting a mug of coffee down in front of Haymitch with a bit more force than it needed, and another in front of her rather more carefully. “Oh, fuck you, Haymitch,” he said, but it was with that light tone that told her it was just the usual fond victor chain-jerking rather than actual temper. “No, I’ll leave fooling around with asskicking younger women to you.”

She couldn’t help a bark of appreciative laughter as Haymitch gave a rueful grin, acknowledging the hit, but it seemed like he’d deliberately provoked it onto himself, knowing it would happen. “Hey, trying to keep up with me keeps him from getting bored and getting himself into trouble,” she told Dazen sweetly as he took his seat.

He grinned at her, and if he wasn’t handsome, he did have a smile that lit up his face. “I don’t doubt it.”

By the look and smell, the coffee was strong and black and could just about dissolve a spoon—just the way she liked it. Still, she let it sit a bit to cool down first. “So,” Dazen said, “I assume you want the district report, huh?” He fidgeted with his coffee mug a bit, as if he wasn’t quite sure what to do to keep them around now that he had them here.

It had been different for her anyway from Haymitch, or Dazen now. Her isolation was somewhat self-imposed. People in Seven weren’t all up in each others’ business for the most part. She’d been at a remove, but she knew that while they weren’t quite sure what to make of what the arena had given back to them, they hadn’t hated her. They politely respected her distance, because she didn’t know how to talk to them any longer, but had she gone to them, she didn’t doubt they would have tried. It wasn’t like with Haymitch where, after he stepped away from his people to help protect them and became caught up helplessly in the Capitol’s manipulations, they shunned and disdained him, rather than thinking for an instant not all was what it seemed on the surface.

She’d stepped away from her people, but she hadn’t lost them. It was solitude—crippling to her in its way, yes—but not the guilt and self-doubt of rejection and isolation. Sometimes she wondered why Haymitch cared so much what the people of Twelve thought of him, considering she figured he didn’t owe them a damn thing after how they’d been towards him all these years. Seven might not be openly warm and fuzzy, but they tolerated odd folk well enough and let them live their own way. Twelve, it seemed like you entirely belonged and were embraced as “one of us” or you were something “other”, to be shunned and suspected and treated like shit. She wondered if the likes of Gale Hawthorne, pissed off as he was at the world by the end, would have so easily written off everyone else’s lives as acceptable loss if he’d been from another district with a less clannish mindset.

Haymitch wrapped his hands around his own mug. “Later, unless you think there’s something that’s urgent. How’ve you been, Daze?” he asked instead, eyeing the older victor. She knew him well enough to see a flicker of concern on his face, realizing he was picking up on the air of loneliness and awkwardness Dazen was giving off.

“Still alive. But you never did ask any of us that I know,” Dazen replied, something almost like mingled anger and pleading in his voice, taking another swig of coffee. “What happened, after the arena fell. Not even Tilly.”

She’d wondered sometimes about that. The only survivors of the victors had been the handful from
the arena that ended up in Thirteen, and some of those who had been filling the chairs up in Mentor Central. Cedrus had died and she assumed as being the mentor of an obvious rebel, he’d been executed quickly. But all those victors left at home had died. The surviving mentors had already been in the Capitol when she and Haymitch and the rest of Victory Squad arrived.

No, she hadn’t asked. She’d had her reasons. Partly because none of the mentor survivors were anyone she was all that close to, but that wasn’t the entire story. Sounded like Haymitch’s were much the same as he said, “I didn’t ask because none of you asked me or Jo what the Detention Center was like. Same as we didn’t ask each other what our own arena was like. We all know better.”

“Talk if you want, but don’t ask?” Dazen said with a wry twist of his lips.

“Basically.” Haymitch waited patiently, obviously looking to see what Dazen meant to do here.

From how he’d brought it up, apparently Dazen had wanted it known. The fact that he mentioned it made her suspect some of his air right now had a thing or two to do with it. “So tell it, if you want.”

Dazen gave a low grunt at that and set down his mug carefully, as if afraid to make too much noise by it. “They rounded us up from Mentor Central and the Training Center. Dragged us down into the training room.” His brown eyes searched Haymitch’s. “They strung Luma, Spark, Carrick, and Cedrus up from the rafters right in front of us. I don’t think Snow much liked Katniss’ little stunt with the dummy.” He said it casually enough, but Johanna couldn’t help but close her eyes, flinching. She’d almost been hanged herself. Haymitch hadn’t spared her from the truth when she’d asked him that final night how bad a hanging would be. Easy enough, if the neck got broken, he’d told her. If not, a hard death. She didn’t doubt it had been the latter for the rebel mentors. She imagined old Cedrus choking, feet thrashing helplessly in the air as he slowly strangled.

Katniss had lashed out about Seneca Crane’s execution for sparing her, had hanged a training dummy in that gym during her private session with the Gamemakers, or so they’d all heard. Apparently Snow had neatly returned the gesture. Stupid fucking kid, she thought, didn’t think about how her little rebellion would cost other people, did she? But she forced herself to calm down, realizing with chagrin she hadn’t been all that wise at that age either. She’d challenged Snow too, hadn’t she, ignorant or perhaps just underestimating the severity of the consequences? Besides, Katniss had grown up fast and hard since then.

“And?” Haymitch said calmly, prompting him to go on, but she could sense that unease in him, and resisted the urge to bark at him that he’d damn well better not be trying to settle the blame of it on his shoulders. She’d told him before—he had plainly asked them that night in Four’s apartment, as his friends, not coerced or manipulated them. They had all agreed to be part of the plan, knowing it might cost them their lives. Sometimes for a ridiculously smart man, some things just didn’t sink in through his skull so easily.

When she looked, Dazen’s eyes had taken that faraway look of turning inside his own mind, remembering it. “They kept us locked up in the Training Center. Not sure what to do with us, I guess. And while executing those obviously tied to the rebels was one thing, killing off close to two dozen of us in one fell swoop might have looked bad.”

She hadn’t known. While she was sitting and suffering and bleeding in the Detention Center, listening to Haymitch’s screams and his hallucinations and his gradually fading sane moments, the other victors had been close by too. They’d stayed there even after Thirteen rescued the rest of them —four and a half, nearly five months anxiously waiting for the axe to fall, probably never knowing if each day might bring their own execution. “Did they torture you?” she asked him bluntly.
“No,” Dazen said, his eyes moving to the sight of how both she and Haymitch were wearing long-sleeved shirts to the wrist, even in the desert heat. They were light, loose cotton that wasn’t too bad, even somewhat cool, but it was long sleeves all the same, covering all the scars from the torturers and the ugly blotchy burn scars from the napalm. They were lucky in that nothing showed with the top button or two undone. Getting dressed this morning, remembering the long sleeves she’d worn sometimes in the Capitol to cover the bruises, or sometimes the marks of ropes or shackles, on her wrists, she wanted to laugh grimly. Only looking over at Haymitch and seeing he was enduring the same, that he understood, made it a bit more bearable. “Anyway,” he said, eyes moving back to his mug and the dregs left in it. “Lyme escaped about two weeks in,” he said half to himself. “Don’t know how she found an opportunity, but she did it. She was from Two, probably fought her way out at least in part. They dragged us downstairs and executed Hannibal for that. Then...let me see. Cotton died one month in. He went peaceful, though, Rice said. Old age and the stress of being held there, died in his sleep.” The calm recitation continued. “Georgette lost it after that, tried to escape. They shot her down—on the Six floor, so Lizzie told me, she heard the commotion outside her door. That was when they took us downstairs again to see another one of us was gone—did that after Cotton died too. I think they wanted us to see it and flip out wondering which of us was next. But that was the only time we got to talk to each other, so it was kind of a plus too. And Greer, well, after that...” He went silent then, shook his head slightly. Eerily calm as he’d been in the recitation of the others deaths, terrible as those were, the loss of his district partner had obviously been the worst. “What happened?” she prompted him, her voice suddenly gone dry like the rustle of a turning page.

“We all knew the bedrooms didn’t have video surveillance, just audio.” His fingers wrapped around the coffee mug, clutching it like a lifeline. “So she strangled herself with a bedsheet and the closet rod.” Obviously from the way he said it, he’d found her. “She’d said she figured it was better we choose our own end than wait for the Capitol to do it for us. That was the day after you forced Snow into signing your execution order.”

She felt sorry for him but at that moment she winced and couldn’t help the spike of temper, You’ve known Haymitch how many years and you don’t realize he’s probably going to feel like he’s somehow partly responsible if you say that? “Shit,” Haymitch said softly. “Daze...”

“No your fault,” Dazen told him, which smoothed over the jagged edge of her temper. “I’m sure plenty of us thought about doing the same, but they took the bedcovers away after that and left us just those foil blankets that couldn’t be twisted into a rope. And the mirrors were already shatterproof because of the tributes.”

Haymitch gave him a bleak smile. “If it’s any consolation, I had plenty of thoughts too. No good way to do yourself in at the Detention Center. That’s why I called Snow out.”

She’d known that had to be the truth and she was thankful he’d done it, tried to give them the only escape that seemed possible at that point. But seeing the two of them sitting there silently drowning in the remembered terror and helplessness, finally was too much. It was pulling her in too; making her begin to think about it, dwell upon it. She could swear her skin suddenly felt too tight, her scars itching in the heat. She’d started thinking about the Detention Center, and Blight’s sightless eyes and Cedrus being hanged in the training gym—then she realized the ones imprisoned in the Training Center had been dragged down there for Coin’s vote on a Capitol Hunger Games. They must have remembered that, being taken down there to see who else was missing from their ranks this time. They’d put on a brave face and hadn’t shown their scars that day, just as she tried not to show hers now.

“You didn’t say how they died at that last dinner,” he said, and it was more of a question than
anything. “When we went through their names.” She remembered that night, going through all the victors. She’d been hesitant on the Seven victors, because two she’d never met, and the other two she had realized only then she hadn’t known as well as she would have liked, and she would never have the chance.

“You didn’t ask,” Dazen returned calmly. “And wouldn’t you rather remember how they all lived than how they died at the Capitol’s hands?”

Somehow she had the sense that he wasn’t talking only about the victors, but also the tributes. “Lots of fun,” she told them archly, “but how about something else before we three all start sniveling, huh?”

Haymitch gave a grunt of acknowledgment at that, nodding slightly to her. “Tell me something,” he asked Dazen, finally now reaching for his coffee. She did the same and found it was lukewarm, which meant it was finally tolerable. “What do y’all do here at the cemetery for a memorial?”

She resisted the momentary urge to reach over and swat him because apparently he couldn’t leave the dead behind, but she could see he was calmer now, having slipped the grasp of memory. This was the sort of thinking about the dead that was OK, that wouldn’t leave him with that thousand-yard stare rather than here among the living.

“We don’t bury ’em, Haymitch,” Dazen said with a shake of his head, fingers nervously tousling his red hair now that the worst moment had passed. “Except the tributes,” he amended with reluctance. Yeah, of course they’d be buried, in a fenced cemetery with those identical white marble headstones, same as in Seven, same as in Twelve. Capitol property forever, denied the right to belong to their families and their district even after death. She thought about the cemetery here and felt sick, realizing one headstone that was there, a boy she’d put there herself.

“We cremate them and scatter the ash. Most people choose to have their kin take the ash up on the bluffs—a few prefer having it scattered over the river.”

By the looks of it Haymitch was having a slightly tougher time wrapping his mind around that than she was. But she was from Seven, where they buried their dead in simple cloth shrouds so their body could readily help the trees grow. A person’s memorial tree usually meant more to the family than the body, after it was buried. “Part of the wind and water,” she said. “Some of the power sources, huh?”

Becoming one with the lifeblood of the district—it made sense to her.

Dazen gave her another of those bright smiles, obviously sensing she understood. “Exactly.”

For his part, Haymitch gave a faint shrug. “Nah, for us, coal’s from plants,” he said, “and it’s a hell of a lot older than any of us anyway. Besides,” he said with dark, almost painful humor, “the mines were grave enough for too many already. Coal ain’t a thing any of us wanted to be a part of after we died.” She could easily recall him singing that song as they buried Peeta’s family, the mournful words about escape from the mines by either freedom or death.

“Anyway,” Dazen said, giving Haymitch a quick glance, “we do put their names up on the memorial walls at the Justice Building. And that’s where you go, light a candle for them.”

“Candle, huh?” She’d bet he was thinking about what he’d told her about New Year’s celebrations in Twelve, how they’d light a candle in the window to welcome the neighbors. Last New Year’s Eve they hadn’t had a chance to do that, or decorate a tree like Seven citizens did. They’d been at the Victory Ball first, then confronting Snow, then back at the apartment because between licking the final wounds from Snow and the fact it was their wedding night, turning to each other seemed like the only thing to do. “Bit old-fashioned for Five, isn’t it?”
“Hey, a memorial lightbulb just doesn’t quite have the same feel to it,” Dazen said with a half-shrug. “Who are you looking to light one for?”

“There was a young Peacekeeper in Twelve. Tried to stand up and paid hard for his troubles. They turned him Avox first, then tortured him to death in front of me,” Haymitch didn’t mince words. Apparently hearing Dazen and his cohorts had been through an ordeal themselves had left the door open for sheer honesty. “I found his record in Two. He was a kid from here in Five originally before he was orphaned. I figured he deserved to come home, if only a bit in spirit.” They’d explained the whole issue with Peacekeepers to the other victors last winter in trying to pick their brains for any sightings of Heike or Ash. She couldn’t say she was surprised none of them could say anything. Had she ever really paid much attention to most Peacekeepers, rendered into an inconvenience at best, an outright menace at worst, in an anonymous white uniform?

“Ah.”

“Plus I figured I’d do one for your girl in the 74th. Being as he killed her, even if it was purely a screw-up, Peeta would probably feel better knowing I took care of that for him.”

Dazen’s eyebrows rose abruptly. “Haymitch. Seriously, weren’t you watching that whole thing play out?”

“Me? I was a little busy at my station keeping two tributes alive. Real novel scenario for me, you know, that close to the end of the Games, and just a little pressure, so pardon me if I was a bit distracted from watching your girl.”

“Johanna?” Dazen queried with interest.

She shook her head. “You know we were all kind of watching Katniss and Peeta by then.” They’d been alternately hopeful and pessimistic about Haymitch actually pulled off the unprecedented feat of a Twelve mentor bringing a victor home, and both tributes to boot. She’d give him credit—when he did a thing, he either did it bigger and better than anyone had before, or he crashed and burned.

A faint smile crossed Dazen’s face, not the sunny smile like he’d given earlier, but something almost wistful and thoughtful. “Marissa was the smartest kid I ever had to put into the arena. Hands down.”

“And then she chowed down on a handful of nightlock. Starvation makes people do crazy things. Hell, the arena makes people do crazy things.” She thought for a second and corrected, “Did.” The arena had definitely made her do things little Hanna Mason from District Seven could never have imagined.

“She aced edible plants in training,” Dazen pointed out. “She knew a handful of nightlock berries when she saw them.”

Haymitch made a slight noise of surprise. “No accident, was it?”

“I think she was bright enough she saw beyond the arena, at least a little. She was fifteen. She’d seen more than her share of Games and how they worked. Probably knew from the rule change that Katniss and Peeta were meant to win, or else Brutus’ boy was going to kill them off in a finale for the ages. They wouldn’t let her make it out alive.”

Haymitch’s own smile was drawn taut as fiddle strings. “Snow didn’t much like tributes that saw the assholes behind the curtain.” Haymitch himself was living proof of that, wasn’t he? A boy smart enough to think like a Gamemaker rather than just a tribute, and he had suffered dearly for it.

“If she was smart enough to take the easy way out, good on her.” Nightlock poisoning was nearly
instantaneous, and compared to starvation or being killed by either Katniss or the huge Two boy, it probably looked appealing. After longing for death in the Detention Center as she had, and after enduring the arena twice, she couldn’t fault those who quietly took their fate into their own hands rather than surrender it to the hands of the enemy. She’d been grateful that Haymitch manipulated Snow into that execution order. When it seemed no escape was possible, dying at least somewhat on her terms had looked pretty damn appealing.

“If you want to go to the Memorial Wall, I’ll take you down there before you leave,” Dazen said, as Johanna felt the dog twining its way around her ankles. She reached down to scratch it on the ears, feeling the silky warmth of its short fur. “I still go there for Sanne anyway.”

She didn’t know who Sanne was, but obviously she was someone dear to Dazen that had died. She realized guiltily just how little interest she’d had in most of the other victors. She’d trusted Finnick, and thus Mags by extension as his mentor partner and someone obviously dear to him. She’d trusted Blight and Cedrus even if she felt like she couldn’t rely on them fully. Of course she’d trusted Haymitch. Aside from that handful of people, she really hadn’t much bothered with the rest of them except in passing. It felt odd to think that as alone as he’d been, Haymitch had still had more friends, and closer ones, than she had.

“Thanks, Daze. Be taking you up on that,” Haymitch said in acknowledgment.

“Come over for dinner if you want,” she offered impulsively. “Be happy to have you.” She couldn’t say exactly where it had come from, but having seen how broken and lonely Haymitch had been, seeing the fingerprints of it on him still, she wouldn’t condemn anyone else to that.

Dozing through the worst of the early afternoon heat when it was too hot to do anything seemed like a good idea. The air conditioning was apparently broken, or maybe even here in the power-generating district, they had to conserve enough that it couldn’t be run constantly. Tugging off her shirt and kicking off her trousers, relieved that with him the scars didn’t matter and lying down on the bed in her underwear, she said, “Seriously, don’t get any ideas. I’m just trying to cool off.” The idea of working up a sweat making love just didn’t appeal right then—maybe after dark when hopefully it cooled down.

Stripping down to his own undershorts, settling down beside her, he said with a smirk, “Wouldn’t dream of it, darlin’. Wouldn’t want to get you all hot and bothered so you need a cold shower to keep from jumping me.”

Anyone else making that joke would have gotten their head bitten off because fuck cold showers and the bad reminders they brought up. But considering he’d been through it as well, she gave him a pass. The fact the drowsiness of the heat was already making her sleepy probably helped too.

He was gone when she woke up, though she heard his voice faintly. Padding quietly downstairs, she heard he was on the phone. “…yeah, I get you, sweetheart.” Apparently he was talking to Katniss. He let out a deep, heavy sigh. “Katniss. Look. Ain’t saying he’s entirely right. But you make time with the dead too long, you start to forget how to be with the living.” The words were laced through with the bitter, tired knowledge of experience. He was right, though. He’d dragged himself back into the world of the living, and sometimes she thought he still dwelled too much with the dead. “Oh, for fuck’s sake, if you’re not gonna listen, why did you ev—“

So Katniss was ranting beyond the point of listening to advice. She held a hand out for the telephone. Shrugging, Haymitch handed it over. “Hey, Kittycat,” she said with a smirk. “What’s Hotbuns done that you want to string him up by his guts?” It had to be Peeta, after all. Nobody could piss a person off like those closest and most beloved.
There were a few moments of dead air. Then Katniss sullenly said, “I was trying to help the work crew at the mayor’s house. For Madge. My friend. The girl who gave me the mockingjay pin.”

Another pause. “She was Maysilee Donner’s niece.” Yeah, she knew about Maysilee now, could put the name to the face of the blond girl who’d been Hayitch’s ally all those years ago. “Peeta was getting pissed off and saying I needed to not spend all my time down there, that I was coming home like I was a ghost myself.” Her voice was almost a mumble at that last. She could imagine Peeta getting frantic at seeing her slip away, unable to think of any way to bring her back except to try to keep her from that place. It wasn’t hard to remember that night with Haymitch after they’d recovered Peeta’s family and how she’d had to yank him back from the precipice of guilt and loss. “He got to bury his family. I want to bury my friend, that’s all.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” she said. “But?”

“But then when I’d had some time to think and I decided I’d tell him to stuff it where the sun ain’t shining, that Madge deserves as good as his family, he comes along and he’s acting like we didn’t even fight and he’s making cheese buns for me and trying to get me in bed!” The squawk of outrage must have been nearly loud enough to reach Haymitch’s ears.

She couldn’t help it, staring cracking up imagining it, Peeta ready to put it aside and Katniss just then spoiling to really start the fight. “Oh, hell. Sweetie. Let Auntie Jo give you some advice, mm? It’s like sex.” Haymitch got an exaggerated expression of interest at that, eyes wide and a smirk on his face, and she tried to not start snickering at him too. “Men, well, they’re quick to get going and quick to finish.”

“I ain’t quick to finish, thank you,” Haymitch pointed out with mock outrage. “You need me to prove it again?”

“Is Haymitch there making sex jokes?” Katniss groaned. She waved for Haymitch to shut up, though she was kind of enjoying the banter, and also enjoying how as usual it got to Katniss.

“Anyway, seems like we women take a bit longer to get warmed up and to get to the end. Sex and temper both. You ever see two men fight over something and ten minutes later they’re having drinks together like best pals? Two women fight and a week later they’re still saying ‘I hate that bitch’s guts.’ So when the thickheaded idiot we’re in love with,” she smirked at Haymitch, “is already done and moved on, we’re just getting wound up and ready to really fight.” She’d seen it a few times with Haymitch. She’d seen it with Finnick too, back in the day. After the initial quarrel, brooding and stewing and growing more pissed off about the thing, and when she charged out ready to fight with full fury and hit him up with it, it was catching him stunned and totally off-guard because he’d already left the argument behind in his mind. “So yeah, he already wrote the fight off as done.”

“But we weren’t finished!” Katniss said irritably.

“So sit him down and start it up again. Without yelling from the start,” she said with a shrug.

“Fine,” she grumped.

“Though you might get what you want by bringing it up right after giving him a good blowjob. Just saying.” In her experience it seemed like men were often both mindless and grateful enough to agree to pretty much anything at that point.

“Gee, thanks, Johanna,” and Katniss’ voice was a mix of exasperation and horror.

“Hey, it’s useful life advice. Here’s Haymitch.” She passed the phone to Haymitch who was obviously doing his best to contain his own laughter.
“Well, if you do kill him, remember, don’t use arrows because that’ll lead right back to you. Also you’re stuck hiding the body on your own, and he’s built damn solid,” Haymitch jokingly warned her. “Uh huh. Yeah, you too. ‘Bye.” He hung up the phone.

“Aw, their first big fight. They grow up so fast,” she said, and he laughed in answer to that.

“Chances are he’ll just go with her, probably better that he does. They’ll figure it out. They’re good kids.”

“You’re sounding disgustingly sentimental,” she teased him, leaning back against the countertop. “Whatever happened to Haymitch the cynical bastard?”

His smile was a little bit self-conscious, but sincere all the same. “Got some reason to care about the living now, don’t I?”

“Still here,” she reassured him quietly, reaching out and taking his hands in hers.
“Well, ready for some more fun, Haymitch?” Dacia Goldgleam smiled at him, all white teeth unnatural against her sky-blue skin as her fingertip traced idly over his chest.

No, he wasn’t ready for more. Between multiple rounds with both Dacia and her sister Cherusca, frankly, he was fucked out and the thought of it was enough to exhaust him, but they’d injected him with something that made him respond nonetheless and his cock was still hard as anything, had been for the last few hours, and it hurt like hell. Most eighteen-year-old boys would happily fantasize about a threesome with two rich and horny nineteen-year-old girls. Of course, most teenage boys weren’t hired and threatened when it came to sex, and they weren’t facing a pair of freaks with dyed skin and dagger-like nails that had already left his back feeling like he’d had a cat dragged across it. He’d known from Briar that women took longer than men to get aroused, but yeah, they damn well could just keep going, and going, and going, and when it was two of them that were equally demanding, it was hell rather than any kind of fantasy.

But he could hardly plead that, or just beg for them to leave him alone already. So instead he struggled for a moment, casting around for something that would buy him even a little time but would fit with what they expected of him, the person they thought he was. Chantilly was trying to teach him how to deal with it better, the training they got in One about how to cope and how to gain the upper hand as best could be done. It was either that, or if he insisted on resisting and protesting, he’d end up with only the ones that wanted to make it as brutal as possible. With memories of last year where it felt like all he could do was submit and be fucked and then try to scrub his own skin off were still sharp in his mind, he had listened to her. He’d survived life in Twelve, harsh as it was, he would learn to deal with this. “Patience, ladies,” he said with an arrogant smirk he hoped looked real enough to pass muster. Remembering that once he’d actually been a cocky little bastard in truth seemed so far away now. “All good things are gonna come to those who wait.”

Cherusca’s hand brushed down his arm. He didn’t know what the Capitol doctors had done to give her that unnaturally snow-pale skin that shone like diamonds, but she felt cool to the touch too, like a reptile rather than the warmth of a human woman. “I never was good at waiting.”

“He’s mine!” Dacia snapped, scowling over at her sister and swatting the hand resting on Haymitch’s arm, “it’s my turn! He’s mine!” She reached down and grabbed his cock like she owned it, and he gritted his teeth and tried to not whimper or cry out because it was pure pain rather than pleasure.

He woke up with a gasp and the words he’s mine, he’s mine ringing in his ears and the memory of the Goldgleam sisters fighting over him. Like the butcher’s mutts fought over the few scraps and bones left each day when Callum was finished, back when Haymitch used to help out there when he was a little kid. With the snares the old man had showed him how to make, they’d gotten by at home. But when he was seven or eight, taking out the trash after school, those dogs and how they’d been ravenously waiting for the discards with hungry eyes had unnerved him.

Laying his head back on the uncomfortably hot pillow, his mind settled a bit and he realized he wasn’t eight and facing those dogs, or eighteen and stuck with the Goldgleam sisters treating him like their personal sex toy.

He heard the rustle of Johanna stirring next to him. He didn’t bother apologizing for waking her up. Neither of them did by this point. It was simply known and accepted that some nights, it would happen.
She didn’t touch him yet. That made him love her all the more, that understanding and acceptance that an instinctive move to comfort might not be for the best right at that moment. She’d wait for him to make that first move, as he did for her when it was one of her bad nights.

Some of those nights he’d start to shake it off quickly after waking, and others he would just wait it out. But there were times like tonight when the barrier between past and present seemed more like a gauzy curtain than a solid wall, when he could still feel those hands on his skin like it had been seconds ago rather than years.

He rolled over and kissed Johanna, hand turning her face towards his. A rough and desperate kind of kiss, needing this too much, to overlay the memory with this new reality, to banish the boy he’d been with the immediacy of the man he was now—a man who loved and was loved, who would never again need to submit himself to torture or degradation.

Her tongue pushed into his mouth and her hands pushed their way beneath the t-shirt he was wearing, shoving it up to allow better access. The feel of it, the calluses and the shape of her hands, how she touched him, was so familiar by now. With that response he knew she was all right with this, that she wanted him in return.

He felt the Goldgleam girls already receding a step away from him. Not nearly enough, though. He needed her closer than that. His hands were shaking like they used to when he’d been without a bottle of liquor for a day or so as he tugged at her pajamas, shoving her pants down her hips as she lifted them to help him out. He needed her so much in that moment he felt like he was going to fumble around or come in about ten seconds, like he was a teenage boy in truth.

He could hear his breathing, harsh and uneven, half panicked. Her hands were far steadier than his as they undid the drawstring of his pants and pushed them down. But at the touch of her hand on his cock, he froze, letting out a sharp, almost panicked protest of “Don’t.” The memory was right there of Dacia's hand on him, and the drugs and the sheer excruciating pain they’d caused, the hours and hours of that long night.

Immediately she let go of him. But for the moment it was no good, it was right there between the two of them. The awkward fear was suddenly there that hell, he wasn’t even sure he could get it up to make love to his own wife with how fucked up his mind was at the moment. Turning over and lying there on his back, giving a grunt of frustration, he put his hands over his eyes and let out a heavy sigh. Time to turn to Plan B, apparently.

The mantra had seemed utterly stupid the first time the head doctor in Thirteen insisted he go through it, especially doing it out loud for Aurelius. When he was more himself, in the light of day, even now he thought it was chock full of the “No shit, really?” fairly obvious kind of information. But it helped at times like these when he was unsteady and in need of finding firm ground again. Say the things that you know are true about your life.

“My name is Haymitch Abernathy,” he began steadily. When he heard Johanna call herself “Johanna Abernathy” now, he couldn’t help the small rush of pleasure and love and a sense of belonging to someone that went through him still. “I am forty-two years old. I survived the 50th Hunger Games when I was sixteen. And the 75th Games last summer, which means I’m the only person in Panem who’s ever endured two Quarter Quells. I messed up both of them so that’s something at least.”

Focusing on slow, even breathing, he began hearing his heartbeat slow on down from its frantic pace from when he woke up. “I started a rebellion to overthrow that bastard Coriolanus Snow. We won. He’s dead. I helped take down Alma Coin. She’s on trial. I was captured. Tortured for six weeks. But I survived. And...I love Johanna Abernathy. My wife. We’ve been married, what, four months now.” She’s one of the few things that keeps me sane and sober every day, he added in the privacy
of his own mind. His hands, clenched into fist, slowly eased.

“Better?” she asked him, propped up on one elbow, the skin of her forearm just brushing against him.

“Yeah,” he said. He reached out, his fingers seeking hers, knitting the two of them together and feeling more secure even by that small gesture. Some nights he wanted to just forget it and go back to bed, and she didn’t question that. But tonight it clung to him and he heard the questioning note in her voice that told him he’d probably said or done something before he woke up that caught her attention. So he asked, almost reluctantly, “What was I saying this time?”

She was quiet, too quiet. Then finally she sighed and said, “You were mumbling stuff like, ’Please. I can’t. It hurts. Don’t touch me.’” In his sleep, he’d been saying all the things his younger self had been screaming inside his head.

He rolled onto his side to face her and tried to keep himself relaxed. “You weren’t on the circuit long enough to find this out.” He was grateful she’d managed to get herself out of it, avoid the worst of the damage. “Eventually…they started to see you as an adult, not a kid.” That had happened sometime early in his twenties, and he could feel the shift in things. “The gloss wears off. The patrons that stuck with you, they wanted you to really play their lover, whatever role you’ve been cast in. It was…a lot easier, in a way. You knew exactly what they wanted and what to expect and how to play the part for them. And you were more used to it anyway by that time. But before you got to that point, those first few years were always the worst…”

“We were just a novelty fuck for them then,” she said flatly. “For anyone who had the cash and the clout. And they could do whatever they wanted with us. Was it one of those for you?”

“Yeah.”

“Are they dead?” she asked matter-of-factly.

“Not that I know of. Don’t know if Brocade’s people have arrested them either.”

“They probably will. She’d said she wants to nail them all for crimes against the people. It’s just a long list.” True enough, and it was all at once reassuring and depressing.

Feeling it recede from him a bit more than he was awake and calmer, he reached over and brushed his free hand against the softness of her cheek, thumb stroking the ridge of her cheekbone, seeing her eyes on him, wide and luminous in the pale moonlight. He cast around in his mind, trying to find something to help settle him again, and with relief, he thought he had found it. “Of course, Aurelius never got to hear the really good stuff about you…” Those last weeks in Thirteen, he and Johanna had been sleeping together, but they’d still been dancing awkwardly around what it meant, and besides, he wasn’t going to admit that to the damn shrink.

“Oh?” He could hear the amusement in her voice as she seemed to sense he was coming back to himself well enough to start to make jokes in that particular tone of voice. “Well, then tell Doctor Hanna all about it.”

“I’m married to Johanna Abernathy,” he said again. “Have been for four months. It’s maybe a good thing she doesn’t walk around naked much anymore because the woman is a fucking distraction. We’d end up having sex all the time.”

“Hell, we do that already,” she scoffed. “You’re about the randiest man I’ve ever met. Good thing we built that kitchen table solid.”
At least she didn’t make a joke about that being all the more remarkable given his age. “I’m making up for lost time,” he offered. After all, he’d pretty much missed out entirely on his late teens, twenties, and thirties in terms of living, period, let alone on having a normal sex life. Some days it felt like the formerly locked gates of something had been opened inside him, that he was rushing to experience all those things he’d been denied so long now that he could finally have them and take joy in them. “And hey, you were the one that insisted we needed to actually test the sturdiness of the table, so that’s absolutely on you.”

“Well, I’m not saying it’s a bad thing,” she answered, and he could hear the offer in her voice, and the question of Want to give it another go?

“Let’s see. Things I know are true. She’s small, but then again, I ain’t exactly tall either. But she’s made just right. Gotta admit I’m very partial to her breasts.” He reached out and cupped one in his hand, feeling the softness of it, the pebbling of her nipple against his palm. “Since they’re pretty magnificent, I have to say. Worth appreciating. Regularly.” He leaned down and kissed it, flicking his tongue across her nipple, hearing her swift inhalation, paying the same equal attention to the other one.

“Though her ass is damn fine too,” he went on, his other hand settling on the curve of it, gently squeezing. “After all, I really like a woman with something I can hold onto there.”

“Can you imagine the head doctor listening to this?” she said with a snicker. “He’d be sitting there with his pen and paper going, ‘Oh, that’s very good. But how does it make you feel?’”

“How does it make you feel?” She wiggled a bit against his hand, the invitation now more than clear. To his relief, he could feel the first stirrings of interest in his cock at the thought of it.

He smirked at her, rolling onto his back and pulling her over him. “Randy?” He stretched up and kissed her again.

He’d covered well enough with the jokes, but the lingering last bits of the memory still made him a bit rougher than usual on her, but that was all right. She could take it and not be frightened or intimidated by it, just as he did the same for her when she woke up screaming. She’d walked that road too and she wouldn’t abandon him when he found himself stumbling in the darkness again. As he gripped her hips harder, urging her on, she moved on him faster and harder for it, her own fingers clenching tighter on his shoulders, as if she knew he needed the heat and the urgency and ferocity of it to successfully burn away the last traces of the nightmare. It worked. There was no room for anything else but her, the sight of her silvered by the moonlight as she moved and arched over him, the sound of the small gasps and whimpers and moans she made, the smell of her skin and her sweat, the feel of her body.

Feeling her shudder against him with a sharp gasp, feeling the pulse of her around him as she found her peak, she shifted and changed her angle just a bit and still kept pushing it relentlessly, giving both him and herself no quarter. Her cheek pressed against his as she seized his earlobe in her teeth for a moment and then said in his ear, low and fierce, “You’re mine, Haymitch. Not theirs.”

That too helped, covering over the words said then by Dacia, rather than being an uncomfortable reminder of them. There was possession in Johanna’s tone, yes, but love also. He was never less than himself to her, a whole man that she loved and lived with and bickered with and kept steady through the rough times, not just a victor to show off, not just a cock to fuck. “Yes,” he said lowly, nuzzling her neck. He belonged to her, body and soul, but she gave him the whole of herself in return, and so she didn’t own him. That was the difference.
Just before he gave himself up to the crest of pleasure he heard her cry out again. Leaning on him, panting with her breath warm against his neck, he held onto her for long minutes, feeling the calm lassitude coming over him, until she climbed off him. He lay back down then, pulling her in back in against his body. She lay there sprawled over him, head tucked under his chin, and her fingers trailed a path across his other shoulder, brushing for a moment through the hair on his chest. She laid her hand flat, her palm right over the still rapid beat of his heart.

“Still alive,” he told her. “In case you were checking. Still yours too,” he added softly.

“Finn told me about the forcefield, back in the arena,” she said. “That…” Her fingers twitched slightly against his chest. He tried to not think about the particular tone in her voice when she said Finnick’s name, even now, or about what whispered conversations the two might have had in the arena. More than that, he remembered hearing from Johanna how Blight had died. Maybe he’d been closer to him than Johanna had, but she had been the one left to find him, killed by the forcefield. Was she imagining him like that, lying there dead but for the lucky happenstance of Finnick knowing how to bring him back to life? “There were times I could tell they were working you over with the electrical wires,” she murmured. “By what they were saying, the sounds you made too. And…I kept thinking about Blight and thinking about you, and the electricity already killed you once, maybe all it would take was one asshole doing it a little too long, a little too strong, and…”

“I’d be more done than a New Year’s goose,” he said with dry sarcasm, because the horror of that was still too close to the surface too, and mocking it was the best way he knew to make it bearable. “It could have happened. They fucks it up with Lavinia, the Avox girl, and killed her. But…I’m OK. I mean, I got through all that training bullshit in Thirteen, couldn’t have done that with a bum heart. I’ll just try to—look, are you worrying about this because we’re in Five? I promise I ain’t gonna go play with any powerlines.” They’d toured one of the powerplants yesterday. Maybe that was it.

“Better not,” she said. “I don’t aim to lose you to something stupid like that.”

Somehow it was easier to talk about things in these quiet, relaxed moments together after sex than to just sit down and discuss them off the cuff. When they were like this, naked not only in body but in some ways, in spirit as well, the armor of wit and sarcasm had already been laid aside and the soft spots and the scars showed. Being already so vulnerable, the next step of laying more of their hearts and minds bare became easier. “You ever dream about that, me and the forcefield in the arena?” he asked her softly. “You saw the footage?” He’d seen it. Watching himself die had been surreal, to say the least.

“I saw it.” Her breathing was shaky for a moment, and she lifted her head, eyes on his face. “And yeah. Sometimes. And I’m the one there rather than Finnick and I don’t have the first fucking clue how to bring you back.”

He might have said something about Blight, about how by the time the darkness had lifted and she could have found him, she would have been far too late to save him anyway, but he knew it wouldn’t help.

He hesitated, his hand on her back tracing small idle circles, as much to touch her and reassure himself that she was there and real as for her sake. “Sometimes,” he admitted in a rough whisper, “I worry I’ll wake up. And I don’t know where I’ll be. Maybe I’m in that cell again. Maybe the arena with that shitty jungle. Maybe I’m drunk off my ass back in Twelve. Maybe I’m eighteen and I wish I was dead because I just had another half-dozen patron night. Hell, maybe I’m even back in the arena for the Second Quell. I don’t know…but I think when I wake up, I won’t be here. This is too good to be true. So it must be the dream.” He sighed softly and went on, “But that’s the venom
talking, and the fear. And…this is real. I know that.” Cupping her face in his hands and kissing her gently, he told her, “Because you always bring me back.”

~~~~~~~~~~

Time had passed swiftly in Five. Another meeting with Mayor Morath and Haymitch was busy once again arguing with the man about the electrical plants that were coal-fired. “Almost half of our production comes from coal!” Morath said with frustration. “If the entire electrical grid was up and running to all the districts, there’s no way we could supply all that power.”

“Yeah, but the Capitol probably made you build coal-fired plants so they could create a demand for Twelve to make us go mine coal,” Haymitch said, throwing his hands in the air in irritation. “And hell, we didn’t have power half the time in Twelve anyway!”

“That’s because coal’s so inefficient,” Morath said with exasperation. “The supply was shipped cross-country so it was always uncertain, whereas the hydroelectric and solar and wind sources are local.”

“So why the hell are we talking about needing coal for power plants you don’t even like? There ain’t gonna be coal mining in Twelve anytime soon, I can guarantee you that.”

“Well, we’ve got to do something because once the power grid is repaired, we simply can’t keep up with demand,” Morath insisted.

Seeing that Haymitch was stubbornly stuck on the idea of no more people dead in the coal mines ever and Esteban Morath was stubbornly trying to make the best of what he had in his district to keep all of Panem from bitching when their power didn’t work, Johanna decided to cut to the chase and reduce it back to practicality. “Does it strike you how idiotic it is that all the power production is in the southwest of Panem and you have to run lines all the way out to the other districts?”

Morath raised his bushy grey eyebrows. “Capitol made it that way,” he said. “But yes, the efficiency losses in running current from here all the way north to the farthest part of Seven or all the way east to Eleven and Twelve was…well, let’s be honest. It was ridiculous. We had to produce so much more power than ever made it out there just to account for that.”

Johanna let out a snort of amusement. “All the more reason to not keep it that way, right? Not gonna be able to use solar up in Six—shit, the sun probably ain’t shining there but what, five days a year? But I remember they’ve got themselves some good rivers. We had a dam in Seven in the north by Five Wolf Lake.” Apparently it had been badly damaged by the rebels during the fighting. “Ten and Nine have good rivers and some nice flat land for windmills. Probably makes more sense to build more power plants locally, doesn’t it?”

“But there’s nobody outside of Five who understands how power production and electrical conveyance works!”

“Yeah,” Haymitch said, leaning back in his chair, “but it’ll help that the borders will be open now and people from Five can travel—or move—to any district they choose. If you can get a few willing to move there, even just for a few years, and help train the locals, problem solved.”

“I suppose you’re both right. Line repair is honestly what most of our district’s citizens were employed in, because when something failed out in the borderlands between, say, Seven and Eight, we had to send a work crew all the way from here to go deal with it. Repairing and replacing cable too, constantly. It was…inefficient, to say the least. Us, Three with their communications lines, and Six with running the workforce transportation—we all have citizens who were probably only ever
in-district for mandatory gatherings on Reaping Day and Tour Day.”

“So let’s not throw more effort in a bad system here. May mean the power supply is a bit dicey for a while as you’re building production places, sure, but it’ll work better in the end, right?”

“I’ll have to see who’s interested in moving out-of-district to help be some of the starter staff for new sites.” Morath gave both of them a wry smile. “Though since some of our people have barely lived here since they were eighteen that really may not be a hard sell.”

“Well, your people know better than I do what’ll work best for building a new power plant in terms of requirements,” Haymitch answered. “I know where there’s a river but I’ve got no damn clue if it’s a good one for your purposes. So if you’ve got some scout crews willing to go out to the other districts, check it out, and draw up some plans?”

“Of course. I’ll make the announcement tomorrow.”

“Ain’t it nice when we can just get along?” she said sweetly.

Back at the Mesa, sitting down to lunch with Dazen, she said to Haymitch, “You got pretty damn fired up about the coal. No pun intended.”

He looked at her and she could see from the intensity in his eyes he felt this one deeply as she had thought. “There were too many funerals in Twelve. Too many bodies families never even got back to bury. We all knew enough widows and widowers and orphans. If coal’s gotta be done, it’s damn well gonna be done a lot safer than it was. I ain’t letting Esteban Morath, or even Brocade, rush what few people are left from Twelve to open the mines again and cost more lives by doing it sloppy just so some lightbulbs can work.”

“I think enough have died overall since Panem began because for the Capitol, life was held too cheaply,” Dazen said softly. “We shouldn’t make their mistake all over again.”

Sensing the mood at the table, she said, “So what’s for lunch? Going to light our mouths on fire again, Dazen?” Dazen found out quickly he’d had to tone down his cooking for the two of them. The Five spices were mostly unfamiliar to begin—Seven and Twelve weren’t exactly known for spicy fare—and then Dazen apparently had an iron tongue and gut and liked to dump the hot pepper in.

“It’s duck today that a kid in the village snared for me,” he said, passing her the platter. “Supplies from Ten are unreliable at best right now, and I don’t want to start a meat war,” and that he directed jokingly at Haymitch.

“Meat war?” Obviously this was another of those references that was before her time.

Haymitch just grunted and with a faintly sheepish look, piled some of the duck on top of the thin flatbread made with tesserae grain. “Before your time,” he said, confirming her suspicion.

That left her looking at Dazen. “So?” she coaxed.

“Must have been when Haymitch was about twenty. It was the year they had the wild pigs…”

“55th. Spark was the victor that year. I was twenty-one,” Haymitch interjected, and by this point the sharpness of his memory didn’t surprise her. “The year before Greer.”

“Ah,” Dazen said, and a momentary sadness touched his expression at the mention of his mentoring partner. Recovering, he went on, “So anyway, some of the tributes were cooking pieces of one and
Haymitch and Chaff get into this argument about exactly what sauce is appropriate to put on a slow-cooked pig. Apparently Twelve and Eleven have very clear ideas about pork."

“We’d have a pig barbecue occasionally at a wedding if everyone could chip in a bit to buy one from the butcher. Same in Eleven, sounds like. And I told that idiot, you don’t ever put tomatoes in the sauce,” Haymitch scoffed, though she could see both fondness and pain in his face at the memory of a good friend. He and Chaff had been virtually inseparable during the Games. She could still remember seeing the two of them in their mentor chairs, passing a bottle and cracking jokes.

“Right, so they go back and forth and bellow about it and they’re getting more and more pissed, and we’re all just laughing our asses off, and Angus decides to poke the rattlesnake a bit more, chimes in they’re both morons, because if you wanted to do a barbecue right, you damn well use beef.”

“And me and Chaff, that stopped us both from yelling at each other and we both told Angus he was an idiot because everybody knows it’s about the pork,” Haymitch said, now finally chuckling a bit. He smiled, a little wistfully. “Maybe I ought to give the damn tomatoes a try. For Chaff.”

Reaching for another chunk of the cake-like bread they made with honey here in Five, she said, “Bet Brutus was listening to the whole conversation and just hoping someone would actually make some of that stuff.”

That set both of the men off laughing, and she smirked victoriously, taking a bite of the bread.

“Anyway,” Dazen said finally, “I was going to the Memorial Hall today after the worst of the heat passes, so…”

“Ah, yeah,” Haymitch answered. “We should go.”

“Is the tribute cemetery right there?” she asked.

Dazen hesitated and then nodded. “They made us keep it here in the district center. If we’d had our way we’d have at least put them up on a bluff…” It had been like that in Seven also. If they could have, she was sure they’d have buried the tributes out somewhere peaceful in the woods, away from the lumber and paper mills and carpentry shops. That was what they did with their own dead, and planted the memorial tree in the winter town to visit. Instead they’d had to bury all the tributes in the winter town too.

Haymitch raised a questioning eyebrow, obviously wondering why she wanted to visit there, but apparently he was smart enough to reason it out. She was grateful he didn’t speak up.

“Could you do me a favor when you leave?” Dazen asked Haymitch.

“Sure, what?”

“Communications in Nine are apparently down still and the phones don’t work. Clover and I, well, we talked a good bit those times were down in the training room in the Training Center. Since we were two of the ones left with nobody else in the room with us on our floors, you know? And I haven’t been able to get hold of her since we all split up. Maybe it’ll be fixed by the time you get there, but just in case, can I give you a letter to take to her?”

She saw Haymitch study Dazen with interest for a minute, and whatever thoughts he had must have been all right, because finally he nodded. She had her suspicions, but again, it was that frustrating wall of history she didn’t know and wasn’t a part of in the way these two were. “Of course. Be glad to do it.”

Walking down to the Justice Building a few hours later after another nap through the heat and calling
Katniss to wish her a happy eighteenth birthday, she chatted with Dazen about the place, the odd material they used for it and the round tower. Timber framing, of course, which she was used to seeing, and apparently some bricks too, but it was all covered over with a hard shell of a pale, clay-like substance. It had interested her on her Tour, different and even more incongruous against the glass and solar panels of a lot of the other buildings, but she was hardly going to ask Gemma about it. “The adobe stays pretty cool in the heat,” Dazen said. “A lot better than the houses in the Mesa, actually. Apparently there used to be quite a few buildings like that back when it was North America.”

She could see he was right. Immediately after stepping inside out of the searing sun, the coolness of the interior was welcome. Brushing off her sweaty brow, she said grumpily, “And of course the cemetery’s outside.”

“Unfortunately. The exit to it is towards the back. But here,” Dazen said, nodding to a booth where a tall, thin woman with grey-streaked dark red hair had baskets of candles. “You want white, for remembering the dead,” he informed Haymitch.

“So what are the others for?” she asked, seeing red and blue also.

“Red’s for newlyweds. Part of our marriage rites.” He gave them that grin again. “Like I said, it seems more meaningful than a lightbulb, right?” Remembering coming out of the bitter winter cold and lighting the first fire in their house together in Twelve as part of their own marriage ritual, bringing light and warmth, making it into a new home for her, maybe home for the first time for him ever. Then she remembered what it had been like making love in front of that fire on her forest cat rug after they got Katniss and Peeta out the door. She remembered too how once they got to Two and the electric lights, some kind of the idyll and magic of their quiet life by candlelight had receded into the past. Glancing over at Haymitch, she wondered if he was remembering the same. “And blue’s for good wishes for a new kid,” Dazen went on. Haymitch didn’t flinch. His expression didn’t change at all.

“All right, white it is,” he said calmly, stepping forward to the candlemaker. “That’s the Memorial Hall?” He nodded to an open doorway where she could see the flickering shine of candles within, against dark walls.

“Yeah. Tribute cemetery’s this way,” Dazen told her, leading the way through the lobby of the building. Back out into the too-hot, too-bright sunlight, she squinted and saw the dazzling white of the marble headstones there, row upon row. “You want me here, or…”

“I’ve got it,” she said, shaking her head dismissively. “You go deal with your candle for Sanne.” She’d learned from Haymitch that she’d been Dazen’s wife, dead almost ten years now. Even the greater wealth of Five, and a victor’s riches, couldn’t deal with treating cancer. Only the very best hospitals in the Capitol had that kind of ability, and she knew Snow would have had no interest at all in letting a victor’s wife come there for treatment when simply letting her die slowly and in agony would have been such a more effective message to Dazen about how powerless he still really was. Her Auntie Inge had died of cancer two winters after Johanna’s Games. At least she’d been able to buy her morphling for the excruciating pain, which she wouldn’t have been able to do before. That had been one of the few times she actually felt good about being a victor. Dazen had been able to do at least that much to ease Sanne’s passing.

Moving among the rows, she read some of the names. Steven Flores. Maria Chapman. Finally, she found the marker. The girl from Five that year had been named Georgina Nunez. The boy…well, for her, there was no forgetting the boy. Clark Saunders, reaped as District Five tribute in the 66th Hunger Games.
She remembered him, big and stocky. She remembered his blond hair and the greasy feel of it beneath her fingers after four days in the arena without a bath, as she tried to push him away from her. She remembered his crooked front tooth she’d seen while his mouth was contorted in a grimace of lust and rage and fear. She remembered his dark eyes, wide and wild as he looked down at her, as he ground against her, pressing her down into the grass and forcing her legs open. *Let’s give the sponsors a show.*

Looking at his marker, she didn’t know exactly why she had come. She didn’t know whether she wanted to kick it or piss on it or break down or what. She only knew that whatever she’d become in the arena in order to survive, Clark Saunders and how he’d tried to rape her before intending to kill her had been the catalyst for it. That had been the thing that finally got through her terror, the realization that everyone back home would watch *this*, watch her being violated. She’d expected to die. She hadn’t expected that. She knew better now, knew it would have been edited out and the tape only sold to the most perverted Capitol types with a taste for that.

She thought she’d escaped that fate and a year later there she was lying underneath Gaius Luna and others after, enduring it times beyond counting over the next few summers, shamed and humiliated and hurt. It was all the same to them, wasn’t it? They thought they had the right to do what they wanted to her to get what they wanted. “Bastard,” she hissed at his headstone. “You fucking bastard. We all went kind of crazy, but...what kind of sick little shit were you to begin with? We knew we had to kill to get out of there alive. We didn’t have to rape. We didn’t have to torture. You motherfucker. You tried it because you wanted to, because you wanted to feel like you were powerful in that hellhole, and that’s all. Maybe nobody deserved the Reaping but I’m not going to damn well cry that I killed you. I’d fucking kill you outside of the arena if you tried it now. I defended myself. I’m not going to apologize. And I don’t forgive you. You know what? I’d never even been kissed yet and the first time a boy touched me, it was like *that*. But I’m not little Hanna now. I survived even worse than you. I’ve moved beyond you. So fuck you, Clark. You don’t matter.”

With that she turned and walked away, feeling like at least some weight had been lifted off her shoulders by it. She paused for a moment at the stone for Marissa Mellone, remembering a few moments of the red-haired girl from the 74th Games, and told her, “If you found a way out of the arena on your own terms, good for you. Means you were damn well smarter than the rest of us and smarter than the Capitol. And you found a way that you didn’t spend the next few decades suffering for it like Haymitch did. We’ll light a candle for you.”

Pulling open the door into the Justice Building, she stepped back into the cool shade of it. Walking across the multicolored tiles of the floor, she went to the candlemaker. “A red and a white one,” she requested. “Four months still counts as newlyweds, right?”

The woman handed them over, giving her a smile. “Congratulations to you too, by the way.” At least she didn’t jokingly ask if a blue candle might be needed in the future.

The Memorial Hall was made of polished dark stone, so the light of the flickering candles reflected all the more sharply. She looked and saw the names etched on the various slabs of stone by year, and some blank panels on the wall for Five’s dead yet to come. Several others were there lighting their candles also. Dazen was there, lighting several candles, presumably for his wife and for Laurence and Lamina and Greer, and she had the feeling he might be near the section that had Sanne’s name on it. Seeing Haymitch kneeling and finishing lighting what looked like a good dozen candles, she went and knelt by his side. “Who?” she asked, nodding to them.

“Too many,” he said simply. “That lady doesn’t have enough for ‘em all. So...just figured this might cover it. To let them know I don’t forget.”
That was both his blessing and his curse, in some ways. Reaching out, she placed the white candle upright in the clay rack, spatters and dribbles of wax speaking of other candles that had been there until they had burned out. Striking the match, she reached out and lit it. He didn’t ask who she lit it for. Maybe he assumed it was for Marissa, though she figured he’d taken care of that himself. Shit, she hoped he didn’t think it was for that asshole Clark. “For Marissa,” she found herself lying clumsily about it.

Sorry, she thought to the kid they weren’t going to have, the baby she would have had now in about three months. But somehow, watching the flame of it and how it reflected off the stone, it eased the hurt of it a little bit. I haven’t forgotten you either. She didn’t think Haymitch had either, but she didn’t know it mattered to him so much. Coming in the middle of everything as it had, and it wasn’t like they’d been trying for a kid, or known she was pregnant before that. Maybe he’d simply shrugged off the burden of it more easily than she had.

Taking a deep breath and trying to clear her mind, she put the red candle in the next holder. He looked at it, and even by candlelight she knew he could see the color was obviously different. “A little extra luck for us would never hurt,” he commented with warmth and amusement in his voice. Taking his hand in hers, they reached out and lit the candle together, watching the wick catch and the flame burst to life, another pinpoint of light in the Hall. “You’ll be my light in the darkness,” he murmured, words she remembered from the Twelve wedding song, as his hand squeezed hers.

“And you’re mine,” she whispered back, knowing that tonight, for the first time in years, she wouldn’t worry that she would dream of Clark.
The people of District Eight clung to the shadows now, always in a rush in the cool spring morning, as if trying to melt into the shabby brick and timber walls of the slums they lived in and escape the notice of the Peacekeepers patrolling every street. The bright headscarves of their women made trying to blend in something of a moot point, but the haste and the fearful avoidance were there all the same.

Theo could hardly blame them. They’d blown up a factory. They’d blown up a fucking factory two months ago. It would have been one thing if the rebels had held the place and were shooting at the Peacekeepers trying to recapture the district.

It could have been that way. For a time it had been brutal fighting against well-supplied rebels making use of the armory from Peacekeeper HQ, and the Peacekeepers were capturing the district back building by building. He was lucky. He’d taken only minor wounds for his trouble, a few near-misses and clips by lucky shots, but nothing serious. He didn’t like to think how many rebels he must have killed. He knew of at least a half-dozen he knew he’d shot himself that he had watched die—however many more he hadn’t seen, he didn’t know.

But that had been putting down the rebellion. The factory, though, that clung to him still. They’d almost finished recapturing Eight and quieting things down, just mopping up a few last diehard holdouts among the rebels. There had been no good reason to do it. But all the same on a cold and grey Tuesday morning the explosion had rocked the air, and even most of the Peacekeepers hadn’t known what the fuck had just happened. They only heard back at HQ that they’d blown the factory as a message to rebels here and elsewhere, since apparently the rebellion had been conceived there, sedition and treason whispered below the whirring and clacking noise of the constantly flying shuttles and sewing machine needles.

Three hundred and thirteen dead was the official count, because the work shift had been running in full force. Even the children were there after their day at school. Men. Women. Children. Passing by the rubble, he had smelled the powder and smoke and the stench of burned human flesh. Body parts lay in the street where the power of the blast had thrown them. He remembered looking down and seeing there had been a hand too small to belong to anything but a child, the palm turned up as if in supplication, the fingers half-curler in.

It had the intended effect on the rebels. The other factories ran swiftly and efficiently and without a hint of dissent. Theo doubted they even really needed as many Peacekeepers as were set to guard the workfloor each day to enforce the total silence and isolation of the workers as much as was possible. The message had been made loud and clear.

True enough that children paid the price every year in the Games for the treason of the districts during the Dark Days, and maybe this was really no different than that. But still, that child’s hand haunted his thoughts sometimes. Had things been different, he would still have been out in the districts too. He might have had a kid himself, probably would have, given that almost nobody was unmarried by twenty-five when they all lived fast and died young. He might have been unhappy enough with his life…no, never mind those thoughts. Dangerous, and wrong besides. His life as a Peacekeeper was better than anything he would ever have had in Twelve, laboring his life away in the mines and like as not, dying while his kids were still young.

But he went around day by day still thinking that perhaps some kind of a line had been crossed now, and there was no way to step over it again. No way to take it back. So the days just went on and that was that. Eight had been recaptured and pacified and that was what mattered. At least they got
permission for the locals to go dig in the rubble and retrieve what sad, pathetic broken bits they could of their dead so they wouldn’t stink with the warming weather.

Though then once the retrieval was done, they’d been ordered to confiscate the bodies and make the locals dump them in a common pit outside the district center. “They don’t deserve the comfort of laying traitors to a proper rest,” Head Bloodgood had said fiercely. “I don’t want any memorials to those bastards.”

The men and women of Eight hadn’t given any obvious lament as they carted the bodies to the trench, burned and broken pieces all unidentifiable. Maybe they were finally too broken to weep. Maybe how destroyed the remains were made it easier than putting a whole body in there, having to look upon the face of a loved one and commit them to that fate.

He could still look to the west from the third floor of HQ, outside the edge of the city, and see the brown scar of overturned earth where he was sure the grass wouldn’t grow this year.

Yet another routine patrol on a miserable day pissing down rain, seeing nothing but white winter greatcoats on their fellow Peacekeepers standing out stark against the dingy brick buildings—it was April already but chilly, as spring was coming late this year this far north—and the furtive figures of the natives. “Rather be inside right now with some coffee, I doubt anyone would even fart now in this district without a say-so,” Thalaea muttered to him, and he couldn’t help but agree with her.

They passed the ruins of the bombed-out factory. When they’d been supervising the workers in the excavation of the dead, they’d all seen the burned and shredded scraps of familiar white cotton and wool. They’d found out soon enough, those that hadn’t been on a duty tour in Eight prior to the rebellion, that the factory had been the one where the workers made all of Panem’s Peacekeeper uniforms. Every time he passed the place now and saw that silent heap of rubble, the uneasy feeling tingled down his spine wondering whose hands in that factory had made the uniform he currently wore even now, and whether or not they were now lying in pieces in that communal pit. It seemed significant to him that the whole thing had started there in the uniform factory, not the factory that wove silks to send to One to be painted, not the factory that made the denim for the jeans and canvas work trousers that the laborers wore in pretty much all the six outlying districts. *They hate us,* he thought with that icy feeling. *And here we are in even greater numbers after kicking the shit out of them.*

They’d quelled the rebels and that was necessary. But the uneasy feeling that they’d put down one rebellion only to sow the seeds of another clung to him. Panem couldn’t keep this many Peacekeepers here forever to maintain a hard hand on the reins of Eight. With the casualties to boot, pulling Peacekeepers from all over to come here meant ranks in all the other districts had to be running thin, and of course they’d reinforced Twelve also due to rumors of unrest there.

Thinking of Twelve brought thoughts of Myrina—how long had it been since he had seen her, heard her voice or her laughter? Near to four months now, it must be, and it seemed like the longer he was here, the grimmer it became, the dimmer the memory of her grew and the dimmer the memory of the man he’d been in One, when things were easy and life was good and it made sense.

He wished he could call her. Even just five minutes. But what would he say? *I want to go home. Away from here. I don’t even know what we’re doing here anymore, babe. The things we did…* Treason to speak it, certainly not within earshot of the Head since the only phone was at HQ. He ought not to even think it, but every time he thought of the factory, of that child’s hand, of that mass grave, it was right there, dark and looming over most everything.

So instead he just turned his face away from the rubble and kept on the duty round. As if anyone would cause trouble tonight—they would all be expected to be crowded around a television for the
mandatory special programming anyway. Something to do with Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark’s wedding. He hadn’t even spoken to his own fiancée in months. He had dreams sometimes about the fighting, about the factory, and woke up in a cold sweat. He could hardly find it in him to care about those two young kids and their giddiness over some lavish Capitol-provided wedding. *Fuck fairy tales, seems like the world is knee-deep in shit,* he thought.

Thalaea seemed lost in her own thoughts. Seemed like most of the Peacekeepers on the duty squad he led didn’t say much of anything these days, except maybe Longinus. The boy was a first-tour, had been assigned to Eight, and wouldn’t stop running his mouth about being here from the beginning for the fight and how he’d show traitors what they deserved, and Theo had taken just about enough of it. Lon was young and cocky and obviously looking to earn his stripes by being a big damn war hero, but he was frankly sick of it. There was no glory to be earned now in babysitting a bunch of pacified, frightened people.

As if he’d summoned him with the thought, he heard Longinus’ voice then, raised from somewhere in an alley up ahead. “Don’t be in such a hurry, girl! Someone might think you’re up to something.”

With a quick glance at Thalaea, seeing her brows furrowed in concern too, the two of them approached. Not running, of course—it didn’t sound urgent, and it wouldn’t do to be seen to appear panicked in front of a district native. Peacekeepers had to strive to be calm and in control.

Longinus had a girl, by the look of her maybe sixteen or seventeen, up against the wall. Not holding her there with his hands on her, but his gloved hands bracketing either side of her shoulders and his arms right there made it difficult for her to try to get away. “Where are you in such a rush to?” he demanded.

“There’s…there’s the mandatory programming tonight, and my shift just ended…” she stammered, green-gold eyes wide with fright. “Please, just…”

“Oh maybe you’re going to a meeting with your little rebel friends, mm?” Lon raised a hand and she flinched. He tugged at the edge of her purple headscarf, his other hand landing on her breast and squeezing roughly. “Maybe I ought to search you to see if you’re smuggling something out of the factory, huh?”

Theo couldn’t say whether she looked more afraid at the hand on her breast or the one looking to yank off her headscarf. He’d never worked in Eight himself, but Theo had always seen the women of Eight on television at Reaping Day and the like, all with their brightly colored scarves. Actaeon had grown up here, though, and he’d heard about the women. Back in the early days working in the factories, even before the Dark Days, too many girls and women were getting injured by their long hair being caught in the constantly moving machinery. The injuries from it were gruesome, to say the least. Apparently District Nine had the same problem with farm machinery. So the solution had been that all District Eight women, while at work, had to cut their hair, or cover it. They chose to cover it, and this being the textiles district, the covering apparently it had evolved from a simple cotton kerchief like most other districts into something utterly personal, the color of it and the embroidery and the fabric salvaged from the factory scraps all utterly significant to the woman in question. Even the way she tied it could apparently mean something.

So the headscarf had evolved from simply practicality to something deeply symbolic and part of the local lifestyle as well. The women of Eight wore their headscarves all the time now, not just at work. Apparently the only people who ever saw their hair were family. *It’s considered immodest now for a woman to show her hair in public,* Actaeon explained, and added with a grin, *though it’s erotic as hell, we boys used to dream about untying a girl’s scarf and seeing her hair, getting our hands in it.* Thinking of how only he saw Rina with her hair down from its regulation utilitarian hairstyle, how
he loved to pull the pins loose and run his fingers through it, he could understand that.

He’d seen a few plain black headscarves lately, for mourning, alongside the bright sky blue and lemon yellow and fuschia pink of the usual offerings. That was the only defiance the local women had showed. He had the feeling more would have worn black if they hadn’t been afraid of it being seen as another attempt at rebellion. They needn’t have worried. He doubted most Peacekeepers even knew what it all meant.

Longinus had been here a couple years though, so he definitely knew what that scarf meant, and that in thinking of yanking it off her, from the girl’s perspective, he might as well strip her naked in public. He wondered suddenly how the girls from Eight felt every Games, since not only were they facing death, they faced it feeling probably ashamed and awkward besides because they always they went into the arena wearing a uniform with Eight’s deep blue, but not their headscarves. Between the scarf and how he was groping her, Longinus obviously meant to shame this girl as much as possible. It pissed him off, frankly. This wasn’t enforcement of the law, it was just a boy trying to be an asshole and frightening a girl to feel more like a man. “We have a problem here with her, Lieutenant Law?” he spoke up coolly.

“Colonel Law,” Longinus gulped, looking embarrassed and caught out for a moment, and then his expression hardened. “Sir, I’m investigat—“

“I really doubt she’s hiding a bomb in her headscarf.” He wouldn’t bark at the boy in front of her. It wouldn’t be professional. But oh, how he wanted to do it. Holding his temper in check with effort, he told her, “Take a hike and go home for the programming,” jerking his head towards the street. She wasted no time complying, her thick-soled boots echoing against the road as she ran.

Once she was gone, then he finally felt a little more free to let loose a little of the frustration. “Lieutenant Law, we enforce the law here and keep things from going totally to shit. That’s it. Feeling up one of the factory girls hardly—“ He realized he sounded a bit stilted, sententious even, but What the fuck were you thinking, you stupid little bastard? didn’t quite fit into the professionalism of the chain of command. At least, not with a rookie whose disposition he didn’t quite trust to not rat him out to the Head if his disciplining a junior officer wasn’t by the book.

“Sir—“

“Shut up,” he snapped. “You really want to stir the locals up again by being so obviously over the line in your enforcement? How many brothers and sisters did we lose in the line of duty putting down one rebellion? You were here since the start of it, so you keep reminding us, so you ought to know. Keep your hands where they belong if you have actual cause for a patdown search. And keep your fucking hands off the women’s scarves. I know you ought to know better than that.”

“Do we need to report this as a discipline issue?” Thalaea asked, her dark eyes carefully calm, making it obvious the call was up to him.

He sighed mentally. Filling out the forms for disciplinary action was a hassle and to be honest, with how savage Head Bloodgood’s mood was lately, he doubted it would really go anywhere besides. More than a few people at HQ probably felt the locals deserved whatever any Peacekeeper decided to put them through. “No, Major Thistledown. I’m sure he just misunderstood some things. Happens to first-tours all the time, right? He walks away with a warning.” He turned to glower at Longinus. “This time.”

“Thank you, sir,” Longinus mumbled, making it all into one word, having at least enough brains to realize he’d gotten away easy.
Once the round was done, he and Thalaea went back to HQ and the next duty pair relieved them in patrolling their sector. Evenings were quieter, with the factories shut down for the night, so patrols were reduced compared to day duty monitoring the work floor. So that meant most everyone was crowded around a television—those just coming off duty were still here at HQ, while those finished for the night or with the late watch would be at their temporary housing on Peacekeepers’ Row. The only ones allowed to miss it would be those out walking the beat.

Theo kept himself busy filling out his duty forms while Katniss Everdeen modeled gown after gown for the viewers at home and Caesar Flickerman invited callers to cast their vote for her gown. He figured he was technically fulfilling the laws regarding mandatory programming by glancing up occasionally at the screen and halfway paying attention, then keeping busy with far more important things. “You wanna call in and vote, Jussy?” Marcellus called to his partner Justicia with a lazy grin.

“Fuck you, Marc,” she said with a snicker. “The last time I wore a dress was, oh…let me see, that would be never.” Growing up in Two as she had, raised at the Peacehome, Theo didn’t doubt she’d been in trousers and handling a stick-sword about as soon as she could walk.

“Well, I like the one with the pearls,” Thalaea said, and there was a hint of wistfulness in her voice. She was Capitol-bred, bound over to Peacekeeper training as the price for her father’s arrest for treason. Now she was past thirty, still single as all Peacekeepers had to be, but maybe when she was a little girl she’d dreamed of a cute boy and a pretty wedding gown too.

“Good thing Cinna Locke had the material for those dresses on hand already,” Justicia commented dryly. “He might have a harder time getting it now between things here in Eight and how it is in One.” Half the silk factory’s machinery had been damaged and the engineers from Three hadn’t come out yet to fix it. Suffice it to say that didn’t matter quite as much given that most of the silk dyers and painters and embroiderers were out of work in One anyway given nobody in the Capitol was buying luxury fabric.

The voters apparently did pick the one with the pearls, and white roses, and the music, and the cake. He was halfway amused to note that the close runner-up on that last one was that Peeta, the baker, ought to just make it himself but Joy Cloudmist, co-hosting with Caesar, was vocally aghast at the idea that the groom should have to lift a finger about his own wedding. “It’s about the bride!” she shrilled.

“And such a beautiful bride she makes, Joy. We can all look forward to the wedding day of Peeta Mellark and Katniss Everdeen this summer, right before the Quarter Quell!”

“Married while mentoring, and in a Quarter Quell,” because of course Peeta would take Haymitch’s place now as the male Twelve mentor. “One hell of a honeymoon,” Theo said dryly. He wasn’t quite sure where the sarcasm in his voice came from, but it was there anyway. Twelve’s kids were doomed anyway this year, everyone knew it. Katniss and Peeta won last year and Haymitch won the last Quarter Quell. The tributes of all the other districts, and Careers especially, would be targeting both Twelve tributes right from the starting gong to prevent a repeat win.

Of course, he shut his mouth in the next fifteen minutes when President Snow came on after the wedding programming, and he and all of Panem found out that the lovebirds would be in the arena rather than holding down mentor stations. “She might not need that dress after all,” Marcellus muttered, and strangely, he sounded almost sad.

“Well, let’s hope we’re all out of here before the Quell, because they’ll all be upset since Eight’s pretty hopeless,” Thalaea said. “Woof is past eighty and he’s deaf as a post. As for the women, none of them is that impressive. Taffeta—I mean, is Taffeta even involved in this? She’s been shacking up with the Secretary of Finance so long she’s basically a Capitol citizen by now.”
“No clue,” Justicia said. “But you’re right. Taffeta’s got to be almost seventy, and Cecelia and Georgette both won because they got lucky.”

“District Two,” Marcellus said with a swift shrug. “I’m not just talking district pride either. We’ve got the most and the best victors. It’s a safe bet.”

“Don’t count Finnick out,” Justicia argued with him.

“Just because you have smutty dreams about him…”

“Oh, shut up, what about you and how you have the hots for Sandy?”

“She’s cute!”

“Yeah, well, they’re pretty much all gonna be dead in July,” Theo cut them off, feeling impatient with the banter about it. “Twenty-three of them, anyway.”

“So much for the star-crossed lovers,” Thalaea murmured with regret. “There’s no way they both survive…”

“There’s only one way it happens,” Theo said, his mind already leaping to grasp something comfortably logical, the pure facts. “Haymitch goes in the arena in Peeta’s place, and before he gets killed, he somehow manages to keep Katniss alive long enough for her to outlast everyone else.” It seemed like the slimmest of chances, and there was little he could say that was inspiring or encouraging about the man he’d seen on the television these past years being able to protect Katniss long enough to matter. Not that Theo was a huge fan of Peeta and Katniss personally, not with how much of a letdown they’d been in person, but he felt for them. Missing Myrina as he was, he felt it keenly. He wondered if in District Twelve tonight, where Rina must be watching this announcement even as he was, how those two had reacted.

There were a few moments of silence as everyone mulled that over. “Nah,” Marcellus finally said with a grin. “He might have been something to watch last Quell, but he’s an old drunk, he’ll be dead by the end of the bloodbath. He has to know that. Peeta has a better chance of living long enough to keep Katniss alive.”

“You want to place a bet on that?” Justicia said. “I’m with Theo. Haymitch deliberately takes the fall for Peeta and Katniss. It’s not like he’s got much to live for, and if he lets one of them die in the arena? He can forget anyone in this entire country speaking to him again.”

He shook his head wearily and finished the paperwork, refusing to get in on the betting pool that quickly sprung up. He’d always been a spoilsport about that in past Games. They always teasingly blamed it on him having some kind of born aversion to them thanks to being from hopeless District Twelve originally.

The spring and early summer months passed swiftly enough, more of the same humdrum patrols and assurances that Eight was well and truly crushed. A few Peacekeepers got sent to other districts where it appeared with the Quell approaching, there was some noisy and fury going on. Theo was relieved enough to see Longinus was one of them, sent off to District Eleven. By and large, though, those that had been there to fight the rebellion stuck around just in case Eight got any more ideas.

On Reaping Day they all crowded into the square where old Woof Jones with a few wisps of white hair and weary eyes stood alone in the section for the males. Taffeta Locke had indeed been recalled from the Capitol for this, and she stood with Georgette Watkins and Cecelia Vechter with the
women. He thought, living in the Capitol year-round as she did, it was probably the first time she’d worn a headscarf in decades. Everything went orderly and pretty quiet. The rifles at the ready weren’t in any way needed.

Woof’s reaping was a foregone conclusion, but the women came first. Cecelia’s name was drawn. Her children clung to her, crying and wailing. **Volunteer, for fuck’s sake,** he thought, looking at the two older women. Georgette had never had kids, and Taffeta’s son was a grown man, Twelve’s stylist for the female tribute. Taffeta looked like she was about to step forward but Georgette grabbed her arm, shaking her head and saying something quietly to her. Seeing the rifles at the ready, he realized of course even something like that could be seen as dangerously defiant after Katniss. They were too beaten down and scared to risk it, not even for Cecelia’s kids.

After the train left for the Capitol carrying all four of Eight’s victors to serve as mentors and tributes in the Quell, the crowd quickly vanished back to their houses to start watching the recaps of the reaping’s around Panem. A few groans greeted Brutus’ volunteering for Two, but as most of the Two victors since him had been females—One and Four often tended to take the Two male out early once the pack broke apart, recognizing a large threat—it was reluctantly agreed that unimpressive in his first Games or not, he was probably one of the better options. Finnick Odair was reaped from Four as their male tribute, which would certainly make for an interesting Games. It meant at least one Capitol darling, either Katniss or Finnick, wouldn’t live to see autumn.

Justicia crowed loudly in victory, “Hand over the pot, huh?” as Haymitch, looking far more fit and sober than he had in years, volunteered for Peeta and made it clear he intended to sacrifice himself for the boy and his lover.

He looked desperately but he couldn’t see Myrina on the screen, just one uniform among the sea of white around the square in Twelve, and the cameras were hardly focusing on the Peacekeepers anyway, glued as they were to Haymitch and Peeta with pans over to Katniss. There was bitching and grumbling as Justicia collected her winnings. Theo could only think with these Games in particular, nobody won. It was brilliant, really, and perfectly timed given the unrest in the districts to remind them that the price paid for treason could even claim the strongest among them. Nobody was immune, no matter how strong or brave or cunning or publicly beloved. Almost too conveniently **timed,** he thought with another of those ugly uncomfortable musings that he tried to shove back down.

Haymitch must have pulled some kind of hidden reserves out because with a twelve for a training score, he might as well have painted a target on his back, and Katniss was in the same situation. Strangely, as uninspired as he’d been by her on her Victory Tour, now that her life and her love were on the line, he found himself secretly rooting for her and for Peeta. And for Haymitch too, whatever he might have planned. Somehow he didn’t think the man planned to sell Katniss out to save his own skin. He seemed too earnest, too fiery in his conviction about it, and finding out he was her father and Katniss was pregnant besides with Peeta’s kid only clinched the deal.

Cecelia and Woof died early, as predicted. Pathetic as most bloodbaths were, how easily the weaker kids died, there was something truly sad about watching this one and how Woof’s shaky attempts to fight were easily deflected by Gloss. Though the One victor’s look of regret as he made the kill was equally depressing—Woof and Mags had been around so long, gathered so much respect, that nobody could much imagine the Games without them. They would have to from now one since both of them would die in the arena.

Cecelia, brown hair bare of her headscarf of course, fell to Brutus’s sword and he thought of her husband and three kids watching her death live just over on Victor’s Row. What made it worse was realizing it wasn’t their house any longer. They would be evicted—maybe as soon as tomorrow, but
suddenly he hoped maybe they would at least hold off until the Games were over. Once a victor died, their surviving kin no longer held any claim to that house. They’d have to go to the Justice Building and apply for an overcrowded apartment in one of the slum tenements, take up jobs in the factory again. No different really from anyone else in the poor districts having to suck it up and somehow carry on and cope with the loss of a spouse, a mother or father, and that happened every day. But somehow the drama of it being a victor’s family now left destitute cast it all into high relief, and it seemed like since the Quell card was read, all of Panem was thinking about things like that which they’d never really dwelled upon before.

It was quickly evident it would be a short Games. The field thinned rapidly. When old Mags died, gutsy to the end, nobody seemed to want to say anything for a minute. There didn’t seem to be much of anything to be said, period. There were a few moments of levity—Johanna Mason apparently deciding to start up an arena romance with Haymitch was one of them. “Bets that it’s a ploy on her part and she’ll slit his throat when his guard is down?” Marcellus offered wryly. “I’ll take that bet,” Justicia said. “It’s for real. Hell, I won the last one.”

“But…Johanna and Haymitch? I thought she liked Finnick?” Thalaea said in confusion, sitting back in her chair. “I would have figured we’d see the two of them flirting if anyone.”

“Yeah, and Finnick likes everybody,” Marcellus said with a sly grin. “But don’t you see? If she likes Finnick, of course she’s going to fake flirting with Haymitch to get inside his guard, because she probably doesn’t want to kill Finnick, right?”

“She’s friends with Haymitch, though. I’m pretty sure. I mean, the newscasts always showed them drinking together—”

“Like Haymitch does anything else.”

“Apparently he still kills people just fine too.” Rye had found that out in the early minutes of the Quell. “And they were all friends until they got dumped in the arena together,” Theo pointed out grimly, just wanting the whole thing to be over.

Then the morning of the fourth day it was down to the alliance led by Haymitch, protecting Katniss, Chaff on his own, and Brutus and Enobaria together. The betting pool on when the alliance would tear itself apart started up. It all went to shit in a hurry and they watched in a daze as Chaff got eaten alive by insects, Johanna attacked Katniss and cut her badly then digging her fingers in the wound for good measure and making Katniss scream with pain before running off, Haymitch defeated Enobaria in a frenzied knife fight and apparently still managed to talk Brutus and Enobaria into a truce, and then suddenly with a blinding flash of light, the screen went black.

“Uh…what the fuck just happened?” He didn’t know who said it, but the sentiment was pretty well shared. The static on the television continued, and Thalaea reached out and carefully switched it off. Within a few minutes the alert siren went off, ringing loud and clear throughout the district streets—the one telling all Peacekeepers to report for duty in case of a disaster. Or, perhaps, another uprising. He didn’t know exactly what had happened in the arena, but his suspicions of what the end of the Games being somehow spoiled by whatever Katniss and Haymitch and Beetee had done had galvanized the locals’ courage again. He could hear yelling and shouting in the streets already. “My guess? Round two just started,” he said, feeling depressingly like they’d brought it on themselves. “Let’s get to HQ and get into the armory.” No unsecured weapons—either they were in a Peacekeeper’s hands and signed out on the daily log, or they were locked up in the armory. Theo knew that rule had been instituted during the Dark Days and in seventy-plus peaceful years since then it had become kind of lax; more than once the quartermaster in his other duty assignments had just told him to keep the damn thing with him in his quarters and he only signed it back in when he
had moved to a new district or he needed to turn it in for maintenance in favor of a new one.

But apparently being sloppy on that rule back over the winter had readily armed more than a few rebels here in Eight so it was enforced hard as iron now.

Still, that meant crossing several blocks of territory totally unarmed, and Marcellus unthinkingly bolted for it, making Theo swear and snap at the rest of them, “Let’s hurry it up.”

Of course, halfway there on Fustian Street, they ran into a gang of pissed-off locals. No guns, but several dozen people there with impromptu clubs, knives, wicked-looking boards with nails and the like—shit, some of the factory girls even had scissors clutched in their hands. Their weapons were crude and even ridiculous. But their expressions were full of wrath and hate and determination; and that was more dangerous than their weapons. Plus he and the rest of the squad were there with empty hands, and that and how vastly outnumbered they were, was more than enough to make him pay close attention. “Oh look,” one said with a wolfish grin, more like a savage and angry baring of his teeth. “Our helpful Peacekeepers are here to save the day.”

Sighing, the part of him forged in those years in Two at the Peacehome and at training camp was suddenly angry and ashamed at the thought of surrendering without a fight. But the rational part of him beneath that—maybe the part of him that had once been a ragged little kid in a dirt-poor district—said with cold, clear logic: Survive whatever it costs. Chances were in a few hours or a few days the armed Peacekeepers from HQ would put this whole thing down anyway. “Hands up,” he told the rest of them quietly. “Don’t fight.”

“Colonel,” Justicia protested, and he could hear how her own pride was bristling at the idea.

“Do it,” he snapped, remembering the stories about Peacekeepers executed on the spot back over the winter. Realizing his continued existence, for now, rested solely in keeping an angry mob as calm as he could and offering them no excuses to bash his brains out onto the broken cobbles of the street, he nodded. “We’ll come quietly.”
Late on the next to last day in Five, he and Johanna were sitting on the porch, enjoying the abrupt cool-down as the sun set and talking over some of the notes from the visit there. Dusk streaked the sky with the colors of fire, painting the red bluffs in the distance. Johanna looked...content, if anything, and he watched the light on her face, the slight smile that was on her lips in moments of silence. As sights went, he mused to himself, it was one to treasure. If he were a painter like Peeta he would want to depict it just so. But he wouldn’t paint this for the world to see. This was something between them, all the sweeter for being a moment only they had shared together.

Then he heard the telephone ring and gave a grunt of irritation as it interrupted the relaxed idyll of his thoughts. “Newscaster for an interview?” he guessed, already getting up from the comfortable chair.

“Someone else calling for our support in their political campaign,” Johanna snarked. Her voice was right behind him, obviously following him into the house. Yeah, they’d gotten a few of those lately. Seemed like every hanger-on and political hopeful was shamelessly looking for endorsements from those whose words they perceived carried some weight, and given that he and Johanna were pretty much Brocade’s right-hand team out in the field right now, people had been smart enough to figure that out. This business of forming a government was really a bitch in some ways.

So of course when he answered it, the voice of Brocade Paylor greeted him. “Evening, Madam President,” he said, offering her the respect of that title first. Hitting the button to put her on speaker so Johanna could hear also, he laid the phone down on the counter.

“How are you both there?”

“Of course,” Johanna said. He raised an eyebrow at her that said, Behave? He could easily have visions of Johanna just nonchalantly trying to yank Brocade’s chain by saying the two of them had been naked and occupied. Not that he wouldn’t be amused by it. She smirked back at him.

“Change of plans, I’m afraid,” and he could hear the strain in Brocade’s voice.

“What’s that?” Johanna leaned back against the counter, eyeing the phone with some suspicion. He noticed once again some of the similarities between the Seven and Eight accents, those rounded vowels they had in the north.

Brocade sighed audibly over the phone. “I’m altering the schedule a bit. You’re headed to District Thirteen next.” They had been due to head north to District Six. Easy enough journey up the western coast, and it made sense to look into transportation for the work crews next. “I talked to Six already, they said new production’s pretty much shot, but even with the bombing they endured, they had enough parts on hand they can keep things running for a while.”

He shook his head instinctively in disagreement, even if she couldn’t see him do it. “Thirteen’s in good shape in terms of infrastructure and all. Probably best in the country. They also ain’t producing grain or something we’ll need urgently. No cause for us to be doing a damages and reconstruction report there.” They’d hashed out the schedule carefully over several evenings during the winter, arguing about the priorities back and forth. Securing the essential resources to get Panem running again, how badly hit each district had been in the war, things like that. It took a while but eventually they’d come up with a list that seemed fair enough.

“No,” Brocade answered him, “but I’ve been on the phone with the leadership there and frankly, it’s a mess. Since Coin was arrested nobody’s stepped in clearly as their president, or mayor, or whatever
the hell they want to call it. Because seems like they don’t even know whether they’re a district of Panem or an independent state. Neither do I, for that matter.”

“Bit of anarchy in oh-so-organized Thirteen? Oh, we can’t have that,” Johanna said mockingly. “Deposing that bitch was the best thing that could have happened to them.”

“I’m not disagreeing with that,” he told both of them, knowing full well that Johanna’s hatred for Coin—and his own—had become just about as personal as it had with Snow. “So fine, they’re having a bit of an identity crisis here. They’ve got good company there in One and Twelve, right?” It had rapidly become clear neither of those two districts could go on as they had before with their former ways and industries. When he thought it over, he might as well include the Capitol in that also. “I’m still not seeing the urgency, Brocade.” Formality offered up front, now he felt free to use her name as she’d invited him to do on their first meeting. “It’ll keep a few more months, right?” His mind was filled more with the problems of starving kids and districts that were half-destroyed than the growing pains of Thirteen. All right, the fact he was in no damn hurry to return there either might have a thing or two to do with it also.

Johanna was the one who made the connection. “Not returning your phone calls?” she asked Brocade.

“Not really. It doesn’t help they don’t know who’s in charge, but…”

“But you’re the usurper who snatched the reins away from Coin anyway.” Trust her to put it blunt as that.

“More or less. And…look, you might as well alter your schedule for late June and the first days of July.”

“To reflect what, do tell?” he drawled. “We’re supposed to be in One then, as I remember it.”

“One and Eleven, I think,” Johanna spoke up.

“Yes, well, you’re going to be in the Capitol instead.”

He looked up at Johanna. Neither of them said anything for a few moments. “Care to share some thoughts, Brocade?” he asked, trying to keep calm. Going to Thirteen and the Capitol too all of a sudden? It was like his worst fucking headache and nightmare all rolled into one. "I know the Capitol ain’t in great shape, but they’re better off than some of the districts.” The takeover had been swift enough, and without the airborne bombs that had hit many of the districts, that the physical damage to the Capitol had been more limited.

“The war’s over but the real work is just beginning. I’ve asked all the district mayors to come to the Capitol then.”

“Yeah, we don’t exactly have one in Twelve, you know. Last I heard from Peeta a few weeks back they were digging Jarron Undersee’s bones out of his house to bury him proper—him and his family,” he said. It hit him with a strange pang of loss to realize anew that with Maribelle and her daughter Madge gone, that was the last of the Donner bloodline dead, the rebels who’d apparently fought and been executed alongside his own ancestors, the Dearborns. More than that, it was the last of Maysilee’s kin gone, and he felt like he’d finally lost the last of her. She’d saved his life and he’d had no way to save her sister’s and her niece’s lives. The personal debt he owed to her could never quite be repaid, even in terms of paying what he owed he’d done some in helping accomplish the Donners’ work left unfinished—after all, he had saved Katniss and sparked off the rebellion.
“I’m aware of that,” Brocade said, and though her voice was mostly steady he could hear the notes of stress and even some temper entering in. “That’s why you’ll be standing in for Mayor Undersee.”

“Uh…beg your pardon?”

“You have a current official population of **four** in Twelve, Haymitch. Two of them aren’t even adults yet under the law. One—sorry, Johanna—is a pretty recent immigrant, and after your entire district was destroyed at that.”

“Eh, no offense taken,” Johanna said dismissively. “It’s true.”

“Which leaves you as the logical choice—I imagine even your neighbors living in District Thirteen right now would agree you should represent them, seeing as they voted for you in the election. I’m holding a peace summit. The war is over, yes, but I want it official. I want it on paper what we fought for and what we all agree this country’s going to mean from now on.”

“No more Hunger Games, no more tesserae, no more second-rate districts, and so forth?”

“Exactly. So I want you there as the representative of District Twelve as we hash all that out. And the thing’s got to be debated, done, and then signed on July 4th.”

He laughed then, seeing the astuteness of that gesture and appreciating that she’d thought of it. “Signed on Reaping Day,” Johanna spoke up. “I like it.” Replacing the anniversary of that yearly horror with something symbolic and hopeful was a smart move.

“Also the day they signed the Treaty of the Treason,” he added thoughtfully. Apparently the Capitol, in a vengeful mood, had forced the districts to sign themselves into oppression on the date that back in the days when most of the districts were instead still states of America, a generation prior and easily within living memory, had stood for declaring freedom. Undoing that treaty on the anniversary of its signing would be a powerful thing too. “A very good choice.”

“So that brings us back to the trouble of District Thirteen. Back then, of course, they apparently signed the Treaty of Thirteen with the Capitol.”

“You read the thing?” he asked her with some interest. Apparently she’d found a copy of it, probably in Snow’s papers. He hadn’t seen it, just had the report from Snow of what it had said.

“Yes.”

“Anything in there about formally declaring independence from Panem?”

“No, just an agreement of mutual non-aggression and non-interference on both sides. You see where I’m going with this, don’t you?”

“Best to bring ‘em fully back into the country, and this is our chance to do it best, yeah.” Thirteen had existed as an independent state in fact, if not in law, for close to seventy-seven years now.

“I doubt you really want a rogue district pissed off at us over Coin sitting there with nuclear weapons anyway,” Johanna observed dryly.

“Yes, I want them at that table too as a part of this new Panem. I need someone to make sure they’ll be there. So go there, try to get them to pick a representative and agree to attend the summit.” Wryly, he thought it would be either that or finding out that Thirteen would in fact be their enemy in the future.
“And you really think we’re the ones to do it? Hell, we’re the ones who led Coin’s denunciation.” Though when Peeta and Katniss went there for the election they’d reported some people approving of that, at least. He still wasn’t fond of the idea of going back to that place, the steel boxes and the iron-hard rules.

“The impression I’m getting is it’s a divided district. You both lived there for several months. You earned their respect by making it through their military training.”

“Barely,” Johanna muttered so lowly Brocade couldn’t hear, obviously remembering both their experiences on the Block, and how she’d needed a retest. “We also deserted,” she pointed out more loudly.

“Bygones. Nobody’s remembering that, because you deserted to actually go fight rather than run away, and besides, we won. You’ve got a better feel for things in Thirteen than me or most anyone else. Look, you’re the best hope we’ve got. So will you go? Please?”

The fact that she asked, rather than demanded, helped seal the deal. It reminded him once again that though she was tough and had been a military commander, Brocade Paylor had been the right choice for president. She wasn’t too proud to admit she couldn’t do some things and to ask for help. Looking at Johanna, seeing the slight nod she gave him, he gave a low sigh. “Yeah. We’ll go.” Pondering it for a moment he asked, “What are we allowed to deal with ’em to get them to play nice?”

“Whatever you have to do.” His eyebrows rose a bit at her giving over that kind of license and the trust and faith in their judgment it implied. “Just so you’re not having to call back and forth with me checking every detail. I want this done. Do it within reason, of course. No point setting them up in a position of power over the rest of the districts or we’re making the same mistake again. Don’t give ’em the whole bolt when a few yards will do.”

“Yeah, got it. It’s gonna be a long hovercraft ride, all the way from the southwest to the far northeast of the country,” Johanna cut in. “So I want an overnight stop back in Twelve before we make the final hop north.”

“It would be better…”

“It wasn’t a request.” In spite of himself he smiled at her blunt ferocity. “You want to send me and Haymitch into that shithole again to help out the country, we get to sleep in our own bed for one night first.” Grateful to her for that, he reached out and took her hand in his. One night back in the comfort of their own home, seeing Katniss and Peeta too and having even a few hours all together again, would be a boost of morale that they would sorely need.

“I’m sure the prep team would like a break before heading back to Thirteen also, seeing as they ended up chained to a wall there in a little misunderstanding,” he mentioned wryly. “One night stopover in Twelve afterwards also,” he added. “There may be folks wanting to come back to Twelve on that hovercraft if they can.” Assuming things were cleaned up enough in Twelve for people to temporarily stay in Victor’s Village. “I’m not making them stay there in Thirteen any longer than they have to.”

“Done.” Obviously their new president was more than smart enough to know when to give a little to get a lot done.

“I want a copy of the Treaty of Thirteen also to look over. If I’m going to have to wrestle any separatists there might be in Thirteen down to bring ‘em to that table, I damn well want to have actually something solid to back me on it.” Other than just the sheer spectacle of stalking in there and
proclaiming they were being idiots and assholes—somehow he didn’t imagine that was going to work too well.

“Peeta and Katniss are taking some supplies tomorrow. I’ll make sure the document’s on that run.” She added, “Thank you both,” which pretty much said everything about her as compared to Snow and Coin.

That about settled the matter and with that, he made their own goodbyes and hung up the phone again. “So?” he said to Johanna. “A vacation in Thirteen might be lovely this time of year, don’t you think?”

“Maybe I’ll keep my axes up my sleeves,” she said dryly. “And not take any fucking drugs they try to inject into me this time.”

The door cracked open a little bit there, but given the whole heap of shit returning to Thirteen would be emotionally and in terms of stress, he didn’t think this was the opportunity to bring up that conversation. Besides, she’d mentioned the drugs and her rage about them. Not the miscarriage itself and her feeling on that.

In terms of things to cope with already, there was the whole political angle, the prospect of going back in as the people who had led a coup on the woman who’d led the place for several decades. There was the trouble of facing the people left from Twelve—while he was in Thirteen, recovering from the torture, focused on the war, and trying to push himself through their military training, he hadn’t mingled with them much. The habit of years of disengagement had remained, not to mention the fact his actions had led to Snow destroying their home and so many lives. That would have cast a shadow over things anyway.

He would have to face them this time, though. They knew the truth now, after Snow’s trial, knew he’d never been a willing Capitol sellout. But the uncomfortable feeling that he’d swapped one shame for another, of being a disgrace for being a victim, lingered. It meant in some ways he still felt awkwardly separate from them. They had voted for him in the election, though, placed their confidence in him. He knew that meant they accepted him, they actually believed in him in a way they hadn’t since he was a young victor. He just didn’t know how to handle that, and all the lost years, and how to talk with them about Twelve’s future. Not to mention he still had to sit down to talk with Hazelle about Gale, and even if Katniss had conveyed Haymitch’s regrets and Hazelle’s lack of blame, he needed to hold that conversation in person.

With all that looming over them, and Johanna having demons of her own about it, tentatively trying to bring up the miscarriage was too much right now, not when she didn’t give him indications she wanted to talk about it. She’d been the kid’s mother. If she didn’t want to discuss it, when it had been her body that suffered, he didn’t feel like he had the right to impose. Still, five months later, he wished he could just fucking well put it behind him if it couldn’t be dealt with openly. But he knew from the arena and everything else, it didn’t ever go away.

“So,” Johanna said, coming up and putting her hands on his shoulders and chuckling throatily, “Mister Twelve Representative. Or are you, like, the Twelve mayor now? Do I have to treat what you say as law?” The idea obviously entertained the hell out of her.

“Like you—or Katniss—ever fucking well listen to what I tell you to do,” he said jokingly, even that small jest starting to lift his mood.

“You wouldn’t want it that way,” she stated it with the simple confidence of absolute certainty.

“No.” He knew he wouldn’t. Someone constantly gentle and easygoing would have bored the shit
out of him quickly. Not to mention he’d have felt awkward, stifling himself and his tongue because
he’d feel like an asshole towards someone who wasn’t willing to engage him on it, always afraid
whatever he said cut too deeply. Johanna could take it and give it right back to him, test him as an
equal.

“Fighting a war with politics rather than weapons. This will be a treat. I imagine you’ll be far better
at it than me,” she said with a shrug. He gave a snort of laughter. No, Johanna was damn bright, but
on the whole, she and subtlety weren’t close friends. She called it like she saw it.

“Me? Successful in politics? I’ve had, oh, two jobs in my entire adult life. Mentoring? Two out of
forty-eight…” He shook his head, not wanting to dwell too much on it. “On the other hand, being
put out on the circuit, well, I lasted a long time there…apparently, I was actually a little too
successful.” He thought about it for a moment and smirked. “Then again, being one of Snow’s pet
whores, that’s probably great preparation for political life. Saying just what they want to hear,
learning to give them nothing that much matters and still leave them satisfied because they think they
got it all, and accepting, yeah, sometimes you’re just gonna end up totally fucked.”

She laughed, one of the few people he would accept that from on that subject. “Yeah, OK. I’ll try to
keep my mouth shut and let you do the talking. In the interest of national peace or whatever.”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “You call ‘em like you see ‘em. You and me both, I think we need
to be ready to just cut through the bullshit. We’ll play nice with them to a certain point.”
He gave her a wry grin. “But we’re victors. We know how to play rough when we have to.”

Late the next afternoon, the hovercraft dropped them on the green of Victor’s Village in Twelve. The
mostly-unattended grounds were now growing wild, the grass up to his shins now, and here and there
he saw the pockets of dandelions that had settled and taken root, a splash of color that satisfied him
more than the showy Capitol mutts the groundskeeper had been obliged to plant every year which
promptly died every winter. The gaudy yellow of the weedy things seemed more peaceful than the
scrupulous upkeep he’d lived in for so many years. He saw the door open at Katniss and Peeta’s
house and tried to keep a smile from his face as he saw Peeta pop onto the porch, waving a hello.
Stretching his back, trying to suppress a groan from hours stuck in a damn uncomfortable seat, he
saw Johanna lift a hand in return. “Oh my,” he scoffed jokingly, “don’t tell me you missed those two
brats. Getting attached or something?”

“Shut up,” she grumbled, though he could see the corners of her mouth lifting in a slight smile too.

Sitting down to dinner—Peeta and Katniss both beaming with pride that he’d set a snare that had
cought a fat rabbit—he looked the two of them over. It had been only about a month since he saw
them last, but just the same, he thought Peeta’s frame had filled out a bit more towards the promise of
manhood—he’d need a new shirt soon enough the way his shoulders were straining the one he was
wearing which had to be a year old by now—and Katniss’ face had slimmed a bit, not out of hunger,
but just the definition of the bones finally coming forth as a woman from beneath the childish
roundness. Mostly, they looked happier than he’d seen them since he met them, near to two years
ago on that stage on Reaping Day. It crossed his mind to wonder if they saw the same in him
also.

“So,” he said, handing the bowl of carrots over to Peeta, “what’s the story around here?” He hadn’t
asked them to update him. He figured if they wanted to start the conversation he’d listen, but he
wouldn’t prod. The fact that they hadn’t, but for the subject of their brief spat regarding the
Undersees, told him they were avoiding the ongoing efforts as much as possible. He wouldn’t blame
them for that. Some things, for the sheer sake of continuing whatever sanity they had left, were better
left to those with less emotional stake in it and less nightmares to begin with. “If I’m gonna be seeing
our people,” he tried to not hesitate to say that and feel like he could again claim them as his also, “in Thirteen, I want to give a good update.” He intended to go walk the village since it was still light out, but they’d been here for the weeks he hadn’t.

“The bodies are all buried,” Katniss wasted no time and no words, getting right down to it. That was the most important thing, to be honest. “Out in the Meadow.”

“The bulldozers razed everything left in the Seam and the town last week and, well, the slag heap now has a nice big rubble heap to match it too,” Peeta added, looking down at his potatoes with far more interest than they probably warranted. “It’s…it’s all pretty empty. Just the Justice Building, really.”

Letting the weight of that sit there too long, Johanna finally cut the silence with, “So we’ll build it again, and better than those crappy shacks people were living in that I saw on my Tour. I’ll be talking to people in Seven about the lumber that needs to get sent here. So you know it’ll be the good stuff or they’ll hear from me.” He smiled a little to himself. Twelve, unfortunately, didn’t know much about building. He remembered tacking boards and nailing tar-paper on that old Seam house when he was a kid to help repair it. On building houses and the like, he definitely deferred readily to Johanna’s judgment. “We’re heading north. Either of you want us to take some letters to people there?” Maybe she was thinking of Dazen’s letter for Clover, tucked away in Haymitch’s things. They’d found out quick enough over the winter that Thirteen wasn’t accepting personal phone calls either. He wasn’t exactly surprised. Anything smacking of individuality in that place got shot down quick enough.

“Delly,” Peeta spoke up. “I mean, she’s one of my best friends, and…” Yeah, of course they hadn’t spoken since Peeta had left.

“Hazelle,” Katniss said. “Even without,” she ducked her head and her saying the name, “Gale,” was half-mumbled, as the loss of her own best friend still obviously cut deep, “there’s still Rory and Vick and Posy to think about. They’re family.”

“Write your letters and we’ll bring them,” he said. “Maybe with any luck a few folks can come back with us.” It couldn’t be many, a few dozen at most. With Brocade already sending a hovercraft out here to delivery supplies, it was almost more efficient to deliver for fifty people than four. But Twelve just didn’t currently have the houses, or the resources right there, to take on hundreds of people right away. Maybe by autumn things would be different but for now it would have to be those both eager to return and able to pitch in on the reconstruction efforts, whether by building things or hunting or whatever.

After dessert, some kind of apple crumble thick with cinnamon and spices, he nodded to Johanna as they left Katniss and Peeta. “Want to go for a walk?”

“Sure.” Walking down the path to the town, he saw quickly enough Peeta had been right. The place was like it had been swept clean with a massive broom, just bare lots of brown dirt and no sign of what had once been there. In his mind he could still see it, though—the butcher’s had been there and he knew Callum’s seventeen-year-old granddaughter Tansy was one of the few merchies that had survived to make it to Thirteen, the Mellark bakery swept clean of the ruins he and Johanna had dug in, the sweet-shop that the Thirlbys had taken over from the Donners.

He didn’t aim to go as far as the slag heap. The mines were closed as a hazard—he could still see the wisps of smoke in the distance as the coal relentlessly kept burning deep in the earth—so no reason to visit, and it was out of town enough to be out of the way. He didn’t think seeing the rubble, and what remains of peoples’ belongings and their lives might be jumbled in it, would do his ability to sleep tonight all that much good.
In front of the Justice Building, he paused. A few shattered windows, a few scorch marks—it had held up well. Then as before, his eyes fell upon the ruins of the stage in front of the building. The thing was half-burned and some areas had collapsed, but unmistakably it was there all the same, like an ugly wound. It was one last piece of the Capitol clinging stubbornly to his district. Mounting the steps, avoiding the burned and collapsed patches, he stood there on that platform where he’d been for so many summers, caught helplessly in the Games over and over. He almost thought if he listened hard he could hear Honoria Delight’s voice calling Haymitch Abernathy again like she had so many years before, then Effie’s voice was there in close echo calling as she had last summer, Haymitch Abernathy. So many kids had stood here, condemned to die, and he’d had to be there every damn year for it. He couldn’t see this particular stage being a place for celebrations and speeches and the like. Too much fear and death were in its history. “Of all the things to survive a fucking firebombing, this does it?” he said, hearing the harsh note in his voice. “I want this thing gone.” The sooner the better, he thought, and by July for certain.

Looking out at his audience of one, Johanna stood there at the edge of the stage and looked back up at him steadily. “Then let’s go get some axes,” she offered simply. Her smile slowly turned into a bit of a smirk. “I’m not gonna turn down the chance to wreck some Capitol property.”

They had axes, all right, everything from a couple hatchets like Johanna carried in the arena and they used to split kindling, to the large axes they’d used in the forest and splitting logs for the fire. Prybars too for the nails, and he grabbed a couple of lanterns too while they were at it because twilight would be there soon.

At first they worked in silence, only the solid thunk of an axe biting home and the grunts of physical effort at swinging the axe again and again. Intent on the task, taking a small fierce pleasure in every chunk he split off the stage, he was surprised when the answering note of Johanna’s axe to his own fell silent and after a moment, Johanna spoke up. “Oh my, my. You’ve gotten good at this. I might even be able to actually claim you when we go to Seven.”

Turning and seeing her looking at him with that look she had, pulling out the neck of her sweat-dampened shirt and flapping the fabric to create the breeze, he laughed, giving another swing of the axe and feeling it bite home into the wood as he left it there. “Lots of practice.” The winter had made certain of that. She’d given him so much shit on his first shaky efforts to split wood, but then as a kid he’d never needed to do it. Their stoves and the like were all coal-fired, and gathering wood in the forest was forbidden. “Like anything. You get better as you go.”

“What do we want to do with all of it anyway?” she asked, kneeling down with a prybar and yanking the nails out, pitching those on a growing heap of them. Holding up the chunks of wood, she nodded to the pile of wood that had been steadily growing in the square where they threw each new piece. “Hold ourselves a nice big bonfire tonight?”

There was something in that notion that satisfied, seeing it all go up in one massive blaze. Still, given what a constant chore chopping wood had been, he hesitated. “Can you safely burn it?”

“It’s old wood. Dry as anything.” Staring at it, she furrowed her brows. “Looks like it’s untreated too. Probably so people would have to keep fixing the fucking things regularly and be reminded of just what that stage was there for.”

“Good. Then we’ll keep it around, people can burn it in the stoves and the like.” He shrugged swiftly. “Might as well have anyone living here getting something useful from the Capitol for once.” No point wasting the practical advantage of so big a supply just for a single moment of personal satisfaction.

Somehow, with that, it lessened the burden. The stage wasn’t a thing of dread any more, just a bunch
of kindling waiting to be chopped up ready for families to make use of it. Hearing her tease and taunt him about her speed compared to his, taking turns swapping between the axe and the prybar, they worked through the rest of the afternoon. His shirt was about soaked through now and his arms and back had begun to ache a bit, but it was the good kind of ache, the sort that could be pushed aside from knowing something was being accomplished.

Somewhere around the first tingles of dusk, she started singing, a song about a girl at work out on a forest path and her meeting a wounded mockingjay who turned into a boy that she fell in love with, timed to the strikes of her axe. Busy with the prybar again, he stopped instead to listen.

*And this to me he did say,*
*“Wings I had once, my love,*
*Strong wings to fly away”*
*For my love he gave them up,*
*An earthbound mockingjay.*

Her voice wouldn’t put Katniss to shame, no. But it was a good voice, low and fairly true, weaving her way in and out of the notes of the unfamiliar tune. More than that, he could listen to Katniss singing with interest, because of the beauty of it, because he cared for her too, but there was something special to this. He knelt there, prybar in hand and watching the fireflies dancing in the dusk, listening to the story as, at the end, the lovers escaped an evil enchanter as they both transformed into mockingjays and flew away.

_Rebellion song_, he guessed. The mockingjay pretty much clinched it. One of those carefully veiled tunes that had sprung up in the Dark Days that sang about the longing for escape and freedom, but carefully enough that the Capitol wouldn’t be able to grasp upon it as anything solid. “Never heard you sing before,” he said, and she stopped, hands going from the haft of the axe to the small of her back, rubbing gently.

“Always been someone else around,” she said over her shoulder.

“I’m not ‘someone’?” he scoffed teasingly.

“That’s different. Anyone else in that cell next to you, would you have sung that ‘Hanging Tree’ song of yours?” Yes, he remembered singing for her that night, after talking about the realities of hanging. What fun they’d had, huddled there on the hard slabs of their sleeping shelves trying to say goodbye, and yet there had been a comfort in knowing it was almost over, and that they wouldn’t be alone.

“No.” He looked up as she came over and grabbed another prybar, working next to him in the lantern’s glow, hands steady and sure. “That was…for you.” Maybe even then, after those weeks stuck side by side being each other’s last link to sanity, he’d been a little in love with her even if he didn’t know it. The only kind of song he’d had in him to give her then, desperate and doomed as they’d been—the sort where dying together was the only sort of love that was left.

“I’ll sing for Peeta and Katniss at their wedding, whenever it happens.” She gave a snort of amusement, throwing a few more nails at the pile. “Gotta be better than Hotbuns was at ours. But that’s for them.”

He nodded, understanding. “And it’s for you,” he told her softly. He knew he hummed when he worked, yes, but he didn’t really sing. Not with other people there. But for her, he could. She gave him a quick smile of acknowledgment.

Gathering up the woodpiles well after dark, tired and aching and desperately in need of a bath, they
walked back up the hill to Victor’s Village. Huddled together beneath the quilt, in the comfortable familiarity of their bed, he thought facing Thirteen might actually be halfway bearable.

Of course, that feeling lasted through bidding Katniss and Peeta goodbye in the morning and taking a bag of letters for folks in Thirteen. But touching down near the bombed-out crater and the old ruins of their Justice Building, he saw a welcome party that on some faces looked rather less than delighted to see them. He noticed nobody from Twelve had been permitted. It was all the bigwigs with their neatly tailored grey uniforms with badges of rank. “Soldier Abernathy,” one said—one of Coin’s faithful, as he remembered it. He didn’t see Boggs, which he didn’t much like. Maybe the stunt he’d pulled to try to keep the man alive and keep his reputation intact hadn’t fully succeeded.

“Which one of us are you talking to here anyway?” Johanna piped up insolently. “I’m ‘Abernathy’ too, you know.”

“Not a soldier anymore,” he said with an easy tone, wanting to get that across up front. With the handshakes and all, he had the feeling that while they were making nice for the moment, once the cameras were turned off and the negotiations began, that was when the real fun was going to start.

As was, they weren’t assigned to old Room 809. He had some fond memories of that room, he would admit, awkward and sweet by turns as those nights had been once Peeta moved out and Johanna moved in. But he was thinking enough of the clomiphen already and hoping they weren’t still injecting innocent women here with that shit—he didn’t need to lie in the bed where that lingering damage had been done for him and Johanna.

Instead they were escorted to Room D—the Everdeens had occupied Room E prior to Katniss moving out. He understood that to have that tiny window onto the surface was pretty much the equivalent of Victor’s Village here. Dropping her bags, Johanna turned to him and said, “Well, I can’t say the accommodations have improved much.”

“You wanted old 809 back? Great memories—me walking in on two half-naked horny teenagers, then there was that night you were so hot and bothered by me you were climbing me like a tree and ripping my clothes off.” That was hardly the truth about that night, or the nights they’d passed after that back here in Thirteen. They both knew it. But turning it into a joke made it all a bit easier to bear.

She snickered, hanging a shirt in the closet—not grey, defiantly bright blue here in colorless Thirteen. “And that would be the same night you were so excited by me you came in about thirty seconds, right?”

He grinned ruefully. But instead of teasing her right back again, he was remembering the two awkward people that had come together in that room, admitted in that night of sheer desperation they couldn’t do it alone, and finally started to put some of the broken pieces back together. He just reached out and squeezed her shoulder and said simply, “Well, we’ve both gotten a lot better since then.” He didn’t mean just in bed either, and he was sure she knew that.

“If they try to fuck with me this time, I’ll rip their heads off,” she said lowly.

Knowing they were going in as a united front here, steady and confident in each other, made a world of difference. “Well,” he said cheerfully, “since there’s plenty of woods and nobody uses ‘em, I’ll help hide the bodies.”
He couldn’t help but admit a certain feeling of smug satisfaction at being able to wake up and more or less tell Thirteen’s rigid scheduling to take a hike. Unfortunately the door unlocking for the morning depended on submitting to the damn purple forearm tattoo as usual, but he smiled to see how small it was compared to the usual. Not much was formally scheduled in, granted, that still meant the drab cafeteria with its sterile white walls at 0700 as usual because breakfast wasn’t going to wait on the two of them, and he was in no mood to go into these meetings without some food. Coffee too—that was for damn sure. He needed that sorely. He might have had some wistful thoughts too about a shot or two of alcohol as a bracer before the inevitable headache, but clearly that wasn’t going to happen here.

As his tray was handed over, he noticed the quality of the meal had gone down again as opposed to the last weeks of the war when the supply lines had pretty much been wide open. This was fare for Thirteen when it was self-sustaining. Apparently they’d drawn back from their talks with other districts, just like Brocade had indicated, while they figured some things out. The fact that they’d let him and Johanna come here, though, had to be a sign that at least some people with a lick of common sense were in the fight.

While he’d have been more than happy for another cup of coffee, he knew better than to go back to the serving line and ask. He’d had his rationed one cup and that would be it, diplomatic envoy from the national government or no. Dressed as they were, him in a dark suit, Johanna in her blue blouse, they stood out pretty well against the rank-and-file in their drab grey shirts and trousers. He suddenly felt the eyes of everyone, Thirteen and Twelve alike, turning towards them, wondering what they were going to do while they were here. The people from Twelve probably had much different hopes than the natives. Ducking his head and finishing off his eggs, not wanting to look around and see who was staring, he was suddenly aware of someone standing there at the table. Fuck, not Hazelle, he thought desperately.

But when he looked up, it was at the curvaceous figure and the heart-shaped face of Delly Cartwright, Peeta’s friend. The cobbler’s daughter, as he remembered it. Dougless Cartwright had been in his year in school. He’d kicked the shit out of him once, didn’t even remember now what they’d been fighting about. He did have one pair of boots Doug had made, though. Good work they were too, lasted him over twenty years now. Peeta had mentioned Delly’s parents had both been lost in the bombing—damn, what had her mother’s first name been, and into which merchie family had the now-dead Mrs. Cartwright been born? Not a Mellark, a Donner, a Banner, a Barrington, or a Hambly: the bakers, the old candymakers, the apothecaries, the greengrocers, or the butchers. Not the Taylors with their tailor shop, he knew from talking with her before sending her in for her interview that Larkspur hadn’t had any sisters. That was back when he’d been young and stupid enough to learn too much about the kin of the walking dead that were his tributes. Suddenly it seemed ridiculously important that he didn’t even know who Delly’s dead mother had been. She’d been buried in a common grave and he didn’t even know her name.

Oblivious to all that going on in his head, Delly looked in a good mood, blue eyes cheerful. Her hair was a riot of blond curls that a headband couldn’t quite restrain. Thirteen must love that. Delly, Mister Abernathy,” she said cheerfully. “Miss Ma—oh—Miz Abernathy.”

“Delly,” he said by way of acknowledgment, wondering if they’d sent her as their own little emissary. “Things all been well here over the winter?”

“Oh, it’s been all right enough.” Her blue eyes betrayed no malice or disappointment or disgust
which was still a wonder to his mind for someone from Twelve looking at him. “We’d…well… there’s talk among some of us, we’d sort of like to go…” Her cautiously hopeful expression told him plenty. People wanted to go home and were hoping he’d tell them it was ready for them to return. Looked like he’d be the bearer of bad news for Twelve yet again; far from the first time.

“Let us work through some of the stuff here with the Thirteen leaders, but…” He sighed mentally, committing himself to confronting the issue and facing them, for well or ill. “We’ll have us a meeting, Conference Hall, during Reflection. Say…two nights from now. Spread the word. Anyone from Twelve who’s thinking of returning.”

“Add in anyone not from Twelve who’d still like to get the hell out of here,” Johanna added with a pleasant smirk. “Unless you’re letting me be the only immigrant in Panem that’s gonna be allowed to move to Twelve?”

“Point taken,” he acknowledged with a weary shake of his head. If anyone, native to Thirteen or an immigrant from another district, wanted to get away to a fresh start in a rebuilding Twelve, he wouldn’t deny them that chance. Particularly given some of them were men and women and their children who had been caught up in the whole clomiphene debacle. It had been one thing when this was a refuge from Capitol tyranny—its restrictions and expectations, while a pain in the ass, had generally been a lesser evil. With the Capitol gone, that had shifted the whole balance of things.

“All right, I’ll let them know,” Delly said. “It’s good to see you back.” Hearing that from a kid rather than getting a half-rotted apple to the back of his head, he knew he was probably staring at her as she left. He couldn’t help it, and in his sheer amazement, he forgot to tell her that he’d brought a letter from Peeta for her.

He saw Posy Hawthorne from across the cafeteria, frantically waving a hand to catch his attention, flapping like she was trying to take flight, and gave her a small wave back. She beamed. What was she now, five, maybe six? What the hell he’d done to earn that, he had no idea, and he hastily finished his coffee before he ended up catching Hazelle’s eye, or that of her two living boys, for that matter. He knew full well Rory’s opinion of him—a drunk embarrassment he’d been ashamed to see his ma acting as housekeeper for—and he didn’t much imagine being the leader of the squad that failed to bring his big brother home would have helped that.

“Want to go topside?” he said hastily, seeing Johanna was finishing up her own oatmeal. The steel walls were already feeling like they were closing in. Not having something to fill the two hours until their meeting began in Command, he knew he needed to keep busy or this place was going to drive him crazy with both claustrophobia and anxious paranoia.

“Yeah. Get some air and all.” She grinned. “Have a little dance.” He smiled a little in acknowledgment of that. Going back to their room, changing into something more comfortable, they were headed to the surface access in a matter of minutes.

At the access hatch, one of the guards scanned their mostly-blank forearm tattoos and said, “Your surface liberty access is unlimited in duration so long as you don’t have anything already scheduled, but orders state you’re to stay within the confines of the training facility.”

“Fine,” he said irritably. He’d much rather walk out in the comfortable peace of the woods, but he’d take what he could get towards time out of the steel can. Obviously the brass wanted to know where to find him and Johanna, or else it was just a cheap way of asserting authority. Either way, he recognized as opposed to last fall when he could freely play the “Keeping Katniss happy and effective” card as much as he wanted, he only had so much latitude to buck the system and tell them to go to hell, so he was going to save those chances for something necessary at the negotiation table.
After they’d walked up the ramp past the hatch and emerged into the spring sunlight, he saw a group of kids out running. Looked like the military training was alive and well in Thirteen still. He and Johanna found a more secluded part of the training field. Stretching out carefully, feeling the warmth of the morning, he felt better immediately than when he’d been down in the vast underground hive.

Truth was, between Peeta’s hellish Quell training, then the military training in Thirteen and the sheer demands of roughing out a living in Twelve over the winter, over the last year his body had gotten used to expecting a certain level of physical activity. In some ways it actually felt good now, a way to help work out whatever trouble the day had brought. He had found that denied that outlet he started feeling sluggish and irritable. He could remember feeling some of that same feeling as a young victor, but there had been no good outlet for things, plus his isolation from people didn’t help, so he’d filled his time with frantic hobbies and then with drinking. Obviously that wasn’t going to work now. So going to Two first and having Brutus kick his ass out of bed for some training, had provided the answer. *Keeps your mind sharp and your body in shape,* he’d explained. By the third day Enobaria had been dragging Johanna up onto the training site on Victor’s Mountain too. After he and Johanna left Two, they’d kept it up every morning in Five, no reason to not do the same here given the chance to get up here to the surface.

So now, feeling his muscles warm and ease more as he moved through some of the basic forms he’d learned in Two, emptying his mind of the frustration and stress, he felt better as he tried to make the movements flow. Finishing up Mountain Cat Striking, he went next into Whirlwind, the spiraling movements of it familiar to him from the *kali* knife fighting he’d learned. The sheer exertion felt damn good; no need to even imagine opponents there. Too many people he might like to punch in the face of late, especially here.

They only had learned those two forms from their hosts, and so they felt comfortable and solid now. But Brutus and Enobaria had given them the parting gift of an old training manual with the rest of the three dozen forms to learn, and so, relaxing back to an at-ease stance, he looked over at Johanna and nodded towards the bag with a couple of water bottles and the book. “Your pick today.”

Crouched beside her, taking a few sips of water while she flipped through the page, he joked, “We’ve got that for the mornings, now all we need is one of those manuals of sex positions for the evening. I’m sure we could get one when we go to One…” He knew from Chantilly that was just another export from the luxury district also known for their sensuous reputation.

She gave a faint snort of mingled surprise and amusement. “What, you mean so I’m, like, balanced on one foot leaning back over a chair with my other ankle back behind my head? Never knew you were so kinky.”

“You’re learning,” he said, grinning at her, but certain she knew he was kidding. To be honest, testing out that joking dare of a list they’d made of the sex styles of the districts was more than enough variety for him. Maybe it was that he wasn’t all that young now, maybe it was the hell his sex life had been when he was young, but somehow, the novelty of seeing if they could wrap themselves into a human knot didn’t appeal near so much as simply being together once again and being able to just let go in each other’s arms. Somehow he thought that would never quite grow old. They knew the worth of it and the struggle to get there far too well.

“I’m thinking Cloud Hawk,” she said with satisfaction, shoving the book under his nose.

He groaned at the sight of the diagrams for the advanced form, the flurry of leaping attacks and aerial kicks. That was classic Johanna, never doing anything by halves, hurrying to go from mastering the basics all the way to the hardest damn thing possible. He loved her eagerness even as it sometimes frustrated him. “You are actually trying to kill me, right? Ask me again in a month.” Maybe with
some more experience he’d be up to it, but the idea of falling on his ass repeatedly today trying to attempt all that didn’t appeal. He might still have good speed and strength and all, but he didn’t move as agilely or recover as quickly as a twenty-year-old any longer. “Let’s not look bad in front of the current audience?” he suggested quietly. Showing weakness right now wouldn’t be a good idea anyway.

“Fine,” she said with a snort, flipping more pages. “Wanna try Guardian of the Pass again? Couple more times, we’ll probably have that one memorized.”

“Sure.” They worked their way through that one, full of blocks and dodges and feints, needing only a couple of references to the book and its diagrams. When it was done, he caught her lightly by the wrist and said with a joking air, “Want a dance?”

She chuckled lowly and twisted her wrist out of his grasp, aiming a quick jab at his ribs that he slipped, and from there it was on. They wouldn’t use blades, not like in Two for their wedding “dance”. They weren’t Careers, raised to the sword. Weapons were something that both of them still took too seriously—if he ever drew a knife against someone again, he had the sense it would be in deadly earnest. Now and again he would train with those just to keep his skills sharp, but never against Johanna. He couldn’t say why, because he prayed that he would never be called upon again to use those talents. But perhaps having paid as much as he had in becoming that boy who had fought to live, the knives had become a part of him, his skill and his safeguard, and so he didn’t quite know how to put it aside. Maybe he ought not to anyway. He was who he was, and no point denying it. You’re a fighter. You don’t let a good sword rust, Brutus had said.

But this was something else, in its own way as much playful flirtation as honest sparring. The sheer awareness he had now of her body, of how she moved, and responding to her movements with his own that she took on and answered in kind, back and forth had an exuberance and lighthearted feel that was like dancing. A great deal like sex too, for that matter. No doubt it would be different sparring with someone else. But things with Johanna had all tended to spill over into each other from whatever neat compartments they’d been in to begin. It flowed together until it was all just her now, and so shifting from one facet of things to another was smooth and easy. Her hand on her shoulder was as much a caress as a grapple, her other hand brushing down his arm, and the way he successfully slipped it to get behind her and got his arms around her was more of an embrace than a restraint. “So I win?” he murmured in her ear, dipping his head to kiss her throat, feeling the rapid beat of her pulse.

“Not if we were really fighting,” she grumbled playfully, as he could feel the tension in her switch from combat to an entirely different sort of anticipation.

“I know.” He’d end up getting kicked in the balls or something, most like, rather than her just acquiescing like this. Feeling his mind more at ease, he let go of her and suggested, “Time to face the joy of diplomacy?”

Headed back below, he recognized their old hand-to-hand combat instructor, Soldier Shagreen, supervising a class of older kids. It looked like they were working on grapples and throws today. “Technique’s still good, I see,” she said approvingly, eyeing the two of them with her arms crossed over her chest, her almost gentle features totally at odds with her role. “Nice to see you two kept up on your training after you left us.”

“Oh course,” Johanna said with the appearance of total sincerity. “He’s a good partner.”

“Always thought so. He fights smart. Carry on, Abernathy.” She nodded to him. “Ah…Abernathy,” giving Johanna the same courtesy.
They were almost back to the hatch when Johanna was the one who finally gave in and let out a brief hoot of laughter. “See? I always told you they obviously don’t know shit about foreplay here. They don’t even recognize it.”

With the good mood from that, after showering and getting dressed again in the more formal clothes, they headed for Command. Escorted to a conference room by two Thirteen soldiers, he saw a half-dozen men and women were waiting already. The rank insignia in Thirteen were discreet, just small pips on the collar, but he read their panel here as consisting of one general, two colonels, two majors, and a captain.

“Captain Abernathy,” the captain said, a man of about thirty. Olive-skinned, dark-haired; he could almost have been Seam but for the brilliant blue eyes.

“He’s not a captain,” one of the colonels said gruffly.

“Lieutenant?” the captain tried again. “Maybe he didn’t have official command but he was certainly 2-i-c of his squad…”

“He’s not anything but a deserter.”

“This whole thing about what rank I had or not is all very fine and well,” he said, as he and Johanna sat down at the two open spots, “but I ain’t in your military now so can we just settle on ‘Mister’ and ‘Miz’ and get down to business?”

Eyeing the group, one colonel, the majors, and the captain looked amused. The general and the other colonel didn’t. “So what happened to Colonel Boggs?” he questioned them idly, pulling out a pen and paper. “Still has his health, I trust?”

“Sergeant Boggs,” said the general icily, “is perfectly well.” So apparently Boggs had been punished by being broken in rank pretty severely.

The friendlier colonel, a middle-aged woman with the look of some Six blood about her from her warm brown skin and almond-shaped eyes, spoke up. “Very well. General Kettering,” she nodded towards the general, “I’m Colonel Thalric, Colonel West,” the grumpy-looking older one who was sixty if he was a day, “Major Sabetha,” a lithe dark-skinned woman with fiery red hair, “Major Compton,” fair-skinned like he’d never seen sunlight, blond and bulky, “and Captain Forrest.”

“Pleasure,” he said coolly. Whether that was true remained to be seen, though he somewhat doubted it. “So, as to the business at hand—who in hell is speaking for y’all anyway?”

Stony silence greeted the question. Kettering and West sat there. A few furtive glances darted between Sabetha, Forrest, and Compton towards Thalric, who sat there doing her best to look nonchalant. So that was the way of it. “General Kettering is senior officer of this council and holds command,” Sabetha said, and that was a fine piece of equivocation that said plenty with how utterly neutral it was.

“All right,” Johanna answered with the excessive pleasantness that told him she was on edge. “So that answers that question. We all know that you follow your orders here. So why are we talking to all six of you if he gets to make all the decisions?”

He wanted to laugh even as he wanted to throttle her, just a little, for kicking the tracker jacker nest so openly like that. Maybe it had to be done, to judge from the disposition of things, but that was Johanna, charging in without apology.

West growled, “I’m not going to stand for this, I wasn’t in favor of this pointless meeting anyway. I
don’t need to hear what bullshit they’ve come to sell.”

“Oh?” he said, raising an eyebrow. “Really now?”

“You’re a liar and a cheat, Abernathy. Everyone knows it. So’s your wife. However you two seduced Paylor to make her just give you enough power to let you go around the country come here and try to play your spider-games with us, I don’t know, but I’m damn well having none of it.”

Yeah, everyone in the country knew it. He was well aware of that. Not like he’d helped free the whole country by it or anything, but in his heart, he knew that it was likely that he’d always be judged as a little too wily, a little too comfortable with deceit, to be fully trusted. People liked their heroes brave and blunt and sincere. No wonder they took to Katniss, who couldn’t lie worth a damn. If they knew about Peeta’s impressive ability to lie, well, then he wouldn’t be such a golden boy to them any longer. “‘Seduced’? Is this about that whole forced-whore thing Jo and I had going on?” he said casually. Get them talking, let them make a mistake.

“You both obviously have the skills,” the last word almost sneered by Kettering, “in that direction. And a woman with no political acumen—she was a factory worker less than a year ago—obviously has handed the reins to you two. What else are we supposed to gather happened?”

That was partly true. Brocade had good instincts, and a good heart for that matter, and the people had responded to that. But she was the first to admit she didn’t know much outside of Eight—victors were some of the few people who knew about districts other than their own. Hearing them take her having the guts to admit her inexperience and ask for help and turn it into something sordid, though, was throwing a fresh shovel of coal on his temper.

“Better a couple of ex-whores than a couple of bitchy eunuchs,” Johanna piped up and he could practically feel her bristling. “Tell me, that whole fertility issue here, rumor is that the plumbing just doesn’t work now at all. That true?”

Sabetha stifled a somewhat horrified laugh and Kettering looked about ready to kill her. Johanna sat there, eyes hard and unapologetic. “If you think you two can simply walk in here and insult…”

“Well,” he said, realizing vaguely he was instinctively clutching the pen like a weapon, “you seem to think you have the right to do that. You really think that’s the smart idea here, given what’s at stake?”

“You really think you can bully us?” West scoffed. The posturing was getting annoying. “You’ll find you won’t like what happens.”

“That a threat?”

“If you, or anyone, are deemed a threat to the welfare and security of our district, the consequences to you could be severe. Or to others.” Kettering left than one hanging, though the implications were obvious.

For a moment he hesitated, the old instincts to accept the threat, to back away and deflect the suspicion that he was misbehaving in some way, still alive and well. Then he realized all over again that this time, he wasn’t the powerless one with no choice given but to panic and submit to it. With that came the surge of anger, remembering the slights, the discipline, the petty rules designed to crush a person’s sense of self, and most of all, the damn clomiphen they’d put into Johanna to make the two of them into a new pair of breeders for Thirteen’s use. The damage from that was still there and it fed his temper readily.
Seemed like after everything said and done and endured, for these people both of them were still nothing human and worthy of respect. Tired of this posturing crap, he decided to cut to the chase. “Chained up naked and starving on the Detention Level, I suppose,” he said, thinking of the preps probably nervously hiding in their rooms even now. “Or are we going right to execution?” Glancing up at Kettering and West, he eyed the two of them. “You really think that’ll frighten me? Snow was better at the whole implicit threat thing than you, Kettering. I’ve survived the arena twice. I was imprisoned and tortured and nearly executed. I led the plans that took down two presidents in the last year. So you really think your little implied threats are gonna bother me? That if you try to threaten me, or Johanna, or anyone else I care for with harm, I won’t be willing to deal with the problem of one pompous general and one annoying colonel? I won’t even fucking hesitate before I take you down, you arrogant shits.” He smiled fiercely at them, and he saw the way West’s eyes went to the pen in his hand as if worried Haymitch was going to stab him with it. “Or given what a devious little whore I apparently am, was that too obvious a threat for you?”

“Sir,” Sabetha murmured quietly, giving West and Kettering an awkward glance, but he could see they were set stubborn as rocks now.

“If you don’t want to talk, that’s fine, Johanna and I will just be leaving. I’ll tell Paylor we can consider that your formal declaration of independence from Panem. And I’ll be making an announcement before we go that we’re freely taking anyone who feels your laws have abused them along with us.”

“You can’t take our citizens away,” West protested angrily.

“Like shit I can’t,” he retorted. “I’ll call ’em refugees if need be. And if you turn down a chance at diplomacy, you can expect us to be armed and ready. Sure, chances are nothing will happen. You sit there with your soldiers and your missiles, we sit there with ours, and we both wait for someone to blink because nobody wants to risk killing off the rest of the human race in a nuclear war. But you know what? The other districts, we’ve all got time and population on our side. We go about our business and rebuild our nation and raise kids and you here, with people immigrating out because you’ve treated them like they’re expendable, are going to slowly watch your district die off. We’ll just wait you out until you’re no longer a threat. So you want to rethink your position here?”

“And people were worried I was going to be the one to kill diplomacy,” Johanna said with a throaty laugh, sitting back and putting her hands behind her head.

Kettering and West were still busy choking on that, he saw. It was Thalric that spoke up calmly, leaning forward and putting her clasped hands on the table, “Then if you’re just here to try to tell us what’s what, Mister Abernathy, what is there to talk about?”

He sighed to himself, realizing he might have overdone it a bit, but really, he’d just needed to swat those two hard to get them to shut the hell up. “I’m not coming here to dictate. Just trying to see what you’re thinking towards your role in the new Panem.”

“Our position is that of course we couldn’t do anything that’s not in the best interests of District Thirteen.” He looked at Thalric with some amusement now, hearing in the cagey words a sort of wily intelligence that he had to respect.

“Are you planning on staying independent or not?” Johanna said. “Let’s just get to that before we’re wasting more time.”

“We’re currently undecided whether to rejoin the union of Panem,” Thalric replied with the air of a fairly practiced line.
“Technically, you never left,” he said with a raised eyebrow. “The Treaty of Thirteen never declared y’all an independent nation. Trust me, I read it over pretty thoroughly.” Very boring reading it made too. “And considering you just voted in a national election right alongside all the other districts…” Granted, it had presumably been to try to keep Coin in power.

“So what advantages are you offering us?” Sabetha asked next. “What do we gain by submitting to Brocade Paylor’s authority that we don’t get as an independent state?”

“Lack of concern about possible hostilities would be good,” he replied dryly. “You’ve got a few problems here. Your resources are limited to whatever you produce right here so you spend time and manpower on enforcing an insanely detailed set of rules to deal with that. You obviously have major problems with sustaining your population. And frankly, maybe it was necessary for the charade of being totally destroyed, but do you really want to keep living underground?”

“We lose our right to make our own laws, though.”

“You’ll be expected to listen to whatever national laws we come up with, yeah.” He shrugged. “But with less worry about your future being sustainable maybe you don’t need to put so much effort towards your laws.” At least that was his hope.

Compton looked unsettled by the thought of Thirteen’s laws being loosened up. Sabetha and Thalric looked thoughtful. He could tell he’d already lost West and Kettering and they were done but for finding the right point to make a dramatic exit. As for Forrest, well, no telling yet—he was busy writing, head bowed over the task.

“What’s our role expected to be?”

He shrugged. “You’re one of the more advanced districts in technology, medicine, and military.” Much as he hated to admit it. “So you have advantages to offer us. Chances are you’d stay a military training center, on behalf of all of Panem.” Particularly with the Peacekeeper question still remaining unresolved as it was. “No point wasting resources. Whether you want to get back into graphite, that’s your business. Figure we’ll all be thinking about what our role as districts will be anyway.”

“And as for the population issues?”

“Are you still using clomiphen on women?” Johanna asked, her voice suddenly taking on a deadly edge. “Without telling them about it?”

He watched their reactions. He thought he got a flicker of something from West. He’d been around a while presumably he’d seen and heard plenty. Sabetha actually flinched a bit. He wondered if possibly she had a kid herself she hadn’t planned on. “Not since Pre—Alma Coin was arrested and that was charged as one of her crimes against the people,” Sabetha said, recovering her aplomb.

He wasn’t sure whether he believed that or not. “That’s another condition of you accepting your role in Panem. No more clomiphen without consent. I ain’t debating that.”

“How are we supposed to repopulate…” Compton began to protest.

“How about making yourselves a place people want to move to?” Johanna retorted, cutting him off.

“Three may have more fertility treatments for you to try, if they’re so inclined to have reason to share them with you as fellow citizens.” He had a flash of inspiration in that moment, remembering the Peacehome, remembering the community home in Five too, also sadly grown full with kids left totally alone by the war. It could be an elegant solution to two problems, if it worked. “There are also,” he said slowly, “a lot of orphaned kids out there in need of a family now.”
“Haymitch,” Johanna said, her voice halfway to a threatening snarl. He could practically imagine her thoughts: *You don’t get to use children’s lives as a bargaining chip, you asshole.* He wasn’t. He hoped she knew that. He wouldn’t send any child to Thirteen as it was currently. They’d be better off still in the community homes, even lonely as they were.

“But there’s no way in hell I’m having a hand in sending any one of them to a situation where they’re just a fucking resource rather than a kid.”

“Terms?” West said tautly, the first crack in his facade.

“Rejoin the country. You’ll have the same rights and resource trade access as any of us and we’ll help you rebuild things on the surface so you don’t have to live down here.” Might as well throw that in there, he thought; hell, they were already rebuilding several districts. He could only think living aboveground like human beings would only do them a world of good here. “And maybe if you negotiate at the peace conference and show good faith in accepting the laws we’ll make there as your own, we’ll see if any kids are inclined to choose to give a family here a chance.” He gave them a warning glance. “Don’t think once they’re here that we won’t be making sure they’re treated right either.” That was about as simply as he could put it—it was on their heads to show it was a place for a kid to grow up and be made welcome.

“You’re asking a lot,” Thalric said bluntly, eyeing him from across the table.

“And you’ll be a lot better off for it in the end,” he said coolly, not backing down. “Your resource and population problems will be solved and you won’t spend all your waking hours worrying that people aren’t following the rules. How’s that a loss? Either you accept us as your allies and say you’re willing to compromise to gain some advantages you want, or else you accept your district is on a countdown to not existing.”

“I’ve heard enough,” Kettering growled, finally now taking that as his cue. “This is not how we do things.”

“Not before, sir,” Thalric said, still offering the old man the respect of his superior rank. “But he’s right. We can’t go on like this indefinitely. We should make use of advantages when they’re offered.”

“It’s basic tactics that a soldier is only as strong as his unit’s support,” Compton chimed in thoughtfully. “So standing alone isn’t the wise course.”

He wanted to risk a glance over at Johanna, sensing that if they didn’t have them, the door was at least open. “So we wouldn’t need to submit a formal declaration of rejoining Panem for the rest of the districts to approve?” Sabetha asked cautiously. Forrest was still busy scribbling notes. Apparently he was the designated secretary for this meeting rather than being entitled to speak up.

“Not if you agree that you really never left.” He shrugged. “Elect someone to represent you and show up at the Capitol next month to negotiate on your behalf and you’ve got the same right to be there as any other district.”

“We’ll have to discuss this, of course,” Thalric said smoothly. “But we should have a decision for you in the morning.”

“Thanks for the hospitality,” Johanna snarked, getting to her feet.

Following suit, she muttered to him as soon as the door to Command shut behind them, “Fuck it, Haymitch, I’m leaving the politics to you from now on. I spent the whole time wanting to throw
things. Do we need to worry they’re going to murder us in our sleep?”

“I really hope not.” He leaned closer, keeping his own voice low as they walked the corridors back towards the hive of the cafeteria, since it was coming up on time for lunch. “The thing with the kids…” He knew he was hesitating, worrying that she somehow thought less of him for it, thought he was just ruthlessly using the lives of children for their bargaining value, rather than letting them simply have their own worth as human beings.

“It’s a good solution,” she said. “Lots of kids out in the districts need parents, lots of childless couples here in Thirteen. So long as we can be sure they’ll be treated right.”

“You know I wouldn’t send a kid into somewhere they’ll be badly used,” he told her quietly. The specter of all those dead Seven and Twelve tributes was suddenly there, unspoken but clearly acknowledged all the same. “They’re not just collateral to me. I was…just thinking of a way to solve two problems at once if this works out.”

“I know.” Her tone softened as she answered, and he felt himself relax as he knew she believed him, believed in him. “Those kids…” she said hesitantly, and he remembered the orphanages, the children who even if physically well-cared for as best as resources allowed, had that furtively depressed air of resignation, of desperately craving the acceptance and love of belonging somewhere, but not expecting to receive it. He could pick the new arrivals there out at a glance because they still had hope in their eyes.

“I know.” It would be far too easy for them to slip through the cracks as just another casualty of the war, a lost generation. The Panem they’d fought for was supposed to be a better place, but he feared for those kids maybe it wouldn’t be. Just because they needn’t be in terror of the Games didn’t mean their lives might not be hard and lonely and joyless from what they’d lost. “I know.” Suddenly it was on his lips, Maybe we should take one in? Hell, they already were approved as guardians, seeing as they served that role for Peeta. How to stop at taking in one child, though, when there were so many out there all equally deserving a home? How to choose one kid over another anyway? A Twelve kid orphaned by the firebombs? Someone from Seven for Johanna’s sake, so she’d have another piece of her own home? A district unrelated to them both to be fair?

That plus the nagging concern that him, with all of his flaws still, having children was an idea that really wasn’t smart, made him swallow the words unsaid. “I ain’t forgetting about them,” he said instead, holding open the door for her into the cafeteria.

“Oh, look, it’s mystery meat in gravy,” she said with a dramatic groan at the sight of the trays. “Goat?”

“I’m betting rat. They won’t even stand for the threat of pests here. It’s not keeping with their sense of order,” he said, tongue-in-cheek.

“I’ve had rat. We had some rough winters. Not too bad,” she said with a shrug.

“Dog ain’t bad either, for that matter. Or cat.” He grinned. “Bad winters, the mutts and strays around the Seam tended to disappear…”

“Cat pie? Really?” she shook her head. “And tell me, Haymitch, do you enjoy the taste of pu—“

“Mister Haymitch!” came the sound of Posy Hawthorne. He glanced down at her, relieved Johanna abruptly cut off the last of that little joke. She beamed up at him, and he could see Jonas in that stubborn chin, and her brother Gale too, and there was Hazelle written clear in her wavy black hair and thickly-lashed dark grey eyes, and the memory of Briar too. He and Briar might have had a
daughters who looked like Posy, he realized, though the stab of pain was lesser than it would have been before. Probably because those rare times he let himself indulge in the wistfulness and pain of imagining the little girl he might have, she always had Johanna’s eyes, sometimes Johanna’s hair too. Posy would be a heartbreaker when she was grown, he was sure. “Mama and Papa Cory want to know if you want to come eat with us ‘cause you didn’t at breakfast.”

“Papa Cory?” He glanced over towards the table where Hazelle his morning, and noticed the silver hair and blue eyes of Corriden Boggs sitting beside her. He found himself smiling. “Well, well,” he said. Apparently Boggs had found something in his life besides probably brooding over his demotion.

“Miz Jo Hannah,” she pronounced it as two separate names, “you can come too, you’re married so that means you two eat together. And Mama told Rory he’d better be nice or he’s not too old for a good licking.” She bit her lip. “He’s angry a lot. ‘Cause Gale went away.”

“I’m sure he is,” he said, feeling the gathering dread at facing the somewhat understandable wrath of a fourteen-year-old boy who already had hated him given more cause to do so with the death of his big brother.

“Did Mister Peeta send cake?” she asked hopefully, tugging on his hand to pull him towards the Hawthorne clan. With a glance at Johanna, she shrugged in resignation, telling him to just go with it.

“No, sorry,” he said.

“That’s OK.” Cheerful as ever, she took her seat and started chattering away with Johanna. Rory was frostily polite. Vick seemed excited about the idea of going home. Hazelle—he didn’t even know what to say to her yet, but the cafeteria hardly seemed the right place for it. As for Boggs, well, he’d like to get some of his perspective on the would-be representatives of Thirteen.

“You two mind going for a walk during Reflection?” he asked them.

“If I can get Delly and Thom to watch the kids again,” Hazelle told him. It struck him that Reflection was probably their courting period, the only unscheduled part of their day. He hated to cut in on that, but there were things needing to be taken care of here.

“Ma, I can watch Vick and Posy,” Rory said with a scowl. “I told you…”

“You’re only fourteen,” Hazelle said.

“And Gale was out hunting when he was fourteen,” Rory snapped angrily. “You and Pa were courting when you were fourteen! Delly’s eighteen, not like she’s all that grown up, just ‘cause she’s our neighbor and all.”

“I’ll watch ‘em,” Johanna said with a shrug. “Don’t think this one’s gonna let me go anyway.” The way Posy was beaming at her said plenty. Seeing the way Johanna smiled back at her, at first tentative and then more genuine, he hid a smile himself.

“Fine,” Rory said, making it obvious it was anything but fine, scowling down at the last of his mystery meat.

Oh, this was going to be fun, he thought. He’d rather be back trying to endure West and Kettering’s taunts than this uneasy feeling of failure, especially in the face of Rory’s simmering anger about Gale. But the time came eventually to face up to the mistakes and apparently that time was now. That still didn’t mean he was looking forward to it.
Leaving Johanna with the Hawthorne kids and hoping Posy didn’t try to play make-up with her and Rory didn’t piss her off, Haymitch headed towards the surface with Boggs and Hazelle. He figured it would be best to get the easy one out of the way first. Compared to all the complexity of things with Hazelle, getting some of the information on his compatriots out of Boggs ought to be relatively simple. “Mind if I borrow your fella here?” he asked Hazelle with a joking air.

“Have at it,” she answered, leaning against one of the broken pillars of the former Justice Building. “Don’t be too long, hear?”

Walking a little ways away, he started off with a casual, “So, you and Hazelle, huh?”

“So, you and Johanna, huh?” Boggs answered with a faint smile, countering him neatly. The fact he was using her first name told him plenty about his mentality now compared to Thirteen. “I knew it.”

He gave a grunt of acknowledgment, not wanting to say anything to that since about all he had was “Oh, shut up,” which would have made him sound about thirteen years old again. “She’s a good woman, Hazelle.”

“She told me about her sister.” So forget carefully probing things; Boggs was apparently just going at it full bore. Tucking his hands into his jacket pockets, Boggs said, “So I suppose you’re about the closest she has to a brother. You have a problem with that, her and me?”

He wasn’t certain he’d put it to the point of him being Hazelle’s brother—in a different situation, one where Briar had lived, sure. But too much time and too much distance had gone by then, he was sure. “She’s a grown woman. It’s her decision. But for what it’s worth, it’s good to see her happy.” Compared to the woman who’d been his housekeeper last year, still tired from the loss of widowhood and the stress of supporting four kids, she practically glowed now. “So no, no problems on my end.”

“When I came back from the Capitol, as squad commander I had to report to her about Gale, and, well…”

“Yeah.” He understood how it had happened well enough. “You never married?” He’d never heard about a wife in Boggs’ past, always had the impression he was solidly wed to his duty.

“No.” Boggs shook his head. “Too busy making my way through the ranks to help out the family, and looking after my brothers, and…well, just never quite happened.” Walking along the edge of the woods, seeing the bloom of wildflowers in brilliant splashes of color around the trunks of the trees, he could imagine that after losing his little sister Channi in the arena and leading his remaining siblings to Thirteen, he’d been fiercely devoted to protecting them in any way possible. Thinking of Channi, seeing the beauty of those flowers, he felt a shiver work its way down his spine and tried to not glance around wildly just in case some cute, ferocious cat mutts were lurking among the trees. Not these woods, he forced himself to calm down.

“Will you go back to Ten, then?” he asked.

“Nothing much there for me after so long,” Boggs said with a sigh and a shake of his head. “The rest of my family was all dead even then.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to say that to hell with Thirteen and their humiliating him with the demotion, he and Hazelle ought to just come back to Twelve. But seeing some kind of hesitation and
tension in Boggs, he simply said, “Whatever it is, out with it.”

“I’m a colonel again, apparently,” Boggs told him dryly. “They came and told me shortly after lunch.”

“And why is that?”

“Colonel West informed me, seems they’d like me to be the representative for District Thirteen to the peace summit in the Capitol. As I was one of the highest ranked of the presidential small council before my demotion, and I dealt well with non-natives, they said it was only natural I ought to take the role rather than sending Kettering, or even Thalric.”

He couldn’t help it, letting out a bark of incredulous laughter. “Clever bastards. They’re apparently playing a better game than I gave ‘em credit for.” Better than he’d have thought given how asininely simplistic their tactics course had been, for that matter, stressing the unit and rank hierarchy as it did.

“Explain.” Even now the tone of command was instinctively in Boggs’ voice, making it more of an order than a request, the sound of a man accustomed to being obeyed from two and a half decades of professional soldiering.

“Oh, Johanna and I pretty much told Kettering and West to cheerfully go fuck themselves.” Boggs raised his eyebrows and stared at him incredulously. “They deserved it,” he told the other man bluntly, not willing to argue that point. “So now they elect you to the job—not that I don’t put faith in you to do right by your district and do a fine job of it, mind. Of course I do. But I’m thinking they asked you figuring as I’m there representing Twelve, I’ll be inclined to play nicer with you than them, and since they apparently think I pretty much control Brocade Paylor…” He gave a derisive snort at that, making his opinion of that notion crystal clear.

“This,” Boggs said with irritation, “this thing you do, all these schemes you can see and ferreting out things like that, I don’t do that. I don’t have the first damn clue on it. And I really don’t want to.”

“Good. I’d say Thirteen—hell, any district—needs a straightforward representative at the table,” he said with a shrug. “I’d rather it all goes honest and aboveboard myself. So you might not like their motives, but it’s a chance for you to help make the transition for Thirteen back into Panem a solid one by you being sincere as you are.” It struck him that perhaps the more slippery political minds had seen that too, that sending someone solid and honest like Boggs would help show Thirteen’s good faith with his sheer lack of guile more than a cunning negotiator who might set things on edge from the start. Surely they’d realized he could easily call bullshit on someone too smooth-tongued. But seemingly they’d realized they were up against the wall when it came to the rising power of twelve districts suddenly freed from Capitol chains, and they were making the best situation of it they could. So long as it didn’t deliberately fuck anyone else over in the process, he could hardly blame them for that.

Boggs gave a soft rumble of acknowledgement at that. “Fine.”

“I would,” Haymitch said carefully, “consider Hazelle and the kids coming back to Twelve for a ‘visit’ with Katniss and Peeta until the peace summit’s over.” He met Boggs’ eyes. “If they’re suddenly trying to make you play their role, it’s better to not have those you care about here where they can get to ‘em if you make a move they don’t like. Trust me on that.” He shook his head, because the moment after he said it he was already thinking it might sound a bit ridiculous. “Maybe I’m just being paranoid, but…”

“It’s probably a good idea,” Boggs replied, a flicker of concern in his blue eyes. “I don’t think any of them have Coin’s ruthlessness. But better to be safe.”
“You do what you have to do,” he answered. When it came to keeping people safe, that was worth any personal sacrifice, in his opinion.

Boggs stood there for a moment, arms folded, looking as if he was wrestling with something. Then he finally spoke up, almost in a rush. “Don’t hold your breath on getting anything from West and Kettering, but obviously you figured that out already. Thalric’s wily, ambitious too, you’ll have to deal with that. Sabetha’s probably the best of the lot, the most open to compromise. Compton tends to just follow the crowd, he’ll jump in to support someone else but he’ll never speak first. Forrest, he’ll probably be on the side of whoever actually bothers to make him feel like he’s more than the note-taker.”

He nodded, absorbing that, realizing that Boggs’ sense of loyalty was still strong enough that he was reluctant to feel like he’d sold out the secrets of some of his fellow soldiers. Just the same as bucking Coin’s authority and helping him and the rest of Victory Squad desert had obviously cost him, but clearly Corriden Boggs was a man who liked to do the right thing regardless of the price. “And you?” he said. “After the summit?”

“I’m still deciding,” Boggs said bluntly. “Whatever terms you make here with the small council for our future, and then whatever we come up with at the Capitol, will probably help with that. This place has become my home so I’m reluctant to just leave it, but I have to think too about what’s best for Hazelle and the kids too.”

“Well, if you do leave, you’ll always be welcome in Twelve.”

Boggs gave a nod of thanks to that. “Good luck. You’ll need it,” he said with understated humor.

“Jo and I, we’ll be in Ten later this year. Did you…is there anything you’d want me to do for Channi while we’re there?”

Now Boggs’ expression was genuine surprise, probably at the thought of the grave he hadn’t seen in so many years. Haymitch only wished he could have gone twenty-five years without seeing them. “We used to…” He spoke hesitantly, as if recalling something almost lost after all this time and buried beneath the Thirteen citizen he had become, barely grasped by now with just the fingertips rather than securely held. *You do what you have to do to survive,* he thought, even if that meant trying to not dwell on the memory of a dead younger sibling. Haymitch hadn’t managed that, given nothing but time and space to dwell on Ash. “Flowers wither and die so fast. So when you were missing them, you’d find a stone, a small one you could carry, and you’d make it represent some kind of memory of that person, and take it there to leave it on the grave. To remember some of the good and see it there next time you came to visit to be reminded of how they touched your life, and also to leave your grief just that bit lighter by the weight of that stone.” He gave a wry smile, his gaze faraway now. “Not as though we wanted any sort of rituals related to our industry, bloody as it was.” Given that after raising the livestock, butchering meat and tanning leather were major parts of Ten’s industry, he could well imagine.

“So give me whatever you, or your brothers,” assuming they were alive and inclined to participate, “want me to take with and I’ll see it put there.”

“Thanks.”

“Meat-producing district, though, I’m sure you had good wedding feasts,” he pointed out, trying to pull Boggs back from that somewhat stricken look. Even though it meant inviting the memory of Angus on himself, with the pang of pain that still came with it.

“We did at that,” Boggs answered him with that smile seeming more fondly reminiscing rather than
with that edge of painful wistfulness. “I’ve never had a really good roast since I left, you know.”

“They tend to cook things to death here,” he offered. Mass-produced as it was for thousands of people, quality and taste wasn’t a concern so much as caloric content.

“They really do.”

Coaxing Boggs out of his shell that much, he couldn’t resist a bit of a grin as he said, with the memory of Angus prodding both him and Chaff fresh in his mind, “Sorry, but here’s fair warning. We like to cook a pig in Twelve, not a cow.”

“It’s all right,” Boggs said with a shrug. “I grew up in the mid-district, on a pork collective farm, so it’s not like I ate too much beef as a kid.” True enough that Ten was a huge and diverse district, he remembered. Angus had been from far south, down towards Four and Five, and apparently that was more of a beef-producing area. “So,” Boggs said, “we’re all right, Aber–Haymitch?” he corrected himself, and Haymitch could easily sense the offer of friendship from it.

“We’re all right,” he confirmed. “Corriden.” At least he thought so. “Let me go talk to Hazelle, huh?”

As he left Corriden there and found Hazelle walking the ruins of the Justice Building, it crossed his mind to wonder if they’d shot her up with clomiphen too once they saw her and Corriden were together. But no, by that point, Johanna had made people aware of the problem with her part in that propo so chances were women were asking questions before allowing themselves to be injected with any kind of drug. Besides, with four—no, three, by that time—living kids maybe they figured Hazelle had done her duty enough when it came to childbearing. “Haymitch,” she said, giving him a nod, her fine dark grey eyes studying his.

It seemed like no matter how old they got he’d never quite be able to look at her without seeing the similarities to Briar, just the same as looking at Ash’s picture at the Peacehome he’d seen too much likeness to himself at eighteen. But the pain was less now and more bearable for it. “Haymitch,” he returned, wanting to shake his head at that brilliant piece of delaying saying anything useful.

She spared him that by saying bluntly, “You look good now.” It was an assessment, not a come-on. “Tell me, are you still off the bottle?”

Anyone else, he would have instinctively wanted to say defensively, And what fucking business of that is yours? But for Briar, and for the realization that she’d been the one to care for him after Peeta dumped all the liquor, held his tongue. “Yeah.”

“Good.” She pushed off the pillar and moved towards him, just a few steps. Her black hair was in a loose queue with the end over one shoulder, a river of dark silk in loose waves. He’d always joked with Briar that he hoped their kids would have her hair rather than his messy riot of curls. All the Hawthorne kids had Hazelle’s hair, except Gale, he’d tended towards Jonas’ straight hair. “You have something worth keeping now.”

“I know.” He watched her as she walked, restless. It made him feel oddly like his own sudden nervous need to pace would be too much and so he stood there, bound by it. “I never did thank you enough for looking out for me, last spring. When I was…sick.” He realized it must have been a thankless job, dealing with him moaning and screaming and yelling at delusions, trying to keep water in him to counter his drenching the sheets with sweat and throwing up constantly.

She stopped and let out a deep sigh. “There were a few times I thought you were going to die. One point in there, Perulla said it was pretty much up to luck whether you’d make it through the night.”
He’d been convinced of that fact himself, that the pain and the horror of it was completely unsupportable, but in the hazy recollections afterward, he’d told himself that was just the madness of the moment talking rather than actually being in danger of death. The fact she’d gone and fetched Perulla Everdeen meant he’d been well and truly bad off. “Well.”

For whatever reason, and he doubted it was just the pay, Hazelle had stayed and cared for him. Maybe it was the compassion she’d always had, the sort of simple human decency that said even someone as disgraceful and wretched as he had been shouldn’t die totally alone. He remembered taking Maysilee’s hand as she slipped away so at least she knew at the end, he was there and he gave a damn. Considering for years he’d accepted the truth of being as solitary in death as in life, knowing that wouldn’t have been the case meant far too much. Things had changed, he wouldn’t risk dying alone now, but the man he’d been was still so close that it hit him hard.

He wondered if Peeta actually knew how bad off he’d been, or Katniss. It wasn’t something he felt like asking either of them.

“You actually asked me to kill you a few times.” He winced at that. “You also called Perulla ‘Maysilee’ and told her you were sorry you let her die.” He winced even more at that one. “And that she was just the first tribute you let down.”

Wonderful, apparently when he was delirious he pretty much spilled his guts. But then Hazelle had pretty much told him he’d said plenty, right before he left for the Quell when she came to tell him she forgave him. He just hadn’t wanted to hear it, and hadn’t wanted to confirm it for her. Too dangerous back then for her to know some of those things as certainties rather than delirious ravings, but obviously Hazelle knew better now. He knew from listening to Johanna in the Detention Center that she’d pretty much done the same when she was hallucinating. Chances were she’d heard more than her share of his secrets too. They’d just never said anything about it since then and that was probably better. “And what did I say to you?” he said, trying to keep his voice calm only with effort.

She stopped and now she did look up at his face. “You called me Briar.”

Of course he had. He’d been convinced he saw her, his befuddled brain automatically thinking the middle-aged Seam woman there had to be a vision of Briar because of course to his mind Hazelle wouldn’t have been there, she had no reason to stay. “I probably said plenty to her.”

“You did.” He could well imagine what it had been, all about his regret at his life and his utter shame and how he hadn’t been worth shit ever since he had been the cause of her death. He’d apologized but hadn’t pleaded for her forgiveness, he was sure, because he wouldn’t have thought he deserved it. Whatever hereafter there might be, he had been convinced then he was bound for the desolate part of it anyway. He was ridiculously thankful apparently Hazelle wasn’t going to tell him for certain. “And you told me I couldn’t tell anyone. Then you spent about fifteen minutes arguing with yourself about whether telling a dead woman would cause trouble for anyone.”

“And what did I decide there, out of curiosity?”

“I think you finally decided since you were going to die, either right then or in the arena, it wouldn’t matter anyway, since neither you nor Briar would ever tell.” Absurdly, he couldn’t help a quick, awkward laugh at the ridiculousness of it. “But things made sense then. About you. The Capitol. Your tributes. And your, um, supposed…conquests.” She didn’t have to say that his admitting to being a forced whore on national television had pretty well confirmed whatever he’d said to that delusion of Briar.

“Hazelle…”
“You think you’re the only one with that on your shoulders?” she challenged him, her tone suddenly fierce. “We all knew about your ma.” Of course they had. Ash’s brown hair made it pretty obvious. “If I hadn’t had a five-month belly on me when Jonas died I’d have been on Peacekeeper’s Row soon enough. But even after Posy came, laundry and Gale’s hunting wasn’t always quite enough, Haymitch. Not with three growing boys, and only one old enough for tesserae, and Gale growing big as Jonas like he was with the appetite to match.” She gave a diffident half-shrug, as if it hadn’t mattered. “It was only a few times. Maybe half a dozen at most, and only when things were really tough. That’s nothing in comparison—I mean, how many times was it for you?” The awkward way she said it, as if trying to convince herself it hadn’t mattered, told him that of course it had. How could it not?

“I don’t even know,” he said wearily. Eighteen years of it meant it was virtually impossible to know for sure, just blurring into a vague notion of something more than a hundred. “Not a big deal how many it was for me versus you. The first time you do it, that’s the one that matters most.” That was the one that made the change, and “whore” with all its awkward shame was a label that suddenly applied, and the knowledge that having done it and survived, it would be possible and even necessary to do it again. Beyond that first time, it was all just a matter of how long it went on and how much of a toll it took.

“I tried again after Gale was flogged,” she said nonchalantly, like discussing the weather, but he could see that she was tense, trying to get through it before it was too much. “Before you hired me. With Gale out of work and me out of a job, seemed the only thing to do. Nobody much wanted a woman pushing forty, though. Not with the young girls there too. One of the young ones—Albus, I think, that other one that was always hanging around with that boy Darius that tried to help Gale—he gave me some money and told me to go home. He meant well but I think the pity was almost worse.”

“The pity’s a real shit to deal with.” He could tell who saw him as a victim first and how stilted it made things. Plus the pang of guilt at being so wrapped up in his own problems that he hadn’t stepped in to help out until Katniss basically bitched at him that he was going to hire Hazelle or else, also hit him hard. “He knows?” he asked her gently as he could.

“Yeah,” she said. Corriden still loved her and the kids anyway, that was clear. “Being from an outer district like he was, he understands better than a Thirteen native might.”

“Probably so.” He remembered, with some chagrin, yelling at Gale for judging him, accusing him of being so full of his own damn pride he’d never submit himself to shame to save those he loved. If he’d known what his mother had been obliged to do, he might have acted differently. “Gale didn’t know,” he said, half to himself.

“No!” Her tone was sharp and her eyes fierce. “None of the kids ever knew. I made sure of it. I didn’t want that to touch them.”

Given how much it had affected him to find that out about his own ma, he could imagine. The door was open now with his mention of Gale’s name and there was no way to take it back. “I’m sorry about Gale. I should have…”

“He was a man, Haymitch. He made his choices and he went to war. He knew he might die.” At least the way she was saying it, the words didn’t have the toneless sound of being something recited rather than actually believed. “And I know you. Even when you were a kid you tried to take on too much of looking after people. Ash. Me. Briar. Lorna. I thought that had changed, that you’d forgotten who you were, but when I saw you with Katniss and Peeta, when I heard you…about your tributes…” She cut off whatever she was going to say about his delirious ravings. “You don’t take lives lightly,” she said. “So if he died, it’s not because you considered him expendable.”
He found himself staring at her, trying to accept the idea that with a few simple words she was trying
to give him the grace of taking away the guilt. “Still. He was your boy.”

“He was,” and now she suddenly looked fully her age, a small, neat, olive-skinned woman with the
lines of grief ravaging her face. “And now I’ll never be at his wedding. I’ll never hold grandbabies
from him. There’s so much I wish...he didn’t even have time to fall in love, not with someone who
loved him back.” There was no resentment at Katniss in her tone, simply the weariness of accepting
all those broken hopes. But Hazelle Wainwright Hawthorne had done more than her share of that in
her life already. She’d carry on, he knew, hard as it would be. She’d borne her losses better than him.

At least he could give her one small solace. It seemed if there were things Hazelle hadn’t shared with
her firstborn, Gale likewise had his own secrets. “He did have a girl he loved. Who loved him back.”
From talking to the boy, and from how she’d anxiously hovered around while he was recovering
from his whipping, he was confident that last was true.

“Who was that?”

“The Undersee girl. Madge.”

“But...what in hell did he have in common with a mercie girl?” she asked in confusion, shaking her
head at the inability of it to make sense right then. “He was always so angry how much easier their
lives were, I don’t think that…”

“Madge was Maysilee’s niece. The last thing Maysilee told me in the arena before she died, didn’t
make sense then, young and clueless as I was, but...I’m pretty sure the whole Donner family had a
rebel streak a mile wide. I don’t doubt Madge was just the same. She gave Katniss that mockingjay
pin. So I reckon she and Gale found that passion for being free of the Capitol in common and from
there,” he shrugged, “things took their course.”

Hazelle sat down a bit heavily on a broken marble block. Her head sank down into her hands.
“She died in the firebombing, Madge.”

“Yes.”

“But...oh, why didn’t he just tell me?” she said, the sound of it a wounded and bewildered cry. “I
thought he was being so angry over Katniss growing apart from him and told him he was
overreacting, that he couldn’t force her to love him, and he’d see that he’d get over it...that was
when he stopped talking to me. His own ma. Went and got his own compartment, and I’d see him
with some of those Thirteen girls after that, and I just...”

Yeah, he didn’t doubt that angry and heartsick and lonely as he was, Gale had probably taken
advantage of a district where birth control was ostensibly freely available and going all the way to
sex was a much more casual thing for it. He’d run across teenagers hanging all over each other in the
corridors here in Thirteen and going in and out of each other’s rooms. Katniss and Peeta had
obviously ended up sleeping together before the end of the war. Clearly being teen parents wasn’t
the catastrophe it was in the districts because the risk of enduring the Games wasn’t there. He
wondered if even now there might be a Hawthorne grandchild on the way, and decided to not bring
that up. He wasn’t sure whether it would be a cruelty or a comfort for her. “He was angry.”

“All the damn time,” Hazelle said with a tired shake of her head. “That temper, he got that from Joe.
You weren’t there,” and even if she didn’t mean it there was still a casual damnation in those words
and how he’d left the Seam, “but after they hanged Lorna, after you and Burt brought her back to the
Seam, he was threatening to go start killing Peacekeepers. It took all of us to settle him.”
“I remember Joe had a temper on him.” It burned hot as coal fires, and once Jonas Hawthorne was pissed off with someone, he tended to stay mad unless someone calmed him down. Probably a reason someone levelheaded like Hazelle had been such a good match for him. “After Gale’s first Reaping Day, he came up and told me exactly what he thought of me.” It was pretty much just confirming the opinion he knew people had of him in Twelve, but seeing the disgust and anger on the face of his old friend as he said it, the words cut all the deeper.

Now Hazelle winced. “I can imagine. That’s probably where Gale, and Rory, got their…opinion of you.” There was a distinct apology in her glance at him. “They looked up to him so much.”

“I wasn’t much to admire.” Whether he had good cause for that or not, the fact remained. “And with Rory, well, he’s lost his big brother…”

“Yes. And they were close. Very much alike too. Rory’s got Joe’s temper too. Though Joe grew out of the worst of it.”

“Maybe Gale would have too.” The boy, in his sheer grief-stricken rage, had lashed out viciously. Trying to kill all the civilians at Eagle Mountain, helping Beetee build those innocuous-looking explosive napalm bombs that had burned children—the things he had stood for were almost unthinkable. Given free rein, Haymitch didn’t know how many Gale would have seen killed in sheer dogged pursuit of his revenge and destroying the Capitol and its allies. But maybe one day, with greater maturity and wisdom, he would have looked back on what he’d said and done and been horrified, and tried to atone. He would never have that chance now.

The fact that there on the Exchange, he chose bravery and sacrifice, saving Katniss and Peeta’s lives, rather than ruthlessly pursuing his own agenda said plenty about the goodness that still remained buried beneath the rage. Haymitch thought on what he’d said at the military camp in the heat of temper about how Gale was apparently too proud and judgmental to suffer for anyone else’s sake, and somewhat regretted those words now. They had been a harsh slap of reality that was needed at the time, but Gale had proven him wrong after that. He didn’t sharply mourn the boy who’d been so filled with wrath, but yes, in his way, he now mourned the grief it caused the living Hawthornes, the selfless path he’d chosen at the very last, and most all, the loss of the potential of the good man he now saw Gale still likely would have become.

“Tell me if he died fast.” She wasn’t interested in whether or not it had been brave or heroic—she’d seen too much to put much stock in that. But she’d seen slow dying in plenty, starvation and bad hangings and disease.

“It was quick. I doubt he had time to know it.”

“You’re not telling me what I want to hear, are you?” He tried to not flinch, because he could hear that word liar right there plainly, and whether Hazelle meant it that sharply or she just wanted assurance and would have said it if he was known as totally honest, that she doubted him stung at least a little.

“I’m telling you plain truth and that’s it. He died instantly.”

“There was no body to bury when you had to leave him, was there?”

“No.”

She didn’t want details; that he could tell for certain. He didn’t blame her. Sometimes he still had nightmares about that skirmish down on the Exchange, just one more horror mingled with all the rest. She nodded, just accepting that. In a way maybe it was almost a strange comfort that they hadn’t
been forced to leave his body to their enemies. He still didn’t know what the Capitol had done with the bodies of the dead victor-tributes from the arena, or those mentors they had executed during their captivity. Well, he knew the fate of one liver. Beyond that, though, he wasn’t sure he wanted to know the details of how their bodies had maybe been desecrated, and almost certainly given no care or respect by being sent back to their homes. “Briar died quick too,” he told her. Another thing he had learned since they last spoke before the Quell. “She…they were shot before the house burned.” It was a small saving grace, but having burned himself, and having the screams of Capitol children in his ears still as they burned to death, he’d a thousand times rather be dead when the flames were lit.

She was silent for a little while. “Thank you for telling me.”

“Ash is alive,” he blurted next, feeling like having edged onto the topic, it ought to be said. So many dead from their group then: Briar, Lorna, Jonas, Burt. For so long they’d thought Ash was among that number. “Or he was, past the fire.”

“What?”

“Fog begged Snow to keep him alive. Because he was Ash’s dad.” His too, but he wasn’t going to tell Hazelle that. “Snow agreed but had him sent to Two—to be raised there and become a Peacekeeper. Apparently they did that with Capitol traitors’ kids already. He was…they used tracker jacker venom to fuck up his mind and make him forget…but I found the record at the orphanage in Two.” He sighed, rubbing at his eyes tiredly. “Johanna’s sister too. Apparently the plan worked so well with Ash that Snow decided to do it to her. Kept them around as secret leverage, you know?”

“Where is he now?” Surprisingly she didn’t resent that his brother had lived while her sister had died.

“I don’t know. Last I know is he was sent to Nine when he was eighteen, but that was so long ago. I’m gonna have to check the records every place I go.”

“Good luck.” There was genuine warmth in it, but at the same time, a rueful tone that said she hoped he could deal with whatever he found. “He used to have the most awful little-boy crush on me,” she said with a slow smile. “I think in his mind—you know how he was, always thinking everything over—you and Briar, and then me and him, it made sense. It would make us all just one big happy family.”

He’d never known that, but maybe he’d been too oblivious to some things about his little brother to sense it. Things had changed since then. Briar was dead and he had Johanna. Hazelle had Jonas first, and Corriden now. As for Ash, or that stranger called Theodosius Law, who knew whose lips he might be kissing? Hopefully not some poor little district girl he had paid. “If there’s anything I can ever do for you…it ain’t pity, so don’t worry.”

“You don’t owe me either.”

That absolution from that careful system of Seam debt meant plenty to him, especially given Gale’s role in rescuing him and his own inability to return the favor. “Then even if you don’t move back to Twelve, you come and see me sometime because I’d like to stay in touch, all right?”

“Of course. I think we will, though. I don’t know there’s much here for Corriden in the future, he’s due some peace anyway, and…the kids and I miss Twelve. It’s home.”

“Yeah. It is.” Those two words, it’s home, simple as they were, still contained far too much loss and longing and belonging to be denied. “Then I’ll look forward to seeing you there. Plenty of houses left in the Village.” He figured Peeta would give up his too. “Might be nice for you to live in one rather than just clean one.”
She looked stunned at the idea of having that kind of abundance. “Well, it’s hard going still,” he pointed out. “No electricity yet, we get some food rations on the hovercraft but it’s mostly whatever you catch or gather, you’re always chopping wood…” He gave her a bit of a smile. “Though that might be just the thing to keep a fourteen-year-old boy’s mind busy.”

“He is going stir-crazy here. Rory doesn’t take to mindless discipline too well.” No, but he’d certainly listened to Prim Everdeen hollering at him.

“Well, Katniss might be glad to hunt with him.” It wouldn’t be Gale, but eventually, as he was finding in his own life, the memories of shared dead might be a comfort rather than a burden.

“Did you ever get rid of those awful curtains in the kitchen?” she asked, a glimmer of humor suddenly in her eyes.

“They were nice!”

“Twenty-five years ago when your ma picked them,” she scoffed.

“Yeah, we replaced them,” he admitted. Johanna’s urging, of course, but in the end he’d been forced to admit she was right.

“How about that ratty old couch of yours?”

He grumbled irritably, realizing unfortunately Hazelle had apparently seen every flaw in his house and remembered it. “Redid the padding and the fabric. Are you and Johanna allied against me here or what?”

Hazelle laughed, and the humor and warmth of it prodded against his awkward self-consciousness and helped neutralize it. “Well, then. That wife of yours is obviously doing a world of good for your house. Plus she’s apparently got good taste to boot.”

“Not sure about that. She took me on, after all,” he joked.

“My sister loved you,” she said simply. “And I know she had good judgment.”

He felt a lump in his throat at that. “Johanna isn’t Briar,” he said. There were a few similarities, perhaps—the strength and the humor, the ability to prod him out of his moods. But the two of them were different enough that he was thankful for it. It meant he could love Johanna simply for herself rather than painful reminders of the past.

“You ain’t exactly who you were then either. But a lot of you stayed the same, I think. And would you want her to be just like Briar anyway?”

“Would you want Boggs—Corriden—to be just like Jonas?” he countered. They didn’t have to say it. Both of them seemed to understand instinctively that wasn’t the case. “He makes you happy?” he asked her quietly.

“Yeah. And her?”

“She does.”

“Good. Bri would have wanted that.”

“She’d also have said at least I went for someone with the guts to chew me out when I need it.”

“She would at that,” and there was humor now in Hazelle’s eyes. “You play fair with Corriden at the
peace summit, all right? You may not much like Thirteen, but he’s there to do the best he can for them.”

“Got it. I aim that we hopefully all play fair as we can anyway.” Otherwise it would just be sowing discontent and the next conflict. “I’d best go be the reinforcements for Johanna. I think Posy really wants to keep her.” The youngest Hawthorne seemed fascinated by Johanna, and he couldn’t help but be amused, and maybe a bit touched, at how Jo’s ferocity seemed to soften in the face of that kind of adoration, showing some of that tenderness underneath. Well, he realized, she’s never had anything like that. Right from her Games she’d been the trickster, the sly villainess. People had wanted to possess her, yes, but they never adored her like that had Finnick or Katniss and Peeta. She likes kids, maybe, he thought, trying to not let that run wild.

“All right. I think Cory and I are going to finish out Reflection up here, if that’s all right by you.”

“Yeah, you two need some time. I’m sure Jo and I will manage till you get back.” He’d survived two trips through the arena, the Detention Center, and a war. Half an hour with three kids ought to be all right.

Hazelle’s amused laughter at that followed him, and he shook his head, unable to help a grin of his own as he headed back for the access hatch.
District Thirteen: Seventeen

About five minutes after Haymitch left, Johanna was wondering what the hell she had been thinking. Her sitting there stuck in a steel box with three kids? “Guess what,” she said, looking at the trio of them, one scowling, one shy, and one eagerly bouncing from foot to foot. Black hair and grey eyes and olive skin; they might have been Haymitch’s cousins, like Katniss had claimed they were to her. They’d almost been his nephews and niece, she realized. “Fu—enough with this. We’re heading to the surface.” She had surface access, might as well use it.

“But Ma said,” Vick began quietly.

“Let’s go,” Rory said impatiently. He grabbed Posy’s hand and headed for the door. Posy was chattering excitedly, some kind of rapid-fire exclamation of andIwannaclimbatreeandIwanna

Vick glanced over at her. “We don’t get to the surface much except Reflection. And Ma worries,” yeah, she could imagine after being widowed and losing her eldest boy, she might, “and Miz Delly and Mister Thom are nice but they usually like inside activities when they’re looking after—“

“Babysitting,” Rory cut him off again with an irritated snort, helping Posy with her shoes.

Followed by a gaggle of mini Hawthornes, she made her way up to the surface. Figuring Haymitch had claimed the woods for his chat with the adults, she led them towards the training field. Them clearly having enough energy to burn like that, to her mind, it was a good idea to just let them run crazy a bit before bedtime safely outdoors rather than making noise in those cramped quarters where sound traveled so well.

Posy was off like a shot towards the training bars, climbing all over them like an agile little squirrel. Vick, at first standing there watching her like an awkwardly silent little eleven-year-old guardian, soon enough got coaxed up there with her. She shook her head, reminded too much of Heike by his gentle shyness. He’d be a sweetheart when he grew up, she was sure. “Might as well go play too,” she said, nodding to Rory.

“I ain’t a kid,” he scowled at her, and true enough, he was already a little taller than her, promising at a height he and Gale both inherited from their dad, to hear Haymitch remember him. But his voice was still boyish, his frame still childishly soft. Remembering him protesting he was fourteen, that Gale had been hunting for the family at that age, remembering that Haymitch had been doing the same, she couldn’t help but weigh that off against the memories of Heike. At fourteen she’d still been a child. Hell, even Gale and Haymitch had been kids—forced beyond their years, maybe, but children all the same.

“Yeah, you are,” she said. “Enjoy it while you can.” Being an adult wasn’t always all it was cracked up to be. At sixteen, seventeen she’d been ill equipped to handle being forced over that edge. Even now, at almost twenty-seven, she was dealing with repercussions of that.

“Gale was…” he insisted, folding his arms over his still-thin chest and his scowl deepened to something almost painful.

“And you’re not Gale,” she cut him off, not wanting to dwell on that, not wanting to remember how the man—still half a boy really—had died. She didn’t want to have the blanket of that grief wrapped around her too. She’d always managed to avoid the worst of it with the tributes. She’d figured Blight couldn’t handle delivering the bodies at the train station to the parents, or the community home in a couple of cases, and so she’d just gone ahead and done it herself. Steeled her nerves each year and
been the heartless person they expected, giving them back their dead child with barely a word said about it, because she didn’t want to let it in anyway. Look how badly it had broken Haymitch over the years, taking it in as he always had and feeling the grief, letting it twist into blame. She didn’t blame herself, not really. Maybe one or two had made a harder mark—Willow, she remembered Willow all too well with her carved wooden ball and how she’d murmured goodbye to her mom before she deliberately dropped it.

But mostly she simply let the clean purity of her anger at the Capitol burn quietly behind that mask of bitchy indifference, so that along with all that she endured herself, each dead kid’s name became a new call for a reckoning.

“How would you know?” he demanded fiercely. “You probably didn’t know shit about him before you all let him die.”

_I knew him enough, _she almost snapped. _I almost fucking your big brother, kid, because after he lost someone he cared about, the other person he cared about picked someone else, so what do you think about that?_ Thinking back on that night after Finnick’s wedding, reeling from seeing his happy ending come true and knowing it wouldn’t ever happen for her and then being pushed away by Haymitch from even a friendly fuck, she’d gone for the old standby—losing herself in mindless sex with someone likely. Seemed like Gale was developing that coping mechanism himself, she thought.

Back then she’d just been impatient with Gale to cover the awkwardness of suddenly calling it off when she realized, _This isn’t what I want._ She’d mocked him, of course, but the issue was probably more with herself, with the odd realization in the back of her mind of how tired she was of it. If anything after the triumph of a few moments she felt worse at what she’d let herself become.

She knew Haymitch had no patience for Gale and his temper; he’d made that plenty obvious at their base camp at the Capitol. But then it seemed like Haymitch’s entire life had been based around accepting the idea that a person simply knuckled under and did what was necessary. His priority was safeguarding people rather than securing vengeance. After what he’d paid to try to keep people alive, she could see how he’d criticize someone who seemed to hold other lives so cheaply, like the Capitol did.

His little show of rebellion against the Games had cost other people dearly and after that, he chose his way and he gave ground over and over to keep it from happening again. But in her case, she’d fought and swore and raged the entire way. Haymitch was quietly pragmatic, she was just pissed off.

There had been days where if someone had given her a button and told her that in pressing it she’d destroy the Capitol and everyone in it, she’d have wanted to press it, telling herself their entire society was a cancer. The desire to just _make them pay_ had been there. So in some ways she understood where Gale had been coming from, much as Haymitch grumbled about him.

Gale had been young still and full of anger about the world and the way it was. Chances were he’d have grown out of it and realized what good things he still had, and what an angry idiot he’d been trying to punish the entire world. Able to step away from the worst of it now herself, she hated a lot of who she’d been. She’d made her choices during the war, and without people like Haymitch and Finnick and Katniss and Peeta to let her know she wasn’t alone and they wouldn’t abandon her, she might still have chosen the bloody path of vengeance herself.

“I knew him enough,” she told Rory, even as her temper wanted to tell him to shut the fuck up and stop being a brat, but she forced herself to calm down. “I know he went hunting to help feed you, your brother and sister, and your mom so he cared a lot about you. I know he risked his ass to come get us prisoners back from the Capitol even though he had no reason. I know he made some pretty bad decisions along the way he probably would have regretted. But I know when it counted his last
choice was that he was going to protect Katniss no matter what.”

Something in Rory’s face crumpled, the angry defiance finally giving way to the lost boy missing the big brother he obviously had idolized. “You were there, huh?”

“Yeah.” She sort of hoped he wouldn’t ask for details on it. The last thing she wanted to do was give him nightmares about forest cats and his brother being blown to bits. “He decided he was going to save her life even though he died doing it.”

“She didn’t deserve that, she didn’t love him,” he mumbled angrily.

“She was his friend. Just because someone doesn’t love you like you want, doesn’t mean they aren’t still a good friend. Trust me.” If Finnick had died down there as he nearly had—she couldn’t even bear to imagine it. “You know Katniss,” she said with a shrug. “She’s not so good at saying things. But she misses him. And we’d have saved him if we could. He was part of our squad.” Maybe not a victor and thus already a friend of hers, but he’d pulled his weight all the same. All the rest of them had been through the arena and the hard choices and none of them would have been eager to sacrifice anyone of their group for the sake of survival.

Rory nodded quickly, more an awkward dip and duck of his head than anything. He looked over towards where Vick was helping hold Posy up so she could climb the bars. “Gale, he used to tell Posy stories,” he said. “Good ones, sounds like. Because I don’t know ‘em and mine are never as good because she still wants his and she doesn’t understand where he went…” There was a sudden crack in his voice and she didn’t think it was just hormones. “It’s not like with Pa, she wasn’t even born when he died and Vick was too little to understand. Vick, he just doesn’t say much at all about Gale...”

She looked over at him, a boy shoved into responsibility too fast by the hand the world had dealt him. “You haven’t said anything to your, uh, stepdad,” they might not be married yet but she figured it applied, “have you?”

“Corriden’s nice and he makes Ma happy,” Rory said with a shrug, “but...he didn’t much know Gale either. Besides, I’m getting too old for needing a pa anyway.” He was trying too hard to convince himself of that fact. She could see it.

“I wish I had mine still.” Had she ever really admitted that to anyone? “My mom, maybe even more. There’s...lots of things I’d want to ask her.” Especially now, as she finally made a life of her own with a man she loved. “I don’t think you ever get too old for having some use for parents, kiddo.”

“Your ma and pa died?” he asked her carefully, grey eyes not quite meeting hers.

“My mom, my dad, my big brother too.” She wouldn’t bring up Heike just yet; too confusing. “The Capitol killed them because I wouldn’t do what they wanted.”

“What was that?” It startled her to realize he didn’t know; it seemed like the entire country knew by now given how public and televised Snow’s trial had been. But he was so young. Chances were Hazelle wouldn’t have let her kids follow the trial and all its revelations, because of all the ugliness that came out from it. Being confronted with someone still ignorant of the worst abuses of the Capitol was an odd feeling. It was hard in one way because he had no idea what she was talking about, but on the other hand, seeing that there was still some innocence out there in the world was almost reassuring.

She almost said *When you’re older* but defensive as he was now, grown up beyond his years trying to fill Gale’s shoes, she shook it off. Finnick had been killing people in the arena at fourteen. Heike
had her memories taken from her and been thrown into a new place and a new life at fourteen. “They wanted me to…” She hesitated still, not sure if she wanted to court Hazelle’s wrath by spoiling that innocence. “They asked too much,” she said. “That’s all you need to know for now, really.”

“You miss ‘em?”

“Every day,” she admitted.

He nodded again, breeze ruffling his wavy black hair, looking at her almost shyly. “You’re a lot nicer than you seemed on the television.”

“Thanks,” and she was trying to not laugh wryly at that. She ought to count that as a win, if she could manage to not terrify a kid.

“Ma says you’re going to the Capitol?”

“Be there in about a month, yeah. Why?” She grinned. “Want me to throw a brick through a window of the Presidential Mansion for you?” Brocade would probably even let her do it.

His eyes lit up for a minute at that thought but then he shook his head. “Nah. It’s…Prim’s there. Prim Everdeen.” Katniss’ little sister, still recovering from her spinal injury. “Are you gonna go see her?”

“We told Katniss we would.” Considering Katniss hadn’t seen Prim in months, it seemed the least the two of them could do.

“Can you say ‘hi’ for me to her?” he asked hopefully. “Maybe, I don’t know, bring her some nice flowers? I don’t have any money but…”

It took a moment but finally she made the connection. There was something almost absurd in the angry sullenness melting away to the awkwardness of a teenage boy anxiously in love. But she knew better than to laugh at him for it. “Sure. Haymitch and I, we’ll do that.”

“Thanks.” He scuffed at the dirt of the track with the toe of his boot. “If you could tell Hay…um…Mister Abernathy sorry about the snowball, and us calling him names…”

Now she really had no idea at all, but she could imagine. All at once she was trying to not laugh at him but the stir of anger at hearing it was there too. She almost wanted to tell him to have the guts to go apologize himself, but realizing it would be all the more awkward for Haymitch too, she just sighed and let it go. “I’m sure you’ll be fine with him.”

“He didn’t let Gale die?” he asked, obviously having decided he could trust her answer.

“No.” She couldn’t come up with any way that Haymitch could have saved him given how it happened.

He chewed his lower lip for a moment and accepted that with a soft, “OK.” Then he shook his head with an incredulous look. “‘Are you really married to him?”

She held up her left hand with the gold ring there. “Yep. Got the paperwork to prove it too.” He gave her a look that said he really didn’t understand it, but at least he didn’t ask. “Don’t question me and I won’t question you about your liking Prim,” she told him with a snort of amusement.

He blushed and mumbled, “Deal.”

Collecting Vick and Posy again to herd the lot of them back downstairs, Posy looked up and her and
said decisively, “You’re pretty. But you’d be really pretty with long hair, Miz Jo Hannah.”

“Thanks, kid,” she said, touched and amused all at once.

“Be careful,” Vick said with a trace of a smile. “You’re different, see. So she’d probably want to
play with your hair like she does with Miz Delly’s.” The words You’re different suddenly didn’t
sound like suspicion. She resisted the urge to self-consciously touch her hair, knowing the dark
coppery brown of it, or Delly’s blond hair, probably was fascinatingly different to a little kid like that
compared to so many black haired kids all around her and her black-haired mother to boot.

“Everyone has hair like me,” Posy complained with a melodramatic sigh. Oh, for the problems of
childhood, she thought wryly.

“I think your hair’s gonna be real pretty too,” she said. Hazelle Hawthorne did have nice hair, she’d
admit that freely. As for black hair in general, well, she was hardly going to tell a six-year-old that
she was damn fond of Haymitch’s, especially how it felt underneath her fingers at night. He might
joke about hating how it curled, but it looked a hell of a lot better on him than the disheveled, grown-
out mop they’d stuck him with for years.

“You think Papa Cory and Ma might get me a little sister?” Posy asked hopefully. She heard a
strangled sound from Rory like he was trying all at once to not choke and not laugh, and an
awkward giggle from Vick.

“I…uh…really don’t know.” People thought she was blunt? Little kids obviously left her in the dust.
She really wasn’t interested in the details of Corriden and Hazelle’s sex life, if they even had one in
this place with three kids around, and whether or not Hazelle might be too old for another kid.
“You’ll have to ask your ma about that.” Might as well put the discomfort where it belonged.

“I always wanted a sister,” she said wistfully.

“Oh a puppy,” Rory muttered, but she could tell he was laughing.

“Sisters are great,” she admitted, thinking of Heike, wondering as ever where she was now. “But,”
she told Posy, “I know brothers are pretty nice too. And you’ve got two good ones.”

“Fine, but they’d better not get me a brother. I don’t want another brother if we can’t have Gale.”

She was spared from having to answer that by arriving back at the compartment and seeing

“Hi, Mister Abernathy,” Rory said almost nervously. Haymitch raised an eyebrow at her and she
shrugged.

“He doesn’t bite. Really.” She restrained herself from making the inevitable Enobaria joke—yeah,
just what she needed to do, give kids nightmares. So maybe she was learning a little bit.

~~~~~~~~~~

After another few hours of sitting back and watching Haymitch try to deftly deal with the small
council, and wondering, Why the fuck am I here when I could be doing something more useful than
trying to not tell people off?, she’d finally excused herself and gone to talk to some of the people
concerned with construction and repairs about rebuilding the district. They could hold their political
pissing match all they wanted and she trusted Haymitch to get the better of them on it. She was going
to focus on something actually useful that she was good at.
Maybe it was because every repair or addition was apparently an utter pain in the ass for them, but they seemed like a pretty receptive audience to the idea of stopping living like a bunch of ants underground. Sitting there talking with them, she had the unfortunate realization that she really knew nothing at all about construction with metal or brick or stone and so many of the baseline principles were different. She knew timber down to her bones, knew how to choose the right wood and then frame and build a home that was snug and solid. They’d need plenty of houses in Twelve, Thirteen, and elsewhere. But something on the scale of the Justice Building, or a hospital, or a school was beyond her and those were going to be sorely needed too.

Surprisingly enough, given it was Thirteen and she was naturally suspicious, the architects and construction crew didn’t treat her like a backwoods idiot. Maybe because none of them had the skill of working with wood; dealing exclusively with this metal hive as they all had, they’d apparently forgotten how to deal with any other material. So between the two of them arguing back and forth over ideas and merits of things, it seemed like they all learned a few things. They were all wryly forced to conclude that masons would probably be necessary for dealing with brick and stone. Unfortunately, she’d been a Mason by birth rather than an actual mason so she had nothing to offer there.

Still, she came out of it with a stack of books on architecture that they freely handed over, and promised to try to recruit some carpenters from Seven for the job. It felt like actually getting something accomplished. “Much more interesting than those law books you were so buried in last fall,” she snarked at Haymitch that night when he came back from his own meeting to see her hungrily reading away.

Picking one up, he flipped through it. “All that math in here. Sure you’re not going all Three on me, Hanna? As to how interesting, well, matter of opinion on that,” he teased her lightly.

“I don’t know. Managed to distract you from yours pretty readily,” she said, smirking at him over the top of the book.

Recognizing the challenge, he proved more than up to distracting her in turn. Though when he leaned down and whispered in her ear, “By the way, spouse, I’m about to enter you,” she got seized in a fit of laughter that put a pause on things for a few minutes, remembering how she had joked that matter-of-fact notification was probably Thirteen’s sole foreplay.

“I’m pretty sure foreplay’s usually supposed to get you hot and bothered, not giggling,” he said, trying too hard for a scowl, because she could tell he was on the edge of laughing. Finally he gave in, chuckling in turn.

When they’d both mostly settled down she managed to say, “Thanks for the warning, spouse.” She wriggled her hips against his. “Entrance is granted,” echoing the voice notifying someone that their keycard access had worked to unlock a door, which started them both up again.

Maybe it meant it took a while to actually get down to the sex, and the occasional snort of laughter kept breaking in, but it felt good to be able to laugh like that, especially here in this place with its memories of those first awkward nights together.

Arriving at the Conference Hall just before Reflection the next evening, it looked like Thom and Delly had done their job well. The place was packed thick as boards on the lumber trains. Thom loped up, seeing them, saying, “Looks like most of the people from Twelve want to hear the news—I think that’s over four hundred of the adults. And some others not from home too.” She saw some blond heads sprinkled in among the coal-black, and some red and brown and a few grey-haired oldsters. For a moment she saw the familiar golden skin and autumn brown hair of a woman originally from the southern lumbering camps of Seven, probably thirty-five, and she gave her a nod,
whoever she was.

Things quieted down rapidly then and Thom went and took a seat beside Delly in the front row. The place was made for a voice to carry, so no microphone was necessary.

“So, welcome,” Haymitch said, raising his voice. “Everyone hearing me OK there in the back?” A few nods greeted him at that. “Good, good. Let’s see. Things back in the district. No power yet, water’s still running and the telephones are working, but the only houses are the ones in Victor’s Village, so it’s not ready yet for a lot of folks to move back in but if there’s some families interested in coming to help build houses and all, well…getting some rations from the Capitol, sure, but it’s mostly what you can catch or forage, so…” He was running rapidly through the list, almost too quickly, and she could see the tension in his shoulders as he stood there.

It was a far cry from the man who’d walked into the meeting with the small council and pretty much took control of the whole thing as he boldly told them all to fuck off, not giving a damn about their power or prestige, or how she’d seen him deliberately provoke them since. Far too, from the man who’d owned the room as he tried to draw all the victors into a rebellion he’d planned and managed to sell all of them on the crazy idea. If anything he was acting like a nervous boy on his first day at school, scared he might not be liked. The change was startling.

But, she realized, this mattered intensely to him. Stripped of his usual defenses of indifference or sarcasm, she could sense his awkwardness all too well. He desperately wanted them to like him again, these people of his district who had shunned him as a disgrace and a pariah, a selfish Capitol sellout, his entire adult life. He feared their judgment still, probably especially now that the entire country knew what he’d endured.

Unlike her, his first response wasn’t to get pissed off. A few times he had lashed out, but mostly he just quietly withstood it, as he took their cautious indifference now. She’d seen that firsthand. She’d clung to her anger so fiercely in part because she’d feared becoming like him, so used to submission and handing over everything without a fight that there was nothing left but medicating with some kind of drug to cover the emptiness and the depression.

Knowing how their lack of response must be feeding his awkward panic of Oh shit this isn’t going well, it stirred at her anger. Part of her wanted to tell them all to fuck off if they wanted to try to judge him. But she realized at the last moment, He needs this. Lonely for far too long, he needed to belong somewhere again.

He was right in needing that. Beneath the fury, she’d been tired of being seen as the angry bitch that chased everyone away. At the voting last year in Seven, the tentative gestures from some people to draw her back in had meant more to her than she could say. But it wasn’t worth bowing and scraping and apologizing for the rest of their lives to be allowed to live on the fringe of things, and always being afraid one screw-up meant being out in the cold again.

If he was still too accustomed to their years of shunning, though, and unable to find his way free to really fight for himself, then damn it, she’d do it. She didn’t owe any of them anything, having no shared history to bind her. Her only loyalty right now was to protecting him. He’d probably had people who reluctantly decided to put up with him, even some of the other victors who liked him, but she doubted he’d ever really had anyone to openly stick up for him. He’d been left defenseless all those years. Not this time, she decided.

“You want him to still be your little embarrassment?” she spoke up. “Fine. Then I’ll keep on being the bitch. Because if you’re going to judge a man who had his family murdered because he dared to challenge the Capitol, and still had the guts to do it again to play the Gamemakers and bring both your damn tributes home and then did it again to go into the arena and start a rebellion to try to save
them and set all of you free, talk to me when you’ve done it. Talk to me when you’ve spent eighteen years being a sex toy for too many people. Trust me, we got fucked in ways you luckily can’t even imagine to keep Snow’s claws off our districts. When you’ve brought kids to the Capitol year after year knowing they’re doomed—hell, you did everything possible but without sponsors, it was a lost cause, and none of them were ever interested in kids from Twelve or Seven. You do all that for years knowing your district loathes you because you’ve been forced to hide the truth from them and be only what the Capitol wants you to be, and you manage to not give in to rage or despair or the bottle, then come talk to me and I’ll admit you’re a really good person. But I’m damn well not going to let him spending the rest of his life feeling like he owes you something. He gave everything he had too many times already.”

So perhaps it was lecturing him as much as them, with that last bit. She was getting tired of him feeling like he wasn’t good enough. If this was one of those lousy Capitol movies, someone would probably start applauding and then everyone would make some big gesture, clapping or rushing to hug him or doing that Twelve gesture with their fingers to their lips or whatever, and it would be a total triumph.

Life didn’t quite work that way. Mostly she saw stunned expressions like she’d hit them with a lumber post. Apparently being ridiculously blunt caught them off guard. A few closed expressions, or even some angry ones, told her she’d lost some of them. But she thought she saw a few that looked like they’d actually listened.

A man a few rows back, his hair far more grey than black now, raised his voice. “That true, Haymitch?”

Haymitch started beside her, as if coming out of a trance. “What’s that, Pavel?”

“I hear your wife there loud and clear,” and the old man looked at her with a nod of acknowledgment. “But that ain’t you talking. So tell me it’s true. You did everything you could for my Hyacinth?”

Haymitch was silent for a few moments. “Yes,” he said finally. “I went to the sponsors. Plead. Tried everything I could to make ‘em take a chance.” He let out a slow breath. “Fucked a few of them in the bargain,” he said, half to himself, but she was close enough to hear it. “None of them were interested in a nice little girl from Twelve who they thought wouldn’t last past the first night. They said,” and now there was finally the long-withheld rage in his voice, and she could see the audience stirring at hearing it, “she was a poor investment and not likely to be entertaining. That was that. Nothing else I could do.”

“They were wrong. She made it to day three,” Pavel said with something like mingled pride and anger and grief.

“She did at that.”

“You didn’t even say a damn thing to me when you brought her coffin back.”

“I quit saying ‘Sorry’ after five years. Got to the point I wanted to just skip it, because it seemed real pointless when I knew all of you thought I was too busy living it up and screwing around to try to save your kid and you’d hate me even more for an apology you didn’t believe. But I am sorry I couldn’t bring more of them back. Always was.” He shoved his hands in his pockets, looking out at the audience. “Lily,” his eyes wandered and settled again, “River and Sam, Tad, Pansy, the same for you.” Picking out the surviving parents of dead tributes, apparently, and she could only imagine the swift ease with which he identified them told those people that in remembering them he hadn’t taken their losses lightly. “I see Frank and Nola ain’t here tonight. If you’d be willing to pass that on,” he
hesitated only a moment, “I’d appreciate it.” One of them, either Sam or Tad, nodded.

Things had eased a bit more with him actually having that opening to speak up, maybe say some things honestly that they’d needed to hear. She wouldn’t say he’d won the crowd, but the air of tension had slacked off considerably. “As to where things are going with the district,” now he seemed on better footing, less awkward and apologetic, “Brocade Paylor’s holding a peace summit in the Capitol in a few weeks to try to get things figured out for the whole country. Since Jarron Undersee’s dead, she asked me to represent Twelve there. If you’d rather someone else go, though, I’m leaving that to you.”

“Can’t Katniss go?” came the yell from somewhere in the back.

Johanna resisted the urge to slap her own forehead. “Putting aside the fact she’s not even old enough to legally be an adult yet, you really want an impulsive eighteen-year-old girl to be the one to argue your entire district’s interests for the future?” Sure, maybe they’d hand her everything simply because she’d been a powerful symbol. Chances were Katniss would be outplayed at the negotiation table, though, by people older and wiser and eager to get as much advantage for their own district as possible. Katniss was many things, but savvy at negotiation wasn’t among them. She’d have been as lousy at getting sponsors as me, she thought with a wry snort.

“Pavel?” Someone else this time, a woman, looking towards him as probably one of the oldest survivors from Twelve.

“Hell, I ain’t doing it,” Pavel said with a snort, leaning back in his chair. “If he’s the one that got the Games rules changed to bring two tributes back, I say let him do it.” He grinned. “Anyone with the guts to call out President Snow to his face on national television probably can handle arguing with the other mayors.” That earned a faint ripple of laughter in some of the others. Still not wholehearted acceptance, but it seemed like a fair amount were at least willing to give him the benefit of the doubt now.

Glancing at Haymitch she saw a brief smile on his face too. “I won’t let you down,” he said simply, and she was sure the whole room heard the implication of this time.

“Mister Abernathy,” Delly called, raising her hand like she was still a kid in school. But she had been not so long ago when Johanna thought about it. “Uh…I want to go back soon as I can.” Probably to be reunited with Peeta—she had to admit thinking of going to Four and seeing Finnick again had her excited. “I don’t mind helping out to rebuild things. But I’m seventeen, and, well, I really don’t want Thom to be my guardian…” Yeah, she could imagine marrying your own guardian might look a little weird.

“Anyone under nineteen whose parents are gone that wants to go back, you could get someone else coming back to sign to be your legal guardian. I’ll make sure the papers are in order so I can get ’em signed by Brocade in the Capitol and make it official.”

“Or Haymitch and I can do it,” she spoke up. She shrugged as he looked over at her. “We’ve already got guardianship of Peeta, what’s a few more?” she quipped.

Haymitch shook his head a little, giving her that faint smile again. Leaning against one of the support pillars for the Hall, he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out paper and a pencil. “Well, if I’m gonna be arguing things for our district, I’d better know what I’m arguing about. What’s first?”

“If we’re going back down the mines there damn well better be some changes.” A chorus of agreements followed the speaker there.
“Well, West Hill and Blue Cloud are definitely closed for the long run ‘cause they’re still on fire,” Haymitch told them. “They will be for a long time yet at that. I’ve been talking to folks in Five, likely to be some changes made in the power supply so we’re needing less coal to begin.” Seeing surprise and even appreciation on some people at that, she hid a smile. He’d win them over yet; might take a while, but they’d see. He’d fight for them where he could. “Who was working Dunstan’s in town?” A few hands went up. “Convenient location compared to the others, yeah, but seemed like the production was going down.”

“We worked it too many years with too many miners. Went too deep, and we were working shittier faces all the time for lousier coal.”

“All right, so we resolve to close down Dunstan’s. Too many dead miners there.”

“You wouldn’t know,” one man called, “you never carried a pick and worked the face.”

She was tensed, ready to leap to his defense again, but it seemed like he was ready this time to do it himself. “No, but I watched my ma come back from Dunstan’s every damn day exhausted. I worked the surface as a shale-picker after school until my fingers bled, same as a lot of you did, till that damn pit finally injured enough miners to have a permanent picking crew and get rid of the kids. I heard the disaster bells every time. I knew plenty of good men and women that died down there. So let’s say nobody else dies down that miserable hole.”

“Piney Ridge has possibilities,” one of the women said. “It’s pretty new, still shallow, the coal’s still good quality. A fair haul from the town, took a good hour and a half to ride the train there each day, but…”

Watching him work with them, seeing how they tentatively were giving him a chance here and extending their trust in this much at least, she felt encouraged. Mostly, seeing how he responded to it like a tree suddenly given sunlight, gradually gaining more confidence in how he responded to them, she felt a swell of pride. He’d do right by them, and if they would give him that faith, she’d be all right calling them neighbors.

At least she got to chime in when it came to house building. She knew next to nothing about coal, but seeing them listen to her about that was gratifying. They all ignored the official Thirteen schedule and went long past Reflection, and the list they’d all worked out for the hopes of District Twelve was extensive. As they filed out, some of them still ignoring Haymitch but others giving a nod of acknowledgement or even a word or two, it felt good.

When they were finally alone he put a hand on her shoulder and said gruffly, “Thanks.” He didn’t have to specify for what.

“Hey, any time. It’s kind of fun defending you, really,” she told him, deliberately being a little flippant. “It means I get to tell people off again.” Leaning in and kissing his cheek lightly, she told him softly, “You’re worth it, all right?” Hearing the catch in his breath, she thought it wasn’t just the kiss that did it.

Walking back to their compartment, a grey-uniformed aide found them. “There’s a message for you up in Command.”

“President Paylor?” Haymitch asked, taking his arm from around her shoulders.

“No, from Finnick Odair,” the aide said, a frown coming over his face. “Non-essential calls are usually refused, but the council said to make an exception in your case…”
“Courting favor, no doubt,” Haymitch muttered.

“Finnick?” she said, wondering why he might be calling them here, knowing as he did what a task it would be to get through. It had to be important, and automatically her mind was going to the worst possibilities.

Holding the telephone, she was relieved the minions actually cleared out and let them have some privacy. Apparently Haymitch had really done a number on the council to make them want to curry his good opinion. Dialing up Finnick, she pushed the button for the speaker so they could both hear it. “Hello?” Finnick’s voice came over the phone.

“Finn,” she said with relief, hearing him sound not panicked or frightened, but happy.

“You called us?”

Finnick skipped the usual pleasantries of asking how they were and how things were going in Thirteen and got right down to business. “She’s beautiful,” he said, the joy obvious in his tone.

“Uh, who?” Annie? Yeah, she was pretty. Johanna would never deny that.

“Maggie. Nice head of black hair just like Annie’s and well, her eyes are blue right now but that’s normal, they’ll probably be green soon enough since we both have green eyes.”

Haymitch glanced at her. “Ah, Finn? Let’s just get this straight. Are you talking about your kid here?”

“Isn’t Annie not due for another month?” she muttered to Haymitch, seeming to remember the baby was supposed to come right about when she and Haymitch were visiting. He nodded, brows furrowed in concentration.

“Margaret Odair. She arrived at five seventeen tonight,” Finnick crowed jubilantly. “Annie’s just fine too,” and the relief in his voice was obvious. He’d confided in her often enough that he just hoped Annie would be OK.

“Good,” she said, imagining that tiny baby girl down south in Four. She tried to ignore the twist at her own heart thinking of another baby that might have been black-haired also. This wasn’t the time to be sad for her own sake; it was about Finnick and Annie and being happy for them. “Look, we’d better get off the phone before we get thrown in a cell for talking too long. We’ll be looking forward to meeting her, OK?”

“Be seeing you soon,” Finnick said. “I’ll try to have some pictures sent ahead to Nine if I can find a hovercraft headed that way.”

“If not, I’m sure if you step out the door a photographer would be more than happy to take pictures for the whole country,” Haymitch said with a wry grin. “Our best to Annie, Finn. And Maggie.”

Hanging up, she looked over at him. “Shit. For having two parents that are that laid-back, that little girl was in a hurry. We’d better bring her a present.”

“A toy axe is not a good present for a baby,” he mocked her gently. Then he grinned at her mischievously, reaching out and taking her hand in his. “Wait until she’s a teenager, and she can use it to keep the boys at bay. After all, any kid of Finn’s is bound to be a heartbreaker.”
For the last five days, the television had been full of nothing but constant commentaries on the upcoming Quell, ever since the trains had arrived from the districts bearing the victor-tributes and their mentor colleagues. Speculation on training, the arena, the odds, the analysis of previous Games, protests from Capitol citizens.

Sitting in the common area of HQ and watching, Kallanthe wasn’t paying all that much attention, but it was mandatory viewing anyway and not having patrol to conduct, there she was with the rest of the squad. Right now, coming up on evening prior to broadcast of the training scores, they were discussing strategy. “If you ask me, Caesar,” Claudius said, “Johanna Mason doesn’t have much of a chance. Her previous tactic’s out the window, they all know what she’s capable of this time. And, well,” he gave a rueful chuckle, “she’s a girl who won’t form alliances too easily to help protect her.”

“Oh, I imagine Finnick will be by her side—that’s a staunch friendship that’s endured for years. More than a friendship too, perhaps?” She’d watched Johanna and Finnick on television for years. She’d place good money that they’d been screwing each other, but then, apparently both of them got around a lot so it wasn’t like it necessarily meant anything.

“If Finnick ever stopped breaking so many hearts! Now, how about Haymitch? It was a very emotional moment at the reaping when he refused to let Peeta take his place.”

“Oh, yes. But he made his intent very clear, Claudius, to sacrifice himself to try to bring Katniss back home to her fiancé.”

“We know that, Claudius,” Virgil said almost impatiently, waving a hand for emphasis. “We were there. So were the cameras.”

Yeah, Kally remembered it easily enough. For all the man had become an embarrassment in many ways, he’d obviously cleaned up his act. In the months Thread had let them train, he’d turned from a fat lazy drunk into a sober and trim man who seemed driven—watching from afar, most days Haymitch was the last one to leave the training, and she and Myrina had seen him out practicing in the moonlight sometimes, moving swift and silent through the movements of what looked oddly like the knife techniques she saw in Two’s arena tributes. To have picked that up he must have paid much closer attention to the Games than it had seemed, much closer than his tributes’ early deaths would have suggested.

At the reaping there had been a sort of dignity in that moment, when he talked to Peeta and told him to step aside and just let this happen. The crowd seemed too weary to respond that much to it, but she’d caught a few nods towards Haymitch, at least token acknowledgment. “…a pity, really,” Caesar was saying, “since it seems like he’s experiencing quite a revival. I don’t think anyone’s seen Haymitch this lively in a while, ever since his apparent long-term struggles with alcohol addiction finally became—well, no other word for it—unfortunately very public several years ago.”

“Hardly the first young victor to be unready for sudden celebrity, and to have it take a tragic turn. I imagine a high-profile win like a Quarter Quell, and being a young man from Panem’s most hardscrabble district, only made the matter worse. He really wasn’t ready for the heights of fame and glory. But it seems like given the incentive of protecting his young charges that the Haymitch of old is back.”
“He’s hardly a spry young twenty-year-old, though, and up against the likes of younger victors…”

“True. Gloss, Cashmere, Enobaria, and Finnick will be particular threats for any prospective victor-among-victors to confront, and Brutus is no spring chicken either but he’s still formidable.”

Getting to her feet and stretching, Kally grumbled, “Can we just open a window?” The mid-July heat and humidity was a killer right now and the rolling electricity troubles here in Twelve meant the air conditioning was unreliable at best. Even now coming up on evening, it was boiling hot. Power outages were apparently more frequent than before according to the long-term Peacekeepers here like Purnia, given that the electric fence had to be up and running even at the expense of everything else.

Myrina, who’d flung herself sprawling into an overstuffed armchair, shook her head, sighing. “Head Thread’s orders,” she said. “I asked this afternoon. He expects to maintain heightened security during the Games and that includes maintaining the integrity of HQ.”

Like some local’s going to lean in an open window and somehow shoot us dead with a slingshot, she thought with a sigh. As if anyone in this district had the will for defiance at this point, after months of showing them who was boss and systematically cracking down on even a whiff of toeing the line.

Or maybe Thread just didn’t want to risk a local passing by and looking in the window to see a group of off-duty Peacekeepers there in their summer trousers and sleeveless undershirts, miserably sweating their asses off as they watched the pre-Games. Being simply that human wouldn’t be acceptable because that had nothing about dignity or the majestic presence of the Peacekeeper authority at all.

“Crap, at least with Cray we used to be able to open the windows,” Albus muttered irritably, and she glanced over to see him swiping the back of his hand across his brow. The sheen of sweat and his half-closed green-grey eyes reminded her a little too much of how he’d looked just after he’d gotten done having sex with her and she looked away.

“Al,” Purnia said warningly, looking over at her patrol partner with a fierce expression.

“Sorry, you’re right,” he muttered, though there was a tightness around his jaw that said he really wasn’t sorry at all.

Hearing it was Darius that had been arrested for treason made something tighten in her stomach. Darius had been easy to like and quick to make friends. Though she’d liked Albus far better, to be honest. He’d been a latecomer to the Peacehome himself, apparently lost his family at age twelve back in District Eleven, so he’d known what a hard adjustment it was to come there as an older kid. Two years later when she arrived, the misfit idiot with no memories thanks to her own clumsiness on the obstacle course, it had been Albus Law that sat down next to her at that first meal and became her first friend. It made him shaming her like that in front of everyone four years later all the shittier.

Well, aside from the occasional helpless reminder like she’d just had, she figured it was better to try to put it behind her than to let it fester. He rarely said anything to her these days anyway beyond stuff related to duty. It had hurt. It had shaken her confidence in herself as a woman, which hadn’t been that great to begin with since she always felt hopeless on some parts of their training. It still caused her some doubts sometimes, knowing the only man who’d ever slept with her had openly talked about how lousy it had been. But maybe she’d learned from it and if she took another man to bed, she knew she wouldn’t let herself be pulled in by idiotic words because of a stupid crush.

Besides, things that had seemed so important in the confines of the Peacehome perhaps weren’t such a big deal out here in the wider world. So long as he wasn’t going to be an ass to her again, she’d do her best to keep letting it slide. “Water break,” she said with a sigh, nodding back towards the
kitchen. “Anyone else?” A few lazily waved hands answered her.

Coming back to the common room with an armful of bottles of water, she tossed them to the others. “Anyone for a betting pool?” Faustus asked, catching his bottle one-handed. “I’m on for Finnick.”

Bets all taken and once the training scores and interviews were all done, she heard plenty of surprised and even angry mutters about Haymitch claiming Katniss as his bastard daughter. Among the Peacekeepers, nobody much gave a shit—plenty of them had been conceived by parents who hadn’t married. But the locals seemed to see it as a matter of honor one way or another, never mind that Katniss was been raised from birth by the people she considered her mother and father. She caught only snatches of conversation, quickly hushed as she and Myrina came into view and the locals saw the uniform. Some condemned, some merely accepted, but it was clear the notion of Katniss Everdeen as Haymitch’s daughter had rocked the district to the core.

“…much of a slut as he was in the Capitol, figures he’d have done it here at home…”
“…bad when even a little Seam tramp wouldn’t jump at the chance to marry a rich man…”
“….funny notion, him carrying on with a girl here, always acted like he was too high and mighty…”
“…seems like however it happened he’s doing right by Katniss now, though.”
“…smarter for him not to claim her, you know how bad victors’ children have it in the arena, and he was always a clever one…”
“…you ask me, he’s trying to pay what he owes, might still be a little Seam left in him…”

Finally the Games began and across Panem the lamentation of killing off victors was sharp, but maybe as Peacekeepers they were a little more pragmatic. It was what the Capitol demanded as a price for the treason of the Dark Days, so no point arguing. If there was blood to be had, best to honor it by not weeping and instead appreciating the quality of the fight among some of Panem’s finest. Not scared little children this year, even if some of the victors were sad ruins of their former selves, but there were enough prime fighters to make it a real show.

Still, it was a hard mindset to accept sometimes for her. Warrior prowess was admirable, and she was fine with fights to first blood, like the wedding dance. But to see a fatal fight as the utmost expression of the art—there was some part of her that couldn’t help but see it as a waste. This entire Hunger Games seemed a tragic waste; the tributes for years to come would be deprived of the wisdom and guidance of their mentors, and that meant it would be just mindless ugliness, like the earliest Games, rather than the ritual it had become, harsh but at least with some boundaries and attempts at holding things in check.

Probably that was why she’d been taken her specialty at Burnt Tree Camp as a medic rather than something like first-line riot response. She was damn good at it too, her trainers had all said so when she’d been sent to the medical training, and she felt pride in being capable at it. She’d taken to healing like a natural; one of the few areas of training she’d genuinely enjoyed because there, she felt strong and capable and sure. It was a necessary role anyway. Not like Peacekeepers could rely on good medical care out somewhere like here where it was all just apothecary herbs and whatever local superstitions went with it. Mostly her medic duties were dealing with people complaining about colds or needing a few stitches, though.

The Peacekeepers’ sense of pride in Brutus and Enobaria showing off their prowess remained, though it was easy to notice a spark of something stirring again in the people of District Twelve when Haymitch and Katniss served notice they weren’t going to go down easy. Apparently the old
man had been clever enough to draw in a strong alliance, even taking Finnick and Mags away from their traditional One-Two-Four allegiance.

Apparently he’d even caught the notice of Johanna Mason as more than an ally. “Hey, District Twelve men have their charms,” Myrina quipped with a laugh. “I can say that from experience.”

“Wait, you’ve been dipping into the local well?” Purnia said with a raised eyebrow. Her voice went lower as she advised, “That may have passed muster with Cray as Head, but you know Thread won’t stand for it, especially with you as squad leader!” After a moment, she added a halfway apologetic, “Ma’am.” They knew full well she was right, though. He’d had Peacekeepers disciplined for “inappropriate fraternization,” everything from reduced rations to flogging. They’d all gotten lectured about the paramount nature of duty and that keeping appropriate distance from the locals was expected, and that in general, thinking with organs rather south of their brains wasn’t going to be tolerated.

“The man’s probably never had a great lay in his life,” Naevia said with a sly smile, though immediately that faded to a nervous look, glancing back towards Thread’s office two floors up as if she was afraid Thread would somehow hear she had said it.

“Well, obviously he never married,” Albus pointed out. “He went for Head rather than mustering out, after all.”

“Probably would have been an arranged match with a woman from one of the other old bloodlines in Two if he had,” she answered. Those were common enough among the most fiercely traditional Peacekeeper families. “But he chose duty instead.”

“No,” Myrina finally circled back to the initial topic. “My, ah, fiancé. Theo. He was born here.”

“Ah, right, you mentioned him,” Faustus said with a shrug. “Well, probably the best thing he did was to get the hell out of here when he was still young.” Considering what a miserable place this seemed to be, Kally couldn’t exactly disagree. The smallest, poorest district in Panem, and along with Eight, probably one of the most tightly controlled now. Not a happy place by any stretch of the imagination.

“Hey, he’s a good man. Any place that raised him can’t be all bad,” Actaeon pointed out, leaping to the defense of his best friend. He grinned over at her, a friendly, teasing kind of smile. “So our fearless Major Myrina Law,” he elbowed Myrina teasingly, “is officially claiming Twelve men really are all that. They must be that she’d pick Theo over the likes of me. Tell me, Kally, Seven women have some secret charms we don’t know about that your sweet Johanna’s caught Haymitch’s eye?”

She felt frozen with dread as she mumbled, “I don’t know, sir.” Instinctively she backed away from the casualness of it, reestablished the formality of their ranks. “There was…I had…” She hated this explanation every time she gave it.

“Kally had a training accident at the Peacehome and she doesn’t remember her district life, sir,” Albus cut in neatly, sparing her once again awkwardly explaining what a clumsy idiot she’d been. Startled, she glanced over at him, wondering what he was doing in trying to be nice like that. He met her eyes for a split second, gave her an anxious smile, and looked away.

“Eh, no big thing,” Myrina shrugged, defusing the tension. “Me, I was raised at the Peacehome since I was just a baby, so it’s not like I had a district life. Theo lost his memories too in the accident that killed his family. I almost think in some ways it was easier for him.”

“Not having to try to forget? Probably,” Albus said, though it was in an undertone that none of them responded to.
Thankfully they dropped the topic and went back to watching the Games. The fourth day dawned and the plan Haymitch and Beetee had been discussing to try to electrify Brutus and Enobaria at noon was something she was going to miss, as her squad was on duty rounds. No fuss or groaning at possibly missing the climax of the Games; that was just the nature of the thing. Besides, the broadcast would be on the huge screens in the town square so if Myrina was really that desperate to see it, they could probably sneak a glimpse or two along the route. “Keep us posted on what happened,” Virgil called towards the off-duty Peacekeepers glued to the television. One of them waved acknowledgement of the request with an idle hand.

They were just crossing the square when Enobaria and Haymitch started into a frenzied knife fight. Standing there stunned at it, side by side with the locals, she heard one of them urge quietly, “C’mon, old man.” Enobaria was one of the best tributes Two had ever sent to the arena, a victor whose win left her covered in both pride and honor. But there was something terrifyingly relentless in Haymitch, some kind of fury that made him step right into her stab if only to have a better chance at taking her down. All those hours of his knife-dancing had clearly paid off. It was the perhaps the fight of a lifetime, and it frankly horrified her, ugly and bloody and brutal as it was.

Ideally, they would have kept walking their rounds, but it felt like everyone was frozen immobile, Peacekeepers and locals alike. Watching through to the conclusion, Katniss’ arrow fired into the air and then suddenly static, the silence was almost overwhelming. Everyone was just staring at the blank screen where a moment ago a girl had stood with her bow drawn and ready.

“Let’s keep going, you and me,” Myrina muttered finally, the confusion in her tone making it obvious she had no idea what just happened either. Kally had no idea what it meant for the situation here either. Seeing the dazed locals, Myrina barked, her tone rapidly taking on the edge of authority, “All right, be ready to go back about your business. We’re resuming normal district activity, so those of you on shift right here at Dunstan’s,” the only mine in walking distance, “will report in for the afternoon shift. Those on the distant mines, back to your homes and report in tomorrow morning.” Thread’s strict curfew and lockdown rules wouldn’t want the off-duty miners in the further mines milling around, possibly causing trouble or muttering with discontent.

Slowly the people trickled out of the square, and the two of them went back to their route. “That’s funny,” Kally said, furrowing her brow in confusion as they left the town and reached the boundary fence. It was routine to check it daily to make certain it was still intact and still working. But the low-level thrum of the current buzzing through the wires was absent now. Considering the fence was considered the most important thing here in terms of electrical supply, it was odd to say the least.

Myrina grabbed a stick and threw it against the wire. The absence of the crackling and sparking told them that the power was indeed off. “Shit,” she sighed. “Something must be screwed up. Let’s walk the perimeter line, see if we can find anything obvious to report for damage.” If not, they’d have to report it to one of the Peacekeeper technicians trained to handle things like the boundary fences. Kally would be the first to admit she knew virtually nothing about electricity. A bit about electrical burns, sure, since fence techs occasionally got injured on the job, and if she’d ever been sent to Five she’d deal with her share of it there, but she’d learned nothing about how to repair the thing herself. “Head Thread’s not gonna like this,” she said softly.

“No,” she agreed grimly. He’d consider getting the fence up and running again to be highest priority. “Should one of us report it first?” she ventured hesitantly.

Myrina made a face, caught between the hard and fast rule that partners never split up, and the notion that walking the fence cost time that could be spent making the repair. “We probably ought to just report it first then come back with some other watchkeeper pairs and a tech and…”
Just then, a hovercraft decloaked over the town, materializing in a shimmer of silver in the noon sunlight. “What the…” She looked over at Myrina. “Uh, can I ask, did Head Thread mention anything to senior officers about maintaining hovercraft in the area?”

“Not a word,” she said, shaking her head and grimacing, obviously not liking being left scrambling to figure it out just like Kally was. “But obviously they were standing by close to Twelve already to have shown up this fast—what’s it been, only about ten minutes since the Games feed cut out? It would have taken the better part of a day to get a hovercraft here from Eagle Mountain.”

“Must be riot response,” Kally ventured, watching as several more hovercraft appeared. “They must have been anticipating some trouble if Katniss fell in the arena.” Having trained first-response riot troops waiting in the area ready to deploy in a hurry would have been a smart move, given how popular the girl was across Panem, let alone in her home district. Though if that had been the case, apparently the situation in Twelve was judged to be more unstable than they’d thought.

Obviously Myrina was coming to the same conclusion, because she murmured, “It’s really not that volatile here, the locals are much too pacified for a rebellion, but I suppose they’re just playing safe…”

But as they watched, the hovercraft didn’t come down to land and deploy riot troops. Instead, suddenly there was a burst of light in the center of town, right where Kally judged the square would be, a blossom of orange fire roaring to life.

Suddenly, where there had been an eerie silence after the Quell so abruptly ended, there was a high-pitched wail of terror, and even up on hill at the fence, she could see the figures of people in the distance running frantically. Another bomb hit, another burst of flame, towards the entrance to Dunstan’s Mine. She could see the coal dust there took the fire greedily, with almost explosive force.

Shocked, she counted a dozen hovercraft there in the sky. All of them were now raining down bombs left and right, and there had been no warning. Not to the people, and most of all, not to the Peacekeepers that were now caught up in the path of the firebombs.

“They’re here to wipe out the district.” The realization of it stunned her because it was unthinkable. It was what had happened to District Thirteen back in the Dark Days, obliterated, bombed to ashes, and another bomb fell, and another, and another, and it was happening in front of her very eyes.

One hovercraft, having sidled closer after bombing some of the miners’ houses, dropped another bomb close enough that she swore she could feel the heat roaring to life, and hear the screams of the people consumed in the inferno. Looking around, she realized with a moment of terror that they had been rapidly caught between the fence and the fire, and the flames were racing closer by the second, like a living, voracious thing.

Myrina shoved her towards the wire with enough force that she stumbled, caught off balance, almost falling flat on her face. As was, she caught herself on the fence post. “Move, Lieutenant,” she said fiercely, all command rather than her usual friendliness. “Get your ass through the fence.”

Good thing it wasn’t electrified, she thought with a panicked laugh as she scrambled through the wires, Myrina close behind her. Embers from burning things danced in the air like fireflies already, singeing her uniform and her hair. The heat was unbearable, every breath a painful gasp with her throat trying to close up against it. But if she faltered, if she stumbled, she was afraid that would be it and she’d be burned alive. That grimly pushed her onward.

Duty would have said they ought to be responding to the emergency, trying to control the population. But when they were bombing everyone, locals and Peacekeepers alike, there was
nothing to try to contain when the intent was total destruction. All that was left was to try to keep alive.

Running, stumbling through the woods up the slope of one of the mountains that surrounded the valley of the town, Kally didn’t know how long they fled. It was until the roar of the flames had died down and the cries couldn’t be heard, until the heat was just the miserable humidity of July rather than the inferno.

She looked back, down the hill. She couldn’t help it. District Twelve was burning, every bit of it, consumed in painfully bright flame and oily, thick black smoke. The work of a few minutes and a dozen bombers had destroyed an entire district. Even District Eight hadn’t been subjected to this. She didn’t know exactly what had happened in the arena; she knew only that it must have led to this.

Trembling in shock at the unimaginable sight of it, she couldn’t even imagine how anyone else could have made it out of that hell alive. Being out at the fence had been the saving grace for her and Myrina. Back against a tree, she leaned over, trying to not retch, trying to not cry.

What was going on down there was bad enough, the thought of thousands of lives so casually obliterated. Innocent children too, even if children had been the price for treason for decades now in the Games, so perhaps the Capitol would have figured it was better to make an example of all of Twelve’s children on this massive scale.

But she realized with a sense of horror and growing betrayal that the Capitol that she had loyally served had just tried to wipe her out. It would have been one thing to have died in battle, like in Eight, trying to put down a rebellion, killed by the rebels. What had just happened here spoke of how easily the lives of hundreds of Peacekeepers, a significant chunk of the force, had been sacrificed needlessly, as if they were no better than the people they were keeping in line.

“They killed us all like we were rebels too,” Myrina said, her voice laced with anger and the uncertainty of having no answers. “No warning, no chance to suppress any trouble, no chance to even try to clear out if they were going to torch the whole place.” To hear someone else voice it was a comfort, to know that if they were the only two to escape District Twelve alive, at least they stood together in this.

They stayed there for lack of anything better to do, paralyzed with indecision. Their duty station had been destroyed. The Capitol they served had tried to destroy them. They were stuck on a hillside, a good week’s walk from District Eleven to the south or Ten to the west, and trains weren’t going to be running to a district that had just been wiped off the map. They had their soot-smudged uniforms and the rifles over their shoulders. Kally carried one canteen of water, standard issue for a watchkeeping pair walking rounds in the summer heat; though it was more than half gone now.

So they stayed and watched. The fires burned brighter as night was falling, still finding something to consume. Remembering that the fence kept out the predators, that bears and mountain cats might be prowling these hills, she kept her rifle at the ready. A flicker of memory crossed her mind, fear of the terrifying forest cats that roamed the north woods back in Seven, and how her brother Max had always teased her that she was such a soft touch that if she came across a wounded forest cat kit she’d probably try to make it into a pet. She hadn’t thought of Max in years, with his booming laugh and his brown eyes, but apparently death clung close enough tonight that she’d summoned what shreds she had of him, and of Inge, her sister too. If you’re lost in the woods, she heard Inge’s voice suddenly, the memory of a lesson learned long ago, you find high ground, you climb a tree if need be to check the lay of the land. Then you stay put until we come find you. Don’t just wander or you’ll get even more lost, especially at night.

Nobody would come find them this time, though seeing Myrina looking around like she was trying
to decide what to do, Kally said with more confidence than she felt, “We’re on high ground. Wait here a bit. Stumbling around in the dark won’t do any good.” She saw Myrina nod slightly, resuming a nervous pacing as Kally tried to grasp desperately for anything more in her mind about being out in the woods. It was like groping in the dark to seize tiny specks, slipping through her fingers even as she thought she had them. The harder she tried, the more the memories eluded her. That had always been the case, but it was about enough to make her scream at the moment.

Suddenly then a voice, warm and deep with the round tones of a Seven accent she’d largely lost—her father, it must be him. She didn’t quite remember his face clearly but his voice was there. *Give the mockingjays your whistle and we’ll know you’re out there looking for us.* Every family had their whistle, she remembered, their call-signal out in the forest when they were separated. But of course she didn’t remember what the Gundersson one had been, try as she might.

But she had another whistle to offer, one for the family she had now. She gave the “muster” whistle, the same tone the bugler blew every morning at back training camp at the ass-crack of dawn. Any Peacekeeper ought to recognize it. Hearing a mockingjay pick it up and relay it, she smiled to herself in the dark. “Smart,” Myrina said appreciatively, getting back to her feet. “Got some survival skills to you, huh, Kally?”

Just then the sharp crack of a stick had them turning, expecting to see another white uniform, albeit one like theirs probably ruined with soot and ember-scorches, and rips and blood from scratches earned in frantic flight. Instead it was a young man of maybe twenty, tall and handsome, with the dark look of the Twelve miners. He stood there with a drawn bow, arrow nocked at the ready. Caught flat-footed, she realized she was probably going to die right then and there. Hearing the click of a safety behind her, apparently Myrina had been more aware and gotten her rifle to bear in time.

The miner stared at them intensely. The tip of his arrow moved up, towards taking out the more imminent threat of Myrina. “I ought to kill you both for what you’ve done to us,” he said, anger coloring his tone harshly. “And what you just did, most of all.” It was on the tip of her tongue to protest, *We just got wiped out too, same as you,* but it was perhaps more dread than wisdom that held the words back. “But I’ve got better uses for my arrows in the days ahead. So I don’t really care what the hell you do, but don’t interfere or I will kill you next time I see you. I’m going to let your precious Capitol look after you. I’m sure they’ll be here soon to celebrate anyway.”

With that he turned and ran, probably hoping he’d make it safely away into the darkness before Myrina could shoot him. She ought to do it, according to the Code of Conduct. Bearing a weapon like that, and especially threatening a Peacekeeper with it, was an offense punished with execution. But she didn’t shoot. Kally didn’t blame her. After surviving that, it seemed to her that anyone deserved a chance to live, and apparently the miner-boy had extended them that same grace.

They traded off watch during the night in case of animals or other locals, though what sleep she got was fragmented and haunted by visions of people burning alive. Occasionally there were voices in the woods calling out, but the mountain twang of them told the two of them it was better to stay silent. Twelve still burned brightly in the darkness. The flames finally began to die down towards the glum first touches of dawn.

No hovercraft came as the miner had predicted. She didn’t expect they would. Why would they be in a hurry to come check out the ruins of a place where they had planned to kill everyone? Still, in a stupidly hopeful part of her, maybe she’d thought they would come, that they would be rescued and someone would tell her it had all been a horrible mistake, of *course* they hadn’t meant to kill their own Peacekeepers, and here they were to find anyone left.

Yeah, and if she had a week cut off her duty tours by hoping for something, by the time she left the
Peacehome she’d have been done with her twenty years already. “What are we going to do?” she asked Myrina, shaking her head with mute incomprehension. No food, minimal water, only a few bullets—it was bleak to say the least. Good thing neither of them was badly injured, given that all her medical supplies had been torched down in HQ.

Nearby, a mockingjay suddenly caroled the Peacekeeper muster. “Someone’s out there?” Grabbing her rifle again, Myrina carefully headed down the hill towards the sound. So much for staying put. She hurried to follow suit.

The mockingjays kept up the sound. About halfway back towards the smoldering ruins, in the distance she heard the sound again, but it sounded like the resonating tones of a human, not the pure, airy sound of a bird whistling. “Hey!” she yelled.

“Over here!” she heard the welcome call.

“Purnia?” she said, a little doubtfully. There were so many Peacekeepers, and maybe it was just wishful thinking.

But it was Purnia, her thick dark blond hair a singed mess. Albus was there too, a wound on his arm crudely bandaged with a piece of ripped uniform sleeve with the white fabric already bled through. He looked pale. Blood loss, shock, the medic part of her mind observed immediately. From the size of the blood stain, he might need that stitched. Stitched with what, she had no idea. She’d have killed for a medic kit right at that moment.

Her attention on that problem lasted as long as it took to see the third figure lying there on the ground. “Who…” She hated to have to ask, but given how badly he was burned on his face and chest and arms, skin charred black, it was impossible to know. He was unconscious—only the thinnest rise and fall of his chest told her he was clinging feebly to life.

“It’s Actaeon,” Albus said. “He got trapped underneath some shit when a house was falling…”

“We were at the fence when the bombs started so we just got out. But we went back in right before dawn when it looked like the flames were dying down some. Went in as far as the fire and the heat would let us, anyway. Al saw the white of the uniform.” Purnia nodded towards Actaeon, “at the edge of the town. He was awake long enough to tell us who he was. Then he passed out on the trip up here while Al was carrying him,” Purnia said tiredly. She looked at Kally and bit her lip, shaking her head. “Naevia must have been with him when the place collapsed. There was…someone else in the rubble there.”

She blinked back the tears. Hearing that her best friend was dead for sure made it all the more real suddenly, but she couldn’t afford the grief right now. She’d mourn Naevia later, when she could finally let herself feel all of it. “Nobody else?” she said roughly.

Albus was the one who answered her, his voice husky with the strain of carrying Actaeon while being injured himself. “We yelled and walked around as far as we could. Nobody else answered and we didn’t see…anyone moving. There’s nothing left. Just…just…” He stopped, looking sick, and instead mustered a faint smile for her. “Good to see you made it, at least.”

She glanced away awkwardly, kneeling beside Actaeon and starting to assess his condition, trying to ignore the smell of burned flesh. The thready pulse and the labored rasp of his breathing were bad signs. Maybe if they were in the Capitol with a state-of-the-art burn treatment clinic and every medical advantage, he might be OK. She wouldn’t give him good odds even then. Right now, without even something simple as a syringe of morphling to offer, she could only be grateful he’d slipped into unconsciousness, because the pain must have been unbearable all through the night.
“Kally?” Myrina questioned her, a tense note in her voice. She looked up to see her standing there looking at Actaeon with an expression already on the verge of mourning, and shook her head. No, Myrina was going to lose her friend too. Myrina nodded, her expression abruptly tightening with pain and then relaxing with a weary acceptance. “I’ll stay with him,” she said quietly. “He shouldn’t be alone. You three should stick together and see if you can find anyone else who’s alive and hasn’t maybe fled into the hills already. Be back within two hours.”

Partner teams weren’t supposed to break up; it was protocol. But to hell with that, she thought, watching as Myrina sat down in the green summer grass beside Actaeon in the shade of a tree —alder, that voice of the memories whispered. She clasped his hand in hers. Chances were he wouldn’t even feel it, but at least he wouldn’t die alone. That meant more than the rules right now.

Chapter End Notes

One last update for 2012! Thanks again to all of you who have been reading this fic and leaving such thoughtful reviews. :)

Johanna hadn’t been back to District Nine since her own Victory Tour, almost ten years ago now. Besides, it had been one of the earlier stops, and the whole thing blurred for her anyway which had been a mercy, as it was an ordeal. So seeing the district through something almost like fresh eyes, it startled her. “It really is flat,” she murmured, staring at the endless horizon of country far as she could see, seemingly even as a well-milled board. Only some buildings here and there punctuated it. Craving the forests of home, and the mountains of the north as she shielded her eyes against the sun and stared off into the distance, being able to see for miles gave her a peculiar sense of everything being far too big and leaving her far too exposed. *What I wouldn’t give for a tree,* she thought with some longing.

Here and there the sprouts of the crops had already broken through the black dirt, and that was at least some comfort to see something green and living. “Yep,” Haymitch agreed laconically, staring at things far less than her. But then, he’d been here far more recently, on Katniss and Peeta’s own Tour. Presumably at that point compared to his Tour as a new victor, he’d been less dazed and paying more attention to things. That was Haymitch anyway. Never stopping looking, thinking, analyzing; she thought she could just about hear the gears in his head turning away as usual.

By now the routine was getting established. Prep and primping beforehand—at least it wasn’t being plucked and basted like a roast goose before being whored out, so she was gradually learning to relax about it. Flavius and Octavia might not be the sharpest saws in the mill necessarily but there was something sincere and even kind in both of them that she couldn’t help but respond to in some ways. It would be like swatting a puppy just to be bitchy—a somewhat Capitol-looking puppy still in the case of Octavia. Flavius’ riot of orange curls was natural, and without makeup he looked strange, but that was just his features rather than bizarre Capitol artifice. Not much to be done about Octavia’s green skin, though, until the dye finally faded away entirely. Apparently it was quite long-lasting. When she looked now, as the coloring was still gradually fading, her first derisive impression from last fall that it was the uncomfortable green of a rotting corpse had faded too. Now it was more trying to decide whether those lingering final shades of soft green were like the underside of an oak leaf, or maybe more like a birch leaf, maybe even the green of spruce needles. Fuck, she missed the comfort of seeing trees.

Flavius was off burrowing in the wardrobe for whatever Cinna had sent for the meet-and-greet for Plutarch’s ever-hungry cameras. Octavia asked shyly in her high, soft voice, “How do you think things will be now? In the Capitol, that is. Since your schedule is due to have you there soon. I mean, I…I haven’t been back. Not since the Quarter Quell, and…”

It struck her that after being rescued by Thirteen and spared execution by the Capitol, and then liberated from what amounted to Thirteen’s dungeon, Octavia had just stayed there all winter long. It made her homesickness pale in comparison. She’d at least gone back to Seven briefly for the election, and even back in Twelve she been too busy and too surrounded by people who cared about her to genuinely feel lonely for Seven for more than a few fleeting moments.

But she’d been free, and happy, and confident that at least her own future held some brightness, even if not everything about it was clear. Looking at another young woman and seeing how uncertain she was about what would happen to her, she felt a pang of sympathy. To feel that awkward sense of no longer belonging was something she understood all too well. “I don’t know,” she said honestly. “We’re gonna be trying to make all of Panem better for everyone.” Although compared to the life she’d known before, high-flying and prosperous, maybe “better” wasn’t going to apply as much in Octavia’s case. “But the Capitol’s probably going to have to change the most. Can’t go back to the
Octavia nodded, her brown eyes a little fearful, but taking it calmly enough. Apparently she’d done more than her share of growing up in the last year. “Oh, I wouldn’t imagine so,” she answered.

“You have family there?” she felt moved to ask, compelled by that strange fellow-feeling she was developing.

Octavia shook her head, her auburn waves bouncing around her shoulders. “Oh, no, I’m an orphan.” She risked a little smile. “My mother’s auntie was still alive and she took me in though, so I wasn’t sent to an orphanage. But Auntie Honoria died while I was still in beautician school. So it’s just me, I’m afraid.” From their time in Two, she knew that Capitol orphans usually ended up being shunted over to the Peacehome. Presumably the shining and prosperous Capitol didn’t want anything as ugly and useless as a bunch of orphans living right in their backyard, marring things. Too desperate, too sad, too close to the reality of what was going on for so many kids in the districts. They only wanted orphans on their television screen tugging at their heartstrings in carefully sanitized made-up stories about pluck and secret benefactors and whatever. So like with most other things they didn’t want to think about, the Capitol found a way to make it so the problem didn’t touch them, so they could safely ignore it. “I imagine all my poor little mice are long dead,” she murmured to herself regretfully. “The neighbors wouldn’t have fed them, of course…”

*She could have been a Peacekeeper,* Johanna thought, looking up as Octavia carefully painted green designs on her nails. Auburn hair, early twenties, brown eyes, the softer nature—yeah, she couldn’t help but be reminded a little bit of Heike, though to judge from the picture of Heike before she got sent to Peacekeeper training camp, the two of them looked nothing alike. But the connection was made anyway and it couldn’t be undone.

“You could stick around in Twelve,” she offered impulsively, but once she said the words, she couldn’t find it in herself to think they’d been stupid. “I mean, it’s pretty much gonna be a fresh start for everyone there. Hell of a lot more fun than going back to Thirteen. Besides, I imagine Katniss would be happy to have you around.” As much as Katniss let herself openly like anyone anyway, but she’d asked Johanna about the preps when they talked on the phone. Octavia seemed to be her favorite.

Octavia gave a nervous little chuckle, high and almost grating. “Twelve? But what would I be doing out there?” It struck at her temper, a Capitol woman asking a question like that, until she actually recognized the tone was uncertainty rather than dismissiveness. “After all, I’m not brave, or a hunter, or anything like you and Katniss,” she murmured softly, dipping the paintbrush into the lacquer again and painting another carefully precise spiral design on Johanna’s right index finger. “I don’t know I’d be of too much use.”

This was the point she wished she was good at reassurance. “Well,” she joked lightly, “you paint your skin green again and you’ll have fantastic camouflage all ready to go out in the woods and learn to hunt.” Realistically she figured the sheer roughness and dirt of being out in the thick of nature, to say nothing of the bloodiness of hunting, might not be Octavia’s style, but what the hell. Twelve would have a place for all kinds. Even shy young women who liked to paint intricate nail designs might well find somewhere to belong.

Octavia let out a genuine laugh at that, quickly followed by a snort as she gasped in air to keep laughing, and she covered her mouth at that, eyes going wide at the sound, raw and undignified as it was. But she kept giggling anyway. Johanna decided there might well be hope for her yet.

Camera-ready in a nice, simply cut raspberry-colored dress, at least she was thankful Cinna was handling wardrobe here and that he had classy taste. On her Tour here in Nine, Donnella had dressed
her in some really fucking awful denim dress, complete with suspenders to counteract how low-cut it was. But that had been Donella, always looking to be as stereotypical as possible. After all, she was the woman who’d dressed Seven’s tributes as trees—nauseatingly skimpy-costumed trees—for forty years. She remembered Twelve’s dress that year more clearly than most, as it had been her first stop. It had been an ugly mottled dull black and grey fabric apparently meant to make it look like she’d been rolling around in coal dust. It was also much too short. She’d sat with her legs tightly pressed together the whole time she was sitting in Mayor Undersee’s parlor, convinced if she moved at all, they would be able to stare at her underwear. That was back when she’d actually been able to have something like shy modesty.

Oh, the joys of the old days. Shaking hands with the mayor, Acarica Watling, and her “friend”, Diedre, two women of about fifty, she and Haymitch made all the usual pleasantries, agreements to sit down for dinner, talk agendas, all of that. Everyone pretty much understood the euphemism when it came to Diedre. She knew full well, as everyone did, the Capitol wouldn’t have legally recognized two men or two women marrying, and every district had its share of two “friends” living together for the rest of their lives. Not moral objections on their part, considering she’d had more than her share of female patrons, and the Capitol let pretty much anything in terms of sex happen with a blind eye. It was simply the fact that it probably annoyed the Capitol that those couples wouldn’t readily be making any babies to contribute to the reaping ball and to provide the next generation of workers and of leverage to keep the system going and keep the districts down on their knees. At least, not without someone else agreeing to help them out in having a child, or reproductive technology like they might have in Three, but no way in hell anyone out here ever afforded that.

But she didn’t doubt that the two of them had been married by whatever district customs Nine had. Back home, Cedrus had lived with his own “friend” Mattias since before Johanna was even born, and the two of them had planted a pair of birches in their backyard to seal the deal. No time to change things like the present, she decided, and get rid of another bit of the old Capitol. “Pleased to meet you and your wife both,” she said to Acarica, loud enough for Plutarch’s camera crew, already practically hanging over her shoulder. She saw Haymitch’s quick grin at that as he stepped forward to greet the ladies himself, and the surprise and then a look of gratitude and something like glee on both the women’s faces.

Stepping down the line, she stuck her hand out to Clover Anden, Nine’s last victor. Clover had the same tall, sturdy build and fair skin Acarica and Diedre did—almost as tall as Haymitch, really. But her hair in its neat intricate braid was a light brown compared to the near-golden of the other two women, the same shade she’d always seen on Capitol movies of Nine that inevitably took place in the middle of fields of ripe wheat. Clover studied her with eyes the same dark brown as the upturned soil of the fields and some unnamed emotion came over her face before she gave a nod of acknowledgment. “Johanna. Good to see you looking well.” Her greeting for Haymitch was definitely warmer, but that was probably because she’d known him a long time. “Lunch, my place, before you get settled in?”

Following Clover to Victors’ Field, seeing the house they’d be staying in, Haymitch asked quietly, “That one Rye’s?” He jerked a thumb towards one painted blue with white trim.

“No,” Clover said, pointing across the lush central green to a yellow-and-brown one. “That one.”

“Ah. I’d have figured…he liked blue.” She hadn’t known that. She’d slept with Rye once, felt his hands on her skin, heard the sounds he made, taken part of him inside her body, and she hadn’t even known that he liked blue. Frankly she hadn’t cared. He’d been just another fuck to her, a means to an end, a way to show Finnick that he hadn’t mattered to her either. She recalled how Rye had tried to make it a repeat performance later, and the next summer too. He’d actually been genuinely interested in her, maybe just friendly sex, maybe more. She’d never know now. But having gotten what she
wanted, she’d had no further interest for him. Her cheeks suddenly felt hot with shame, not at having slept with Rye, but for having used him.

“I’m not going to come cut your throat while you sleep, Haymitch,” Clover said, shaking her head with some impatience. “We both knew Rye wasn’t going to join the alliance. Good kid, but he always preferred to just keep his head down and not cause any trouble. He tried to kill you and you got to him first. No blame. Probably turned out better for the whole country that you were the one left alive.”

“Yeah, but I shouldn’t have had to kill a man for what boiled down to his not wanting to join a rebellion,” Haymitch said with an aggravated tone.

“None of us should have had to kill anyone in the arena at all,” Johanna said wryly, thinking of blood on her hands, thinking of Sandy and Gloss, thinking of her five kills back in that horrible garden arena, lush and beautiful like the Field’s central green was here. “But we did.”

She got what might have almost been a look of respect from Clover for that. “That one,” she said finally, nodding to the blue and white house Haymitch pointed out, “was Harvest’s. For the little time she lived there.” The victor of the First Quell, Johanna knew, had apparently “forgotten how to swim” one day in the pond of the Field here. Considering it was knee deep at best, that was quite a feat. But seeing how miserable living among people who shunned them had made Haymitch and her both, she could well understand how Harvest Anderson had likewise found it intolerable to live in the district that had rejected her when they voted her into the arena to die. Haymitch had just ended up drowning his sorrows in liquor rather than shallow water. Her own sorrows she had burned instead, in the fierce furnace of her anger, a heat almost nobody could withstand and which kept them at a safe distance.

Clover unlocked the door and nudged it open with her hip, grumbling, “Stupid thing always sticks now.” Without as regular maintenance in the Field these days, Johanna didn’t doubt it probably did.

“I could look at it,” she offered casually. “Know a thing or two about wood, after all.” Her suspicion was some rain or snow had slowly gotten into the wood from an untreated edge and swelled and warped it.

That earned her another nod of acknowledgment from Clover. Maybe a slight softening of that odd distance she sensed. Inside the house, she glanced over at the parlor and saw a jumble of kids’ toys there on the floor, a rag doll and a toy tractor and…her eyes widened. Stepping into the parlor and crouching down, she picked up the wooden horse, carved in beechwood, complete with an intricate leather harness like it was ready to pull the little wooden cart waiting there.

She recognized the work instantly. Blight’s victor talent had been woodcarving, and he always gave away toys he’d carved to the district kids for New Year’s. It struck her only now that he must have taken enough interest to find out at the Justice Building just who’d had a baby that year so he could make a toy for them. Back in Seven, on a closet shelf, there was still a box with Bern’s bear, her wolf, and Heike’s badger in it, put away long ago as a painful reminder of lost days, and because she’d known in her heart there would be no Mason kids to hand them down to in her life.

Well, it made sense. She remembered Blight and Clover had been friends. More than friends, really, they’d had one of those summer arrangements that even in her years as a mentor, other victors still used to tease the two of them about how noisy they’d been. She didn’t think Clover had ever married, not that the two of them had been close enough for her to know. But apparently she’d had a man here long enough that she had a kid, and Blight had sent that kid a toy. “Didn’t ever know you had a kid, Clover,” Haymitch said, his tone almost too guardedly casual, which told Johanna plenty.
Clover looked at the two of them defiantly and said, “Actually, I have three kids. Two boys and a girl. Barley’s ten, Alfafa’s seven, and Amitra’s four. My sister and her husband died during the war while I was stuck as a ‘guest’ of the Capitol and I came back here and found the kids in the orphanage.”

“Admirable,” Johanna said quietly, thinking of those kids in the Peacehome, in Five, imagining three little kids alone in the orphanage, just more lost children caught up in the tide of war. At least their ending had been happier.

But seemed Clover wasn’t done yet, her words coming with an almost physical force as if she couldn’t bear to stop now. “The last…the youngest. Amitra. She’s mine. I hid her away. Made sure nobody knew. I pretended I was sick that spring and stayed inside much as I could, and when she was born I held her, and I named her, and then I gave her to my sister to raise her and they registered her as theirs. Because I knew the moment my girl was in the reaping, as a victor’s kid, they’d want take her for the Games. I knew I’d rather have to be her ‘aunt’ and give up raising her as my own than see her die because of being mine. So no, I didn’t fucking well tell you that, Haymitch.”

It made sense and Johanna could imagine it. A horrible choice to have to make, to say the least, but one she could understand. Clover had done the best thing she could for her daughter, hard as it must have been. Coming back from the war to find the girl in an orphanage with her two cousins—no, brothers—Clover had repaid the debt to her sister by taking in the two nephews as her own sons. Repaying a debt; wasn’t she starting to sound like Haymitch?

“You didn’t think the blood identification was going to find her out?” Johanna said incredulously, still trying to wrap her mind around how the fearful risk of it had paid off. “That they wouldn’t know?”

“They only took the blood to associate with a name for the reapings, Jo, they didn’t run it to see if your parents are who the birth record says,” Haymitch said quietly. She looked over at him and something uncertain and almost embarrassed in his glance said, Or they’d have found it out about me. Remembering the story when it came to his father, she nodded in awkward acknowledgment.

Apparently hearing the voices, Johanna saw a little girl peeking through the slats of the staircase railing, hiding there most of the way to the second floor. That must be Amitra. Clover had obviously had her later in life, must have been in her early forties, but then again a victor’s body didn’t age and wear out as fast as the rest of the district’s did, being spared the hard labor.

“Ami,” Clover called, her voice suddenly gone softer than with her and Haymitch, “where are Barl and Alfie at?”

“Went out,” came a somewhat peevish, obviously pouty reply. “I wanna go out too, Mommy.”

“You’re grounded, kiddo. But you want to come down and meet our guests?” The little girl launched herself off the bottom step, Clover neatly catching her with the air of a routine that had been well-established already. Sulking forgotten at that show of affection, Ami giggled, burying her face in Clover’s shoulder for a second, then staring at her and Haymitch with shameless curiosity. “This is Amitra,” Clover said, and that edge was back in her voice as if daring them to make something of it.

She heard Haymitch’s soft sound of surprise the same moment she saw it. The eyes—it was a subtle difference. Most people would just see a brown-eyed girl from a brown-eyed mother. But they weren’t Clover’s rich earth-brown, they were a lighter brown, a green-tinged woodland brown so common and familiar. Someone not used to seeing a pair of Seven eyes probably wouldn’t even know, but those eyes were home for her. More green than hers, actually a true hazel, so those eyes probably came from bloodlines of the northern lumber camps. “Hello, sweetheart,” Haymitch said,
not even sounding surprised.

“Hi,” Johanna managed, giving the little girl a smile. “Excuse me a second here?” The suspicion crystallized in her mind, put into bloom there by the thought of the mayor and her wife, and the memory of Cedrus’ wedding birch trees and the apple trees she and Haymitch had planted too back in Twelve. Crossing into the kitchen, knowing from the identical floor plans all the victor homes shared that it offered a great view of the backyard by that one particular window, she was almost certain of what she’d see back there. Blight had planted maple trees in his backyard—not a pair, everyone knew what that meant. He’d planted three of them, apparently to cover his tracks. Though it made a few of Cedrus’ remarks take a new light now as he always seemed to like to make a gruffly approving remark about how Blight’s maples were thriving.

Clover had two maples back there. But she could get away with that here in Nine where trees were just trees. Staring at the trees, she was all at once angry and hurt at yet another thing in her life Blight had never fucking bothered to tell her. Turning and seeing them both there, looking at Haymitch, she knew he’d been clueless about the little girl but he’d known this much, or at least suspected. “She’s Blight’s,” she said, just wanting to hear it confirmed unequivocally. She kept her voice low, conscious of Ami probably playing in the parlor now with her toys, still grounded and unable to go outside.

Hesitating at first, Clover finally nodded. “The 71st ran long. You both remember that.” It lasted just over a month, as Johanna remembered it, a hellish arena of bare rock and steep sheer walls in the bottom of a canyon. After the first week or so, tributes had holed up in little pockets of it until the Gamemakers had flushed them out and tried to force them together again with rock falls and mutts. “Apparently my injection ran out or wasn’t effective enough.”

“Ah,” Haymitch said simply. Yeah, that pretty much explained how she’d found herself pregnant. It also explained why she’d kept the kid, because it hadn’t been just some foolish district fling or the like. The girl was the only piece of Blight she was ever going to allowed to keep with her. Also made more sense of her hiding Ami away; bad enough to have one victor parent. She managed to suppress a shudder as she remembered Snow musing last winter to her and Haymitch, As your children, they would have made truly magnificent tributes. Though whether they would represent Seven or Twelve would be something of a dilemma, I admit. He’d sounded so intrigued by the prospect of a new act to grace his circus. Clover had probably done the smart thing. The child of two victors would have been virtually guaranteed as arena bait.

“Are either of you going to ask if he knew?” Clover said somewhat sarcastically. “Or can we just assume I wouldn’t keep our kid from my own husband, even if he never got to lay eyes on her in person?” The faint tremor on the last words made Johanna want to wince. Blight hadn’t ever met her, and now he never would. She tried to not think back to those wide-staring hazel eyes looking sightlessly up at her after the darkness had lifted, loopy Wiress crouched nearby muttering nonsense to herself. She’d wanted to slap the older woman and scream, You’re all so fucking smart in Three, why didn’t you save him? “He loved kids. That was what they used to break him like they did.” Now she was gathering anger again and that was OK, she figured. Sometimes anger was the only thing that kept the walls from crumbling down entirely. “Sick fucks! What kind of choice is it, having to hurt a kid to keep them from being tortured to death as a business lesson to their dad?”

“I’ve wondered sometimes,” Haymitch said softly, a little hesitantly, “if they’d have tapped me for that one. If I hadn’t been on exclusive contract that week to Lucia Flair. After all, they did make me play the sort that really enjoying ravishing virgins. It would have fit.”

“Even a twelve-year-old one?” Clover said, her anger rising to match Haymitch’s own.
“Twelve was old enough for plenty of district kids to die in the arena,” Haymitch pointed out with a sudden cynical smile. “Old enough to endure things in there that never made it past the editing room.” Johanna kept silent for the moment, aware of a conversation she had little place in right now, a history she hadn’t been a part of and didn’t know. It was an awkward feeling, given that Blight had been from her own district, and she knew less about him than these two did. Hearing about what had apparently turned him so panicked and nervous about anything to do with hurting kids or whoring, what had made him so absolutely fucking useless in doing anything to help her when she was on the circuit or to help the tributes as a mentor, she tried to keep her temper down and just listen. “I’m sorry.”

“They picked him because his role was playing the dumb thug,” Clover said dully. “They probably figured he’d be glad to help enforce someone’s will, and he probably didn’t care who he was fucking, he’d just enjoy getting laid.”

“I know,” Haymitch said, almost gently. “But we all knew each other better than the parts we had to play.”

She remembered now, Clover yanking her aside in the weeks after Finnick shattered all her illusions by telling her about Annie and made her realize he’d never loved her and would now never love her. Get over him before it screws you up even more. You thought you’d really be able to live a total happily-ever-after with a victor from another district? Being near him only one month of the year and not even able to give him a phone call the rest of the time? It doesn’t work out that way.

At the time, nineteen and heartsick as she was, she’d thought, What a nosy bitch, nobody asked you, Clover, and cheerfully flaunted her successfully fucking Rye in front of her as a figurative middle finger. Now she saw it clear. It hit her like a punch in the gut because she remembered obliviously planning that somehow she and Finnick would be together, already thinking about how the hell getting married and having children would work out when they only saw each other at the Games. But what had just been confused daydreams for her had been a reality for Clover. “It was enough?” she asked, before she could help herself. “One month of the year together, a month in hell to boot because of the Games, and a kid he never got to meet?” A husband who’d eventually been so badly broken by the things he’d been forced to do that he couldn’t even bear to face them and spent most of the summer drinking and avoiding everything where he could? Almost immediately she realized she’d better not judge too quickly on that one. Haymitch had more than his own share of problems, and she’d sworn she’d stick by him, never mind if it was good or bad times. So maybe she and Clover had a bit more in common than Johanna had thought at first glance. She thought now it was likely Blight had been different with Clover, away from Mentor Central and the stress and horror, safe in the arms of the one he loved and trusted.

“No.” Clover shook her head. There was the crack of grief in her voice, harsh and painfully real. “Never enough, not when you come to love someone like that. But it was still more than they thought we should have, so we decided we were fucking well going to take back what we could from them.”

“I’m sorry.” Whether it was sympathy for Blight, apology for her naïve disappointment that had blindly festered into actual disdain, she wasn’t sure. Perhaps it was kind of for everything.

“He cared,” Clover pointed out softly, the aggressive edge fading now. “He knew he couldn’t help you. So he at least tried to find someone who could.”

Haymitch’s laugh was a sharp sound, wryness and pain all mixed together. “He did at that. Merciless bastard when he wanted to be.”
She stood there in that little apartment, staring at Haymitch Abernathy. Somehow, from seeing him on television, she’d expected he’d be taller when they finally met. But the man had a sort of presence anyway that seemed to fill the room. She wondered why Blight had brought her here. He hadn’t helped. He had done nothing when Snow called for her, done nothing when her family was dying off in the woods. Like he actually gave a shit now. What did Haymitch have to do with anything? “Shit, Blight,” Haymitch drawled, leaning against the dresser, a nice hand-carved maple piece, and folding his arms over his chest, “Mags already brought the Odair boy by yesterday to see me. Why am I suddenly being dubbed the Keeper of the Whores?”

“I’m not a whore,” she snapped at him, still terrified and sick at the thought of someone fucking her by her invitation, let alone against her will and finishing what Clark had tried to do. She thought she’d throw up. She wished right then she’d died instead, rather than her family who hadn’t deserved to suffer because she’d had a fucking panic attack there in Snow’s parlor. She wanted to go kill Snow for it.

He gave her a deeply amused look. She hated him a little right then, him with that smirk and his messy black hair falling in his eyes, looking at her like he knew just how powerless and scared and pissed off she was. “I am. Blight was. And you will be soon enough, sweetheart. So what’s this got to do with me, huh?” She realized he was addressing Blight again, ignoring her. She wanted to yell and make him pay attention but considering she had nothing to say, and the fear of things was stealing what words she might have, she just listened.

“I figured you’d be willing to help with Johanna.” He actually used her name, which startled her.

“Will I now?” She almost itched to hit him for that. “You’re making a big assumption there that I want to take on your responsibilities. She’s your district partner.”

Blight straightened next to her, and his voice went into a low rumble of indignation, powerful and sure, rather than the awkward way usually he wanted to just say something quickly to her and end the conversation. “We were there for you, Haymitch. All of us. When you were just a stupid fucking kid who didn’t know the first thing about what to do on the circuit or at a sponsor event, because we saw you had nobody. We were the ones that picked you up after a rough night and when your tributes died. We knew you needed us, so we were there. So tell me, you’re really gonna try to say ‘Not my problem’ when Mags and I need something in return?”

Haymitch’s eyes shot to Blight, and rather than the casual arrogance, now there was something glittering fierce and hard in his eyes, anger and pain mingled all together. “Fuck you, Blight,” he said, his twanging Twelve accent getting a bit thicker with the sudden edge of temper. “You manipulative shit, you’re gonna pull out the talk of owing? On me?”

“Seems that you’re making me do it.” Blight sighed, scratching fretfully at his brown stubble. “We need you. You’re in the know from still being on the circuit and obviously Mags and I aren’t. Also, you’ve survived it this long. So I’m here the same reason as Mags was—I know you’ll do a good job if you look after them.”

“Dammit,” Haymitch muttered, but it was more resigned now than angry. “Trusting me with kids, Blight? Really?”

“I’m not a kid,” she said, finally finding her tongue.

“That so, huh?” he said, regarding her now with something like a keen interest rather than that dismissive amusement.

“I’m not a kid,” she repeated, feeling the confidence of that rising within her. She hadn’t been much
of a kid ever since Clark pinned her down, ever since she snapped out of it bathed in his blood, ever since she killed five other children to stay alive. What last bits of scared, soft little Hanna might have remained after that had been burned away these last few days, because her fear had cost her the only people who loved her still. Haymitch looked at her a few moments more, and simply nodded.

She hadn’t seen it then, young and confused as she’d been, knowing neither of them. But now, looking back, she could understand that Blight had ruthlessly used Haymitch’s own sense of honor, that damn prickly Seam pride, to twist his arm. He’d risked pissing the man off so much he could have lost one of his apparently few true friends. It may not have been a clean, shinningly noble sacrifice, but he’d placed trying to secure Johanna’s well-being above everything else at that moment. He’d cared enough to admit he couldn’t handle it and make sure he gave her to the keeping of someone who could help her.

It wasn’t love like in the stories her mom and dad used to read to her, the ones Clover probably read to her three kids now. That kind of love was so reassuringly simple. Good won, evil lost, everything was so black and white, and everyone got exactly what they deserved in the end. There was no place in that for a mother whose love meant giving up her child to her sister to try to save that little girl’s life. There was no place in that for a man who admitted his own failings and used the best of intentions to convince someone else into look after her. But there was probably no place in those stories either for Haymitch and her. She was no princess. He hadn’t awoken her from a curse with a simple kiss. They had fought for everything they now had, and darkness as well as light was permanently within them both. That was reality, messy as it was.

Truth was, apparently Blight had cared about her, as best he could. In a better, gentler world, maybe he would have simply been a toymaker, a man who loved kids, and a man who would have adored his own kids. But that wasn’t the world they’d all endured. She looked in the direction of the parlor and thought of Blight’s daughter there, and thought, Enough. There had been plenty of pain and hate and blame to go around. Blight had unquestionably let her down, but he hadn’t simply left her to the wolves like he could have done. He did the best he could for her and left it to someone more capable, and that was all anyone could do.

Though she knew it had taken its toll on Haymitch also, that with how deeply he took his responsibilities, looking after her and Finnick had been just one more factor in eroding what remained of his crumbling defenses. She was sure it was no coincidence over the next few years he’d finally lost his way entirely to drinking. Far easier to let go of Blight’s failings towards her than to overlook what grief they had caused Haymitch. But she thought of Rye again, of others she’d used, of her own failures. In that moment, she could let it go and forgive Blight his frailties. They’d all been made into broken Capitol toys in their own way, and none of them had meant to hurt each other. She’d been so thoughtless in her self-absorbed pain, but not deliberately malicious.

Right about then, a hollering whirlwind composed of two young boys came roaring through the front door—Barl and Alfie, presumably home for lunch. She heard Ami give a squeal of joy at seeing her brothers. The noise and ruckus disappeared upstairs as the kids presumably washed up.

“Lively place you’ve got,” Haymitch said, the edge of laughter now in his voice.

Clover grinned in return. “The kids definitely keep it interesting. I learn something new every day. Sometimes much to my chagrin.” She looked at the two of them with interest for a minute, and Johanna prayed with a nervous intensity that she wasn’t going to ask if the two of them were considering kids. But apparently she just let it go. “It’s nice, really, to have some noise of them just being happy,” she said, voice suddenly soft. “If it gets too quiet, it’s a little too much like being back at the Training Center.” Those months of imprisonment, Johanna thought, and in Clover’s case, living all alone on the Nine floor. She could see how the silence would be oppressive.
“Reminds me,” Haymitch said. “I’ve got a letter from Dazen for you. Sends his regards too. I’ll get it for you after lunch.”

“Thanks, Haymitch.” The easy rapport between those two appeared to be just fine. But as to her, Johanna wasn’t sure. Besides, much as it was Haymitch that had been raised with that recognition of debt rather than her, there was a feeling of something left out of balance that bothered her. So before they headed off to the meal and the moment passed, she figured she’d better just get it out there.

Looking over at Clover, she took in a deep breath and said, “When she’s older. Ami. She…you should have her come to Twelve.” Realizing it was a big assumption Clover would even give a damn, considering that she now recognized Clover’s attitude towards her was based on how Johanna had disdained the man she loved, she rushed to explain, feeling stupidly self-conscious. “Haymitch knew Blight. And me, I can…I can teach her. About Seven, I mean. She ought to know where she came from.” She owed Blight that much, to see that his kid had that legacy that was hers by birthright.

It seemed like an eternity before Clover finally nodded, expression easing. Johanna read with relief that apparently, Clover had let her own resentment go. She wouldn’t judge them to be best friends, but they would give each other a chance now free of those old burdens. The scales balanced again, apparently.
The Peacekeeper Headquarters in District Nine looked much like the one back in Five when Haymitch had checked that one also—a scene that spoke of violence followed by neglect. Rebels had ransacked the place, presumably for weapons, though they’d taken the time to destroy some of the furniture and scrawl anti-Capitol epithets on the walls, the mark of people frustrated and oppressed and abused by Capitol power for far too long. The place smelled of mildew and rot where the rain and then the winter snows had gotten in through a few broken windows.

Gingerly stepping around the smashed remains of a desk, he cracked open a file cabinet labeled as containing personnel files, thankful the anger hadn’t extended to the point of burning these files. The filing cabinets labeled for incident reports and punishment records and the like actually had been yanked open and emptied and their contents presumably destroyed.

Flicking through the files, his heart suddenly beat faster as he saw one labeled, “Law, Theodosius,” and the serial number that had been on the file back at the Peacehome. Yanking it from the drawer, he almost dropped it in his eager haste. Wiping a layer of dust from where half the top of the desk remained intact and upright, he put the file down, and opened it.

From the years listed he saw Theodosius—Ash, his mind insisted, unable to accept that other name—been here for his first tour, between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three, before being sent next to District Seven. Seven, where Johanna had been, but of course she hadn’t known, and Ash had been just one face among so many in a white uniform. He prayed like hell Ash hadn't done anything to her people, or...fuck, to her family. It sat inside him like a stone suddenly. Maybe he shouldn't mention it to her and he shied away, tried to think of other things. He couldn’t help but think of those years in his own life, some of the higher years of his popularity out on the whoring circuit. The money Snow must have made off of him, the way the weight of despair settled on him year after year, more inescapable, knowing that this was all his life would ever be until the day finally came nobody had any further use for him. Slowly losing more ground to the inevitable as he finally moved away from the last of the boy retaining foolish hopes and became a man—that had been the story of those years.

He’d been turned into a whore and a mentor. His brother had been obliged to turn Peacekeeper. So it seemed like both of them had been denied the privileges and joys of simply being a man, the life with a wife and children and the warm embrace of a community that they could have expected back in Twelve even with its hardships, and instead been forced to serve the Capitol in their own ways.

He looked at the photo of a newly-promoted Captain Law in that file, bound for Seven. Carefully overlaying the image of the eighteen-year-old graduate of Icewind Peak Camp with this man, tracing the five years of living and the changes it had wrought—some of the traces of youthful softness had continued to fade. Ash seemed to stand straighter, more confident, or at least Haymitch thought so. He’d distinguished himself for his abilities at investigating crimes, and at learning and applying the Code of Conduct as a legalist—he laughed at that, though the sound was a bit thick and choked. He remembered the law books he’d been reading last autumn too, late into the evening until his eyes ached from the strain and he got a headache from it. Although in his case he’d been interested in what the letter of the law could do to protect the people he didn’t want to see unjustly hurt. Ash, he’d always been the sort that would have loved it purely for the sake of knowing. He could see the boy he’d known growing up to investigate things. Seemed like Why? had always been Ashford Abernathy’s favorite question to ask, and young and stupid as he was, Haymitch’s answer was usually a roll of his eyes and an impatient, Because that’s how it is. He’d always thought it was better to think about what a person could actually do about those things.
The man in that picture was twenty-three, and the file talked about him to that age. Having traced Ash this far, he had so much more to work with now than the memories of eleven-year-old boy he’d thought dead for so many years, but it wasn’t enough. That was still near to fifteen years ago now, and he felt the frustrated disappointment of not having the answers, of not knowing more. Why? Because that’s how it is.

Perching on the other half of the desk, he flipped through the rest of the file. Facts, that was all. *Lieutenant Law’s progress on his first duty tour is exceptional. He is conscientious, intelligent, and dutiful.* He got so little sense of the man from it, loves, hates, or anything like that. There was really nothing human in there, just performance evaluations. That had been their only concern, and Snow’s only concern too—that he performed well, and loyally. Ash hadn’t done anything to Johanna’s kin. He had to believe that. Whoever Ash had become, he wouldn’t have shot people down in cold blood like that.

Closing the folder, he hesitated a moment, and then decided he might as well take it with him. It wasn’t like anyone else would need it, not with the Peacekeepers more or less disbanded as an organization.

Heading back towards the Field, he saw the Anden kids playing near the pond. His eyes rested on Ami. He’d seen it first thing off, just as he knew Johanna had—the eyes were what gave it away. He’d spent too long now looking into a pair of brown Seven eyes with that faint bit of green every day to not see it.

Blight had never said anything. Whether it was reticence or fear or both that held his tongue, the man had done just like Clover and kept it secret. He’d known the two of them got hitched, at least as much as the Capitol would permit two people from different districts. It had been obvious to anyone who knew them as long as he had that somewhere, it had evolved from the casual, friendly arrangement like he had with Chantilly into something far more, something deep and abiding. He’d seen it—the two of them lit up around each other. He’d envied them even as he pitied them, because it wasn’t like what they were allowed to claim with each other was anything but a shadow of what it ought to be by rights. It was better he had never been at risk of falling for Chantilly, because with her being from another district as she was it would have landed him in the same situation.

But then, unlike Clover and Blight, unlike him, unlike Johanna, Tilly had been from One, with the advantages of Career training and the perspective of so many victors before her to give her words of wisdom. She’d set the ground rules down damn solid early on. *Don’t do anything stupid like fall in love with me,* she’d insisted the first time they slept together. She’d be his friend and his solace, but not his lover in the fullest sense. Wise move on her part, he could admit that freely. If she hadn’t made it clear what it was that they had, he knew he could have fallen for her, lost and lonely boy that he had been, eager to respond to any show of kindness or affection, still naïve enough to believe that sex and friendship would have implied love. He could have ended up heartbroken as Johanna had been by Finnick, or had she fallen for him in return, caught up in the wrenching frustration of a marriage half-lived as Clover and Blight had.

The harsh irony that for all his years of solitude now he’d married a woman from another district, that he was living the life Blight and Clover ought to have had, hit him with a curious pang. *Not everything they had,* he thought, looking over at Ami. Blight had never met her, true. Never would. But at least before he died, he’d known he was a father, sent toys to his girl, had pictures and stories from Clover. It wasn’t everything, but it was at least the comfort of knowing some part of him was in the world and would last, no matter what.

Some days he thought he must have dreamed it, that it was just another venom delusion. Things were in his head sometimes that he realized later couldn’t be real, nightmares and horrors left over from the
arena and the torture chamber. Why should this be any different? It could be just one more torment his deluded, drug-addled mind unleashed on him as a lingering effect of that. Hell, he’d been on plenty of painkillers and other drugs at the time Johanna told him. Maybe one of those drugs had played tricks on his mind too, interacted with that confused, fucked-up part of his consciousness that had been made into the plaything of tracker jacker venom and warped reality once again.

He had no proof of it, no experience of it in his own body to tell him down to his very bones it had been real, just the memory of that moment on the rooftop of the Training Center that Johanna told him two things: Coin’s secret use of fertility drugs on women in Thirteen meant there had been a baby, and that she’d lost it thanks to the drugs treating her burns. He knew asking her to marry him had been real because yeah, they had gotten married. The way she was around him, the way other people openly spoke about it, the way he woke up next to her every morning, and the gold band on his left hand were all solid proof of that. But if the miscarriage had been real, shouldn’t there be more than a single moment as proof of it? Shouldn’t Johanna be showing some sign of it, given it had been her body that had been left bleeding and in pain by it? But there was nothing, compared to all the other ordeals in their lives he could clearly point to as still having left their marks, and that caused him that odd thread of doubt that it had actually happened.

Maybe it was just his imagination. Maybe he’d finally lost it like Blight had when it came to the idea of kids being hurt or killed. Maybe that meant he’d dreamed the whole thing as some kind of messed-up justification to himself of why he shouldn’t have kids because this had been one more kid he couldn’t protect and keep alive. Some part of him was afraid if he went to her and asked bluntly, “Last fall, did we have a baby that you miscarried?” that she’d look at him with alarm and tell him he actually was going crazy. More than that, there was a good chance the actual form of that hallucination would freak her out. If she’d wanted kids he figured she would have said something by now. He saw she seemed to like them, had interacted well with the likes of the Hawthornes and now the Andens, but she’d never said anything about hungering for a child of her own.

He knew too that the next stop on this grand tour was etching himself into his mind like acid—District Four. Where there was now apparently a little newborn girl, the darling of her parents. Black-haired too, like his own daughter might have been, and that would make it all the harder. Somewhere in those quiet months since December, the child had become a girl in his mind and his heart because it was easier to grasp hold of the loss of something concrete and real, my daughter, than imagining the loss of a formless it. Delusion or not, his image of the girl that might have been and her suddenly vanished potential was all too real now.

How he’d get through meeting Maggie Odair and not thinking of that unnamed—but not unmourned—child, and the weight of Mags besides, he had no clue. But he’d managed to hear the news that Brutus and Enobaria were expecting a kid, and to deal with little black-haired Posy, and now he’d met Ami, and it hadn’t driven him to his knees. He’d pull through this. If there was one thing he knew how to do after all these years, it was how to endure the hurt alone and not speak it. I have Johanna, he thought. I have her, and that’s far more than I thought I’d have. It’s enough. In time the hurt would lessen. It wouldn’t go away but it would at least grow over some.

Meeting again with Acarica Watling, walking through the fields of the first sprouts of corn on the farm closest to the district center, he listened as she explained brusquely, “Harvest last year was pretty much a disaster. Everyone away at war to begin, and beyond that, some fields burned, some harvested grain got destroyed.”

“President Paylor mentioned the grain rations were running a bit low,” Johanna agreed casually. “I mean, it’s a lot more evenly distributed without the Capitol confiscating it all and doling out just
Acarica grunted irritably. “Yeah, and I’ve got Mayor Dravid from Ten calling me desperate for more grain for fodder. If it wasn’t for the big population losses in the war, we’d be genuinely fucked and facing a famine this year, I’ll be honest.” She scowled, shaking her head. “Don’t take me to mean I’m pleased for it.”

“I’m not,” he answered her. “That was last year. You’re thinking this year shouldn’t be a problem, though? I mean, ain’t like we’ll be at war come harvest this autumn.”

The mayor shook her head again, sending her elaborate grey-streaked blond braid flying. “You don’t get it…”

“Enlighten us, then,” he said coolly as he could. Clear enough to see from having done this in several districts that there were things he and Johanna didn’t know that natives of those districts just took for granted because they only knew people who had that knowledge by birth and upbringing, close as instinct. The two of them even ran into that issue themselves sometimes, the differences between Seven and Twelve.

“Trouble begins with trying to…” Another sound of frustration. “Understand this first, all right? It’s not like just reaching for seed corn, because our entire harvest was always confiscated. Besides, everything we grow, it’s a Capitol mutt. Every single seed strain we’ve got is modified to grow better, grow faster, grow for higher yield, grow in conditions where it shouldn’t normally be, whatever. Because the Capitol says you plant only soybeans here, you damn well do it, never mind if any damn fool knows rotating the damn crops would…anyway. That’s all done in Three in whatever labs they do for their mutt-splicing, or maybe it’s just ordinary cross-breeding, I don’t even know. Capitol never let us in on that, that was for the scientists, not the farmers. Every year, seed comes from Three ready to go, treated with whatever chemicals they put on it. So every year, our planting depends on two things before you even get to local issues: we need Three getting their act together to have the seed ready to go, and Six having their people transport the stuff to us.”

“All previously controlled by the Capitol, of course,” he said, starting to see some of the issue. Deprived of that central control, left to try to figure out the system of production and transportation and make it happen all on their own, it would be a giant fucking headache. The phone calls, the logistics, the paperwork and accounting of it trying to make two other districts accountable for it—the notion was giving him a headache.

“So we got a bad start there, several weeks behind,” she said with a grumble. “I’m already trying to talk their ears off to get the wheat here on time for planting in midsummer, and the late beans too. Then, of course, we’re so shorthanded to begin, and to boot, the frigging mechanics for most of our motorized equipment were always flown in from Six because that’s what it was built…”

“Not enough people and equipment failures,” Johanna summarized neatly. “Got it.”

“We’ve had enough breakdowns that we’re pretty much back to the olden days here,” she said with a wry chuckle. “Down to using horse-drawn plows and planters and the like, where we were using those mostly for the tougher ground that you couldn’t do easily with bigger equipment. Ten was more than happy to offload quite a few extra horses and mules on us.”

“Not much use for the mules elsewhere this year, I imagine, being as the mines of Twelve ain’t running,” he said wryly.

“Lumber crews probably aren’t using them back in Seven either,” Johanna added.
“Dravid was happy to make them my problem,” Acarica confirmed. “We’ve worked hard as we can, but we still have some fields that still need planting, and we’re coming up on the Grower’s Moon Festival—we should be done by then and we won’t be. And come harvest time, it’s going to be a nightmare if we don’t have the equipment and the people to handle it. We can’t be harvesting into November and December with the crop buried under two feet of snow.”

The tension in her voice brought back that ugly word, and he decided he’d just be blunt. “Famine a possibility?”

She hesitated only a moment, looking up and down the rows of small green leaves. “As it stands, yes. If one thing goes wrong, if we don’t get every field planted or replanted if the first crop fails, if we don’t get the harvest in quickly…there’s a lot that could fail this year too. I can’t even speak to how good a job they did on the seed back in Three to begin. We might have run on lean bellies with the Capitol but at least we knew the greedy bastards had grain stored away. They’d keep us hungry and desperate, but chances were we wouldn’t starve.”

He thought about that a bit and asked, “Any particular skills needed?”

A low, rueful chuckle was his answer. “We’ve got enough people to run what equipment we’ve got. As for the rest? Nothing that couldn’t likely be learned in a day. Mostly to get through harvest, you just need a strong back and the ability to keep working through the pain.”

Johanna glanced over at him, ended up giving him a long, hard look, and said with a snicker, “Well, Mayor, I know that look. That means he’s scheming something.”

“Purely benign. Evil plans are far too much work,” he said equally dryly. “Nah, I was just thinking I’ll be seeing all the mayors in less than a month anyway. Easy enough to ask if any of them have enough people to spare some willing to pitch in for harvest to make sure the whole country gets to eat.” Districts like One and Two certainly had their share of idle people out of work, to say nothing of the Capitol—question was whether the formerly privileged would be willing to labor for their bread, quite literally. Two’s prickly pride in particular might balk at it. He figured that was something better talked about quietly with Brocade and the mayors involved rather than to try to make promises now he maybe couldn’t keep.

“You’ve both been a lot more concerned than I figured you’d be about a district that isn’t your own,” the mayor said bluntly. He gave her points for not resorting to polite bullshit. “So thank you.”

“Laborers needed,” Johanna said, with a nod of acknowledgement, simply moving past it, which seemed to be the best way to proceed. “By when?”

“We can probably handle the summer harvests for the barley, alfalfa, oats, and winter wheat and the like—those are a few smaller collectives. The main harvest starts a couple weeks earlier in the south than the north, but in general, we’ll be in a rush to harvest the corn, sorghum, spring wheat, rye, and soybeans from August onward. We try to be all done by early November if possible so we’re not losing crops to snow up on the north farms. It’s a pretty busy couple of months.”
She lost him on the details somewhere in ticking that list off all those unfamiliar crops—he wouldn’t know winter wheat from spring to save his ass, or even what “sorghum” was, for that matter. He was already planning to look it up when he had the leisure. But at least he got the gist: August to November was the furious rush here and the period she was most concerned about.

“Anything else?” he asked. “I mean, we can lean on Six regarding getting mechanics out here…”

“We really need the equipment for harvest, so yeah. Ask if they’ve got someone that can fix a vibrator hopper, because those things are always breaking and I’m sick of it. Seed bridging is always a problem with those idiots in Three, they must not let it dry properly…”

“Sorry, you lost me.” Right around the point of vibrator hopper. He’d spent too many years in the Capitol, apparently—he had the feeling out here in Nine, a sex toy with a motor wasn’t something they’d have heard of readily either. Then again, something about Acarica’s face, almost too serene as she watched them, told another story. Perhaps this was native Nine humor. Clover had always had a terrifically bawdy mind that she managed to hide behind seeming innocence. “You wanna back up a few steps?” he asked, as he heard Johanna strangling back a laugh, though when he looked over she was perfectly calm.

“The seed we get from Three is usually stuck together into huge clumps, sometimes big as the whole bag it was in,” Acarica explained patiently. “We have to spend time getting all that apart so we can use it in our planters. The vibrator hopper,” another soft sound of mirth from Johanna, “helps shake those bricks apart quickly. And when we’re bagging harvested grain in the fall, it helps keep things from sticking together there too.”

“Thank you, make sense now,” he said coolly as he could, reaching over surreptitiously and giving Johanna a nudge of, C’mon, stop it, we’re official government representatives and we can’t laugh at it like a pair of sixteen-year-olds.

Walking the fields the rest of the afternoon, listening to Acarica talk about the land and her enthusiasm shining obvious for the work that she did, he figured he’d never look quite the same at the food he ate. He’d be remembering these black-soil fields now and the people that worked them, and not in the trite way Capitol films showed it.

“If things are changing,” she finally ventured hesitantly, as if finally warmed up enough to them to share dreams beyond immediate practicalities and yet a bit afraid to ask, “having our own mechanics would be good. And…and medics. Real ones, trained. The equipment, it’s dangerous. Heavy machinery like that injures plenty of people. We’re actually doing well this year because most of the machines are down. But we always have people that lose fingers and hands and arms and legs each season yanked into the machinery. Always seems to be some fool girl who doesn’t cut or cover her hair properly either.” Staring at Acarica’s thick waist-length braid, he tried to not shudder, imagining it. “A lot of the injured died because they just have an apothecary, one per collective to handle all the workers across so many different fields. Some survive and they’re stuck working the factories and grain mills if they’re able, but the pay’s so lousy.”

He was put in mind of workers crippled in the mines, people like Ripper with her one arm and Mol McCrory with her one leg. Miners crushed by falling rock, injured by explosions—too many ways to be hurt down there in the deep and merciless black. The regular accidents got so bad when he was probably about thirteen there were enough permanently disabled miners unable to work the face that the Capitol hired them on at half-wages as shale-pickers and kicked out all the kids they’d been forcing to do it for free. Half-wages weren’t much, though, so eventually Ripper made her still and Mol had begun to dip candles for the Hob instead.

“We’ll work on getting proper medics,” he said, clearing his throat awkwardly and feeling how tight
it was, remembering the way things had been back home. “But seems to me you’d be well served by things being safer to begin. Ain’t a good way to make it totally safe, but we can make it better, at least.” All it took was valuing lives more than production and taking the steps to make that happen. He intended to see it so in the mines, and from Johanna’s remarks on lumbering, that could use attention too. It seemed like the farmers here also needed that reform.

The look of surprise and even gratitude on her face, as if they’d said something she’d never imagined could occur in her lifetime, was a sight. “Well.” She cleared her own throat. “Thank you for that. Much appreciated.” As if hurriedly skittering away from the awkwardness of her emotion, Acarica mentioned hastily, “I know you’re off to tour some of the other collectives, but you might as well come back here and enjoy the Grower’s Moon Festival three nights from now. We figured we’d hold it anyway. Everyone needs an evening off. There’ll be food, and corn beer, and singing and music and dancing.” Well, he perked up a little that—he was Twelve enough to appreciate a good festival with music, and the prospect of adding to his growing collection of fiddle music from around the districts. “We’ve got the cornstalk there in the square… the green pole, that is. The dance we do, it’s for fertility of the land, helping the crops growing tall.”

Remembering the odd green-painted pole towering against the sky and freshly hung with what looked like ribbons in cream and ivory and gold and tan and brown, presumably all the shades of the grain, he nodded in acknowledgment. “Sounds like a plan,” he agreed cheerfully. “We’ll be there.”

“Good. If you’ve got questions while you’re out around the district, just call from the farm boss’ house—they all have phones.” Waving them goodbye at the turnoff for the path to the Field, Acarica headed back towards her own house.

They actually managed to wait until she was out of earshot. Johanna started it with a half-mumbled, “Vibrator hopper.” He couldn’t help it, finally letting out the laugh, relieved that if he was totally corrupted by having been exposed to influences from the Capitol and the richer districts, at least she was right there with him to share the humor. “You think the local women like sitting on it?” she asked, cocking her head aside and giving him a devilish smirk.

“I have to wonder if they named it deliberately and they just love it when outsiders like us do a double-take.”

She chuckled lowly and pointed towards the “cornstalk”, with its ribbons drifting and snapping lightly in the breeze. “Considering this is a district that basically stuck a giant cock up in the center of the square, and apparently they dance around it?”

“But it’s a special cock, with ribbons,” he corrected her with a grin that he felt growing wider by the moment. Leaning in, he kissed her lightly and said, “What, you thinking that night you want to tie a bow on mine? In the spirit of honoring our hosts’ traditions?” Although apparently it’s supposed to be a fertility dance, he thought wryly. For crops, anyway. They’d be OK, he reminded himself. He had her, he’d always have her, and the joy of that.

She let out a whoop of laughter at that, giving him a playful shove on the shoulder. “We’ll have a nice dance,” she promised with a laugh, slipping an arm around him as they walked back to the Field.

The phone rang that evening just as they were sitting down to dinner. “Bet you that’s Katniss. Got the worst damn timing,” he groused. Though to be fair, given they were an hour earlier here than in Twelve, maybe she’d just forgotten that fact.

It was Brocade, though, much to his surprise. “Our trip being diverted again?” he guessed, though he couldn’t see cause to break things off right in the middle of assessing one district. It had been another
thing to mix things up a bit and go deal with the tensions in Thirteen.

“No,” Brocade said tiredly. “Just telling you, you may be hearing Mayor Watling being frustrated over the rest of your stay in Nine, and it won’t improve when you move on to Four. Things are a mess. The entire nationwide identity and registry system just crashed today.”

“Oh, shit,” Johanna said. “That’s…ah…kind of a problem.” Considering a confirmed identity was necessary for everything from employment to marriage to being issued the monthly ration coupons for everything from flour to sewing thread to chocolate that had been necessary after the war until everything was on more even keel, it was indeed a problem.

Remembering the sudden omissions of some Capitol citizens and the wiping out of Peacekeeper records, the suspicion blossomed in his mind rapidly. “Sabotage?” he asked bluntly.

“Likely,” Brocade was equally straightforward. “The entire computer server here didn’t just fail, it was apparently attacked with some kind of program that wiped it clean. Which means someone on the inside with the technical know-how to do that.”

“Someone from Three,” Johanna piped up. He couldn’t disagree. They were the only people in Panem with enough training in computers to pull this off.

“I’ve got people investigating and Beetee is offering his expertise to this, of course. But…it looks like whoever did it last fall came back to complete the job when they realized their earlier meddling let us still identify people who came up as not existing in the database as likely being people with something to hide.”

The fact that they had someone in Three who apparently supported the cause of the old Capitol was disturbing enough, and that it had happened now, months later. It spoke to a methodical approach he really didn’t like. Obviously, no matter what, some people were going to be pissed off with the way things were after a big change. But disgruntled people waving signs were one thing—there were plenty of those on the television every day protesting one thing or another and making demands. They were being too merciful on the Capitol. They were punishing the Capitol too harshly. They ought to punish Districts One, Two, and Four as long-time Capitol collaborators. They ought to just punish Two for being the source of the Peacekeepers. Usually, this district or that wasn’t getting what they wanted.

That was normal enough, constant noise and racket. But imagining people who didn’t like the way things were and who apparently had the brains, organization, and ability to just sneak in and fuck it up made him very uneasy. “Maybe they’ll settle on down now that they think the rats can hide out safely without fear of being caught.” He hoped that would be the case, that they’d be satisfied with this much. At least whoever it was had done nothing violent.

Still, he looked over at Johanna and saw the flicker of worry on her face. He knew it too. They’d shown it clear as day last year with the propos broadcast safely from Thirteen out of the Capitol’s reach, freely pirating the Capitol broadcast to suit their needs. If these weren’t just people seeking to cover their tracks and slip away into safe anonymity, if they were people with the will and the ability to attack and try and change things, and the ability to not get caught, it probably wouldn’t stop. The trouble was not knowing which it was. “People with some kind of message to send rarely keep silent forever once they’ve gotten your attention.”

“I suppose we have to wait for that message and see what the hell they want to say,” Brocade said grimly. "Meanwhile, if they're rats hiding in their holes, I'm damn well going to try to find them and flush them out before something else happens."
Interlude: Twenty-One

The irony of them being locked up in the same cell they’d previously used themselves to hold prisoners wasn’t lost on Theo. Though this was just a holding cell—it wasn’t meant to serve for long-term imprisonment. Most of the crimes they dealt with were petty enough. A few days of lock-up, time in the stocks, flogging in some severe cases, making restitution, or the like, and it was followed by release back into society. Then there were the execution offenses, and that was a long list of everything from murder and rape to attacking a Peacekeeper to theft of things from the workplace. That last one, though, was probably the most overlooked capital crime in Panem except for a few specific things. He hadn’t actually seriously enforced that one at all until he got here to Eight where everything was enforced strictly after their little rebellion, though he knew some Peacekeepers did.

But things falling in between those two categories of short-term punishment and death were rare, a very few offenses calling for prolonged imprisonment. It was understood that HQ wasn’t equipped to deal with months or even years of incarceration, so those prisoners were sent to the Capitol to serve their sentence there in the Detention Center.

This cell wasn’t meant to be lived in more than a few days. It also wasn’t really meant for more than one person. But the four of them, the half-squad that had been with him that night, had been stuffed in here for several weeks now. Or at least that was his estimate, based on the admittedly erratic meals and the like. It wasn’t like they got to see daylight at all for him to confirm it. He wasn’t going to ask any of the rebels either. He already knew they wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. Most of what they directed towards their captives was the expected insults and abuses.

It was blazingly hot midsummer and the heat generated by three other bodies in this stuffy, windowless cell was depressing. All of them clung to their own particular corners, trying to move as little as possible. They rotated use of the one bunk and slept on the floor the rest of the time. The small toilet in the corner had broken a while back and their can-toilet, emptied only when they pretty much begged for it, meant the smell of piss and shit was constant in the heat.

That day their jailers marched them into the walled back yard and told them to wash up. “You stink like the Capitol pigs you are and I’m sick of smelling it,” one of the rebels had said bluntly. He’d passed the point of being able to smell it, but he knew from the sweat and the heat and the inability to bathe that they probably did reek. They’d ended up stripped down to their trousers and undershirts, and after weeks without a wash, those looked and felt disgusting. Left with a couple buckets of water and watched closely, it was clear they weren’t going to get any privacy to bathe. None of them had any particular modesty around each other at that point. The weeks in the cell had cured them of that already.

He’d heard a few pointed comments and laughs as they stripped and started washing. Justicia stirred next to him as one commented, “The tall one’s got nice tits.”

“Fuckers,” she said through clenched teeth, and he saw her hands shaking as she crouched and reached for a rag in the bucket, her shame and anger obvious.

“Ignore it, Jussy,” he said calmly, trying to tune it out and just enjoy the sunlight and the feel of being clean. He might not be able to shave, and the beard itched like hell in the heat, but at least this was a clear improvement. It would be a while before he had either luxury again, he was sure. He didn’t know what had happened to any of the others in the district or if maybe in other places around the district center there were other Peacekeepers held prisoner. He thought he heard the sound of distant rifle fire, as if the fighting was going on somewhere in the area. War’s still going on here, he noted,
filing that away for reference. From the more intense heat compared to when they’d been captured, he was pretty sure they were indeed into August now.

He knew his orders would have been to try to quell any rebellion and keep order in the district. That obviously was sheer impossibility at this point. Any attempt to do it would end up with all four of them shot dead in a heartbeat. Clearly the rebels were armed and organized that the fighting was still going on here in Eight, and he would lay good odds they’d learned from the mistakes of the winter.

No orders covered this, because successful rebellion and being captured were pretty much unthinkable. He could see how it chafed all of their pride to sit in that cell, powerless and humiliated. Marcellus was probably worst of all. Justicia had been born to a Peacekeeper mother in Three, her golden-tan skin and dark eyes attesting to the fact her father had been a district native, and promptly surrendered to the Peacehome. Thalaea had been handed over as a Capitol treason-price. As for him, well, he had his own murky, unremembered district life. But Marcellus was Two born and bred, probably with constant thoughts of his family back near Burnt Tree Camp. He was usually the one whose temper flared easiest about the situation, understandably so. But as Theo was their senior officer and their leader, they looked to him for what to do.

Without orders, without reference of some logical framework in his training to handle this, it was like groping blind in the dark. He found more and more he was obeying that curious instinct that had made him surrender to the rebels that afternoon rather than die defiantly as orders would have said. You do what you have to do. But you do it and you stay alive. It meant captivity. It meant enduring the too-infrequent food and the can-toilet and the mocking laughter now. It meant watching, waiting, and mostly, trying to not piss their captors off too much.

Because he’d realized it was simple as the fact that so long as they were still alive they could hope to stay that way. Training, legal codes, and everything else gave him nothing right now where everything was chaos. Some nights—or what might have been nights out in the world beyond the cell, anyway—he wondered if that was something from that buried past growing up in Panem’s most hardscrabble district. The constant feeling of uncertainty in the future and of gnawing hunger already tugged at something within him, knowing with utter certainty that as a boy, he had felt that way too. So maybe it was a mentality that wasn’t dependent on conscious and clear memory, but something rooted in instincts, something in his blood.

He was left trying to grasp it, tease it out and work with it, try to think ahead if possible. He could follow the clues and make the leaps of logic and track down a thief, but he couldn’t fucking well predict if someday a rebel would come through the door with a rifle rather than food. Sometimes it left him wanting to scream in sheer frustration. There were probably people who enjoyed that situation in all its uncertainty, found an adrenaline rush in it. Not him; he just wanted to solve it, wanted it to make sense, wanted to know.

Doesn’t much matter why, runt, that’s just how it is and you’ve gotta learn to deal with it, the memory of a boyish voice piped up impatiently in his mind—Dougless. It had to be him, because he recognized the voice. The pressure of the situation bore down on him. Deal with it, he thought as they were escorted back to the cell.

Perhaps a week later that uncertain day finally came, a rebel coming in with fire in his eyes and a gun in his hand. “Get out here,” and his tone brooked no argument.

Well, he thought, here it is. Already, though, his mind was trying to analyze it, trying to force it into some frame of logic. The look of fury on their escort’s face, and how their captors had kept them alive this long only to suddenly want to kill them now—he almost figured something had to have happened to whip up the mob frenzy again. “What happened out there?” he asked calmly as he could
as they were joined in the front receiving area by three more rebels. The younger woman wore a plain headscarf of unrelieved black tied in elaborate knots; she was mourning someone. Perhaps it was someone dead in the factory and buried in that ditch. Chances were she’d enjoy watching him die.

They had the handcuffs all ready, courtesy of raiding Peacekeeper supply. But they knew so little about restraining a prisoner that they were ready to restrain his hands in front of him. Chances were he could take down at least one of them before being shot, even with bound hands. But even if they took down all four, what then? It’d be him and three comrades against the entire district. That was just stupid, pointless odds. They wouldn’t ever make it to the edge of town before they were shot down. No, he judged, no point to a futile gesture like fighting back. If he had to die, he was damn well going to do it with whatever dignity and stoicism he could. But at the very least, it meant if he stumbled or was helpfully tripped, he wouldn’t fall flat on his face like he would with his hands cuffed behind him.

“As if you don’t know,” the younger man snarled, green-gold eyes alight with rage.

“Considering I’ve been locked up for the last month or so?” He raised his hands, calmly letting them lock the cuffs on. “Not really. If you’d be so kind as to enlighten me.”

“Don’t get snarky with me,” the younger woman warned.

“I’m not.” Calm. Controlled. In command of yourself. He was positive there wasn’t even a shred of sarcasm in his tone. “Just asking.”

“Oh, just today your air force decided to come here yesterday and bomb a hospital.” The cuffs dug in, suddenly cinched too tight. “With plenty of women and children inside too. No survivors. But you lot already showed that’s your little game with the uniform factory, didn’t you?”

The factory, it was always going to come back to that fucking factory. But hearing about another building here reduced to smoking rubble and no survivors, he felt that uneasy, sick feeling again. “Wasn’t enough you motherless fucks had to destroy all of District Twelve right after the Quell,” the older man said, his grey-laced mustache practically bristling. “You had to come try to destroy us all over again, huh?”

He was knocked out of focus by that, suddenly hit with a stab of pure terror. “Wait, they bombed District Twelve?”

“You bombed District Twelve,” Black Scarf corrected him, enunciating the word very clearly.

“Fifteen minutes after the Games ended,” the older woman confirmed in a low, husky voice. “Bombed to rubble. We’ve all seen the pictures. Not many survivors. Though I hear tell you even wiped out plenty of your own in doing so.” She gave him a pleased smirk at that.

The Peacekeepers had died there too? Myrina. Actaeon. He felt like he couldn’t breathe, imagining them there as the bombs exploded, blown to pieces like the people in the factory. No. it would have been firebombs, of course, but still, the Capitol had sacrificed its own Peacekeepers there? He prayed they were lying but he suspected they weren’t.

Marcellus was the only one brave and stupid enough to voice it, though. “You’re lying,” he snapped, his face flushed with anger, though his voice was almost shrill. “The Capitol wouldn’t just bomb its own Peacekeepers.”

“You want to see the pictures of it, boy?” Husky said, sensing her advantage and pressing it.
“Pictures of the dead the Capitol put all over the television these last weeks to try to frighten us? Burnt to a crisp, hard to tell a Peacekeeper pig from an innocent, but both just as dead. The survivors from Twelve said there was no warning.” But how were they hearing from those survivors? Somehow, they had. He wanted to believe they were just trying to mess with his head before they killed him but it seemed too elaborate a ruse for people that caught up in their own hatred. Mobs just wanted to see blood spilled; they didn’t bother with elaborate deceptive mindfucks. “Business as usual right until the bombs started dropping. You know what that means? All those Peacekeepers were there right to the last moment. They’re all dead.” The jubilation in her voice, and his anguished fear for Myrina and Actaeon both, made his stomach turn. They hate us, and they’ll celebrate killing us. The hospital bombing had been the last straw. There would be no reasoning here, no convincing them to calm down.

“Colonel,” Justicia said softly, questioningly, and it said enough that she was relying on the formality of rank to steady her, and not giving the rebels the pleasure of seeing anything personal. He could feel the other three waiting to take their cue from him. He shook his head slightly. He saw there was nothing to be done for it. “As good a day to die as any,” he told them, trying for a brave nonchalance, telling them by his words and tone that blubbering or resistance wouldn’t be tolerated. They’d die with courage, if nothing else. He risked rallying them with the slight insolence of, “At least we don’t have to go back to that fucking cell.” At least if there was some kind of thereafter, and Myrina had died in Twelve, he’d be with her soon. Never to have to wait for each other, never to be parted again—that was a small comfort.

To his surprise, they didn’t direct them towards the back yard with its high stone walls to take care of the messy business of shooting them. Instead, they were shown the front door and marched through the streets towards the town square.

He must have had a questioning look on his face because Mustache informed him, “Seemed fitting to make it public, as your lot made such a spectacle of executing us.” He remembered the executions of captured rebels there in the square. There had been a couple of weeks where there had been executions conducted daily. The Capitol had broadcast it to the people of Eight as further proof of how serious they were about suppressing the rebellion. He wondered if the rebels were taping this.

In the distance to the east he could smell the ghastly scent of burned flesh, just like with the factory, and see a plume of smoke even now as the ruins of the hospital burned. The rebels hadn’t lied about that. As they came to the edge of the square he could see a crowd there already, and he could sense the ugly mood as if it was a living thing. Up on the platform of the stage in front of the Justice Building, an Eight native was being pushed down on his knees, protesting the entire time. One more, a woman, waited nervously at the foot of the stairs.

“Collaborator,” Black Scarf said casually. “Been dealing with their lot all morning. About time those rats got what’s coming to them.” Apparently the four of them were the entertainment for after that, as they were clearly headed for the stage themselves.

“Theo,” the voice of the man apparently running the show quieted the crowd, “you’ve been denounced as a traitor by the people of District Eight. Multiple people reported you acting as a collaborator and informer, selling your own people out,” low murmurs of rage, “for preferential treatment from the enemy. Do you have anything to say?”

Theo didn’t watch, but he couldn’t close up his ears. Sakhalin was still blubberyng his innocence,
how he’d done it to save his own family, when the pistol shot rang out, clear as thunder.

They repeated the process with Mantilla Beckworth. *Traitor. Collaborator. Informer. Pistol shot.* He suppressed a nervous laugh as he wondered just how being confronted with a Peacekeeper for execution would trip up what sounded like a quite well-rehearsed script by this point. How many had they already shot this morning? “Which of you lot is first?” Mustache asked.

He shrugged, trying to not let the terrified desire to live seize hold and make him panic where there wasn’t any hope at all, and said, “I volunteer.” He was senior officer, it was only fitting he ought to go first, lead them in this one last thing, give the example.

The irony of saying those words at the foot of a stage used for decades of reappings only struck him as he was climbing the stairs, and he stuffed back another of those hysterical laughs. “Name?” the head of this merry little carnival asked as he crossed the stage, willing his knees to be steady.

Where he found the nerve for it he wasn’t quite sure, but he felt almost strangely calm as he told him, “No point. You really don’t give a fuck what my name is, just my uniform.” What were they going to do anyway, kill him for that little defiance? He looked up, feeling the warmth of the sun for a few last moments of life, hungrily drinking in the sight of blue sky. “You don’t much care if I have last words either. Let’s just get to it.”

“All right then, Peacekeeper. You’ve got some guts, at least.” Shoved roughly down to his knees, he debated whether he should close his eyes or not. No, keep them open, closed would make him look afraid.

He ended up staring down at the spray of blood on the well-worn boards of the stage, feeling it soak into the knees of his ragged uniform pants as he’d apparently knelt in a pool of it where someone had lain as they bled and died.

*So afraid, too terrified to move at what had just happened to tear apart the quiet afternoon. Two women were down on their knees in front of him, black haired, one young and trying to not sob in terror, the other older and calmer, and they had two Peacekeepers behind them with pistols pointed at their heads. His ma, and…who was the other girl? He liked her, he knew that, liked her being around.*

“*I’m sorry, Nola,*” came the low voice of a man, the man that was holding him tight, restraining him, a big, strong man in that frightening white uniform of a Peacekeeper. He thought the man sounded broken and lost. “*At least I got the President to let the boy live.*”

“You did that, at least. So now you do it quick and don’t you make him watch. He doesn’t need to see this.” Ma reached her hand out to the girl. “*Honey, it’s OK, just hold my hand.*” He saw their hands clutching each other tightly before his face was turned away. The silenced shots still made him cry out, the sound muffled into the white uniform, knowing it meant the end of his world.

As he was half-carried out, too paralyzed by shock and terror to walk, he was unable to resist looking back, wanting somehow for it to not be true. He was too far out the door to see the bodies, but he saw the spatters of blood against the old planks of the kitchen floor scoured almost white by his ma’s weekly Sunday scrubbing.

“*Ma?*” he said hoarsely to himself, utterly confused and suddenly terrified, as that boy had been. What the hell was that? His ma—his mother—and his brother had died in an accident, and there had been no mention of any girl there. But it was so real, it felt like one of those occasional bursts of memory that came to him at the most unexpected times. It felt like it belonged, but he could make no sense of it.
He heard a laugh above and behind him and felt the press of the pistol barrel against the base of his skull. “Maybe not so gutsy after all. Don’t piss yourself. Your mommy can’t help you now.”

“What the fuck is going on here?” came another shout, a woman with the rounded tones of Eight.

\textit{Oh, come on.} Theo thought with a sort of mingled desperation and exasperation, \textit{can’t we just get on with it?} Glancing up, he looked at the woman interrupting the proceedings here. Eight born and bred, of course—light caramel skin, golden brown eyes, and the little bit of hair showing beneath her blood red head-scarf was also brown. He’d been around the Corps long enough to recognize someone easily taking charge, who wore the mantle of authority like it fit comfortably. This woman had the power to command the crowd because they’d fallen respectfully silent at her approach.

“Commander,” the voice of the man who’d been leading the show was suddenly deferential and nervous, “we were…”

The Commander stepped forward and her voice went low enough that the crowd couldn’t hear it. Being literally a captive audience, though, Theo heard it well enough. “I authorized you to handle the execution of those collaborators and informers whose information was \textit{clearly confirmed} had led to the execution of innocents,” the Commander snapped. “I thought those orders were pretty clear. Not publicly, Denim, and not rounding up some extras to put on a better show! We’re not the Capitol. We don’t make a spectacle out of \textit{this}. So tell me, why the fuck is there a Peacekeeper here ready to get his brains blown out?”

Denim’s pal obviously stepped back as the gun barrel was taken from the back of his head. Denim cleared his throat. “People are angry after the hospital, Brocade. Commander,” he corrected himself. “I figured, so long as we’ve got most of the district back as our own, and we were already dealing with other trash…these fuckers bombed us \textit{again} yesterday, they deserve…”

“Justice, Denny. Not this. Yeah, he’s a ghost,” wryly he understood that might be some kind of slang for a Peacekeeper, “but I’m pretty sure he was in lockup all day yesterday. Not in a bomber hovercraft.”

“What about the factory?” Denim demanded angrily.

The commander, still standing over him, addressed him in a quiet voice that still carried the expectation of being listened to and respected. “How about it, Peacekeeper? What was your involvement in the factory bombing?”

“If I say I wasn’t involved in the bombing, why are you inclined to believe me?” He’d dealt with plenty of guilty people in his life. At a certain point, truth was indistinguishable from a man simply saying what he wanted his captors to hear.

She crouched down, now on his level, and stared at him directly. He was surprised the fact that he had to smell like hell and likely looked like the worst kind of beggar, thin and ragged and unshaven and dirty, didn’t seem to bother her. “Try me.”

“Truth? I was in the district a few weeks after you captured the district center. I fought against your forces. I’ve killed some of your people in battle. I wasn’t on an execution squad but I probably arrested some people who did end up executed. But I didn’t bomb the factory.” In light of things that didn’t seem like much of a claim to moral superiority; the whole thing had just been one slippery slope, and where exactly enforcement had ended and terrorizing began, he didn’t know. He gave a weary shake of his head. “Even those that laid the charges and lit the fuse—that was just orders from higher up.” Some may have thought it was justified. Some may have just done it because obedience was the name of the game, because they realized it was their own neck if they didn’t. “But we did it.
So I reckon there’s enough to kill me for something.”

“Well. I’ll give you points for sheer honesty.” She gave a low sigh, sitting there apparently mulling it over. “We’re not like the Capitol,” she said finally. “And the descriptions of the ones who took special joy in abusing us—oh, we remember them.” She said the words with a fierce edge, a threat and a promise. Theo had a sudden thought of Longinus, and figured that if the boy hadn’t gotten kicked over to Eleven, he would have gotten himself on that list eventually. “The few that haven’t been…dealt with…they don’t match you four. So you did your duty, or whatever. I won’t execute you for that.”

“Then what are your plans, ma’am?” He figured it wouldn’t hurt to give her the politeness of courtesy, even if acknowledging a rebel would probably be considered a pretty dirty kind of treason. Yeah, well, this whole situation wasn’t as clean-cut as anyone would like.

“The Capitol’s not going to give me a damn thing for four Peacekeepers when they hold lives, even their own soldiers, so cheap. They killed hundreds of your kind in District Twelve without a second thought.” His heart ached again to hear it, and he tried to steel himself against it. Now wasn’t the time for breakdowns. “So here you are, in our district, eating our food, breathing our air, and you’ll keep pissing people off too much being here to remind them what you ghosts did to us all. I don’t want to bother protecting you from the next mob, and the next. You’re a dangerous thing to keep around and you’re not worth the trouble because I have better things to focus on and as prisoners, you gain me nothing but unrest in my own people.”

Put that way, it was cool and even ruthless but utterly rational in a way he had to appreciate. “Then if you’re not executing us, but you’re not willing to keep imprisoning us…”

“I figure four Peacekeepers won’t affect the course of the war one way or another. So here’s the deal. We’ll turn you loose far outside of the mills. I suggest you leave the district. If we see your faces again back here in the district center, we will shoot you. What you do after that is up to you. Rejoin your troops if you want, I don’t care.”

Released, but left miles from anywhere—his mind rapidly calculated the odds of surviving that. Depending exactly where they kicked them out of the district, it would likely be something like two weeks on foot to go south and west to the closest potential refuge in Ten, given the need to find food along the way and being obliged to follow the shore of massive Lake Weaver. But that was still preferable to heading anywhere east—all that was there now were the ruins of Districts Thirteen and Twelve. “Kicking us out into the woods without food or weapons gives us a good chance of dying out there.” Not to mention Peacekeeper training wasn’t exactly geared towards foraging or hunting skills. There was the persistent tug of something in his mind, that dark morass of memory, but he didn’t have time to follow it just now. “You might be kinder to just shoot us.”

She looked at him. “No weapons, no food, no survival skills? It’s the same odds our tributes had year after year in the arena,” she told him. He winced, acknowledging the hit. Eight’s tributes, raised in this urban misery, usually performed especially poorly. It was a barbed kind of mercy she was offering, but it was understandable, and he had to admit it was utterly fair. “Except we won’t be trying to kill you in the bargain. I’ll also give you some food…and some clothes, we’ve certainly got plenty of those on hand on this district.”

“And why would you do that?”

Getting back to her feet, all she said was, “Because we’re not the Capitol.” With that she spoke quietly to Denim and gave whatever orders she intended for it, as he still knelt there, more than a little stunned. Then she walked away without looking back.
Whether it was there being no more Peacekeeper uniforms in the district after the factory bombing, or simple courtesy on the part of the commander in not dressing them in clothes that would probably have them shot on sight in war-torn Panem, they were issued civvies. He felt peculiar—he couldn’t remember the days he hadn’t worn the white, or the Peacehome uniform before that. He felt oddly more naked in the blue-and-white checked shirt and canvas trousers than he had in the yard of HQ while their captors watched him washing. *Never mind, don’t think about that. Think about keeping alive.*

Of course it was Marcellus that protested as, backpacks in hand with some meager supplies to get them started, they were ushered into the back of a truck the rebels had commandeered and painted with a crude symbol of a mockingjay over the previous Capitol property tag. It must have been one of the ones previously used to deliver goods from the factories to the train station. “This is…we can’t…you’re just *surrendering* again,” he said, face twisted with anguish.

Thalaea shook her head. There was nothing to look at in the stuffy, canvas-enclosed back except each other. “Leave off it,” she advised him. “We were this close to getting our brains blown out in public. We’re lucky to be alive right now.”

“Better that than this!”

“You’re alive,” Theo pointed out, a little irritated that his whining was distracting him from trying to figure out just how the hell they were going to last until Ten. He was alive and that was probably more than Myrina had gotten. He couldn’t let himself think about that, not now, not when this task would need all his wits and focus. “Have a chance of staying that way too, with any luck. Far preferable to the alternative.” He thought he’d never forget the press of the gun into his skull, the feel of kneeling in someone else’s blood, the jeers of the crowd. Mostly, he’d never forget that odd fragment of memory—delusion—whatever it was, that had been jolted loose by the sight of that blood on those boards.

“You don’t know what it’s like,” Marcellus insisted, panic giving way to something ugly in his tone. “You aren’t born from Two blood, you were just another district brat lucky enough to end up out of the coal heap that spawned you.” Apparently out of uniform and out of sorts, discipline that would have made the younger man horrified at the idea of casting a slur on a superior officer had broken down quickly enough. Fine, so be it. They weren’t much in the way of Peacekeepers any longer, were they?

“Marc!” Justicia said sharply, though the hurt was clear in her tone. “You want to try that on me? I’ve got district blood too and I’ve served with as much honor as you have. Don’t be an asshole.”

Looking over at his partner, Marcellus’ temper wilted. “I can’t…my family will never…we know it, you’ve gotta either come home with your rifle or shot dead by one. That’s just how it *is.*”

“And yet you surrendered,” Theo told him, trying to keep it matter-of-fact. “You didn’t insist they shoot you dead first back when they captured us. You didn’t try to escape because you knew you’d be gunned down. You didn’t tell them you’d sooner die than be forced to leave Eight on their terms. Apparently, Marc, you want to live.”

“Seems only sensible that a person would want that,” Thalaea spoke up, voice barely audible above the flap of canvas in the breeze. “And I know it, *I* want to live.”

They were silent for the rest of the ride after that, all of them lost in their own thoughts and speculations. There was a strange roaring noise that grew louder and louder.

Finally the truck stopped and the canvas was thrown back to the blinding daylight. “Out,” Mustache
said bluntly, obviously in no mood for questions or arguments.

Clambering down from the truck, stretching his stiff legs, he saw what the roar was. They had been hearing a massive waterfall—he’d never worked in Eight, and this was one thing Actaeon had never mentioned. Maybe he’d never even seen it, being as it was likely he’d never even been to the border of his own district. Maybe he’d never see it now, being as he’d likely been burned to ashes in District Twelve. He knew he felt the probable loss of Myrina and Actaeon more than an entire district he couldn’t remember.

He stared at the roiling, foaming tumult of the water and had to wonder if the commander had lied, if she’d told her people to just throw them over and had spun that story to get them out here quietly. Stupid fear, though, she wouldn’t have wasted food and clothing on people she planned to kill.

“Fuck off now and don’t come back,” Husky told them, gesturing towards the long high bridge crossing the falls, towards what looked like the ruins of an old city on the far side. The railroad tracks on the bridge told him at least it was currently maintained and not a two-hundred-year-old relic of old North America that might crumble beneath their feet.

He shouldered his backpack and turned for the bridge. “Let’s go before they change their minds,” he muttered, thinking getting out of Mustache and Husky’s rifle range as quickly as possible might be a very good idea. Given the lack of argument and how briskly they all started the march right behind him, obviously they were thinking the same.
District Four: Twenty-Two

The only other times he’d been in District Four were on his own Victory Tour and accompanying Katniss and Peeta. In the bleakness of December, as far south as Four was, it had been above freezing. His own Tour date had been bright, sunny and warm. The one for the 74th had been chilly—a raw and windy wet cold not entirely dissipated by having a drink at Finnick’s house while the kids were getting the grand guided tour, and both of them carefully avoiding talking about important things. In both cases he’d just wanted to get the hell out of the district and have the ordeal over.

Both of those Decembers were better than this. Four in the heat of midsummer was blazing, humid, the sun inescapable; the air thick and steamy so it felt like a clammy hot blanket around him.

It felt far too much like the arena. Annie had been up in Mentor Central for it, but he had no idea how the hell Finnick could live here after that experience. The heat, the humidity, the riotous thick and dark cypress swamp backing onto Victor’s Bayou that he kept eyeing for some new horror, the distant line of the beach on the horizon miles away. The moment he stepped off the hovercraft, his skin crawled and he wanted to get right back on. The dry heat of Five had been uncomfortable, but it hadn’t been a nightmarish reminder like this. He realized, watching the cypresses again, that he wanted the security of a knife in his hand, waking and sleeping.

He wondered if Katniss would feel like that too when she and Peeta arrived in a week. Johanna showed him nothing, didn’t say anything either. “Still looking for that nice beach house, lad?” the mayor said to him with a chuckle of glee. Wrack Solange was a wizened, sun-bronzed, tough old nut of a man who’d been mayor even since Haymitch’s own Tour all those years ago. He remembered he’d been shocked that the district center, and apparently most of the fishing villages to boot, were located in sheltered waters several miles inland from the ocean. He could see now he’d had his notions of things influenced by Capitol movies and their romantic image of Four—good old “Splendor in the Sea” and its ilk. But sixteen and naïve as he’d been, he’d blurted to Wrack at dinner, I figured you’d be living on the beach and all.

Wrack had answered then, Ah, now, a lot of the best fishing is in the bays, so it makes more sense to have our homes and our boats there, see?

It was later, away from the dinner table, the man had explained kindly, but with a roguish glint in his eye, On beaches, we build only the tourist hotels for Capitol folks, lad. They don’t want to see our homes while they’re taking in the sights anyway. That way every time a hurricane comes along and fucks those up because they’re unprotected from the storm, our homes and our boats are safe as anything, away from it as we are.

Finnick and Annie were there too, Finnick’s scarred face healing nicely in the five months since Haymitch had seen him last. He would never be the gorgeous creature he had before, but the way he looked content even if he looked tired, that inner radiance, seemed to render the scarring and the slight crookedness of his face a moot point. “Good to see you, Finn,” Haymitch said, as Finnick gave him a fierce hug of greeting.

“You’re both looking well,” Finnick said, giving a lopsided smile.

Annie stepped forward next to greet them, looking a bit exhausted like Finnick did. He smiled at her too. He noticed Johanna’s greetings for Annie were more restrained than her fiercely warm welcome hug for Finnick. “Congratulations to you both,” he offered.

Annie’s smile grew a bit wider. “I can’t wait for you to meet her,” she said. “But Mayor Solange has
you and Finn heading out with a crew on the bay for the afternoon, but me, I need some sleep.” She gave a low chuckle. “It’s late nights, I tell you, with a newborn.”

“Oh, of course.” There was something a little odd in her tone when she spoke about the fishing boat, but he didn’t want to pry. “We’ll see you for dinner, then?”

Finnick walked them down to the docks, chattering all the way about Maggie, her looks, her habits, her favorite things, the nuisance of the photographers flocking around waiting to catch a good picture of the child of two victors. The excited litany of Maggie Maggie Maggie Maggie made him want to just cover his ears like Annie did when she was having one of her attacks. The effort of keeping his temper in check and not blowing up wasn’t easy, but he’d be damned if he’d scream at a friend of his like that for no good cause but his own issues he really didn’t want to explain anyway. He’d endured losing his entire family. He’d endured being sold and raped on a regular basis. He’d endured helplessly escorting children to their deaths. He’d endured being shunned by his own people. He could make it through two weeks of an innocent infant without biting Finnick’s head off. Yeah, but probably not without a drink, he thought, stuffing down a sardonic laugh, feeling the old black melancholy rising up, fit to swallow him like one of those waves crashing on the beach.

Escorted aboard the Tormadillo, a neat, red-and-black painted boat with nets hung off metal frames on each side like the spread wings of a bird, they met the captain, Juncus Dufours, a small, neat, dark-featured man, with near-black eyes. “We’re taking a little shrimping trip ‘round the bay, none of the offshore business,” he promised. “Just so’s you’ve got a better feel for things here. Can’t understand the business of fishing till you’ve spent a little time of deck.”

Being as it spared him the trouble of trying to put on a brave face about baby Odair for at least a few more hours, he was all in favor of that notion. Finnick shut up about the kid and was soon talking about the fishing business, and he listened to that far more eagerly than before. The breeze of the boat’s motion certainly helped dissipate some of the heat too, and he considered that a plus. Leaning against the rail of the boat, he had the feeling captain and his helper were watching the two of them with amusement waiting to see if they’d puke. His body slowly was adjusting to the vibration and the motion, though. “Easy there, Jo,” Finnick said with a laugh. “You’re looking a little green.”

“I’m fine, Finn,” she said, sitting down on a box on deck. But seeing how he fussed over her, it irritated him in a way he couldn’t quite name. True, he knew plenty about puking but didn’t know much about motion sickness, so it was better left to Finnick. He kept himself busy talking to Dufours about the process of fishing, how and where and when to set the nets.

Simple commands like Haul that line, hey? and Bring that bucket there yonder at least made him feel less useless. The catch was pathetic, to say the least, and he didn’t need to be born on a fishing boat to see that. The nets were dumped out onto the sorting table, and a few measly shrimp heroically tried to leap to freedom, mixed in with tiny fish and flotsam of all sorts. “Not bad,” Captain Dufours said with a bit of a grin. “Not the worst we’ve been catching these years past.” It was probably a good thing his ear was attuned to the thick Four accent after so many years of Mags, Finnick, Carrick, and others, because he was sure to most anyone else, it would have just been met with looks of total incomprehension.

When they finally turned back up the bay, he stared dubiously at the bucket of shrimp that represented several hours of the giant nets, being dragged through and through the waters of the bay, all the way out to where the bay opened up to the oceanic coast. “You actually make a living doing this?” Johanna said, wiping her brow with the back of her forearm, being as their hands were sticky with slime now. “Capitol quotas were that low?”

“No, means they got real fuckin’ pissed when we didn’t bring in the shrimp like they wanted,”
Dufours’ apparent second-in-command said, a lithe young woman with bronze hair like Finnick’s.

“Part of why we all rebelled so easily compared to some other districts,” Finnick said, clearing the rest of the table of fish, water, and snot with the casual sweep of one hand towards the hatches for dumping things overboard. “Haymitch and I were talking about that some before the Quell last year. We weren’t meeting quotas and they cut out some food rations in response.” He remembered that talk in the training gym, comparing notes on the misery in their respective districts. It seemed like Four finally had stopped being favored and pampered by the Capitol and been kicked firmly out into the cold with the other low-tech districts.

“Fish ain’t there,” Dufours shrugged, one foot on the steps—the ladder—up to the wheelhouse. “And they ain’t been there for years. Capitol set the quotas too high. More time fishing the bay for what shrimp there are, going further and further offshore chasing the fish, going out in all weather…more sinking boats, more dead crews.” Easy enough to compare that to the frantic pace the Capitol had forced on Twelve down in the mines, the constant accidents and deaths in the harsh months before the Quell.

“How long’s that gonna take to recover so you can fish again like normal?” Johanna asked, wiping her hands on the rag Finnick handed her as Dufours turned the boat back for the dock.

Finnick shrugged. “Nobody knows how long it’ll take the fish to come back,” he admitted honestly, green eyes looking troubled.

“Sounds to me like you’re running too many boats after what little you’ve got,” Haymitch said bluntly.

“Probably right,” Johanna said. “One thing when the Capitol made you do it, but now? I mean, you cut down too many trees and you’re looking at years and years to recover from it. At least with trees, though, we could intervene, replant more every year so years down the road those would be ready to be cut down. Just throwing more lumberjacks at it over a wider area wouldn’t have solved the problem.”

“We can’t just plant more fish, Jo.”

“It’s probably like coal. Takes so long to turn into coal that it’s either there or it ain’t, and not much you can do when a mine’s stripped out but move to another one. But you can only do that so long before there’s no damn mines left at all.”

“People here have to eat, you know,” Finnick pointed out with a spark of temper. “Without the fishing or the tourism we used to have, we’re in big trouble here. You want to create an entire district of people out of work and starving?”

Remembering Clover and the problem with harvest, he gave a low murmur of acknowledgement to that. They might be particularly well suited to District Ten, being as they pretty much slaughtered and processed meat. “If they’re willing to work and don’t mind moving, at least for a time…”

“But this is their home,” Finnick protested with some anguish.

“If there’s no work to be had at home,” he said, “does survival or pride matter more?” It was a hard hit, he knew it the second he said it, but it was no less true. All three of them would have had to answer survival without hesitation, victors as they were.

“Don’t tell me you don’t miss Seven, though, Johanna,” and Finnick’s voice was almost pleading. He tried to not flinch, feeling like he’d just been hit. It didn’t strike him, as it usually would in a
clearer frame of mind, that perhaps Finnick’s desperation was fear for the security of the future of his family. What hit him was the man was trying to get his wife to admit she wasn’t happy with having moved to Twelve to marry him, and doing it to his face. *But moving to Four for you would have been OK, would it?* he thought angrily. Right now he wasn’t sure he could bear to hear it. Twenty-five years of Capitol pressure took the sharpest confrontational edge out of him. His first instinct wasn’t to aggressively pick a fight; it was to stuff it down and try to analyze and deal with it later if possible. Suffering and slavery had taught him patience, if nothing else.

Leaving them together on the back deck, he went to go talk to Dufours and his crew. Might as well do something useful during the ride back in to the dock and get more perspective on the fishing issues. That was what he was here for anyway. Glancing occasionally at them, he saw her laughing, obviously enjoying Finnick’s company, the two of them talking like the old friends they were. How easily they’d just picked up the traces of that bothered him, and compared to how moody she’d been the last few days, it stung to see that Finnick was the one who sparked that change.

Once the boat was securely tied up, Finnick started to invite them for dinner. He wondered if he could make a good excuse to avoid it. Right now, irritated and off-balance as he was, he wasn’t sure he could face meeting Maggie. Johanna mumbled something about feeling sick and wanting to skip dinner and go to bed. “Seasickness,” Finnick said sympathetically, clapping a sympathetic hand on her shoulder. At least he didn’t ask if she was pregnant. “It happens, especially to landlubbers. I’ll have Annie bring some saltines and—”

“No,” Johanna said sharply, shaking her head. “I…really just want to sleep, Finn.”

“Well, then you’ll have to come meet Maggie in the morning. We’ll make you a nice big breakfast to make up for you missing the meal tonight.” Johanna looked about as thrilled as facing a Capitol execution squad at that. What—facing the woman Finnick had chosen to marry, and the child he’d had with that woman? Finnick smiled at her and said, “It’s good to see you again, Jo.” She brightened at that.

“I ought to get back,” Finnick told him, smiling a bit. “Maggie will…. Need feeding, or have shit her diapers, or whatever, Haymitch finished silently.

“Now c’mon,” he said, with a jovial laugh he really didn’t feel, grabbing Finnick by the shoulders and steering him towards what clearly was a raucous waterside bar from the lights and the noise, “you can spare twenty minutes for me to buy you a drink. To celebrate your little girl.” Oh, he’d been a master of finding plausible excuses to raise a glass, back before he just didn’t give a fuck and gave in to becoming a drunkard in truth. Drinking games, toasts, celebrating another day of a tribute’s survival, and now Finnick had just handed him the key here.

Finnick glanced at him, struggling with the words, something almost apologetic in his gaze and his tone as he finally gave in and asked, “Will you be…”

“I can put the bottle down, Finn,” he resisted the urge to lash out and ask, *And if I got roaring drunk, tell me, whose wife would you hurry to tell first? Yours or mine?* He focused on keeping his tone even and cheerful. “Got no reason to start chugging. This is a happy day.” One drink, maybe two. That would get him through tonight and the thought of tomorrow morning.

With a nod to their location, they called for the local spiced rum. Quick enough he realized his tolerance had gone down dramatically in the year and a half he’d been a one or two-drink wonder at worst, and actually most of the time completely sober. Two drinks and already he felt the edge coming off just enough to bear it, and to feel the worst of the thundercloud of black frustration and helplessness recede. He wouldn’t say he felt good. As ever, drinking just cast a gauzy curtain over the hurts that blurred and numbed them a bit and thus made him calmer.
He could easily have ordered a third, and a fourth. But conscious of Finnick by his side, he didn’t. Finnick, always so much better, didn’t need to give him more cause to shine even brighter next to his own dull, battered self. Finnick who was still young and even with his facial scars, still attractive—if anything, the imperfections of his face simply made him more human rather than too beautiful. Finnick who’d always managed to stay pretty positive and kind and never turned into a cynical, disgusting drunk. Finnick who was the man Johanna had loved right until the day he married another woman…

Oh, he realized with a sharp stab of pain, wanting to laugh. She’d kissed him that night right after the wedding. Two lonely people desperate to feel something, and by the time they were sleeping together regularly, he figured she’d gotten over her unattainable dream of Finnick. Maybe she hadn’t.

Begging off from dinner himself with the excuse that he ought to go make sure Johanna was all right, he stopped in the sweet-shop that was still open and bought some wintergreen candy. In years gone by, the years his drinking was private rather than public, he’d used them after he’d had a few steadying drinks to cover the smell on his breath. He didn’t know Johanna would fault him for having a few, she hadn’t before. But that was away from here. Right next to the shining example of Perfect Finnick, he figured it was better to just not deal with the risk of her having yet another thing to fault.

Chewing a few of the candies on the way back to Victor’s Bayou, he wondered if the infernal heat ever died down in this place. He didn’t look at the other houses, not wanting to know right now which ones had belonged to Mags or Carrick or others he’d known.

She was asleep already when he got home, hair pulled back, wearing only a t-shirt and underwear rather than actual pajamas, covers flung back and the window cracked open to allow for a breeze. Standing there watching her, he had the strange impulse to wake her and ask her, Tell me we’re OK. But that was stupid and childish. Sighing, stripping down to his own undershorts, he lay down beside her and quickly fell asleep.

Breakfast was as generous as promised, although he and Johanna were picking at it. Part of it was he knew neither he nor Johanna were all that keen on the taste of seafood, having not grown up eating fish or shrimp or the like as kids in Four did. So the likes of fish rolled in oatmeal didn’t appeal—he wished mightily for some bacon in that moment. A big part of it was seeing Finnick and Johanna eagerly latch onto each other to remember things, sharing old reminisces, old jokes, laughing and teasing as if the two of them were wrapped up in a private little world of their friendship that hadn’t changed at all to include spouses or a child. He glanced at Annie across the table and caught a slightly puzzled look on her face too. So it wasn’t just him.

“I’ll go get her,” Finnick said, beaming as they finished the meal. The coffee, Haymitch would admit, was some of the best he’d ever had—he didn’t know what they put in it here, but the earthy hint to it was damn good. “Just a minute.” He scampered upstairs as Johanna excused herself for the bathroom. Silently, he helped Annie clear the table. He wanted to say something, but he didn’t know exactly what. Say, congrats on the baby, are you worried as I am that your husband is still in love with my wife?

Maggie was a tiny thing at three weeks old, with the dark tan skin of both her parents and the wisps of black hair Finnick had spoken of on the phone. She opened her wide eyes, clear baby blue still, though of course with two green-eyed parents chances were she’d have those too. He looked at her and felt like the sheer love and loss and longing would kill him. She could have so easily been his, looking the way she did. The helpless wanting cut deep as any knife could.

Finnick handed her to Johanna first, and Jo looked down at her, gave a half-hearted smile and murmured something to the baby. “Here,” she said after a minute or so, handing the tiny bundle to
him. She felt like she barely weighed anything in his arms. But the last baby he’d held before this
was probably—who? Hazelle? Lorna? Ash? He’d been tiny himself, that was for sure.

He sat there and held another man’s daughter, unable to look away from her. She looked at him with
her newborn yet strangely inquisitive eyes and he tried to not want to break down, tried to resist the
impulse to not want to give her back. Real or not, the child he’d never have now hurt anyway. He
knew he was too old, too broken down. He shouldn’t subject a kid to that anyway, but it didn’t stop
the longing. Finally, she started to fuss and squirm, and Annie reached out to take her from him,
murmuring about her needing to eat. His fingers instinctively tightened for a moment, not wanting to
let her go, before he realized it and handed her over.

The rest of the day, meeting with the fishermen and touring some of the processing factories and the
like, at least gave ample distraction. He tried to not think about her, but the painful specter of years
ahead of hearing about her birthdays, her milestones and the like, stretched ahead of him. Johanna
had barely wanted to hold Maggie, barely seemed to acknowledge him either since they had arrived.
Already she was talking to Finnick again. Yeah, it would be like that, wouldn’t it? Faced with the
child the man she loved had fathered on another woman, that woman herself, and the man she’d
married as an apparent distant second, obviously she was having regrets. She’d want to focus only
on the bright object of her affections and shut out the rest.

What the two of them had made together was real. He was confident of that. The love, the laughter,
the way they’d slowly made their way back from a pretty dark place—that had been no lie. But
seeing that he’d given himself to her entirely, she’d lied to him in her own way. For all she’d given to
him, the best of her was apparently still reserved for the man she couldn’t have. She loved him, but
not entirely. He would never, ever be enough to compare to the dream of Finnick. It seemed like all
Finnick would have to do was snap his fingers and she’d cast him aside like a crumpled-up scrap of
paper. It rendered that love they had together nearly meaningless, whereas before it had meant
everything.

He has everything. He’s young, he’s still decent-looking, he’s a good man, he has a wife and a child,
he thought angrily. Why the fuck does he need the one good thing I’ve been allowed to have in my
life? It felt like the Capitol, rich and yet selfishly greedy, reaching out to claim what little the district
poor had.

They could be happy together, had been deeply happy together. To his mind, once she had Finnick
as her own she’d be unhappy anyway. It was one thing to comfort-fuck each other during the
Games. But to make a life together was something else entirely. He could match her on her terms.
Finnick’s open sweetness and quieter strength would be hurt by her ferocity and snark and how the
best and softest of her was well hidden beneath that, and likewise, she’d be frustrated by how he
never challenged her or how she was forced to be afraid of hurting him every time she opened her
mouth.

That night as they settled down in bed, he reached for her. Nuzzling her neck gently, he thought with
a sort of miserable desperation, Please, just give me something, tell me this is still worth something…
She stiffened, sighed, and mumbled, “Not tonight, OK?”

It wasn’t like she hadn’t said not tonight before, and hell, he’d said it to her. But with it happening
tonight, he figured that rejection was answer enough. Her preferences there were crystal clear.
“Yeah,” he said, unable to resist kissing her lightly on one shoulder, taking his hands off her even as
he wanted, if nothing else, to just hold her. But apparently she didn’t want even that, from her
reaction. The stiffness in her body before she’d forced herself to relax had told him more than
enough—she didn’t want him touching her at all. He wouldn’t shame them both by begging for what
she obviously didn’t want to give.
The reality was that if she wanted children at all, she didn’t want his babies. She was moving away from him towards the dream of another man. What he had to give her couldn’t overcome that. What was there to do? Scream about it? Demand she love him? Insist that they have a kid in hopes it would bind her to him somehow? No, whatever wasn’t freely given was worthless. He’d rather be alone than suffer through love grudgingly given.

He waited until her breathing turned to the quiet, even rhythm of sleep, and carefully reached for his trousers and shirt. Maybe that bar was open late. Not to get really drunk, of course. Just one or two drinks to chase that blissful mercy of a little fog over the worst of the pain—he figured he was owed that much.

~~~~~~~~~~

She woke up in the night to find Haymitch gone and something in her ached at it. So apparently if she wouldn’t fuck him, he didn’t want to be around her. That was the way he was playing it? Did she really mean that little to him?

Maybe she should have just given in and had sex with him. But she couldn’t muster actual desire for it, and the momentary notion of Yeah, but I could just fake it was an idea that had made her go rigid with disgust. They’d never lied to each other like that, faking interest and desire and pleasure. They’d done it for so many people that she never wanted that to taint what they had. They’d agreed in the past they’d rather handle an honest brush-off for that night than faking it. Apparently he’d reconsidered that.

He’d been a bit distant for days before getting here, and it seemed like ever since they’d landed in Four he’d been walking around like a man with splinters beneath the skin. She saw it now clear enough. He wanted a baby. She could still readily see the way he’d stared longingly at Maggie, how tenderly he’d held her, how he’d hesitated for just that moment to give her back to Annie.

Apparently seeing so openly with what Finnick and Annie had, and he didn’t, had only made him moodier. As if it was just a matter of keeping score—well, he’s a dad so I need a kid too. Was it because he was older, or what? Or maybe it was because of Finnick and her. She’d caught the flashes of temper in his expression when he saw her and Finnick talking together, the hints of jealousy.

Was he thinking knocking her up with his baby would prove for well and good that she was his? She’d married him, she’d given him parts of her fears and her heart and her soul Finnick had never even touched. That wasn’t enough for him? It had to turn into some kind of competition now.

Did he even want a kid to actually be a father, for more than just proving some stupid point about his virility or whatever? He was good around kids, but he’d never spoken anything about actually wanting them to her. Over and over she circled back to the same thing: if he really wanted kids, he would have let himself show that he grieved the one they lost. He’d never mentioned the miscarriage, not once. He wouldn’t be acting like the kid he so obviously wanted would easily replace that one. He wouldn’t be looking at her now like Thirteen had, like she was just a fucking womb to be filled and all the rest of her didn’t matter.

She wasn’t his wife to him right now, she was just a means to an end to prove some kind of point. The way he was acting, he’d probably fuck any woman who could conceive a child for him. The way he looked at Annie, as if he was speculating something about her, stirred her anger. Haymitch always had a plan. What, was he calculating a plot to try and knock Annie up just to try to prove something to Johanna and Finnick both? At least Finnick still saw her as a person, as her friend. Coming here and talking to him had been a ray of light. He was open and friendly as ever, seemed to go out of his way to make her laugh and to remember the good times they’d had together. She was
honestly relieved to remember a time before the miscarriage. She felt herself drawn to him like a moth to flame, unable to resist the brightness of being around him. He cared. He wanted her company. If her being comforted by a friend’s warmth made Haymitch jealous, fuck him.

Besides, it helped. Guiltily, she shied away from acknowledging it, but maybe it was better this time she faced it rather than let it catch her unaware. She could feel that darkness within rising, how the miscarriage and Maggie and Haymitch’s silent rage and his jealously reducing her to a thing, all formed into a giant mass that seemed to hover at the edge of her consciousness, threatening to come crashing down.

Three times in her life, she’d felt that presence before. The first time was when they called her name at the reaping. The second was when Snow informed her coolly that she hadn’t escaped being raped at all because it was going to happen on a regular basis. The third had been on the Block in Thirteen. All three times, the force of it came suddenly smashing down on her like a monster, flattening the entirety of Johanna and turning her into something lost, something smashed to pieces, all fear and anger and reaction. All three times, she’d entirely lost her mind. The first time she snapped out of it only because the animal instinct of wanting to get away at the realization that the boy on top of her meant to hurt her, meant to kill her, reached her. The second and third times she woke up only after being drugged into unconsciousness.

All three times she’d lost herself, it had cost her. The first time she’d almost died in the arena during her blind terror, and the nightmares of near-rape and killing had made her shrink away from almost everyone in the next year. It probably helped they kept a polite distance from her, because they knew she was either crazy or if they believed the Capitol, a cold-blooded psychotic bitch. The second time while shrieking hysterically at Snow that nobody was ever going to touch her again, she had been so caught up drowning in her own terror she hadn’t even heard the price to be paid for defiance. She didn’t even know her family was in danger until Snow summoned her to tell her they were dead. The third time had almost cost her what sanity and self-respect she had left after being broken in that torture cell. It was only Haymitch aggressively pushing for a second chance for her that kept her from being left behind while the rest of them went to gain closure in the Capitol. She’d needed to go—she couldn’t have withstood being left behind. That fear was what had shattered her on the Block in the first place.

But now she helplessly wondered what would have happened if she’d accepted her failure and stayed behind. Would she and Haymitch have still slept together? She could imagine he would have tried to comfort her, and even if initially she might have seen it as pity, eventually she would have wanted to accept it. Would they have made a kid? Probably, the clomiphene did its work anyway despite the two of them being stressed and physically ragged from the training. Maybe they wouldn’t have been as close as they became, or maybe not as easily, without those extra weeks of training together. Maybe they would have. But it seemed fairly likely the baby would have existed.

Suddenly faced with the prospect of that other Johanna who could have been, who even now would probably be looking forward to her own baby in just a few weeks, she felt the wrenching sob of it work its way out from her. Did that mean it was her selfishness in insisting on going to the Capitol that had killed her baby? Look at Annie. She’d stayed behind in Thirteen and her daughter was alive—alive and beautiful. Johanna had barely been able to stand holding Maggie because it hurt too much, a reminder of her own body’s failure to let that child thrive.

A daughter—she’d thought of the baby as a girl. Maybe it was thoughts of missing Heike, maybe it was just the dream of what might have been and how she figured a daughter would be hers, while a boy would always belong a little more to Haymitch. The child had been only hers anyway, a secret her own body hadn’t even revealed to her yet. She knew it was crazy, maybe just her attempts to somehow impose some kind of sense on the utterly senseless, but somehow she felt like if the baby
had been a boy, she would have felt that strange faint sense of otherness within her more quickly. Maybe a girl had been welcomed as familiar flesh and stayed hidden longer. Of course if there had been signs, if the tiredness had been from pregnancy as well as training, she hadn’t understood. When she held Maggie, she kept thinking with misery that she should have been hers.

Chances were it was stupid too that she was grieving. It was so soon, too soon for her even to know, how was it even real enough to count? It wasn’t like she’d lost more than something that if she remembered her biology class right didn’t even remotely look human those short weeks into the pregnancy. A little blob of cells was all she’d lost. If it had been anyone else’s kid, fathered by one of her patrons, she would have wanted it gone. But the loss she felt belied that cold attempt to rationalize; the way she grieved her child, imagined the daughter she would have had, was all too real. The mingled longing and fear she felt at the thought of another baby were all too real. She wanted a kid, but the terror of maybe proving herself an unfit mother even in her instincts with her body rejecting another child rather than letting it be born—oh, that was all too real. She wasn’t sure she could bear it again, or Haymitch’s potential judgment if it did happen. Was it possible to be too much of a nasty bitch to nurture a living baby?

She couldn’t stand to be near Haymitch’s jealousy and his expectations. She couldn’t stand to be around Finnick when he was with Annie and Maggie, shoving her failures in her face with his happy family. She couldn’t stand to be around Annie because she too was proof of it—she’d given birth to a living child, she was a good mother. It was only when Finnick talked about the past, the times the two of them leaned on each other as friends, that it was all OK.

Fed again by her despair and her grief, she felt the monster stirring again, ready to destroy her one more time, and shoved it back only with effort. No, she wouldn’t lose her entire self again. She couldn’t. At least after being caught off guard three times, she could recognize it and fight it. Lying here dwelling on it wasn’t helping. Restlessly reaching for a pair of trousers, she got out of the too-lonely bed and headed out into the night, towards where the cypress trees lined the banks of the river that flowed into the bay.

Finnick and Annie obviously adored Four. But for Johanna, it was a fucking horrible place and already she wanted to leave. Everything from its beaches and water and its oppressive heat conspired to remind Johanna far too much of the arena. That on top of everything with Haymitch’s cold distance and the wound of meeting Maggie, felt like too much. At least the cypresses felt like they welcomed her, child of Seven as she was. Unfamiliar trees they might have been, with their branches hung with wispy moss like the fronds of willows and the strange knobby spikes they grew above the ground, but a forest was a forest. To simply touch the familiar comfort of bark, to be surrounded by the tall silent sentinels of trees, felt good.

Palm laid flat against the trunk, she choked down the tears. She wasn’t going to cry over Haymitch when he was acting like this. She wasn’t going to cry over the baby because she was afraid she’d never stop. Instead she just sat down at the base of the tree with her arms wrapped around her knees, the trunk solid and steady against her back, and tried to simply think of nothing.

She must have dozed off, but she felt calmer when she got up, heading back towards Victor’s Bayou. Haymitch wasn’t back yet. Off fucking someone else? she thought cynically, then shook her head in denial. No, she wasn’t going to believe that of him. Sex, at least in the past, had meant too much to him. She’d meant too much to him. But what Four had showed them about each other obviously was pretty ugly. However much he loved her, it was apparently being overpowered by other, more selfish concerns.

They didn’t say much over breakfast. He looked tired. Finnick came and knocked on their door. “Heard you had most of today free,” he said brightly. “Annie’s napping so I wondered if you wanted
to go fishing for the afternoon? I could teach you to use a cast net.”

It struck her suddenly that for a man with a newborn at home he obviously adored, Finnick seemed to be out a lot, usually accompanying her and Haymitch on their tours of things. It was the most involved she could remember another victor being. Dazen, Brutus and Enobaria, and Clover had seemed content to take care of their own business, let the others of their district explain and show things to her and Haymitch, and simply chew the day’s impressions over at dinner and the like. They’d been more like advisors, while it seemed like Finnick was actively playing tour guide.

Still, some time away from things, just having fun with her friend and not thinking about the baby, sounded very tempting. She was about ready to speak up when Haymitch glanced up from the last of his coffee. “No thanks, Finn,” he told Finnick. “I’ll probably go for a walk instead, think some things over for the peace conference. You two go on, I’m sure you’ll both have more fun without me in the way.” He didn’t give it away with words or tone or even a faint smirk, but he looked right at her, grey eyes hard as steel, and she knew exactly what he’d meant.

*Bastard*, she thought, furious and humiliated. Why the fuck didn’t Haymitch openly call her a cheating slut in front of Finnick while he was at it? He’d pretty much done just that.

Fuming, fighting the urge to start screaming at him, she watched him push in his chair and head out the door. “Is he OK?” Finnick asked, shaking his head in bewilderment.

It was a relief and a surprise to recognize that Finnick didn’t see it, that he didn’t understand Haymitch and his carefully chosen words like she did. “He didn’t sleep much last night,” she said grimly. Whatever hour he’d finally dragged home at, she didn’t know. “I think it’s still bothering him.” Let Finnick think it was just a nightmare or the like. Those were familiar enough to victors. “Sorry to skip out on the cast netting.”

Longer legs as he had, Haymitch was already a good ways down the path towards the cypress woods. She almost wanted to laugh. Most people in Four would probably head for the bay or the beach, towards the water. She didn’t doubt she’d find a troubled or pissed-off Finnick retreating to the beach. But she and Haymitch, they were the same—they turned instead to the wildness of the woods for their strength. At least they still had one thing in common there. She tried to not think of the long winter each day out the Twelve woods, working together to make a home and to survive day by day. Apparently that had no place in things now.

Walking behind him, trying to keep pace, she resolved to not run after him and catch him, at least not yet. She’d wait until they were in the forest a ways. She wasn’t going to scream at him where the whole of Four could hear it. Even if Finnick hadn’t picked up on it, he’d already tried to embarrass her enough in public today. That was maybe what hurt the most: to see that his affection had dimmed enough that, fiercely private as they’d kept things about love, his indifference meant he didn’t care if he insulted her for the world to see.
There the two of them went again, he thought angrily, shutting him out, the two of them wrapped up in that private, past world that had no place for him in it. The fact they were doing it so brazenly, as if they didn’t even give a fuck if he or Annie noticed, was perhaps the worst part.

There were plenty of words on his tongue, sharp and caustic and fierce. But something, maybe some last stupid impulse that wanted to shy away at the last moment from wounding her as she’d wounded him, held him back. He throttled back his temper enough to offer up words that would have sounded completely innocuous—to someone without a guilty conscience. Go on, you’ll both have more fun without me in the way. He waited only long enough to see Johanna’s face and the momentary flash of surprise and anger there. That was confirmation enough. He didn’t need to look at Finnick to see his expression—he knew Johanna and what tells she had far better. At that point all there was for him was to get out of there before he did something genuinely stupid.

On instinct he headed into the woods—it seemed to him that people in Four would probably be crowding at the beach or along the bay, and the open spaces of it unnerved him a bit, just as they had in Nine. Somewhere in his mind, places like that simply felt too wide open and they left him too exposed. In the arena, wandering around a place like that, with no place to hide, meant discovery and then death. Right now he wanted nothing more than that blessed ability to hide. So into the cypress trees he went. They had the added benefit of some shade from the oppressive summer sun.

He should have figured Johanna wouldn’t just let it go. She never could. He glanced back to see her following him quickly enough after he left Victor’s Bayou, but he didn’t stop. Let her run after him if she wanted to talk. As if there was much to say anyway.

It was probably a good ten or fifteen minute hike of following the river before he finally heard her footsteps behind him, running now to catch up, and instinctively he turned to face her, not wanting her to catch him unawares. “You fucking bastard,” she snarled without any preamble.

“That’s true,” he agreed with a smirk, seeing there was no way out, determined to not back down now if there was no escape. She was the one who’d provoked it by coming after him like this. “Bastard of a Peacekeeper and a whore, ain’t that right?” He pushed past that in a hurry, not giving her a chance to respond or to use it. It felt like a small victory to deny her that, even as it hurt to cast the slur on his ma like that, but that was how these things went—rush to make the insult first and rob it of the ability to be used against him as a weapon. “Oh, sweetheart,” he said, now giving freer rein to the words he’d wanted to fling at her back at the house, “really. You know I wasn’t into threesomes even when they got forced on me—I’m not going to volunteer for one now. Besides, you and dear sweet Finnick seem to be pretty ready to cut me and Annie both right out of the picture anyway. Sorry if I wanted to leave before you two started fucking each other on the table in front of me.”

This was how it was with the two of them, in the arena and in anger. Neither of them was the type to use a bow safely from a distance. Not even a trident with its longer reach and the ability to coolly test and jab and retreat. Both of them had killed seven people in their lives by their own hands—him with a knife, her with an axe. Both of them leapt right into the fight, immediate and up close and feverishly quick, heedless of the mess and the blood and the sheer risk by being close enough to make every strike count, but incapable of avoiding the return blows at all. It was a fighting style of sheer attrition, total commitment to just trying to deal out more damage first.
Pretty much as expected, she rallied right back. “Oh, fuck you, Haymitch. Call me a slut and have done with it, even if we both know it’s just your anxieties about how you measure up. Let’s get to what you’re really whining about. Bet you’re worried that any kids I might pop out just might be little redheads, hm? Is that it? Or…let’s see, we both saw how you didn’t want to let go of that baby. Maybe she gets that black hair from both Mommy and Daddy?”

Was she actually serious about him and Annie? If he wasn’t so pissed off he’d have just started laughing because it was absolutely ridiculous, some far-flung accusation. Hardly Johanna’s best by any means. When exactly would I have been fucking Annie, Jo? While I was in the hospital after being tortured? While I had no interest in sleeping with anyone at all and it had been years since I had, until you? While she was stupid in love with Finnick and anyone could see it?

It would have been a barbless attack, totally laughable except for one thing. She’d noticed how he’d clung to Maggie, and now she used that chink in his armor to cut deep. Of course she couldn’t even imagine it was about their own child…though if it never even crossed her mind as an explanation, was that even more reason to think it was all in his head? He didn’t know, all he knew was that between that and her taunting him with the image of how she wanted kids with anyone but him, he was furious and trembling, poised on the edge of sheer violence.

Why did you even marry me if you just wanted to rub it in my face that you’re going to run around on me? She was saying something else, standing there with that look of triumphant defiance on her face, brown eyes smoldering with rage, but he barely even heard it. He couldn’t stand to listen as she tried to cut him down further. He couldn’t say anything because if he did he would just start yelling in earnest and he’d be totally lost. *For fuck’s sake, you’re my wife, not his, he had his chance with you for years and he didn’t take it, he picked someone else,* he thought, shutting her up attack the best way he could think of at that moment, caught up in the panic and pain and anger and instinct. Grabbing her, he kissed her, rough and ruthless.

She laughed low in her throat, her hands coming up to grab him, nails of one hand digging into the nape of his neck as she kissed him back, as if daring him to keep up with her, taunting him with what she’d denied before. *Think you can keep up, old man?* he could almost hear her thinking it, and it was suddenly a challenge rather than sex.

Somewhere at the edge of his mind, the conscious rational part that was rapidly being blotted out, he knew this was different than it had been before. Sure, they’d slept together a few times when they were irritated or a little pissed off. The bickering stopped when they’d run out of words and one of them kissed the other. Then it turned into another competition, one of *Bet I can make you come first,* and he had to admit, it had been a good way to just let the little spark of temper blow over. By the time they were done, they were usually laughing, wrapped up in each other, the quarrel quickly forgotten.

This wasn’t like that. This was beyond aggravation and he didn’t want to laugh or tease her. At that moment either he wanted to fuck her senseless or throttle her or very possibly both, whatever it would take to get Finnick out of her mind. If she’d made one move, backed off or called for a stop or told him “No”, he’d have laid off immediately, but there was Johanna, pushing him on and on, taunting him with the way she acted, telling him with her kisses and her reactions that she was just fine. “C’mon, I can take this, is that all you’ve got?” she murmured, nipping him on the neck too hard for affection.

It didn’t take long before they were down on the ground, and it felt as much like a wrestling match as anything. Nothing like their fights in morning training that could easily range from earnest sparring to playful flirtation, this was something else entirely. *Fuck no, dear, you’re not on top this time,* he thought furiously. He wasn’t just giving her that advantage, not when she would take that and use it
to shame him even more, flaunt how she’d had the upper hand and he’d just given it to her.

He was bigger and stronger and that advantage readily told, and he had her pinned down quickly enough. He realized her deliberately provoking him and egging him on had suddenly changed to a panicked struggle to get away, right about the time he caught her hand coming at his face out of the corner of his eye. Instinct took over—head ducked, pushing aside and getting an arm up just in time, she raked her nails into his forearm rather than clawing his face or his eyes. He let out a grunt at it, though it wasn’t so much the pain. He was pretty well conditioned against that. It was the sheer shock of realizing that in a split-second, the entire thing had shifted and she’d been ready to attack him in earnest.

Sprawled out on his ass in the dirt, staring at her and trying to catch his breath, he felt his stomach churning suddenly, a nauseated feeling rising. *What the fuck just happened?*

Wide-eyed, she stared right back at him, scrabbling to get away, untangling her legs from his own. He could see her panting with fear or exertion or both, though he wasn’t sure she actually saw him from the look on her face. He’d seen that terror there before, some nights in Thirteen when they were so slowly and carefully learning their way back from the nightmares of whoring.

She’d provoked and prodded and goaded him until he’d pinned her down and had been ready to take her, rough as anything. This was why, even if he hadn’t been in his fading years on the circuit when she started, they’d never have been booked as a double act. They both liked to be the one in charge too much and that was why they’d both been pushed into dominant roles. Put together as a double show and probably expected to fight it out for who was in charge of the encounter, the patrons probably would have figured they’d pretty much try to kill each other like they just had rather than submit. “Hanna?” he ventured, his voice an odd rasp to his own ears. That name was the one thing he had that might call her back. He knew by saying it, by stepping away from the fight, he’d pretty much offered her his throat. He didn’t much care.

She came back, licking her lips and clenched fists slowly easing, though her hands still trembled a bit. But when she looked at him again, she was there again rather than a thousand miles away. “You’re bleeding,” she said awkwardly, gesturing to his arm.

He glanced down to see the rivulets of blood running down his forearm. “Not bad,” he said, shaking his head. It would heal quickly enough; besides, they had some of the Capitol wound ointment back at the house that would probably have it healed up by morning. He noticed then his shirt was hanging open—she’d torn all the buttons off with one impatient yank. He saw one of them lying nearby, pale blue against the dark earth. Tearing at the tail of the shirt and pulling off a strip, he fumbled one-handed to try to wrap up the arm.

Suddenly she was there, having moved closer, and her hand was on his arm. He flinched instinctively, couldn’t help it, startled as he was. She’d tried to take out his damn eyes there, and he had the momentary thought that she was just coming back for more, to finish what she’d started and to kick him while he was down. But instead she grabbed the rough bandage and started to wind it around the bleeding scratches, even though he could see her own hands were unsteady too, they were gentle. “Sorry,” she murmured, eyes focused down on his arm so he couldn’t see them, hair falling in her eyes besides in loose brown waves where it had pulled loose from her ponytail. Part of him wanted to yank the arm back, but instead, he tried to calm himself and let her do it. “I didn’t mean to…scare you into it,” he said hesitantly, words coming awkward as anything. With that it was like the dam had cracked and he felt the sick feeling of it coursing through him. Bastard that he was, to let his temper get the better of him like that to the point he’d terrified her enough to try to attack him. “I shouldn’t have…I’m sorry, I…this is my…”


“Shut up,” she said, softly but firmly, tying the fabric off and sitting back, brushing the hair back out of her eyes and looking up, her expression awkward. “Just…don’t. I can’t fucking well listen to you doing that right now, OK?"

What did she want from him then? She wouldn’t even let him apologize, and the fear in that was tightening down around him. The arm didn’t hurt too badly. It would heal. The concern was that this between them wouldn’t, and he felt like he could barely breathe. No, he realized almost immediately, forcing himself to calm. No, he needn’t fear that. After all she—they—had endured already in life, neither of them was so soft that this would break them. Unquestionably that explosion of what had been festering had dug deep right into the darkest parts of them; the anger, the violence, the suspicion.

But knowing she wouldn’t shatter because he’d lost his temper wasn’t the same as solving it. The problem still hung there between them. Casting his mind back he recalled she’d talked about children when she was flinging her own words at him, but he quickly thrust that to the side. It wasn’t actually babies that they’d been arguing about, not really. The miserable, painful crux of the matter was Finnick. “I don’t…fuck, I don’t want it to be like this, all right?” He wished it could go back to how it had been before they got to Four. They couldn’t go on like this.

She brushed down the front of her shirt where a streak of dirt showed dark against the soft yellow of it. It must have been mud because she only smeared it worse. Fingering the tear at the collar where he’d gotten hold of her, she glanced up at him, eyes a bit calmer now, and scooted aside to where one of the knees of the cypresses stuck out above the ground. Leaning back against it, drawing up her knees, she was the first one to speak up. “Me either. So say whatever it is you have to say.”

The spark of defiance was there even now, but she sounded tired as he felt. The fight had beaten both of them, in a way, enough that at least they could agree that they didn’t want to do it again. She hadn’t walked away either. That was something. Maybe there was still something, except for the fucking problem of her obvious regard for Finnick.

Settling back against the trunk of the cypress himself, he noticed wryly that they were facing each other, close enough to reach out and touch, but he didn’t. Not just yet. Casting around in his mind for the words, for something that could come across without being another flung verbal dagger, he felt lost. Facts, yes, persuasiveness, yes, sarcasm, yes—all of those were tools he could wield well. But to simply say I feel or I want, he felt tongue-tied and awkward. Too many years of knowing that nobody gave a shit what he wanted and what he felt were a hard habit to break. But she was here, and listening.

He sighed, resisted the urge to toy with the neat knot she’d tied in the bandage. “I know I wasn’t your first choice.” He’d known it right after Finnick’s wedding when she kissed him that first time. The urge to say, But do you have to make it so obvious like you are? stuck in his throat. That was too self-pitying, too accusatory in a way. “But I thought that maybe…hell, I imagine even you thought that…” He had thought perhaps they’d moved beyond that, and she’d come to love him as more than the fallback option. Maybe she even thought she had. He shook his head, seeing that he was fumbling, stopping and trying again. “Just tell me. Be honest.” He kept his voice even as he could; not wanting to turn this into another accusation. “Now that you’re here with him again, is he always going to mean more to you than I do?” She loved who she loved. He couldn’t force it.

He had the uncomfortable thought that this was far different from the last time he’d fought a girl known for prowess with an axe. Sapphire just tried to rip out his guts. What Johanna could do, and not even maliciously, might cut out his heart.

~~~~~~~~~~~
The whole thing happened too fast. She’d charged after him, thinking only that she couldn’t bear to let it go on like this. When he kissed her, the surge of anger at *This is really all that matters to you, isn’t it? You aren’t there for me, Finnick is, and now you want to fucking prove something with this?* The old traces of it were right there, not burned away yet. She knew how to prove to someone that they might have her body but they didn’t get anything that mattered, to be the one fucking them. Screw him, if he wanted the upper hand he’d have to keep up with her, and she’d readily prodded him on, wanting to just get the sheer force of her anger out, make him be the one to submit first. But she hadn’t planned on his equal anger and the force of his strength. She only realized now how much love led to willing restraint with how easily he wrestled control from her and sent her spiraling back into the terror of a teenaged girl rendered helpless. Before she knew it, there they were, staring at each other with something akin to shock, and he was bleeding.

It was only his own instincts that saved him from being raked right across the face, and she felt nauseous at the idea that she could have hurt him that badly, even blinded him. Was this really what it had come down to between them? Was this really what she was, underneath it all, that when pushed too far enough she’d even turn on someone she cared for and lash out?

He readily dismissed the wound. He was no stranger to pain, but from how he acted and his awkward apologies, that hurt almost more than whatever ridiculous accusations he’d been throwing about Finnick. Apparently even from her, he didn’t expect any better than to be hurt. The misery of that sat heavy in her chest and she thought it would have been easier if he’d been yelling at her rather than acting like he deserved nothing but pain. Shutting him up was the only thing she could do because she couldn’t stand to hear it. She’d provoked him too, furious as she’d been, and she knew it.

Sitting there among the cypresses, there was the air of being too tired and unsettled to keep fighting. Behind the anger she had just sadness and weariness. In a way, tinged with an awkward pain as the atmosphere was, it still had a strangely calm feeling. It was as if having weathered that furious burst of temper in all its sheer ugliness, now she could say anything because it could hardly be worse.

She still wanted to laugh when of course he brought up Finnick first, instead of what really mattered. But maybe it was better that they finally just get over that. “No,” she said, looking over at him, scratched and dirty and sweaty, his bandaged arm draped over one knee, the torn shirt hanging open in the unbearably stagnant heat. “Finnick and me…” *I was talking to him because you wouldn’t,* she wanted to yell. Forcing herself to not let anger color her words, it was a definite struggle. “Yeah, I was talking to him. Because you weren’t there. You left me alone here. Just like you did before.”

His eyes suddenly went intense with interest and she could practically sense him mulling that over in his brain, trying to figure it out. But apparently he wanted there to be no assumptions, no misunderstandings. “What do you mean ‘before’?” he asked carefully.

She wasn’t really sure herself. It felt like it was something that spontaneously came to her lips, a feeling of anger and abandonment that she’d never quite admitted to herself, let alone him. Prodding at it carefully, turning the feeling over and mentally eyeing it like it was a tree she was trying to characterize, it finally clicked, like the moment she could see just what that wood could become. “When I was seventeen,” she said softly, not quite meeting his eyes now. “You fucked me, and then you shut me out.” He slept with her once and then when she came back to him later, desperately needing comfort, he had refused. “So I turned to the one person who was there for me and who’d comfort me. That was Finnick.” To her mind, he’d lost some of the ability to judge her for falling in love with the one person she could totally depend on in those first couple of years.

He tensed at that as if ready to make some kind of protest. “Hanna,” he murmured, shaking his head. “Then…you were young. You were just a kid and you were overwhelmed. You needed someone
your own age for sex. If I did it, if I let you depend on me like that? I’d be using you as much as any
of the patrons, and I’d have only myself to blame for it.” He gave a faint, melancholy little smile.
“Besides, you and I both know I had nothing left to give you, or anyone. Not then.”

She tried to see it, put herself in his place then. Being almost twenty-seven now, perhaps she could.
If she had taken up with a scared sixteen or seventeen-year-old, the imbalance in the relationship
would have been massive. It led to some nasty places mentally. She could imagine the other victors
would have judged him for it. He must have seen the understanding in her expression, because he
nodded. “I was luckier when I was young. I had the older victors like Seeder and Mags to look out
for me, and people my own age too. You didn’t have that. Too many Careers won around your year
and we never quite belonged to them.”

“We never quite belonged to them. He was right. There was something in Finnick that she had never
been able to touch, the certainty of having his district behind him, of other victors to catch him and
tell him how it all worked. “That how it was with you and Chantilly?” she asked. “Why the two of
you never worked out, her being Career?” Obviously whatever the two of them had together had
ended years ago, and the One victor didn’t resent her for marrying Haymitch. If anything she seemed
pleased.

“She’d be my friend and we’d do the whole consolation bit when it came to sex, but no romance. No
future in it. She told me that up front, first time we slept together. Apparently Finnick didn’t tell you
the same.” She tried to imagine how it would have been different if he had. Maybe it would have
hurt less if she’d known beforehand, if the boundaries had been clear. Another of those deep sighs
from Haymitch. “I know I told you two to set some ground rules after Finnick pulled that stunt with
Gloss, but I should have made it clearer…”

“It wasn’t all on you,” she cut him off, not willing to let him take the full weight of it. “I was there
when Blight asked. He asked you to look after me on things related to us being on the circuit. I bet
Mags asked the same for Finnick. Not your responsibility to look after us entirely. Finnick’s Career,
Four knew how the game went. Mags could have told him, Carrick could have told him, any other
Four victor could have told him, but they didn’t. Blight could have told me because he was fucking
well living it with Clover. He didn’t.”

“I still could have done better by you both. If I’d been able—been willing—to take a bit more on.
What I could do to help wasn’t much at all. Don’t act like I did you a huge favor by it.”

It was all he could have done, though, short of standing up and saying Leave her alone, this is
wrong. That would have been pointless at the time, would have earned him only a bullet in the back
of his skull. But he’d done what he could. She thought about that dungeon party her first year, the
one he’d “escorted” her and Finnick to in the name of showing them the ropes. But once they were
there, he’d told them to not eat or drink anything, and she wasn’t sure how but he’d managed to bait
their hostess, turn her attention to him and away from her and Finnick.

You’re not a submissive, Haymitch. Everyone knows that.

My my, Lucretia, then y’all will just have to work all the harder to tame me down, won’t you?

Perhaps. Let’s hope you’re a better sport than the last time you were at my house.

Oh, but that was years ago. Seventeen-year-olds don’t make for much fun, sweetheart. They don’t
know what they’re doing.

The worst she’d endured that night was some skinny bitch in a Capitol school uniform who wanted
Johanna to whack her a few times on the ass with a tawse and tell her that she deserved to be
punished. She’d been clumsy with it, confused as she was, though she knew now that was pretty
mild stuff. She’d laughed about it in the bathroom, nervous giggles of relief. She didn’t know then
what degrees there were to that kind of sex and what she’d avoided.

She thought about how he’d disappeared for hours and came back reeking like sex and blood. When
she followed Haymitch up the path to the Training Center from the car, the back of his shirt was dark
and wet. They’d erased those scars, but sometimes when she looked at the ones there now from the
Detention Center, she remembered that night. She knew what a whipping felt like herself, from
someone wielding a whip with full cruelty rather than a gentler leather flogger.

He laughed tiredly. “I slept with you and I trained you and I watched you go off and get raped over
and over. Don’t act like I did you favors.”

“You did what you could.” She and Finnick ended up at Lucretia Hollowbrook’s the next year
taking the full brunt of it. So Haymitch might say what he’d done was in vain because it happened
anyway. All she knew was that he’d paid the price to spare it a little while longer and that was worth
remembering. “Are you still feeling guilty about sleeping with me?” His tone pretty much said it all.
“I’ve told you, it was the better option at the time.”

Something flashed in his eyes. “Then if it’s a done deal for you, why the fuck do you keep
mentioning it?” he asked, and there was a hint of temper in his voice that he smoothed out before
going on. “Any time you were pissed at me, that was the one thing you would bring up. Because
you obviously knew it bothered me.”

He was right, she realized, not liking it. Maybe she hadn’t even done it viciously, but she knew it
was the one thing that shut Haymitch up. “It wasn’t the sex I minded. It was how you left me on my
own afterwards.” Probing again at the feelings of that confused, teenage Johanna, she said hesitantly,
“I think…OK, I was pissed. You slept with me once and you made it clear you never wanted to do it
again. I didn’t think it was just that you were into virgins,” he gave a soft grunt of something that
might have been amusement and she remembered, flustered, how she’d tried to fling that ridiculous
accusation at him after Finnick’s wedding. “Which meant it was me. I was lousy and you weren’t
interested.”

“Hanna,” he told her vehemently, shaking his head, “it wasn’t you.”

“Sure, I can figure that out now. But you never said that,” she fired back, feeling stupidly upset about
it. But the words were out there now, and having started talking now to each other was like they’d
first been a trickle, then a stream, and now a torrent and she could hardly stop herself against the
force of it. “You think I was smart enough then to figure that out for myself? I was seventeen. All I
knew was boys didn’t like me, and the first man to kiss me, the first man to have sex with me, didn’t
want me. What was I supposed to think?”

Something almost like pain and guilt flickered across his face. “I…fuck. You hadn’t even…” He was
floundering like a teenager himself.

“No, Haymitch, I hadn’t,” she said, gritting her teeth and feeling almost ashamed, which was stupid.
She’d fucked for pay-to-views and been caught in “compromising situations” for tabloids since then,
but yes, once she’d been a seventeen-year-old girl that had never been kissed. “We weren’t all lucky
enough to already have someone madly in love with us back home.” It was a shitty, low blow that
she regretted as soon as she said it. Briar paid hard for loving him and Haymitch took on the burden
of that. “Fuck. Forget I said that.”

“Sorry.”
“Don’t apologize, dammit.”

“Don’t ask me to act like it means nothing,” he retorted, equally sharp. “I had figured that much had been yours, at least.”

“Yeah, well, it wasn’t. But a lot of things happened that shouldn’t have, Haymitch.” Seeing his awkwardness about it, she was moved to ask, “So if you were going to beat yourself up about it, why did you agree to sleep with me anyway?”

“Because of how you went into the arena, and what Dazen’s boy tried to do to you.”

“Clark,” she supplied, suddenly feeling her face grow hot, flustered. She’d known he might have seen that unedited footage, up in Mentor Central, but she suddenly realized that he’d known more than that. He’d always known it wasn’t an act on her part. Stupid that she hadn’t seen it, Haymitch was more than perceptive enough to figure it out, but she hadn’t wanted to believe anyone knew. She hadn’t wanted to be that weak, terrified little girl.

“Clark,” he echoed. “Blight told me Snow called you in and you ended up coming back unconscious and sedated. You’re the only one to ever try to refuse Snow’s little offer. But I know you’re not nearly selfish enough to sacrifice your own family. Didn’t make sense. So I figured…after the arena, and Clark…”

“You figured I went full crazy when he told me what was going to happen and they had to knock me out, and I didn’t even realize what was at stake until they were dead,” she said bluntly. Sometimes it might be a little more comfortable if he was a bit stupider. More boring, though, she’d admit that.

To her relief, he got off that subject rather than digging deeper. “I considered just trying to talk you and Finnick into it. First impulse, right? But with you, well, I ended up thinking, ‘At least I can go careful, I know I’ve got better control and I can read her better than a teenage boy will’. I couldn’t give you much, but it wasn’t like Finnick would be doing it out of love either, so…it seemed for the best, in the end.” It had been, she thought. He might have been emotionally disengaged, but he’d been patient, and confident, and gentle. With him, she’d felt safe. Clumsy fumbling around with Finnick, still so unfamiliar to her, probably would have freaked her out.

She sat there and looked at him, getting the sense he was waiting for something from her. Damnation or forgiveness, perhaps. He’d disappointed her with his rejection, child that she’d been, and hurt her already shaky self-respect. But he hadn’t done it deliberately, and he’d been there for her in countless other ways. Plus he’d had more than his own share of shit to deal with besides her. She could let it go. “Whatever you couldn’t give me then,” she said, hesitant at first, then feeling greater certainty in the words, “you’ve more than made up for it.”

He smiled, though it faltered and some of the openness faded from his expression as he asked carefully, “Finnick?”

She willed herself to not look away. “You’ve been…away. So I turned to him, like I did then, because he was there to listen. And I’ll always love him. As my best friend. But you give me more than he ever did. I give you more than I ever gave him. It’s you I…I want.” Funny how saying a few simple words like that seemed so difficult, with all that they meant. “Not him. So can we call the whole Finnick thing closed already?”

“Yeah.” He sounded relieved, if anything. But now she wondered why he’d been so damn distant in the first place. Removed now to a calmer place, away from the sheer drowning panic of worrying he didn’t give a shit and that she was replaceable to him, it didn’t make sense. “You might as well know,” he admitted, as she resisted the urge to start nervously plucking at some of the plants by her
side. “I was…at the bar since we got here. Twice.” The way he said it, with that edge of shame, told her this was different from him casually having a single whiskey now and again after dinner and promptly putting the bottle away.

She had a momentary stab of fear, trying to not panic that her absorption with Finnick and his support had chased him right back to the liquor. “How bad?” she asked simply. Not stinking drunk, she’d have known that.

“A couple. Enough to take the edge off.” He let out a deep sigh, glancing up towards the branches waving gently overhead as a light breeze finally sprang up. “I know I wanted more.”

“Because I’ve been away.” Might as well admit it, she knew she’d been too wrapped up in her own problems and her anger.

“Yes. But I don’t…it’s a fight, always, I think it’ll always be a fight when it’s too much to stand, to not just grab a bottle…but at least I had you, and then suddenly I didn’t…” Broken and rambling as that was, it told her enough.

“You’ve wanted to drink before, though?” She hadn’t known that. At least he’d put the bottle down, though. What strength of will that had cost, she could well imagine.

He looked up at her, eyes pleading with her for something, she wasn’t quite sure what. “Do you,” he asked, voice low and soft, “still see things? Think things that later you know aren’t real? I know we both did back in those cells with that fucking venom, and we were still seeing ’em even last fall, but…does it still happen now?”

“That. I mean, do I ever worry I’m maybe imagining things or going crazy?” Yeah, she remembered admitting the venom did a number on her last fall after her failure on the Block, but it was different admitting it then, still so closely removed from the torture, under the stress of things in Thirteen. Admitting it again, months later when things were calmer and her life supposedly quiet and happy, was harder.

“Yeah.”

She laughed. Somehow it was a blessed relief to have it out in the open. He already knew she’d lost it before, no point in trying to hide it now. “I spent the last two days half-convinced you were going to leave me and maybe you really wanted to fuck Annie to boot because you were jealous of me and Finnick.”

“Sweetheart,” he said, shaking his head. “I may fail people, yeah, but generally, I don’t just quit on a lark. Tilly was the only woman for me before you. The only one it wasn’t…professional, anyway.” He didn’t need to explain that further. She’d been the only one he’d chosen. “As for love, well, you know about Briar.” She knew. Though she hadn’t known he quite was that loyal.

Saying it openly now, it sounded insane especially given the somewhat incredulous look on his face. But her fear had been intense and real. “I know. But I felt that anyway and it felt like I had to believe it. See, I don’t…I don’t really ever see things. But…I think things. I feel things.” He already knew she’d lost it twice, and he’d been the one to come see her in Thirteen’s hospital. “I think I’m gonna lose it sometimes,” she told him, looking down at her hands, seeing cuts and scratches on her skin where the two of them had apparently rolled into a thorn bush. “I’ve lost it before so bad they’ve had to knock me out. You know that. It happened again on the Block.”

“Well,” and he had an air of weary self-deprecation as he said it, “I ain’t judging for that. You know about me and my own little drug-induced breaks from reality.”
Wrapping her arms around her knees, she asked him, “What about you? Do you see stuff?”

“Sometimes,” he admitted. “When I’m off-kilter. Even now I’ll sometimes see… I think of ‘em as ghosts. Dead people. Or sometimes arena mutts. Or I’ll hear people saying things.” His mouth turned up into a wry sort of a smile. “The stuff that was just in my head or my nightmares all those years, now it was outside of it like it was real again, you know? On the Block I had every single damn one of my forty-six tributes lined up along the streets yelling at me because I was abandoning one of the squad to capture and probably death. It’s not so bad now. Last fall they wouldn’t leave. Now it’s like something I see or hear for a moment and it’s gone.”

She nodded, thinking about that. She’d seen hallucinations in that cell. But she hadn’t really seen them since, or heard things. But apparently he didn’t have his own venom-induced damage working on his emotions and sense of reality quite like she did. “Maybe I was seeing some things that weren’t there too. With Finnick,” he ventured. He gave a slight dip and shrug of his shoulders. “Tell me something,” he said, and there was a sudden note of something fierce in his voice. “I think sometimes I can’t be sure stuff from last fall is real. Not without something else to prove it. I know we were on plenty of drugs at that hospital anyway. I know you told me about the clomiphen because that whole business has serious legs under it now. I know I asked you to marry me because, well, we got married. But…”

He was edging around it, apparently still too afraid to just come out and say it. She could only think of one thing he would be asking about related to that night. “There was a kid. I lost it because of the drugs to treat the burns. Is that what you meant?” Speaking it out loud felt like it split what little armor she had left open, left her totally soft and vulnerable and undefended as this finally probed at the center of that loss, still raw and bleeding.

Suddenly his silence about it made sense. If he hadn’t even been sure it happened, how could he deal with it? Why didn’t you just ask me? she almost cried out. The answer was obvious, almost instantaneous. She could have asked him at any time herself, but she hadn’t. She’d been afraid. Probably he had been afraid also; particularly if he worried it was just his imagination playing tricks.

He shuddered as unable to contain some kind of emotion. “Yes.” He pushed off from the cypress, moved closer until he settled back down by her side. “Tell me.” His eyes were soft, but she could see he was afraid to ask, that this hurt. “Do you ever… think about her?”

“Her?” she asked, voice suddenly thick, realizing that with that one word, it told her almost everything about how he felt. He must have dwelled on the idea of a child he wasn’t even sure had existed to the point where he’d clearly imagined what he had lost, just as she had. The baby had mattered. No wonder he had been walking around Four like he had, distant and distracted. Maggie must have hurt for him too. How fucking stupid we’ve both been, she thought with a shake of her head.

He glanced down, awkward, almost shy. “I hate thinking of our kid as an it.”

“I know. I always…it was a girl for me too.” She felt like she might just burst into tears, though whether it was grief or relief, she wasn’t sure. Very possibly some of both; finally she could speak of that painful emptiness that had been there within her ever since the nurse told her, because now she wasn’t alone. “I lit a candle for her,” she confessed, as he looked back up at her, his expression now full of a mingled pain and hope. “In Five.”

“I did too.” She remembered the glow of the flame against the polished black stone. She’d been nameless and unborn, their child, known and then taken away in the same moment, but definitely not unmourned. The thought that Haymitch had been right alongside her, quietly grieving himself, gave her the courage to reach out and take his hand. His fingers grasped hers almost hard enough to hurt,
and she was doing the same to him, but that was good, it meant neither of them wanted to let go. She
needed him right now against all those months they’d both borne the burden in painful, lonely
silence.

“Maggie’s beautiful,” he said, voice rough with emotion. “I didn’t want to let her go.”

“I couldn’t stand to hold her.” Somehow, she didn’t feel horrible for it now.

“She could have been ours,” and the wistfulness in his tone felt like it unlocked another gate within
her, and her breath caught on a sob.

She swallowed that back down and asked, “What do you think she would have been like?” Finally
after so much time and grief, actually openly talking and purging the misery of it felt too good to
stop.

“I always thought,” he told her, his other hand coming up to cup her cheek, fingers gentle, “she’d
have looked like you.”

“No, she’d have your hair,” she said, reaching out to touch it. “I’ve always liked it.”

“Oh, shit, not the curls,” he said, a tremor in his laugh. “I got teased so damn much for them…”

“Smart,” she ventured next. “She’d have been smart, that would get her further than being pretty.”

“Probably would be smart enough to give us both headaches. Get into a lot of trouble.”

“Maybe. Though maybe she’d be smart but she’d be the gentle type and not give anybody trouble at
all.”

“Like Ash,” he said with a faint smile.

“Like Heike.” The dream of that little girl was so clear, something she’d clung to all these months.
But she’d clung to her dream of Finnick for too many years also. Some things just could never be.
She had to find a way to let go. “But we’ll never know, will we?”

“That’s true.” She could see the damp shine in his eyes, glistening bright in the sunlight. “We’ll
never know who she would have been. But I know this. She would have been born free. She
wouldn’t have to go through what we have. She’d have had chances we never did.”

He’d have wanted that child, she could tell. “The world just wasn’t ready for her,” she said quietly,
moving closer, leaning into the solid warmth of him and letting him wrap his arms around her. It felt
right, felt safe. This was what she’d needed all along—that trust of knowing that he was there for
her, and that they were in this together. “I think we weren’t ready for her.” She could admit that
honestly. They hadn’t been married then, hadn’t even admitted that what they had was more than
comfort sex.

Even now, though at least she was sure he wanted kids too, she wasn’t sure they would be ready.
They’d just tried to kill each other rather than feel like they could confide the burden of this, turned to
irrational fears rather than say something. Maybe they’d do better now. She could speak her mind
easy enough. Speaking her heart wasn’t something she was used to after so many years of having
only herself to rely upon. That would take more time. But it was clear they couldn’t go on like they
had been, trusting that if it mattered that much somehow they would understand each other and just
figure it out. Today had proven thoroughly that speaking up was tough but the cost of silence was
too high. Neither of them was as good as they might have wanted to be, but they’d truly seen the
worst today and they had gotten through it.
“No. But we cared. We would have tried,” he said, the tremor in his voice finally breaking on the last word. Finally, secure that it was safe, that they might be in this tropical hell and they might have lost their baby but she hadn’t lost him so she wasn’t facing it alone, she gratefully let it all go. All the grief and the fear and the anger that had boiled over seemed to just come rushing out.

“Don’t let me go,” she said roughly. “Ever.”

“I won’t, I won’t,” he murmured in her ear. He drew her in tighter and her fingers gripped his much-abused shirt again just as she had when she pulled off all those buttons. But this time, it was only to hold him closer, putting her head on his shoulder.

She couldn’t remember the last time she’d cried, and it had been even longer yet since she’d cried in someone’s arms, so utterly undone that she didn’t care about the ugly sound of it, the harsh sobs and the keening noises as she was making a further mess of his shirt with her tears. But she needed this comfort more than anything, more than the sex she hadn’t wanted last night. All she could do was hold on to him, unable to offer more comfort than her very presence and that shared sorrow. He obviously needed it because he was grieving just the same, deep racking sobs that shook his own body beneath her hands, feeling the dampness of it against her neck.

She felt like she might well weep herself fully into exhaustion before she was done. But once that was done, they would be the only two people who had seen and heard this. Once they were strong enough again, they could get up and head back to Victor’s Bayou, and hope Finnick and Annie didn’t see what a mess they were. The secret of this moment would be theirs alone forever, and now they could begin again.

Chapter End Notes

BTW, I'm on Tumblr at "whiskeysnarker" if anyone's interested. :)

Mumford and Sons’ "After the Storm" is pretty much the soundtrack song for this chapter. If you listen you probably see why.
In a perfect world, everything would now be a smooth course and it would be like the whole thing never even happened. Of course, Haymitch wasn’t six years old anymore to believe in that. The darkness was still there, but the unbearable pressure of all the anger and fear and grief had been released. They had gotten past it and even if it had hurt like hell, they came through it stronger and better.

Somehow they’d gone back to Victor’s Bayou, cleaned up, and managed to go listen to a council of tuna boat captains talk about the dire state of things that afternoon, and not give a flicker of what had happened that morning. All of that was theirs and it would be theirs alone until the day they died; still, listening to the fears of people of Four for their own future, he couldn’t help but be grateful that now at least he felt less like he was hopelessly drowning himself. When he felt Johanna’s fingers brush against his beneath the table, he answered it, lacing his fingers with hers, squeezing and then holding on for a few minutes until he had to reluctantly let go to take some notes.

Neither of them suggested sex that night because the whole matter needed some time to settle—but holding on to her, waking up with her still there, that was more than comfort enough. After breakfast, he found himself just standing there in the kitchen with her in the bright morning sun, feeling her hold onto him with that relaxed familiarity, caught up in an embrace without a need for words or the urgency of passion. It was then that he let himself think that yes, they had survived once again and would now find a way to move on together.

Now it was Sunday and they had the day off from scheduled talks and tours. He’d talked her into going for a walk—the heat was inescapable anywhere, but the house without air conditioning was too miserable to stay in during the day. They could turn both their minds to the issues at work here and kick some ideas and impressions back and forth. They’d long since learned that he might pick up on things she hadn’t, and vice versa.

Though the moment they stepped off the porch, Finnick was there, giving a wave. “Out for a walk?” he said, giving them another of his almost charmingly lopsided smiles. “Mind if I join?”

Johanna hesitated, glanced over at him. He gave a slight shrug. He’d probably prefer some time alone with her, but no, he wouldn’t kick up a fuss if Finnick came along. “Haymitch and I were going to…” she finally said hesitantly, shifting a little bit closer to him.

He stood there and watched, and without the irritation and the irrational fears, he noticed things he hadn’t. Like before, Finnick was trying to talk with her about the old days of their friendship. This time Johanna wasn’t playing along quite so well, and as if sensing he was losing his audience, Finnick seemed to get more and more animated, almost insistent.

“Where’s Annie?” he asked, cutting into Finnick’s recollections of a prank he and Johanna had played on Cashmere and Gloss, “not interested in a walk herself?”

“We haven’t seen her much since we got here,” Johanna added.
“She’s…tired a lot,” Finnick spoke up. Haymitch watched the nervous twitch of his fingers, oddly rhythmic. “The baby takes a lot out of her, of course. She’s napping again.” He smiled again but there was a peculiar desperate edge to it. “But we’d be happy to have you over for dinner, of course.”

“Sure, Finn,” Johanna said almost gently. He glanced up and met her eyes, seeing the concern there. She’d sensed something off about her friend too. The two of them had been too caught up in their own problems before to see it. Apparently all was not well with the Odairs—Annie sleeping constantly, Finnick avoiding the house? “Maybe,” she said, still looking at him, “I’ll leave you two boys to have that walk. I’m not feeling great. Too hot. I’ll go check on Annie and the baby, have a nap myself.”

Finnick’s eyebrows rose. Haymitch just hoped he wasn’t going to ask if she was pregnant. But then, blunt and even rude wasn’t Finnick’s style and never had been. He and Johanna had always been the prickly ones. The look and smile he gave Johanna was full of concern, though, and the warmth of that shone through, utterly genuine. “Then feel better, Jo, OK? You haven’t eaten much since you got here, and you look like you haven’t slept well.” Only a friend could get away with stating it that plainly, even with the gentleness of concern. Finnick’s eyes flicked over to him. “You either, Haymitch. I know the summer humidity here is rough on newcomers. Constantly wearing trousers and long sleeves isn’t helping you either.” He glanced at their rolled-up sleeves, showing off some of the scars from the torturers and from the napalm on their forearms. Doing that when they were alone, or just with Finnick or Annie, was the one concession the two of them made to practicality.

“I don’t want people gawking at me, Finn,” Johanna said with a fierce edge. “Taking pictures of it, leering and trying to imagine what’s hidden under my clothes.” She gave a guttural laugh. “And I don’t mean what they saw when they had me running around in that barely-there shit either.”

“I know,” Finnick told her gently. “They try to get pictures of me now too. The face, you know.” There was a glimmer of awkwardness and pain in his expression that he quickly smoothed out. But then, Finnick had more than his share of practice at putting on a mask and not letting it ever slip.

With a quick squeeze of Finnick’s shoulder and a nod to him, Johanna headed over for the neat sand-colored house with green trim where Finnick and Annie lived. Left alone with Finnick, Haymitch fell in step with him, following wherever Finnick’s instincts would lead.

He wasn’t surprised they ended up on the boardwalk towards the beach, walking through the sand dunes with their tufts of grass. The row of large, luxurious-looking hotels for Capitol tourists right on the beach looked neglected and a bit weathered. But they probably hadn’t been cared for in a year. Finnick nodded to one down near the end, with several of the windows broken and gaping dark like missing teeth. “The Crestas ran that one,” he said softly. “At least until the Capitol ordered them executed.”

From that Haymitch understood Annelle Cresta probably grew up making great fish chowder and trinkets for the tourists, but she hadn’t seen the utter slaughter from a fishing boat or processing plant. Finnick had. No wonder she’d reacted so badly to the sight of death and blood when her district partner got beheaded when the Career pack tore itself apart. It spoke even more to her sheer guts that she’d still managed to survive.

He was reminded then that Finnick’s people had been executed too after the Quell. An image of his ma and Briar being shot down in the house in the Seam flashed through his mind. “I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “For both your families.”

Finnick heaved a deep, shuddering breath. “Thanks. From you, especially.” He leaned back against the wood of the boardwalk. “It really is good to have you here, and Jo too.”
The trouble was, he thought wryly, the Capitol forcing all of them to communicate in things unsaid for fear of surveillance meant they weren’t much good now at saying things directly. “What’s the trouble, Finn?” he said bluntly, deciding to cut to the chase. If nothing else yesterday had taught him that getting to the heart of the matter was for the best. “You’ve been rehashing the past ever since we got here. You seem to be avoiding your house too.”

Finnick stood there, elbows braced on the rail of the boardwalk. But for the breeze ruffling his bronze hair and the faint rise and fall of his chest visible beneath his t-shirt, he might have been a statue. “I can’t,” he said finally, voice rough and barely more than a whisper. “I can’t, I can’t, I can’t…”

“Can’t?” he asked.

“All of it,” Finnick’s fingers clenched the wood. “Too much. A year ago I was just the cute little Capitol fucktoy. It all changed while we were away in Thirteen, there’s nothing left here. I’m going to screw it up, Haymitch. I’m going to let them both down. And they’re all I have now.”

Haymitch found himself trying to unbraid the strands of that ramble into its separate parts. It wasn’t an easy task: Annie and Maggie, the status of Four, Finnick’s past, and the loss of everyone else. It didn’t want to unravel neatly, a snarled mess. But then, that had been him too. It hadn’t just been the miscarriage. It had been the silence and the way she’d turned to Finnick and the baby and everything all the way back to sleeping with that young, scared Johanna to spare her some pain. They’d just had to deal with the whole damn knot of it.

He’s drowning, he realized with a sudden flash of insight. Everything had changed. Maybe he’d gained a wife and child, but moving from a whore to a husband and a father in the space of months, in the middle of war, left no pause for Finnick to try to shed that slave-skin he’d worn since he was a teenager and simply be himself. He’d lost his family, lost all his fellow mentors, all murdered by the Capitol. He’d come home after the war to find his district was desperate and barely surviving when he’d been so used to it being thriving and wealthy.

Maggie and Annie were all Finnick had left, and he was terrified of failing them. Left alone and with an uncertain future, Haymitch could hardly blame him. He had known that feeling, hadn’t he, of being totally alone and helpless, cast adrift on a wide and merciless sea? Fear of failing was still right there on his heels even now, and the hardship of trying to figure his life out after so long having it dictated by the Capitol. “Annie?” he queried.

“She worries. About Maggie.” Finnick’s eyes were lowered. “She has since before Maggie was born, since we came back here and found out how bad it’s gotten. We…didn’t tell you on the telephone.” He let out a sharp, harsh laugh, a strangely ugly sound from him. “Stupid. Like you wouldn’t figure it out when you got here, right? It’s gotten worse since she was born. Annie sleeps a lot. Cries sometimes. And…I try to bring her back, but…”

But it wasn’t a nightmare of cold water and mutts from the arena that could be escaped by coming back to reality. It was reality. The crushing depression, the feeling of helplessness—oh yes, he could relate. “I drank, more and more every year,” he said, leaning against the rail beside Finnick, “because that was the only way I could escape reality,” the only way short of killing himself, anyway. “I know what it’s like. To…not be able to bear it. To be so sure you’re going to fail. To have nobody left you can turn to because the Capitol took ‘em all. And…yeah, now I know what it is, not being able to turn to the one person you do have because you’re most afraid of failing her, right?”

He heard the shuddering gasp Finnick made, like a man taking a deep breath after too long. “Yes,” he said, voice cracked and low.
Well, that was getting somewhere at least. Trouble was trying to figure out what the hell to do about it. He cast around in his mind for what might help. Running up against one simple thing: they need to not be alone. The two of them might be there for each other, but some problems were bigger than that. He couldn’t even say how much having Katniss and Peeta there over the winter had been a help sometimes. They were young and he couldn’t necessarily lean on them, but sometimes in talking things through with them about their own problems, it eased his own mind too. “Come to Twelve,” he blurted suddenly.

“It’s home,” Finnick argued with an intense edge in his voice. “We can’t just leave.”

He tried to imagine leaving Twelve. Even as an outcast, the thought of living anywhere else would have terrrified him. There was nowhere in Panem he would be safe for a new start anyway—the Capitol publicity damaging his name was nationwide. Twelve might not have been comfortable and welcoming as it had when he was a child, but it was familiar. It was still a place whose rhythms and people and ways he knew, familiar as the back of his hand. “Johanna did it,” he pointed out softly, remembering how Finnick had asked her desperately if she was happy having done so.

“She moved because there was nothing and nobody for her in Seven,” he pointed out, keeping his tone soft. “She moved because that was where she’d have people who would be there for her. And let’s face it, Finn, you and Annie need more people. We ain’t made to live alone. It does things to you.” He sighed and shook his head. “Believe me on that. Ha—Jo and me both, we found that out.” He shied away from calling her “Hanna” in front of Finnick. “Years of being the solitary designated assholes messes you up a lot.” Eventually, so deprived of people to turn to, forced to silently endure, he’d forgotten how to confide in someone. That had exploded badly yesterday. “I was there, and Katniss and Peeta, and it made more sense for her to come where three of us were than the three of us to move there.”

“Even to a destroyed district?” There was an almost incredulous air in Finnick’s tone. With anyone else, Haymitch might have thought it was verging on sarcasm.

“We had each other this winter, and we kept busy with the day-to-day. That helped a lot. Look, Finn, I don’t know what Twelve’s gonna be, and there’s a lot of work to be done. But it’s work that can be done. At least we’re not helpless to just sit and wait for the problem to fix itself.” The Four industries weren’t coming back for years to come. That much was pretty clear. The fish would need to increase in number and not be fished to help that happen, and he was pretty sure nobody would be taking big vacations to the Four seashore for several years while the nation was tenuously rebuilding from the brink of disaster.

Looking over at Finnick, seeing he was listening, he added, “Doesn’t have to be forever. Four will come back. I know it.” He had the confidence its people would somehow prove resilient. They were canny. They’d been smart enough to learn how to utilize the Capitol’s attention to their favor, with the tourism and the Career training. Right now being down at the bottom of the heap might be throwing them for a loop but they’d eventually figure it out. But he was concerned that Finnick and Annie, alone as they were, didn’t have several years to wait for that to happen. “But for now…”

Finnick laughed, and now it was a rueful sound, but a genuine one, rather than high and thin with panic like it had been before. “You just don’t know how to let a person go, do you?” One hand rose and traced the scars on the side of his neck from the forest cat, still a raw pink. “You step in to save a person and it seems you’re responsible for ‘em forever. Me. Johanna. Katniss. Peeta.”

The way he said it, almost admiringly rather than judgmental, eased Haymitch’s mind. He was right.
Maybe it was so many years in solitude but he got attached. He couldn’t bear the thought of leaving any of them to suffer alone if he could intervene. “You’re family, Finn.”

Finnick smiled slightly at that. “I’ll talk to Annie, and we’ll think about it,” he said. That was enough. It was a decision better made with his wife anyway. Guiltily he realized he’d made the offer without talking to Johanna, but he couldn’t see a reason why she’d be upset to have a good friend so close by. “It’d be nice to have all of you there.”

“It helps. A lot.”

“You seemed pretty taken with Maggie,” Finnick mentioned, giving him a broader grin, though the hint of something cautious was now in his eyes. Apparently he’d noticed Haymitch being reluctant to give her up. He was relieved Finnick didn’t seem to have picked up on anything between him and Johanna in the last few days. But he’d had plenty of issues on his mind. “I don’t mean to pry, but…” That was Finnick all over, anxious that everyone would be happy and get along.

Looking it over, he decided it was just easier to bite the bullet. “The clomiphen worked on Johanna too. But…we lost the kid. We’ve been dealing with that.” No need for Finnick to know the details there of how recently they’d been dealing with it.

“Oh,” Finnick didn’t say anything beyond a quiet, “I’m sorry.” Haymitch nodded in acknowledgment of it. Better that way. He didn’t want to talk much about it. He’d done his talking and all the rest with Johanna and while the pain was still there, the knot of it had eased somewhat. Finnick had burdens enough already anyway. “Are you OK being around…?”

“We’ll be fine.” No cause to make Finnick feel awkward having his kid around, especially when he already had his own shit to deal with here. “I mean it.” He managed a smile of his own, telling himself to let Maggie be herself rather than an echo of that never-to-be vision of the little girl he’d imagined. It wouldn’t be fair to her to always look at her as a ghost. He tried instead to imagine her as she might be—black haired like Annie, dark tan skin like both her parents, and whether her eyes would be Annie’s lighter green or Finnick’s brighter shade, he didn’t know. But she’d be something to behold anyway, the first freeborn victor child of this new Panem. “She’ll be a pretty little thing, Maggie.”

“Well,” Finnick answered. “Looks aren’t everything, right?”

Haymitch raised an eyebrow wryly as if to say, And you would know that how? He was pretty sure Finnick’s looks had always gotten him the advantages and privileges of beautiful people and he probably hadn’t even been fully aware of it—at least until the payback came after his Games. Even now, though his looks certainly had come down from their former state, it wasn’t like he was ugly.

Deciding to let it go, because it would be a pointless argument, he just pointed out with a grin, “No, but you gotta admit, it sure as hell doesn’t hurt in life to not be ugly as shit,” and Finnick finally gave in and laughed.

It was hot and sticky a morning as ever, but at least standing there with his friend and just laughing like two crazy fools, he felt like a few more pieces of things had started to mend. Whether Finnick and Annie came to Twelve or not, maybe they’d at least be able to reach out if they needed some help.

~~~~~~~~~~

Going to see Annie and Maggie, and having all the reminders of things that might have been for her, wasn’t high on Johanna’s to-do list in life. But Haymitch was obviously handling Finnick and she
hardly felt like she could just leave Annie alone. Besides, running away from all of it wasn’t going to help. It was time to just face it and deal with it. A woman and a baby could hardly hurt more than the things the Capitol had done to her over the years.

The door was open, only the screen door left shut to allow what breeze there was to flow through the house. Shrugging and opening the door, she thought that was pretty much an invitation for any gawker or photographer to come right in. Fortunately it seemed like neither were around right now. Calling Annie’s name, she checked all through the house. Seeing Finnick and Annie’s bedroom, the bed where they slept together and made love, didn’t hurt as much as she had thought. Maggie’s nursery with its pale coral-orange walls and the soft stuffed toys all ready for when she grew a little older, that hurt a bit more. But in both cases, the fact she saw nothing of herself in those places, no things or colors she would have chosen herself, helped. Green, she thought wistfully. For a nursery, she thought of a soft green that would recall the forest.

Where the hell was Annie anyway? The baby wasn’t there either. Finding the back door open too, she stepped out into the walled garden and startled to hear Annie’s soft drawl behind her, “Johanna? Is everything OK?”

She turned to see Annie lying there in a hammock on the back porch, Maggie asleep in her arms. “Oh, fine, the boys are having one of those manly chats,” she said flippantly, propping herself up against one of the support columns of the porch. “Figured I’d come see how you were doing.”

Annie gently lifted Maggie, who stirred restlessly. “Would you mind?” she asked, looking towards Johanna with those green eyes of hers.

She hardly felt like she could refuse without inviting a need to explain. Besides, with Finnick in her life still as her friend, she’d have to see Maggie over and over during the years. She’d have to learn to deal with it, and the first step was trying to accept Maggie for herself. She’d done her best yesterday to let go of her own child. Time to put that to the test, she thought. Trying to not feel like she was handling a bomb rather than a baby, she reached out and gingerly picked Maggie up, tucking her into her arms. Maggie gave a soft yawp and then relaxed, eyes fluttering shut again. Annie sat up, bare feet against the planks of the porch, moving over to sit down in one of the rocking chairs there. She didn’t ask for Maggie back, so still clutching the kid, Johanna sat down beside her, looking out at the view over the wall towards the bay and the marshes, the sunlight shining brightly off the calm waters. One of the shrimp trawlers was barely visible in the distance, sluggishly pushing its nets through the water.

“You’ve got a good touch with her,” Annie said softly, nodding toward Maggie. Johanna glanced down to see Maggie had drifted off to sleep again. She stared at the tiny features, the wispy tufts of black hair. She tried to keep that ache in her heart that howled, Mine in all its grief to a dull roar. Maggie wasn’t hers. She never would be. It worked, at least somewhat. It hurt a little to hold a baby, but not nearly so much as before when she could barely stand to touch her.

“Thanks,” she answered, rocking lightly back and forth. “Must be hard,” she ventured finally, deciding to go for broke. “You, Finn, a new baby, your families and the other victors are all gone…” Just for a few moments last winter she’d thought of what her life would be like if she hadn’t lost the baby. If she’d gone back to Seven, because of course at that point she hadn’t been confident enough that Haymitch would want a place in her life. The thought of raising a baby alone had been overwhelming.

Annie curled up in the chair, arms draped across her knees. The slight residual bulge of her stomach peeked from where the hem of her tank top rode up. “It’s all changed so quickly,” she admitted quietly. “I miss…I wish my mama was here to see the baby. To see Finnick and I got married.”
Johanna thought of her own mom, and how she’d never know Haymitch, or meet any grandkids. She’d never helped Johanna do her hair for her wedding like most mothers did for Seven brides. She thought back with a lump in her throat to that last day at the reaping of the 67th Games, her mom braiding her hair, her callused but gentle fingers. She couldn’t even remember now what her last words to any of them had been. She’d been far too caught up in the reaping and her own misery.

At least the Crestas had met Finnick and they knew Annie loved him. That was something. But the massive hole ripped through Annie’s life was there anyway. Grief was heavy and dark all the same. The important moments that could never be shared were there now. “I know,” she told Annie wearily. “I thought the same, day Haymitch and I got married.” To find common ground with Annie Odair was more than she’d have easily expected given all those years of quiet resentment, this woman who had claimed Finnick’s love when she had so longed for it herself. But she’d come to realize now that Finnick had never been hers, and maybe she hadn’t wanted him so much as she’d been desperate for him as the one person to be there for her in every way. She’d loved him with a wild, naïve child’s love, with a need for comfort rather than with confidence and passion. She knew the difference now. She’d managed to let go of what resentments she’d had towards Haymitch. It might be time to do the same towards Annie.

The two of them sat there in awkward silence, and it was then that Johanna truly realized that Annie was more than perceptive enough to have seen how she used to act towards Finnick. It was an uncomfortable thought, and the notion of Annie sitting there judging her as some cheating slut irritated her. Some of the words of yesterday, although forgiven between the two of them, were still fresh enough to stoke new fires. Is that how Annie sees me? “I don’t love Finnick, OK?” she said defensively. “He’s the one that’s been coming over to our house the last few days, and I don’t know why, but I’m not fucking him and I don’t want to either. Let’s just get this shit over with and say what you mean to say.”

Annie sat there, hands clasped between her knees. As her shorts rode up, Johanna saw the edge of an ugly puckered scar above her right knee, the rest of it disappearing up under the hem of her shorts. “I know you loved him before, when you had nobody. But I trusted Finnick then because he proved I could trust him.” The way she said it with utter confidence told Johanna that apparently the two of them didn’t keep secrets. “I still trust him now. And seeing you two together, I see you love Haymitch and he loves you. So I trust you both.” Annie cocked her head a little aside and asked quietly but matter-of-factly, “These last few days, should I actually need to worry?”

“I don’t know exactly what’s wrong with Finn, but he’s not trying to fuck me.” That much she was certain of, down deep in her bones. It was on the tip of her tongue to suggest something that if she couldn’t keep him home, maybe the problem was hers, but she stifled the words—bitchy, unnecessary. It was clear Annie was worried. “He’s worried about you, though. And you seem to be sleeping a lot. Haven’t really seen you.”

Annie picked lightly at a thumbnail. “Half the time I feel like I don’t know what to do. There’s… there’s a little one now that needs me and for Maggie’s sake I can’t just lose it and go away, but Finnick’s so stressed that he’s not always there, you know what I mean? And I worry I won’t come back.”

How the hell did she just say stuff like that, the things that stuck in her own throat like brambles? “I know what you mean,” she said with a grim little laugh. Annie’s eyes rose to meet hers, questioning but not demanding. “You’re not the only one who flips out when it gets to be too much.” The only difference was in the past, unlike Annie, nobody had been there to rush in to save her, to anchor her and bring her back. Feeling the resentment stir again, she pushed it back only with an effort. All those people were gone now for Annie anyway, weren’t they? All the victors, the friends, the family… it hit her with a force like one of the giant redwoods in the far west of Seven hitting the
ground. She’s alone. No wonder she was talking to the woman who she’d suspected in the past of wanting to fuck her boyfriend. She had nobody else to turn to now. The rush of sympathy was there, sudden but fierce. Maybe she’d been bitter about the relatively softer landing Career victors like Finnick and Annie had after the Games, but that didn’t mean she’d wish her own ordeal on them.

“You could leave,” she told Annie. “Go somewhere else. It’s not like you have people keeping you here.” Just ghosts, really. “With no place to work, and no guarantee the government’s continuing our victor pensions, that’s no place to raise a kid. Trust me, growing up hungry is shitty.”

“I know,” Annie muttered, looking over at Maggie in Johanna’s arms with a worried pucker of her brows.

“I did it. I left.”

“And how did you manage that? Leaving behind your home, all the memories, everything you used to love?”

She sighed, resisting the urge to start picking at her own nails in anxiety. “I miss it,” she admitted quietly. She wouldn’t have said it to Haymitch, especially not with how Finnick was insistently pressing her on it. She wouldn’t have wanted to wound him like that. The thought of the familiar cadences of voices, the trails of home, the little rituals and daily rhythms that had made up what it meant to be Seven—she missed those. “Sometimes. But I’m better off than I was all alone there. Besides, Haymitch tries to let me be Seven still where I can. He…” She found herself smiling a little in spite of herself, remembering him talking to the people in Thirteen. He’d been so alight with a sheer energetic idealism totally at odds with the defeat she’d seen in him for years, drawing all of them in with the idea of the new place they could build together. “Keeps saying Twelve’s gotta become something new now, so we might as well all bring what we have to the table. You miss it, but you find things that matter more.”

“I know. I know.” Annie heaved a sigh and nodded out to the waters of the bay. “But how can Finn and I leave this? This is who we are.”

“You think it’s worth staying where you’ll be miserable and afraid just because it’s familiar? You’re a fucking victor, Annie. You and Finn both, and me and Haymitch. We’ve all had to change to survive before. We’ve had to give up things and accept reality. You’ll do it again, and maybe when Four’s come back, you’ll come home. But in the meantime, just come to Twelve for a while so you can get back on your feet, all right?”

A smile twitched on Annie’s lips, lighting up her tired, strained face. “So…was that an invitation or a demand, Johanna? I’m not really sure.”

Johanna stared at her, not sure whether to be insulted or not. Finally giving in and just giving a snort of amusement and disgust both, she said, “Take it however you want, Annie. But I say obviously you two really need somebody to kick your asses and tell you the truth.”

That smile turned wistful. “Yeah, you’ve got a point. Mags, she was very good at that.”

“But she’s gone.” She was suddenly thankful that tough as her own ordeal in the arena had been, with Blight’s death and dragging Beetee’s useless dead weight, she hadn’t had to watch Mags’ death live. Seeing it on recap tapes had been hard enough. She’d turned away before the bear-mutt found her. Maybe Mags hadn’t been her family, but she had loved Finnick and she’d sometimes looked after Johanna in an offhanded way as Finnick’s friend. That meant she grieved the loss of a formidable woman like that all the same. “They’re all gone. And they’re never coming back. You’ve gotta find a way to keep going. Find new people. Haymitch and me, we’d be happy to have you…"
and Katniss and Peeta probably too…”

“You’ll really be happy to have me?” Johanna almost hated how in that quiet even voice, it sounded almost like a gentle question, rather than a sharp bitchy accusations like she’d make it into herself.

“I like Finnick. I want to see him and his kid happy. I don’t much know you,” she answered bluntly. “But you make him happy. So that’s points in your favor. If we can agree Finn and me fucking each other is something long gone and not gonna be repeated, and we’re all happier and better off with who we’ve married, don’t see there being a problem.”

Maggie stirred and sniffled and whimpered in her arms. Carefully, she held the baby out towards Annie. “Think she wants you.” Annie reached out to cradle her, drawing her daughter in. Johanna was surprised she didn’t feel the emptiness of it as much as she’d figured she might. She could look at the baby and see her friend’s daughter, not her own. The relief of it was almost too intense to bear.

“You may be right,” Annie said, fingers lightly caressing Maggie’s downy hair. “We can’t handle this. Not all by ourselves. Finnick’s going frantic trying and me, I’m just…” She cut herself off and shook her head. “We’ll talk. Let you know.”

She nodded in reply to that. This wasn’t going to be one of those deep conversations, not with someone she barely knew. That was fine. She could barely talk about some of these things even to Haymitch yet. Annie hesitated a moment and asked almost delicately, “You and Haymitch are OK? You seemed a bit wrung out yourselves since you got here.”

“Lots of troubles in Panem,” she said lightly. “It wears on you after a while, seeing what a mess the country is in.”

“I can imagine.”

“Tell me something,” and she felt like she couldn’t keep from asking. “If you’d known about her,” a nod to Maggie, “and Thirteen hadn’t totally barred you from training, would you have done it, gone with us to the Capitol?” Turning the idea over and over in her head that even if she’d known she couldn’t have done different, that she’d needed to be there, for her own sake as well as to defend those she cared about, had knotted her up in guilt. Shouldn’t her first instinct have been to protect the baby at all costs?

But still, the vision of it haunted her. If she hadn’t been there, would she have regretted it? Worse yet, would they maybe have not come home? Finnick might have died. Haymitch could have been killed too, without someone there to help restrain the worst of his damn self-sacrificing instincts.

“Yes,” Annie said, and there was something low and fierce in her voice, the ironclad nerve of a victor. Johanna was suddenly reminded of the slim, graceful girl in the 70th Games wielding her spear. “I’d have gone with you. I fought hard enough to have him and to keep him, do you think if it was my choice, I’d have just stood there and let him go?” Johanna was suddenly reminded of the two of them right after they got married, seemingly clinging to each other and cuddling every moment. At the time she’d felt bitter and lonely and yeah, pretty annoyed at the constant public display. But while a mildly exasperated Please get a room was still in her thoughts she could understand that mingled joy and desire and fear of loss far better now. She and Haymitch kept it fiercely private in comparison, but that urge to hold on and just not let go was there all the same. She remembered holding his hand yesterday under the table at that meeting, and how reluctant she’d been to let go.

“Even if it meant you might get killed and your baby would die with you? Even if you knew from the stress or if you got injured that you might lose the kid?” She realized only belatedly that her
fingers were clenched, from the sheer need to know. Maybe she wasn’t the only one who felt that way. Maybe she wasn’t entirely selfish to feel like it wouldn’t have been enough to sit on a porch somewhere with a baby and a handful of memories of the man who’d been in her arms for such a short time. It hadn’t been enough for Clover either in the end.

Even as she clutched Maggie close, her fingers cupping that delicate little head, Annie thought it over a long time before she answered. “It’s a lousy choice. But…if it were mine to make, I’d have trained and I’d have gone. Even knowing the risks of it. Because how do you choose between the risk to your husband’s life or your child’s? Watching him go and knowing the man you just finally got to call yours might die out there far away from you and saying ‘At least if he dies I’ll have his child’? That isn’t consolation enough. Not for me.” She took in a deep, racking breath. “I need Finnick. I need him. I had to let him go into the arena without me. That was more than enough that I wanted to go with you. I love Maggie, and I’d do anything for her. But she needs Finnick too.”

Seeing Annie’s body trembling with the force of it, she only hoped she hadn’t triggered her into a panic attack. But quickly she realized it was just the force of the emotion. “At least we brought him back to you.” If Finnick had died, she wouldn’t have been able to face Annie because of the guilt. Mostly she wouldn’t have been able to face herself.

“Yeah,” Annie’s voice took on a rough edge underneath that slow drawl. “And you and Haymitch and Katniss kept him safe in the arena before that, and Peeta helped get me out of Mentor Central. So I owe you four more than I can ever repay.”

Haymitch’s influence must be rubbing off on her because the talk of debt made her uncomfortable. “Never mind it,” she mumbled. “We all have to look out for each other.”

Another of those silences fell. Looking out over the water, losing herself to her own thoughts, she jumped at Annie’s hand touching her arm. Annie drew back, a guilty look on her face. “Sorry. Sorry. I already know how it is, I should have thought…”

She’d noticed already that people in Four, and Eleven for that matter, were more hands-on with people than Seven, or even Twelve. It was worse with the women than the men, but she’d seen it even a few times with Finnick when he was really young. They seemed to like to touch people to get their attention and maybe even put a hand on the shoulder or arm of someone they were talking to and the like. She’d endured it out of politeness by not screaming Just fucking well take your hands off me please, even as she hated it.

It crossed her mind that unlike most people around the district, Annie understood what was wrong and what it was like to be startled by an unanticipated touch—she must have gone through it with Finnick. Casual touching just wasn’t the same with those of them that had been through the circuit. It meant something now, being touched. She was much better with it from Haymitch by this point, though even he knew better than to grab her from behind without warning her by saying something and announcing he was there, and to not do it too suddenly. But Annie was still unknown. “It’s all right.” She’d rather they not get into an awkward apology cycle here.

“I’m…sorry about your baby, Johanna.” She couldn’t help a hiss of indrawn breath as Annie said it, not liking that she was apparently intuitive enough to have figured it out. “No wonder you didn’t take to Maggie at first. I thought at first it was about Finnick, but…that makes…”

“Just shut up!” The words were out before she could stop herself, but hearing Annie musing softly about it, striking the target with every word and leaving Johanna feeling utterly exposed, was too much. “It’s done,” she said roughly. “It’s done and I…Haymitch and I, we’ll be OK, but I just don’t want to talk about it now.” Talking it over with Haymitch had helped, and the memory of his arms holding her while she cried was there. But she’d lanced those wounds open only yesterday and she
wasn’t ready to just spill everything to Annie Odair. It was between her and Haymitch at this point. “I’ll be OK,” she repeated herself with more confidence. It was more Annie’s insight that bothered her than anything.

“All right.” Annie shifted, pushing up off the chair with one arm and holding Maggie snug in the other. “You want some tea, maybe?”

“Tea?” She stared. “In this weather?” The words Are you fucking insane? crossed her mind.

“Cold tea, with sugar. I keep forgetting y’all up north don’t drink that kind of thing.”

“Sure.” She figured she might as well accept it.

“Pitcher’s in the fridge if you wouldn’t mind. I’ll go put Maggie up for her nap.”

Soon enough she’d kicked off her shoes and she and Annie were sitting drinking a cold glass of tea that felt like it was melting her teeth with every sip. She figured she’d be polite and not mention she’d have liked it better without so much sugar. Surprisingly, she noticed Annie seemed to brighten up, that while she wasn’t exactly noisy and sassy, some of the glum quietness rolled back and she seemed livelier. She was surprised to realize she hadn’t heard the woman laugh yet until she heard the sound of it for the first time. She’s needed people. That only cemented the idea in her head.

Finishing her tea, Annie gave a low sigh. “Best that we be getting in the house, or out and about. The reporters tend to come snooping around the place around lunch, if any new ones have arrived in town on the morning train. Trying to get pictures of Maggie, you know.” Johanna hadn’t seen much of that, but granted, most of the time around lunch she and Haymitch had been buried in yet another meeting. She could well imagine the media furor surrounding Maggie. The fact Katniss and Peeta would be arriving for their visit in a few days would only make it worse. She and Haymitch had already threatened their fair share of reporters in several districts looking to get some “happy newlywed couple” pictures of them. They’d agreed to Plutarch’s damn propos for the national reconstruction tour. Personal stuff was totally off limits. It was going to stay that way.

“Annie,” she said, giving the other woman a fierce grin, “you and Finn are too nice. You have any idea how many tabloid photos I’ve managed to wreck over the years with a well-placed middle finger or a well-thrown object? Leave it to me.”

That time Annie’s laugh was full-throated and whole-hearted. Johanna realized she genuinely liked the sound of it.
The next morning, he nudged Johanna awake shortly after dawn. She stirred, face half-buried in the pillow, and murmured something. “I imagine we’re skipping training again this morning?” he said dryly. They had every morning so far, in part because of that awkwardness. He found he missed it.

“Too fucking hot,” she grumbled, turning over and settling back with her head on his shoulder. “Make up for it later, once we leave here.” Though she tossed and turned and kicked off the sheets and finally said with a scowl, “Too hot to go back to sleep.”

He had to agree. So getting up and rubbing his eyes, he padded over to the bathroom and turned on the shower. After ruing the lack of hot water in Twelve over the winter, the lukewarm shower felt like bliss, sloughing off the sweat that had dried on his skin during the uncomfortably humid night. Apparently it never really did ease up here in Four. He’d be glad to help them out but he wouldn’t be sorry to leave. The weather was just too much.

As usual the shower was pretty perfunctory. He and Johanna made the habit of showering together, but it wasn’t a place they ever fooled around, naked as they might be. It was more to just be there as a solid reminder yet again it was a shower, not torture. Besides, he figured they could scrub each other’s backs and that was always a help. Still, the shower was done without any lingering. Clean and toweling off, he was busy shaving while she was rooting around in a drawer, mumbling about her hairbrush getting buried. He moved aside a little to let her burrow a bit easier.

“Ah, Haymitch?” Eyes on the mirror, he finished the stroke of the razor before looking over at her. The last thing he needed to do was cut his throat accidentally. Still half-shaved, he turned his head. He saw her holding up the small black leather case that they both knew held the hypodermic syringes and the bottle of contraceptive. It was old news by now. Thirty seconds to fill a syringe, jab the needle into an arm or thigh and push the plunger, and it bought another month worry-free.

“That time of the month again, huh?” Actually, when he thought about it, he realized they probably should have taken the injection a few days ago to be right on cycle. But they’d been distracted. “Well.” The two of them stood there just staring at the case in her hand. Neither of them moved to take it and open it. But neither of them was moving to put the thing away either.

They’d mourned that child lost, and he was mostly certain she actually did want kids. Though not totally certain, and the question of now or later, that was absolutely up in the air. Apparently it was time to try to use words again and not make a total mess of it. “We should…talk,” Johanna’s voice was a little hesitant as she set the case down on the counter. He nodded in agreement.

“Let’s take a walk.” Get the hell out of the stuffy house and find some peace and quiet somewhere. That would help. This place, the echo of their own house, would have him thinking too much about those empty bedrooms upstairs and the child that might belong there.

Her lips twitched up in a smile. She gestured to the two of them, wrapped up in towels, her tousled messy hair falling in her eyes and his face still half-covered with shaving foam. “Now?” she quipped.

“Really give the reporters something to look at,” was his teasing reply.

Ten minutes later, they were walking down the trail on the way out of Victor’s Bayou. Seeing Finnick and Annie on their porch, getting out of the house themselves, he raised a hand in greeting. He had to admit he was little relieved neither of them hailed him or Johanna or tried to run and catch up. But seeing how they were there with Maggie, attention clearly focused on each other, it seemed
like they were happy on their porch. Good, he thought. Maybe Finnick and Annie had done some
talking of their own last night after a dinner that had been the happiest he could remember since
they’d arrived. Whatever choice those two made regarding Twelve, at least the two of them knew
they had people to rely on for some support.

Once again, they didn’t turn for the beach. Instead, back into the cypress woods they went, though
this time he wasn’t trying to run away from her and run away from everything, furious and stricken
and feeling like it was all unbearable. This time she was right by his side.

The soft lapping sounds of the river on the little beachhead, the knobs of cypress knees, the moss
swaying like a delicate lace curtain to and fro in the soft breeze—a familiar spot. He almost laughed
as he realized this was where they’d ended up before. Seemed almost fitting that they pick up where
they left off, though. “Nice view, at least,” he said, nodding towards the scenery.

“You’re not so bad yourself,” she quipped back, though her arms were tightly and nervously folded
over her chest. That earned a faint smile from him.

How the fuck did people do this anyway? He could say something to her when he felt like he was
deresperate and defenseless, but to consciously just put that aside wasn’t natural yet. “So.” She eyed
him, nibbling her lower lip a little. In other circumstances he’d have wanted to kiss her senseless with
the way it drew his attention. This wasn’t the time. “You want kids, or not?” Might as well start with
confirming that much.

“You.” He nodded in relief at that. “You?”

“Yeah.” Progress of a sort, though that when was still hanging over them. “All right, fuck it. Reality
is I’m not getting any younger, I’m more the age most men in the outlying districts are lookin’ at
having grandkids, not kids.”

She gave a soft chortle, her lips curving up into a grin. “Oh come on, don’t be so fucking sensitive
about…”

“Will you just listen?” He regretted lashing out even as he said it, but how she’d made light of it told
him she didn’t understand, and he was in no mood to listen to jokes. “I’m forty-two. I’m probably
gonna be at least forty-three when any kid comes along and that’s assuming we start trying
immediately. I’ll be dead before they get old. Be lucky if I live long enough to see them my age. Be
lucky, period, if I live long enough to see ‘em all grown up and with kids of their own.”

“Is that a ‘Yes but no’, then?” she asked, propping herself up against the trunk of one of the trees.

“It is what it is, Hanna. It’s the reality. That’s all I’m saying. I ain’t young and face it, it hasn’t
exactly been a nice peaceful healthy life. For all I know I’m already winding down and I’ll drop dead
in five years and leave you with a little kid.” The thought of it haunted the idea for him. To have a
kid growing up with no father, even with as strong a mother as Johanna would be, was something he
was a little more hesitant to take on. If he was even thirty-two still…but he wasn’t. No point just
wishing on moonbeams. “It’s one thing for you to marry me knowing that. It’s another to bring a kid
into it.”

“You think I can’t handle it?” she asked, voice almost too calm. “Think I can’t raise a kid by
myself?” At least she wasn’t protesting no, she didn’t want to hear it, that he’d live forever. But
they’d both seen how short and fragile life could be sometimes.

“I know you can do it. You shouldn’t have to, that’s the point. And if I bring a kid into the world I
damn well want at least decent chances they’ll be able to remember having a father, all right?” It had
been one thing with Thirteen’s meddling, with the child they hadn’t planned. They would have tried to cope and done the best they could. But given the chance now to be deliberate, to plan, he wanted to take it. Seeing how unready Finnick and Annie had been for Maggie only steeled his resolve all the more.

““All right,” she muttered, fingers of her left hand tapping a rhythm on her forearm. The dappled sunlight through the leaves winked off the gold of her wedding ring. “All right, so….what, Haymitch? We can’t fucking well de-age you.”

“Even the Capitol hasn’t managed that feat,” he said dryly. Not that they hadn’t tried with their surgeries, the nip and tuck and tightening, the cosmetics, the fat suctions, the permanent hair coloring and replacement. They could fight the appearance of age, but they couldn’t turn back the clock.

““What’s gonna put that worry through the saw for you and chop it down to size? I mean, shit, like I told you when you were flailing about wanting to marry me—you could get hit by a train or I could get hit by a train. No guarding against that.”

“No, there ain’t. But that’s something we can’t avoid. It happens, no warning. But if it’s likely I’m on the short run to the end for some reason—the drinking, the torture, even some kind of disease that I don’t even know about? I could probably find that much out.”

“You really want to know that? If you’re likely to be dead in five, ten years you really want that hanging over you? Over us?”

He sighed, admitting to himself that was a well-reasoned issue there. ““Not especially, but…”

“You also want some doctor probing and testing you that much?” She shook her head. “Some things I’d rather just not know, OK? I’ve lost enough. Just let me enjoy what time we’ve got without putting some fucking dark cloud over it.”

Mulling that over, he finally offered, “We’re headed for the Capitol next. If I find some doctor there I don’t want to stab in the first thirty seconds, let me get some thoughts. No turning me into some Three lab mutt to get dissected, all right? Just…if he thinks there’s issues or not. That much, I owe you and any kids.”

He could tell by the softening of her expression he’d carried the point. “You and your damn owing,” she told him, but it was a gentle kind of exasperation.

That was enough. He figured whatever hand he was dealt he couldn’t change, but he’d commit to doing his best to stick around by what he could control. Cutting out the drinking and getting in better shape for the Quell, forced as it had been, was something he would reluctantly admit now had probably been a lifesaver. No reason to backslide, not when he had something he wanted to live to see for as long as possible.

“So, what? That puts us at least a month down the road.”

“You really want to start trying for a kid when we’re in the middle of this?”

She grimaced lightly. “You’re not getting any younger. Neither am I. I mean, whatever, sometimes you get knocked up the first try. Other times it takes months or even years.” But there was a hesitation in her tone that he noticed.

“Put aside the time issue,” he coaxed her. “Just…seriously, say we put the injections away and by next month you’re pregnant. We’ve got something like four more months on the road before we even go home, and that’s four months we’ll be looking after everyone else’s problems. I mean, are we
even fucking *ready* for this?"

“We can get a nursery painted in five months,” she quipped at him. “Even if I’m too damn fat to climb a ladder, I’ll just make you do it.”

“Be serious.” He loved her humor but sometimes, it had to be put aside.

She let out an impatient, frustrated huff, and glanced away. “I don’t know. I don’t, OK? There’s a thousand fucking questions. What if we try and nothing happens? What if I—we—lose another one? What if we do actually have a kid and we’re terrible at it? What if,” now she looked up at him, brown eyes sharp and steady, “I’m the one that dies, huh? Women sometimes die having kids.”

He knew that all too well. He’d seen the coffins being carried to the graveyard in Twelve often enough growing up, the remains of another Seam woman wrung out and old before her time, too strained and starved to survive another birth. “Chances are less, the way things will be now. It ain’t gonna be just the apothecary. We can make sure you’ve got a real doctor.”

“But we can’t know for sure.”

“Just like we can’t know for sure with me.” He nodded, acknowledging a good point. “So that’s the trouble.” He thought of Perulla Everdeen and how alone she had been left in the Seam, never quite belonging, drowning in her grief and now guilty about how she had failed Katniss. He thought of Katniss and her wariness after being left to fend for herself. He thought about how all those dead tributes had crushed him. “You willing to swear if I die and leave you with a young kid—or more than one—that you’ll do what it takes? Get whatever help you need to carry on?”

She thought it over a good while which made him certain she was giving it the deliberation it deserved. He knew neither of them instinctively turned to others. They’d been left as alone as Katniss, with nobody to turn to in the hour of need. To ask for help in that case, especially with the weight of grief, wouldn’t be easy. Finally she nodded. “Yes. You?”

“Yes.” He didn’t like to imagine a possible future without her, but the two of them could be ruthlessly practical when need be. Life was uncertain and for him, trying to give her these certainties was how he tried to do his best by her, something more enduring than the ease of poetry or flower-strewn bedrooms. *Never gonna be into the whole fucking rose petal thing anyway,* he thought with a mental snort of disgust. He turned his mind back to that list she’d reeled off. “If we try and it doesn’t happen…or if we lose another one…at least we have each other for that.” The risk would always be there of failure or loss or pain. The only way to avoid it was to stick to the utter safety of never taking that chance. But they’d always been daring if nothing else. “Let’s just take the rest of this t—“ he stifled using the word “tour” because of the Victory Tour, “this trip to make sure it’s all good beforehand. That we ain’t having second thoughts and that we’re ready.”

~~~~~~~~~~

She nodded in acknowledgment at that. He was right, seeing the bigger picture as he so often did. A kid was something they couldn’t take back. “It’d probably be a bad idea right now,” she admitted quietly, watching his face as she said it. “We need some time. I mean, after…her.” Somehow she had the sense that a child they conceived now, still trying to settle from the loss they’d finally lanced open, would always feel like a replacement of sorts rather than one loved in its own right.

“You promise me something else,” she said, the thought taking hold and her voice going fierce, but she was utterly convinced of the rightness of it. “This kid—*any* kids we have—we name them for themselves. No naming for the dead. We’ve got too damn many people we’ve buried. I don’t want a kid of mine growing up taking on our losses. That’s ours. Not theirs.” Especially since seeing the
attention paid to Maggie, and the frenzy of commemoration for Mags given her new namesake, it had been on her mind. She knew inevitably their child would grow up somewhat in the public eye, and so the Petra or Chaff or Magnolia or whoever they had been named for would be so well known. It wasn’t just naming a kid for a dead brother when the entire country knew exactly who that was and how they had died. It would be a heavy, ill-fitting coat of expectations, stifling in its weight. She wasn’t going to do that to a child.

She saw the flash of acknowledgment in his eyes, the look of something almost like relief. “Done,” he agreed without hesitation. “I’m gonna throw in there—no naming for symbols either. We saw with Katniss already making a kid into some kind of symbol rather than being themselves is no favor to them. So that means no Faith or Hope or Victor or Freedom or Liberty, or…I don’t even know what the hell else.”

“Mockingjay.”

“Mockingjay?” He made a face, shaking his head with exaggerated disdain. “Really?”

“Come on. You know there’s gonna be little girls named Katniss and little boys named Mockingjay—Jay for short, right?—or I’ll be a halfwit sweep-up girl,” she told him dryly. “It’s a fucking certainty.”

“I think I can readily agree to not saddle my son with a name like ‘Mockingjay’. Credit me with a little taste, Hanna.”

“Well, we’re not naming him ‘Whiskey’ either.”

“Fine,” was his answer with that faint smile touching his lips. “Cross that bridge when we come to it.”

Reassured by having at least figured that much out, she felt better. They’d have a few more months to get their heads on straight and make sure they were really prepared for all of it. “We’ll have a pretty damn great kid,” she told him, watching that amused smile turn into something warm and genuine.

“Yeah.” Neither of them would dwell now on the possible failures. If that happened they’d deal with it then. No point trying to anticipate every possible thing that could go wrong now and flip out over it. He reached out then and folded his arms around her, and she went willingly into the embrace, secure and comforted. “We’ll get by,” he murmured into her hair. “We managed to start a national rebellion, so I think we’ll find a way to do OK by a kid.”

She laughed at that. “Just gotta be smarter than the rugrat. And willing to get dirty.”

“We’re not from Three, they probably go nuts if a speck of dirt lands on their experiment,” he scoffed with a low chuckle. No, he’d grown up with the coal and she with the lumber, and both of them knew what things like blood and slaughter were like, up close and ugly. Baby shit paled in comparison.

“You think sex bugs ‘em in Three?” she asked as she pushed back a little and chuckled. “I mean, it’s pretty dirty and messy and…”

“Hell of a lot of fun,” he interjected, and she was pleased to see the stir of interest in his eyes. Good, the distance wasn’t there permanently. They’d been too careful these last few days, giving some space after that fight. It struck her that he’d been waiting for her to make the move. Her eyes fell to his arm. Three made good medicines and it had healed clean with no scar. That was a relief. She’d
have known that scar, even among all the others he bore. The thought of looking at it for the rest of her life and feeling the guilt of having attacked him, even if she’d been doing it out of pure frightened instinct, would have been tough to endure. “And who knows how they are in bed? I never fucked someone from Three.”

No, he hadn’t. She remembered what he’d told her, that the only one he’d been with as a lover of his own choosing was Chantilly. She was silent because she couldn’t say the same. She couldn’t say much about what Spark Fortescue had been like in bed. She’d been half-drunk and pretty much all depressed, determined to prove to Finnick that he could go ahead and reject her for his precious Annie because he didn’t matter to her either. About all she remembered aside from the sick, dizzy feeling that might have been the alcohol or else the tears she was trying to keep pent up, was telling herself she wouldn’t cry and she wouldn’t call him Finnick. She’d never touched Spark again and barely spoke to him if she could help it. He’d been one of those executed in the training gym, one of the rebel mentors.

Haymitch noticed, and clever as he was, apparently his mind went to the same place. “Hanna…” The gentle understanding in his voice was almost harder to bear than him calling her a slut would have been. She wasn’t proud of those days, hadn’t been even when she was in the thick of them. Looking back on them now, knowing it had all been so public and it could never be totally forgotten, she wished she could undo it. She wished she could undo a lot of things.

But at the least she could move on. She wasn’t that same bitter, scared kid and she knew he didn’t hold it against her. She shook her head. “Bygones,” she told him quietly, moving back within reach. She stretched up on her toes to kiss him, feeling the rightness of doing it. He responded wholeheartedly and beneath the warm comfortable familiarity she could feel the current of desire running through it. She pushed that, kissing him harder, deeper, her tongue running along the seam of his lips. She felt the eagerness in him as his hands went into her hair, holding her there so he could kiss her back. Something in her was exulting at it as ever, at how she could make this man, her man, feel like that.

Suddenly he murmured something wordless and drew back, saying against her cheek, “You wanna take this back to…”

She felt the frustration and thwarted desire boiling up in her. Always steady with his control. She wanted him so fucking wild for her that there was no way he could wait until Victor’s Bayou. “No,” she said, forcing herself not just yank at his shirt and start ripping off buttons—no, not that again. Talk. Say something. “I want you to fuck me here.”

After she said it, she felt the rightness of it in her bones. They’d fought here, seemed only logical they mend things here too. Besides, neither of them was the type for prim. They both felt more at home out in the woods than inside the house the Capitol had provided. Not that she didn’t enjoy the bed, the one her family had made—that was a part of both of them now, a part of her family and now part of his—but the bed back at Victor’s Bayou was just some generic Capitol-provided piece of furniture, made by the dozens at one of Seven’s mills. She’d even made a few of those beds herself, and compared to imagining her grandparents making their marriage bed, or herself and Haymitch carefully crafting that kitchen table and chairs through the long winter, that bed was soulless. No, they belonged out here to make this new start. The thought of getting him naked out here in the forest felt good and natural. Here was a place the Capitol’s grasping fingers hadn’t reached. So there was no reason to be afraid or ashamed. “Later,” she said softly, kissing his neck, “whenever that later is, I want to make our kids at home, in our bed. But right now,” she slipped the first button loose on his shirt, “I want you. Here.” She undid another. He didn’t stop her.
“Always in such a hurry to get naked,” he told her lightly with a raise of his eyebrows and hints of that teasing smile on his face, “not that I don’t enjoy the hell out of that—though you’d think you’ve never had the kind of fun you just want to linger in for an hour or two beforehand.”

“Well you already know all about my history, don’t you?” she couldn’t help snapping it with defensive temper, hating herself right as she did it because that meant the illusion of this place was shattered suddenly. The Capitol was right here because now the Capitol-molded Johanna she wanted to leave behind, the one that was resentful and bitchy and angry, had come out to play.

He gave a soft sound of acknowledgment at that but he was watching her with that earnest look of his, and whether that was better or worse than his roguish humor she didn’t know. “I suppose there’s no reason to act like you should have, not like you had incentive to…linger. It was patrons, some desperation sex with Finnick—and trust me, I know a scared teen boy fresh from an appointment ain’t exactly the most patient and considerate, I was one, people in clubs you wanted to fuck in a hurry….and, well, me,” and that last one was almost mumbled.

“We agreed that was done with,” she reminded him, not wanting to dwell again on a situation where they’d both been helpless pawns. She already regretted snapping at him. She only hoped he wasn’t going to make it into a club to beat himself up with again.

“I,” she said, trying to not grit her teeth and trying to not panic, “don’t need you to treat me like I’m some delicate little flower. I’m not seventeen and scared anymore, Haymitch. You didn’t fucking break me either when we were fighting out here. You don’t have to easy on me.”

He stared at her, grey eyes suddenly thoughtful. “Hanna,” he finally said, her name little more than a soft exhalation. Then his shoulders stiffened a bit out of their slump and he told her, “It ain’t that I have to go easy. It’s…fuck, I want to, all right? It’s…” His hands flexed, grasped, as if trying to actually seize hold of the words. “I want to not feel like every damn time we’re together you’re putting up with me touching you but you’re always in such a damn rush to get straight to the fucking.”

It was right there on the tip of her tongue to yell something, to lash out and hurt him, because it stung like an insult on first contact. As if somehow, what she did for him in bed wasn’t good enough and here he was, fucking well criticizing. Listen, shut your mouth, think it over for a minute. “And you’re not,” she finally said flatly.

“Hanna, seriously, sometimes yeah, but sometimes…”

“Maybe I like it,” she told him, voice barely above a whisper, feeling the nervous churn of her stomach as she tried to actually put it to words. “I like it when you aren’t always so much in fucking control of yourself.”

“You didn’t like it when I lost it the other day,” he pointed out softly to her.

“That was different. That was you being angry, not about you really wanting to fuck me. And it all
happened so damn fast, but if I’d said ‘Stop’ I know you would have. It’s…” She struggled to try to frame that feeling and give voice to it. “When you…when I’ve got you so wound up you can’t wait another minute to fuck me, when I know you’re just feeling it, I love it. I love it. OK? I love it when you’re like that. Because then it’s nothing like it was when I was a kid. It’s nothing like it was in Thirteen when we were too scared to do anything but just try to get through it without falling apart. I sit there in those meetings and I look at you owning the damn room, and I think about how I’m the only one who’s ever seen you just let go like that.”

She watched him, seeing how his grey eyes darkened at those words, the color in his cheeks that might have been pleasure or being flustered or both. Finally he swallowed, and nodded. “Well.” Her heart sank a little. She’d pressed too far, chased him away.

But it seemed she’d underestimated him. “I like the idea that we don’t have to be fucking in a hurry, like it’s the Training Center all over again or like we’re at some club. I like it when I get to take my time. Because then it’s pushing aside all those years I had to do that to women and men I hated, and me playing the happy whore. I like it when I touch you, when I make you come over and over again. Then I can tell myself this is what it should be like, that yes, I’m with a woman I love, and I’ll never have to go back again. I give you more there than I do just shoving you into the nearest closet.”

Something in her responded to it, the heavy heat of it suddenly curling its way through her body. She tried to imagine it, the thought of lying back and letting him do what he would, those clever fingers and tongue all over her body. It wasn’t a natural instinct for her. It had always been about dominating, about holding control, aggressively and fiercely. “I’m not a little girl sighing over a fairy tale, you think I need some stupid little thing on a bed of rose petals? I grew up past that.” They’d forced her beyond those daydreams.

“Oh, fuck no on the roses,” he said, the look on his face caught between horror and laughter. “Fine. Maybe you’re not a kid. I ain’t sixteen anymore either. Doesn’t mean you can’t still want something finer than hurrying to the fucking. Doesn’t mean you shouldn’t have the best I can give you. You never got that from anyone. You’ve never just been able to play, have you?” His eyes were on her, bright and intense. “Nobody ever let you learn how. You were a girl who’d never been kissed and then suddenly you were a whore. So I want to…I want you to have that. What you’ve missed.”

“And you weren’t like that,” she said flatly, trying to not feel the embarrassment again at her awkward teenage self, desperately hoping some boy would somehow like her. “When you were sixteen you’d been kissed and probably then some.”

He looked at her and there was a flicker of something in his eyes, something both hurt and wistful, and obviously he was caught up in the memories. Just for a moment in those grey eyes she saw not the man who was her husband, but the ghost of that half-grown wiry coal miner’s son, a boy who’d loved a girl before his world was shattered. “It doesn’t matter,” he said almost gently, shaking his head. “That was then. I’m not that kid. What I have, I want it to be with you. Don’t worry I’m hung up on some memory of Briar.”

“I’m not.” She’d had more of Haymitch than poor Briar Wainwright ever had. Still, she thought of boy now. She’d never gone walking in the woods with a boy, never been asked. But she knew what kids did out there. Contraceptive herbs were pricey and it was tough enough for married couples to buy them consistently, let alone provide for randy teenagers. Risking a baby during the reaping years was madness. So kids did pretty much everything short of sex in the privacy of the glades and woods. That had been Seven. She didn’t know what it had been like in Twelve, with the woods so forbidden. “Where did you two meet up?” she asked. “For your trysts?”

He looked startled at the question. “Johanna, it was years ago. Does it really…”
“If it doesn’t matter, why can’t you just tell me? I mean, were you sneaking her into your mom’s house or what?”

Still looking puzzled and maybe a little irritated, he gave an exasperated sigh. “The woods. Days we slipped the fence, we’d meet up in the woods after we’d run the traps and the like, and…we’d take an hour or so.”

She imagined it then—two kids out in the woods, naked in the sunlight, olive-skinned, black-haired, grey-eyed. Young, innocent, living a hard life but not one spoiled yet by the Capitol. She imagined Briar’s hands on Haymitch, imagine the look of bliss on his face. There was a sudden hot spark of jealousy. But it wasn’t that she hadn’t been there first—she wasn’t going to blame him for having a life before her, she wasn’t going to resent a murdered girl. Given what a misery it had been for her, she was glad he’d had that before he got plunged into years of hell. But for finally recognizing what he’d held back from her, she couldn’t help but feel hurt. “You let her touch you, Briar.”

“I let you touch me,” he said, obviously even more confused now. “A little.” It was coming together in her mind now. “But then you’re moving on and trying to take over, and it’s like you’re trying to distract me so I won’t do it again.” If he’d made some glib remark about how a man didn’t need foreplay like a woman did, she’d have lost her temper. But it seemed like they’d both gotten to the point of just listening rather than trying to nervously deflect things. “I meant to give you a damn blowjob on your birthday and somehow that ended up being you going down on me instead.” She wasn’t quite sure how. But she’d tried to not feel too disappointed afterwards. He was obviously happy; he’d curled up with her and murmured that he loved her.

“You’ve never let me do that, and there’s not a man with a fucking pulse who would normally turn that down. When’s the last time you actually had one—and I’m not talking anything to do with training for the circuit. I’ll bet when you were sixteen, huh?” His glum silence was answer enough. She tried to not hate Briar Wainwright. Mostly she tried to not let in the concern that somehow, she wasn’t enough to break through that wall.

“I suppose I’m too used,” he finally told her, voice a little awkward, “to keeping the touching to a minimum.” Yeah, she was sure that was why he’d developed his role, why he’d been so damn good at that type of domination that was a velvet leash rather than the iron shackles of her own role. It meant he could control them, that he set the terms, that he was the only one doing the touching. “And I’d rather see to you anyway, I get more out of…”

“Bullshit. You haven’t let anyone in like that since you were just a kid with a girl you never even got to have sex with, how the hell do you know what it’s like with us?” Her fingers clenched into her palms, tight and almost painful. “I’m your wife.”

“And I’m your husband,” he returned neatly. The two of them stared at each other, and it seemed like there were enough layers of meaning in those two sentences that it was almost terrifying.

“You want to know why I’m in a rush? I learned how to make it hurt and how to get hurt and how to break someone down entirely, but no, I never got a chance to learn to relax and enjoy it. And hey, my husband apparently doesn’t want me touching him, so it’s not like I’ve had the chance to learn how to do that without pain or insults being involved. So why wouldn’t I hurry up and get to the part that I know works?” There she went again, words coming out in an almost unstoppable rush now that she’d begun talking.

Surprisingly, he didn’t yell or argue. “When you’re always so impatient it ain’t easy to just tell me to relax,” he told her finally. “So yeah, sometimes I end up trying to take over a bit so I have a little space to settle down, OK?” She wondered again about his first few years, how aggressive they might have been. If they’d been anything like hers, he’d probably been brutalized more than his share by
people who wanted to show a smart and tough district kid just what their place really was. Her pride stung, but she tried to put it aside. “We made it this far, when you remember how bad things were last fall,” and hearing that from him helped. They really had come a long way from that.

“Guess it just isn’t quite far enough.” Of course he didn’t argue. At least they’d managed to say things this time rather than scream at each other. “We could at least…try?” Try and see if they could manage what he had been missing for so long, and what she had missed entirely. Trouble was that would mean one of them offering to start.

“Well,” he said, squaring his shoulders and giving her a rueful smile, “I apparently fucked up your birthday present. So…” She realized with a rush of gratitude he was volunteering to go first. She might have managed to lie back and let him take over somewhat once or twice, but she’d still felt the instinct to assert herself the entire way.

She gave a snort of what might have been humor or nerves. “I don’t bite. Promise.” Now that she had him, what the fuck was she supposed to do with him anyway? It wasn’t like she’d ever had experience with just touching a man for the hell of it. It had been desperation or training with Finnick, and with the patrons, the less remembered the better because she didn’t want that in bed with the two of them.

“You know plenty already, Hanna,” and it might have unnerved her that he seemed to instinctively understand. “Basics are the same. Just take your time with it.”

“You gonna be all right for that?” she asked him bluntly.

A slight shrug answered her. “If not, I know how to say ‘Stop’, don’t I?” She couldn’t help a smile at that, moving to kiss him. Her impulse was to reach for those shirt buttons she’d begun. Slow, she reminded herself. Slow. Take your time. See how it feels. Instead she looped her arms around his neck, fingers gripping lightly in the hair at the nape of his neck. His arms went around her in turn.

Every time she wanted to move on she tried to step back in her mind, ask if the kiss really wasn’t enough anymore, or if it was the fear talking. Deciding every time it was the fear, she went right back to kissing him. She marveled at discovering the nuances, the way he responded if she altered it just so, the way he’d kiss her a little deeper or a little sweeter and how the whole thing changed, it was more than enough. He’d kissed her at length that day at the victors’ apartment, all finesse and carefully calculated seduction but no meaning—that kiss had been just a means to an end. He was here now in every way. She’d never really considered the possibilities of kissing once sex entered the picture and she’d mentally labeled the idea of kissing for its own sake as childish. But this was its own reward. It felt like coming home.

Finally he was the one that stepped back, and she let out a faint sound of protest, breathless as she was. She didn’t know how long she’d kissed him. It might have been a minute or it might have been an hour. But already she missed the feel of him. “Better than the last nice long kiss you and I had in a forest,” he joked, and she could tell from his expression that he’d been as affected as her.

She rolled her eyes at that, remembering the act they’d put together in the arena, how they’d kissed in the thermal extreme zone while trying to keep warm. She’d felt nothing of this warmth and quiet joy then. All she’d felt was contempt for the cameras and a wicked glee that he was game enough. “No comparison,” she said. She looked him right in the eyes and told him, “After all, this is real.”

If their hands were a little unsteady on buttons neither of them commented. She could have kept her clothes on for now, but it felt right to not leave him just that bit more vulnerable. It felt natural anyway to be naked out here with him, away from Victor’s Bayou and all its weight, here in this place that would be a secret between them.
First impulse was to go right for his cock, of course. But spurred on by the idea of taking her time, and by the unexpected pleasure of kissing him making her think there could be fun had in other places, she felt a grin curving her lips. “Always liked your shoulders,” she mused, putting her hands on them, moving over the line of them and then down his arms. “Nice, broad ones they are too,” she bit back the casual comment of broader than Finnick’s, because comparing the two of them wasn’t going to happen, not any longer. Finnick’s tall handsome litheness no longer haunted her dreams; instead, there was only the solid, dependable strength of this man she loved. “All that woodchopping only made ‘em even better, huh?”

He laughed softly at that, and she could almost feel the urge in him to touch her in return, but to his credit, his hands stayed off. So instead she moved there, taking a hand in hers, caressing the back of his hand with slow strokes with her thumb. What to say? Talking wasn’t her usual thing. She hoped she didn’t sound like a babbling idiot. “Love your hands too. I may not be good at letting you, but you do know what to do with ‘em when you touch me.” She looked up at him. “You’re gentle. You don’t hurt me.” She could see a shadow cross his face, a memory of that fight here, and she shook her head. “Let it go. You didn’t ever hurt me.” No, she’d been the one that hurt him. He’d only scared her, and she knew they wouldn’t let something like that happen again.

In a way, his scars made it easier, standing out clearly in the warm sunshine. They gave her somewhere to go. The Capitol had marked him for life. She knew the scars so well by sight, but now she touched them deliberately—the ones stark against smooth skin, the ones half-hidden beneath the dark hair on his chest. She traced the lines and ridges of them with her fingers and her lips, claiming back each part of him from the Capitol and making it her own. She heard the sudden catch in his breathing and hesitated. “S’all right,” he said lowly.

She looked up in his eyes and didn’t see fear there. She nodded, slipping behind him, repeating it with the uglier marks on his back. She wrapped her arms around him, lightly, pressing a kiss to his shoulder. “You’re strong. You’ll go through hell for the people you love. I love that too.”

“You’re better at this than you thought,” he told her, turning his head to glance back over his shoulder at her.

She gave him a sheepish grin, both thrilled and flustered by the praise, and couldn’t quit resist slipping back into form at least a little by reaching down and giving one firm cheek a good squeeze. “I really like your ass, by the way, when you’re fucking me and it gives me something to grab. Or when you’re wearing just the right trousers to show it off and I end up thinking about how quick I can get you out of them.”

He laughed in earnest at that and she reveled in the sound of it. Finally she got him to stretch out in the warm summer grass. Hands running down his chest, she reached down and wrapped one hand around his cock. “Of course, I really like this. I like how you feel when you’re inside me. When you’re in so deep it feels like I can’t tell where I end and where you begin. When you make me come and it’s so damn good,” she stroked him lightly, watching his face as she did it, gratified he kept watching her eyes rather than what she was doing to him. “When you finally come, and sometimes you say my name. How you say it then, it’s the most beautiful fucking thing because I know it’s me that’s made you feel like that.” She watched his eyes darken even more at hearing mere words from her, and it surprised her.

This was power, the way she was making him feel even now, how he let her touch him and claim him as she was doing. She knew she couldn’t overpower him and dominate him by force of will, just like he couldn’t with her. They were strong and stubborn and tough, equal to the challenge. The only way one of them gained that power was by it being freely given. But he’d given it, and the thought of that brought a rush of tenderness and pleasure both, and she leaned down to kiss him. She let it
linger a while and then leaned back just a little. “You want me to go on?” she murmured. If he wanted to call it quits now, she wouldn’t be offended. What he’d given her already was plenty.

“Yeah,” he told her, his voice rough with arousal. She grinned at him and slid down his body. However harshly she’d come by the knowledge, she knew her way around a cock. Though testing out the notion of dawdling as she was, she tried it here, using slow strokes of her fingers and her tongue first, teasing him. He obviously liked it, as she felt the faint shiver going through him, the way his hand went to carefully cradle the back of her head. She glanced up to see him watching her with an almost fevered intensity. Giving one last lick, she smirked at him, and moved on, using her whole mouth.

Hearing a muffled curse, she laughed to herself; not to shame him, just out of sheer pleasure at seeing him undone like that. She turned to her task and she felt his pulse leap, felt the shudder in him and the splay of his fingers against the back of her head as he tried to keep utterly still, probably trying to not fuck her mouth and to not push her head down. Was he thinking about how she’d looked when she knocked on his door early the morning after Thalius Eland had used her long hair to hold her in place while he fucked her throat, the first step in a long night of horrors? Was he remembering her, a scared and shattered kid with raggedly shorn hair cut with a knife and a shaking hand, a hoarse voice, a painful walk, and bruises around her neck? She drew back. “You’re not them and I’m not an ignorant kid. You aren’t going to hurt me, dammit.”

He looked at her a long moment and finally nodded. She was about to bend her head again when he touched her shoulder. “You might want to quit soon. It’s good. Too good, really,” he said with a rueful laugh.

She shrugged. “Well, you haven’t had a good blowjob in a couple decades,” she teased him. “And what, you coming in my mouth? I’m not squeamish, Haymitch.”

“I know that.” Running a hand through his sweat-dampened damp dark hair, he then braced himself up on his elbows for a moment. “But I ain’t eighteen. I can’t just be ready to go again in two minutes, you know?”

“I’m well aware. I have been sleeping with you for the last seven months.” She smirked at him. “But you handily outclass the eighteen-year-old by what you know and how long you last, trust me. No complaints.”

“Good to know,” he said dryly. “Point is,” and now that crafty, teasing tone entered his voice, “if you finish the job here, we’re gonna have to do something for a while before we can actually get to the sex. You up to letting me return the favor?” He turned more serious. “If not, well, we can put the sex on hold for tonight.”

She thought about it for a moment. It seemed only fair. Even if the idea of putting herself so utterly in his hands, pushing back the urge to snark and put up little walls rather than leave herself so laid open was tough, he’d done it. She thought about how that trust had made her feel. She owed him no less. “Done,” she said, “all yours after I finish up.” She stroked her thumb down his cock teasingly, enjoying the slight instinctive buck of his hips at it. “Now are we done talking and will you just enjoy it already?”

Once he caught his breath from her attentions he returned the favor, all right. Touched and kissed every inch of her, claimed back her own scars as she had done for his, all the while murmuring words of how he loved her, how he loved her body. She’d never quite look at her tits and ass, always frustratingly too big to be cute and perky, the same way. She’d thought he’d been gentle before but given opportunity, the sweetness he showed her almost brought tears to her eyes—well, there was the clear wicked edge also, but without both he wouldn’t have been Haymitch.
He’d been right. It wasn’t about treating her gently because he was afraid to hurt her, it was about him wanting to lavish her with the love and desire he had for her. He gave her those things and made her feel like it was no less than she deserved. She felt cherished, not awkward. “Oh hell,” she said in frustration, “you’re making me wonder if I was holding back on you.” Maybe there was that gentler Johanna still left to be coaxed out further. Head buried between her thighs, he only laughed. “If I was, make it up to you next time,” she told him, fingers twining in his hair as she tried to not arch into it.

He was as good as his word and kept up his attention to her until he was aroused again. She lost track of her own pleasure, he’d done such a damn thorough job, but she knew it wasn’t enough. “Want you now,” she told him, breathing hard still from the latest aftershocks as she drew him down to her, letting out a groan of relief as she finally felt the welcome weight of him entering her.

“Tell me how you want this,” he murmured in her ear, settling himself over her. “You want it fast now?”

“No,” she said, the sound almost a drawn out moan as her body felt unbearable, every little sensation electric. She thought fast might just kill her right now. “Do it slow.” They moved together with every thrust slow and deep, and her hands helped guide his hips. Her eyes were on his, neither of them able to look away. The pleasure hit her again, the gradual dragging build meaning it came over her in overwhelming all-consuming waves rather than a swift lightning bolt.

She lost herself in him, and gloriied in that rather than being terrified. When he finally came she watched his face and she knew there was no wall left, that he was utterly hers. Lying there after in the crook of his arm, tousled and sweaty and a bit dirty, she felt almost stupidly happy.

Children could wait until after their trip was over. What might happen then, she didn’t know. But they’d face it when that time came and at least they’d faced that fear and talked about it together. For now, at least they’d come through all of this crap here in Four far more solid than they had been. She’d given him herself entirely, but lost nothing by it. He’d given her himself in return, and that was precious. She thought about how submitting to him had actually been anything but humiliating, but that wasn’t right. Submission was all about who had the power. This had been about something deeper than power and something inherently equal—a mutual surrender.

“How the hell are we ever going to stay dressed after this?” she asked. “I mean, really.”

A sleepy chuckle answered her. “I might be lifting you up onto the nearest table on a regular basis.”

“Told you so,” she said with satisfaction.

“Told you so too,” he answered, nuzzling her neck.
The days were still rough sometimes given dealing with the desperation of people in Four was no easy task. Pretty much saying, *We’ve got nothing that can really help you immediately*, given the potential food shortages, was a hard thing to do. But truth was everyone in Panem was going to have to labor for their bread still, in one way or another. That meant the people from Four might have to become migrant workers for a few years. To their credit, Wrack Solange and the rest of his people seemed to take it well enough, though Haymitch could sense their dread at losing an entire way of life. It was the same awkward fear he’d felt in people in Two at being obliged to give up their warrior ways, waiting to see what the future would bring and being afraid of surrendering everything that had so long held meaning and pride. “Maybe there’s fishing grounds to be opened?” Johanna suggested suddenly, interrupting the two of them hashing out likely homes for Four people. “I mean, it’s not like Four has the only coast on the continent. I don’t know that’ll be enough for all your people, but…be a shame to lose the most experienced fishermen and all.”

She was right, and unlike the fishermen, the hoteliers, the cannery workers, and the like could more readily transition to other districts. “It’s a good idea,” Haymitch said, “so long as we’re not just repeating the old habits that led to this mess.” But given she was from Seven and with his upbringing in Twelve, the two of them tended to think in the long term. Coal and trees took so long. The Capitol’s solution of mining even deeper or opening yet another, more distant mine further from the original site at Dunstan’s couldn’t hold out forever.

Wrack nodded eagerly, seizing the idea. “But it won’t be Capitol demand running the show now.” Cynically, he thought that leaving it entirely open to fishing crews wasn’t the best idea either. If it was a matter of knowing a fish might be getting scarce and it ought to be left alone but the sale would pay the bills, the fish would lose every time. Trees, coal, grazing land—probably the same issue across the board. Leave something there for the taking without making people accountable for restraint and wisdom, they’d think only of themselves rather than the greater impact. The Capitol might have taken self-interest to the heights of cruelty and decadence, but he’d seen more than his share of cruelty and greed even among the districts. But thinking about fishing regulations was an issue for later. Right now it was just trying to keep Four’s people from total collapse and trying to keep some seafood supplied to the nation if possible. Wrack frowned, turning to stare at the map of Panem on his wall. The twelve districts, since Thirteen was still supposedly destroyed when this map was made, were outlined clearly and garishly colored with their traditional Capitol-assigned colors. Four was a bright blue-green band hugging the curves of the southeastern coast. The large areas between the districts, huge swaths of the country, were grey blanks labeled only “Borderlands”. Meanwhile, Wrack was going on thoughtfully, pointing a finger towards the map, “I suppose…if President Paylor is already talking about tearing down the border fences? I mean, there’s the western coast near Three, Five, and Six…the eastern near Eleven, Twelve, and Thirteen. We could even go due west from here to the coast opposite us. That would probably be closest.”

It would still mean moving but at least for some of the Four fishermen it would let them keep their way of life, while still earning their place by providing something needed for the country. “It would mean building some fishing towns in a hurry,” Johanna mused, chin propped in her hand. “And setting up for transporting the fish from those places.” But those were things she could readily seize upon. She might sigh and grumble over the things like laws and politics that he found he more readily gravitated towards, but give her something that needed to be built, and her tenacity and grasp of that situation far exceeded his own.
Still, there were a few points to be made to keep things level. “It’s gonna be small scale, to avoid the same problem of just stripping another fishing grounds bare.”

“Plus can’t go large-scale immediately with as isolated as that will be from the rest of the country,” Johanna pointed out to them. “It’s not like there’s a rail built. It’s hovercraft only to start. When it’s going to be a larger distance to get the fish and to bring the crews everything from food to knives to playing cards—the fewer trips made to begin, the better.” He knew she must be thinking about the hovercraft drops in Twelve over the winter. Even now in Twelve it was a few dozen people at best—those that had stayed from the body recovery crews and the handful that had come back early from Thirteen to start to rebuild.

“We’re no cowards,” Wrack said irritably, eyeing him askance. “But I take your point. No point having two hundred boats out there right away. I’ll see if there’s anyone willing to give it a test run. Maybe a couple dozen boats, and build one small port where the fishing grounds are likely. We were running too many boats, we know it.” He made a face. “No idea where that might be, though. Maybe some of the old North American books I hear they have in the Capitol might say where we used to fish before the disasters.”

“We’ll look. Can put the idea forward at the Capitol when we’ve got us all together. Get Six on board with it, since we’ll need their resources for the transportation and the building materials, Three for the engineering, Five for power…” Haymitch was already ticking components necessary off on his fingers, trying to think of everyone that might need to pitch in to make it happen.

“I can check on the book thing, talk to some of the builders in the Capitol too,” Johanna chimed in for her part. The two of them looked over at her. She shrugged. “They may have used tacky colors but obviously they know their shit. Besides, what else am I supposed to do while you lot sit and argue politics all day? Eat bonbons—if there’s even any chocolate left in the Capitol—and read fucking fashion magazines? I’m not a Capitol housewife, dammit.”

A wide grin cracked Wrack’s wizened face. “I knew I liked you.” He couldn’t help but smile too, loving her all the more for it. She might have that sweetness to her too, surprising but utterly touching in how she finally opened up enough to let him see it, but she would always be fierce and blunt.

“Three makes mutts already, we eat ‘em daily,” he added, thinking of what people had said to her in Nine about the muttation crops. He had the suspicion Ten’s livestock and Eleven’s produce might be the same story. “Maybe…I don’t know, you can farm cows, you’d think you ought to be able to farm some kind of fish somehow. That possibility never came up?”

Wrack shrugged swiftly. “Nope. But I suppose it didn’t much fit with the image of us as romantic sailors. Something else to ask the geeks in Three.” He grimaced slightly. “Still not going to be enough to save the district for now, of course.”

“But it’s a beginning,” Johanna consoled him. “We’re starting from the ground up in Twelve too.” He tried to hide another grin at her use of the word we in reference to Twelve, some part of him thrilling at how she’d asserted herself as belonging there, considering herself a part of it.

“Aye, I suppose you are,” Wrack acknowledged with a sigh. “I’ll be talking to some of the people, have some thoughts to bring to the Capitol with me.”

More notes jotted down on notepads, more ideas filling their heads. He could see why Paylor had wanted someone to visit all the districts. Already those little ties back to what she’d seen and heard already and the sense of the bigger picture was making it easier to deal with some of the issues. In some places people were jobless and in others they were stretched too thin, frantic for workers. But everyone was unsettled and afraid of losing everything. Freedom might be a grand thing but it wasn’t
Katniss and Peeta were due to arrive in the morning, and he was sure the press would be there thick as fleas on a stray dog, but they would enjoy one last quiet night first. After a week here he would finally admit that now he could sense that after dark it cooled down. That still wasn’t enough to make him totally comfortable physically, let alone with the persistent tugs of recollection about the arena.

But it would be OK. He was with her. Funny thing how just when he thought they’d gotten it all settled he realized there was something else yet for them to discover or to overcome. He would spend the rest of his life figuring Johanna Abernathy out, of that he was fairly certain. But the thought brought a sense of anticipation rather than resentment, because now what he had to learn, she wouldn’t hide from him. He knew now that something irrevocable had taken place out there in the cypresses. For once, there had been no secrets, no fear, nothing withheld.

He thought until the day he died he’d be remembering her lying there in the soft summer grass as she let him touch her, remembering how it felt making love with her, because “sex” just didn’t fit what had taken place. Those last few barriers laid aside, he’d felt the final pieces fall into place, and he’d felt the same joy and wonder that boy had felt all those years ago, almost overwhelming him. Even if he and Briar never had gotten their chance, he knew now what it was supposed to be like, and he appreciated it all the more with a man’s wisdom rather than a boy’s naïveté. I’m hers and she’s mine. It really was that simple. Maybe the Capitol hadn’t taken that ability to totally lose themselves in each other from them. Maybe, just maybe, they had finally gotten it right.

It was a wonder either of them had gotten any sleep at all since then, and if not for the fact they were here on Four’s behalf, he’d have been happy to just stay in bed all day. If I thought you were randy before, she’d panted last night, fingers digging into his shoulders, obviously I didn’t know you well enough.

Complaints?

Fuck no. Keep it up.

Seeing her on the porch, watching the moon out over the bay, he came up behind her and warned her with a soft, “Nice night out there.” He wrapped his arms around her waist, gratified to feel that split-second of hesitation wasn’t there any longer before she leaned back into it. She turned her head to kiss him, lingering on it, and that edge of expectation was missing. He thought he’d never get tired of her kissing him just for the sake of it, whereas before it had been either a quick “hi, honey” kiss or an insistent “fuck me now” kiss.

“Upstairs now, or later?” he murmured. Not a suggestion, just a question. He’d be happy to go to bed, all right, but there was no rush. Once they got there it would be good regardless.

“Go for a walk,” she said, shaking her head. “Too early yet to work up a good sweat inside the house.”

He laughed at that and dropped a soft kiss on her shoulder, squeezing her lightly for a moment before letting her go. “Walk it is.”

He’d admit the beach in the moonlight was beautiful, listening to the low roar of the waves, seeing the shine of the light on the water like silver threads rippling in a sheet of dark silk. It wasn’t home but there was a beauty to it all the same, once he convinced himself that he needn’t fear any Gamemaker horrors here. Johanna kicked off her shoes at the foot of the boardwalk and he followed suit, and the sand was actually a little cool between his toes now that the sun had gone down. She took his hand as they walked, moving a bit closer to him. “No cameras tonight,” she said softly as
she turned to him, taking his other hand too, holding them in hers.

He didn’t know whether she meant the reporters or the arena. He wasn’t sure it mattered. “No getting frisky here,” he teased her, letting go of her hands.

She scoffed, head cocked and giving him that challenging grin. “What, you’re only into getting naked outdoors when we’ve got trees? We get on a beach and suddenly you’re all shy and demure?”

He shrugged. “No, dear, just thinking about how even sleeping on a beach meant we all woke up and were busy shaking sand out of our clothes.” He raised an eyebrow. “You really want sand everywhere?”

She stared at him and he regretted bringing up the arena. “Point,” she finally admitted grumpily. “There are definitely places I don’t want sand.”

“I could go get a blanket if you want,” he offered.

She waved one hand in a no, no gesture. “It’s OK. I can hang on until we’re back.” He chuckled, unable to help it. “It’s worth the wait,” she said softly, half to herself, as if she was still testing out being able to say something like that openly. He heard anyway, and leaned in to kiss her for that.

“Oh, fine,” she scoffed, slapping teasingly at his hands as they settled around her waist, “you say you won’t screw me senseless right now and then you want to get me all hot and bothered?”

“I like you all hot and bothered,” he told her, kissing her again, kissing the line of her throat, his thumb skimming the swell of her hip where her shirt rode up a little. “When you’re looking at me like it’s all too much but you still can’t get enough, and telling me you want me right then, can’t wait another minute…” He stopped then and told her with a grin, “And you know I like taking my time to get you there. So we’ll continue that later.”

She gave a soft huffing laugh that was both fond and a little annoyed. “Yeah, sure.” Her tone turned gleeful. “Just be prepared to get as good as you give, honeybear.” Though after a few seconds the humor faded from her voice as she said quietly, “That last afternoon, I actually forgot for a little while. In the arena. It was like Finn and me and Katniss were here, just having some fun.”

He remembered. He’d been sitting up on the beach with Beetee going over the electrical trap, but watching the three of them in the water, he’d been struck by how young and carefree they’d looked, if only for a little while. “I know,” he answered her lowly, remembering it. “I saw you three still had something left in you that let you forget. It let you have some hopes. I wanted you to make it out alive, go live your lives.”

“I’m living my life right now, and fuck the Capitol, they didn’t take it from me.” She gave an angry-sounding grunt. “Even if that was the last time in my life I’m gonna go swimming.” There was something like mingled anger and grief in her voice. He didn’t know she had been all that fond of swimming—she hadn’t been more than a novice at it, much like him. It was more the loss of potential, of knowing an opportunity had been taken away.

He reached for her hands again, somehow needing that small contact as he knew both of them were remembering the torture cells. “We could try it.” He remembered them saying that out in the woods. He gave her a slight smile. “It’s just you and me and the water, right?” He could imagine the pressure of having Finnick try to coax her in would be worse. He loved the ocean and swam like a fish, and that would make it worse. He hadn’t been there in the Detention Center. He couldn’t understand the dread in that bone-deep way.
She turned her head, looked out over the water for a long minute before replying. “Might be worth a shot.” It seemed to him it said everything that she was willing to tackle a fear and risk failing with him to see it. Because it was true for him also—far better her than anyone else. He trusted her deeper than he ever would anyone else. There was less worry about looking foolish, or about her not understanding.

Well, there was the risk both of them just started panicking. Better to have at least tried though. Leaving his clothes in a semi-pile—hers were strewn in a heap, of course—he joined her at the water’s edge. The surge of the waves lapped around his feet then receded. So far so good. “How deep?” he asked dubiously. Did they have to actually swim for this to count? He’d never swum in the ocean before and even to someone without the whole water torture issue, that might be daunting anyway.

“Let’s just see,” she said with a grimly determined note in her voice. Her fingers found his, gripping tightly. “Try—I don’t know—to the knees?”

“Your knees or mine?” he threw out there jokingly, trying to distract both of them as they waded cautiously through the surf. “There’s a bit of difference.”

“Shut up, it’s not like you’re a foot taller,” she grumbled. Standing there in more or less knee-deep water, she said, “Well, we’re not dead yet.” He heard the faint note of doubt in her voice.

“It’s warm.” Even after sundown, the summer warmth was there. “That probably helps.” By mentioning it, he could suddenly remember the icy water hitting him, hitting him right in the face and a few times the shock of the cold made him gasp and inhale and choke, feeling like he was drowning. Then there was the far deeper shock of the wires, and him twisting and writhing against the restraints. He couldn’t get away, he’d never get away.

“Haymitch!” Her voice was sharp and it cut through the flashback. Hearing his own ragged breathing, he tried to calm down. “Enough?” she asked him softly.

“No.” He took another step forward. “I’m OK. Mentioning it got me thinking about it, that’s why.” He wasn’t going to quit just yet. Not unless he had to, and he was doing better, she’d brought him out of it before he could really spiral down.

Gingerly they inched their way out to waist-deep water. Her fingers gripped his a little tighter for a minute and she said, “Just a little more?”

“All right,” he said finally once they were in to their chests, feeling the warmth and pressure of the water against his skin. “Any more than this and we’re swimming for sure.” Between the torture and the memory of choking and sputtering in the arena as he tried to find the rhythm of swimming again, he wasn’t eager to try it.

She looked at him for a long moment, eyes very dark in the moonlight, and slowly shook her head. “Not tonight.” She lifted her free hand and put it on his shoulder, the droplets of water cascading off it water trickling down his skin. “This is enough.”

“More power to us, eh?” he teased her, wrapping his arm around her waist, moving closer to her. She laughed then, and he was coming to realize how he liked how carefree she could sound sometimes, and she put her arms around his neck. Feeling the slide of her wet skin against his, he was startled as she suddenly kicked off the bottom, aided by the natural buoyancy of the water, and wrapped her legs around his waist.

Instinctively, he grabbed her, hands going beneath her to help hold her up, and now her laugh was
one of wicked delight as she teased, “Any excuse for getting your hands on my ass, huh?” He might have grumbled, You could have tipped us both over, but instead he just laughed in return.

It was much easier to hold this position with the water helping out than it was normally. He might be strongly built enough, even if not stocky like Peeta, but the balance and strength to hold a woman up in the air for long minutes were tough enough. Then add in the idea of moving to that? No deal. Besides, he liked being able to get his hands on her. “Not thinking of getting frisky out here, are you?” he asked her. He could see that ending badly. Not to mention they might be naked and she might be pressed up against him, but he wasn’t sure he could instinctively find this all that erotic—all the water.

“Nah,” she told him, bending her head and nipping lightly at his shoulder. “The water, it’s…not exactly putting me in the mood. Just wanted to get a bit closer.” His heart seemed to leap at hearing her just say that.

“Snuggle up as much as you like, darlin’,” he teased, shifting slightly to get his arms around her waist. “I won’t tell.”

She gave a snort of exasperation. Reaching up with one hand, she tucked a damp lock of hair back behind her ear. “Never had a man ask me skinny dipping before,” she mused. He felt her heart beating steadily against his.

“Mm? A first for me too, gotta admit.”

“You never had a man ask you to go swimming naked in the moonlight?” she said with mock astonishment.

Now it was his turn to roll his eyes at her. “Sadly, no, I’m not quite sure why.” It didn’t surprise him that he could joke about men being attracted to him now, whereas before it had been a source of discomfort. He was learning to let things go, finally. He felt compelled to honesty, saying to her, “It ain’t the first time I’ve been swimming with a girl, but that was me and Briar and Jonas and Burt, and that was when we were all young. Little kids. Briar and I, we didn’t…”

“Well, I’ve been skinny dipping with boys,” she said, “out at the camps when we were by a lake. But that was, you know, before I grew up. While I was still flat as a board.” He understood. Before boys and girls finally became aware of each other, when a friend was just a friend and what parts were present or not were a subject of jokes rather than sexual interest. He and Briar hadn’t swum together out in the pond in the woods. The few years prior to that, after they started growing up, it would have been too awkward for her to swim with him or Burt or Jonas. After they started keeping company early in the fall they were both fifteen, they had never had a hot midsummer day together where it might have happened. The reaping, and her death, had made sure of it.

But there was no cause to mourn now. He was happy, for once in his life. The thought still startled him sometimes. “My, how things have changed. You make a gracious armful now, Johanna Abernathy.”

She kissed him lightly. “Let’s go back,” she told him, relaxing her thighs around his hips and sliding down to put her feet back on the sand. “Thanks,” and her voice was quiet above the surf.

“Always.” He was sure she’d do the same and be there for him likewise.

Come morning, they made the trip with Finnick and Annie to go meet Katniss and Peeta at the center of the Bayou. He and Johanna had their sleeves rolled down as usual. The hovercraft landed, the cameras moved in, and he tried to ignore it. He’d seen Katniss and Peeta overnight right before
Thirteen so it had been barely three weeks since then, but to his eyes, they seemed to have grown up even more in that short span. “All right, Kittycat, Hotbuns,” Johanna grumbled, “let’s get back to Finnick and Annie’s before I start breaking cameras.”

Safe in the Odairs’ kitchen, Peeta held baby Maggie with an expression of delight, and he was surprised to see even a few tentative smiles for the baby from Katniss. Though he got the odd sense something was up with the two of them. Something was off. Still, it was nothing as jolting as Finnick and Annie, so he wouldn’t pry. Chances were if it was a real bother, one of them would pester him about it. Peeta would tentatively try and ask, or Katniss would pretty much spit it out at him like a challenge.

“I did some bargaining with the press,” Finnick said, leaning back in his chair. “They’ll stay off the beach tomorrow afternoon and leave us alone.”

“The beach?” Katniss said dubiously. “Were you…planning something?”

Finnick looked like a smacked puppy for a second. “I had figured you’d want to go to the beach? Since we’re all here and Haymitch and Johanna have the day off…getting you swimsuits shouldn’t be an issue.”

Annie, as usual, was the intuitive one. “Finn, hon,” she said gently, looking at the four of them, “they might not like wearing swimsuits.”

It was one thing for Johanna to see the mess on his skin. It was another for the rest of them to see it. He could imagine Katniss and Peeta, with their burn scars, might be feeling the same.

“Oh,” Finnick said. “Right, of course…I mean, you’d be welcome to wear whatever you’d like.”

Haymitch caught a look of chagrin on his face—his scarred face, the one the press kept trying to capture, compare to his former glory.

Johanna glanced over at him, and said, “Fuck it. The war left us all a mess. If there’s no press there, I’ll wear the damn swimsuit.” Well, it wasn’t like being naked in public at least. He had the feeling they could never take that idea casually again.

“No press,” Finnick said. “I promised some pictures with Maggie to get them to back the hell off for the day.”

That small sacrifice touched him. Maybe the photographers would have been all over Maggie eventually but that he had been willing to trade something of his own for their comfort said plenty about Finnick. “Thanks, Finn.”

Finnick shrugged. “I figure at least this way Annie and I get to dictate how pictures of Maggie get taken. Gotta give a little sometimes in the interest of keeping some control.”

So the next afternoon, dressed in a pair of shorts, he found himself sitting on the beach. At least Finnick hadn’t given him a tiny piece of nothing to wear, but after some of his own “clothing” in the Capitol, the knee-length shorts Finnick was also wearing seemed more to his liking. Annie was sitting on a blanket with Maggie, Finnick was out doing his half-fish bit out among the waves, and Peeta and Johanna were building some kind of sand castle. He was pretty sure there was some friendly bickering about whether sand castles were like building houses or like constructing cakes.

“Fine, I build the basic damn castle and then you can decorate it, Hotbuns,” he heard Johanna say, and he couldn’t help but laugh. A shadow came over his vision and he saw Katniss standing there. Dressed in a blue and black one-piece suit that pretty well covered her torso, he could still see the...
skin of her arms and legs. He hadn’t seen it since the hospital, when he’d been watching the doctors covering it in gauze. He could see patches of natural olive made a crazy quilt mingled with the paleness of skin grafts and the shiny, ridged pink of burned but salvageable skin.

He didn’t say anything. He could sense she was checking out his own wounds: the raggedly torn whip marks, the thin knife cuts, the slick pink burns and smudged black electrical burns. “Yeah, they did a number on us,” he said dryly, moving aside to make room for her on the blanket. “Did you come just for the inspection, sweetheart, or are you gonna say what’s on your mind?”

She sat down, drawing her knees up to her chest and wrapping her arms around them. At least her arms and legs, while still thin, were lean with muscle rather than too skinny with hunger and stress.

“He’s said we’re not ready for kids yet,” she told him, without any preamble, but neither of them needed it.

“Smart,” he acknowledged, looking over at Peeta laughing with Johanna, his patches of natural fair skin already beginning to go a bit pink in the sun, his prosthesis visible for all of them to see right alongside his own remaining leg, “the world’s changed, it’s not like you have no options but to settle down right away. You had that talk about it? Good.” Considering he and Johanna had finally had that talk quite belatedly, maybe he shouldn’t have been giving advice, but if it had done them good, he wouldn’t complain.

“Yeah, but he said it because we’ve both gotten some offers to go train with people in other districts.”

Not entirely unexpected given their celebrity, and he could see that One would certainly want artistic Peeta, and maybe Six for Katniss with how they explored and mapped even the wilderness? “It’s a good opportunity. Learn to do something you love, see more of the world.”

She bit her lip, her black hair blowing lightly in the breeze. “I know, OK? I just…I don’t want to maybe lose him.” He could imagine it. Finally after everything she’d been through, the terror of losing the one thing that was only hers had to be acute. He knew how he’d feel if he lost Johanna. But at the same time, their situations weren’t exactly the same.

“Sweetheart, if it’s being happy with your lives and wanting to be together more than anything else in life that keeps you both in Twelve that’s one thing, but if it’s fear that makes you stay, hiding from the world ain’t doing either of you favors.”

“I am not hiding!” she burst out angrily. “I just…” She scowled over at him. “I don’t know what’ll happen.”

“Nope. But chances are you get out there, you’ll find out who you really are, kiddo, and what you can do. That’ll do you more good being resentful in ten years that you didn’t take the opportunity to know who you are, before you became one half of something and you got locked into that shape.”

“And you? Like you’re not changing too, and you didn’t hurry to go get married?”

“It’s different. I’ve got twenty-four years less than you. This is my one chance. I’ve gotta just leap in and try to figure it all out while I have time. It’s not like I have five years to go to school, ten years to wait to start a family. I’m grown, you’re not yet. But even I’m trying to get beyond that damn house I spent all those years locked in.” He thought about Johanna in Thirteen fiercely defending him, how the people of Twelve had finally looked at him with something besides disgust. He’d felt the certainty that night of This is what I was meant to do. He might not have been able to fight for their kids in the Games, but he could fight for them now, make certain that Twelve wasn’t the least and
poorest anymore. He shook his head. “You want my honest opinion? You’ll never find anyone who understands you like he does, or understands him like you do.” That was the case with him and Johanna. Everything they’d been through, from the arena to the loss of their families to the Detention Center—he couldn’t imagine anyone who simply got him as readily as she did. Nobody else would ever have known him quite like she did. “You’ll both grow up if you go do some schooling, but I don’t imagine you’ll grow too far apart.”

Katniss nodded, looking over at Peeta. “He said he was willing to stay if I didn’t want him to go.” She heaved a sigh of frustration. “Stupid idiot,” she mumbled. “I keep telling him I don’t want him to make sacrifices for me, over and over. I want him to be happy.”

“Then you’ve made up your mind already, haven’t you?” He eyed her and asked, “So who asked, out of curiosity?”

“Oh,” she said, giving him a wry little smile, “the Capitol asked for us both. One of the pastry chefs wanted Peeta and they wanted me to come learn to sing. I told them my voice was mine. I’m not gonna make recordings for them.”

He couldn’t help but smile in return. “Good on you. Who else?”

“Let’s see. Um. Three wanted to know if I wanted to become a doctor—weird. I told them to talk to Prim instead, she’s apparently getting moved there anyway.”

“Wait, what?” Prim was leaving the Capitol just before he and Johanna would arrive? “Shit. I meant to ask if there was anything you wanted Jo and I to bring her, but…”

Katniss sighed. “The Capitol’s done all they can with physical therapy. It’s been months and she still can’t walk and still doesn’t really have sensation. They’re sending her and Ma to a research facility in Three that said they may have…more options. Experimental, of course, but it may be worth a shot.”

“Oh, she’s tough. Tougher than I gave her credit for, I think. Tough enough to go into a combat zone. Tough enough to endure all these months. She’s already said if she can’t walk she’s determined to be hell in a wheelchair.” He couldn’t help but laugh at that. Prim Everdeen had come a long way from the scared little twelve-year-old Katniss had shoved aside on Reaping Day. It made him think of Ash, and the man in that Peacekeeper file, and who his brother had become. “She talks to Peeta a lot. I think it helps her.”

“Probably so. So no Capitol and no Three.”

“We got some other totally random offers that are just folks wanting to brag we were living in their district. But Six asked me to come join their surveyors, because if we’re tearing down border fences and the like there’s gonna be a lot more mapping going on of all the old borderlands. Sounds like all they have are maps where there are powerlines from Five? So that’s still not much. And I know my way in the woods, Haymitch, and I kind of like that.”

He hid a grin, hearing his guess had been spot on. “I’ll talk to Lizzie while I’m there. She’s a good sort, think you’ll like her.” He didn’t mention that even with what he knew of Six, it might be a bit of a culture shock. Katniss was adaptable. “You get me the name of who’s taking you on and I’ll check ‘em out too, make sure it’s all fair dealing.”

“Thanks. Do it for Peeta too, right? I don’t remember the name, but one of the master painters,” he was thankful Johanna wasn’t there to make some wisecrack about the sound of those two words, “in
One asked him to come apprentice.”

“Chantilly and Niello will help look after him, she’s a good friend of mine. And they do really nice art in One. He’s good already, but untrained. He’ll learn a lot by being there.”

She nodded again, decisively, as if she’d heard what she’d needed to hear. “Six and One aren’t that far,” she mused. “They’re both in the northwest. I mean, if we’re getting inter-district travel, he and I might be able to see each other sometimes. And come back to Twelve too, of course, for some holidays and the like?”

“We’ll miss you,” he told her sincerely. Chances were they’d settle in Twelve eventually, and he was pleased they were getting the opportunity to go live fuller, happier lives. Didn’t mean he wouldn’t miss the two of them sometimes.

“Well, it won’t be right now. I know eighteen’s old enough to go work and do that training, but I think we’ll wait until we’re nineteen and don’t need you or Ma signing everything for us. Plus I want some more time at home before I go. Peeta and I need it. If they really want us, they’ll wait another year until next fall.”

That earned a real grin from him—demanding girl, setting her own terms. It would get her far in life. “Good. Don’t let ‘em badger you into doing something you don’t want.”

She nodded over to the sand castle. “I think that thing’s getting big enough for Buttercup to live in.” Glancing over, he had to agree. “I’ll go make sure it stays sane.” No uncomfortable leave-takings between them—he always enjoyed that.

He headed over to go talk to Annie. He had to admit, the feel of the sun on his skin felt good. “Thanks for the camera-free zone,” he said, as they watched Finnick in the surf again, trying to coax Katniss in. “I think it’s doing us all some good.”

Annie made a wry face and said, “Well, even I’ve got my baby weight to show off,” she gestured to the thickness at her waist visible in her swimsuit, “so the cameras wouldn’t love any of us.”

“That’s nothing to be ashamed of,” he told her. “That’s from giving a life.”

“And your scars are from saving lives,” she returned neatly, sitting up and laying Maggie down gently on the blanket. “The ones you saved from the arena by letting yourself be left behind, and the kids and Peeta you saved in the Capitol. So there you have it. Nothing to be ashamed of either.”

He was left with nothing to say against that, and he could only shake his head and acknowledge it. “Point taken.”

“Finn and I will be moving to Twelve. We’ll take the hovercraft back with Katniss and Peeta,” she said softly.

“You’re really OK with it?”

She rubbed her hands up and down her arms, a little nervously. “I don’t like to leave, no. Finn and me, we’re a part of this place. But we’re going where people care about us, where we’ll have a future for us, and to give Maggie. That’s going to be far more important.”

“It’ll be good having you there.” He gave her a wry grin. “We’ll do our best to get you through the first winter.”

She gave a soft moan of dismay. “Oh, don’t get me thinking about that already.” But she was smiling
as she said it.

They spent the entire day at the beach, even into sundown, starting a fire with some of the driftwood washed up and dried among the dunes. The salt dried in the wood made the flames flicker with occasional hints of blue and green and red and purple, catching with a hiss.

Johanna jabbed the fire with a stick, sending a spray of embers floating into the night sky, winking like fireflies. The rhythmic roar of the breakers and the crackling of the flames made for an oddly soothing rhythm. “All we need is some marshmallows,” Annie teased, moving closer to Finnick as he put an arm around her shoulders.

He saw Katniss looking around warily. “What’s got you so jumpy?” Johanna asked, tossing the stick into the fire. The flames made a snapping noise as the new wood caught flame. “Afraid of monsters in the dark?”

Peeta chuckled lowly. “I take it you’re not?” he teased her gently.

Johanna laughed in return. Hearing the idea of monsters in the dark, he was remembering the long and lonely years with the mutts he’d known were just waiting for night to fall to come find him where he was sleeping alone and totally vulnerable. He remembered desperately trying to stay awake until dawn and then falling into an exhausted sleep with a knife clutched in his hand. He couldn’t help an instinctive shudder. Johanna must have sensed it since she pressed against him lightly in reassurance, nudging him, letting him know it was OK. It would be. He might still have those dreams left over from a terrified boy sometimes, or dreams of the jungle of the Third Quell, but when he went to sleep he wasn’t alone and defenseless. When he woke in terror he would never be alone and that made all the difference. “Oh, hell no, Hotbuns,” she said, shrugging. “In Seven, we wrestle bears for fun. You think a little darkness is going to mess with my head?”

“Really?” Katniss said, half-interested, half-surprised. He heard a strangled sound from Finnick as he tried to not burst out laughing. Well, wasn’t Katniss’ fault exactly that she’d actually believe it. Raised isolated in one district and unlike most other victors, she’d never gotten much chance to get to know others. Her only knowledge of Seven would have been through whatever skewed lens the Capitol chose to present. Even he had to admit he didn’t know a hell of a lot about Seven, but at least he knew enough to not believe what Johanna was trying to sell. Bet Katniss’ seen that bear wrestling scene in “Splendor in the Forest” a few too many times, he thought with a grin.

“It’s our district sport, Kittycat,” Johanna said with utter solemnity, face betraying not a flicker of how she was obviously playing them. “Every autumn when the lumbering’s done we hold a bear wrestling competition. We have to do it before they hibernate, you see.”

He tried to not laugh his ass off. It was no easy task, but he managed, and he decided to get into the joke himself. “Don’t you have something with shark boxing here in Four, Finn?” he asked Finnick, his voice somehow betraying not a single quiver of laughter. He’d had to become a good actor over the years.

“You mean shark punching?”

Peeta shook his head, leaning back further against the piece of driftwood he and Katniss were using for a backrest. “Are you for real?”

“Absolutely,” Finnick promised, his expression absolutely serious. “It’s a test every would-be boat captain has to endure to prove he’s brave enough to not panic in the face of danger. Swimming with the sharks and fighting one—a good hit on the snout usually does it.” He resisted the urge to shake his head, enjoying how Finnick had just jumped right in on the joke too.
It was a good ten seconds, but it was Finnick that finally broke first and starting howling with laughter, and the rest of them quickly joined in.
Sitting there, throwing another log on the fire, and putting his arm around Johanna’s shoulders, he could only think that nights like these, safe and happy in the company of these people that had become his family, were very good indeed.
The first thing to do, they agreed, was to bury Actaeon out in the woods. There were plenty of corpses inside the fence that would be left to the summer heat and the scavengers. Kallanthe tried not to think about Naevia, just letting that part of her mind go dark. There would be time to cry later but it wasn’t now. Actaeon was here with them and he had been one of their own, their friend. This one small bit of caring was something they could do for him. But with no shovels, it was a makeshift job at best. Blistered hands on tree branches, sweating in the July heat, they scraped at the earth to dig. They were all tired and hungry and thirsty, and Kallanthe saw Albus’ arm was bleeding again through the bandage, but they grimly pushed on.

Nobody said anything. No words seemed to be enough for the horrors they’d just been through. Two burial rites had never been big on speeches anyway, and none of them knew any of the rites of Eight, where he’d been born. Silently standing around the scratched-out grave, right first pressed over their hearts, they gave a fallen brother his salute. “Bye, Teon,” she heard Myrina murmur softly as they turned away to go.

It was after a short hike away from the grave that she seemed able to speak again. She halted the three of them, and looked them over, green eyes tired, brown hair straggling out of the neat regulation hairstyle. “We can’t stay here,” she said flatly, perching on a fallen log. “So we decide what to do now.”

She was senior officer of this group. That went without saying. She and Albus were both first-tours, and Purnia was a second-tour. But instead she was speaking to them as friends, as fellow survivors, rather than trying to stick to the rank hierarchy. “There’s nothing really to the north,” Purnia spoke up first, shaking her head. “That’s where the ruins of Thirteen are. Sure, we’d get to the eastern edge of Eight if we skirt Lake Weaver, but considering the reports out of there before the Quell—”

“I’m not jumping into another fight for the Capitol,” Albus said fiercely. “Fuck that. Fuck all of it. The Capitol just tried to kill us.”

“Keep it down, Albus,” Myrina told him, shaking her head. “Time for discussing loyalties and all that shit later. Right now, we’ve gotta figure out where to go to stay alive.”

Albus accepted the rebuke with a quick nod. “Sorry. North is no good. Eight’s too damn far and it’s a mess. I wouldn’t go south.”

“You’re from Eleven, yeah?” Purnia said, looking him over. She didn’t have to say his coppery skin was fairer than most people Kally had seen on television from Eleven. The reddish hair and green eyes were a giveaway too that he wasn’t pure district blood by any means. But hell, half the Peacekeeper corps probably wasn’t, between kids born to a district parent, and those whose Peacekeeper parents had been born in different districts and married after mustering out after their twenty years.

“Yeah,” he agreed tersely. “And we heard the rumors of unrest there over the last year. I know from growing up Eleven they do not,” he looked at each of them in turn, “take too kindly to Peacekeepers there. And we’re an odd-looking group to be anything else, at least in Eleven. If we want to keep our brains in our skulls, I wouldn’t be going south in a big hurry.”

“Then the only option left is west, then,” she said, unsettled by the odd look on Albus’ face, some odd mixture of chagrin and anger and shame and confusion, “to Ten.” She sighed, automatically seeing the problem. “But I was posted there before I got seconded here. I could get recognized.” She
thought about it a bit more. “But we were out on the collectives, got all together in the district center so rarely. And you know how it is. People usually only see a uniform. If we—if we avoid the far north, with the hog farms, and we head towards the central district, or even south towards the cattle ranches, chances are nobody there will know me.”

“I’d say it would be smartest to go to the district center first,” Purnia spoke up, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand. Her fair skin was already starting to look a little pink. “More chance of finding out what the hell’s going on, more chance to lose ourselves in a crowd too.”

“Point,” Myrina acknowledged. “Kally, you know best where we’re going, how’s your orienteering?”

Albus actually spoke up first. “She was top of the class at the Peacehome.”

Along with healing, that had been one of the few other things she’d been good at as a kid. It must have been from a childhood out in the woods working with the lumbering crews and knowing how to find her way, even without a compass. The knowledge was there, belonging to whoever little Hannelore had been, and apparently it wasn’t linked to her conscious memory because while she could access that skill, she couldn’t remember using it at all.

She’d actually been top of the class too at training camp, but Albus didn’t know that. Hearing him talk about her with something like actual admiration, she felt her cheeks glowing hot with more than just the miserable heat. What was he getting on about anyway? Was this some stupid game to him again? “Must be instincts from growing up in Seven,” she said curtly, not wanting to delve too deep into that. “West is that way,” she nodded, heading off in that direction already. “But we ought to find some water.” Not that their two small canteens would go that far.

“I’ll go,” Albus volunteered. “Look on the edges where it’s less burned. See if I can’t find something useful. We can’t go walking into the mountains with just these clothes, no food, no weapons, and no water.” He shook his head. “I ain’t of a mind to have us in our own little Hunger Games here.”

It took her a moment to realize what he meant because of course Two’s tributes always had food and water and shelter and weapons, right from the Cornucopia. He was referring to the sorry little district kids that got killed off quickly. She didn’t remember Games back in Seven, but given their poor track record, almost as bad as Eleven, watching them must have been rough for her as a little girl. She had another momentary recollection of terror and desperate hope, something too intimate to be just watching another kid from her district get killed on television. Her heart had been in her throat. Who had it been that had died in the arena? They must have died in there because Johanna Mason was Seven’s only recent victor. Best friend? A boy she’d had a crush on? A sibling? No, Max and Inge had been her only siblings, hadn’t they? If she’d had a sibling killed in the arena, would they have told her at the Peacehome or would they have taken the chance to just let how quickly they’d died be forgotten to help her make the break from the scared, weak little Seven girl she’d been? But why should she doubt the system? They’d taken her in, after all.

The Capitol bombing had upended her entire world. What had once been utterly certain was now cast in shadow. Doubt had suddenly crept in, like water flowing into the first tiny crevices worn into a rock, and it threatened to crack everything.

Forcing herself out of that, she told herself sternly to pay attention to the present. Myrina nodded. “We’ll all go. No sense separating now.” With relief, she realized that Myrina would stick to their partner teams here because she had the weird sense that given half a chance, Albus would jump at the chance to talk to her. Maybe he wasn’t as much of an ass as he’d been at eighteen, but she was in no hurry to give him another opportunity to try to deceive her again.
They spent the rest of the day preparing for the journey west. The flames were still burning in the town. The ash was falling like grey snow and the smell of burning wood and burning flesh hung in the air. Some of the homes on the edge of the district, in the far reaches of the Seam, were less damaged and yielded some useful items. She shook her head again at how spare these peoples’ lives had been. Thinking about the grinding poverty, and how even these sad lives had been cut so brutally short, some part of her felt guilty at taking a battered canteen probably carried down in the mines, or a carefully mended shirt, or the handful of bruised strawberries carefully hoarded in someone’s kitchen along with depressing tesserae grain rations. They don’t need them, she reminded herself, but at the same time she was hoping that if there was a spirit after death, the people of Twelve would forgive her. Stupid, really—they’d probably disliked her for wearing the white to begin, and for raiding their houses for what meager things they’d had? They’d probably loathe her. But she had to do it in the interest of surviving.

They gathered up again, silently ditching their torn, bloody, sooty Peacekeeper uniforms. None of them said anything about it, though Purnia and Myrina had a faintly pained expression, as if cutting off a hand. But then, they’d both been raised in Two. Dressed in the worn clothes that had once belonged to Twelve’s miners, she tried to imagining recognizing herself in the jeans and shirt, a faded green kerchief tying her hair back. Shouldering the crude sack carrying the meager supplies she’d scrounged up, she nodded towards the west again.

They left and they didn’t look back towards the ruins of District Twelve. She was relieved when, a ways into the woods, the smell faded and the eerie stillness gave way to the sounds of living things. She may have lived the last years of her life far away from the woods, but it felt familiar, comfortable.

Slowly during those first few days, as if forced by necessity, realizing the three of them were depending on her, a handful of the skills that must have been her birthright came back to her, a flicker of memory or a wisp of remembrance. Her mother’s voice, telling her, Now you look here at this, you see the way the leaf looks almost striped, light and dark? This is safe to eat. It’ll be good in the stew tonight.

Surprisingly, Albus could rig a few simple snares. Though she had the familiar sense she’d once known them, the technique remained frustratingly elusive, no matter how hard she tried to force her way into those memories. It didn’t do them any good during the day on the move, but when he set them up near their night camp, usually he’d have at least a rabbit to show for his troubles. “Didn’t learn that at the Peacehome,” Myrina said with a sigh of relief, tucking into a piece of a fat badger on their fourth night in the woods.

“Worked in the groves as a kid,” Albus said. “I was from the far south district—almost near the Four border. We’d have to rig up snares to catch the pests before they’d come on and eat all the fruit. We had some of the better Peacekeepers. The ones that understand when it’s good to live and let live, you know? The ones on the cotton and the rice and the sugarcane, heard they were real harsh, but most of ours let us take the catch home for the stewpot. Some of the windfall fruit too, sometimes, since it was bruised and the Capitol wouldn’t want it. No shaking the trees to make it happen—you know that shit got people punished, and they’d check what we were taking. But so long as we kept it honest, and so long as we weren’t stupid enough to ever talk back or cause trouble,” an odd note of something like trepidation crept in his voice, “they usually dealt straight with us.” His voice brightened again as he went on, “So we’d have peaches and plums, almonds sometimes too. Lemons. Oranges—we’d usually get an orange a week if we were lucky. Tangerines and satsumas, blood oranges, these really sweet pinky-orange ones that I don’t recollect the name for…”

“Stop it,” Purnia groaned, chewing on a sorry-looking cracker. “I haven’t had an orange in years, Al, you’re going to make me start drooling.”
“None of us have,” Myrina pointed out softly. “Not exactly in the rations. Though I suppose we were still eating better than some of the places we were assigned. In Nine,” she shook her head, “there was the famine there, my first tour. “ Kally remembered at the Peacehome things had been more spare than usual. “The mill workers were starving, but they were swallowing handfuls of grain from the bins as they took it to be ground to flour. It swelled in their stomachs,” and from the look on her face, it had been a horrific memory. Apparently Twelve had shaken some things like that loose and brought them to light again. “Put them down on the ground in agony. Of course, the response to that? Executing someone for theft of Capitol supplies who can’t even stand up because they’re too weak and in too much pain …”

“You don’t believe that. Like I didn’t see you spinning a line of bullshit to Head Thread about his having administered the ‘prescribed punishment’ for Katniss Everdeen’s cousin,” Albus contradicted her. There was a glimmer of something raw and angry and hurt on his face. “You saw what he did to Darius, Purnia.”

“Someone had to do it before he just whipped that boy to death,” Purnia snapped at him, blue eyes glittering in the firelight. “And we both knew it wasn’t going to be you, was it? Darius was always stronger.”

Albus flinched as if he’d been struck. “Hey!” Kally spoke up, not sure why she was compelled to do it for fucking Albus, but something about the way he simply took it in silence, a look of something almost like shame on his face, stirred something in her. Maybe it was just ordinary compassion.

Getting to his feet, Albus just shook his head and told Purnia wearily, “I’m sorry, all right?” Then he headed off into the woods, mumbling something about needing to set his snares. Kally knew damn well they were already set. Glancing over at Myrina, the older woman nodded. Obviously she was going to try to settle Purnia down—her rank and how they naturally followed her leadership would help that. That left her to go chase after Albus—oh, joy.

She found him, sitting down on a log, head down. Like instinct, she sat down beside him, remembering how they’d used to do that at the Peacehome. They’d shared each other’s troubles. He’d had a hard time adjusting too, always been the quieter, gentler type. He’d been her best friend. She still couldn’t understand just how that had all been a lie.

He was bigger than he’d been that last summer at the Peacehome. He’d filled out more. “She and Darius met when Purnia got sent here last year to start her second tour. They were good friends,” Albus said, not quite looking at her. “I think she was hoping for more, but…no point. We’d all have been split up in a couple years anyway when we moved to our second duty rotation. But she’s right. She and Darius were the ones who stood up to Head Thread. I just kept my head down and hoped it would be over soon.”

Privately she thought that from what she’d heard about Eleven, the fear of rebellion there was so acute that enforcement was usually pretty harsh, more like what she’d experienced in Twelve since her arrival. Even Albus’ recollection of his childhood being decent except for the fear of what would happen at the slightest slip spoke pretty clearly. It seemed like he’d been taught to instinctively respect the authority of the white uniform long before he ever wore it. He shook his head. “I don’t know what they did to him. Whether he’s alive or dead or…”

She remembered the boy she’d known at the Peacehome, full of mischief and humor, mouthy and good-natured. Albus had been closer to him. Darius had always been a little too overwhelming for
her, with his constant teasing and flirting, but he’d been kind to her. They both knew chances were he was either an Avox or dead. Disappearing without a word or a trace was even more terrifying in a way than knowing his fate. “I know.”

“I’m sorry,” he blurted too, glancing over tentatively to look at her. “She’s right. I’m a coward.”

She was personally more inclined to think he was a lying, insensitive jackass than a coward, but something about the look on his face cut short her usual confused, resentful hurt thoughts towards him. “And why is that?” she asked cautiously. Maybe he’d just feed her more bullshit, but something just didn’t fit in all this.

He stayed that way, halfway towards looking at her, like he was on the verge of being able to look away at the blink of an eye. “You know,” he mumbled. “That…you and me, before we went away to training camp?”

The way his voice lifted at the end, like it was actually some kind of question, tugged at her anger. It hadn’t been in doubt. “Oh, I know,” she answered him. “I know you pestered me and pressured me and talked me into sleeping with you, and then you turned around and told everybody.” She was shocked, at least a little. She wasn’t the sort to spark a confrontation, just spit out angry words like that. But it felt good. She’d been the one paying the price for it. “I thought you were my friend,” and that was maybe the most damning accusation of all.

“I know that!” He let out what almost sounded like a cry of protest. “I know, all right? But it wasn’t me spreading rumors, it was… it was… I was talking to Darius out in the yard. Then Tiberius overheard, and you know he was always bullying everyone else. He heard it and he started making fun, and I should have said something, but I didn’t. I knew if I did he’d be twice as hard about it because then he’d know it mattered, and I figured we had only two weeks to go and we were headed for different training camps…then when I tried to talk to you, you just wouldn’t say anything!”

“Probably because by that time it had gotten around that hey, Albus fucked Kallanthe and she was nothing to brag about!” But in a way it made sense. Tiberius had always loved to throw his weight around and make the other kids miserable. He’d always been jealous of Darius anyway, probably because Darius had more luck with girls than he did. Stupid ass that he was, Tiberius never seemed to realize a Two girl respected strength and fighting prowess and honor, not picking on those that were weaker like it proved something. So he’d picked on Albus before, quiet Albus who didn’t have Darius’ quick and ready tongue. “Why were you talking to Darius about it anyway? Bragging?”

Now he did look away. His voice softened a little bit. “No. I was… was asking his advice. Because he’d been with his share of girls and I figured he’d know better what to do. That, with you? That was my first time too.”

Well, that explained a few things. Namely why he’d seemed so shy and clumsy too, and why it had been over with so quickly. She was left staring at him. It wasn’t like they were expected to have sex with each other, but she doubted hardly anyone graduated training camp still a virgin. For a Peacekeeper cadet, facing twenty years of unrelenting service and having to be discreet when it came to sex—whether with locals or with each other was a daunting prospect. With condoms readily available, most of them didn’t hesitate to give in to their hormones at least a little, either at the Peacehome or training camp or both. She’d assumed Albus had before. She’d known she was probably the exception in that she’d never felt comfortable enough with a boy to do it. “What was making you think there would be a second time anyway for you to use that advice? You made me feel like a stupid little girl until I gave in and slept with you. ‘Come on, Kally,’ you said, ‘nobody wants to go to training camp still a virgin!’”

He seemed to wilt under the force of her fury. “I’m sorry,” he said again, now not daring to meet her
eyes. “I was trying to be like Darius. Because I couldn’t be me.”

“Why the hell not?” She’d liked him, funny and sincere, more than Darius. She’d certainly liked Albus more than his apparent attempts to be like Darius.

“What could I say? I had nothing I could offer you, not the way it was! ‘Never mind that we’re gonna be going to different camps and I probably won’t even see you for the next twenty years, but you should wait for me because I’ve been in love with you for three years now’? I was trying to show you I liked you without putting that on you, because sex was all we could have! I didn’t think anyone would be waiting twenty years for me,” and that last bit was said with such awkward self-deprecation she almost hurt to hear it.

He loved her, had loved her for years before that? There was sheer sincerity in his voice that seemed to prove it, and how she could be furious with him and love him all at the same time, she didn’t know. So he’d been in love with her and because it couldn’t go anywhere, he’d put on the slick charmer act to try to have what little they were allowed. “You should have just said,” she told him. “It would have been better than you teasing me into it. You think I couldn’t handle knowing chances were we wouldn’t ever be in the same district? At least if I slept with you before we left, it would have been something I wanted. Because I loved you too.” That was why she’d felt so betrayed by this Albus she didn’t know and didn’t understand, who’d turn her into an object of mockery. “And at least it should have been my choice whether I loved you enough to wait twenty years for you or not.”

She remembered how awkward and tense she’d been. He’d offered her nothing in the way of romance going into it, asking her like he had; and after she’d made up her mind she’d pretty much just hurried on and done it before she could back down. It felt more like being at the infirmary for some kind of nerve-wracking procedure, getting rid of her virginity, than anything she’d really been eager for at that moment. She remembered the shy kisses and touches he’d tried to give her, and how they had made her feel even more panicked and awkward. She’d turned away from his kisses and begged him, Just do it, will you? That had just seemed to make him clumsier. “You weren’t ready for it either,” she guessed.

“I thought I was. I thought I had to be, because it was the only chance I’d have with you.” He was looking down at his hands now, fingers nervously flexing. “It got to the point…you sounded so impatient with me and I was just ready to have it over, because I knew I sucked, and it was nothing like what I’d hoped it would be.”

She couldn’t help but ask, “What did you hope it would be like?” She’d had her daydreams about what it might be like with him, and the further it got away from those, the worse she’d felt. Hearing that he’d been awkward and nervous too somehow helped.

“Better than ten minutes in your room that ended with you looking ready to cry,” he said bluntly. “I wanted it to be something that if that was all we’d have for ten, twenty years, or maybe ever, that it would be a memory worth keeping. That was why I went to go talk to Darius. I figured if you’d maybe give me another chance…”

“Then Tiberius happened,” she said grimly. Tiberius and his big fat mouth spreading rumors, the rumors that had made the end of her time at the Peacehome hellish, as well as her start at Burnt Tree Camp. The rumors that had made her doubt her own self since then, and doubt her judgment in being in love with the boy who’d used and embarrassed her like that. Somehow, hearing him explain it like this helped define it, and cut it down to size. It still had hurt, but it was a manageable thing now, a boy’s foolishness rather than having to question her very foundations.

“I should have told you I loved you and I’d wait twenty years for you. I should have told Tiberius to
fuck off and that it was none of his business. I should have told Head Thread to stop whipping that kid. I should have said a lot of things these last months in Twelve. I didn’t.”

The loathing in his voice, touching on memories of him coming to her in despair at the Peacehome, made her instinctively reach out and put a hand on his shoulder. “You fucked up with me,” she figured they might as well at least acknowledge it. “But I screwed up too. I could have told you we needed to stop. I should have, because I knew pretty quickly this wasn’t how I’d wanted it with you. I think some part of me knew you weren’t enjoying it either but I was determined to get through it, and I was…angry with you for getting us into it.” She wasn’t sure she’d consciously realized it at the time, but she could remember the hot feel of that anger now, the thought of, You started this by embarrassing me, so you’d better finish it mingled with her self-consciousness and panic.

She thought of the people in Twelve, of friends and families and lovers who’d had everything snuffed out in an instant of pain and terror. She thought about Naevia, dead in the ruins, and how Euskal might never know what had happened to her. She could hardly risk going there to tell him. He’d hurt her, but obviously he’d beat himself up plenty over it, for his sense of weakness. Perhaps there had been more than enough suffering without prolonging this. They’d been so young, so foolish, and against what they’d been through now it seemed to pale in comparison. Neither of them had meant to make such a mess of it by being too scared to say things. “Let’s just put it behind us. We were both young and dumb and didn’t speak up. We’ve both learned there’s a lot more in the world beyond the Peacehome. Maybe none of us were what we’d want to be then, but we’re still alive. There’s a chance now to make it right.” He may have been too afraid for things in the past, but that didn’t mean he had to be that way for life.

The look he gave her, full of a tentative but dawning hope, warmed her heart in a way that she hadn’t felt since arriving in Twelve. There was her friend again, the boy she had loved. He reached up and carefully took her hand in his. “Friends?” he asked softly.

She nodded, relieved that he didn’t press for more than that. She wasn’t ready to think about that with him yet. Perhaps she’d forgiven him, and come to understand it more, but that didn’t make everything better in an instant. The bulk of her feelings about what had happened hung around waiting to be carefully worked through, and besides, the situation right now, fighting each day for survival, took precedence over things like romance. But he would be her friend and they would help each other. After losing Naevia and others in Twelve, to find that an old friendship had been bent but not broken felt pretty damn reassuring right now, and she could imagine losing Darius and others made him feel that same lonely vulnerability. Holding on to his hand for a minute, eventually she let it go. “We should get back.”

Apparently Myrina and Purnia had a good talk, and even if there was some reluctance in Purnia’s tone, she apologized. With that it seemed like the four of them came together stronger.

Coming down out of the mountains, for days they walked the remains of what must have been huge roads once, wider than she could imagine, meant for automobiles beyond her imagination a century and a half ago in the days of North America. The concrete barriers dividing the middle of the road sometimes were broken and weathered and overgrown with vines and moss. Collapsed bridges lay in ruins too, sometimes crossing over the road, sometimes a part of that road itself suddenly truncated into thin air and forcing them to scramble down the hill to the ground below to find a crossing to where the road began again.

The surface of the road was cracked and broken like a shattered plate, punctuated here and there by the growth of actual trees punching up through those cracks. She could see the ghostly remnants here and there of what must have been brightly colored paint marking the road. There were numerous posts where signs had once been, and some of the signs still hung there, but they too faded or rusted
to read. The rusted remains of some automobiles were there too, though they were so collapsed or broken it was near impossible to tell what they had once looked like—the rubber tires were what gave them away as abandoned automobiles. Sometimes overgrown or collapsed houses were visible along the roadside, or even unthinkably huge buildings far bigger than the Justice Building—she couldn’t even imagine what they had been used for once, or why there would be so many of them together. What signs they may have had were long since disappeared. It was an eerie feeling walking here, Kally thought, among the ghosts of a long-dead civilization, but for heading west away from the smoking ruins of Twelve, it was still easier walking than going through the forested mountains had been.

The mountains gave way to foothills, and then gradually to flatter rivers and plains as they moved far beyond Twelve. They reached the border fence of District Ten after nearly two weeks. At the first farm, obviously a poultry collective, they ended up in the office of the forewoman, a lithe woman with iron-grey hair. “ Came from the fighting down south in Eleven, did you?” she said, studying the four of them and shaking her head. Kally breathed a quick sigh of relief that apparently she was giving them the benefit of the doubt and taking them for rebels. “Hell of a mess, so I hear it. We’ve had people straggling in pretty much ever since the fighting began to regroup, but people from pretty much every district were going in there to make a big push. But at least we kicked the Peacekeepers out in a hurry pretty quickly here—fighting lasted barely a week—and I hear Eleven’s been pretty much taken, except for some pockets here and there.” She wasn’t fully surprised Ten had been taken quickly. The natives knew plenty about how to use weapons, didn’t they? Compared to people in Twelve, people here in Ten had the likes of slaughtering knives, wool shears—so easy to handle, so easy to conceal, so easy to use.

“Oh, that’s so reassuring,” Myrina said, stepping forward and subtly telling them to let her speak up. “Sorry, I’m forgetting my manners. We’ve been sitting here jawing about the war,” because clearly they were quickly given to understand Twelve hadn’t been an isolated incident and it had turned into nationwide war. By the sound of it, they—the Capitol, she couldn’t identify with the people that would have so callously killed her like vermin—were losing. It hurt to hear that brothers and sisters in the Corps were dying out in the field. “And we haven’t even introduced ourselves. I’m Rhiannon. Most people call me Rhee, though.”

That sounded like a Four name to Kally’s ears. Maybe it was actually Myrina’s district name. Immediately she chimed in, “I’m...Hannelore. Lori.” The name, the one that had once belonged to her back in Seven, felt awkward. There was nothing she recognized in it. But for safety, it was better to be thought of as district natives.

Albus nodded. “Jarrah.” He gave the forewoman a faint smile. “Got that name since my mama and daddy came from the rice fields originally.” It made no sense to her, not knowing Eleven names at all, but how he said it, the sound of it was genuine. “But call me Jay.” Looking over at him, she tried the name on him mentally. Jarrah. Jay. She wasn’t sure it felt any more natural right now than “Hannelore” did for her, but he seemed to have an ease with it.

Purnia spoke up, “Holly.”

“Seven?” the forewoman asked, eyeing tall, strong Purnia from Two with her fair skin and blond hair. “You don’t look it.” She nodded towards Kally. “She does.”

“We’re merchants,” Purnia said coolly. “My parents own the butchers.’”

“You do look like one. Fit right in the merchant quarter here,” the forewoman acknowledged with a shrug.

“Sounds like the merchants in every district seem to be those big fair-skinned types,” Myrina said
“They are down in Eleven too,” Albus agreed with a chuckle.

Kally realized with a flash of realization that the merchants here in Ten had looked a lot like those in Twelve, and if Eleven was like that too—she had a sudden flash of a store back in Seven, of hungrily looking at bread at the baker’s. The baker and her dad had both been big, burly men, but her father had been golden-skinned, dark-haired, and the baker had been fair-skinned. When she thought about it, most of the quarry families in Two were darker-skinned. Someone like Enobaria was all the more remarkable for having come from poorer stock. It seemed like Myrina was right, though she didn’t know exactly how it had come about.

“If you grew up a butcher, though,” the forewoman said, “that’s a blessing.” She eyed them again, less with suspicion and more now with a weary sympathy. “We’re sending more and more people to help take to the fight in other districts. Fair is fair, we managed to tip the balance quickly, so now we’re helping with the districts the Capitol is rooted a bit deeper. But you four look like you’ve had your fill of the war already.”

“Pretty much,” Myrina acknowledged softly. That, Kally knew, wasn’t a lie.

“We’re shorthanded here ever since so many people went off to go take to the fight in other districts. The poultry’s doing OK, but I hear they’re looking for hands for the pigs, sheep, and cattle in particular. You’re welcome to stay so long as you’re willing to work for your keep.”

“We’re not afraid of hard work,” Albus piped up, sounding vaguely offended.

“Which is furthest south?” Kally asked, as if she didn’t know. She tried an easy grin, feeling like it looked stupid on her face. “Rhee and Jay here don’t know how to deal with the cold, and if this war lasts a long time and we’re here through the winter…”

A laugh answered that. “Southerners,” she agreed with a grin. “Then you’ll probably want to go for the sheep or the cows. The cows are furthest south, and a skilled butcher would be useful with the beef in particular—they’re really having a hard time down there, I hear.” She nodded towards a battered old truck. “We’ll be heading to the district center tomorrow, in fact, with a delivery. You’re welcome to ride along, and I’m sure you can hitch a ride south from there.”

“Thanks,” Myrina acknowledged.

Finally the smile from the forewoman seemed easy and relaxed. “I’m Fayoumi. Let’s get some dinner in you. You look like you could use a shower and a good meal.”

Clean and in fresh clothes, feasting on chicken that tasted perfect after the tough game they’d been eating, she could hardly believe their good luck.

Myrina gathered them out beyond Fayoumi’s house shortly after dinner. Kally could hear the soft clucking of the chickens in one of the barns nearby. “Remember,” she said in an undertone, “we stick to using our district names from now on.”

“Nice bit of fibbing, P—Holly,” Albus complimented her.

“My parents really were butchers,” Purnia answered him. “They’re dead now. I was the third child. First takes over the business, second marries into another one, third is for the Corps. That’s how it goes.”

“Is your name really Jay?” she asked Albus.
“Yeah,” he said with a nod. “Though I tried so damn hard to forget, to move on. It…it doesn’t feel like it fits yet.”

“Mine doesn’t either,” she told him. “I don’t remember.” Except for the occasional flash of that old life, it was all still a blank. It felt like Hannelore was a stranger even to her.

“Neither do I,” Myrina chimed in. Kally remembered she’d been at the Peacehome ever since she was a baby.

“And mine’s total bullshit,” Purnia added grimly.

“We’ll do what we have to do,” Myrina answered all of them, green eyes shining in the lantern light. “Whatever we have to learn down south to fit in. And when the war’s over, we’ll figure out what to do from there.” Kally felt the surge of relief that none of them had brought up the idea of desertion or treason, or that they owed it to the Capitol to find the Corps and continue the fight. It seemed since the being left to die either by bombs or by starvation in the wilderness by the Capitol, none of them were feeling that much particular loyalty to the white. But without that cornerstone of who she had been, she felt shaky, like she didn’t know quite who to be now. She didn’t have the luxury of worrying about it too much. For now, she’d do her best to just get by, to fit in, to not give any cause for suspicion.

“We’ll survive,” she said softly. They had each other to lean on and somewhere to go, and a soft bed to sleep in tonight. After how they’d spent the last couple of weeks that seemed like more than enough for the moment.
Back to the Capitol again, Johanna thought. So much seemed the same and that was an eerie feeling, like déjà vu all over again. At least last time they had been here it was winter. It was summer, the cool summer of the mountains. The crowds were there, she was dressed far nicer than she would have chosen at home. Grumpily she realized the thinner air at altitude here was even more of a contrast after the humid, sea-level climate of Four, rather than coming here from Seven as she always had before. The adjustment was worse than usual. She felt like she was breathing just a little harder even on something simple as walking.

It couldn’t be because as usual, she kind of wanted to leave. She didn’t even have to look at Haymitch. She could feel the tension in him as he took her arm, that faint current of wary readiness. She had the feeling neither of them would ever be able to entirely let down their guard in this city. Glancing over towards the dome of the Hall of Justice, towering high over the city skyline, she was surprised to see that the damage to the dome and other areas from the rebel bombs and shells from the mountains was being repaired—there was scaffolding erected and everything. She remembered the signs there the day she and Haymitch went to get married, warning “Passerby should beware of the potential for falling masonry”. Capitol pretentious as usual: a fancy way to serve notice of Hey, dumbass, rocks might fall on you.

“Gonna go check it out?” he murmured lowly to her, as they walked towards where Paylor and the rest were waiting. “Nice architecture there, if nothing else.”

He knew her too well. The Capitol knew how to build things to last, if nothing else, and she wanted to help gain that for everyone else. “Probably. Gotta keep myself out of trouble somehow while you’re all busy cock-waving with your politics.” He let out a soft chuff of amusement at that.

It seemed they were the last to arrive. She was surprised to recognize the spouses of some of the mayors they’d met already—apparently given that she was attending along with Haymitch, even if she wasn’t involved in the meetings, Paylor had been savvy enough to invite everyone else to bring someone from their family—mostly spouses, but not always. Someone like Esteban Morath from Five had never married, but he’d brought his brother Voleo instead. Given that Brocade’s own husband Cambric was standing there too, a solidly built man with receding dark hair and a gentle smile as he greeted people, Johanna thought it was a smart play. All of them here knew how to play the cutthroat game of politics, maybe with Corriden Boggs as the sole exception. Maybe Brocade was relying on the family members to keep the delegates less stressed, and maybe also keep them civil and from trying to kill each other.

Spying the familiar face of Hazelle Hawthorne, who’d apparently been invited as Corriden’s girlfriend, she gave the other woman a quick smile and received one in return.

Sassafras Luoma also gave her a nod of greeting. Safra Johnston had been Elmar Luoma’s second wife, and he was her second husband, for that matter, after her first died young out at the camps—just another accident. Probably a good twenty years younger than her husband, she had been in Bern’s class at school. Everyone had been shocked a few years ago that their long-widowed mayor, born to the merchant and artisan class, had married a lumber woman. They’d all noticed the age difference too, and the merchants had mumbled about how a “shameless timber tramp” had taken advantage of his grief. But the lumber families, they’d been satisfied that one of their own now held the ear of the man in power in Seven. Or at least, as much in power as a mayor had been beneath Snow, which wasn’t damn much. The match had always seemed happy, at least, and Johanna thought she spied a faint swell beneath that well-cut jacket as Safra turned to say something to her
husband.

They endured the photo opportunities, and unfortunately Brocade had called a press conference for a historical occasion, so Johanna sighed and took her place. She eyed the reporters—the usual Capitol assortment of serious journalists and celebrity-chasing hacks. Joy Cloudmist was practically shivering with excitement in the front row, her formerly silver-dyed hair now a plain brown, alongside lean, dark, hawk-nosed Virgil Ibis. With those two present, the reports tonight were obviously going to be pretty sensational in nature. Johanna didn’t think she’d ever seen Joy do a broadcast without sounding on the edge of fainting.

When the second question of the press conference was about the style of Brocade’s sky-blue headscarf, Johanna thought wryly that wasn’t the most promising sign that the Capitol had managed to totally shed its old ways. At least some of it was about the peace conference and the future of Panem, though.

Some were obviously there more for publicity for something rather than asking questions of the peace conference delegates. One younger woman piped up, her face and body clear of the typical Capitol alterations. She must have been from a poorer family before the rebellion.

“We at the Fulmer Theater would like to extend our personal invitation to the Panem Peace Delegation to attend the premiere of the new musical, ‘Flight of the Mockingjay’, this Saturday night.”

She heard Haymitch’s low, throaty chuckle at the name of the musical. Should have figured it wouldn’t take long for them to start publicizing things about Katniss and Peeta. She was surprised there hadn’t been some crappy television movie in between their Games and the Quell, to be honest, but the Victory Tour had probably whetted that appetite enough.

With an eager-to-please expression, the woman called, “And of course Haymitch and Johanna and President Paylor have roles in the story. I actually play Katniss! I’ll be excited to portray her, even if she’s not here to see it.” She actually did sound like it. Definitely too tall for Katniss, a good ten years too old, and too fair-skinned, but what the hell, Johanna wasn’t going to kill her enthusiasm. She’d wait to see the musical first and see if it was really that awful before that. Far more fun if she had actual ammunition to use to mock it, she decided. Hopefully they wouldn’t make too much of a hash of her. That was going to be weird—seeing herself onstage, played by someone else.

“Who’s your Peeta?” Haymitch asked with some amusement. She had the feeling the two of them were going to laugh about this in private later, but for now they’d be good sports.

“Oh, we were so lucky. Jolly Frill is playing Peeta.” She felt Haymitch start slightly beside her. “Only the best, you know, for that role. Jol’s the finest young actor we have to offer, his mother and gra—“

“I’m well aware of who his mother and grandmother were,” Haymitch said, and there was a bite of anger in his tone. It didn’t take Johanna long to figure it out, knowing Haymitch’s history as she did. His grandmother had been Gloriana Frill—Secretary of Communications after she left acting, and also the sick bitch who had paid for a seventeen-year-old Haymitch’s virginity. She’d been hanged along with most of Snow’s cabinet this past spring. Not for raping one teenaged boy, as her crimes as one of the highest in power in Panem had provided more than enough reason, but Johanna couldn’t be sorry she’d been hanged. It felt like a small measure of justice.

Glory’s daughter was Jubilation, a famous actress too, and one who’d eagerly paraded Haymitch around for the cameras once she was old enough for her trust fund to kick in and support her buying him for the night. She could remember seeing more than a few pictures growing up of Jubilation Frill being escorted by Haymitch to some event or another—she’d been Haymitch’s most devoted patron, one of the last to finally stop paying for him. She’d been happy to see the news report during those
long winter months that Jubie Frill was far from her old galas and evening gowns: she was currently serving a life sentence in the Detention Center for a decade and a half of making Haymitch into her personal fuck-toy. She hadn’t said anything to Haymitch that day, but she’d held him close that night. She hadn’t been surprised when he reached for her; she’d known he needed to push away the memories with something real, and it felt good to be the one who could do that for him, and know that he could do it for her in turn when the ghosts of Gaius Luna or Thalius Eland or others clung too close to her.

Haymitch recovered enough to say in a kinder, calmer tone, “After all, the name ‘Frill’ is pretty famous in acting by this point.” But she could still sense the subtle waves of anger emanating from him as he struggled to shake it off.

“I’m sure we’ll all be glad to see the production,” Brocade spoke up, soothing things over, and Johanna was grateful for that, and for her taking the attention off Haymitch. Another question came about the future cooperation of the agricultural districts—a surprisingly thoughtful one—and Acarica Watling, Bardoka Dravid, and Fallow Boyce stepped up to take that discussion. She risked brushing Haymitch’s fingers with hers. His hand tightened on hers just for a moment, and then he let go again. Neither of them wanted to give the cameras anything.

She was a little surprised when Virgil asked her, “So with Haymitch taking the part of the District Twelve delegate, Johanna, what’s your plan while you’re here in the city? Do you plan to be involved in the conference?”

“Elmar Luoma’s got Seven well covered,” she nodded to her old mayor, “and Haymitch has Twelve. So nah, I’m gonna leave the political wrangling to him, ‘cause he plays better with others than me,” Johanna said flippantly, nudging Haymitch with her elbow. The reporters responded with the expected chuckle. “While they’re dealing with the laws I’m more concerned with talking to the right people about things like assuring everyone’s gonna have well-constructed housing, clean water, reliable electricity.” To her way of thinking all the laws in the world weren’t as much use if people were still living in squalor in crappy shacks that would collapse if someone breathed too hard. “I see you’re doing a good job rebuilding here, so I’ll be out and around talking to people about that.”

Another hand went up and Brocade gave the nod to let him speak. “Johanna,” the reporter said, the scarlet tattoos on his face and neck still bold and visible, “I represent Selonius Whimsy, who unfortunately right now finds himself languishing in the Detention Center unjustly accused by the Bureau of Investigation for Crimes Against the People.”

Who came up with that mouthful and who the fuck is Selonius Whimsy anyway? Obviously someone was taking the opportunity here for some publicity, maybe to play on her sympathies and get some more punch to his push to get the guy out of jail. “Sorry to hear that, but if he didn’t do it, I’m sure the system is gonna be fair to him and find that out.”

The reporter—must have been a lawyer, actually, she suddenly realized—raised an eyebrow and said with a tone of overacted outrage, “Considering he’s accused of raping you, I would hope you would have the courage to tell the truth?”

Now she really was staring at him. She could almost feel everyone turning to look at her, wanting to read her every reaction. “I don’t…” She honestly had no idea who the hell that was.

“Of course,” Scarlet Tattoos said, stepping forward, “you testified before the War Crimes Council about Capitol citizens engaged in forced prostitution with you, but according to your testimony, that stopped in 69…or perhaps 70, if we count the instances you discussed of trading your favors on President Snow’s orders to gain advantage for Annie in the arena…”
The way he droned it, with a little smirk on his face, like he was just imagining how it had been, like he was remembering those pictures of her barely dressed and enjoying it, made her want to kill him. It made her want to run away at the same time. The way he said *trading your favors* too—as if she’d had a choice, as if she could have just let Annie die, knowing what she meant to Finnick. Somehow, he made her sound cheap and sordid, a whore peddling her body for favors, and she remembered how she could barely walk and barely talk for a few days. There had been no safeguard there of needing to keep her relatively fresh for the circuit. Those few nights still lived sharply in her nightmares. There had been a few moments she’d been convinced they would kill her. Ridiculous, of course: killing a victor would leave too many questions, but in the moment, she’d been terrified she was going to die, that Snow had traded her life for Annie’s.

Lost in those memories, she listened to the lawyer with only half attentiveness, “Mister Whimsy claims he met you at the Pink Pussycat Club during the 72nd Games, and that you accepted his invitation back to his apartment…well, there’s a picture of you coming out of his house quite early the next morning.”

She still couldn’t place Selonius Whimsy. There had been probably a dozen of those photos over the years, splashed everywhere so everyone would see just how naughty Johanna Mason was. 72nd Games? She’d probably fucked a half-dozen people that year. She hadn’t even known their names. She could barely remember their faces. The clubs she’d met them at all tended to blend—loud, dimly lit, booze flowing freely and people looking for a fuck. All she could remember was the anger and the burning need to show them, making fools of them by making them do her bidding, knowing that whatever happened, she controlled it. They’d all been just convenient bodies. Not a one of them touched anything inside her that counted. She should have figured it would come up. It had been too public, too salacious, to just let it rest. “What do you want?” she demanded, her own voice coming out harsh and more panicked than she’d like.

“The truth. BICAP is now engaging in some kind of witch hunt assuming any implication of sexual contact between a victor and a Capitol citizen *must* have involved rape. But he didn’t rape you at all. You slept with him of your own free will, didn’t you? Him, and plenty of others.”

Her mind cast back to Seven, the occasional disapproving murmur of *slut* when her back was turned—never to her face, they were too afraid of her for that. Haymitch may have endured the accusations too in Twelve, but in his case it had all been just the façade he’d had to maintain. In her case it was actually true. She’d fucked Capitol people, and they were never going to let her forget it. Those that hated the Capitol would view her as tainted for having willingly slept with any of them, and the Capitol would smirk that they’d managed to own her at least that much.

*It’ll never come off, will it,* she thought with a mingled panic and rage and despair. She’d finally just come to realize how stupid a coping mechanism it had been, how she’d gained nothing by it except feeling even more lost and angry every summer. Since then she’d learned better; in Haymitch’s arms she’d found that sense of power that she’d desperately sought by aggressively fucking strangers. She’d gotten it right and wanted to forget who she’d been then, but it would never go away because it was all so public and people like this asshole lawyer wanted to keep shoving it in her face and mocking her with it. She’d never be free of her own stupid mistakes and at any moment someone like this idiot could just spring it on her again, drag her right back into the past. That gathering darkness was there again, at the edge of her mind. It was too much, and the thought that they were right there with their fucking cameras to catch her if she lost it just made the feeling all the worse. She couldn’t break, and especially not so publicly. They’d caught it on camera once at the reaping but she wasn’t going to give them that again. “Johanna,” he prompted impatiently, “do you have a response to that?”
“Give her a minute,” she heard Haymitch’s reply, tense with concern. She thought she was going to be sick.

“We know she’s very good at faking weakness when it suits her,” came the derisive reply. “But I think the country deserves to know—”

“Back. Off,” Haymitch actually snarled. “And give her a minute here. You try dealing with a few years of being whored out and people just bringing it up as a fucking publicity stunt. Shut up until she responds or I’ll come down there and shut your smarmy little mouth for you.” She didn’t look at him but she could feel him bristling, and knew that the charming, diplomatic man who’d chuckle at the idea of the “Mockingjay” musical had slipped away. This was the darkness in him that came out of the arena, the victor of the 50th Games, the man who’d spent his entire adult life as a sex slave—a man who could become angry and even violent when threatened. She was put in mind of an amiable pet dog that had suddenly transformed into a fighting wolf without warning.

He’d jump to her defense and he’d fight for her, even if it made him look impatient and angry, and she knew on the verge of a peace conference, that wasn’t the wisest move. But she mattered to him enough to do it. More than that, he wasn’t moving to take over for her, to fight the battle for her and make her look weak and incapable. He was shielding her so she could put herself back together.

Haymitch believed in her. Her fists were clenched and she was trying to not shake, trying to not want to puke, and fighting back the unbearable weight of it before it could overpower her.

The slight pain of her nails cutting into her palms, and the awareness of Haymitch right by her side, was reality enough to break through. With effort, she shoved the looming mass of it back. *Not today. Not in front of them.* It gave way reluctantly, but the harder she pushed the more it responded. She could feel it there still, but it was distant enough to not be an imminent threat now.

Instinctively, she wanted to rip him a new asshole. But that wasn’t going to help. If she did that she was just going to be the vicious little bitch they wanted her to be. She nodded to Haymitch, an unspoken *thanks*. Glancing down at Whimsy’s lawyer, she tried to keep her voice even as she could. “I probably slept with him. I slept with enough Capitol people.” Might as well get it out there and get it over with. “Because after I’d been raped repeatedly by some of the Capitol’s finest,” she let herself indulge in a slight sarcastic edge, “I wanted to feel…like I was in control again. That I could go out and this time it would be my choice to be able to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to someone here in the Capitol, and that it would go the way I said it would. No, if it was after the 70th Games, he didn’t rape me. None of them did. But,” unwilling to let Whimsy or any of them be painted as poor innocent little lambs who’d run into bad slutty Johanna Mason, “none of them ever wanted to know why a victor was in such a hurry to fu—sleep with them five minutes after meeting them. Only a few ever turned me down. None of them cared at all. They all just wanted to brag they’d been with me. So, sure, go tell BICAP to release him.” She stared at him, trying to project a confidence she didn’t fully feel, trying in a rush to get through it, trying to not just start yelling at him for trying to turn this into her shame once again, some Capitol asshole feeling like he had the right to do that. “And I know you did this here just so you could get publicity for yourself. I would still have told the truth if you’d asked me in private. From now on, anyone else subject to BICAP investigation who has legal questions about who I did or didn’t sleep with, you come talk to me off-camera. Otherwise, stay away from me with your cameras, and stay away from Haymitch. We’re both done being forced to make our sex lives public for peoples’ personal jerk-off fantasies.” If they had to edit the tape before the broadcast because of her language, that was just too fucking bad.

She looked over towards Haymitch for confirmation on that, and the look she saw on his face, the admiration and affection shining openly in his eyes, was more than answer enough. It warmed her through and through to see it. He was the only person at this conference whose good opinion she really gave a damn about, in the end.
As she stepped back, she felt his hand at her waist for a moment. With that, Brocade glanced over at the two of them, then back at the reporters, and said sternly, “From now on we’re keeping it strictly to questions about the peace conference.”

With that Virgil raised a meek hand. “There was a question of whether or not a Capitol delegate might be involved in the negotiations?”

Corduroy Yasbeck from Eight said dryly, “I don’t recall the Capitol let the districts negotiate in the Treaty of the Treason.” There was a thread of anger in his voice, though she could imagine why. Aside from Twelve, Eight had been one of the hardest-hit districts during the rebellion, thanks to their winter uprising and being occupied by Peacekeepers for months prior to the Quell. The Capitol had been particularly merciless.

“Roy,” Brocade murmured softly, too low for anyone not on the stage to hear. Corduroy gave a sigh and nodded.

“A Capitol delegate has been invited to share in the negotiation sessions, but it’s undecided whether they’ll have voting power or not. That will be up to the thirteen districts,” Brocade said smoothly, “and will be resolved during our first session tomorrow.”

Strange how monumental that seemed—a president who would let people choose something, and what role the Capitol would play in Panem’s future.

It would have been easier to want to include them fully as equals if they’d shown a change of heart, but maybe it was too much, too soon. They were still concerned with frivolous things right alongside what actually mattered. But they treated the mayors from the districts—the asshole lawyer excepted—with respect rather than gawking at them like curiosities or barbarians, and she could sense the wariness in them that she’d seen in the districts. They were as afraid for their own future as anyone. But at least Brocade wasn’t shutting them out entirely. She was letting them at the table, letting them speak and try to negotiate and persuade. It just mattered now whether the Capitol’s opinion counted when it came to the numbers.

Finally the thing ended. Brocade came over, obviously intending to pull them aside for a minute. “I’m sorry,” she said, looking a bit upset, arms crossed over her chest. “I debated whether I should have cut off his question and told him to stand off, but…”

She shook her head. “It would have made it look like I had something to hide, and that you weren’t interested in getting to the truth. You can’t afford them thinking that,” she said it bluntly. Brocade had built her reputation on fairness, particularly at the War Crimes Council. To look like she was going back on that now with BICAP would potentially be devastating.

Brocade looked at her a long moment, brown eyes thoughtful, and then finally nodded. “For what it’s worth, I think you handled it very well.”

“Don’t be surprised if I ask the delegates for some show of support of victor privacy,” Haymitch said. To most anyone else his tone would have been nonchalant, but Johanna could pick up on the faint current of temper under it. “Jo’s right. We’ve had to give the Capitol, and the nation, too much of our lives on camera already.” He straightened slightly, a moment of tension. “What’s this about a Capitol delegate?”

“I had figured they deserve to hear what’s going on and to participate, but I’d leave it up to you to decide whether you’ll accept them or not as peers in the vote,” Brocade said. “The mayors have been simply dictated to by a president for long enough for them to not take kindly to it continuing with me.”
“Point,” Haymitch acknowledged.

“Either way I’ll do my best to make sure we’re not unduly harsh.” She sighed. “Look, if it was up to me, I’d have given the nod, but I know the feelings in some districts—Eight included—are still fairly strong.”

“I don’t like it. That’s half the population of Panem here in the Capitol. You tell two hundred thousand people they’d better shut up and like it, we’re no better than the old Capitol was. We’re setting ourselves up for a rebellion again in seventy-five years.”

“I’m aware of that,” Brocade said, and Johanna had the sense she was trying to keep a lid on her frayed nerves, “but I’m doing the best I can here. You’ve been in enough districts, you already know how everyone’s got their own views of how it should be—”

“We know,” Johanna told her. “You’re letting them at the table and letting them speak up and be heard. That’s more than Snow ever gave anyone.”

She caught the look of polite skepticism on Haymitch’s face which he managed to conceal by the time Brocade turned back to him. “You’ll all be staying in the Presidential Mansion,” and there was an apologetic tone in her voice. “I realize for you two, that may hold some…”

“Better than the Training Center,” Haymitch said coolly. “Besides, I understand. It’s about the nicest accommodation in the city, and you compliment us by offering us to be your personal guests.”

She nodded in something like blatant relief. “Then we’ll see you at dinner tonight.” She smiled then. “We’d better all get some rest. I have the feeling we’ll need it.”

Once they had extricated themselves from the press, Johanna turned to him as they headed up the Avenue of the Tributes towards the mansion. She tried to not think of last winter and how it had been traveling this same street then, or sitting in those now-empty stands for those summers and watching terrified Seven tributes in their shitty tree costumes. “Thoughts?” she prodded him.

“I don’t like it,” he said bluntly. “If we cut the Capitol out of the vote, the entire nation knows exactly who had the say-so on that. I didn’t like it when Coin tried to pass the responsibility on to us, and I don’t much like it now.” He gave a soft noise of frustration. “Not that I’m saying Brocade’s doing it like Coin. She’s got good intentions by letting us decide rather than just imposing her will, but I’m not sure it’s doing us any favors.”

Brocade was obviously developing that strategic sense to see where the pitfalls of good intentions might lie, but now that Haymitch pointed it out, Johanna could see the parallels. “Either way,” she said, shaking her head, “you’re going to piss people off. If you cut the Capitol out, they’ll be pissed, and the idealists will be pissed. If you don’t, those that didn’t want them on board and want them kept down will be pissed.”

“And they’ll blame the thirteen delegates in that room either way,” he told her wryly.

“Do I even have to ask how you’re voting?”

He gave her a slight smile. “You tell me.”

“I think anyone going into that vote has you already down as a foregone conclusion. You’re the one that led the call for mercy last winter with that propo against Coin. If there’s people in that room looking for reconciliation, they’re gonna be looking to you to speak first.”

“You’ve got a better grasp on the politics than you think.” She saw how people were looking at the
two of them as they passed. There was something almost like hope in their faces. It wasn’t quite the shining, open admiration she’d seen on peoples’ faces towards Katniss during the war. Admiring a symbol during wartime was easier. He wasn’t a symbol, though, he was just a man, and one heading into a real fucking mess of politics rather than the straightforward call to defeat some enemy.

There was a twinge of fear suddenly—in some ways, his being a disappointment had been easier. There was nobody left to let down, nobody to upset in those days. Disgust was pretty universal, not polarizing like this situation might be. People would probably admire or hate him when it was over. “It might make your job tougher,” she realized, “the districts we haven’t been to yet, if you piss their mayors off by going against them.”

“I know,” he sighed, nodding to the dark-suited security guarding the front door of the mansion. From their size and fair skin, she immediately pegged them as being from Two. They were ex-Peacekeepers, probably, as they would be among the few military-trained people in Panem. She wondered how well that had gone over with some people. “And I’m sure they’re already annoyed they fell lower on the priority list to begin. It might fall heavier on you there if I’ve earned myself a place on the shit list.”

“Don’t worry,” she said with a smirk, “if they want to whine, I can just remind them that we can right turn around and leave if they’ve got no interest in help rebuilding.”

He gave a quick laugh. “Very diplomatic, especially if they’re already pissed.”

Being escorted to their room by one of Brocade’s aides, she leaned in and said softly, “I keep telling you, sometimes you think too much. It’ll be how it’ll be. You can’t control everything.” Hearing his snicker at that, and knowing he was commenting on her own former need for controlling everything, she rolled her eyes and swatted him lightly on the arm. “We’ll deal with it when the time comes. You just focus on the treaty first, OK?” One thing at a time; sometimes Haymitch got so far ahead in his thoughts he seemed to end up in a rut for current issues.

Once they closed the door behind them, he leaned down and kissed her lightly on the cheek, wrapping his arms around her. “You were pretty damn magnificent, have to say.”

She relaxed into his embrace, his words warming her through and through. But remembering it, how it still clung a little close, she gave a self-conscious laugh. “They may not love me, but maybe they won’t be terrified of me or think I’m just a slut.”

“He probably expected you to lose your temper. But you made him look like the fool, not you.”

“Doesn’t change that everyone in the country knows how much I fucked up.” They’d seen her admit to that kind of weakness, and she still couldn’t help the feeling of self-conscious resentment and vulnerability at it.

“They also saw you held your ground on it. You admitted you did things you aren’t proud of, but you had your reasons, and you did it with dignity.” He shook his head slightly, looking at her with that pride in his eyes again. “You’ve got nerve enough to challenge them for the world to see and tell them the truth, even if they don’t want to hear it. You always have.” The smile grew a little wider. “Even yelling in the arena about starting a rebellion. Damn, you’re fearless.”

“I almost lost it,” she told him, a lump in her throat. “Right there in front of the fucking cameras.” That was hardly a brave moment, to her mind. If she’d known, if she could have gone on the attack first to keep it from catching her off-balance—but that was who she had been, aggressive almost to the point of viciousness, never willing to let anyone close enough to hurt. She didn’t have to totally cast away who she’d been. She’d never be quiet and thoughtful and gentle like Annie. But like that
wild, angry girl fucking people in clubs to feel like she owned her own body again, maybe she didn’t need to be as aggressive as she had been before. She’d stood her ground there and done it without telling that tattooed asshole to go get fucked by a rabid goat, as satisfying as that would have been.

She’d felt the difference in the crowd today. They would have feared the old Johanna, maybe laughed nervously in response to her curses and threats, and just been thankful they weren’t the target. This time, they’d still seemed grateful to not be enduring it, but they’d looked at her with something almost like respect. They had let it drop after that too, and that was pretty telling. She would have to see what they put on the news out of that.

Funny how he’d been the one more readily sparked to temper than her. But she could understand it. Her anger would be fiercer in his defense now than her own. “It may have cost you, but…thanks.”

She didn’t have to say for what. He already knew. “You did it for me in Thirteen,” he reminded her, looking at her with an expression that said clearly that he wouldn’t forget that. Haymitch wasn’t the kind of man who forgot those who stood by him, particularly during the hard times. He shrugged awkwardly. “Chances are it didn’t hurt, anyway. A man defending his wife isn’t going to be seen as a negative.”

“Well, so long as it helps your political image,” she mocked him gently, fingers gripping his lapels a little bit tighter. She wasn’t going to make a big deal about how she was grateful he hadn’t taken over entirely, and he’d simply bought her time for her to collect herself and make her own defense. He already knew, because he’d chosen to do it that way.

His hands came up and carefully tugged hers loose from his jacket, fingers weaving through hers instead. “I’d fight for you. You know that. I’d die for you too, come to that.” He said the words with a matter-of-fact tone. There was nothing of a boy’s romantic vision of the tragic beauty of dying for love, the way Peeta had played the Capitol crowds over Katniss by offering that glorious illusion. He was a grown man who had bled and killed and suffered and knew dying was nothing beautiful, one who saw the world for what it was, and one who knew exactly what he offered her in making that promise.

“I know. I would too.” She could do nothing else but offer the same in return. He was hers and she would protect him, body and soul. “But I’d rather we didn’t have to, you know.”

He laughed at that, grey eyes dancing with humor. “I don’t plan on it anytime soon. I’m too fucking stubborn to die.”

“I expect at least fifty years out of you, honeybear,” she told him, relieved to be back on more lighthearted territory. She didn’t, not really. But however long they had, she’d take it as a gift. It was far more than she’d expected out of life even a year ago.

“Why do you call me that, anyway?”

“Honeybear? Big, black-furred things—maybe you have ‘em in Twelve too. Another Capitol invention—they’re small enough to climb trees and fast enough to outrun a lot of things. The Capitol’s terrified of them. The teeth, claws, whatever. Apparently they weren’t vicious enough for being put regularly into the arena, though.” Not compared to the likes of forest cats, anyway, or the larger and more aggressive snow bears. “They keep to themselves, mostly, unless you piss them off. Yeah, you’ve gotta respect ‘em, but if you catch them when they’re not in a pissy mood defending what’s theirs, and they don’t know you’re there, you’ll see them out in the woods playing with each other or the like, cubs climbing all over their parents, all of it.” She grinned at him. “So you can stomp and roar all you like, but I know what you’re like behind closed doors, mm?” The fearsome image coupled with the well-hidden softness—it fit. Besides, it was too damn much fun to answer his
joking *darlin’* for her with a teasing name of her own.

He rolled his eyes a little in response to that, but she saw his half-smile anyway. “We probably ought to be getting ready for dinner soon. But,” he hesitated and then added quickly, “they went pretty rough on you. You want to boss me around a bit tonight, if it would help?”

She thought about it for a minute, grateful that he would let her take over and use him to regain that sense of control again. Certainly it was no easy thing for him to offer that up to her. He meant well, but she realized it wouldn’t help in the end. He did more for her by simply loving her and treating her as an equal, rather than offering himself up like that. “No. It didn’t help me then. And with you…I’m not scared enough to need that to deal with it. Not now.” Maybe she had been when they’d begun together, afraid as she was. Stretching up to kiss him, she felt relieved that they’d moved so far beyond that. “Tonight, I just want you.” Being with him like that, both loved and loving, neither of them holding back, was the best way to answer the hurts of the past. “But…I’ll take you up on that some other night, though,” she whispered in his ear, nibbling gently on his neck. “When it’ll be just for fun. Because I’m not her anymore. I don’t want to be. I don’t need to be.” That felt right and true, resonating within her even as she said it. She’d still fight for the things she cared about, with all her strength and no regrets. But she wasn’t that person any longer, and she would try to not let anyone take her back to that place.
Early the first morning of the conference, Haymitch headed down the stairs from the guest rooms on the second floor of the Presidential Mansion towards the offices and meeting rooms. He’d never toured the entire house, of course, but he could remember some of the rooms from before.

Brocade obviously hadn’t wasted the budget on complete redecoration, not when there were far more pressing concerns, but he was relieved to see some of the style of Snow had been stripped away. It had been an odd mixture of imposing and fussy, though he supposed for a man who was as exacting and control-hungry as Snow had been, perhaps it had been reflective of his mentality. His own house in Victors’ Village, with its untouched rooms and the disarray and neglect in the areas he did live in, had probably said plenty for that matter.

So with the house in mind, thinking of the changes that had been wrought since Johanna came home to stay, he looked at the fresh paint, the tasteful drape of Eight-made fabric here and there to cover some of the harsh wallpaper and ugly lines, and the disappearance of Snow’s knickknacks. Brocade had done a lot with a little. She may not have been able to erase Snow’s influence entirely, but she’d certainly imposed her own stamp over his more than enough to blur the old ways almost beyond recognition. It was only because this house still lived in his nightmares that some of those details stayed sharp in his mind. A more casual viewer would never see it.

At least they weren’t meeting out in the rose gardens, or the greenhouse. A man and woman were standing in front of the door to what had formerly been Snow’s guest parlor, dark suited and somber. Glancing at them, at their coloring and the subtle differences in how they carried themselves, he would guess the man was from Thirteen and the woman from Two. That had been another smart move by their new president—bringing representatives from both military-trained forces in as part of her security detail. He filed it away as a positive sign regarding the Peacekeepers on the whole, since that was inevitably a question that would come up.

“Mister Abernathy,” the woman said, nodding for him to pass. “They’re just waiting on the last few of you.”

Nodding in return, he headed in, seeing that Snow’s fussy, overstuffed furniture had been cleared out and a long conference table and chairs had been put there instead. “Coffee,” Brocade, sitting at the head of the table and already scribbling notes, idly gestured to a table with coffee and a pitcher of water, and some pastries.

Taking some coffee, he took a seat next to Corriden, given that it was labeled for him. Name tags probably were needed. He was the only one in this room who’d actually met all these people before, during the 74th Victory Tour. Brocade knew Corduroy Yasbeck from Eight, maybe a few others if she’d moved with the war effort. Corriden was too old to have known Bardoka Dravid from Ten before he left for Thirteen.

Apparently they were seating by district order to avoid the awkwardness of everyone figuring out where the hell they would sit. About half of them were there already. He noticed the chair for “Galen Wing,” with the Capitol seal, down past Corriden. He raised an eyebrow and nodded to it, catching Corriden’s attention.

Corriden gave an awkward smirk, leaning close and pitching his voice barely above a mutter, “They’re putting the delegates for the two entities they aren’t even sure they want in this room to sit together at the far end. Looks like you get to hang out with the unpopular kids on the playground.”
He snickered before he thought better of it, realizing it turned a little attention his way. “Don’t forget—most pathetic district and most disgraceful victor in Panem.” The fact that everyone was falling all over themselves now to praise the glory and courage of Twelve, and approve of him, wasn’t going to make him forget that. “I’m in good company.”

“Don’t be so sure,” Corriden advised, breaking off a corner of his pastry and popping it in his mouth. Like everything else he did, Haymitch noticed the man did it tidy and precise. Not a crumb to be seen. “I think you’re still so stuck in what they used to think of you that you don’t even see the effect you can have now.”

He shook his head, wanting to ask, Have you and Peeta been talking too much lately? He remembered Johanna observing that anyone looking for reconciliation was probably going to look to him. There was the unsettling thought, sitting here in Snow’s mansion, of the old man asking him among the ashes of District Twelve with condescending amusement, Have you lived all this time believing someday the chance would come for you to prove yourself the phoenix that would rise from the ashes? No, he wasn’t that. Katniss had been the symbol, not him. “I’m here to do what I can to get this going. That’s all,” he said bluntly. After that he reached for his coffee instead to have something to do rather than continue the discussion.

The rest of the mayors arrived and took their seats. Galen Wing proved to be a man in his early forties, free of Capitol alterations. Haymitch suspected the man would have at least had highlights in that dishwater dull hair, but any dye had either washed out or been cut off when his hair had grown out; it had been at least half a year since any Capitol citizen would have dyed their hair. As Capitol citizens went, he was rather nondescript. Not too young for anyone to take him seriously in this room, not so old that the inevitable backlash at him having profited from the system for so long would come into play. More interesting was the gold pin on his lapel denoting that he was a doctor.

Clever play, he thought. Thirteen had sent a soldier, and one known to be close to Katniss. The Capitol, lacking someone like Cinna or Effie to fill that role, chose instead to send a doctor, one with an oath to do no harm, rather than an astute politician. As Galen took his seat, Haymitch wondered just what marching orders the good doctor had received.

It didn’t take long to find out. Galen Wing’s voice was mild, soft. He removed his glasses, laid them on the table, and said quietly to Brocade, “Thank you for inviting me to take part in these discussions.” He sensed Fallow Boyce to his left stirring with discontent, but Eleven’s mayor decided to hold her peace for the moment. “My first charge here is to propose—“

“Nobody said you could propose business,” Wrack Solange piped up, sitting back in his chair. “I mean,” he looked around at the rest of them, “actually, do any of us open this up by proposing business?” The look on the old man’s face clearly said, How does this fucking thing work anyway?

He could almost hear the sigh Brocade had to be suppressing. “I would suggest,” she said, looking down the table at all of them, “that since I imagine the issue of what role the Capitol will play in these proceedings is a paramount issue, we address that first. And for that, hearing Doctor Wing’s proposals from the people of the Capitol would probably be helpful.”

“Agreed,” Tertullia Sangus said brusquely.

“You’re with Two, of course you’ll agree with the Capitol,” Edsel Raven said.

Tertullia bristled and glowered at the Six mayor, and it was obvious her blood was up. In about thirty seconds, Haymitch was sure the whole thing was going to turn into shouting and armwaving and districts blaming one another.
“If everybody wants, I’ll go get the weapons and we can settle any district grudges that way,” he said sarcastically. “I would have figured we’d seen enough of being at each other’s throats year after year.” Edsel in particular flinched at that. His wife Lizzie was Six’s sole surviving victor now. If not for Poppy Lowry, she would have been in the arena too. Haymitch wondered just how much Edsel had Snow breathing down his neck for having married Lizbet Takhar, because the power of a mayor aligned to a victor probably came across as a potential threat. He had never asked Lizzie, but he was sure Snow had taken pleasure in selling her on the circuit even past her marriage to prove who held the power.

“Why are we even debating letting the Capitol vote in this conference?” Edsel said, calmer but still looking troubled. “Is that really in our best interest, to give people with equal population numbers to our own combined the ability to vote?”

“It’s one person, one vote here in this conference,” Brocade pointed out to him gently. “Doctor Wing would hold no more authority than you.”

Edsel frowned, shaking his head in frustration. “I’m looking to the future, President Paylor. The Capitol, with those numbers, can potentially sway every decision in the future to their own advantage by sheer majority in a popular vote like we had for your own election.”

“We let them vote in the presidential election,” Acarica Watling said, leaning back in her chair. “As I remember it.”

“Yeah, and that was mainly to assure through sheer numbers that Alma Coin’s ass was shown the door in a hurry,” Tertullia Sangus interjected.

Brocade broke in. “We can debate the impact of Capitol citizens having voting power later. I think we’re wandering away from the original question of Doctor Wing’s role in this meeting. So…Doctor Wing?” she prompted.

Galen blinked owlishly and gave a sheepish smile. “Right. Uh…my first charge was to convey the wishes of the people of the Capitol that…well…we wish to surrender the honor of being known as Panem’s capitol. We would like to submit a petition to join you instead as District Fourteen.”

Whoever was feeding the man his lines was smart. It was a nice bit of appeasement to open things, to voluntarily surrender any claim to represent the nation, and to ask to be considered simply as equal. That also made it a lot harder to deny that latter aspect, and he saw recognition of that on a few faces.

“And what,” Fallow said next to him, her voice careful and even, but not hostile, “does this so-called ‘District Fourteen’ contribute to the nation?”

“What does District Thirteen contribute, for that matter?” Gilt Roseby asked from his seat next to Brocade as One’s mayor.

“In that case, we might well ask what does District Twelve contribute?” Iridia Crick piped up, and he was startled to hear what sounded like her undercutting him—Three had been an ally in the arena and all he could think was the cost had been too high. It wasn’t Twelve’s fault it had been bombed to nothingness. But Iridia nodded to him, and the look on her face was friendly enough, so he held his tongue. She continued, “For that matter, what’s District One or Eight or Four or most of the districts currently contributing? We’re all deeply damaged by this war. Must we all really justify our existence?”

“Not Thirteen,” Gilt said sarcastically. “I don’t think they’ve been dealing with starvation and unemployment—“
“Welcome to what we’ve been enduring in the outer districts for seven decades,” Bardoka said with a derisive snort.

“It’s hardly the fault of District Thirteen,” Brocade spoke up, the tone of her voice telling them she wasn’t going to tolerate argument on it, “how Alma Coin ran things. She’ll be paying for her actions.” Coin’s trial was coming up soon enough, though Haymitch had his concerns that the continuing delay was the scramble for hard evidence. The victors may have seen her condemned in public opinion, but Coin would prove far trickier to nail down legally than Snow. He’d been arrogant enough to thoroughly document everything. From what he had seen, Coin had been wily enough to rely largely on verbal orders, and he wouldn’t put it past her to make sure most of the people concerned were now conveniently dead and able to tell no tales. “Mister Boggs is here at my invitation to hopefully bring District Thirteen into our nation again.”

Esteban Morath from Five sighed, rubbing his eyes tiredly as he sat back in his chair. “So, how about it?” he addressed Galen again.

“Oh, of course.” He cleared his throat. “We would…continue to offer entertainment…” A snicker came from down the table, but Haymitch wasn’t sure from whom. To his credit, the man pressed on. “…as that’s something no other district is really trained and equipped to handle. Naturally all programming will be involving other district citizens. Secretary Heavensbee is already recruiting for that.” He looked up the table and said, “I realize it may not seem much to you, but arts and honest newscasts and entertainment are valuable things. And I think we all need them in these difficult times.” He had an almost embarrassed look. “We’re also not exactly configured to manufacture goods, I’ll admit.”

“At least you’re honest about how you’re useless to make your own goods because you’ve been living off the fat of everyone else,” Corduroy said with a shrug, giving Galen a careful glance as if testing to see how he’d react to being provoked, rather than throwing it out there in direct anger.

“We of course regret…”

“You regret?” Elmar Luoma said incredulously. “Do you really regret the suffering and the oppression and the glorified murder of children in the arenas for the amusement of your people, Doctor Wing, or are you telling us what we want to hear??”

District Seven direct—Haymitch had to appreciate his cutting right to the chase and confronting the matter rather than sniping. “It’s a fair question,” he said, adding his voice to it. “You’re here speaking for the ordinary citizen of the C—this proposed District Fourteen. Not the Gamemakers or Snow’s cabinet. So let’s hear it.”

“I would have figured you, of all people…” Galen said, looking confused.

“I voted against slaughtering your children in retribution,” he said coolly. “I’d do it again, and again. I’m not here for revenge. That doesn’t mean I’m to the point of just automatically welcoming a so-called District Fourteen as equals. You haven’t earned that. You can, but you don’t just get to assume. You’re changing your name and giving up your power as our capitol. That’s good. But convince us of good faith. That you’ve changed your minds and your hearts and you’ll change your ways along with that name, and that you’re not just here to save yourselves.”

Do I need to hand you a fucking blueprint here of how to get through this? But he needed to hear it too, he realized. He’d thought this would be easier. Objectively he realized the Capitol—District Fourteen—had to stick with them and sit at the table with the rest or else they were setting themselves up for bitterness and more violence down the road by trading one oppressed group for another. In this moment, though he was trying to not pick on one person as the representative for all
the sins of many—they’d done that and called them *tributes*, after all—it wasn’t easy.

He’d fight for them to have justice and fairness. But to actually believe he could one day look at a Capitol citizen in earnest when they did something stupid and not instinctively want to cringe or feel that spark of rage, to visit this city and not feel the past gripping him too closely, wasn’t something he could just will into being. It wasn’t his fault for feeling that way. They would have to earn that trust from him. Some of them had as individuals, but trusting the whole entity was difficult.

He’d held his tongue some. If he hadn’t, all the words about how he’d been watched Capitol children making light of the Games as district children died for real, about how he’d been in the arena at sixteen reeking of blood and looking hopefully to an indifferent sky for water from someone safe and snug in their living room taking enjoyment from his ordeal, how he’d been whored out year after year and how he’d begged and cajoled and even sometimes fucked to try to keep children alive and been met with amused dismissal or even disdain from sponsors, threatened to come bursting out. *Not the time,* he told himself, *or the place.* Brocade had asked him here in good faith to help make this happen. If he’d learned nothing else, it was the ability to put aside his own confusion or emotion and come at a problem with a clear head. He would deal fairly with them, so long as they showed things had changed. The way they’d gone after Johanna yesterday, though, sounded a sour note to him. He would force them to confront what they’d done, because it was the elephant in the room. Either Galen Wing could acknowledge those sins and convince them it would be different, or he’d fail.

Galen looked at him a long moment, a look of intense concentration on his face, and nodded. He then turned to look at Brocade. “I apologize in asking for a recess so early. But clearly I think this question is one that has to be answered before progress gets made. If I can ask the rest of the delegates and also you, Madam President, to have some time to address the subject?”

“Why do you need time?” Acarica said, shaking her head.

“Because,” and Haymitch had the sense of the calm ruthlessness of a surgeon at work, rather than the unsettling sense of a politician’s cunning, “the entire nation deserves to hear that, not just the handful of us in this room.”

Brocade nodded without hesitation. “We’ll reconvene after lunch.” Haymitch caught a spark of frustration on her face, and thought of her desire to get the treaty hammered out before July 4th. This wasn’t a good start. But to her credit, she recognized what needed to be done. They weren’t going to get anywhere without answering the Capitol issue first. Giving them only the morning to come up with something convincing wasn’t much time, but in a sense, they had better be able to put up or shut up.

“Thank you,” Galen acknowledged, inclining his head slightly. He looked over at Haymitch. “And you’re right. Slapping a bandage over it doesn’t help.”

As he slipped out of the room, Haymitch looked at the rest of them. “Well,” he said dryly, “the rose gardens are nice, if anyone wants to check them out.” Before he and Johanna got in a mood to destroy them, anyway.

Brocade nodded to him. “We’ve got some time, if you wouldn’t mind?” He understood from that she probably wanted to go over the districts he’d been to already. That was a good thing—putting together some thoughts for the conference would be a plus on things like the labor shortages in Nine and the lack of work in Four. He needed to keep himself busy somehow, and he knew Johanna was already out in the city. He hoped she was having a better morning of it than he was.
Johanna hoped Haymitch was having a better morning of it than she was. Brocade, probably meaning well towards those who’d never been here, had apparently asked Cambric to take all the “plus ones” on a tour of the city. She managed to not point out she’d been forced here for nine summers. It wasn’t like she’d been forced to join them, but it seemed to have been assumed, and she could recognize being the one refusing to rub elbows with the group probably wasn’t the wisest idea. She mostly ignored the tour. Instead she chatted with Sassafras Luoma, congratulating her and Elmar on the baby, a little relieved to be near another person born to the lumber crews, talking about the familiar comforts of home. The two of them, golden skinned, brown-haired and brown eyed in the way of the southern camps, probably could have passed for cousins. Tall, slim Ratuin Boyce, with handsome grey-green eyes against skin like finely polished blackspire, talked with her about the possibility of some lumbering in Eleven as they cleared away land for new fields, and she quickly found him to be a man with a quiet dignity to him that reminded her a little of Cinna.

Right after they finished touring the Avenue of the Tributes, Hazelle Hawthorne caught her attention. Compared to when Johanna had seen her in Thirteen, she was dressed well in a bright blue blouse and dark trousers that did far more for her than the colorless uniforms had, and her dark hair was neatly caught back in a twist. She could only imagine how Hazelle must have looked, Twelve-poor and ragged, before that. But for all her understated, elegant look, her grey eyes were somber, her face suddenly tired. “Can you tell me where?” she asked simply.

Johanna didn’t have to ask what she meant. She wanted to see where Gale had died. “I’ll show you,” she said, making the decision in a moment. She had needed to go up to the woods to see where her family had died. Here was Hazelle’s chance for that small bit of closure. Catching up to Safra, she told the other woman, “There’s somewhere I need to take Hazelle.” She nodded back towards Hazelle in case Safra hadn’t caught her name yet. “If Cambric asks, we’ll be back at the mansion for lunch, OK?”

Safra gave her a quick grin. “Count on me,” she assured Johanna. “I don’t think he’ll take it hard. He seems like the easygoing type. I think he’s just hoping we all get along and keep things sane, because you know there’s got to be ego trips going on in that conference room like crazy.”

She stifled a laugh because it would call attention to her, and nodded to Hazelle, gesturing her towards an alley off Hardin Lane. She’d already decided she wasn’t going to try to barge into the apartment where they’d come up out of the sewers last November. But she was pretty sure she could get it close. Once they were down on the Transfer anyway, that would be easy. They’d had to avoid it last winter so as not to be detected. That was no concern now.

Should have figured their departure wouldn’t go unnoticed, or that they hadn’t been unescorted the entire way, given that the president’s husband and loved ones of all the mayors of Panem were clustered together in one tight group. Sensing someone approaching, she bristled and turned, seeing one of Brocade’s dark-suited security detail standing there, complete with her discreet earpiece. It was a woman, with honey-brown hair, though her skin was the ochre-gold color of Three and she had the dark eyes to match—a striking combination. “Let me guess. Born in Three, ex-Peacekeeper, raised in the Peacehome?” she asked bluntly.

“Yes ma’am,” came the quiet reply.

“What’s your name?”

“My name was Justicia Law,” she acknowledged. “But I’m not a Peacekeeper. I wasn’t for a while before the war ended. So I go by my birth name—Alayna Trevino.”

“Well,” Johanna said, leaning back against the brick wall, “Alayna, here’s the deal. Hazelle’s son died in the Battle for the Capitol.”
“Ma’am,” Alayna acknowledged with a polite nod to Hazelle, “I’m sorry.” It sounded genuine to Johanna’s ears.

“I’m taking her to see where he died, down on the Transfer. You can either help me with that or you can get the fuck out of my way.”

Alayna said into the microphone of her headset, “Marc, we’re fine, but c’mere, we’ve got a job.” At that point, another dark-suited figure joined them. Two born, Johanna would stake her life on it—big, fair, and brown-haired. “Marcellus Toth,” he introduced himself.

“I’m taking them down on the Transfer. Call it in so we’re not causing a ruckus, and stick with the rest of the group.” Marcellus nodded and turned away to rejoin the tour, already talking to whomever was on the other end of his microphone. Alayna looked at them with a snort of amusement. “You’re lucky you didn’t just try to sneak down there. You’d have had guns in your faces in a hot minute, and you’d better hope they recognized Johanna Abernathy before they decided to just shoot you as a security threat.”

Johanna smirked. “We sneaked down there once before just fine,” she pointed out. But fine, if they would make the job easier and avoid her and Hazelle having to answer questions over and over along the way anytime they ran into Capitol security that would help.

Alayna led the way, though it was obvious even she didn’t fully know the underground when Johanna was giving her some of the directions, casting her mind back and trying to remember some of the twisted, confusing path they had taken.

Finally they went to one of the maintenance stations with hatch access down to the Transfer. “You all right with this?” Alayna asked Hazelle. “It’s dark and dirty and can get kind of cramped…”

“I worked the coal mines for years before my husband died,” Hazelle told her firmly, grabbing the ladder and swinging over and down onto the first rung with an easy grace that indeed spoke of years of habit not quite leached from her body’s instincts. Alayna had the awareness to look slightly embarrassed.

Johanna followed Hazelle, hands and feet steady on the rungs of the cold metal of the service ladder.

It didn’t take long to find a door opening onto the Transfer, and once again Johanna cringed at the flood of bright light and the pastel bricks after the darkness of the tunnels. She was relieved to see bringing presidential security along had been a good idea. While the nightmarish pods had been removed, probably to eradicate the reminder of the Games, she could see watchposts set up at regular intervals along the Transfer. Alayna exchanged a few brief words with the black-uniformed guard at the first post, and from then, nobody challenged them.

Finding the spot wasn’t easy. To say her mind hadn’t exactly been on pinpointing her location and she’d been distracted by other things—like not becoming giant kitty food—pretty much summed it up. The fact that much of the Transfer looked similar didn’t help either. But finally, the “17-G” worked into the wall with stark, dark bricks against the pale colors of the others helped her place it. She remembered the Peacekeepers, and the twang of Gale’s bowstring right near her ear as he shot the one radioing it in.

“It was near here,” she said, stopping. She imagined herself then, tired and smelling of sewer, in the grey field dress of Thirteen, fifteen pounds lighter and still too thin, and with her hair so much shorter. It had been fiercely cold then on the unheated Transfer, the chill of winter penetrating even this deep. The warmth of summer didn’t do the same now.

Glancing down the tunnel, she saw the door they’d raced for desperately. Walking towards it, the
past caught her up helplessly. Of course, months later, the carnage was long since cleaned up, and the black residue of the explosion from Gale’s arrow had been scoured away. She shuddered, though, to remember those desperate moments, Finnick bleeding, Katniss and Peeta limping to safety, the wreckage that had once been Gale, and Haymitch racing back to save Finnick as she shouldered her rifle and stood ready to shoot anything and anyone that would threaten them. The Peacekeepers had been screaming as the two other cats tore at them, trapped by the black goo. Then they had suddenly stopped right before Katniss took care of the cats with her own explosive arrow.

“Johanna?” Hazelle’s voice, the familiar sound of her name pronounced with a Twelve accent, brought her back.

“Here,” she said, licking her suddenly dry lips nervously. “It was here.” Maybe not the precise spot Gale had died, but it was close enough. She noticed Alayna had stayed back at a respectful distance, giving the two of them some privacy, and she appreciated that.

Hazelle nodded, hands clasped tightly as if to keep them from shaking. When she spoke up again, not looking at Johanna but instead staring at the empty expanse of pastel brick, her voice was too even, as if she was controlling herself only with supreme effort. “Tell me how he died. If you can. I know it weighs on Haymitch too much. All he’s told me is that he died saving other peoples’ lives.” Hazelle could handle it, Johanna decided. She had lived through enough hardship that she could bear hearing the truth, ugly as some of the details were.

“That’s true,” she said, glad to look at Hazelle, and know it was different and she wasn’t in the middle of that horrible fight with the mutts again. “We ran into Peacekeepers down here. They spotted us and we started fighting them. A pod—a trap—got triggered.” She wouldn’t tell Hazelle it had been Gale that had impatiently done it. Some things she just didn’t need to hear. “It had forest cats in it. Vicious mutts. Some of them were chasing us. We were running, Peeta was slowing down because of his leg and Katniss was helping him. Finnick turned to face one of ‘em with his trident. Haymitch was trying to shoot the other. But it didn’t even slow it down. Gale…drew its attention. Then he took it out right before it caught him. With an explosive arrow.” Hazelle’s eyes met hers, grey on brown. “He was brave. At the end, he chose and he decided that saving the people he cared about, even if it cost him, was more important than continuing the fight. I know that’s small comfort against having him come home, but hopefully it’s something.”

Hazelle nodded, but it was an absentminded acknowledgment as she bowed her head, arms folded over her chest. Johanna stepped back herself towards Alayna, to let Hazelle have the moment alone. She looked at the older woman, amazed by her strength. Hazelle had lost a husband young, and still managed to support four kids in grinding poverty. Now she had lost her eldest child.

The miscarriage had been grief enough. She couldn’t even fully imagine giving birth to that child, watching her grow for twenty years, and then suddenly losing her. As well, the thought of losing Haymitch filled her with the kind of dread that she could barely fathom. The idea of adding kids into the mix of that—they knew it was a risk, but she prayed fate would be kind to the two of them. They were fucking well owed that by now. These were peaceful days, hopefully prosperous days. Their children would never know the suffering and hardship that she and Haymitch had.

Finally Hazelle looked up. “Thank you,” she said. If her voice trembled just a little, it seemed neither Alayna nor Johanna said anything about that. Addressing Johanna, she said, “I…don’t know how it goes. I could only afford a wood marker for Jonas. Can we see about getting a stone ordered for Gale?”

Johanna didn’t know much about that, given that nobody ordered stone markers in Seven. But she had the feeling leaving Haymitch to face it alone would be rough. “We’ll see it done,” she assured
her. “And one for Jonas too.” It seemed only fair. She made a mental note to put one for Burdock Everdeen in there too, and the much fresher graves of the Mellarks. Katniss and Peeta would appreciate it. It was what those raised in Twelve needed.

Back on the surface, she took in what felt like the first deep breath since they’d climbed down that hatch. She felt herself relax, tipping her head back into the summer warmth. She swore that virtually nothing short of a dire emergency would ever get her back down in those tunnels again. How the miners of Twelve withstood it for so many years, she had no idea. She was made for wide open spaces.

Walking back towards the mansion, Alayna was watchful and wary, a quiet sentinel beside Johanna and Hazelle, and Johanna was sure there was a pistol in a holster beneath her dark suit jacket. She was also sure the ex-Peacekeeper knew exactly how to use it. To be honest she would have liked to try to talk to her about how exactly someone ended up an “ex-Peacekeeper” during the war to the point Brocade Paylor had trusted her enough to make her part of the presidential security detail, because the idea gave her some hope that just maybe there would be some future in Panem for those who’d worn that white uniform. The fear for that in Two had been almost a palpable thing; it wasn’t exactly the same as Four’s nervous despair, but she felt like it was a close cousin. But Alayna’s demeanor now was the politely, distantly professional I’m on the job, don’t distract me.

Nearing the mansion there was a crowd there already, as if waiting for something, and Alayna tensed, speaking into her earpiece. “What’s up at home base that we’ve got a crowd? Daily demonstration?” she demanded. Johanna watched as her brows furrowed in concern, and then slowly relaxed as she nodded slightly in unconscious acknowledgement to whoever was talking to her.

“Daily? Do you regularly have demonstrations?” Hazelle inquired, looking at the crowd with some concern.

Alayna grunted in acknowledgment. “Everything from people demonstrating for peace to people demonstrating for reparations to the districts to people demonstrating for bread to people demonstrating for jobs to a few loons demonstrating for how they’ll never ever submit to any authority derived from the districts. Seems like barely a day goes by that there’s not some kind of demonstration for something.” Her lips twitched up in a smile. “Someone was demonstrating last week for better programming on television instead of ‘sickeningly violent content and content perpetuating hurtful district stereotypes’. Go figure. But no, Base says this is actually a press conference.”

“Seriously?” Johanna said, shaking her head. “No fuckin’ way they got a whole peace treaty hammered out this morning.” Not unless Haymitch had managed to beguile every one of them into following his lead, she thought, unable to help a little bit of a smirk. She didn’t doubt his ability to sway people, but that was certainly pushing it. Not to mention Haymitch had too much respect for Brocade Paylor and her abilities to just usurp her authority like that.

Catching the rest of the group, Johanna led Hazelle and Alayna back over to them. “What’s the story?” she asked Ratuin.

“It sounds like the Capitol delegate asked for a press conference,” he told her.

“Trust the Capitol,” Diedre Watling said with a slight roll of her eyes, “to make everything into a public proclamation. Probably going to complain they’re not being treated fairly?” There was a faint note of worry in her voice, though. Johanna thought about it a moment and realized that the Capitol might be defeated, but stirring all of them up again was going to put a hell of an obstacle in things. There were more than enough of them in comparison to the district population that it wasn’t like any
Capitol defiance or protest could just be overwhelmed and shut down by sheer numbers.

Kersay Yasbeck looked grim, fingers smoothing a lock of dark hair back beneath the edge of her bright purple headscarf in a nervous gesture. “I don’t know. I’m not sure I like it.”

Lizzie Raven looked over at Johanna, coming over to chat. The Six victor was a little older than Johanna, surviving the 58th Games when she was fifteen. But given that Poppy Lowry was fucked up on morphling more often than not, it had been no hard decision to make Lizbeth Takhar, as she’d been then, Six’s female mentor. With Max Tunnis also often in a morphling oblivion, Johanna was well aware Lizzie had been carrying most of his mentoring workload as well as her own. It was hard to ignore, considering Lizzie sat right next to her in Mentor Central. They’d joked now and again in frustration about being bracketed by uselessness, with Blight on Johanna’s other side and Max on Lizzie’s.

If anyone else in Mentor Central could be considered her friend, it was probably Lizzie. It was a more casual friendship than she had with Finnick and Haymitch, but the two of them usually ended up bitching together once their tributes made a quick exit and that had been a comfort. “So here we are,” she told Lizzie dryly. “Back in the Capitol again, oh joy. Although at least this time we’re not stuck picking up the slack of the men we came here with, right?” Edsel and Haymitch weren’t Max and Blight by any means.

Lizzie gave a faint smile at that, her dark eyes crinkling at the corners. Her bronze skin looked a little pale and her eyes a little tired, as if she hadn’t been sleeping well of late. “You and Haymitch. Should have figured if either of you were going to budge out of solitude it might be for each other.”

Johanna made a slight dismissive noise, not wanting to talk about it right now. Too private, too many ears around them. “We’d have come seen you in Six already, but we got diverted to Thirteen.”

Lizzie gave a shrug. “It’s all right. Things in Six haven’t changed much to make you rush there. We’re getting by, same as before.” There was a faint dark note to her voice as she said it. She’d never said much to Johanna about Six; it hadn’t been the kind of friendship where the two of them talked wistfully about home. It had been more the kind of mutually supporting each other in frustration. But Six sounded like it had always been a pretty private kind of place. As she remembered it, “Splendor in the Sky” had pretty much covered a Six kid as he moved from hovercraft factory worker to a pilot and then showed him joyfully flying all over Panem. Odd, because even Capitol propaganda admitted most Six citizens didn’t enjoy travel.

She was about to speak up on that when Brocade Paylor appeared on the dais, walking over to the lectern hung with the seal of Panem, and adjusted the microphone. “Thank you for coming here on such short notice,” she said, nodding to them. “Nice piece of diplomacy—like the newscasters weren’t waiting like starving alley cats for a whiff of something going on at the Presidential Mansion. What the hell else were they going to report on anyway that could beat this? “This news conference is at the request of the Capitol delegate to the Panem Peace Conference, Doctor Galen Wing.”

Johanna didn’t recognize the name. That actually was good. That meant he hadn’t been a patrons of hers or Finnick’s or Haymitch’s or any other victor, and he hadn’t been known as a potential catch as a tribute sponsor. She glanced up at the dais at the plainly dressed, physically unremarkable man there just behind Brocade, obviously waiting for his cue. Further back, the rest of the delegates stood, and she caught a few looks of interest or concern or confusion, quickly covered up at the realization of the cameras. Meeting Haymitch’s eye, she raised a questioning eyebrow. What’s up?

Haymitch gave her just the slightest shrug of his shoulders. Don’t know. He tipped his head slightly towards Galen Wing. Watch him and we’ll find out.
“So without further ado, Doctor Wing apparently has some remarks for the nation.” Brocade stepped aside and nodded to the Capitol physician, who took his place at the lectern, putting down a sheaf of notes.

He adjusted his eyeglasses, raised the microphone a little. “This morning, I started this conference looking towards the future, ready to discuss that with my fellow delegates. But soon enough I was asked what I, as the representative of the Capitol and its people in this conference, had to say about the past seventy-five years.”

He paused for a moment, and Johanna heard a few unsettled murmurs in the assembled crowd. “I realized they were right. I’m a doctor. For those that would ask, I spent the war treating the wounded rather than taking up arms on either side. But you can’t hope to treat an ailment unless you’re willing to explore the course of its symptoms, willing to diagnose it by name, and sometimes, willing to do what it takes to treat it, even if it means causing pain in the interest of the long-term. Sometimes, you have to cut deep and open the wounds, ugly as they may be, so that healing can begin, rather than letting it fester. So.” He took a deep breath. “On behalf of the Capitol and its people, I offer my deepest regrets to the districts of Panem for their suffering these many years. For decades we viewed you as something less than quite human. At best you were simply the workers who provided the goods and services we expected and took for granted, and at worst, we viewed you as dangerous beasts to be kept in check. The stories of suffering from the districts were kept hidden from us until the War Crimes Council made them clear, but that doesn’t excuse our lack of interest. In truth, I think we didn’t want to know. We didn’t want to be disturbed by hearing that our lifestyles were bought by deaths in unsafe conditions, or threats of starvation or execution. To the men and women who toiled under harsh and oppressive conditions, who suffered all their lives, who were denied any legal rights, I apologize.”

A pin could have dropped and been heard in the stunned silence. Johanna heard Hazelle’s swift, shaky intake of breath beside her, and instinctively reached down. Hazelle’s fingers wrapped around hers, clutching tightly. “We reaped your children every year for the Hunger Games claiming them as a due for treason. We made bets on their fates. We cheered their deaths. We decided with our attention and our money who we thought deserved to live. In truth, they were all innocents of any crime, and they all deserved to live. To the families of the 1800 children taken for the Games, and those few that still survive, I apologize.”

Johanna met Haymitch’s eyes again and saw the flicker of astonishment on his face. No, obviously he hadn’t expected this either. “The survivors of the Hunger Games,” and she appreciated he didn’t use the word ‘victor’ but opted for honesty, “we believed we loved them, so much that we dictated the rest of their lives, showering them with prosperity, perhaps to assuage any guilt over their ordeal by telling ourselves their lives were so much improved. We resented when anyone’s love mattered to them more than ours, so we made them into our sexual slaves because we desired them, and threatened their loved ones if they didn’t comply with the grateful and compliant image we wanted. We forced them to take part in the Games still, to watch more children go to their deaths every year and to beg us for money in hopes of keeping those children alive. To these men and women, I apologize.”

Galen Wing went on, apologizing now to the devastated District Twelve. It would be all over the television tonight, and it was on tape forever now. Chances were some people would scramble to deny, to qualify, or to protest what had just been said. There would be people in the Capitol pissed off at this, unable to accept that things had changed, that they had been wrong. But the whole country had heard and those words had wings now—they were indelible. Something inside her was shouting with an unbearable elation, though the heaviness of the price was there too, the grief at all the losses that had brought them here. Particularly at that last part about the victors, she wasn’t sure whether she wanted to laugh or weep, maybe both. She wouldn’t do either, not where the cameras
could see. But watching Haymitch, she could see the emotion in his eyes, knowing he was feeling the same as her.

Finally, this was victory. This was vindication. Capitol people had been convicted of wrongdoing by the War Crimes Council, and now by BICAP, but that was external judgment imposed on them. The people of the Capitol accepted that, but beyond that, they had been silent, seeming to largely prefer just talking about the future. These words offered up by one Capitol doctor was the soul-searching they had all wanted to know existed. This was actual regret; this was the apology the districts had needed, that they deserved.

Looking at Haymitch finally grew too much, as if the feeling multiplied between the two of them would be too much to contain. Glancing over instead at Galen, she couldn’t help but respect his courage at being the one to offer up something that monumental; even now she could see his hands trembling as he moved to a new page of his notes, but he persisted. “I acknowledge we have no right to ask the forgiveness of the districts, or expect it, but we hope in time that we may earn it. We hope too that with the sins of our past acknowledged, we can perhaps now offer our help in setting some of it right by helping rebuild this country.” Healing would be a long time coming, and while maybe in time they could forgive, they could never entirely forget. Because if they forgot, they risked repeating the mistakes, and none of it could never happen again. But it was a start. *Sometimes, you have to cut deep and open the wounds, ugly as they may be, so that healing can begin, rather than letting it fester.* Maybe it had taken a doctor to see what a politician couldn’t.
The next morning Johanna told Haymitch jokingly, “Play nice with the other kids at school today.” He shook his head and laughed, leaning in to kiss her as he left for the meeting downstairs. She grabbed his arm and pulled him back in for another moment, then straightened his tie and sent him on his way. She noticed he looked a bit more at ease than he had the day before; it sounded like they had made good progress in the afternoon after Galen Wing’s press conference and agreed to let him have a vote in the treaty negotiations. He’d earned that, to her mind, by laying it all out there on national television. If they could trust anyone here to deal fairly, it seemed like he was it.

Hearing a knock on the door, she hurried up to finish getting dressed, yelling, “Just a minute!” If it had been the old days, she’d have answered the door in her underwear and to hell with whoever had a problem with it, when her body wasn’t even considered her own. But that was then.

Cambric Paylor stood there, giving her that warm smile he had. “Good morning. I know you mentioned it at that press conference before the lawyer got involved, and Haymitch had mentioned to Cadie,” Johanna understood that must be Brocade’s nickname, “that you were looking to talk to some of the architects here about rebuilding in Twelve.”

She nodded. “Sounds about right. I got some books to study in Thirteen, but I figure they’ll know their fair share here too.”

Cambric acknowledged that with a nod of his own, dark eyes studying her. “I hope you don’t mind. I asked Lentulus Sangus and Kersay Yasbeck along too. It sounds like Two has a lot of rebuilding, and well, Eight…” His smile faded a bit.

“I’m sure you know plenty about the status of Eight.” She raised an eyebrow. “Not to mention I’m sure Two and Eight are some of the hardest at odds with each other and getting the spouses of the mayors to get along in common cause might have some influence?” Haymitch had groused about Tertullia and Corduroy arguing yesterday.

“Guilty,” he acknowledged with an awkward shrug. “Plus having you there as a representative of Twelve, which—sorry—is worse off than both of them, and you having dealt fairly with Two already, may make things more at ease. I was concerned Lentulus might feel outnumbered since I’m from Eight also.”

“But you don’t share Kersay’s feelings, mm?”

“I saw my district occupied by Peacekeepers. I saw my people slaughtered, sometimes on a whim. I tended to people dying of their wounds.” Something in his voice turned harsher at the memory of it. “But there were Peacekeepers who were as humane as their orders would permit, and there were people in Eight who turned vicious. It’s not as simple as black and white. And I can’t just be Cam Paylor from Eight anymore. My loyalty is to the nation, not one district.”

She shook her head, impressed and a little amused all at once. “Lucky Haymitch didn’t get elected. You’re doing a much better job of it than I would.” The idea of playing the gracious spouse and trying to smooth everyone’s ruffled feathers to make the nation get along didn’t come naturally to her at all.

“Don’t sell yourself short. In any case, shall we?” He gestured downstairs. “I’ve got the two of them waiting for us.” Leaving the room, Johanna peered over the railing towards the downstairs foyer, seeing Kersay’s purple headscarf and the tall, solid bulk of Lentulus. She noticed neither of them was
standing near the other. The dark-suited figures of Alayna and her partner Marcellus were there too, obvious assigned as security detail.

“Still both alive, though you might want to hide the dinner knives,” she reassured Cambric, glancing back over her shoulder. He cracked another smile at that. She decided she rather liked Cam Paylor.

Heading out the door, Len Sangus nodded to her, blue eyes friendly. Cambric was astute enough to have tapped her as the one person Lentulus probably felt comfortable with in the “plus ones” group. “How is your journey going anyway?” he inquired.

“Lots of work to be done,” she answered him, the most honest response she could come up. “I imagine it’s the same in the districts we haven’t been to yet.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t come to Eight first,” Kersay said, her voice a little aggrieved, “seeing as we’re probably worst off besides Twelve. We were first into the fight, even before the national rebellion, and we paid for it. Instead you go to Two, the place that had to be brought in as allies only after defeating half their district?”

Looking over at Kersay, Johanna had the sense she’d been just waiting for a chance to express that sentiment. There was temper in her expression, but something like worry and concern too. It meshed with what Cambric had said, but also what had hadn’t said either. She wondered just how bad it was in Eight.

“We didn’t send Haymitch and Johanna to Eight first,” Cambric told her, his tone quiet and even gentle, “because Brocade and I figured having lived through the occupation and the war there we knew how things were. And so other districts we didn’t understand the situation took precedence. We know how bad it is, Kersay.”

“But…Two,” she protested. “You’d help the people that inflicted the damage first?”

“It was the Capitol that did it,” Lentulus protested, his big body tensing as if preparing for an attack.

“You want to blame the Capitol? I saw it was you ghosts killing my people,” Kersay snapped, “Peacekeepers from Two, dressed in the uniforms we were forced to make for them. I saw them blow up the factory with innocent people in it. I saw them confiscating the food supply. I saw them executing people out on city streets. I saw them making us dig a pit to bury our dead. I heard the mourning songs sounding up and down the streets and saw people heading for their grief-visits with the family until your fucking kind kicked down the doors and started shooting people for the crime of grieving our dead! That wasn’t the Capitol, that was Two acting as their trained lackeys!”

Johanna glanced over her shoulder to see Alayna and Marcellus a few steps back. Their faces betrayed nothing of their own feelings.

“Under Capitol orders,” Lentulus snapped harshly. “You think we got to make our own orders? You think a Peacekeeper who disobeys an order just got told off? Turned into an Avox, or executed, most likely, and the order would still be carried out anyway. Resisting or protesting was useless. You know why? Because nobody could disobey the Capitol. We were as powerless as any other district in that.”

“Don’t pretend you had it easier…”

“We didn’t watch our twelve-year-olds die in the arena, that’s true. But we knew there were expectations for that. Our tributes had to be outstanding every year. The few times they weren’t, we knew it could go badly. Any of you watch the 33rd Games?”
“None of us were born yet,” Johanna said dryly, “except maybe you. So we obviously missed the broadcast.”

“I don’t think I ever caught that on reruns,” Kersay admitted. “So maybe it was too boring for them to rerun. Why?”

“Who won that year?” Cambric questioned.

“Poppy Lowry,” Johanna answered. “Six.” She only remembered from reviewing that before the Quell. Poppy had pretty much won by default by hiding and letting the rest of them all kill each other. Her Games had ended after two days.

“Clusterfuck of a Games,” Lentulus said, shaking his head. “Both Two tributes were dead in the first half hour. That was a record for us. It was also a year there was a rebellion in Five and Six that almost turned into something bigger. The next year? The Capitol didn’t allow us our volunteer tributes. That was the only year a thirteen-year-old and a fifteen-year-old ever went from Two. They broke the previous years’ record. Dead in one minute when One and Four took them out as the first two tributes of the Games. We got the message about meeting expectations, in the arena and out, loud and clear. We never made that mistake again.”

“To our cost,” Kersay protested angrily, shaking her head.

“We paid,” Lentulus argued right back. “Our lives weren’t our own. If it wasn’t dying by inches in the stone quarries, being a Peacekeeper was hardly a life of freedom. We signed over twenty years, the best years of our lives, to the Capitol as proof of our absolute loyalty to them above family, above marriage, above our own district’s future. So we served, and we married late if at all, and with the wife already near forty at the youngest, we knew we’d be lucky to have one child, maybe two if we were very fortunate. And we’d raise any children knowing they were never really ours but the Capitol’s from the moment they were born, and we’d send them away at eighteen to do their duty, knowing we’d probably not live long enough to see them come back home or see grandchildren.”

She tried to not think of Haymitch standing there among the cypresses in Four, a look of rueful realization on his face as he told her that he’d be lucky to see any child of theirs grown up. He was getting such a late start, but that was normal for the Peacekeeper families. It seemed the Capitol took more than twenty years from them; it claimed their entire lives and the fates of their children.

How the hell District Two had sustained itself, and the Peacekeeper Corps, like that, Johanna didn’t know. Having only one child to replace two parents? They didn’t, she realized in a flash. The Capitol had turned instead to the children Peacekeepers had with district men and women, or the Capitol children claimed for their parents’ treason. That had made up the missing numbers in the Peacekeepers for that lack of fertility, and after retirement, had meant there were spouses available to try to keep the numbers up by having that one or two children. She wondered just how strong district heritage ran by this point compared to native Two blood. Two people tended to be big and fairer-skinned, but when she thought about it, beyond that they tended to not share any defining physical trait like most districts did.

“You lost one or two children each year in District Eight,” Lentulus said harshly, “claimed by the Capitol as their price for your continued existence. We always lost at least one in the arena, and several hundred more besides to the training camps. Because it was expected of us to honor and serve, and if it was easier to convince ourselves it was because we served a fair and kind master, and we came to believe it over the years to make it all more bearable, that’s how it was. I’m sure District Eight told itself some lies to cope with the situation too.”

Kersay looked at him, conflicting emotions on her face. “And I suppose you were a Peacekeeper
“Yes. Districts Twelve, Ten, Four, and Two, before you ask, and no, I never exceeded my orders. I took no pleasure in inflicting punishments, if that’s what you’re asking, but I did it. I saw it as my duty because I knew my life was the Capitol’s to command.”

“Then why didn’t you just rebel when you had the chance?” Kersay asked, shaking her head. “You had the trained soldiers, you could have succeeded where we failed.”

“Why should we?” Lentulus countered. “We all knew what you thought about us so why would we risk what safety we had, knowing that the Capitol’s wrath would fall even harder on the district it saw as most loyal, for a girl who hated us? You could tell our tributes disgusted her, they were no better than dogs to her. She sat and watched and listened to our tribute dying for hours, torn apart by mutts, when she could have ended it for him in an instant. You want casual cruelty? The Games were in her pocket by that point, didn’t have to play the kill up for the sponsors by drawing it out. She just didn’t fucking care enough to end it, not until the boy actually suggested it for her. Maybe she wanted him to suffer.”

Kersay opened her mouth, and then closed it and shook her head. There wasn’t much to say against that. Johanna had been up in Mentor Central, seen Katniss and Peeta arguing a little bit about whether she could make that shot, but considering that eleven, considering the archery feats she’d seen Katniss pull off, she could have done it. But

Johanna stirred uneasily, not willing to go so far as Lentulus on it. She knew Katniss in a way he didn’t. “I don’t think she wanted him to suffer.” The arena fucked with peoples’ minds plenty and maybe that was no excuse, but it was reason. Without asking Katniss, she couldn’t know. Katniss was sometimes impatient, short-sighted, and judgmental. But she typically wasn’t cruel. Lentulus might well be right. Maybe Katniss just didn’t care enough at that point to end that Two kid because at that point, he’d probably still represented just the enemy to her, the last obstacle to her survival. The long night of listening to him moan and die by inches had probably helped change that.

It was funny to think now how little she’d known about the situation of things growing up, how she hadn’t even known that Peacekeepers came from Two. She’d just hated the One, Two, and Four tributes growing up, seeing them as those whose districts had sold out for Capitol favor. But that had been before she’d actually befriended the likes of Finnick and later Enobaria, when she found out that being Career meant paying a price too. “Poverty and starvation isn’t the only form of being oppressed,” she finally spoke up. “I learned that from Finnick. I hated him when he won. Just another stupid Four kid from a privileged district happy to make nice with the Capitol, right?” She directed that at Kersay. “Lentulus is right, though. The Career districts made their deals, but the Capitol had their nuts in a vise just the same, and they were constantly squeezing, demanding more.” Starvation and hardship weren’t pretty, but at least the Capitol usually didn’t bother with the outlying districts, considering them too boring. It was a kind of freedom, if nothing else. “We all did what we thought was best for our districts.”

“I think that was more of the evil of Mackenzie and Snow,” Cambric said, shaking his head. “In offering the districts a choice like that—to submit in every way and be favored, or to reject that and continue to suffer.”

“They did it to the victors too,” Kersay said quietly. “So it seems.”

“They did,” Johanna said bluntly.

“Katniss did reach out to you, though,” Cambric said to Lentulus. “During the attack on the mountain in Two. She found common ground.”
Lentulus acknowledged that with a slight smile. “Yeah, she did. So we finally saw what we didn’t
the year before: she believed we were human. We mattered as people and she didn’t want to see us
all wiped off the map.” There was a pointed edge in his voice that might have been directed at
Kersay. “Of course, too little too late for some, and there were those that figured she was faking it,
but,” he shrugged, “enough people responded to her to make a fight of it.” He shook his head,
looking at Johanna. “I’ll be honest. We’ll still respect the likes of you and Haymitch far more than
we ever will that girl. You don’t put on any airs. You’re the ones that are friends with our victors,
came to our district to help rebuild it. That’s more proof than the girl ever gave us.”

“Give us half a chance,” Johanna told Kersay, “and we’ll do the same with Eight. I promise you, we
won’t hold back when good we can do for you.”

Kersay nodded. “And you?” she addressed Lentulus. “I’ve heard your explanations and maybe they
make sense, but that doesn’t lessen what Peacekeepers have done to my people, and to other
districts.”

“Do you require a press conference?” he asked her with a quirked eyebrow. “We did what we had to
do to keep our district safe. I can’t apologize for that. I wouldn’t expect your husband to apologize
for it either. But yes, I am sorry for how the Capitol used us against others. And for those
Peacekeepers whose actions went beyond their orders, District Two of course condemns that. There
was no honor in that.”

“There was no honor in serving the Capitol in the first place,” Kersay answered him harshly. But
then she sighed, rubbing a hand over her face, and her voice was calmer when she spoke up again.
“Do you condemn it to the point of being willing to see those Peacekeepers prosecuted and even
executed?”

“Is this going to turn into a situation where anyone who wore a white uniform might end up dangling
by the neck on someone’s whim to punish them?” Johanna tried to keep her face impassive there. If
Heike was still out there, she refused to believe her sister had changed so much she’d done things
worthy of execution. In that case, she’d damn well fight to keep Heike from harm, no matter how
much a mob might want to howl for blood. Maybe she would have been among them in the past. But
she’d learned better since then. Justice satisfied, but revenge seemingly only spurred further hunger.

“Are you saying that we would lie about that?”

“I’m saying people in any district might get a little overzealous out of a desire for justice, particularly
against those that lived among them actually enforcing the Capitol’s orders. I heard about executions
of captured Peacekeepers in Eight during the war, and obviously, feeling there still runs pretty high.”
Out of the corner of her eye, Johanna thought Marcellus stirred restlessly at that, and Alayna moved
closer to him, putting a hand on his arm.

“That was wartime, we couldn’t feed our own people let alone prisoners, and your Peacekeepers
damn well shot anything that moved,” Kersay protested. “If you want to throw a stone there, better
be ready to have one flung right back.”

“Look, can’t you just both agree there’s reason to make up some guidelines for going after
Peacekeepers who stepped out of line, all four of us will try to get the spouses in a good mood
tonight,” she got a chuckle of knowing acknowledgment for that from all of them, “and mention it,
and they’ll make sure it gets brought up? I mean, we could spend years arguing everything, but I
think we all want to get the hell out of the Capitol and go home, so let’s just find some fucking
common ground already.” It would be easy enough to try to find those that clearly had used their
authority to inflict harm. For those that had stayed within orders, short of reading minds to find out
whether they’d done it out of true belief or just doing their duty, they’d never know.
“Natural diplomat,” she heard Alayna mutter and Marcellus snickered.

Kersay gave an exasperated sigh. “All right. It’s something to take back to Eight, at least. You know Corduroy has to answer to the district, though,” she told them, “so he’s going to have to press for as much as he can get on that.”

“As does Tertullia.” Lentulus gave her a wry smile. “I’d expect no less. So long as it doesn’t relegate ex-Peacekeepers to worrying that anyone in Panem feels they have license to go after them, agreed. Cambric, I realize you and Brocade have been open-minded by including some former Peacekeepers in your security force, so I’ll trust you.”

“Former…” Kersay eyed Marcellus and Alayna.

“They never lied about what they were,” Cambric told her. “They came and offered Brocade their service because, they said, they believed in her ability to be fair. And they and others from Two and Thirteen both have protected her, and me, against several threats already. So I’ll trust in them and their honor.” He inclined his head towards the street again. “Shall we? We’ll be late for our meeting with the architects if we don’t hurry, and I know all three of you have a lot of rebuilding to do for the people of your districts. They’ve already agreed to donate their time to the project.” So maybe Galen’s speech had some repercussions there already.

Shaking her head, Johanna followed him, thinking once again, Panem had gotten the presidential team it deserved in Brocade and Cambric. She risked another glance at Alayna and Marcellus, but decided from the looks on their faces, absolutely fixated on business, she’d have to try to catch them off-duty if she wanted to talk about just what had gone on for them during the war.

She came back from that meeting, pleased to have an architect willing to move to Twelve for a few years to oversee things, and who’d agreed to let Johanna apprentice with her. She was also pleased Jaina Rush seemed sensible and enthusiastic, and only had a few small tattoos on her hands and wrists. Likewise, Haymitch came back to lunch pleased with the progress being made in the negotiations. But as it was Saturday, negotiations were restricted to the morning because of that musical at the theater. They were also holding a party beforehand, more or less as a propo for Plutarch and also to get all of them mingling outside negotiations. She hoped nobody would get pictures of one delegate strangling another.

Getting dressed for the evening, she was grateful to see Cinna had dressed her again in blue, the lucky color for Seven, a deep blue-green like spruce needles. She twirled in front of Haymitch and said, “And just how fast is this dress coming off when we’re back here tonight?”

Finishing his black bow tie, he laughed and gave her a look that promised all sorts of things, and made her wish he would just step behind her to undo that zipper right now. “If we didn’t have to be downstairs in just a few minutes, believe me, it would be off you in ten seconds.”

“Quickie?” she suggested, only half-joking. She hadn’t enjoyed him in the ridiculous peacock-bright colors they’d started to foist on him in the years she’d been a mentor, but something about him dressed well in those dark, starkly elegant clothes made her want to get him out of them. “The skirt’s loose enough to just hike it…”

“Be a shame to wrinkle a dress like that right before we’re near the cameras,” he said, though there was a slight hint of regret in his smile.

“Well, then you just have to wait to see what my underwear looks like.” Most likely it was Effie that had thought of including undergarments. “Or,” she gave him another slow smile, “I could leave them off entirely. In case you change your mind and just have to sneak off to the library with me.”
His eyes darkened a little at that, but he said, “Leave ‘em on.” He stepped forward and tipped her chin up, kissing her. “This is a night where I think anticipation’s all to the good,” he told her. Then he leaned down and nipped her neck just slightly, though not enough to leave a mark, and she was about ready to yank him over to the bed and say to hell with being late and being rumpled. “But if the musical’s really that terrible, we’re sneaking off. Deal?”

“Deal,” she laughed, straightening his tie. She might be looking for an excuse to call the musical terrible, in that case.

Downstairs in the ball room, as Haymitch excused himself to go grab some drinks, she tried to not remember the last occasion here—the Victory Ball. It had been New Year’s Eve, she and Haymitch had just gotten married, and it was the night Coriolanus Snow had committed suicide with the poison she and Haymitch gave him. She still didn’t regret that. It had spared Katniss from being turned into Coin’s pawn. Snow was dead either way and had paid for his crimes with his life.

She wondered if Brocade had ever been inside the greenhouse since then. She wondered if anyone had. Startled to hear her name, she turned to see Hazelle standing there, dressed in a richly colored garnet gown with accents in a red so deep as to be nearly black, her hair neatly styled and held back with fancy combs. “Looking good,” she complimented the older woman.

Hazelle gave her a slight grin, moving closer. “There’s so much food,” she said with something like awe. Johanna eyed the table with its selection of snacks and tiny desserts and didn’t have the heart to tell Hazelle that compared to the bashes thrown in Snow’s day this was the model of restraint and economy. It was nicely put together, but nobody would call it lavish. Johanna actually appreciated that; in a country that was still struggling, it showed Brocade’s priorities.

“Eat up, might as well enjoy,” she said instead. “The food’s there, right?”

“I’ve never worn anything this nice either,” she confessed. “I keep worrying I’ll spill something on it.” Even on her wedding day, Haymitch had told her, a woman in Twelve just rented a white dress. Like the food, it struck Johanna just how much her years as a victor had changed her from the poverty-stricken girl she’d been. Ample food and nice clothes of luxurious fabrics were far less remarkable. “And I’ll never wear it again anyway…”

It finally hit her that Hazelle was feeling out of place here. Johanna was reminded of her Victory Tour. “Don’t worry about that. You’re here and you look good, and I’ll bet Corriden can’t wait to get that dress off you, mm?” Seeing Haymitch and Corriden at the drinks table, chatting with each other, she gave Hazelle a knowing wink.

Hazelle chuckled. “It’s…been nice, really, being here, at least like that. There’s no privacy in Thirteen, and with the kids sleeping in the same compartment…they’d have known if I spent the night in Corriden’s room.” She understood that to mean that the two of them had been forced to keep it pretty chaste until they came here. No wonder the two of them looked blissfully happy these last few days. If Haymitch wanted to joke about anticipation, Johanna could barely imagine the thought of months and months of stolen touches and kisses and nothing more. She also had the feeling Corriden Boggs wouldn’t have settled for sneaking ten minutes in the infirmary the first time the two of them had sex, sexually frustrated as he must have been. He’d have wanted to wait. The way things were now with her and Haymitch, she could finally see the value in that. It apparently paid off. Beneath the jangling nerves of being at this party, Hazelle looked content.

“Good,” she told Hazelle. “You’ve had plenty of rough years where you had to think about everyone else. You’ve lost a lot. Just enjoy having some time for yourself and having good sex with the man you love.”
Another laugh from Hazelle answered her. “Thanks,” she said, giving Johanna a friendly pat on the shoulder. She gave a soft sigh. “He would have married my sister.” She nodded to Haymitch. Johanna felt an odd pang of panic. If she was going to resent Haymitch for having let Briar’s memory go, it would hurt, because Johanna actually liked Hazelle.

“I know. He’s told me about Briar.” She felt moved to try to say, “He loved her, and I don’t want to replace her, if that’s what you’re…”

“I know how much he loved her. And I know what it’s like to lose someone. He loves you enough to move on and that says a lot about what you mean to him. Don’t worry, Johanna. It’s not like I resent you; I’d be a hypocrite if I did, because of me and Corriden. I wish she hadn’t died, because I miss her.” Johanna thought of her parents and Bern, knowing the truth of that. “But I’m glad to see him happy, and you too. You’re a good sort. And you’re welcome at our place anytime.”

“Really?” she asked, before she could think better of it.

“He would have been my brother. So, to my thinking, that pretty much makes you my sister.” Hazelle gave a wry smile. “So long as you don’t mind the kids.”

She felt the warm flush of embarrassed pleasure in her cheeks at that kind of acceptance. Thinking about Twelve, about Finnick and Annie and Katniss and Peeta and the Hawthorne kids, she felt a wave of longing. She missed it, because it had become home. “Nah. They’re a good lot.”

“Katniss told me that Posy’s got both Peeta and Buttercup in love with her. Peeta’s trying to teach her to draw cats.”

“She told me that she and Rory are trying to teach Finnick to go trapping.”

“Well, your friend’s good with knots…”

“He is at that.” She grinned at Hazelle. “But he hates the cold. He’s going to be bitching and whining come fall and I’ll make fun of him, trust me. It’ll be great.”

“We missing the fun here, ladies?” Haymitch said, handing her a glass of punch. “Or are you just telling her all the stories of my misspent childhood, Haze?”

“Oh, hush it, Hay,” Hazelle said, shaking her head at him with a chuckle. “Just catching up with the news from home.”

“Sounds like Posy’s well on track to become mayor of Twelve by popular acclaim,” Haymitch said with a grin. Johanna took a sip of the punch, relieved that she couldn’t taste alcohol in it. She wondered if Brocade had done that for Haymitch.

“Don’t worry, she’ll be fine,” Corriden reassured Hazelle. “Rory and Vick too. They’ve got Finnick and Annie there now too. They’re good sorts.”

“I know,” Hazelle said, “but I’ve never even been away from the kids overnight, let alone days on end.” She bit her lip. “It still feels a little funny. I’m sorry.”

“We’ll call them for the night before we head to the theater,” Corriden reassured her with his voice gruff as usual, though his arm slid around her with tenderness and his blue eyes were shining with his affection for her.

Finishing her punch, she held a hand out to Haymitch. “Dance?” she asked.
He grinned. “And here I thought the man was supposed to lead.”

“Work for it,” she told him sweetly as he led her out to the dance floor.

“Looking forward to it,” he replied smoothly as he settled his hand at her waist, his other hand in hers. On their wedding evening they’d been caught up in too many other concerns to really fully enjoy a simple pleasure like dancing, but tonight she let herself indulge, liking the feel of moving as one with him in this, as they did with sparring, and sex. Knowing his body as she did, it made it easy, and she could see the recognition of that and the enjoyment on his face as they danced. He looked happy, and that memory overlaid the worry and strain she had seen there the last time they were in this room.

She danced with Cambry Paylor, complimenting him on his diplomacy, and Edsel Raven with neither of them chatting about the Games, talked logging again with Ratuin Boyce, and then Galen Wing stepped in. “If I may?” he asked politely.

Ratuin nodded, giving Johanna a smile and a nod, and turning towards Bardoka Dravid. “Nice speech,” she complimented the doctor. “Even if I’m sure some people here in the Capitol aren’t too thrilled with you.” She’d seen some of them on the newscasts already, pissed off at supposedly bowing and scraping to the districts. By and large most people seemed to think Galen had done the right thing, so that was encouraging. There would always be a few idiots and malcontents, though.

“Thank you.” He gave her another of those slightly self-conscious smiles. “I’m not used to speaking, I’ll admit. They’re a pretty fierce bunch in that room besides, every one of them.”

“They’ve had to be. District life is no picnic. And being a mayor under Snow wasn’t exactly a low-pressure job.”

“As we’re seeing, yes. Athena—my wife, I mean,” he gestured to a tall woman in a golden gown that brought out the tones of her fawn-colored skin talking animatedly to Emerald Roseby, “and I, we’ve been talking about the need for better medical care across Panem. We were…unaware medical conditions in most of the districts were so…”

“Primitive?” Johanna said archly. “We mostly had to rely on soap, herbs, bandages, and hope in Seven. I’m sure Twelve was no different.”

“Yes. That needs to change. We have the medical advances and everyone ought to be benefit from them. I’ve meant to try to catch either you or your husband outside the negotiations to talk about what you’ve seen in the districts you’ve been in so far. Perhaps Corriden Boggs also to speak for joint efforts with Thirteen.”

“Good plan,” she told him. “We need more hospitals and doctors. That’s pretty damn clear.”

Talking with him, she had the impression of a man who’d seen the light on something and come to believe fiercely in a particular cause. Politics probably wasn’t his calling, but if Galen and Athena Wing had their way, every district in Panem would enjoy good medical care. She couldn’t fault him for taking up that as his chosen battle.

Finally after dinner they were escorted to the Fulmar Theater for the much-ballyhooed premiere of “Flight of the Mockingjay” and ushered to a box up on the balcony. Johanna knew from having some “dates” here that those were reserved for the wealthiest and more powerful, and Snow’s box had been the most exclusive of all. She’d usually sat in someone’s box because nobody down in the cheap seats could afford a victor’s company. When she glanced down towards the orchestra, she saw the Capitol seal that had once adorned the front of the Presidential Box had been removed and
nothing had yet replaced it. She had to imagine from down below it looked oddly naked.

Taking her seat, settling her skirts, she saw Haymitch looking a little tense. “What?” she asked softly, pitching her voice so those around them wouldn’t hear.

“This theater was always one of Jubilation’s favorite dates,” he said dryly. “Particularly if she was starring. If she was on stage rather than sitting with me then I usually ended up stuck with Gloriana finding a reason to sit there rather than Snow’s box and cooing about how fucking handsome I still was and expecting me to flirt with her.”

“Forget them both,” she coaxed him. “You’re here with me.” He gave her a slight smile at that, reaching over to take her hand in his as the lights dimmed.

Oddly, the first number wasn’t nearly as ridiculous as she’d expected, given the Capitol had produced “Splendor in the Mine.” Singing about toil and worry and hardship, the Twelve miners sounded weary as hell. Maybe the Capitol had actually been listening to some realities, because she could imagine the coal miners’ voices fading and echoing as they moved off-stage into the dark was eerily like them disappearing into the tunnels of a mine.

Of course, right after that, seeing the reaping as a musical number, “Luck of the Draw”, according to the program they’d all been handed, felt a little weird considering the somber silence of the actual event. Not to mention “Peeta” was singing his heart out about watching his true love volunteer for her sister when Peeta himself had probably just been scared shitless hoping his name wasn’t pulled. Jolly Frill did a pretty good job playing a vulnerable, lovestruck teenager, though. Angelica Frost made a pretty convincing brave and determined “Katniss”. Even if, Johanna thought with a smirk, she wasn’t nearly sullen and suspicious enough to be Katniss back then.

She heard Hazelle gave a soft, choked cry as “Gale” said goodbye to his “cousin” in a touching song to “Katniss”, promising to look after her family if she didn’t come back. She glanced over to see Hazelle clutching Corriden’s hand, and he was murmuring something quietly to her. It was just a musical, maybe, but some parts of it dug oddly deep.

Moving to the Capitol, it continued the odd mix of somehow right on target and oblivious fancy. She snickered as “Haymitch”, with his hair longer than she’d ever seen in reality, flowing down around his shoulders like some kind of shampoo commercial, debated with himself what to do with the dilemma of two children in love, both strong tributes, but fated to the arena where only one could live.

“Like I spent days moping and angsting about their feelings before acting,” Haymitch muttered sarcastically. She knew; for a successful tribute, the strategy started right on the train. She didn’t doubt he’d been doing that for both Katniss and Peeta, recognizing he finally had two contenders.

“Your hair’s so damn pretty on stage,” she teased him, sliding one hand up to tousle the short, unruly curls. “Maybe you should grow it out again.”

“Shut up, you’re on the program too, you know,” he warned her.

She was, and she was grateful when she showed up that “Johanna” was wearing actual clothing rather than skimpy bits of nothing or even just body paint, though she rolled her eyes that they’d ignored her short hair and given her hair even longer than “Haymitch” had. The moment “Haymitch” stepped into Mentor Central, the stage versions of the two of them seemed to be flirting madly. To the point where, after the “two victor” rule had been declared, “Johanna” found “Haymitch” and what started as a cheering-up session by her to reassure him it would be OK quickly enough turned into a tentative love duet, “You And You Alone”. Trying to not start laughing her ass off, she
nudged Haymitch with her elbow and said, “Aw, you big softie, you know you wooed me hopelessly that summer, so I just couldn’t resist declaring my hopeless love for you on arena-cam the next year.”

“I’m pretty sure I was too damn busy keeping two tributes alive to send you flowers, not to mention you’d probably have kicked my ass for it,” he said dryly, though there was a smile on his face as he squeezed her hand a little tighter.

It actually hadn’t been nearly as sickly sweet and oblivious a song it might have been, Johanna thought. Sure, some of it was over the top, and they couldn’t have fully known, but they’d verged on getting some of it right—the weariness, the loneliness, the wary hope by two people nobody much liked. The way only the two of them had been able to understand what it was like.

Of course right after “Haymitch” and “Johanna” started falling in love up in Mentor Central, ending with a kiss, it was time for the dramatic climax of Act I where “Katniss” and “Peeta” apparently had a soaring love duet at the Cornucopia, probably clutching each other dramatically, before almost chowing down on deadly nightlock and defying President Snow.

After Lentulus’ outburst about it earlier, she tried to not imagine the Two boy down below, dying slowly as he was chewed to pieces. The musical naturally had cut out that part. They’d kind of undersold most of the parts of the Games, really, in favor of telling the stories of love and hope and inspiration. She wasn’t sure whether that was continued obliviousness or just trying to highlight the hopeful stories from a very dark situation. Considering they’d shown some flashes of understanding with things like the miner’s song and taking time for something like “Haymitch” trying to console “Chaff” about the death of the Eleven girl, showing that the mentors cared and that the little girl had mattered, she thought it was maybe some of both.

Trying to shake that heavy feeling off at remembering the Games, she focused instead on “Love Is Stronger Than Fear,” that upcoming love song. “Whoever laughs first during their cute little epic love duet buys the drinks,” she murmured to Haymitch with a snicker. She couldn’t help it, knowing it had all been an act at that point, just like she and Haymitch had. Some things the Capitol just never would know and never understand, and that was all to the good. It had turned out just fine in the end and they didn’t owe anybody else the truth.

He chuckled and shook his head. Jolly Frill and Angelica Frost took their places again, the lightning dimmed to a romantic spotlight glow, and she heard a strangled snort from Haymitch as the two of them gazed soulfully at each other and sang about their love and how it was the only thing that mattered in the world.

“No, Katniss,” came the cry from “Peeta” as she started to lift the berries to her lips, “not like this, not without me!”

“Together, Peeta, let’s do it together, and show Panem that they can’t take our love away.”

“Together,” he agreed, though his tender, lovestruck expression disappeared into something like a victorious smirk, and his gaze lifted from his true love, towards the Presidential Box, towards Brocade Paylor. “Let’s show the president that we won’t let what we love be taken from us, and that we’re not going to be slaves.”

She heard Haymitch’s swift intake of breath next to hear and knew he’d seen it too, just as he said, “Oh, fuck.”

It was hard to see clearly at this distance, but that bright red thing in Jolly Frill’s hand when he opened it definitely wasn’t fake nightlock berries, and she heard Angelica Frost shout out in alarm as
he pressed the button.

The world suddenly felt like it was something someone was violently shaking, jumbling everything in it, and she cried out herself as Haymitch’s hand was yanked out of hers. She was falling, or flying, she didn’t know which or what way was up or down.

She hit the ground after what seemed a long while, curling in on herself with a gasp as the air was driven from her body. Her left arm felt like someone had driven a red-hot poker through it and she heard the snap as the bone broke, trying to not retch from the pain. Trying to breathe, she managed only a breathless whimper of, “Haymitch?”

Even if there had been any power to her voice right there, he wouldn’t have heard. His ears were probably ringing like hers were, and the world was probably the same nauseating whirl. Able to do nothing but lie there stunned and hurt, she closed her eyes to try to recover. It took a minute for the world to stop spinning and her ears to stop ringing, the enormity of what had just happened finally came over her. As her hearing returned, she could hear the shrieks and the moans filling the air. The panic followed swiftly after realization. Trying to scrabble desperately to her feet, this time when she called Haymitch’s name, she screamed it.
District Fourteen: Thirty-One

The musical itself was a mix of highs and lows, good and bad. Haymitch groaned at his stage version’s ridiculously long hair and how his sarcasm and quips were as overdone as a steak burnt to charcoal. But still, when he looked over at Johanna during “Haymitch” and “Johanna” having that cautious duet, he thought maybe they’d gotten one or two things right. She’d been there for him, and he had for her, as best as they’d known how. They were still figuring some of it out, but looking how far they’d come, he couldn’t look back on those days with any kind of wistful nostalgia.

Of course, caught up in that good feeling, Haymitch saw the look of sly triumph on Jolly Frill’s face as the boy stared defiantly up towards Brocade’s box—towards him also?—and knew with a sense of dread and inevitability. How very like an actor to make it into a dramatic stage moment. Given it was only a second or so later that the explosion came, there was absolutely no time to react, no time to do anything but grip Johanna’s hand tighter in something like instinctive terror.

When he came to again he was on the ground and staring upwards in a daze at the starry sky. His ears were roaring like a Capitol bullet train, and as he tried to hitch up to his hands and knees, he couldn’t help biting back a sound of pain as it felt like agony in his chest, and breathing hurt like hell. Broken ribs—that must be it.

As he came back a little more, forcing himself to his knees first and then starting to think about the arduous task of getting to his feet, he started looking around wildly in a panic for Johanna. He didn’t see her. To his right he did see a woman’s trim leg in a neat black and white satin high heel, ripped off below the knee like the limb of a rag doll, and he breathed in roughly, staring at it. It got worse as some of the noise in his ears faded to be replaced by the sounds of the injured and the dying, and he inhaled deeply and slowly to try to steady himself. That was a mistake because he immediately tried to not gag. The smell—oh, fuck, the scent of explosives and burnt flesh, he’d had it in Twelve when Snow forced him to march through the destruction, he’d smelled it again down on the Transfer when Gale had died, and then again right in front of Snow’s mansion when the kids were bombed. I can’t, I can’t do this again, he thought, trembling, mind caught up in the loop of memories, but then with sharp cold clarity like a sliver of ice, the thought of Johanna, gotta find Johanna punctured through the dizzy whirl of past and present horrors.

A hand grabbed his arm and he looked up to see Emerald Roseby there, with her green dress torn and bloody and covered in brick and plaster dust, her blond hair a snarled, tangled mess. “I’m looking for Gilt,” she said, her eyes showing both her terror and her determination.

“Johanna?” he wheezed hopefully, which was a mistake because even that sent the pain through him. Emerald shrugged her shoulders, giving him an apologetic shake of her head. “How long was I out?” When she looked at him in confusion, he repeated it louder, even though it hurt to talk.

“It’s only been about a minute,” she said, and he had the feeling she was almost yelling it but it was still hard to hear. She offered him her hand to help him to his feet which he appreciated. He looked up to see the theater half-blown out, most of the walls still standing strong here and there, but near where the stage must have been there was a huge pile of rubble and wreckage like it had been smashed with a giant fist. Figures were stumbling around here and there, and those that had apparently collected their wits and were strong enough were already digging through the wreckage.

“Come on,” he said grimly. He wasn’t going to just stand there, the dread and fear for Johanna spurring him on. There were other people in there too, other people’s loved ones, and maybe he couldn’t breathe well but he could still damn well try to dig.
They headed for the wreckage, others joining them along the way. Some he recognized: Fallow Boyce, asking about Ratuin, cradling a shattered arm; Wrack and Syrenia Solange giving a glad cry of joy as they saw each other and quickly embracing; Lentulus Sangus looking around anxiously for Tertullia.

They started digging, pausing now and again to shout the names, and sometimes that person answered and made their way over on their own two feet from having made their way from wherever the explosion had blown them. As for the rubble, usually what came back was just the shriek of someone unknown but begging to be rescued. But now and again a familiar voice was heard. District didn’t matter. Four and Two and Eleven alike pitching in to dig people out. It was slow going. Finally Brocade was there, her headscarf missing and moving as if everything hurt. “Madam President,” one of the security officers said with relief, “you’re OK…”

Brocade nodded as if that didn’t quite matter, casting her eyes out over the wreckage, and for a split second Haymitch saw the enormity of it in her eyes.

Then Lentulus and Watts Crick suddenly left them and were racing—or more like hobbling rapidly—towards a figure reeling and bobbling on the edge of the wreckage, laughing wildly. There was only one person Haymitch could think of that would be celebrating this whole ghastly scene, and so caught up in it that the two men easily caught up and tackled him down to the ground. One of Brocade’s security quickly followed, pistol drawn. “Jolly fucking Frill survived this?” Elmar Luoma said, shouldering a beam and grunting with the effort to help lift it, gesturing for Haymitch to take the other end. His ribs were killing him, but it didn’t matter, they could deal with that later, right now he was running on adrenaline and the need to find Johanna.

Haymitch grinned, more like gritting his teeth through the pain as he helped lever the beam off Texel Dravid’s legs, which by the looks of them were pretty badly smashed. “If Lentulus snaps his neck right now I ain’t complaining.” Whether it was justice or bad luck that Jolly Frill apparently survived to very likely be hanged for this, Haymitch wasn’t going to worry about that right now. The time for rage and questions would be later. Right now there was just the toil and anxiety of the rescue work.

“What, you think Watts won’t do it too?”

Haymitch looked over at Elmar and said with dark humor, “No, he’ll just build a fucking robot to do it for him.” The two of them stared at each other and then laughed at that, an almost hysterical edge to it. For a moment that made it just a tiny bit more bearable, both of them terrified for the women they loved, still missing.

They kept working, and he was like a robot himself, just desperately searching each face for Johanna. They’d just pried someone else out of the rubble when suddenly somebody grabbed him, hitting him with enough force it was like they were trying to tackle him down to the ground, and pain exploded in his ribs along with that terrified instinct about being surprised from behind. He twisted and broke free, ignoring the agony in his body as he did it, and turned to see Johanna standing there. It took him a moment to recognize her, covered in dust and streaks of blood as she was, but the eyes, he’d know those eyes anywhere.

Now he was the one lunging for her, grabbing hold of her and holding her tight and ignoring how he really couldn’t breathe with the pressure of her body against his. She clutched him just the same, her breath a hoarse sob in his ear murmuring something about It’s you and alive and scared shitless. He didn’t really listen, knowing he was mumbling to her in return, just holding on to her, feeling the warmth of her in his arms and about ready to weep out of sheer relief himself. She was alive and she was walking enough to have come here and found him. That meant she was OK.

Finally, reluctantly, he stepped back, running his hands down her arms in some kind of need to still
keep touching her, to know she was real. She grimaced and he realized only now she’d been hugging him awkwardly. “Broken?” he asked, nodding to the left arm she was gingerly holding at an odd angle.

“Yeah,” she said wearily. “Think my ankle’s sprung pretty badly too. You?”

“Ribs for sure.” Now that the surge kick of adrenaline was wearing off, he was starting to feel it just standing there, let alone moving at all.

It took him a moment to recognize Athena Wing when she came up to the little knot of delegates there. “We’ve got transport to the hospital,” she told them, looking down at Texel laid carefully across a door, taking in the sight of his shattered legs without a flinch of horror.

“I’m fine,” Elmar argued. “I need to stick around until we find Safra…”

Athena drew herself up to her full height, which was impressive, but her voice was strangely gentle as she addressed him, obviously recognizing a man in fear for his wife. “You’ve all pitched in and done what you can around the edges here and people owe you their thanks for that. But most of the other recoveries will be more involved and dangerous, and you do yourself no favors putting yourself in harm’s way. You may actually hurt injured people worse by rushing to get them out. The rescue crews are here.” She nodded towards the violently neon yellow coats of the Capitol fire department. “Let them do their job. Go to the hospital and let them do theirs too, because you could be more injured than you know.”

“I’d take her advice. Blast injuries are nothing to mess around with,” came the weary, ragged voice of Hazelle. He turned, cursing himself for doing it so thoughtlessly and causing a fresh jolt of agony. But it was worth it because she was there, covered in the same coating of dust as everyone else, her dress in ruins, bloody and limping badly, but alive. Coriden Boggs was by her side, though he looked alarmingly unsteady on his feet. “I worked the coal mines as a blast captain,” Hazelle said, grey eyes moving to each of them gathered there to let the weight of the words fall. “Anytime there was an explosion, people who thought they were fine might still die later because something got injured inside them by all that pressure and they didn’t know.” Haymitch remembered that. There were always late casualties, and not even ones who’d been blown to bits. After the last mine explosion, the one that had claimed Burt Everdeen and Jonas Hawthorne among others, he’d heard that the deaths had continued later. People sent to the apothecary complaining of feeling dizzy or nauseated and they never left their beds again.

With that, they let themselves be bundled into the back of an old truck, Texel on his door laid flat on the floor, and Haymitch could see him biting back the pain only with effort. Those that couldn’t climb up readily were helped up by those that could.

They huddled there, a dozen people from different districts, some of who’d been arguing over the negotiations table just that morning. There were no arguments now between them; there was just the stunned sense of having survived an unthinkable experience together, and trying to process it, while thinking of those whose fates they still didn’t know. He put an arm around Johanna and she didn’t lean against him, conscious of his injury, but he closed his eyes and could only be grateful for his luck tonight. He knew not everyone in that theater was going to be so fortunate. If Jolly Frill hadn’t survived to be taken into custody, he wouldn’t consider it a big loss.

At the hospital, the staff hurried to usher them in, and from the hustle and bustle he sensed they were already handling the inflow of people from the blast as quickly as they could. He tried to not compare it to the mine disasters of his youth and how different it was here with this clean, sterile, white place with its modern medicine compared to the helplessness in Twelve. He was sure Hazelle, being led away by one of the nurses, probably was doing the same.
Then another of them tried to pry Johanna from him; he hadn’t let go her hand since she had found him. “No,” Johanna said stubbornly, fingers clinging to his, “I’m not letting go of him this time. You hear?” He was inclined to agree, remembering how her hand had been ripped out of his by the blast. He didn’t want to let her from his sight again.

“Mrs. Abernathy,” the nurse said with that annoyingly soothing and condescending tone used with children and idiots—and by the Capitol towards district people—and the Capitol accent made it even worse, “just let go of him, it’ll be fine.” At least he wasn’t stupid enough to use the familiarity of Johanna with her. Johanna stared at him, eyes blazing, and he had the sense she was about ready to unleash hell. “We can’t treat either of you otherwise,” the nurse pointed out, looking a little bit taken aback. All right, he probably had a point there.

“Fine,” he said, “but you keep us next to each other.” So long as he could see her or even hear her, he would know she was OK. Staring at the two of them for a long moment and looking confused, the nurse finally nodded. He gave Johanna’s hand one last squeeze and reluctantly let go.

The poking and prodding commenced. When they got his shirt off the red-coated doctor stared at him and snapped briskly, “Sedate him, the less he’s moving the better. And get him to scans right now—I want to see if any of that shrapnel punctured through the peritoneum.”

_Punctured the what?_ Glancing down he saw the wounds on his chest and stomach and realized some of the shrapnel had hit him. _A few more scars for the collection._ He hadn’t even felt it, compared to Sapphire and Enobaria’s attacks. Maybe that was a good sign. Feeling the sting of a needle in his arm and immediately going a little thick-brained and thick-tongued, he grinned at the doctor. “Huh,” he said cheerfully. “Well, hey, I’ve been stabbed in the guts before, and my intestines aren’t hanging out this time and maybe I ain’t gonna need a third liver either...” The red coat swam in his vision, going more and more blurry. “Always wondered. You guys wear red so the blood doesn’t show and freak patients out?”

He woke up in bed, panicking and the first thing out of his mouth was “Johanna?” He immediately regretted the force of how he said it rippling through him; he felt his ribs pushing against the thick layer of bandaging that were stabilizing them but it still hurt.

“Still here,” came the reply over to his right and he closed his eyes in relief at that. He didn’t wonder that being in pain like this she’d instinctively said that in reply. Carefully, by inches, grunting with the effort, he managed to turn himself on his side to see her on the opposite bed. Her face was bruised and cut, her right eye was blackened, and her arm was in a thick plaster cast, but she’d never looked more beautiful to him. “Been waiting for you to wake up,” she said with a fond roll of her eyes. “Look at you, needing your extra fucking beauty sleep as usual. You might need a few more days for it to do any good.”

He laughed although it quickly turned into a hiss of pain. “No laughing,” he pleaded. “Shit. Ow.”

She smiled at him and he reveled in it, comforted by the sight of her alive and well and here beside him, where he could see her and hear her and know she would be OK. “Where’s the nurse with the morphing anyway? I think we deserve a little treat after the night we’ve had.”

“Don’t know.” Johanna shook her head. “Only reason I can come up with for not shooting us up straight to Happy and Dazed Land is that the supply after the war might be low if Three isn’t working at full capacity yet—and let’s face it, you were telling me Iridia was making it sound like they they’re probably not. So they might be saving it for the worst cases coming in tonight.”

“Joy,” he mumbled. “Can we maybe talk them into a bottle of whiskey instead?” Her answer for that was to throw what looked like a crumpled-up towel at him and hit him in the chest with it. At least
her good arm was uninjured. “Kidding. Have you heard the latest?”

“Nobody tells me anything,” she said grumpily. “They just come in and ask if I need any help to the bathroom to pee.” She wiggled her leg beneath the loud, colorfully striped hospital blanket. “Sprained the ankle and tore a tendon.”

A little while later there was a knock on the door, and Haymitch couldn’t see who it was given his back was turned, but he called in exasperation, “It’s open.”

“Brocade,” Johanna said, both by way of greeting and by letting him know who it was. “Sorry if we don’t stand,” she wisecracked.

The green-uniformed nurse wheeled Brocade’s wheelchair to the space between their two beds and then left as Brocade told her, “Five minutes, please.” Cambric, leaning on a crutch, wasn’t far behind, and he sat down heavily in a chair, never taking his eyes from Brocade. Haymitch couldn’t blame him.

“Making the rounds?” he asked Brocade.

She nodded. “I keep telling her,” Cambric said with an air of irritation, “she needs to keep her ass in bed.”

“I’ve got work to do, Cam…”

“You’ve got a bruised spine and broken bones, Cadie,” he argued back fiercely. “You shouldn’t be up yet.” Haymitch now noticed the brace she was wearing around her body beneath the open hospital robe, though with as rigid and thick as it was, it looked more like a piece of body armor.

“He’s tried this already with everyone else we’ve visited,” Brocade said nonchalantly. The hospital had given her some plain fabric that she’d tied around her hair to cover it. “So can we skip you two trying to convince me?”

“Sorry Cam,” Johanna said with a shrug. “If she’s made up her mind, I’m not gonna be the one to tell her she’s being stupid.”

Brocade nodded. Cambric sighed and leaned back in his chair, a look of irritated defeat on his face.

“So how are you two?” she asked, looking at the two of them with her dark eyes. He realized he didn’t know, given he’d woken up and not seen the doctor yet.

“Busted arm,” Johanna wiggled her cast, “bum ankle. Nice shiner. Him,” she nodded to Haymitch, “the doctor said some busted ribs, bruised liver—you just can’t leave that poor suffering bastard alone, can you, Haymitch—and they dug some pieces of glass out of his stomach. Didn’t punch through into his guts, though, so…” Her nonchalant tone belied the look of worry as she looked over at him.

*Probably the glass was from that gaudy-ass chandelier*, he thought. But if it hadn’t actually punctured deep into his guts, that was probably why he hadn’t felt the wounds—well, that and the more immediate pain of his ribs. “We’ll survive,” he said grimly. “How’s everyone else?”

“They’re still looking for Voleo Morath and Diedre Watling,” Brocade told them, and now with the fire of arguing with Cambric gone, she looked exhausted. “Most of us in the delegation were lucky. The blast looks like it was set off in the center of the theater and there wasn’t nearly enough explosives to take out the entire building.”

“He probably didn’t pack enough punch,” Johanna said. “I mean, you watch a Capitol movie, and
they’re blowing up an entire house to powder with a couple sticks of explosives. That’ll blow up a big tree stump, not a house, let alone a huge theater.”

“That’s about what Hazelle Hawthorne said too.” Brocade’s mouth thinned to a thin, angry line. “Lucky—if there’s anything that could be said to be lucky about this—Jolly Frill’s an actor and not a blast engineer. It could have been much worse.”

“How bad?” he asked again, his main concern for the victims first.

“65 already confirmed dead, probably all seated right around the actual blast. Dozens still unaccounted for. From our group, we were above it and away from it, so it’s mostly broken bones and cuts.” She shook her head. “Coriden Boggs is still in surgery but they expect him to be all right. It sounds like Texel Dravid might lose at least one of his legs.” Remembering the smashed ruin of his legs, Haymitch could imagine.

“Sassafras?” Johanna asked about the other woman from Seven.

Brocade hesitated. “They found her. She’ll be OK.” He thought about the hesitation, the slight emphasis on the first word and realized what Brocade had perhaps delicately implied but not told them directly. Presumably she was leaving that to Elmar and Sassafras to tell people. A wave of sadness came over him at that, because he knew that feeling all too well himself, and it had been a bombing here in the Capitol too that had cost their own child her life. He looked over at Johanna and saw the grief in her eyes as well. Brocade cleared her throat and went on. “All the delegates are expected to recover quickly. I’ve schedule a press conference for tomorrow.”

“We’ll be—“

“I don’t need you there, Haymitch, I need you getting well quickly as you can,” she cut him off, gently but decisively. “I just need to get the situation under control, reassure people that I’m laying the blame only on those that did it, not the entire Capitol, and that this isn’t ending our peace conference. But I will ask you, and all the others, to consider taking advantage of what they’ve got here for rapid healing. I understand usually they just totally knock you out for close to a week to let it work its course fully because it’s…not pleasant.”

“Probably that’s the treatment they used on victors when they pulled them out of the arena.” He remembered the first time, when he was a teenager, they told him he’d been unconscious for four days. He knew it had been several days after the Third Quell before he woke up on his sofa in Twelve, ready for his little guided tour with Snow.

“It’s not fun.” Johanna glanced over at him. “That’s the stuff they injected into Katniss for her ribs in Thirteen. You can’t have morphling for the pain. Bad reaction.” He remembered Johanna had been rooming with Katniss at that point. He’d ask her about it after Brocade left. But for Johanna to be daunted by it, he knew it had to be unpleasant as hell.

“We don’t have a week we can afford to lose,” Brocade told them. “Not with the country depending on us. Not if we want to show any gutless shits out there that they can’t stop us from making a new country. If you think you can endure the pain, and be ready again the day after tomorrow, we’ll meet here at the hospital. Anyone who’s stuck in bed, we’ll get them wheeled in.” She hesitated again. “I know it’s a lot to ask. Sessions may be short. If you’d rather heal on your own schedule and you think you can still be well enough to at least sit there and say your part, that’s fine too. But I need every one of you for this.”

He nodded, seeing the logic to it. Any delays would present a shaky front and only encourage further resistance from anyone inclined to stop this treaty from happening. “I’ll do it,” he said quietly, not
looking forward to it, but knowing it was needed. He’d endured plenty of physical pain in his life, and for much less cause than this.

“Me too,” Johanna said. He looked over at her with a questioning glance. She shrugged. “What, you expect me to watch you go through it alone?” He couldn’t help but smile at her stubbornness and the affection right beneath it.

“Thank you,” Brocade said with something like relief.

“Anyone turned you down yet?” he asked out of curiosity.

“No. I think ‘I’m not letting the actions of some Capitol asshole dictate to me’ is pretty much the common opinion,” and Brocade gave a wry grin at that.

“Nobody’s blaming the Capitol, huh?”

“There’s some rumbling. Although the fact the dead so far are all Capitol citizens, and the response and effort by Capitol rescue teams and medical treatment has been stellar, that’s silenced a lot of it. This hurt them a lot worse than it hurt us.” Eyes on him, she leaned forward a little, wincing as she did so, and gave it up as a bad job, sitting back again, moving her chair forward instead. She lowered her voice. “You two know the Capitol best of this delegation. Your thoughts? Was this some kind of larger plot?”

He looked over at Johanna. She shook her head slightly. That readily agreed with his thoughts. “If this is some kind of plot, and they were willing to sacrifice dozens of their own just for the chance for sympathy and to show Capitol disaster response in a favorable light, there’s seriously a fucking mastermind on the level of Snow and Coin at work there. And believe me, that ain’t Jolly Frill.” He tried to not think of Gloriana, and all those many nights over the years with Jubilation treating him like a prize possession to be paraded. “I watched that boy grow up. He’s just a spoiled, self-centered little brat. He probably did it because he wanted to show you that you don’t get to tell him how it is, and tell his family they were wrong for always taking what they wanted.”

Brocade nodded, sitting back in her chair with a sigh. “I suppose a few isolated people with a grudge, that’s still better than an organized plot.”

“We still never did find who wiped the identity database, but that doesn’t mesh well with something like this that was all about a pretty melodramatic public message,” Cambric spoke up, idly rubbing his forearm as if trying to soothe an ache within. Cramped muscle perhaps, Haymitch thought, from stumping around on that crutch, stubbornly refusing to leave Brocade’s side.

“I’m inclined to believe the database was an isolated incident. I don’t like that someone was desperate enough to cover their tracks that they wiped the entire thing.” Brocade shook her head, then giving a sharp gasp of irritation and hurrying to fix it as her impromptu headscarf started to fall free, exposing more of her dark brown hair. “Damn thing just won’t stay tied, they’ve got no good fabric for it here,” she groused. Haymitch wondered wryly if it was the same stuff that the uniforms in the Detention Center had been made from, the stuff that wouldn’t hold a knot, presumably so prisoners couldn’t hang themselves. Maybe they worried about that with patients here. “But anyway, I’m thinking maybe we’re better off with it gone. Scrap it, just start with our own identification and registration system. Iridia, and your friend Beetee, were saying it would actually be less work to write the computer code for a new database than trying to alter the old one. So maybe they did us a favor.”

“Tell that to the people that’ll be pissed that some criminals may have gotten a chance to slip through the cracks,” Johanna said dryly.
“Still,” Haymitch said, “you know we’ve pretty much determined some solid legal standards to use on rogue Peacekeepers and the like.” After they all got done bickering about it, of course. “We’ll just have to trust that people will get their comeuppance. They never expected they’d have to answer for it. It’s not like they can easily leave the country and hide, not unless they’re living in some crappy shack out in the borderlands.”

“Good,” Brocade said. “I’ve got to see Gilt and Emerald next, but I’ll let the nurse know you’ll be taking the treatment tonight.” She looked at both of them. “Thank you,” she said sincerely. “I know I’ve already asked a lot of you.”

“It’s worth it,” he answered, not wanting to get into some kind of deep and even maudlin discussion about the value of sacrifices for their country’s future. She had to know all that already. “Good night. I’ll be ready day after tomorrow. Just let me know where we’ll be meeting.”

The nurse came back and wheeled Brocade out, and Cambric followed close behind. Half an hour, and several injections later, he was already starting to wonder if it had been a really bad idea. He knew he pretty much had to do it but that didn’t mean, as the stinging and smarting began and started to spread, that he wasn’t regretting it somewhat. Looking over at Johanna and seeing her stiffening and grimacing in pain too didn’t help.

The clock was readily visible on the wall opposite their beds so he could easily time it. An hour and a half in he was starting to curse Jolly Frill, the medical staff, whatever asshole in Three had invented the healing treatment and didn’t make it work with morphling, whoever had built the damn Fulmer Theater, whoever wrote “Flight of the Mockingjay”, and pretty much anyone else he could think of at that moment. Johanna’s contribution was equally colorful.

At the two hour mark he lay there in bed, feeling like the very center of his bones was on fire, like he would burn to ashes at any moment. He tried to figure out how to not shake his entire body to pieces with the tremors trying to work through his locked, tense muscles. Each hit more like a wracking spasm, and he found himself lurching for the dishpan-looking thing on the bedside table to throw up into it. They’d said he might throw up once or twice; that was his banged-up liver getting further pissed off as the treatment tried to shove its recovery along the fast track. No wonder they’d stuck him with a fresh drip bag of fluids alongside the one they’d already said was antibiotics. The pan might have not been intended for puking, but he really didn’t give a shit at the moment. If they’d needed it, those that weren’t in agony and were up on their feet could just damn well get a new one. His stomach muscles and ribs, already protesting the abuse they’d taken, felt even worse after the effort of throwing up. He gave a breathless, humorless huff that was about the closest he could get to a laugh. “Feels like the time Peeta dumped the booze on me,” he mocked himself.

He was startled to see that she’d gotten out of her bed, with her broken arm and bandaged ankle, and she was leaning heavily on her own pole of drip bags, swaying and taking a stumbling hobble towards his bed. “Hanna…”

“Like we’re gonna just lie there and listen to each other whimper all night,” she said, brown eyes determined, even as the lines of pain were etched sharply in her face and in the tension of her body. “Like you think either of us can stand that.”

He stared at her, remembering that air vent, the sounds of her in pain as they tortured her, knowing she was nearby but being unable to see her or touch her. That had been the worst torment of all. “C’mere,” he said hoarsely, shoving the pan back on the nightstand and trying to scoot back enough to make room for her as she lurched her way to the bed enough to sit down. It took a minute and both of them trying, but finally she’d hauled her way into bed enough to be halfway lying down, leaning over him on her good arm.
“How do we…” She obviously knew any pressure on his ribs might make him scream, and there was her injured arm to consider, and not tangling or pulling out any of the drip lines into either of their arms. “This is making me hate puzzles,” she told him, tongue-in-cheek.

He gave another of those not-quite-laughs, immediately regretted it. Carefully, they managed to work their way together. With her tucked back against him but not pressed too tight against his ribs and with him carefully avoiding jostling her broken arm, it felt like they were holding on to each other with the care of handling eggshells. But her hand in his held on tight, and he kissed the nape of her neck. She smelled mostly like harsh disinfectant and the lingering whiff of pulverized stone and char and smoke rather than her own familiar scent. But feeling her warmth against him, he was comforted all the same by having her there.

Her fingers squeezed his tighter when a fresh spasm of pain hit and became unbearable, and he did the same with her. They talked to each other, mostly about the small things back home to do still, about more plans for fixing up the house, about how to help Finnick and Annie settle in. They spent twenty-two minutes talking about maybe getting a dog, rambling on mostly to hear each other’s voices.

“You know,” she said suddenly, a little sheepishly, at three twenty-seven in the morning, “I’m really fucking glad you told me to leave my underwear on tonight. Or the doctors would have gotten a show.” He knew that in the past, flaunting the lack of underwear would have been her way of defiance. There had been at least one tabloid photo of her in a too-short skirt with a strategic blur. He thought about when she undressed for him, how there was no self-consciousness to her, but there was a sense of pride as well. That confidence along with the notion that some level of public modesty actually mattered to her said plenty, that she felt she had the right to her body again and to choose who saw it and on what terms.

He understood that feeling of finally owning himself again all too well, and the power and pleasure there was in being with her knowing his body was his to give to her, rather than hers to take.

He smiled to himself a little and asked, “Since I didn’t get to find out, what color was it anyway?”

“Dark green,” she told him, turning her head a bit to look back over her shoulder at him with a wry grin. “Silk. With leaves embroidered on it.” Sex was the furthest thing from his mind right now—he could hardly breathe and he was exhausted and the thought of her body pressing against his, over and over, brought a wince rather than interest. But the thought of her in a few wisps of dark green silk was a pleasant notion and he let himself imagine it. She heaved an irritated sigh. “Of course the night I get to wear the nice underwear, it gets wrecked. And that dress.” She actually sounded a little depressed at that. If she could wear it without bad memories, maybe he ought to ask Cinna to make her another dress like that. She’d looked so beautiful in it.

“Of course the night I get to wear the nice underwear, it gets wrecked. And that dress.” She actually sounded a little depressed at that. If she could wear it without bad memories, maybe he ought to ask Cinna to make her another dress like that. She’d looked so beautiful in it.

“Of course the night I get to wear the nice underwear, it gets wrecked. And that dress.” She actually sounded a little depressed at that. If she could wear it without bad memories, maybe he ought to ask Cinna to make her another dress like that. She’d looked so beautiful in it.

The less he remembered about that night, between the pain and the broken sleep that kept being interrupted by one of them waking up in terror from a nightmare about any number of horrors, the better. But the pain died down to a dull, persistent throb by morning, though between that and the other hurts through his body, he had to move with the stiff care of an eighty-year-old to go to the bathroom. When he was hobbling his way back Johanna was finally sleeping peacefully, sprawled out in the bed and lightly snoring, and Galen Wing came in, dressed in the same black-trimmed pale green hospital pajamas he and Johanna were wearing. The bandages on his face and head, the
bandaged left hand, and how stiffly he was moving, said pretty clearly that he’d had a bad night of it too. Haymitch put a finger to his lips, nodding to Johanna then gesturing out to the hallway. Whatever it was, it could wait for her to hear it so far as he was concerned, because her finally getting some rest mattered more.

Eyeing him, Galen guided him to the nurse’s station about thirty feet down the hall, rattling off a string of mumbo-jumbo that ended up with him with two small bottles of an electric blue liquid. Cracking the top, he sniffed it and smelled nothing, and stared at it suspiciously. “Nothing edible is naturally this color,” he pointed out. Blueberries were actually purple.

“It’s naturally almost colorless. Three dyed it to make it more appealing,” more appealing to Capitol eyes anyway, “and we’re using up the supply,” Galen said coolly. “It’s a sleep aid. It won’t interfere with your healing medication. Take it when you’re back in your room. You look like you need it. The other is for Johanna.”

“No sleep for you, huh?”

“Too much work.” He gave a weary sigh and Haymitch wondered if he or his wife had slept at all during the night either. “Though I suppose most anyone being recovered now was so badly crushed they won’t be pulled out alive.”

“Voleo and Deidre?”

“Deidre’s in surgery. Voleo?” Galen shook his head, a glum expression on his face.

“Damn.” He hadn’t known Voleo Morath well, met him only a couple times in Five, but he’d seemed like a good man. Esteban had to be devastated by losing his twin brother. Better keep him off the morphling, he thought, with a sudden thought of Maribelle Donner Undersee, who in twenty-five years had never gotten over losing her twin. Twins had an odd bond sometimes, so he heard, and he wondered again if somehow she had felt Maysilee’s pain as she lay there dying, if it haunted her nightmares. He resolved to go give his condolences to Esteban when he could. “Have you slept at all?” he asked curiously.

“Athena and I were just about to take the accelerated treatment now that it’s calmed down. I was just making one last check.” He gave a wry smile. “I may not be in shape for the trauma ward but we could at least do rounds among stable patients.”

“How full up is it?” He leaned back against the nurse’s counter. They were all off doing their own rounds. The emptiness and silence of the corridors was almost oppressive, nearly funereal in a way, and he found himself talking just to fill it. Though he supposed a bustle of activity would mean a crisis, so this stillness was actually a good thing.

“Bad,” Galen told him succintly. “The worst we’ve had since…” He grimaced. Haymitch quickly realized what he’d meant—the final desperate push to capture Snow’s mansion. The fighting, the pods, and the bombed children; it must have been a day in hell here at the hospital. He hadn’t known because he’d been knocked out for most of that.

“Oh, you mean the last time I was here?” he said, his discomfort making him a little glib. Though seeing the look on the other man’s face, he forced himself to calm down. “You were working for that?”

“Yes.” His eyes lifted, held Haymitch’s. “In fact, I helped treat both you and your wi—well, I suppose she wasn’t your wife yet at that point. But of course I assume you were engaged…”
In that insane floundering, Haymitch read the discomfort of that situation, and he also realized with an acute sense of panic that he must have read Johanna’s medical file pretty thoroughly. He knew about the baby, probably why he was babbling on about them being engaged. “I’d appreciate,” he said, hearing the sharp edge in his voice, “if you wouldn’t go spreading that piece of news.”

“I haven’t in seven months, why would I do it now?” Galen retorted.

“Nice piece of leverage for the negotiation table if you should need to force me to back your play on something, don’t you think?”

Temper exploded in the other man’s blue eyes, and the tremor of anger was in his voice. “Don’t insult me. I’m not Coriolanus Snow. Plus, I respect a patient’s confidentiality.”

“So did Lucius Sixleigh.” He smirked, his defensiveness at this potential threat bringing up the resentment of the victors’ doctor and how he’d been such a fucking joke. He couldn’t trust one doctor who was supposed to look after his well-being, and knowing Galen Wing had a secret of his and Johanna’s and potential leverage, made him resentful of that. “Respected it so much he never told anyone—hell, he never asked us any questions, just made sure we were fit to be fucked.”

“And he was hanged for his part in the harm that came to you. There are lousy doctors. The ones that see a child coming in with broken bones and just ignore how it keeps happening—they think they just need to treat the symptoms, rather than look into the disease. Sixleigh was a doctor who wanted to stay blind. I suppose he had cause.”

“And what cause is that?” he challenged him.

Galen eyed him carefully. “I suppose it’s fear.” Sensing Haymitch’s attention, he went on. “Fear of our president for Sixleigh, of course, as I’m sure President Snow made expectations of silence quite clear to him, and probably chose a man who had little interest in digging deeper. But even those of us who just knew the president as a distant figure in that mansion, we had plenty of fears. Fears of looking foolish, of being judged by our society. But of course, that all paled against our fear of you.”

“Me?”

“Not you, specifically.” He sighed, fingers playing nervously with one of the pens from the nurse’s station. “How to explain this? From childhood, in school and on the television and at home, we all learned that the districts were full of barbarians who had tried to destroy us many years ago. We beat them and after that we had to take such care in keeping them well-patrolled by Peacekeepers, making sure they couldn’t amass weapons, and making sure they were kept busy with useful work for our nation so they wouldn’t plot more treason. Of course we also controlled them with the yearly loss of their children. That proved that while you weren’t fully civilized, and of course the arena proved that even the children among you would resort to violence quite readily, at least the loss of your children meant something, so you weren’t complete animals. That meant there was still hope. For those that survived the arena, we took a special pleasure in giving you our attention and advantages, trying to make you into proper human beings. Because a victor, a child, was still young enough to be properly influenced; we figured the district adults were just hopeless brutes. We thought that someday, every district child would look at the victors, prosperous and civilized, and let it be known they’d prefer to be like that, and then we would of course step in and do our best to nurture you, to educate you. Then, finally, we would have peace again. Even as we celebrated the Games as an attempt to bring culture and civilization to one lucky district child who proved their mettle, we told ourselves they were also quite necessary because the district adults were so damn stubborn and kept breeding a new crop of little savages who chose ignorance. Twenty-three of your children who didn’t have the right stuff, all for the advancement of one district child and the continued safety of the future for thousands of our own children, seemed like an acceptable trade.”
Haymitch stared at him. “Do you have any idea how utterly fucked up that is?” He couldn’t even begin to unpick the various threads of how much insult and offense was in that mentality. It frankly boggled his mind a bit to hear it stated so baldly. But he’d seen it in the Capitol, the obliviousness, the way the districts were considered brutish and even dangerous, the way people spoke about the districts. He’d seen it in Honoria and then Effie, every year, as they sighed about the hopeless unattractiveness of District Twelve. Just hearing it finally put together as one cohesive philosophy made an awful sense of everything.

“Now? Yes. Before? No. I’m afraid I was about as comfortably snug in my assumptions as most anyone else you met in this city.” He said it with a tone of apology.

“So what changed your mind?” If he said it was Katniss and Peeta’s heartwarming little romance, Haymitch was seriously going to want to scream.

“Athena and I have a daughter,” he said simply. Then he looked over at Haymitch, pain etched in his expression, before he glanced away, staring with undue interest at an ugly painting of flowers. “We had two. The girls were with my parents while Athena and I were working the casualties here. They were evacuated to the Presidential Mansion.”

Haymitch stared at him with a painful comprehension. “Oh, fuck,” he said softly.

“Cornelia made it out alive. She was thirteen then—older, stronger. Badly burned, about as badly as Katniss and Peeta, but…alive. She left the hospital months ago.” Haymitch didn’t bother pointing out that to the appearance-obsessed Capitol, a girl with extensive skin grafts would be considered flawed and ugly, and might not have much of a future. “Phillipa—Pippa—was six. She died here after three days. Down on the third floor, in the burn ward,” and there was an absent tone to his voice, as if he was caught up in the awful remembrance of it. Haymitch said nothing, just letting the silence stand, feeling the horror of it wash over him. He tried to not remember the screams, the smell of chemical fires and burning flesh, but it was right there in his mind.

He hadn’t thought about the parents of those children too much, maybe because that would have made it all the more real and reminded him too much of handing over all those tribute coffins. Now Galen dared look at Haymitch again. “I don’t know which of you pulled them out of the fire. But I know this. I saw the newscasts. The president who was supposed to safeguard me and my children was ready to sacrifice both of them for his own sake. Four people from the outlying districts, victors who were fighting against us, were the ones who ran to try to rescue my children.” His eyes held Haymitch’s steadily. “You saved children you had every reason to want to see dead, and you and Johanna lost your own child in the bargain.” He couldn’t help the slight flinch. Did Galen assume they’d known, somehow, and still willingly made that sacrifice? No, he was a doctor. He had to have known it was too soon for either of them to be aware of the baby. “It gave me and Athena a lot to think about while caring for all those burn cases and sitting with Nell and Pippa. So when the trials started and we heard the details, and when you all voted against killing Capitol children in vengeance, maybe we were finally ready to listen.”

Hearing that, all the pain of it that had finally broken through the thick fog of oblivious privilege and condescension, Haymitch wasn’t going to take that away from him by challenging or mocking him. He’d buried a child and watched another one go through weeks of agony and worried for his future and the future of his surviving daughter. Galen Wing had earned his way through suffering, finally understanding the agony and fear the districts went through, and Haymitch would respect that. “I see,” he said finally, seeing from the tension in Galen that the grief was still quite fresh. His own grief at the miscarriage was bad enough, and that from all those dead tributes. To imagine having to bury his child was unthinkable, unbearable.
Another thought coalesced in his mind, a reminder of what he and Johanna had talked about in Four. *He already knows the details of my file from treating me, he knows about the kid. That would save so much explanation that was still painful. And maybe he’d be inclined to help out...* “I hate to ask for a favor.”

Leaning on the desk as if he needed the support after talking about Phillipa, Galen gave him a wry smile. “I owe my daughter’s life to you. If it’s a personal favor, just name it. If it’s political, that I won’t do. I’m sorry.” Haymitch tried to not be impressed with the prospect of an actual honest man, but it only solidified his opinion a bit more.

“Personal,” Haymitch assured him. “You saw my file already when you were treating me, yeah?”

“Yes. I’d say you’re in rather good shape, all things considered.”

“Can we do a consult or whatever the hell you’d need to do, off the books?”

“Why? Do you have some reason you’re concerned for your health?”

“Nothing right now. Just... for later, if there’s anything going on that would make me kick the bucket sooner rather than later.” He decided to be blunt. “Johanna and I were talking about kids. I’ve taken things rough enough in life that I want to know if it’s likely I’ll be around for them.”

A nod answered him. “I see. Of course. I’d be glad to help.”

“Confidentiality, huh?” he said, both as a reminder and a warning.

“Naturally.” Galen raised an eyebrow clear to the white bandage across his forehead. “You’re really willing to trust a Capitol citizen, hm?”

Haymitch gave him a fierce smile. “Here’s some advice. Just in case you’re a far better actor than Jolly Frill and you’re clever enough to be totally playing me, you’re probably smart enough to take the examples of Coriolanus Snow and Alma Coin to heart. You’ll realize that trying to manipulate me and threatening people I care about is a bad idea because frankly, when it comes to taking you down, I don’t give a fuck how important you are, and I can be very patient.” He gave a slight shrug, gingerly making the motion. “But I’d prefer to think you are who you claim to be. As for trust—I ain’t ready to trust the entire Capitol yet. But I can trust some of its people and I think you’ve earned that.” He held out his hand. “We’ve gotta start somewhere, after all.”

Galen reached out and clasped Haymitch’s offered hand for a moment. “Good. Before the conference breaks up, we’ll sit down and discuss your status.” He frowned slightly. “There is one thing I’ve noticed that I think needs addressing, though.”

“What?” Haymitch asked, already hoping it wasn’t something serious, visions of something that would kill him slowly and painfully running through his brain. *Or is he going to chew me out for having a glass of wine with dinner?*

“I noticed you read with the material held close. And I imagine if you read for too long, you get headaches. Has that been since you were a child, or is it more recent?”

“It’s been like that since I was a kid, and yeah, the headaches happen,” he answered shortly. He could remember having to take a break from schoolwork sometimes at night because it felt like someone was stabbing behind his eyes with one of his ma’s steel knitting needles. “My friends used to give me shit that I had my nose buried in a book.” Johanna had teased him in Thirteen about too much reading law books overloading his brain when he was rubbing his eyes complained about a headache, and offered to distract him.
“I think you’ve needed reading glasses for a long time, then. I’m surprised nobody picked up on it before now.”

Glasses? Was it really something that stupid? He’d been ready for news of it being a brain tumor or something terrifying like that. Seemed like every time he’d had a doctor show interest in him before, beyond his “annual checkup” for the circuit, it was always for him being halfway done to death, whether by a patron or his experiences in the arena, with the bombs, or with the aftermath of the torture. He stared at Galen incredulously. “Really? Sixleigh didn’t care about my eyes. And I wasn’t much inclined to let any other Capitol doctors poke at me. As for back home? Nobody there had glasses when that needed a doctor to figure it out and money to buy them, and they didn’t have either.” The few kids that were virtually blind without glasses were just expected to get by as best they could. He suspected they died quicker in the mines, less able to see any potential danger or quickly escape in an emergency. *Yeah, I’m blaming this one on Fog,* he decided. His ma’s vision had been just fine.

Galen sighed, a look of chagrin on his face. “Of course. I didn’t stop and think…”

“It’s a lot different from what you know,” Haymitch acknowledged. But at least the man was trying. He gave a sigh of his own. “Glasses? It would be nice to not have to worry about a massive headache from reading.

“I really think it would help. It made a huge difference for me when I just finally accepted the reality as a boy.” When Haymitch thought about it, Capitol kids with glasses probably got teased mercilessly. “I begged my parents to let me get corrective surgery, but they wouldn’t do it on a child whose eyes were still changing. By the time I was old enough,” he shrugged, “I was just so used to the glasses anyway.”

“Fine,” he grumbled, just knowing Johanna would probably tease the crap out of him. “We can talk about that later. Right now,” he picked up the bottle of knock-out drugs, “I’m gonna get some sleep. Then maybe after that, I’ll go strangle Jolly Frill while I’m at it and save us all from having to listen to whatever melodramatic justifications he’s got for himself.” He wasn’t serious about it. He’d killed in self-defense in the arenas and in the rebellion, and he’d helped let Snow commit suicide, but he drew the line there. He would never give in to the worst, most violent impulses in himself and take another life for no cause. He was a killer, but unlike Jolly, he was no murderer. But he felt that fury anyway, knowing the little asshole would enjoy having more time in the spotlight, and that innocent people had paid for it.

“He’s downstairs on the fourth floor, handcuffed to his bed, guarded by several of President Paylor’s security team, and he was trying to be very loud and demanding. Sedating him for the peace of the other patients around him, as well as his guards, was actually a pleasure.” Haymitch looked at him in surprise. “‘Do no harm’ doesn’t mean I can’t hate the little bastard,” Galen pointed out, his aggravation obvious in his voice.

Haymitch smirked at him. “You know, the more I get to know you, the more I think I like you.”
District Fourteen: Thirty-Two

When it was all said and done, 88 people had lost their lives to the Fulmer Theater bombing. 86 were Capitol citizens. Voleo Morath and Sharabi Inkermann, one of Brocade’s security team who’d been born in Thirteen, were the only district-born casualties. But close to two dozen people remained in the hospital needing longer-term recuperation, Texel Dravid included, and Galen had wearily confided that a few of those, in a coma, weren’t expected to wake.

It had been an evening in hell. The mourning was fairly public, with reports on the victims all over the newscasts. Everyone seemed stunned still. But from the smoke and rubble and devastation, at least something good had come about. Brocade’s address, laying the blame squarely on a single angry young man, and refusing to be intimidated or frightened, reassured the districts that the Capitol’s actions wouldn’t determine the course of events anymore, and reassured the Capitol that they wouldn’t collectively be punished for Jolly Frill.

The newcasters also made a great deal of the pictures of the delegates working together side by side with the Capitol citizens, everyone’s only thought in search and rescue. That shared terror and determination showed through when they reconvened on the first floor of the hospital. Their wounds had healed, and they had tackled the treaty with a new tenacity of purpose. Some of the sharpest bickering edge had been worn down, and instead of arguing bitterly about how Two or Eight or Eleven profited or would be hurt by a proposed action, things ran smoother. Galen Wing still took some crap occasionally, but calling him out was usually a gentler thing now. Not that it was entirely sweetness and light, but the air seemed to have finally turned from suspicion to cooperation.

Sitting there at the table on July 4th, they were busy hammering out the final details of temporary work force permits to allow people from One and Four and other places with no work to go help those desperately in need in places like Nine and Eleven. Haymitch looked down the table at all of them, a sense of bittersweet nostalgia suddenly going through him from a shared ordeal and subsequent shared purpose bringing people from all the districts together here in the Capitol.

But looking down the table at all the mayors, he felt the odd sense again of being a bit of an outsider. He knew the mayors were pretty much all from the merchants. Jarron Undersee had been merchie, through and through. In contrast, he, Corriden, and Brocade were born to the laborers of their districts. Most were fair-skinned, but others, where the workers were mostly fairer, tended to be darker; Bardoka could have probably passed for his cousin but for her blue eyes. It only mattered that the merchants looked different from the workers somehow. Somehow, the divide was there. People in a district could look at a person and know where they belonged by birth.

Granted, Seam-born or not, he could have married any merchie woman in Twelve without anyone saying anything about it. But victors were different because they were now exempt from those class divides. Case Tallmadge had found that out Seeder--though their shared Tallmadge surname and Seeder's lighter olive skin suggested some mingling back before the Dark Days--and Edsel Raven had with Lizzie. But Perulla Everdeen had caused murmurs of her own by running off with “Seam trash” like Burt. A mayor like Elmar or Fallow, marrying someone from the working class was pretty much a district-wide scandal.

Growing up with the blond, blue-eyed merchies, and vaguely resenting their relative wealth and power like any Seam kid did, he’d wondered how that stark divide of privilege by appearance had happened. Mags had told him years later that it had been the Capitol. In the chaotic resettlement days after the wars and their fallout wiped out so much of the population, the growing Capitol had placed their favorites in each district as the leaders and merchants and craftsmen, giving them the positions
of power. Not surprising that in each case they’d deliberately chosen people looking different from those assigned to be the workers to make the two classes more easily keep separate—just another control, another way to divide people and make them suspect and shun each other rather than join together to present a united front. That divide had been shattered by the rebellion, with workers and merchants fighting side by side for their freedom. That had been the case even in the Dark Days too, apparently, as he remembered Pavel Donner. He wondered just how smooth the other Donners had been to talk their way out of being considered all traitors and maintaining their social status.

Looking at the mayors, close as they’d become especially due to the bombing, he couldn’t help but think of that other group of friends who’d been there for him through years and years of ordeals. He was reminded of the victors in Mentor Central so strongly it was as if he could imagine Chaff and Mags sitting there with him rather than Fallow and Wrack. His eyes stung for a moment as he thought of all the victors who hadn’t lived to see this moment of the districts sitting together deciding the course of their own country. Fuck, he missed them so damn much, and the reminders here were too sharp. He tried to cover it by rubbing his eyes as if they were tired, reaching for the new reading glasses he’d put down on the table. Much as he hated to admit Galen was right, when he wore the damn things reading was comfortable on his eyes for the first time in his life. Johanna had teased him that he looked dignified but desirable in them—“like some kind of very fuckable brainiac.”

“One more matter,” Brocade said, pleased when the resolution passed and was added to the Treaty of the Fourteen Territories. “I know we’ve accepted Doctor Wing’s proposal for the Capitol to cede its status and join us as a territory. And I think we can agree that the center of government will stay here for now until our new chosen capitol is built.”

“Agreed,” Bardoka said with a shrug.

“We need to choose a new capitol, then,” Brocade pointed out.

“I propose District Twelve,” Corduroy said. “Or, well, whatever that territory ends up naming themselves.” Shedding the old district designations had been a point they all agreed upon readily, new names to be chosen in next year’s elections by the citizens of the freshly-designated Territorial Union of Panem. About keeping the name “Panem”, they’d argued, bread is survival, it’s life—we just need to make sure there are no more circuses. “The victors of District Twelve are the reason we’re here. Twelve lost the most in fighting the war when the Capitol tried to destroy them, but they still kept going. We should recognize their role,” he nodded to Haymitch, “in where we are today. I can’t see any other choice that deserves that honor.”

Murmurs of agreement answered him. Haymitch tried to not smile at the irony that the worst district in Panem was apparently now the nation’s pride. “It’s an honor, Roy, and thanks,” he answered, “but I’d rather we not locate our capitol smack in the middle of any of the territories, period.” He shook his head. “We all fought to get here. We’re all working for this right now. This new capitol shouldn’t belong to any one territory. I think it needs to be something separate and belong to everyone.” To put former-Twelve up on some kind of pedestal would just be tipping the scales uneven again, one part of Panem held above the others.

“Well said,” Tertullia acknowledged with a nod of approval.

“Well,” Elmar said wryly, “there’s a hell of a lot of places that could be cleared and built up, and I know people in Seven would be more than willing to turn to that task.” He looked down the table at Haymitch, a wry grin on his face. “Proposing that the new capitol be located in the borderlands near the former District Twelve, details to be worked out?”

“You’re not arguing your way out of that one, I think.” Corriden told him dryly, blue eyes alight with amusement. Haymitch just sighed and shook his head, touched and exasperated all at once.
vote was unanimous.

“I suppose that’s it,” Gilt said, a tone of something almost like awe in his voice. He put his pen down, running a fretful hand through his brown hair with ink-stained fingers. He’d been chosen as the official writer of the terms of the treaty, as he had the fairest handwriting of any of them. Haymitch supposed that was the One upbringing and how kids there had apparently hand-lettered tags on things for Capitol consumption as school homework.

They had talked about simply typing the thing on a computer for the sake of efficiency, but seeing it there on paper in bold black strokes of ink, lent it the human touch that a machine could never replicate. It seemed fitting that efficiency not be considered in a document that was all about the rights and hopes of a people who had bled and suffered for this day. He thought it was right that it should be carefully and painstakingly made by hand.

Leaning over his shoulder, Tertullia said, “You might want to add a closing, Gilt.”

“Oh,” Gilt said, nodding vigorously, picking up the pen again and dipping it in the inkwell. Holding it there, he looked at the rest of them and said, “‘Resolved by the undersigned this day, July the 4th, 76 AT’?”

“Fuck ‘AT’,” Esteban spoke up fiercely. His grief was still obvious, but if anything it seemed to only spur him on harder to see his job done. After the Treason, the calendar the Capitol had imposed on Panem after the Dark Days. “We’re not forcing Capitol timekeeping on things any longer.”

“Well I really don’t think we want to go back to the old calendar from the days before Panem existed,” Iridia pointed out. “It’ll give everyone a headache transitioning, and does anyone even know what happened two thousand-odd years ago that everyone got so excited about that they started marking time from there?”

“I think it was something to do with one of the old religions,” Galen spoke up hesitantly. “I know the records are probably in the restricted sections of the libraries but we learned only a little about that in school. They called it foolish superstition, of course, and in the world after the war and the nuclear winter and the famine, it didn’t have much place. The last remnants of the religions were easily put aside—or rather suppressed, I imagine—after the Dark Days.” He gave a wry smile. “I imagine President Mackenzie didn’t fancy much competition for the obedience and loyalty of the people. Religion would be dangerous like that.”

Interesting point but not one they needed to engage in just now. “Do we really want to force another new calendar on everyone?” Acarica said with a sigh. “It’s just going to cause confusion and we’ve got a lot of that to go around already.”

“So we rename it,” Corriden said with a shrug. “Or hell, we just cut the ‘AT’ out entirely.” Haymitch assumed the mayors had been asked as the delegates rather than any of the district commanders during the war because from long years of leadership, they were the ones already used to considering things like legal issues and food supply and permits and approving building plans. They wielded that experience casually even now. Every so often when he, Corriden, Brocade, or Galen spoke up too bluntly or without realizing something, he could feel the difference. Looking at the startled faces around them, he realized this was one of those times.

“Cut it out, I say,” Brocade offered. “Easier than trying to come up with a new tag that works. Something like ‘After the Rebelllion’ is going to be a mess because our rebellion is the one most people would be referring to there.”

“Just put it as 76,” Wrack said, “and let’s get this thing signed.” He grinned, rolling his eyes. “You
know the newscasters are waiting.”

Gilt jotted down the closing, and offered the pen to Brocade. “She should go last,” Edsel said, shaking his head. Gilt nodded, bending his head over the paper and signing with a flourish. He laid the pen down and Tertullia went to take her turn with it.

Finally he went to sign, taking a moment to see the signatures on that paper, from Tertullia’s bold script to Corduroy’s fine letters. He signed, taking care to make his signature neat as possible. The thought that a hundred years or more from now that his name would still stand on this document, long after he was dead and gone, was humbling.

When Brocade went to sign, she looked the treaty over for a moment, a slight smile on her lips, she looked up at them and said, “We’ve made history today, all of us. Despite those who tried to stop us from it, we’ve made our own country here. Thank you for that.” She signed, and the smear of black wax was stamped with the new fourteen-starred Panem seal. One of the artisans in One had done a rush job on it after they’d decided that last week that it would be needed, rather than relying on the old Capitol seal. “Let’s go tell the nation, shall we?” she said with a slightly giddy grin.

The newscasters were indeed waiting. Standing there with the lot of them, feeling the fierce pride in what they had done, he listened as Brocade announced the treaty had been signed, and read the new Articles of the Territorial Union of Panem, for the people of Panem to hear. Some of it might be a little dry to listen to, but the start made a few things loud and clear. “The First Article: from this day forward, all citizens of Panem are endowed from birth with equal rights and dignity. These include the freedoms of life, education, immigration, justice, and a voice in government. No citizen shall be arrested without due cause. No citizen shall be punished without a fair and impartial trial. No citizen shall ever be made to pay the price for the accused crimes of another. No citizen will be made to endure a state of slavery.” Brocade paused and then concluded, “As part of the guarantee of these rights and freedoms, this delegation declares void all the terms forced upon Panem by the Treaty of the Treason.”

He felt Johanna slip her hand into his, and he didn’t want to let go. Someday, their kids would hear about this. There were plenty of awful, horrible things that surrounded it that would be much harder to tell them about—the Games, the oppression, the rebellion—but this one moment, he would always claim with nothing but pride. Even the crowd, which was made up mostly of people of the ex-Capitol, newly-dubbed District Fourteen, and eventually to be something else, looked hopeful and even excited. In part he was sure that was probably because the Treaty of Fourteen Territories wasn’t laying dire punishments upon them to mirror the Treaty of the Treason, but also because the Fulmer Theater disaster had drawn them in. They had bled too for this day at the hands of someone who would rather kill than see the idea of freedom take root. It didn’t even things out, of course, but it made that gulf a little narrower. It had shown their former tormenters as human and willing to cooperate with the districts. The days of the Capitol were finished. This had closed the door on them firmly.

With that good feeling to hopefully armor him a bit, he and Brocade went to the Detention Center. He sensed that for Jolly Frill it had been personal in some sense, and he knew the boy’s hanging was a foregone conclusion. Jolly didn’t even bother denying his role in the bombing. Haymitch wanted to see him. He wanted to try to just finally shed the burden of three generations of Frills in his life.

He thought about being here himself, suppressing a shudder. He also thought about the last time he had been here, talking to Cinna and Effie, grateful again they had been released and were safe.

Walking through the corridors he tried to not feel the walls closing in, feel the hopelessness of so many people who had suffered and died here. He also tried to not think of the scum that were
currently residing here, like Jubilation Frill with her life sentence. Cray, last he had heard, was serving two years here; as Haymitch observed, the ex-Head was unquestioningly disgusting, but unfortunately from a legal standpoint, only the proof of one girl who’d still been fifteen when Cray took her into his bed was something that BICAP had been able to prosecute. Likely she’d claimed she was sixteen and able to consent, but Haymitch doubted Cray had asked too many questions to make sure of it. He still wasn’t sure whether a weak man like Cray or a fanatic like Thread was worse, and he hoped fervently yet again that the white uniform hadn’t corrupted Ash into a copy of either.

They brought Jolly out, in the grey uniform Haymitch remembered so well, shackled hand and foot. “Oh, visitors!” he said with a bright smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “Madam President,” he made a mocking bow with a rattle of chains, “Delegate Abernathy—or have the masses proclaimed you the mayor of Twelve yet?”

“Shut up and sit down,” Brocade told him coolly.

Jolly’s blue eyes sparked with a childish contrariness. “I’d rather stand.”

“You have to ask?” he scoffed. “You come here, the great Brocade Paylor, pretending you have no ill will towards anyone. I’m an actor. I’m not fooled by poorer actors like you. You sit in that mansion, and you think have the right to tell us what to do now, tell us that we ought to bow and scrape and snivel at your feet about how wrong we were. I know what you are,” he snapped.

“And what am I?” Brocade asked, folding her hands on the table and waiting calmly.

Jolly laughed. “Do you really think if you took off that rag,” he gestured to her headscarf, “and a man actually sees your hair, it actually means something? This is the woman who will lead the country, one clinging to superstitions and half-civilized ways? You’re just a silly ignorant district bitch, and we all know you want your pound of flesh in the end. Hanging all those people with your farce of a court wasn’t enough? We all saw how savage District Eight really is and how hard they needed to be put down to restore order. So if you think I was going to sit back and let you ruin everything, you’re as dumb as you look.”

Haymitch tensed at that, his temper up, but he saw the slight shake of Brocade’s head. “So you’re a patriot,” she said.

“With you and those pet monkeys you call ‘mayors’ gone, plus that nauseating little worm of a doctor you made publicly grovel for your forgiveness—and I assure you he doesn’t speak for anyone but himself—we’d actually have a chance to set things right again,” he shrugged. Listening to it, Haymitch was incredulous at how warped it sounded, how in his own sorry little mind, Jolly Frill was a liberator rather than a terrorist. He looked at Haymitch and his expression turned sullen. “I’d really watch out for this one if I were you, though. The great ‘mastermind of the rebellion’,’ he mocked Haymitch. “Has he been whispering in your ear, advising you?” He smiled, leaning forward and giving Brocade a confiding smile. “Of course he has. He doesn’t know how to do anything but lie and betray.”

Stupid as it was, being accused of deceit, even by someone like Jolly Frill, still stung, because he knew for some, the taint of it would cling to him forever. Never mind his lies and manipulations had been in a good cause; there would always be those that would never trust him. “You can’t betray someone who never had your loyalty in the first place,” he told Jolly, trying hard to keep his temper in check, knowing that the idiot was grandstanding and overacting as usual.
“We were good to you,” he protested, and there was something genuine in that hurt rage, cutting through the layers of lofty arrogant smugness. “We gave you the best the Capitol had to offer, showed you culture and civilization, tried to help you break free from that dreary disgusting backwater you were born to. We took you on, half-wild little district brat that you were—Grandmother always loved the story of how you were so confused by the forks at Mother’s fourteenth birthday—and tried to help you.”

The forks, he remembered those fucking forks at dinner that night, alarmed at how there were so many of them at his place setting and how embarrassed and angry he’d been at a group of teenage girls at the table giggling a little at his ignorance. He remembered Gloriana Frill chiding them, *Remember he hasn’t had the privilege of a civilized upbringing, girls, it’s hardly his fault,* and patiently instructing him. Her hand had been on his shoulder as she pointed the forks out, he remembered now with a shudder working its way down his spine, and he’d been so young then, so stupid, that he hadn’t even known yet what that touch had meant. “She taught me the forks,” he agreed, the rage simmering hotter within him, “and then when she sent your ma to bed, she took me upstairs and she fucked me because she knew I couldn’t say no. I was seventeen, you little shit. She was forty-two.” Forty-two years old now himself, he couldn’t imagine fucking an awkward, scared seventeen-year-old girl—the thought was nauseating. He forced himself to not think about Johanna at that age. That was done with, they’d both agreed. “Sorry if I think correct fork use pales against being a pervert forcing a teenager into having sex. Or against being like your mother and flaunting someone as a personal fuck-toy for years.” The Frills would never change. Their sense of entitlement was just the same. “You rotten little shit, I’m sure that having finally gotten your trust fund you’d have been buying victors too last summer, if Snow hadn’t cancelled the appointments before the Quell.”

“You ungrateful—” Jolly’s face was red now, his eyes glittering dangerously, his teeth bared. “You fucking unwashed shit-eating barbarian. You’ve spread those filthy lies, and you got Grandmother hanged, and as for Mother, she cared for you, all those years, even once you started to embarrass her. Instead of someone like her with breeding and refinement, someone who’d elevate you, obviously your taste—and your loyalties—never escaped that coal heap you were born in. Maybe you *deserve* the likes of a cheap little district slut like Johanna Mason. Everyone knew she was an easy catch if you wanted to say you’d had a victor. I fucked her once, but really, she wasn—”

Now it got to twisting the truth so badly and then insulting Johanna; that was too much to bear. He punched Jolly before he even thought about it, seeing red. The crack of breaking cartilage in the other man’s nose, and the unsettlingly familiar feel of blood on his fingers, mingled with a savage satisfaction that hadn’t been there in the arena. It was a gut-churning combination, and he thought, *The Games trained us well.* The changes had been wrought and couldn’t be undone; violence when threatened was still right there as an instinct. He reached for his handkerchief and wiped the blood off his hand, then tossed it to Jolly for him to use to hold staunch the flow of blood.

He looked over at Brocade, not sure what to say. She looked at him calmly, giving him a slight shrug. He understood without saying that she’d call that one punch justified, but Haymitch wasn’t getting free license to just beat the shit out of Jolly. He nodded in acknowledgment. That had been enough. The satisfaction was too intertwined with the discomfort for him to want to do it again. “I think,” Brocade said carefully, “we’ve gotten what we came for.”

As much as he could, yes. Hearing how deluded the boy’s sense of the truth was would probably haunt him, given Galen’s words to help put it all together. He could only hope other people weren’t so arrogant and blind. As for what Jolly had said, about Johanna, he wondered if that had been a lie meant to discomfort him. The thought it could be true was almost worse.

Leaving Jolly, who had finally reluctantly taken the handkerchief and was holding it to his nose,
Brocade said quietly, “It’s hard to believe that one entitled young man could unleash so much chaos.”

“Anyone who feels like they’ve got more rights than others do feels justified in whatever they do,” he said wearily. That was how the whoring had come about, hadn’t it, and the Games too, and all the oppression? He prayed the Frills were some of the last gasps of the old Capitol and that the new would be much different. “At least we’ve fixed that with those rights put down solid on paper for everyone.”

She nodded at that. “There is…one more prisoner I’d like to ask you about,” she said hesitantly. “If you think you can handle it.”

“I’m not sure I can handle Jubilation Frill today,” he said wearily. He couldn’t stand her justifications and her hurt feelings at his supposed betrayal of her. “As for Alma Coin, I don’t think you need more from me than you’ve got already.”

“Neither of them,” she answered. Curious now, he followed her through the corridors to what looked like a minimum-security ward where several prisoners were sitting playing board games in a common area. “The more minor crimes, mostly,” she explained. “Peacekeepers serving short sentences,” Haymitch winced at seeing Cray there in his prison uniform, “and the like. I wanted to ask you about him.” She nodded to a figure in the corner, curled up in a chair reading.

It took Haymitch a minute. The characteristic beard was gone, and for a man nearly ten years younger than Haymitch, the dark hair was far greyer than his own. “Seneca Crane?” he gasped.

“We found him on the lowest level here,” Haymitch winced, knowing that was the torture ward, “when we liberated the city. Apparently he had been there since the end of the 74th Games. We couldn’t identify him immediately since he was…in no shape to speak up, and his information was among those wiped at the end of the war.”

“If Snow didn’t wipe it when he imprisoned him,” Haymitch said grimly. Wipe him from existence entirely. He stared at Crane, and only the physical changes from the young, dapper Crane he’d known convinced Haymitch he wasn’t seeing a venom ghost. “A year and a half in that hellhole,” he said wearily. “Snow told me he was dead.” Seneca Crane had an unfortunate accident. Strange how Twelve victories keep causing a need for new Head Gamemakers. Keep the two of them under control, Mister Abernathy, and I expect your next victory to perfectly be by the books. Are we understood, or shall I outline the consequences again in case your drinking has affected your memory? “But that sounds like Snow, holding out one last card to play. If it suited him more to keep Crane alive than to kill him, he’d do that. Making most everyone think he was dead and if someone needed a hard lesson beyond the threat of death, bringing them here and letting them see…there really is a fate far worse than death.” He suppressed a shudder, trying to not let his own mind go back to the cell and the ordeals he’d suffered there, wishing only for the end. Helplessly caught up in it, he remembered what they had reduced him to in there, how he’d looked forward to his execution as the only escape. He looked over at her. “After all, he told Johanna and me that our siblings were dead when they weren’t, but he’d have dragged them in front of us if we hadn’t behaved.”

“I don’t know what to do with him,” Brocade confessed. “He’s much better off now than when we found him…”

“I can imagine,” he said wearily. Six weeks had been bad enough for him. After sixteen months, he could only imagine Crane was in rough shape. “Is he sane?” he asked bluntly.

“Sometimes. Other times he has episodes.” She shook her head. “I know he was a Head Gamemaker for that one year, and that blood is certainly on his hands. But he’s clearly not well, and I’m not sure
he’ll ever recover…and some might say he’s been punished enough.”

“You never fully recover,” he said harshly. He sighed, shaking it off only with effort. “He was far from the worst,” he said. “He never reveled in the Games as punishment. He never bought a victor.” He smiled painfully. “Even if his mother did.” He had memories of young Seneca so thrilled that Haymitch had come to his house, begging him to play, with no idea Lucretia Crane had brought him there for her own purposes. “With Crane, it was…” He shook his head, trying to explain. “The Frills were generation after generation of actors, see? The Cranes were Gamemakers. His father and grandfather were Gamemakers—also named Seneca Crane, by the way. That’s how it went. The boy was raised in Central Command and Mentor Central. He loved the victors. Wanted to be our friend from the time he was a kid. I think even once he was a grown man he was still in awe a bit, saw us as his heroes. He didn’t want to own us, didn’t want to fuck us. He wanted us to like him. And we knew that. We knew he’d be in Central Command someday so we used it.” He remembered that little kid, so delighted to be up in Mentor Central, how Haymitch had noticed each victor carefully trying to befriend him. “We were nice to him—in part because he was actually a sweet kid, even if he was clearly oblivious like most Capitol kids, but also because we had to think ahead. We always tried to befriend the mentor aides because we knew they’d be Gamemakers eventually and if we had their ear it would pay off. With Crane, we started even earlier, making him our friend right from the start, knowing it might be life or death for a tribute someday.”

He hated that it sounded so cynical, but that was the truth of how it had been. Mentorship was about image and influence, and who was most successful with both. Knowing he’d have less impressive tributes when it came to sponsorships, he’d scrambled even harder than most to try to have some friends in Central Command. “I worked Crane pretty hard,” he admitted. “Because his ma used to buy me so I’d be over at his house, have some extra time to try to make a good impression. So when the 74th came around and he got the Head job, I used that. Every bit of it I could.” He’d ruthlessly played Crane, knowing how gullible he was, how anxious he was to be loved and accepted by the victors, how easy it would be to coax him with the idea of the most fantastic, unusual Games anyone had ever seen. Two victors, Seneca. C’mon. We both know you played it a little safe on the arena, right? It’s just a basic forest and plains setup. I’m sure you didn’t want to rock the boat too much in your first year, but…

Wait until you see the finale, Seneca had said, beaming widely, wanting to show off a point of pride to a friend. I’ve really outdone myself there, I promise. Haymitch had to admit, those wolf mutts had been something else entirely. Though knowing the Games as he did, he knew they hadn’t made those things from the dead tributes—it was the eerie suggestion of it that was the dramatic touch. Making mutts took longer than a day or two, but having Three make those wolves ahead of time with different colors of fur and eyes would have been a cinch given that they already knew the general coloring expected for all the district tributes, ready to release whatever ones were needed to match up with the deceased tributes. He was damn certain there had been two small black-furred wolves with grey eyes, and two slightly bigger blond ones with blue eyes, in case of whoever got reaped from Twelve.

Sure, of course. But think about it. Your pa and grandpa never came up with an idea like that, and the Capitol will be talking about these Games for decades. Looking at the man huddled in his chair, as if trying to disappear and giving the occasional nervous look to his fellow prisoners, Haymitch felt a racking sense of guilt. He had done what he’d needed to do, what circumstances had forced him to do. He couldn’t apologize for that. Every mentor had done it because it was the only way. He’d cultivated Crane as an asset, lied for years, because it had been necessary, and then he’d used that advantage, ruthlessly playing on Crane’s eagerness to please, his desire to stand up well against the example of other Cranes. But had he realized Snow would make Crane pay for what Haymitch had manipulated him into doing?
President Snow isn’t happy, Seneca had said nervously that final day. Haymitch had thought about those riots, about the girl’s ability to inspire, and steeled himself to push harder. He’s suggesting I rescind the rule change. One victor only. I’m sorry, Haymitch. It should be a dramatic finale if nothing else, but...they’re quite a pair, I wish they both could survive.

Seneca, really. Boldness in the Games is what gets it done, right? Think about it. When President Snow sees how happy everyone is—everyone across the entire country—with these two little victors, he’s not going to question you. Believe me. Everyone’s happy in that scenario. His pressure had worked. Crane had bowed to Snow first and rescinded the rule, but seeing the two of them ready to commit suicide, he’d saved them instead. Haymitch had the sense then that Crane actually did regret it, that he’d started to see beyond the enthusiasm of a man seeing the arena only as an exercise in spectacle and artistry: these two kids deserve to live. Maybe, just like Effie, he hadn’t yet applied it to the wider notion of nobody deserves to die in the arena. But the first crack had appeared, though Crane never got the chance to find out what he might have done during the rebellion. Haymitch thought that maybe, he could have gotten through to him.

No, he wasn’t ignorant enough to not be aware that when it came to Coriolanus Snow, people always paid. He just hadn’t cared. He’d used Crane and then thrown him away, because he’d gotten what he wanted from him. In his own way, he’d seen a man’s life as of less worth than what use he had for it. Every mentor had, but Haymitch had just carried that to the limit. He’d felt the pang of guilt hearing Crane had been killed, but he’d had other concerns then. The guilt was back in full force now. Feeling sickened at himself, his former pride at saving Katniss and Peeta now a little tainted by staring at the cost of it, he shook his head. “He’s...paid enough,” he said heavily. “Believe me. And being here isn’t going to help anyone. For fuck’s sake, just release him. He’s no danger to anyone.”

“I can’t just release a Head Gamemaker without conditions without having people howling for his blood,” Brocade pointed out, albeit gently. “He could readily become a target himself for that.” She looked over at him. “We did put in place for Capitol citizens to work in the districts as voluntary restitution, and to earn their living while jobs are scarce here. That was the bargain we made with your friends Cinna and Effie last winter, and I know Caesar Flickerman will probably take advantage of that parole too. We could…”

“Keep him undergoing treatment for now—let Aurelius keep doing what he can with him—and he can come to Twelve eventually,” Haymitch said heavily. “I’ll take responsibility for him.” If the man wanted to leave for another district eventually, that was fine, but here was something else he felt obliged to make some restitution. As a Gamemaker, Seneca Crane certainly had his sins, but they didn’t deserve a year and a half of torture. In Haymitch’s eyes the scales were balanced enough, so long as Crane kept doing something useful after his release. Maybe not everyone would agree, maybe some would insist a Gamemaker deserved nothing but death, but then, none of them had been tortured over and over either. They didn’t know what it had been like, how it was a thousand small deaths until that final descent into the black would have been a mercy.

“Doctor Aurelius is out in the districts, but there are other psychiatrists,” Brocade answered him. “Crane has shown progress, though.” She looked over at him and finally nodded her agreement. “I’ll let you put faith in him, because we all need to try to put some belief in our ability to move forward. I’ll be hanging Jolly Frill, Alma Coin will probably swing for her sins, and I’m getting damn sick of the executions. But if he doesn’t transition well,” she warned him, “I expect you to admit it, regardless of whatever you feel your responsibility is, and he comes back here.”

He acknowledged that with a nod, feeling the chill of this place that had nothing to do with the temperature working its way back down his spine, knowing he had to get out soon and he swore to never return here if he could help it. This was the legacy of old Panem—they now could enjoy an
unbounded hope for the future, yes, but the sheer mess of the past came right along with it. This city in particular held far too many reminders and always would.

~~~~~~~~~~

When he wasn’t back at the Presidential Mansion and Cambric told her that Brocade had returned from the Detention Center an hour ago, she knew where she would find him. Sighing, she nodded to Marcellus. “Heading back out again,” she told him.

He rolled his brown eyes good-naturedly. After Jolly Frill’s idea of welcoming the peace delegation, none of them had been allowed anywhere without one of Brocade’s security team to accompany, just in case anyone else got bright ideas.

She smirked at him. “I’m messing up all your naughty plans with Alayna, mm?” Seeing the rueful grin he gave before he caught himself, she managed to not laugh. So she was right on that score. “Wedding plans in the offering?” she teased him further as they headed back out the front door.

“Not yet,” he said, although he sounded thoughtful if anything. “It’s not that I don’t want to…”

“So what’s keeping you?” she asked bluntly. “You like her, she likes you, life’s short and we almost all got blown sky-high a week ago.” Her wounds were healed, although she suspected when it rained the bone in her arm might ache a bit for a while yet, as she’d found out yesterday.

“My family.”


“Twenty-eight.”

“Hell, you’re older than me,” she scoffed jokingly. “Besides, they’re in Two,” she guessed from his looks, “and you’re here.”

“I know.” He shook his head. “After the war, when Ally and I came back, they asked me why I hadn’t done my duty and gotten killed back in Eight rather than end up surrendering.”

“You were in District Eight?” That made a little more sense of their expressions when Kersay and Lentulus had been arguing about it.

“How did you…”

“Brocade Paylor,” he said shortly, holding the door for her and following her out. “We were captured when Eight rebelled again, held prisoner. It sounded like only the four of us surrendered and were taken alive. The rest, they all died fighting, or were executed on the spot. I was so fucking ashamed…” He cleared his throat, and went on. “They got pissed when the Capitol bombed their hospital and dragged us out to execute us and it was her that stopped them. Because vengeance wasn’t what she stood for, even then. She turned us loose and told us to get the hell out of her district. We went. The treaty, the amnesty for Peacekeepers, that changes a lot of things. But we didn’t know that then. So not much place for an ex-Peacekeeper to be welcome in Panem, we thought. Not unless you were willing to lay low and pray nobody ever recognized you or asked you too many questions. But I had family back in Two, figured that was my place. Turns out, not so much.” She had the feeling it was only years of that rigid, emotionally controlled upbringing discouraging excessive attachment to a family that he would likely never return to that now kept his emotions in check. “So Ally suggested we come here instead and came to President Paylor. Told her who we were and,” he looked at her with a glimmer of defiance as if daring her to mock him, “told her we’d be honored to serve a true leader if she’d have us. She proved herself to us that day in District Eight. I just was too stupid to see it then.”
She listened, interested to hear that Peacekeepers had apparently been hiding out in some of the districts. She wasn’t going to press him for details, because she had no wish to pry where there was no need. Even his tight emotional control suggested things in Eight had been particularly hellish for him, and the need for lies and constant fear after that. It was a little too akin to her post-Games experience for comfort. “I don’t spill anyone’s secrets,” she said with a slight shrug, certain he didn’t want her to make a big deal of it. “But if your family’s told you to go to hell and you two have good jobs together now…”

“Johanna Mason, a secret romantic?” he mocked her lightly, a slight smile on his lips as they turned the corner towards the building, spun like an airy castle of multi-colored glass that even now brought the spike of fear and adrenaline and loathing. They’d controlled too many lives from that top floor, up in Central Command.

“Hidden depths,” she told him, forcing her own feelings from her expression and tone. A Peacekeeper might have had to be stoic, but she’d been on camera for years and perfected the art of actually acting a part. In some ways it was still second nature to her. She liked him, but Marcellus wasn’t someone who’d yet earned his way to seeing fully beneath the mask. “You’re welcome to thank me later.”

Taking a slow breath in, she pushed open the door to the Games Headquarters, seeing the steel barricade on front of the door had been put aside. Snow had probably ordered that put in place, knowing that for the rebel army this would have been a popular target during the war due to its sheer symbolism. The glass panes were more or less shatterproof. But she could see they had been defaced on the outside by graffiti, probably by vandals or demonstrators. “WE’RE DONE PLAYING GAMES”. “THE ODDS ARE IN OUR FAVOR NOT YOURS.” “FOR 1800 INNOCENTS.”

She noticed the ruined panels were only the large, uniform, dark-and-light spacers. They hadn’t ruined the panels depicting nameless, anonymous children in their district’s colors in moments of idealized, bloodless triumph and heroism. Those panels had been left alone in something almost like reverence. As she entered the lobby, the multicolored light through the panels painted the place with warm jewel hues as it always had, though as opposed to the gleaming white marble, the thick layer of dust over everything didn’t catch the colors quite so well. It was still like walking through the rich colors of the rainbow. The place was as beautiful, obscene, and horrible as ever.

There were only two sets of footprints in the dust on the floor. She wasn’t surprised at all to find the door at the top of the stairs to the fourth floor from the lobby was unlocked and open. Brocade would have handed over the key when he asked. There was an elevator but she wasn’t going to expect that would be running.

Seeing another dark-suited security officer waiting by the door, not Alayna but a solidly built man she would bet was from Thirteen, she nodded to him. “How long has he been here?” she asked him calmly.

“Only about ten minutes,” he answered her.

She pushed open the door to Mentor Central. The lights were working. The musty smell was there from the dust that had settled thickly, and she could see spiderwebs strung along the corners and between some of the surfaces. There were other scents too, the smell of something long gone rotten and then faded—there would have been food here as usual, that last day. A faint rusty smell as well, and she could see the dark marking on the wall, the five lines of fingers leading to a broad smear where someone’s large, bloody hand had landed and then dragged down, probably to help keep standing. It wasn’t hard to imagine—the Gameskeepers bursting in with weapons ready to arrest them all. Someone had made a move, whether to fight or just something their
captors had taken as a threat, and been shot. Anyone shot that badly probably wouldn’t have survived without medical attention, and she doubted Snow would have wasted that on them, not when he was happy to kill them or let them die. Someone who had died quickly, probably that very day. They rounded us up from Mentor Central and the Training Center, she remembered Dazen saying, recalling his struggle to keep calm as he remembered it. Dragged us down into the training room. They strung Luma, Spark, Carrick, and Cedrus up from the rafters right in front of us.

It was right near the Six mentor station, where Lizzie would have been sitting. Cedrus, she thought. He would have at least challenged them. They don’t make us naturally meek in Seven. Who had stepped in to help keep him upright? Lizzie, Taffeta or Georgette, all sitting right nearby—maybe Carrick, Spark, or Luma, knowing they were doomed and figuring a small act of defiance made no difference?

Lizzie obviously hadn’t been back. Johanna didn’t blame her. She didn’t know if Haymitch had asked, but she doubted it. Like she had absolutely no desire to ever see that hellish arena again, he would have known she wouldn’t want to see this. Besides, he would have wanted this moment alone.

He must have heard her come in but he hadn’t said anything. She found him where she knew he’d be—in that chair where he’d spent twenty-four years, Twelve’s sole mentor. The look on his face as he took in the ruin of Mentor Central would have been hard to read to someone who didn’t know him. Haymitch was rarely obvious. But she knew him so to her, his grief and anguish and guilt might as well have been written there openly.

She looked out over the empty chairs surrounding the console circle, knowing that even as she was, he was imagining those people who had sat there, and what must have happened in those last terrible minutes after the end of the Quell. He must have also been thinking of those who he’d worked with for years and who’d died in the arena. She thought of Chaff—always at Haymitch’s left hand, the two of them passing a bottle and swapping jokes.

At first she moved to sit down in that chair beside him, the one no other Twelve victor had ever claimed. But she knew other people had sat there occasionally, just over to visit him and taking advantage of an open seat. She wasn’t here as his friend, as she had been in those years before.

Carefully, she put her arms around him, sitting down on his lap. He inhaled sharply at that, almost a gasp, like a man suddenly taking a deep, desperate breath after nearly drowning and finally breaking the surface. His arms went around her tightly and his eyes flicked up to hers, the lost and ravaged look suddenly gone, although he looked like a boy needing reassurance against his nightmares.

“Still here,” she told him, leaning down and kissing him softly on his brow, smoothing the unruly curls away first. Still here for you. They’re gone but I’m not. We’re both still alive. “Wherever they are, if there’s some place beyond here, they know we did it,” she told him, able to offer no greater comfort than that—that the sacrifice he had asked of them had been worth it in the end. “And I know they’re glad.”

He nodded, the grip of his hands easing. “Fuck, I miss ‘em,” he said, his voice uneven. “I…had to come, though. I asked them to do it and maybe they did it willingly, but I had to see it. Say goodbye. I owed them that.” Him and his damn sense of responsibility, she thought, and of course, like with her, Mentor Central had become the only place he felt like he belonged, where people gave a damn about him and befriended him. “I don’t know,” he told her, voice taking on a dark, even aggressive edge, “whether I want to see this place destroyed to dust or whether I want it fixed up to always remind us that it can never happen again.”

“There’s time to figure that out later.” But she knew the Games would always have their shadow on
their lives. It was unavoidable. “They told me you went to go see Jolly Frill.” She’d understood—Haymitch needed some kind of closure on the Frills, and probably to reassure himself it hadn’t been just vengeance against him.

“Little shit,” he scowled, and she almost smiled because now he was back. “Him and his justifications.”

“Pissed at Brocade too?”

“Of course. Very pissed at me not being the good little family pet. I punched him, broke his nose.”

“Did you really?” she said, laughing, enjoying that idea, although she regretted it because inhaling some of the dust almost immediately made her sneeze. “What did the asshole say to make you lose it?”

The silence was telling. That was when she knew. He would always be fiercer to fight for her than he ever would for himself. “What did he say about me?” she asked him, wanting to go kick Jolly Frill in the nuts for good measure right then. “That I’m a dirty little district slut?” Of course he had, and she suppressed a shudder at the half-remembered words in that vein some of them had whispered to her while they were fucking. “He even tell you he fucked me, maybe?” It would be logical. Thinking Haymitch had destroyed his happiness, he would have wanted to return the favor, cause him to doubt his own wife, thinking about letting herself be fucked by the likes of Jolly.

“Hanna,” he protested, shaking his head vehemently, “if you did or didn’t, I don’t care. That’s in the past. We all did shit we weren’t proud of doing. If you fucked him, I know he meant nothing.”

She closed her eyes for a moment at that, grateful beyond words for that dismissal of things. Others would have tried to use that as a club to beat her with continually, to suggest she was lucky they were willing to love her anyway. “I didn’t, though,” she felt compelled to say. “Believe me, even if I was drunk or pissed off enough to not be at all choosy, I’d still have had to gag him. The man will not shut up.”

Haymitch let out a sharp bark of laughter at that, which turned into a coughing fit. “OK, OK,” he said. He looked at her, his thumb caressing the line of her jaw softly, looking at her like she was everything good and hopeful to him. Maybe in this place, she was.

“What do you say we get the hell out of here?” she suggested softly. They could make their escape from Mentor Central, together, knowing they wouldn’t need to return next summer, or ever. They could mourn these dead friends better in the districts, the homes they had loved, the places where they lived rather than here where they suffered for years and then died.

He nodded and his hand tightened in hers as she climbed off his lap. They walked through the door of Mentor Central, heading for the stairs to the lobby, and she knew they wouldn’t look back. It had been a productive trip here, no question, and Panem’s future looked brighter than ever. But she was positive with so many of the wounds still so fresh, neither of them would be sorry to leave District Fourteen behind them again.
They’d left the falls and that eerie dead city far behind them days ago, and Lake Weaver in the distance made for a good guide for their path to the southwest, heading towards District Ten. They carefully avoided the Eight border that continued along the lake’s edge; Theo took Commander Paylor’s warning seriously. On foot, through woods and hills and sometimes on the broken pavement of abandoned and overgrown roads, it was tough going. They’d all been able to pass their annual physical; only “lifers” on their fifth rotation and beyond and Heads had some leeway there. Still, none of them were quite as toughened as they’d been as eighteen-year-olds in training camp, when days of running and marching were the expectation. The nonstop hiking, with few pauses, left them all groaning when they called a halt the first night, and hobbling their way along for the first few hours of the second day until their muscles loosened up a little. They were still moving like they were sixty even then.

But they endured the aches and pains, as was expected of a Peacekeeper, and anyway, what the hell could they do about it besides sit down and quit? Nobody was going to consider that as an option. None of them had medic training beyond a few basics, though without a medikit that wouldn’t have done much good anyway. There was no morphling out here in the wild. Though memories stirred slightly in Theo’s mind about some of the plants, and he was confident enough of some to offer them up as food, he wasn’t certain enough of them to risk it. He must have been out in the woods as a kid. That much was certain. Occasionally, looking at something, he’d have a moment of memory, of voices with that Twelve twang, and the feeling of listening intently and absorbing everything he could. Spying dark purple berries on a bush, he remembered. Don’t you be eating that, runt, Doug advised him, that ain’t blueberries, that’s nightlock.

A girl, dark-haired and grey-eyed—the same girl in that odd vision of those two women being shot in the kitchen, he realized—laughed, elbowing Doug. Whatever, hey, not like I didn’t have to keep you from killing your fool self with nightlock when you were eight.

Meanwhile his young self was busy studying the berries, trying to not roll his eyes at the two of them. Hazelle—who the hell was Hazelle—said her sister was sweet on his brother.

Shaking his head, utterly confused as ever, he turned away from the nightlock. The girl had liked Doug, but they’d all died in an accident. But that memory of the gunshots was so damn real. Shaking it off with effort, he tried to focus on the here and now. Two hundred yards away was a blueberry bush. They ate berries that night until they were about ready to be sick, laughing at each other’s purple-stained fingers and lips. It was the little things like that, small moments of humor that kept it teetering right on the edge of being overwhelming.

Thalaea caught up to him on the third day. “You don’t know how to hunt, do you?” she asked doubtfully, dark eyes studying him. “Neither of them do,” she nodded back towards Justicia and a very sunburned Marcellus, “they’re Peacehome raised, and me…”

They both knew she’d been raised in the Capitol until she was eight and then sent to the Peacehome too. “If I had a rifle,” he said with a sigh, “maybe. Hell, any of us could do it then.” But Paylor hadn’t exactly handed over the firearms before kicking them out of District Eight. Considering she’d kept them alive and given them some clothes, food, and water, Theo wasn’t complaining about that. Racking his brains, as usual he felt like he was trying to grasp something in the dark. He had a thought then, the thrill of having caught a rabbit to bring home to his ma, and he could see the knots, tight and perfect. “I might know a snare or two,” he said hesitantly. “For camp at night. No good
setting them during the day when we’ll be miles away before long. Otherwise, we just try to ration out the stuff they gave us in Eight and supplement it where we can.”

“It’s no good eating like birds when we’re hiking this hard, and it’ll be a couple weeks before we make it to Ten,” she argued gently. “We’ll be too weak soon enough.”

“I know that, Lea,” he told her, trying to keep his voice even. It didn’t do for the unit commander to lose his temper. “I’m doing the best I can to keep us all alive here, all right?” That was all he could think about. They were counting on him and it was his duty now to try to save them—no, not just his duty, they weren’t his subordinates now, they were his friends. But he couldn’t think about everything that could go wrong, and he couldn’t think about Myrina and Actaeon probably burned to ashes down in District Twelve, or it would just be too damn much. He was just trying to take it on one problem at a time and solve what he could, and keep going.

“I know, Theo,” she said, putting a hand on his shoulder lightly. “I know.” She’d used his name before, off-duty, but he had the sense then that he’d never be Colonel again and she’d never be Major. They’d left the white behind them for well and good, and whether that was in that prison cell in Eight or somewhere in this wilderness, he didn’t know.

Fumbling through the knots that night, it was as much applying reason and testing it out as recovering memory that let him make up some kind of snare that he hoped might work. But they were rewarded—a badger stumbled into it. It wasn’t much, and trying to clean the thing with a sharp rock rather than a knife made something of a ragged-edged mess of the meat, but it would be a few mouthfuls for each of them at the next evening stop.

A week in, they were all toughened to the effort of walking all day long, and the hunger pangs had faded some. They ate enough between their Eight rations and foraged plants and the occasional snare catch or fish that they weren’t starving, because the hunger never quite went away, but it died down to a dull gnawing rather than a fierce roar. He was just grateful they were enduring this during summer, rather than the lean months of autumn or winter.

On the eleventh day, looking down into a valley from yet another hilltop, they saw a familiar sight. A huge glass dome several miles across, and Marcellus, blue eyes alight, said with excitement, “That’s an arena down there, maybe there’s something in there we can use…food, weapons, stuff like that?”

He knew these were sprinkled throughout the borderlands of Panem. A lot of them were to the west, closer to the Capitol, but even out here in the east, they’d built a few arenas. He knew this one, though, had seen it plenty of times from the window of a tourist hovercraft as they took a hop over from the 22nd Games arena to the north.

“It’s from the 49th,” Theo answered, looking down at the expanse of the arena in the valley below, the forcefield long since replaced with the glass dome for more certain long-term preservation and protection from wind and weather. “Chantilly Forbes, District One—she was a little before your time, though,” not that he could remember those Games himself from when he was a kid, since that was in his lost years.

He knew these were sprinkled throughout the borderlands of Panem. A lot of them were to the west, closer to the Capitol, but even out here in the east, they’d built a few arenas. He knew this one, though, had seen it plenty of times from the window of a tourist hovercraft as they took a hop over from the 22nd Games arena to the north.

He could see the arena in his mind’s eye clearly—almost boring, basic forest with a surprisingly swift river, since most of the Gamemakers had probably been focused on designing the next year’s Quell. The tour of this one always focused more on the spectacular fights, had never rhapsodized on the environment and the clever design the way he knew they probably did with others: the 67th, for example, with its garden maze, or the 50th with the whole “beautiful but deadly” thing.

Hearing the voice of the arena interpreter again in his mind, he could almost give thedamn tour himself: And here is where Chantilly and Sabinus from District Two had their final clash for the
victors’ crown! You can see, everyone would stare at the life-sized mannequins of the brown-haired girl in One gold and the huge, black-haired boy in Two red, crouched with weapons at the ready, that Sabinus was quite the impressive tribute, a worthy entry from District Two as ever. Now let me see, do I have two brave, strong volunteers here to re-enact their fight for us all?

He shook his head, turning away from the arena, wanting to put it and its unsettling replicas of dead kids and re-enactments and all of it far behind him. “Don’t bother going down there, Marcellus. I was on tourism security duty for part of my third rotation in Six, and the food was always flown in fresh for the underground kitchen, the weapons are all toy replicas, and the stuff in the Cornucopia is just fake. There’s nothing there in the way of supplies that can help us.” He gave them a wry smile, adding, “Arenas were meant for death, remember, not life.”

Nodded towards the west, he told them, “Good news is we’re probably only a couple days from the Ten border now.” That gave them fresh resolve, pushing harder to keep going, even as he could tell all of them were flagging.

Two days later they stumbled onto a hog collective in the northeast district. The foreman, Duroc, took one look at them, grunted, “More war stragglers, huh? You bunch look like shit, let’s get you some food,” and invited them back to his house.

The richness of the pork that night was too much after weeks of poor eating in captivity and then walking through the wilderness. He’d overdone it, as had they all, as if they were afraid that they’d never see a meal like this again. Acting like district natives, he thought. Hanging over Duroc’s toilet, regretting it, he groaned as another spasm seized his stomach. He had the feeling of déjà vu again, that long ago he’d had this experience of being unable to bear too much food after too long of too little. Was that when he’d gone to the Peacehome? The food there hadn’t been great, but it was abundant. He couldn’t remember but as usual, the inability to put it in its proper place bothered him.

Standing, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and breathing deeply, he rinsed his mouth out with water from the sink and splashed the cold water on his face. Sneaking out to the kitchen, he snagged a bread roll leftover from dinner and carefully ate it slowly, standing there looking out over the quiet peace of District Ten. The war here was over already, so Duroc had told them over dinner, and people were wandering into Ten regularly enough, separated from the fight elsewhere, or having seen more than enough of the war. He was grateful for that. It gave them room to hide.

Duroc insisted on keeping them around for a few days and feeding them up. Shaving and bathing and having clean clothes, and having privacy for it, were a wonder to him now. The kindness the foreman showed, how dismissive he was of thanks and how he grumbled, “Seen captives coming into the district before, I know the look, you just rest easy,” just covered Theo with a wave of shame. They’d been captives, all right, but not the way Duroc was assuming, and they were lying to a good man by being here and taking his hospitality. Still, he couldn’t help but wonder if Duroc knew that Alister, Alayna, Marcus, and Kalea really were, if their welcome would be quite so warm. Survive, he reminded himself. The guilt he could deal with later.

The third day after finding the collective, the television actually came on with programming. Apparently in the wake of the Quell, the usual inane serial dramas and bad movies and the like had ceased, and only important war news came on now. “Last we got was a few days back,” Duroc said, folding his arms over his chest as they all sat in the living room, watching the screen. “Some interview with Haymitch Abernathy. Not much of an interview. Don’t know what they’re doing to him in the Capitol,” a hint of anger was in his voice, “but I tell you the man looked right about as shitty as you lot did when you walked in. Then the freedom fighters, they come on with an update
saying the war’s going well in Seven. Seems like the two of them are countering one another. One broadcasts, the other’s got something ready and lined up to have the last word.”

“So look at it this way, you always get a two for one show,” Thalaea said with a wry smile.

Duroc looked over at her and his weathered face split in a wide grin, brown eyes alight with mirth. “True enough, girl. True enough.”

“It’s the Capitol up first,” Justicia said as the seal was displayed.

It felt strange to view a Capitol broadcast and feel nothing, as if he really was just an observer rather than an agent of enforcement. *They killed Myrina,* he thought. *They things they had us do in Eight…* Logically, he knew he was right, but trying to shed those old instincts for loyalty and obedience still wasn’t easy.

The broadcast was Haymitch himself, and Theo saw quickly what Duroc meant. The man looked like he’d been dragged to hell and back, too thin, tired, moving like he was in pain, clasping his hands to keep them from shaking, and his eyes darted around wildly at times as if looking for something there. Seated there beside President Snow, he droned words in a flat, exhausted twang like he was reading off a prompter—he probably was, Theo realized.

“It’s not right,” Marcellus said, shaking his head, and Theo looked at him in surprise, knowing his loyalty was probably rooted deepest of any of them. “He’s showing him off like this, just to play with Katniss Everdeen.” Maybe their own ordeal in captivity had etched Marcellus deeply enough to have that fellow-feeling, and realizing they’d almost turned into their own little broadcast at that would-be execution. “He ought to kill Haymitch and have done with it, not toy with him like this.”

“Marc,” Justicia—Alayna—said, putting a hand on his shoulder in reassurance.

Duroc looked them over and there was a glimmer of something in his eyes, and he shook his head and made a low noise of irritation in his throat. “You said it, boy.”

The rebels broke in with their own broadcast, and Theo felt sick as he saw the images from the District Eight hospital, the building engulfed in flames. Whether or not Katniss was exaggerating—and he doubted it because the rage at the lack of survivors had seemed utterly real in the people of District Eight—the images spoke for themselves.

Back and forth it went, the Capitol and the rebels trading the feed and cutting in on each other. Finally the Capitol seal came up with a message of *We are experiencing technical difficulties, please stand by.*

“What’s the word out of Twelve?” he asked Duroc while the broadcast was still down. “Did anyone survive?” The ashes of District Twelve were almost unbearable. Looking at the images of Peeta Mellark wandering the ruins, he was almost positive Myrina couldn’t have lived through that.

“About eight hundred made it to District Thirteen, so we heard.”

“Whoa, wait,” Kalea, always Kalea from now on, even in his mind, spoke up. “District Thirteen?”

Duroc laughed. “Yeah, you lot have been away from the news for a while. They’ve been up north all along. Hiding underground. They’re the ones providing hovercraft and the like to the rebels, you see? Took in the survivors from Twelve too, and Katniss and Peeta are there too. Probably the safest place for them.”

Eight hundred survivors, but he knew no Peacekeepers were among them, with certainty. The
Twelve natives, furious over the loss of their entire district, probably would have demanded Thirteen arrest and execute any of them who had managed to survive. The pit of grief opened up again, deeper and blacker than ever before, and to sit there and try to pretend he felt nothing of the kind was almost impossible. He wanted to find somewhere private to scream and to rail at the entire damn world, but he sat there in that chair and tried to keep his expression neutral.

The broadcast finally came back and Snow, impatient, tried to end it and demanded to know if Haymitch had anything to say to Katniss. Haymitch leaned forward, brows furrowed with concentration, eyes suddenly intent.

Whatever he was saying about winter to Katniss made absolutely no sense to Theo, but it was clear that it wasn’t the deluded ravings of a broken, crazy man. There was some purpose behind it.

Then, suddenly, in a matter of moments the entire thing shifted and Theo could pinpoint the moment Haymitch had yanked control of the situation away from Snow, and left the president of the country scrambling. By the way, I’m absolutely guilty. I made contact with the rebels. I thought up the whole plan to get Katniss out of the arena. I convinced others to go along with it. I’ve wanted to overthrow you for years now, you malicious bastard.

To most people, in response to being condemned to death, Haymitch’s glib laughter and mocking Snow about it taking three tries to kill him would come across as just balls-of-steel bravado. But Theo saw the resolution on his face, and the hints of triumph and relief, and recognizing the feeling within himself. The memory of that prison cell and the fear of never knowing what would happen next were still so sharp. As if he knew Haymitch’s mind like reading a book, he understood what had happened. Haymitch knew he was going to die. He was just going to force it to happen on his terms, probably after weeks of torture, by the looks of him.

Strangely, he felt a swell of emotion which was entirely out of sorts for a man he didn’t even know, and a man who he’d always mildly rolled his eyes at as a washed-up has-been. But he knew that sympathy for a fellow sufferer now. Even he, at the end, had been left with his fate in the hands of the others, and simply trying to keep his pride and dignity intact as he walked to his death as his final act. Haymitch had dared further than that—he had acted, not reacted. He’d chosen the way of his own death and robbed Snow of that victory. That sheer courage after the agony he must have endured was something he could only admire. Maybe this was who Haymitch had really been all along, and Theo could only think that a man like that was a loss. Maybe he’d just had too much death around him. He didn’t know much about his loyalties right now, except to those at his side, and what he believed was right. All he could believe in easily was smaller things, and they told him that the notion of a man being imprisoned and tortured slowly just to make him into a better spectacle was wrong.

Duroc was shaking his head, looking almost lost in a way. “Damn,” he said simply. “Never knew he had it in him, but…damn.” That pretty much seemed to say it all.

He found Marcellus outside that afternoon, staring out at the hogpen with the pigs rooting busily for their lunch. The smell of sun-baked earth and animal and pigshit in the summer air was no treat, to say the least. “We can’t go back to the Corps now, after all this, can we?” he said simply.

Whether he meant in terms of practical realities of being accepted back after fraternizing with their supposed enemy; or simply in terms of the moralities of everything being turned upside-down, Theo wasn’t exactly sure. “No. And I’d rather you not get yourself shot in a war you don’t feel right fighting. Duty is duty, yes, and there’s pride in serving your district and your country, but…when those that command you aren’t worthy of your loyalty? I think there’s no honor in saying you won’t serve them any longer.”
Marcellus nodded, taking that on with barely a flinch. The stoicism was Two, down to the bone, but the flexibility in thinking, the swerve away from Capitol loyalty, that was entirely his own. “So what do we do? What, you want us to take up rifles with the rebels, and…” His voice was rising, a thin note of panic and frustration in it. That would be too much. “After they wanted to murder us?”

“No, Marc.” He shook his head. “Not unless you’re suddenly passionate enough about the rebels’ cause.” He had the feeling all four of them would rather just live quietly as they could right now and try to sort things out. They might not hold much Capitol loyalty now but asking them to take up arms on behalf of the people who would have snuffed them out so brutally wasn’t exactly appealing either. “I think we’ve had enough of war and taking lives for the moment.”

“We’re in the livestock district,” Marcellus pointed out with a wry smirk. “I’m pretty sure they slaughter for a living.”

That was true enough. Ten’s tributes were almost always some of the tougher ones of the low-tech districts. They’d grown up shedding blood. Theo suspected even the little kids had to help out in the butchering. “True. But there’s something…it’s not the same.” He searched his mind, trying to think how to explain.

”Hey, runt, c’mon. Quit crying.”

“You killed it!” Staring at a dead duck with an arrow through it, where a moment ago it had been a blur of wings, terrified at the sudden transformation from life into the stillness of death. Young as he was, he’d been watching the Games ever since he could remember, and he thought about dead kids staring sightlessly from the television.

“We have to eat. Feeding your family with what you kill, that’s…that’s honorable. We never kill just for fun or because we don’t like somebody, or something stupid like that. We ain’t the Capitol. We don’t make a death into a waste.” Doug, as ever, prodding at the veil between Theo and those old memories back when he was Alister.

“It’s not like killing a man because your ideals don’t agree with his. Killing a cow to feed other people with it? That’s different. That’s making the death have a purpose. So unless you want to go plant wheat instead,” he gave Marc a wry grin, “I say we stick around here. They’ve been kind. Maybe they can use a hand so we earn out keep.”

“All right, fine.” Marc sighed. “That’s about what Jussy—Allie—thought too. Hell, it’s better than wandering through the woods again eating berries.”

When Theo asked Duroc about it, the foreman nodded. “We’ve got hands enough here in the north, I think, with the poultry and hogs and all. Down south, though, I know a lot more of ‘em went to war in the other districts.”

“Why from the south?” Kalea asked, obviously curious. “They like a fight more down there?”

Duroc just laughed and shook his head. “No, girl, the shepherds and the ranchers are the ones here in Ten that are good hands with a gun. Not like here where the livestock’s secured in a pen or a coop. When it’s free-range, gotta be ready to shoot anything threatening to kill the cattle or the sheep. Nasty mutts out there, too.”

“They let people have guns here?” Alayna asked, eyes wide in astonishment. Given how strict the firearms controls had been everywhere Theo had ever served, he was shocked as well.

“Don’t know all the details of how they kept the supply secured,” Duroc admitted, “but sounds like
the Peacekeepers were all over their asses down there to keep track of every rifle. Heard at market
day last year about a couple hangings over some lost rifles. Genuinely lost or not, of course the
palies,” another epithet for Peacekeepers, apparently, “assumed they were just hidden away.”

Theo kept silent. Of course they had. Right there in the Code of Conduct it was spelled out that
anyone caught with an unauthorized weapon would be executed. In the interest of safety, of keeping
rebels from stockpiling firearms for a rebellion, they would have to punish them severely for losing a
weapon. Otherwise, some of those “lost” rifles very likely eventually would have shown up again,
having been hidden away and claimed as lost. He understood all the simple logic of it, but faced with
the smoldering rage in this man, he had to admit to himself that the justifications fell short.

“Unfortunate,” Kalea said finally, shaking her head. “Too many deaths for so little reason.”

Duroc nodded slowly, the lines of anger in his face easing. “True enough. But if you want work, 
sure, you ought to go south. Got nothing for you here, I’m afraid, but daresay they can use you out
on the range.” He shrugged. “If you’ve been in the war I reckon you know your way around a rifle
and obviously you ain’t afraid of rough living in the wilds by now.” He grinned. “They just gotta
make riders out of you. Good luck. I only have to ride to other hog collectives when it’s my month
on circuit,” he nodded towards the barn where Theo had seen a pair of horses, “and that’s enough of
a pain in the ass. Literally. Living in the saddle day after day for months, no treat. You sure you
don’t want to head back to Eleven and pick peaches? Maybe go to One and sit on a comfy velvet
cushion weaving rugs?”

“Thanks, we’ll manage,” Theo said wryly. He knew life in One was no treat, even when it had been
prosperous before last winter. The artisans always worked long, thankless hours, and all it took was
one rejected piece to make for countless wasted time. But he was hardly going to admit that and have
to explain just how he came by that knowledge.

They caught a ride with a delivery of hogs towards the district center four days later, and from there,
south with a man who gave his name only as “Drover”, picking up supplies and heading south
towards the open range of the sheep and cattle country. The landscape changed from the riverlands
of the north to broad, open rolling plains—already, out the window of the truck, he could see what
looked like a flock of sheep milling in the distance, and a few figures on horseback. The summer
heat grew greater the further south they went, and the humidity become more oppressive as well.
He’d never had a duty tour in a southern district, so it was an adjustment for him.

Finally they arrived at Southlands Station, the main center for the ranchers and shepherds. Tin-roofed
buildings gleamed unbearably bright in the afternoon sun, and the red dust blew everywhere in the
breeze. As he watched, one young woman was working with a black-and-white dog in a nearby
corral, apparently training it to herd a flock of sheep. Their coats were short compared to the pictures
of fluffy sheep he’d always seen on television, and he realized they must have sheared the wool off
to send it to Eight. “Fresh meat for you, Nadji,” Drover announced cheerfully as he efficiently
shepherded—there was no other word for it, and he was far more successful than the dog—them
through an open door into a cramped office labeled “FOREWOMAN”.

Nadji, a short, squat woman of about forty with sun-streaked brown hair and bronze skin that might
have been nature or sun or both, looked up. “Ah, found me some more hands, Drover?” she said
with interest. “Good on you.”

“Found ‘em hitching south from Centerville. More come walkin’ in from the war. They say they
stumbled across Duroc’s place up north.” Drover grinned. “They’re half as good as the lots Fayoumi
and Karakul sent you, might actually make decent hands out of them.”

Nadji nodded, eyeing the four of them. “Well, you look healthy enough. You handle a rifle in the
war or were you stuck stabbing people with a cane machete?"

“Rifle,” Theo said, and he could feel the instinctive deference in the others that hadn’t yet died down in full, towards him as their former commander. They’d let him do the talking right now in this dangerous moment. “Duroc explained it’s a good bit of roughing it in the wilds too. Not a trouble.”

A nod answered him. “Being around blood bother you at all?” she asked bluntly. “This ain’t a pretty business come the fall slaughter. It’ll be fast and furious then because I’ve already got Bardoka Dravid and me both in a bind because Thirteen’s all over her ass wanting to know when we can supply beef again to the soldiers. We both told ‘em, we’re not slaughtering herds in fly season and trying to transport in high summer to boot, it’s foolish. And it’s not my fault the Capitol poisoned entire warehouses full of meat rather than let the rebels have it, damn waste that it was.” Somehow, he wasn’t nearly as surprised as he could have been to hear that. The Capitol had proven they would sooner see things destroyed than ceded to their enemy, and if they could take some of their foe out in the process, so much the better. The sheer waste of all that food wouldn’t bother them. He wondered just how many people had died from tainted meat before the trouble was found out. It surprised him to realize even that small sign of his shifted loyalties.

“We’ll manage,” he answered her coolly, sensing she was frustrated enough trying to deal with her job given current difficulties. Not having to hand-hold with them would probably put them on her good side far more quickly. Besides, the further away they kept from general scrutiny, the better.

Giving them one long last look, she nodded once again. “You’ll do. You may not be thanking me in a few days, though. You stay here and we issue you gear and all, I expect at least a season out of you before you quit.” Apparently she had adapted quickly to using workers who were more transient than the Ten natives who were tied to this land by birth and by law.

“Do we need to sign for it?” Kalea asked quietly, well used to the quartermaster procedures from the Corps.

Drover just laughed. “What authority’s gonna enforce a contract? The Peacekeepers? No, we’ll note your gear in the station books just the same as anyone, but we’ll trust to your honor.” He grinned. “That and knowing if you try to go back on your word and slip away, you’re gonna be shitty enough riders that chances are we’ll catch up.”

Taken next to the supply house, the supply master Alatau started shoving things at them left and right, in four neat stacks, firing off rapid-fire questions to determine clothing and shoe size. Sleeping bag, socks, leather boots, denim trousers—Theo remembered the factory in Eight that had made work trousers for the outlying districts—shirts, several neckerchiefs, a hat. “You sending them to train in the home paddocks first, Drover?” he queried.

“Not letting a bunch of greenies out on the range, Tau,” Drover quipped. Theo had the odd sense of being back as a first tour and being mildly razzed and teased by the older, more experienced Peacekeepers about everything he didn’t know yet.

“How’s that last bunch working? Ain’t seen ‘em since that Lori was here askin’ after making up a medical kit. Smart girl. Said her mama was an apothecary back in Seven. Be good having an apothecary out on the trail.”

“Yeah, true enough. They’re doing all right. They’ll be good enough to work some of the inside pastures soon enough.”

“Better than I expected,” Alatau said. “All right, old man,” he tapped the register with an ink-stained finger and Theo bristled a little given that Alatau had to be twenty years older, “gimme a scribble.”
Carrying their things towards the living quarters, Drover mumbling to himself about assigning them a place, suddenly someone knocked into him and bowled him off his feet. All his clean gear ended up in a heap in the red dust and he could tell from the rusty-stained wool of the sheep that the dog had been chasing around it would probably be a bitch to get it clean again. But that all paled when he looked up and saw who’d tackled him and was leaning over him even now in the too-bright sun. Her face was a little thinner and had new freckles from the sun, but her green eyes were just the same, though they were suddenly shining bright with emotion. “Rina,” he said, barely breathing the word, afraid that somehow, if he said it too loud it would shatter everything and he’d find out he was just imagining it. This couldn’t be real. It was too much.

“Rhee,” she corrected him, “I’m Rhiannon and you’re Alister, yeah?” He remembered telling her his district name, so many months ago one sleepless night in One, in the quiet hours after making love. That seemed so long ago, months and miles away, back when they were different people. But she had remembered it, and he was relieved she’d figured it out too, that these people had accepted her as Rhiannon rather than questioning her.

“Yeah,” he said, throat suddenly tight. “Alister.”

“Well I can’t call you Al—“ He stopped her talking by kissing her, with all the hunger and desperation and fear of all the lonely days and nights in Eight missing her and worrying about her in Twelve, the endless weeks he’d been convinced that she couldn’t have survived the firebombing of Twelve. But she had, and she’d found her way here, and he clung to her, unwilling to let her go.

He heard a whoop of amusement from Drover and a few assorted chuckles from other people further away. “Do I need to reassign you to couples’ quarters, Rhee?”

Grinning down at him sheepishly, Myrina—Rhee, he would have to think of her as Rhee even as his heart wanted to refuse—got off him and then crouched to help pick up his gear, carefully dusting off what she could as she handed it to him. “This is my fiancé, Drover,” she said. “We got separated back in the fighting in Eleven. I…thought he was dead.”

“Whirlwind romance, huh?” Drover said with interest. “You two meeting for just a few weeks during the fighting, and all.” He saw a flash of panic in Rhee’s eyes, realizing she’d possibly slipped. Aside from the Corps, there was no way for a Twelve man and a Four woman, their heritage written obviously in their features and their coloring, to have met before the war started.

“Wartime, everything seems to get a little more urgent,” he shrugged, looking up at Drover. “Besides,” he nudged her with a teasing elbow, “you see she’s more than capable of knocking a man off his feet two seconds after seeing him, right? Couldn’t resist that.” A laugh told him he’d gotten through it all right, and Rhee’s face relaxed.

“Yeah, OK. I’ll get you two reassigned.” He winked. “Don’t think your little ‘back from the dead’ reunion tonight and wearing each other out gets either of you out of starting work at first light tomorrow.”

“Heads up, they’re pretty bawdy here,” Rhee muttered, her hand still clutched tightly in his. “No shock, considering they deal regularly in animal breeding.” Yeah, that would make sense.

For the rest of the afternoon, he listened to a lesson in herding dogs but only half-heard it. He felt like he could barely keep his hand from hers, or take his eyes off her for a moment for fear she would disappear, and the urge to just steal away and pin her up against the nearest wall was ridiculously strong. But he’d learned discipline and patience in the Corps if nothing else, so he applied that as ruthlessly as he could.
The stories would have to wait for later, in privacy, but they did the introductions. He found out the auburn-haired, golden-skinned Seven-born Hannelore was the “Lori” Alatau had referred, and he immediately figured she’d trained as a medic. He gave a nod to Jarrah and Holly, who eyed him with something like interest, maybe because of his Twelve blood, as they’d obviously been assigned there. He introduced Marc, Alayna, and Kalea, though Rhee already knew Kalea from One, and all eight of them stood there in a moment of understanding of just who they were and that common bond they all shared.

Finally, after dinner at the mess, the rest of them continued back to the single quarters. Drover, in his capacity as Nadji’s right hand, had assigned them a snug little cabin, and Rhee had already moved her things here. It hadn’t taken long.

Neither of them had time to unpack, things still in a heap of clothes and saddlebags and other things he didn’t even understand what they were for yet. The two of them stood there and looked at each other, as if neither of them could really bear to believe it was true and somehow end up disappointed. “What do I call you now?” she asked, voice soft, eyes even softer. “Jay—Jarrah—he was Albus, and we called him Al…”

He thought about it a moment. “Out there,” he said finally, “you call me…Terry, that works.” He stepped forward, laid a hand gently over her heart, not groping her breast but more just feeling her warmth and her heartbeat beneath his fingers, reassuring himself she was alive and safe. “In here, Rina,” he tapped his fingers to let her know what he meant, in your heart, “you call me whatever you want.”

Her eyes filled with tears and she swore, “Ah, shit, Theo,” softly, knowing it would have been considered a badge of shame in the Corps. “Tell me, how did you…”

“Please, I don’t want to talk about that,” he stopped her softly. “Not right now. Not first thing. I can’t. This, you and me…this is what’s most important.” He needed her so badly, needed to put aside all the horrors he’d been carrying. They would talk about it later and he would tell her about Eight and he would hear all her pain and grief that now showed so openly in her eyes, but he thought that neither of them was strong enough at the moment to bear that. He’d noticed Actaeon wasn’t with her and he would need to ask in time too, even as he had a dreadful near-certainty of the answer. With her, they would shut it all out none of it would matter for a little while, and they would finally be safe for the first time since they’d parted ways in One.

She nodded hastily, slipping her arms around his neck, and he gathered her in close. Much as he’d wanted her, strangely, he found they just clung to each other for a long, long time. It didn’t take away everything he’d seen and endured over the last four months but to have her restored to him when he’d thought her dead made him feel like maybe, just maybe he could bear it.

“Oh, hell,” he said finally, giving an awkward laugh. “This isn’t like we can just go to the infirmary. And I don’t have any condoms on me, you know.” Not exactly like Commander Paylor had included those in the supplies, and he doubted they were available here in Ten, being as it was an outlying district and the natives depended on whatever methods they had. “And we don’t need there to be three of us.” Not right now, though given that he’d been resigned to the idea that marrying her when she was thirty-eight and he was forty-four, that they’d be lucky to have a child, the vision of it was suddenly almost frighteningly real. Now he could marry her, have children with her, and have a life with her, but what kind of a life would it be? It was too much and he found he held on to her all the tighter as if to steady himself. He could barely think about tomorrow at this point and this new life in Ten trying to hide his past, so trying to figure out who he was and what he would do now was overwhelming. The certainty she would be there was enough for now, that was a rock he could build upon.
“It’s OK,” she murmured back, “I went and I got some tonic from the apothecary’s this afternoon. It tastes really fucking awful, but…we’re covered.”

He gave a laugh, hearing the tremor in it still. “Sorry, love. Then I’ll make that up to you.” He leaned down to kiss her, grateful that despite everything that had changed, this still felt so utterly familiar. He knew her, the scent of her skin, every curve and line of her, the little birthmark on her right hip. There were a few new small scars on her skin, as there were on his own, though whether that was from what she’d endured in Twelve or in the journey here to Ten, he didn’t know.

Drawing her down with him on the bed, they relearned each other slowly, as if making up for all the lost months and the fear. Though when she finally moved over him, he watched her, seeing the beauty of her body silhouetted against the fiery brilliance of the sunset—they’d have to get some curtains, they really would. Though that thought flew out of his head as both let out a gasp of surprise at how it felt, finally being together again. It felt amazing, and it felt so damn right. Trembling, she leaned down and nuzzled his neck, and hearing the thick, low moan she made as she tested how it felt when she moved, feeling every little sensation in a way he never had before, he felt more alive than he had in months.

The electricity was apparently sporadic with issues in Five, so once he finally threw off the drowsiness, he got up and lit the lamp as the night had darkened rapidly. The light cast her in soft glow and shadow, the gleam of it shining in her green eyes as he looked at her lying there, smiling at him, stretching a hand out to gesture him to come back to her. Not letting you go again. Ever.

Settling back down, putting an arm around her and drawing her in against his side, he kissed her brow and said, “Marry me.”

“You already proposed to me once,” she teased him gently.

“I know. But…we’re both free from the Corps now. I know they’ll probably want us to get through their training first, but as soon as we can.” It didn’t matter that the circumstances had changed and things were uncertain. He knew her, and he knew that he wanted her for his wife, come what may.

Her hand tightened a little on his shoulder and she looked up at him, that smile widening from one of cheerful invitation to one of an outright open happiness. “I don’t even know what they do for a wedding here,” she confessed.

“Me either. But we’ll find out.” He kissed her again, and her hand on his shoulder turned into a caress. He knew he’d probably regret a late night tomorrow morning, but it didn’t matter. This night and the joy of it was something golden that he’d want to remember the rest of his life.
District Eleven: Thirty-Four

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Haymitch knew District Eleven would be one of the tougher ones. Not that he worried about dealing with Fallow, and Johanna seemed to have gotten along well with Ratuin. But this was Chaff’s home, and Seeder’s, and there were too many memories over the years of the man who’d been his best friend and the woman who’d acted like an aunt to a motherless boy. Chaff would drink with him and Seeder would chew them both out. That was the way it had been. After being back to Mentor Central, the memory of the two of them in their chairs, how they’d talked constantly, was right there. It was their personal friendship, their proximity in Mentor Central, and probably being two of the most forlorn districts in terms of tributes, but for all his years as a mentor, Eleven and Twelve had something of a special relationship. They always turned to each other first if there were any thoughts of a lasting alliance rather than just Run for the Cornucopia and make it quick on yourself. It had been Eleven, and Seeder and Chaff, who had handed over the sponsorship money for Katniss when their own girl died. Calling up the parachutiers for that particular gift, it was one he’d been almost proud to send, a message from the people of Eleven rather than just another Capitolite. He’d been secretly proud, as well as terrified, to hear about the riot in Eleven.

He remembered too that during the Tour, the current of rebellion had been seething close to the surface, dangerous and electric. Katniss and Peeta blundered their way through the speeches, cost at least one man his life, and prodded Eleven just that bit further. Eleven and Twelve together had been the cradle of the rebellion, and he knew he would always owe them for that courage and suffering, but both Chaff and Seeder were gone now. That made coming back here difficult to bear. For just a moment he wished that the preps and the cameras and Plutarch would just back the fuck off for a few minutes rather than being ready to descend on him the moment the hovercraft landed, and that he could escape to the still, dusty silence of the dome of the Justice Building. He’d hid there on his own Tour, dragged the kids there for a private chat during theirs. He could be alone there. He could be away from the cameras.

He felt almost guilty that for a moment, with those thoughts, he hadn’t even wanted Johanna there either. But she hadn’t known them like he had.

He resolved to go visit their families while he was here. Chaff’s second wife Zinnia—Zee, he’d always called her—was here still, and their three kids. His first wife Navara had died only four months into their marriage, which was even before Haymitch’s Games. Dead of some kind of fever, so Chaff told him—even a victor wealth’s meant nothing when proper medicines weren’t anywhere to be had quickly in a place like this. Even if Snow had let Chaff pay a hovercraft to make an emergency run from the Capitol, it was the better part of a day. Of course he didn’t, Chaff had said, fingers of his one hand tightening into a fist. I pleaded. But the needs of the many outweigh the few, you know. Couldn’t spare the hovercraft for the sake of one woman. Bastard just wanted to prove that even if he couldn’t sell me, just how powerless I was.

Enduring prep by this point was routine, and compared to his years in the Capitol, it wasn’t a big deal. Mostly just making sure he didn’t look like he’d just rolled out of bed. Thankfully, in the thick, miserably humid July heat, Cinna’s wardrobe in this case had left off the suit jacket. Shrugging on the pale green shirt and swiftly buttoning it, he hesitated, and then rolled the sleeves up.

“Sure you want to do that?” Catullus asked doubtfully, eyeing the scars still there from the torture
and the napalm bombs.

Venia shook her head. “Tully, leave it be.”

“Sorry,” he mumbled. “It’s just…that’s a dress shirt!” Haymitch almost laughed at the chagrined apology on his face.

“This is Eleven,” Haymitch told him calmly. “They don’t stand much on ceremony here. Besides, let ‘em see.” Maybe it was almost getting blown to hell courtesy of Jolly Frill and having a couple more scars for the collection, maybe it was the memory of that afternoon with Johanna in Four when all his flaws, both physical and personality, seemed to be understood and simply accepted, or maybe being on the beach with all of them with all their scars and flaws on display. He was who he was, and the scars were a part of that. He was a survivor. Considering he’d been forced in court to tell all sorts of things that had been done to him, lurid details about murder and sex and suffering, there was no point in hiding it as if it was shameful to him.

Somehow, he wasn’t surprised to see Johanna in a sleeveless green dress, her own scars on display. “Got tired of sweating your ass off in the southern districts?” he murmured.

“Effie gave me a jacket. I left it off.” She shrugged. “Tired of the heat. Tired of hiding from all of it.” Her fingers twined in his hair just for a moment in a quick caress. “But hey, if you want to sneak off and get naked somewhere outside, by all means…” She gave him a sly grin.

“How sick of this are you by now?” Fallow asked wryly, shaking hands with him. “As you’ve done these shots in every district?”

“Pretty tired of it,” Johanna said. “But it keeps Plutarch off our asses otherwise, and good to see you two.”

“How busy are we going to be?” he asked Fallow bluntly.

“It’s a mess here,” she acknowledged with equal frankness. “Fighting was heavy, lots of casualties so we’re kind of low on workers, some of the orchards and fields were destroyed.”

“I was talking with Johanna, and then Sassafras too, about teaming up with Seven in clearing more fields,” Ratuin added. “It won’t help the orchard losses, those will take years, but if we can clear more ground in a hurry, we can still get some more crops in for harvest before winter hits the north.”

“But,” Fallow told him, “I imagine you can get the flavor of things quickly enough. We’ve got some sites planned for you, of course, but did you have something you wanted to see?”

“Zinnia McCormick and Theobrom Talmadge? Were they removed from Victors’ Orchard right after the Quell?” Given that both Chaff and Seeder were killed in the arena, he knew that policy was strict on survivors of a victor’s family: they had to evacuate the house within a few days.

“With Seeder, I assume they were waiting for the end of the Quell to deliver the news to Brom in the interest of decency,” and his tone made it clear he had seen it as anything but. Haymitch was inclined to agree. “Fortunately,” Ratuin said, eyes glittering with emotion, “the Peacekeepers coming to kick
them out the day after the arena fell was just one more thing that helped started a riot. After that, the rebellion was on in full force. Chaff and Seeder’s families were never forced from their homes. Rice too. If Cotton had ever married and had more kin, we’d have kept them in their home too.” He said it with a fierce pride.

“I’d like to pay my respects to their families then. As well as Rue Kitteredge and Thresh Jackson.” Katniss and Peeta had asked that, given they’d had no chance to actually talk to the families of their fellow tributes during the Tour.

“He stared at her in confusion. “Sorry?” Cotton had died in captivity. Dazen had confirmed that well enough. Seeder and Chaff both died in the arena, and he tried to force himself to not think about their deaths. That left only Rice still alive.

“Believe me, I was confused too,” Fallow told him with a wry little smile. “Apparently Shad showed up while Tony and I,” a slight nod towards Ratuin, “were in the Capitol. Just walked in with a string of fish and headed for the Orchard to offer ‘em to Rice. He hasn’t said anything to me about where he’s been all these months since the war ended.” She made a slight face. “He gets kind of upset when I ask.”

“Shad?” Johanna asked, obviously confused. “Wait, he’s Four, yeah?”

“Shad Atwater,” he confirmed. “29th Games.” He was also known colloquially as poor Shad to many and Sobbing Shad to the exasperated. “Male mentor until Carrick won in the 40th, and then the two of them kind of alternated duties during Rick’s…uh…’glory days’ so he’d be more available for patrons. Officially Carrick was the mentor.” Just like Finnick had officially been the mentor after that, from the 67th on, but if he was in particular demand, Carrick was expected to step in without anyone knowing.

Given his Games had damaged him more obviously than others, and Shad would sometimes just burst out crying at seemingly nothing, he’d never been a particularly popular victor. Coming late in the revenge years of the Games, when the Capitol was starting to try to shed that image of punishment and go to the “affectionate advancement of district savages and provide national entertainment” mentality, a crack-up victor would have been a stark reminder of what the Games really were. Besides, having Mags as the titan of Four and the enduring image of their mentorship helped; any male victor, even Finnick, had inevitably lived deep in her shadow as a mentor. So Shad had been able to quietly hide there until Carrick had taken over full-time in what, 57 or 58? Whenever it had been that the interest in Carrick had finally cooled, and a still-young Haymitch, seeing that the man had endured almost twenty years on the circuit, had wondered if that would be his fate.

“Well,” he said. “That’s a surprise.” He had noticed unlike most of the other districts, Rice wasn’t there to greet them. From Chaff and Seeder he’d gotten the impression that Rice largely kept to himself and didn’t go out in public much. Haymitch could respect that, although he knew from years of it himself that it wasn’t all that great in the long term. Being alone too much did its share of damage. “You mind if we go take care of some of the social calls?”

“By all means,” Fallow said. “We’ll keep you plenty busy rest of the time. Besides, I’ve gotta go grab Plutarch before he hustles off somewhere. I want a propo out of that man before y’all leave.”

“Oh?” Johanna said.
She gave another of those little edged smiles. He’d noted at the peace conference that both she and Acarica were of a like mind—decisive, sometimes a little sharp, sometimes a little ruthless. That probably came from being mayors of Panem’s two big food-producing districts where the Capitol controls had been particularly tight and they’d had to deal with that. He’d heard plenty over the years from both Nine and Eleven’s victors about how tight security was, how quickly things were punished. Having to jump to allow demands of punishment like that in the name of not inviting worse from the Capitol was no enviable task. He’d respected that toughness forged in unthinkable pressure, and the fact of their control of much of Panem’s food supply, during the negotiations. They were two pretty damn formidable women. “You’ll see.” Instinctively, he looked towards the remnants of barbed wire fence. One of Fallow’s fiercest stands had been on security. No whitecoat is setting foot in my borders, I promise you that. I agree we need a security force, but Eleven’s people will not accept any ex-Peacekeepers. At least not right now. That had gotten Tertullia’s back up, everyone ended up arguing about Peacekeepers again, and it had been a damn headache.

With that the tense moment with her look of being besieged passed and her smile was relaxed again. “All right. Go settle yourselves in.”

Soon enough they knocked on Rice’s door. Rice’s mother, Criolla, answered; a tall, strong woman with calm dark eyes who shared Rice’s coppery skin and black hair. “Been expecting you two,” she said, stepping aside to invite them in. “Shad, he’s here also to see you.” She sighed and shook her head, sounding a little overwhelmed. “Nice man, Shad, means well, but when he and Rice get each other all spun up and caught up in the past…”

“Yeah,” Haymitch acknowledged, well able to imagine it. Stepping into the parlor, he caught sight of the two of them: the young Eleven man of Johanna’s age, tall and strong as an ox, though as ever doing his best to look as small as possible. Then there was the old Four man with his crooked nose, his dark blond hair gone now almost entirely grey. His skin was darker than Haymitch remembered it; seemed like Shad had spent time out of doors. With that hair color and his paler skin, he’d always stood out against the other Four victors. Haymitch had never asked, as he knew from Ash it could be a sore subject, and probably even more so in a relatively prosperous district where it was likely fewer Peacekeeper brats were born. But given Shad always gave the impression of growing up dirt-poor even for Four, so he imagined the man’s ma might have been forced to seek a Peacekeeper’s bed for the purpose of coin. Knowing what he did now about Fog, he had a sense of fellow feeling that hadn’t been there before. “Rice,” he acknowledged. “Shad, good to see you both.”

Rice nodded. “Good to see you alive,” he said, a quick succession of emotions flickering across his face. “We saw the newscasts about the bombing. Mama didn’t much want me seeing ‘em—”

“No use upsetting you, Rice,” Criolla said, leaning against a piano. Haymitch wondered if that was Rice’s victor talent. He’d never asked Chaff or Seeder. Once Rice was pretty much tucked away by the Capitol, he’d kept his questions about him to general stuff, focusing more on the victors there with him in the Capitol. He regretted that a bit now.

“I ain’t as helpless as you th—”

“It was terrible,” Shad said hoarsely, interrupting the two of them, and Haymitch saw his eyes, one grey and one green, already starting to shimmer as the tears welled up. Pulling a handkerchief from his pocket where he always had it ready, Shad dabbed at his eyes. “Oh, hell,” he said.

“It was something well worth crying about, don’t worry about it,” Johanna said dryly. “Don’t think you and I ever met.” Haymitch saw her gaze went over to Rice. “Either of you, really.”

“Didn’t get to the Capitol much,” Rice mumbled, looking down at his hands. “They didn’t want me there.”
“Lucky you,” she said coolly, and there was a world of venomous resentment in those two words. He could imagine—her own breakdown had been neatly packaged and relabeled as vicious deception to make her still “acceptable” and thus desirable. Rice’s had gone far enough to keep him from that. Then he heard her mutter, “Ah, hell,” to herself. Her voice was much calmer as she said, “Bygones, fuck Snow and the Capitol, it was their fault.”

Rice nodded at that but he still looked wary. Meanwhile, Shad was still busy with the handkerchief. Haymitch couldn’t help but feel a little uncomfortable by it, given that he’d locked away so damn many of his own tears for all those years. The damage done to a victor was something they all acknowledged quietly, but seeing it so open, like a bleeding wound, was something he didn’t enjoy watching. “They set off a bomb, you know,” Shad said, looking at them with an expression of wanting to explain himself. He made a choked noise. “40th Games. Carrick. My only victor. Though of course Mags did most of the mentoring—for me, for Carrick, for Finnick too, I’m sure. But…they set a bomb in the amphitheater around the Cornucopia. Fed the kids a good dinner and then blew them to bits. They bombed the docks too, after the Quell, people were on fire and screaming. Didn’t bomb the Bayou of course, they couldn’t destroy the nice houses, but they dragged the Odairs and the Crestas to the central square of Port Marsh and they made us watch…”

He heard a faint groan from Rice who was now getting that wide-eyed look of unseeing terror, being caught in the merciless grip of some memory. “Shad,” he said, seeing now Criolla’s concern here. Hearing the details of what had happened in Four, remembering seeing some of the blackened and twisted hulks of docks and fishing boats caught in the bombing and hearing how Finnick and Annie’s families had been executed, he was trying to not give in to a spiral himself. Already the images of the Fulmer Theater bomb were hovering around the edge of his consciousness, and right behind them was a parade of so many dead it was unbearable.

Surprisingly, it was Johanna that stepped forward and touched Shad’s shoulder. “That was then,” she said, her voice quiet but firm. “They’re gone, but you’re still here. And we beat the Capitol. It’ll never happen again.” Surprised, Haymitch watched her. He knew her well enough to be certain that even a year ago, she’d just have rolled her eyes and made some snarky remark about a need to shut off the waterworks. He’d known she had that gentler side to her, the one that she’d slammed the door on out of all the pain and loss, and that she had let him see it was something that still caught him with a sense of awe. But seeing her moved enough by Shad’s plight, or comfortable enough with herself, to do this for a man she’d never even met, made him realize just how things must have shifted for her. Besides, Shad was a victor. She may not have met him, but she knew him in some sense because she knew what haunted him.

Shad looked at her, dashing the back of his hand across his eyes, clearing his throat, giving her an awkward little smile. “Of course.” He looked at her more closely with those strange, mismatched eyes. “More to you than people think, isn’t there?” he asked almost gently. Shad’s voice went almost too low for Haymitch to hear, as he told her, “Always thought you got such a bad deal, being painted as the clever little fiend.” Johanna startled at it, and instinctively at that he tensed himself, ready to go on the offensive, but Shad reached out and patted her hand comfortingly. He looked up over Johanna’s shoulder and asked Haymitch, “The newscasts said that Finnick and Annie moved to Twelve, now?”

He nodded in reply. “Four’s not in great shape.” He suppressed a wince, hoping it didn’t start another flood of tears. “So they’ll be staying in Twelve a while.”

“Theyir little girl looks beautiful,” Shad said wistfully. “So much like Annie, I think. And look at you two. Congratulations.” Now there were a few tears again but from how he was beaming, these were happy ones.
“You could come to Twelve too,” Johanna said suddenly. “Finn and Annie would probably be happy to know you’re alive. You could meet Maggie.” Neither of them asked, _How did you not end up dead, and where have you been all this time?_ He knew it might be too much. He noticed she didn’t add that there was nothing left for him in Four either. From what memories he carried, whatever he’d fled from when the Capitol was killing victors, he had to know that fact already given he hadn’t returned.

“Maggie,” and now the handkerchief was out again, being put to use. “Mags would have enjoyed that, I think.” He smiled at the two of them. “Well, I don’t have many things, so ain’t like it would take me long to pack. If you don’t mind me around the Bay—no, it’s the Village there, isn’t it?”

“Be glad to have you,” Johanna told him, and Haymitch could detect no insincerity there. If anything, he could almost feel those waves of resolute protectiveness rolling off of her, the sort that said she’d already decided she’d defend Shad. Maybe it was the solitude of one lonely old man, or maybe it was how he was one of the obviously damaged ones and it somehow now touched her rather than unsettled her. But it seemed like she’d adopted him as her own.

He knew what it was like to be lonely and to have nowhere to turn, to be shunned and mocked and even hated. Particularly for an old man in his twilight years, and one as quiet and harmless as Shad, it was an easy choice. He’d been Four’s least popular and publicized victor, a victor in his Games almost by default and too sensitive to endure surviving the arena, and perhaps because of that, Haymitch felt for him keenly. Perhaps Shad reminded him a little of Peeta too, a Peeta who had been forced to do the unthinkable and live with it, and that certainly helped. Of all people, someone so damaged and vulnerable deserved somewhere to belong, and when the end of his time came, to not be alone. “She’s right.” Besides, Annie in particular probably knew how to deal with Shad and his episodes. He would be in the best possible hands.

“Well, if that’s decided,” Shad said, “I won’t hold you up. I’m sure you’ve got so much more to do than sit and watch an old man bawling.”

“We came to see you and R—” Johanna’s brow furrowed. “Where did he go?” She nodded towards Rice’s empty chair. Haymitch sighed and shook his head. Chaff had said Rice tended to just slip away and avoid people, sometimes in mid-conversation.

“Wherever he felt he needed to be, I suppose,” he said, feeling oddly like he’d failed there. Rice was a fellow victor, the only Eleven victor left. He ought to be there for him somehow, be able to get through to him. “All right, Shad, so if you want to have dinner with us tomorrow?”

The way Shad smiled, joy and relief all at once, twisted at his heart. Shit—he never wanted to remember how it felt to have one gesture of kindness be such a ray of light in what seemed like total darkness.

Outside, on the porch, Johanna touched his arm. “Let me take Rue and Thresh’s families. You’ve got enough already with Chaff and Seeder.”

“I ought to,” he argued, shaking his head.

“You were going to see them on behalf of Katniss and Peeta anyway rather than for your own sake, so if I go instead, what’s the big deal?” she argued right back, and where the gentleness had been, now he could see that resolute stubbornness. “What, I’m not good enough to handle the job because I’m not originally from Twelve so I don’t count when it comes to talking to the family of people who helped save my friends in the arena?”

“No, Hanna, it’s…”
“You take on too much,” she told him bluntly.

“So do you. Guess it comes from having to do everything for ourselves all those years.”

“Don’t make me useless here,” and he saw how her brown eyes were determined. He understood. “I can go to them, same as you. Hell, I have just as much right. Your two tributes weren’t the only ones in those Games, Haymitch, don’t you fucking forget that, even if the rest of the country did. While Katniss was busy suspecting everyone and Peeta was off wooing the Careers and your sponsorship account was flush for once, the rest of us were making do as best we could, as usual. If either Tamarack or Hannelore had made it out of the bloodbath, they would have formed an alliance with Thresh or Rue. I owe their families something for that anyway.”

At that point all he could do was nod. She was right. Besides, he owed her the trust of taking care of something like that. By this point she knew Katniss and Peeta as well as he did. “You’re right. You go do what you think best.”

The way her expression eased and the look she gave him, that spark of warmth and relief, resonated even deeper after thinking about Shad’s gratitude. It made him want to reach out and hold her, tell her once again that she was his. Besides, he owed her the trust of taking care of something like that. By this point she knew Katniss and Peeta as well as he did. “You’re right. You go do what you think best.”

“The way her expression eased and the look she gave him, that spark of warmth and relief, resonated even deeper after thinking about Shad’s gratitude. It made him want to reach out and hold her, tell her once again that she was his. Besides, he owed her the trust of taking care of something like that. By this point she knew Katniss and Peeta as well as he did. “You’re right. You go do what you think best.”

Good luck,” he said, turning towards what he already knew was Chaff’s house. He’d never been there, not even on Katniss and Peeta’s Tour, but in his mind he could heard Chaff describing it. Zee, she planted flowers in some windowboxes her brother made, and we painted the front door panels blue, the spacers, those are still white. The Head started to give us lip about that, altering a Capitol-provided home, but I just claimed I was developing a ‘landscaping and home planning’ talent and he shut right up.

The blue paint was a bit faded now, ten years or more gone. He knocked and a woman he’d seen only in photographs opened the door. He thought of the wedding picture Chaff had showed him, tall lanky Chaff and short, curvy Zinnia, and Chaff joking, Guess we’re the long and the short of it!

Zinnia McCormick was a woman around forty now rather than a twenty-year-old bride, and the years had taken a toll on her. Three children later, and with a victor as a husband, she’d gained some more weight though she carried her plumpness quite comfortably, and her dark hair was caught into a multitude of intricate small braids. “Zinnia?” he asked, which was stupid because he knew it was her, but it was like the formalities had to be observed here.

“Haymitch,” she returned, eyes intent on him, and of course she knew him. “You paying a social call, then?”

“I figured I ought,” he answered, feeling unsettled that she seemed almost indifferent to seeing him. Her husband had been his best friend. Didn’t that count for something? “Chaff and me…I mean, he was damn good to me, and…he’s gone now, and so I owe you because obviously I can’t do for him now, and…”

He’d never really thought ahead to what he would say, had he? He’d simply known he had to come see Chaff’s wife and somehow try to make it right, try to find someone who felt the loss of that man
so keenly, who’d been horrified at him being torn to shreds by iridescent, flesh-eating beetles. Surely they would just get each other, having something so profound in common. With the victors, having someone in common like that had always prompted that kind of bond and mutual understanding. But looking at her face, he could tell with a growing sense of awkwardness and panic that wasn’t the case.

Zinnia looked at him, her golden eyes almost gentle, but her expression was resolute as she shook her head. “Haymitch, let me save you some time. You’re not seeing it. That, what Chaff had with you? That best friend of yours was the part the Capitol grabbed and it never gave back, and it never belonged to what he had with me and our babies. And his life here wasn’t ever yours either. You never met the kids, Haymitch, and now they’re grown—even Chardy is fourteen—and I’ve got grandkids now from Rabe. I know you looked after him in the Capitol, so you don’t owe us. But you belong to that part of his life that got taken from me and the kids, that part that left him waking up screaming, the part that finally killed him. It’s good of you to pay your respects. We both loved that man, we both miss him. But he’s gone now and you and me, we’ve got nothing left common between us, so… I think it’s best we stay our separate ways.”

He felt like he’d been punched in the gut, even as he understood what she was saying. Maybe it was the Capitol’s fault, and she understood that and there was no blame. But he was ten, fifteen, twenty years too late to be involved in Chaff’s life here in Eleven, and with Chaff gone, there was no way his life and Zinnia’s intersected anymore. It was only years of having to grit his teeth and carry on and not show that it hurt like hell that kept him going now. He wouldn’t embarrass himself, of Chaff’s memory, by making a fool of himself now when she’d made it pretty clear where she stood. “Maybe so. But I wanted to pay my respects.” Fuck, how many times had he said that to families of the dead? “He was a good man, Chaff. The best. And if you and the kids ever need anything…”

She nodded. “I’ll keep it in mind,” she promised. He sensed she was doing it from compassion: he already knew she wouldn’t call him unless she was in dire straits. “Thank you for coming.”

“Did they…” He hated to ask, and he cut himself off as he realized the gap between victors and non-victors again. For the victors, talking about returning bodies was an annual reality. They were used to it. But he didn’t know whether or not the Capitol had returned the dead to their families. Probably not, he realized with a fresh pang of grief, thinking of Chaff and Seeder and Mags and Angus and all the rest treated with contempt. They didn’t respect their lives, why would they have respected their deaths, particularly with a war on and no incentive to use the ostentatious and hypocritical grief of sending ornate coffins home as another emotional kick in the ass? He would have to try to find out where they had been buried, if it was possible. They had volunteered their lives at his request and paid for it, so the least he could do was try to bring them home. “Never mind it,” he said gently, sensing that it would tear open Zinnia’s wounds all over again. “Goodbye, Zinnia. Take care.”

She shut the door behind her and he didn’t look back as he walked away, knowing he’d never again knock on that blue-and-white door.

At least things were more cordial with Seeder’s husband Theobrom, and he wasn’t flailing as much. He paid his respects, Theobrom returned the compliment by saying Seeder had always spoken well of him. Haymitch told him to call if there was ever anything he could do for Seeder’s kin. Theobrom thanked him, and Haymitch left. It was all very polite and even kind, but he’d felt the distance there of two people who didn’t know each other at all.

Sighing, he went for a walk outside the confines of the Orchard, through a lush orchard nearby. The plums were only half-grown still. The faded signs posted on the fences had been defaced by graffiti to the point he was having to guess what they said, most likely “THEFT OF CAPITOL PROPERTY IS A PUNISHABLE CRIME.”
Standing there in the summer sun, he heard a mockingjay give the lilting four-note call Seeder’s girl Rue had taught Katniss. At last alone, he sat down in the shade of one of the trees and closed his eyes, letting himself remember Seeder and Chaff, all those memories he couldn’t share with Zinnia and Theobrom. The victor part, the mentor, the forced whore, the violence that was in everyone who survived the arena by taking lives—that darkness was something that those back home could never quite understand and maybe it frightened them. He thought maybe they preferred to think of that Capitol self as something that had to be endured, and hopefully shed as much as possible once they came home again.

But that Capitol side every summer was the only part of them that he had ever known, and for what it had been worth, in seeing the worst of them, he had still called them his friends. If he was the only one—besides Rice, perhaps—who would grieve that part of Chaff or Seeder, so be it. They deserved it.

~~~~~~~~~~

Johanna went to go visit Thresh’s kin first. For that, she ended up at the community home, nearly empty. It seemed if people had died in the war in Eleven, it had largely been a case of entire families wiped out, and she didn’t have to say much on the tragedy of that. The bleak look of the Harvesters, the caretakers, left with virtually nothing to do, was a stark contrast to the determined energy frazzled by overwork of the Xiphioses back in Two.

Case, the husband, told her, “Molly came in last summer when her gram got killed in the first riot after the arena fell. No other family left.”

Molasses, apparently called “Molly”, came to the office following Blossom, the wife. Compared to the slender, petite figure of Blossom, Molly Jackson was a bear of a girl even at sixteen—tall, well-muscled, and she looked at Johanna with fearless golden brown eyes. “What’s it you’re wanting?”

“Mrs. Abernathy wanted to convey her condolences about Thresh.”

“He’s dead,” Molly said. “Everybody’s saying how sorry they are, all the damn time. It ain’t bringing my brother back, is it?” But she could see the tension in the girl, how the muscle in her jaw jumped as if she was trying to hold herself together. No, she was no stranger to tough talk to cover a bleeding wound.

“You wanna give us a minute?” she asked the Harvesters. Case nodded, and held the door for Blossom. Johanna perched on the corner of the desk, close to Molly.

“I had an older brother,” Johanna told her quietly. “The Capitol killed him too.”

“Your brother was in the Games?” Molly shook her head. “Before my time, maybe. Don’t remember that. But then, you won when I was just a little kid anyway.” It startled her a little to hear Molly didn’t know, given it had been splashed all over the newscasts last winter during Snow’s trial. But then, maybe television here had been sporadic, and maybe the Harvesters had kept some of the worst details from the kids. She couldn’t blame them for that, exactly. Kids in the districts had been forced to grow up too damn fast already for generations now.

“Bern wasn’t in the arena. But the Capitol killed him and my parents both.” She was trying to find that fine balance here, to be open enough without pandering to a girl who was obviously feeling alone as hell, and being offensive by it. “So yeah, I was seventeen and I’d lost everyone. Everyone said they were so sorry. Soon enough, though, they all moved on, that’s life in the districts, life’s rough enough you’ve got no time for pity, and nobody cared. So I was the only one who remembered my family. And I hated everyone who moved on.”
“Nice speech,” Molly said dryly. Johanna tried to fight the urge to slap her. “So why you, anyway, low person in the pecking order and you got assigned to this? Your husband too busy with more important things? Wasn’t your kids in the arena that survived ‘cause Thresh didn’t. Where the hell is the girl my brother spared, and that boy who got to live too? Safe and snug at home.”

“I came because I told Haymitch I wanted to come talk to you.” She stifled the urge to add brat at the end. “Katniss and Peeta asked, they wanted to come but the president isn’t exactly sparing hovercraft for personal reasons—your grief sucks, but it doesn’t take precedence over trying to make sure everyone is surviving. And because you don’t have to be a fucking District Twelve victor to have a right to care that a kid from Eleven got murdered in the arena. My two in the arena were going to be allies with Thresh, so yeah, I was hoping for him after they both got killed. So are we done having our little pissing match yet? Because trust me, I’ve got a hell of a lot more practice at being a nasty bitch than you.”

Molly stared at her, opened her mouth as if to say something, looked like a goggle-mouthed fish for a second, and then closed it. “Fine,” she muttered. “Done your duty by me, yeah, thanks, see you never.”

Seeing her in the community home had put the germ of an idea in her head, and she knew Haymitch wouldn’t disagree for it. She thought about Shad, and how she’d moved to settle him down, recognizing someone else who labored with the burden of that overbearing shadow that could sever the tether to reality and the shame of that seeming weakness. Now here she was moved by this kid’s plight. Damn Haymitch, she thought with fond exasperations, he’s making me a sucker for every tough-luck story that crosses my path now. “You don’t have to stay here,” she said. “Three more years stuck in the home until you’re nineteen. Long time.” Maybe she could move out earlier if she married, and the Harvesters were willing to sign the consent form for it—happened all the time for kids after their last reaping as eighteens. But the community home or marriage was a shitty choice. “Or,” she said, catching Molly’s eye, “you could let Haymitch and me take on legal guardianship of you. You come move to Twelve. Make a new start. There’s other kids your age there in the same situation, parents are gone, so you’d have friends.”

Just for a moment, something unguarded slipped through that tough armor. There was a spark of gratitude and hope and fear all at once. “No fooling?”

“Nope.”

“Fine,” she said, not even thinking about it too long. “Sign the paperwork and I’ll go to Twelve. Nothing left here for me. Mama and Daddy died years ago, and Thresh and Gram too…no, nobody else I’ll miss.” She cocked her head and looked at Johanna defiantly. “Besides, that way if Peeta and Katniss ever have something to say to me, they ain’t gonna have to send someone else to do it.”

Johanna couldn’t resist a smirk. “You’re gonna fit in just fine. I’ll talk to Fal—Mayor Boyce,” she caught her gaffe, “and we’ll get it all done and proper.” She tried to not smile wider as she imagined just what an odd hovercraft ride that would be to Twelve, containing one off-kilter old Four man and a brassy Eleven teen girl.

Rue’s family was out for the day, and she sighed in frustration at that. They’d have to come back later. But maybe Haymitch ought to be along for that one anyway, she’d admit. Rue had been tied closer to Katniss than Thresh had, and given Chaff and Seeder had signed over their sponsorship money to him, he deserved to give thanks in person for the life of one little girl. She headed back towards the Orchard, confident of at least one success for the day.

Oddly, he wasn’t back, and she checked with Chaff’s widow and Seeder’s widower and he wasn’t there. Rice, Criolla Lee informed her, was up in his room and not much interested in seeing anyone.
As for Shad, she’d rather not risk setting him off again by making him think Haymitch was missing. She found him out in the orchard nearest the Orchard, head bowed a bit and eyes closed as he leaned against the trunk of a plum tree.

“Napping?” she asked as she sat down beside him. His eyes opened and he lifted his head to look at her. There was a trace of sadness on his features that took him a moment to cover up.

“Just thinking,” he said, shaking his head.

“No good in the Orchard?” she asked.

“It’s done,” he said, almost curt. It took her a moment to realize he meant it as in it’s totally over. What ties he had to Chaff and Seeder were apparently unbound now, and she hurt a little for him to hear it. If Finnick had died, she couldn’t imagine trying to talk to his family.

She reached over and took his hand in hers. “It’s OK,” he said, a slight, sad smile on his features. “Sometimes you’ve just gotta accept it and let go.”

“Well,” she said, trying to cheer him up a little, “I’ve got one new recruit for Whatever-We-Call-It Territory, formerly known as District Twelve. Molasses Jackson—call her ‘Molly’, she looked ready to kill the community home directors when they called her ‘Molasses’—is going to Twelve. I figure we’ve got enough kids from Twelve we’re serving as guardians for, why the hell not take on one from Eleven? Save her a couple years of misery in the community home.”

“Good,” he said, the smile a bit more genuine now. “With Shad, that’s two we didn’t expect.” He shrugged. “Fate takes away, but at least now it’s apparently giving back as well.” He was right, she realized with a startle. They’d grown so use to loss after loss, that the idea of some kind of balanced scales was strange.

“I was thinking,” she said.

“Dangerous,” he teased her lightly.

“Says the man who thought his way into toppling two presidents,” she mocked him right back. “Don’t overwork that poor brain of yours. Anyway. I know you and the mayors all hashed out the adoption process.” Thirteen had been eager to get started on that, and maybe even some couples in the districts would open their homes to an orphan. But that wasn’t going to handle the sheer flood of war orphans in some districts. The overcrowded Peacehome was still on her mind. If she’d made the offer to Molly Jackson, she owed it to the other few Eleven orphans too, didn’t she? Maybe a new start in a place where everyone was equally rootless, the old Twelve having been burned away, would be something with equal promise for everyone. “Maybe we ought to leave an open offer to any orphans not getting adoption offers. Transfer to Twelve if they want. Make a fresh start. If they want to stay in their home district, that’s fine, but I have to think at least some of them might be willing to take the risk.”

He nodded, and she could see the spark of enthusiasm in his eyes suddenly, as if something in him had lit up. “It’s hard when you’ve got nobody to call your own, even if it’s a familiar place. You’re not really a part of it anymore. By birth and by blood, maybe, but…you’ve lost the people that made it home. You’re outside looking in.” He shook his head. “That’s all anyone really needs,” he said softly, half to himself. “Somewhere you’ve got people among the living rather than just being tied down there by ghosts in the graveyard. Where it doesn’t matter where you were born or who your parents were, because it’s the future we’re looking to, not the past. Because in the end, everybody’s got worth and we all deserve to belong somewhere.”
She looked over at him, knowing he was talking about Molly and Shad, but about himself and her too. It was the wistfulness and sorrow and pain of all those lost, solitary years he’d endured as an outcast that had forged that kind of a vision. It was something simple but powerful: a place where nobody would be turned away. She could have ribbed him, made a joke about how he was building a territory out of orphans and half-cracked sorts and who knew what else, but truth was, she’d started to believe in that vision herself of the place Twelve could be. She’d been the first to make that transition and believe in it as somewhere she could belong, given people who loved her were there. She had found her home and maybe the urge was there now to give that gift to others who were lost and lonely, felt worthless and outcast.

He had just finally been the one to articulate the whole thing as a simple statement of purpose, and the two of them just looked at each other, realizing the power of that. “I think,” she said, “that sounds like the place you and Katniss and Peeta helped make for me.” She smiled at him, shaking her head a little in mock exasperation, “Give up and accept you’ll run for territorial governor next spring, my cuddly little honeybear,” she couldn’t resist tweaking him with that joking pet name, lest he think she was getting too soft on him. “You’re pretty much acting as Twelve’s leader already, you’re the one who’s got the vision and the experience and the passion for it, and everybody knows you can play politics at a high level and not get stomped. So who the hell is going to beat you?”

“Who the hell else would want the headache?” he asked her archly. “But they may want someone less…” he waved a hand, “…with a mixed reputation. We need a fresh start.”

“The past,” she reminded him. “We’re looking towards the future, remember? You’ve proven yourself how many times over the last year, done things nobody else has managed, and fuck ‘em if they say otherwise. Stop apologizing for all the shit you couldn’t help, and be proud of what you’ve actually done.”

He grinned at her suddenly. “Sure you don’t want the job yourself?”

“Hell no. I don’t play well with others, remember.” She grinned equally back at him. “I’ll help where you want help, then I get to go build my buildings, and you get to deal with the rest. Including handling the people you actually want to strangle.”

“Deal.” Though he held her hand tighter in his rather than shaking it, and that was better.

Chapter End Notes

Shad Atwater was created by Suzume, and she was gracious enough to let me borrow him for my own 29th Games victor from Four. :D
District Eleven: Thirty-Five

Fallow's propo with Plutarch proved to be burning the instruments of cruelty used on the citizens of Eleven. They'd gone and watched the bonfire consuming the whips, shackles, and all the rest. Even as the Eleven natives cheered and whooped with joy to see it, Haymitch felt ill at ease, trying to remind himself this fire was under control, that it would only burn away the past, rather than consume lives and the future. After that, they went to the southwest for a few days, away from the orchards and rice and cotton, nearly to the narrow strip of near-tropical borderlands before Four, for the coffee and cacao and citrus and sugarcane, the luxuries the Capitol so prized. Chaff had been from the sugarcane fields and seeing them for the first time, looking at those who’d grown up working the cane, Haymitch saw it had been no easy childhood.

But while that area had taken some damage, it clearly was the east district where the fighting had been fiercest, so they’d returned here to spend the rest of their time. He’d seen some of the scorched earth within a short distance here where crops had burned and where the farmers informed him the ground would take years to recover. Eleven had emerged scarred but unbroken, and looking at the resilience of its people gave him some fresh hope for Twelve. They were rebuilding from the ground up, but as he and Johanna had said, in some ways that made them free to make the place they wanted it to be, rather than struggling to throw over old ways.

Awakened early in the morning, Haymitch just growled irritably at the mockingjays caroling their songs from the trees in the center of Victors’ Orchard as he and Johanna tried to go through their morning sparring exercises. Damn things were breaking his focus.

Of course even the lush fruit trees here had been more for show on Capitol television than anything; the fruit they produced, so Chaff told him, had always been as tightly controlled in harvest as any other orchard in Eleven. *Cherries and peaches and plums and everything else growin’ right there a stone’s throw from my front porch, Haymitch, and nobody can eat ‘em*, he’d snorted with disgust. *Though one rookie Peacekeeper was dumb enough to nab a nectarine*, Haymitch didn’t even know what the hell that was, to be honest, and started eating it in front of the workers just to be an ass. *Turns out theft from the Capitol is theft, even if you’re wearing that white uniform. That was one flogging nobody much minded.*

Things had changed so much in a year, and children only looked at some of the fruit with longing frustration now because in July, some of it was still unripe and out of season. But he could see kids scampering up into the peach and plum trees to nab a sweet prize.

The combat techniques drew an audience, most of them littles, but there were a few teenagers mixed into it as well. It seemed like it wasn’t long before he and Johanna had somehow gotten talked into giving a demonstration for them, and even showing a few techniques. Neither of them mentioned they were fighting styles from Two. He knew Eleven’s relationship to Two, given the rough enforcement demanded of the Peacekeepers, was going to be a sore point for a long time. At least Tertullia and Fallow had apparently mended fences enough to try to work together and that was a promising sign.

Standing back, watching a group of kids in the morning sun practicing a few of the techniques, he felt an odd mingled feeling. He could understand their elation at the new freedom, the ability to learn how to fight back when it had been just submission and cringing before. They would never be helpless and defenseless again, some of the poorest and hardest off in all Panem. But for him, even just watching kids fighting in practice tugged at the edges of too many rough and bloody memories. Still, condemning them to continued helplessness was no answer either. “The most important thing,”
he told them, voice a little louder and harsher than he’d like it to be, seeing a dozen pairs of eyes suddenly snap to him with startled, solemn attentiveness, “is you use this only to get some exercise, clear your mind, and maybe someday, if you absolutely have to, you defend yourself. Never attack another person with it. You understand me? Never. The Capitol made kids fight each other. Don’t let ‘em win again by becoming someone who hurts other kids.” All of them were old enough to have seen at least some Games, and to have the attendant nightmares that came with watching them. They would more easily understand what he meant.

“But you survived ‘cause you fought, Mister Haymitch,” one little boy piped up. “You knew how."

“Knowing a thing and knowing when to use it are two different things,” he said a little heavily. These kids here, now transitioning towards playing tag with their lessons quickly forgotten, were Panem’s future, and he prayed in their new freedom they would lead it with wisdom and compassion. But at least they knew about the darkness of the Games. The kids born after this never would and that was a blessing, but also a curse in that they would never understand the weight of the world that had once been. Everything would sit a little more lightly on their shoulders and he hoped they wouldn’t take things for granted because of it, and make the same mistakes all over again because of it.

But those were heavy thoughts, too dark for a morning like this with kids shouting in gleeful laughter. He looked around for where Johanna had gone while he was delivering his impromptu little lecture, and spied her shoes kicked off at the trunk of a peach tree. Glancing up, he saw her there almost ten feet in the air, bare feet balancing lightly in a crook of the tree, and she hung on with one hand and leaned down, handing him two peaches. “Don’t drop ‘em,” she said, even as she scampered down from the tree herself. As she hit the ground, grunting a little as she lifted her right foot and flexed it, obviously having hit the ground too hard, she looked over at him with an irritated roll of her eyes. “Must be getting old. Climbing trees used to be so much easier.”

He just laughed and handed her one of the peaches after she slipped on her shoes, taking a bite of his own and then leaning in to kiss her, tasting the sweetness of the fruit on her lips as well as his own. Twelve was so silent still with everything destroyed, but here in Eleven, the freedom from the heavy weight of the yoke that had been on their shoulders came with an air of joy. This was what they had fought for, wasn’t it? Things had changed. Things could be good now, he thought.

The business of social calls wasn’t over yet, though, as the two of them went to go pay respects to Kinze Kitteredge, Rue’s father. He thought about the lively, inquisitive little girl who’d died in the arena. He didn’t blame Gloss’ boy for spearing her; he’d done only what anyone else in the arena was forced to do. But the image of her decked in flowers still haunted his dreams sometimes. It must have been a thousand times worse for Kinze.

Kinze, a short, solid man with smooth brown skin, answered the door at his shack. Haymitch judged the man around his own age, and given that Rue had been his eldest, either he’d married rather late or else he’d been like Chaff and had an early first marriage that ended with him as a widower. Haymitch remembered seeing Kinze from the stage during the Tour, him and his surviving five kids, and his wife. His wife was nowhere to be seen and his heart sank as he knew what that probably meant. “Been wondering if you’d come call,” he said. “Might as well come on in.” He shook his head. “My wife Marion died during the war,” he got it out of the way almost matter-of-factly. “Got caught right in the crossfire out in one of the peach orchards when they were trying to get some fruit. War, it don’t feed your kids when they’re starving. Rebel bullets or Peacekeepers, it killed her, and two of our kids, Basil and Echota.” His dark eyes glimmered with both anger and grief. Haymitch tried to not imagine it, the smell of gunpowder and blood and peaches, and the ground taken heedless of the cost of innocent lives. War could be merciless on both sides, they’d seen that readily.
“I’m sorry,” Johanna was the first to speak up.

“You’ve lost a lot,” Haymitch acknowledged readily.

Kinze’s eyes settled a little and he gave a terse nod and what might have been either a grunt of acknowledgement or sniffling back tears. “You two’d get it, I suppose, of anyone. Lost plenty yourselves.”

He’d grieved three children and a wife in little over a year. That was so much worse than Haymitch had imagined. “We came to pay our respects to you on Rue. Since we couldn’t say everything during the Victory Tour.” He hesitated and asked, reluctant to pry but needing to know, “Your other three?”

“They’re out playing,” Kinze told him. “Two boys, one girl. Bale’s twelve now, Chelon’s ten, and Amity’s six.” Struggling to raise three kids alone was no easy task, he was sure, particularly with as much grief as he had to have. “Sorry, don’t know where my manners went. You want a drink here? Got some sun tea, no sugar though, the harvest ain’t in yet.” He turned to the kitchen cabinets.

Haymitch noticed they were neatly painted with a design of vines and blossoms and fruit, a bright touch to the cheap wooden cabinets now faded by sun and age. He thought of his own kitchen back home and how Johanna had brought changes to it. Whether it had been Kinze or Marion who painted it, the ghost of a dead woman clung there nonetheless, because he imagined it had been done early in their marriage.

When he turned back he plunked a bottle down on the table. Haymitch recognized it as a bottle of Eleven’s own white liquor, the raw rum before it was aged to Capitol tastes. Kinze raised an eyebrow, asking him if he wanted any. “I’m good, thanks,” he said politely. Johanna declined as well, and he was thankful she didn’t say But it’s only ten in the morning either. Haymitch felt a trickle of sweat running its way down his back beneath his shirt and knew it wasn’t just the humid July heat. He knew all too well where this road went, and Kinze didn’t have to speak up and talk about the grief and the unbearable weight and the shame and failure, because it was still as familiar to him as the back of his hand. The only difference was that Haymitch hadn’t had kids there every day to depend on him.

Johanna must have realized something too because she said a little too brightly, “I think I’ll go see if I can find the kids. Might be as we ran into them this morning.”

As Haymitch heard the screen door close, he looked towards Kinze taking the first swig from a glass. At least he still bothered, rather than just drinking right from the bottle. Dust motes danced in the sunlight. He wondered how long it had been since the place had been thoroughly cleaned. “I know how this goes. How much are you going through a day, and is it to the point you drink around the kids?” he asked matter-of-factly, not seeing any point beating around the bush.

Kinze’s eyes met his, and the momentary belligerence faded to that awful look of nothing but bottomless pain and self-loathing. “About a bottle. And, oh no. Only really get going when I’ve got ’em safe to bed. I don’t want my kids seeing that.”

“Then at least you’re better off than I was. Got to the point I didn’t give a shit if the entire country saw it.” He was relieved they could at least just talk about it openly enough, two men sitting at a kitchen table built for an entire family, talking matter-of-factly. The booze was easier to discuss than the pain behind it.

“But you got off the bottle. I mean, compared to how you were…”

Haymitch nodded in acknowledgment of that. But what could he say? He’d gotten sober first
because he was forced to it by Peeta being an overbearing little dictator, then he’d had to keep it up because of Thirteen’s rules. At that point, he’d been off it long enough that sobriety was almost a habit. But he knew it had also been because he’d found other things to fill the terrible emptiness. He’d found Johanna, he’d gotten a bit of his self-respect back, he had Katniss and Peeta. “I’ve still slipped a few times. When I feel like the bottom’s dropped right out again.” He thought of Johanna and their wedding night in the Capitol, and the revelation from Snow about their siblings. It had been only that he’d found something far better with her that had made him quit drinking and follow her to the bedroom. But it was a closer call than he wanted to admit to her; though he suspected she knew from how she’d angrily demanded, So what, you want me to leave you alone to get cozy with the mistress here?, brandishing the bottle.

It had been such a relief to see that someone finally cared enough to fight for him, to insist that he find some way to not retreat from the pain by killing himself slowly. The alcohol was a demon that had long since defeated him; he’d had no strength to fight it himself at that point. He could never have just put down the bottle and people nagging him and telling him how disgusting it was—how disgusting he was—didn’t help, just meant he felt all the more loathsome. But she’d demanded he not just go to hell the way he wanted, shown him he meant enough to her that she didn’t want to see it, and the wave of love and gratitude he’d felt at that moment was almost overwhelming. Katniss hadn’t ever done it and Peeta had only done it when his drinking would have fucked up things for all of them for the Quell; so he’d never done it simply for Haymitch’s sake. Maybe they’d have done it now, or maybe they would have assumed caring meant he’d earned the right for them to not interfere as he drank himself to death.

He looked across the table at Kinze and said, “You can drink and drink and they’ll still always come back, you know—Marion, Basil, Reka…Rue. So,” he picked up the bottle of white rum, went and got another glass for the cabinet, and carefully poured one small drink into both his glass and Kinze’s, “you and me, we’ll have one drink to remember them. Then neither of us are having any more and we’re gonna figure out what we can actually do about it.”

Kinze stared at him and for just a moment Haymitch saw it written all over his face, a kind of gratitude and relief that someone gave enough of a damn to stop him when he couldn’t stop himself. Carefully he reached out and took hold of the glass. Haymitch likewise reached for his. With a slight clink of the two glasses together, Haymitch said softly, “To the ones the Capitol took.” The two of them then drank in silence.

He was relieved Kinze didn’t protest when Haymitch capped the bottle and set it on the floor by his chair. “What’s your job here in Eleven?” he asked.

“I was in processing,” he said tiredly. “Makin’ the packaging to be sure those damn peaches and the like wouldn’t arrive all smashed or bruised.” Haymitch nodded at that. A fairly unskilled job—whether that was lack of ambition or talent, or more likely just lack of opportunity, in some ways it made things easier than trying to take a foreman away.

“Plenty of jobs going to open up in Twelve as we rebuild. Chance to move up, if you’re so inclined. Thresh’s little sister is coming there already—she was in the community home. There’ll be other kids there too for yours to make friends with. Might be as a new start is what you need. Away from the memories.”

Slightly bloodshot eyes met his, and a glimmer of something that was mingled hope and fear was there. “And how am I supposed to leave? Two wives I’ve got buried here now, and three babies.”

“And you’ve got three more babies that need you to carry on,” he returned, not harshly, but bluntly enough. “The dead don’t need you anymore, but the living do. I had to learn that myself. Katniss and
Peeta promised to help take care of your family for what Rue did. I don’t know what’s gonna happen
with victor pensions, I’ll be honest.” The government was in a deep enough put trying to rebuild
everything that funding the lifestyles of victors young enough to work and contribute wasn’t exactly
high priority. The elderly like Taffeta and Shad, now that was a different matter; besides, most
victors Johanna’s age or older had decent savings laid by. “But it ain’t just money you need right
now, is it? So if you come to Twelve I promise you that you, and your kids, will always have
someone trying to look out for you until you can stand on your own again. You might not get that so
easily here when you’re just another face in the crowd. Fallow Boyce already has a lot to deal with,
and she doesn’t owe you a debt like Twelve does. Your daughter gave us back one of our own. Let
us pay you back by giving you a place for your own kids.”

He hoped he’d managed to walk that fine line between sympathy and pandering. But he understood
—the man’s pride, what was left of it, wouldn’t want to take lifelong charity. Presenting that help as
something owed, and something offered so long as it was needed probably made it more palatable.
He sat there and tried to keep still as Kinze mulled it over. Finally Kinze looked up and him and
nodded. Haymitch could see it still shamed him enough, feeling like he’d failed, that he didn’t want
to say it aloud. “More liquor stored by?” he asked instead, knowing just how much he’d had
squeezed away in his worst days.

He left the house with a crate containing seven bottles of white rum, although remembering Peeta’s
self-righteous wrath and the days of agony that followed, Hazelle and Perulla both saying they
thought he might die, he quickly thought better of it. He placed a call to Galen Wing from the house
in Victors’ Orchard. “Getting someone off the bottle that’s drinking daily to cope,” he said without
preamble. “How do you best do it?”

Galen sighed lowly. “Have you been drinking again? You said you were off the bottle when you
and I did your consult. What triggered it?”

“Not me,” he said peevishly, “it’s someone else. But when they dumped all the liquor I had before
the Quell, I was raving crazy for days and apparently they were worried it was going to kill me.”

“That was a very real possibility.” Haymitch winced and told himself he probably should never tell
Peeta that, no matter how pissed off he might ever get at the boy. “Alcohol withdrawal is dangerous
and often painful at the best of times, particularly just making it total and sudden.”

“So tell me how to actually do it, Doctor Wonderful.”

“I’d rather he come to a professional treatment…”

“He’s embarrassed enough by it, and he’s got no reason to trust the Capitol. He won’t do it.”

Galen sighed. “Then you’ll watch for any of these symptoms over the next week or so and you call
me every evening with an update.” He carefully outlined a schedule of gradually weaning Kinze
down on the rum, slowly decreasing his intake. He also promised to send some drugs to help manage
the final break—the pain, the nausea, and the like that Haymitch ruefully remembered all too well.
Haymitch listened and scribbled a fair amount of notes on it. He’d have to turn it over to someone, he
realized with reluctance. This wasn’t going to be a “clean and sober” inside of two weeks before he
left and Kinze went to Twelve. Katniss was getting better at it but she wasn’t always the kindest
towards a man showing weakness, and he knew given the weeks her mother had checked out after
Burt’s death, a parent struggling to make do for their children was a tough issue for her. Besides,
Kinze would probably feel even more ashamed that Rue’s friend was the one trying to get him clean.

That left Peeta, who Haymitch trusted to be both strong and compassionate enough to handle this,
and that was no mean feat. Like it or not, looked like the two of them were having that discussion.
Sighing, he dialed the house the two kids were sharing. To his gratitude, Peeta answered on the fourth ring. “Haymitch,” he said with surprise, “didn’t expect to hear from you today.”

“Interrupting the baking?” Hopefully nothing important, like being very busy with Katniss.

“I just started the bread dough rising. What’s up?”

Quickly he explained the situation. He heard the swift intake of breath and Peeta blurted, “I’m sorry, I had no idea that when I dumped your liquor it…”

“’Course you didn’t,” he said, determined to pull that topic of conversation up sharply because he really didn’t want to dwell on it, “but I survived.” No point going into how agonizing it had been. “He’s not as bad off as me. I don’t want him getting there. So if I start him on it and I cut him down off the rum by the time he gets on that hovercraft, you willing to take over with the detox drugs once he gets to Twelve?”

“Of course.” Peeta agreed without hesitation. Haymitch didn’t think he even had to wonder if he would have done it if Kinze wasn’t Rue’s father.

“I’d suggest you don’t tell Katniss.”

“I thought we agreed no more secrets, Haymitch,” Peeta insisted.

“This isn’t something that’s gonna backfire on her if she’s blind to it. If she asks directly what you’re doing, I don’t expect you to lie, but there’s no point in shaming a man by just blurting out his worst moments to your girlfriend as dinner conversation.” To Haymitch’s mind there was a clear difference between keeping secrets and just declining to discuss details that weren’t anyone’s business.

“All right, all right,” Peeta said, voice a bit gentler. “I know enough about things you don’t want being common knowledge.” Thinking of Jinny Mellark, Haymitch could well imagine that.

“Thanks.” With that he said his goodbyes and called Taffeta next in Eight. Effie answered. “Haymitch! It’s so lovely to hear from you, how are things in District Eleven?” Making a face and letting her ramble excitedly for a good two minutes about everything she was doing and seeing and how Cinna was and how District Eight was, he thought there was a feverish edge to it that was beyond even the usual Effie prattle. He wondered if it was as rosy as Effie was claiming. Then he wondered if he was just a cynical bastard by nature at this point. “Taffeta there?” he asked politely. After a moment Taffeta came on the phone. “Are you ready to gag her yet?” he asked wryly.

“Haymitch,” Taffeta sighed, that way she had that always made him feel like a twelve-year-old caught misbehaving.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “In any case… I called ‘cause we found Shad here in Eleven. He’ll be coming to Twelve, but since I figure you were probably friends…”

“How did he survive?” she asked in astonishment.

“I didn’t ask. You know Shad gets upset easy.”

“He’s a victor and he’s stronger than you think,” Taffeta contradicted him with almost steely politeness. “Just because he’s not Mags or Carrick…” She trailed off. Neither of them wanted to talk about the dead Four victors.
“I was also dealing with Rice flipping out at the same time because the two of them set each other off,” he argued.

“Oh, dear.” She sighed heavily. “And how is Rice?”

“I don’t think there’s much I can do for him. Maybe…make sure he gets help from a head doctor since you know he’s never had that. I’ll arrange it. But there’s nothing he wants from me, or Johanna, or Katniss and Peeta for that matter. My read is he’d rather just avoid other victors. After being held captive for those months besides, anything about the Games and the victors, I think we remind him too much of it all.” It hurt a little to imagine that he was the cause of pain rather than any kind of consolation; fellow victors had been all that he’d had for so many years. But he’d respect Rice and what he needed on that, even if it felt like failure to not be able to draw another victor in and make him a part of that family and its tight-knit support.

“Maybe in a year or so,” Taffeta consoled him gently. “Things can change a lot.” He thought of himself a year ago now and had to agree.

“In any case, I reckon Shad would be happy to hear from you?” He gave her the phone number of the house Shad was staying at—one of the guest houses in the Orchard.

“Will do. And Haymitch…it’s good to hear from you.” With that he read that she wished he’d call a little more often. He’d been trying to leave her to her privacy, but apparently that had been the wrong call.

“I’ll talk to you soon,” he promised, carefully hanging up the phone, and heading back outside.

~~~~~~~~~~

Bale, Chelon, and Aurora actually had been at the orchard that morning, and so Johanna quickly had the three Kitteredge children flocking around her chattering like tiny dark sparrows. Getting them to climb trees and play was no hard task. The sweet-shop in town had a low stock but they still had some sticks of striped hard candy, and seeing how the kids’ faces lit up as she handed them over, she tried to not break out in an idiot grin.

Apparently she was their new celebrity and they pestered her with questions around licks and crunches of their candy. Chelon had little shattered bits of candy all over the front of his shirt because he’d bitten and chewed his. Aurora’s lips were sticky when she gave Johanna a smacking kiss on the cheek and tried to pull her towards her favorite climbing tree. She was reminded suddenly of Posy Hawthorne and how openly she’d taken to Johanna as well, surprising her. Suspecting as she did that Kinze and his three kids would be making their way to Twelve if Haymitch had anything to say about it, she thought the Kitteredges might get along well with Hazelle’s kids.

Though the way they clung to her and vied for her attention and tried to show her climbing trees and special treasures and tell her stories soon made her realize it wasn’t fascination with a lady they’d seen on television. They miss their mom, she realized, her heart suddenly aching. Chances are their dad’s been kind of missing too if he’s drinking regularly.

So she kicked off her shoes and sat down in the grass and let Bale tell her all about the puppies he’d found last week and how he desperately wanted one because he was old enough, and soon enough he and Chelon were arguing back and forth about names for the dog. She found herself braiding Aurora’s black hair, as the little girl wiggled and tried to hold still. It was coarser than her own, or Heike’s, but the old motions of it were still familiar, as was the memory of her own mom doing this for her. She crossed the two braids over the crown of Aurora’s head, tucking and weaving them into the coronet style from Seven, and weaving a handful of little purple flowers into her hair too. “You
look so pretty,” she said.

Aurora gave her a shy, gap-toothed smile as Bale scoffed good-naturedly, “Looks like a girl.”

“She looks like a pretty girl,” Chelon argued, obviously trying to be the peacemaker and looking at Johanna for confirmation. She gave him a wry grin and a “thumbs up” for that.

It was only after looking at Aurora with the pinpoints of purple in her black hair that she winced and realized she could have easily screwed up there and given all three of them memories of her dead big sister, covered with flowers by Katniss. Though, when she thought about it, perhaps they hadn’t broadcast that? It smacked too much of mourning rather than victory over a competitor. She breathed a sigh of relief that one way or another, a well-meaning gesture there hadn’t traumatized any of the three kids.

Still, she was thinking of Rue lying there in the arena in a pool of flowers when she heard Haymitch saying cheerfully, “Well, looks like we’re gonna have some new neighbors in Twelve.” Looked like she knew him too well, she thought, but she was relieved. It was obvious Kinze was drowning trying to keep it together under those staggering losses. He looked at the Kitteredge kids and said, “Moving won’t be easy, I know, but there’ll be other kids your age there.”

“His friend Hazelle has kids about your ages,” she chimed in.

She saw a flash of grateful recognition on his face there. “That’s right.” She wondered if she ought to call Hazelle and ask her to try to let the kids play together. Maybe she could be a friend to Kinze too, being as she knew that kind of grief all too intimately—she’d lost her oldest child, she’d been widowed too.

Walking the kids back to their house for lunch, the two of them kept up the cheerful chatter, and she saw he managed to be funny and clever and listen to them, no matter how strange or unimportant what they had to say might be. “Johanna did your hair?” he asked Aurora, who nodded eagerly. “Looks beautiful. Your pa best be careful. Another ten years and you’ll be breaking hearts left and right.”

She thought again of their daughter that would have come into the world right around now, and the twinge of pain was still there, but it was far more bearable now. It was the pain that would always be there at the thought, but it didn’t feel like it killed all the joy in her life any longer. Slipping her hand into his, they made the rest of the walk down to Peachtree Flats where the Kitteredges lived and dropped the kids off. Haymitch took a minute to talk quietly to Kinze, probably about the drinking, while she drew out her goodbyes to the kids to help cover it.

He summarized things on the walk back to the Orchard. “He’ll be in good hands,” she told him. “And you’re right. He needs help right now.”

“Well,” he murmured, eyes meeting hers, and the look she saw in them, the love and the gratitude and the lingering traces of shame, almost hurt, “you cared enough to make me stop.”

“Are you suggesting you’re in love with Kinze Kitteredge?” she scoffed jokingly, trying to get it back on more comfortable territory.

He smiled. “No, but…I’ve been thinking. Drinking and me, and all. The risk is there. The stress is gonna be there. And I need to…trust myself with it. And if it’s a glass of wine with dinner or whatever, and it’s a regular thing, I’m still telling myself it’s no big deal. That’s playing with fire for no good cause. And I ain’t putting you through that or making you play Peacekeeper on my habits. Not like I started out just chugging white liquor one day. It built. It could do it again. One little drink
with dinner turns into two or three if it’s a rough week and then *that* becomes normal and then when it gets bad again I have to drink more and before you know it...so I think I’m giving up the booze.” He gave an awkward little shrug. “One drink at special occasions excepted, of course, I’m not gonna put a damper on other peoples’ events.”

She nodded, relieved to hear it. She was proud he’d made it this far without the alcohol, given how deep in its thrall he’d been, but she’d always wondered if someday, it wouldn’t be enough. Maybe *she* wouldn’t be enough. After Four when fighting had chased him to the bar, she’d known that was a one-time thing, but the darkest, most fearful part of her worried it could happen again. She didn’t want to lose the man he’d become. “Good,” she said softly. “Good.” She moved a little closer to him as they walked.

Shad came to the house they were staying in for dinner that night. As ever she had the sense the old man was simply grateful to have somewhere to go and people to talk to again. Given that he’d lost his entire victor community, it had to have been a hard adjustment. But tonight he was seemingly in a good mood.

Even as talkative as he was, he seemed less frenzied than he’d been in Rice’s house. Being over to dinner with the two of them frequently, and talking to other victors too, apparently he felt more centered around rather than cast out into the world alone. Hearing he’d talked to Taffeta, and also gotten hold of Finnick and Annie, he sounded actually happy.

Apropos of nothing, as they were having some lemonade out on the porch after the meal, Shad sat there in his rocker and said, “I suppose you’re wondering how I made it out alive.”

“Had crossed my mind,” Haymitch answered.

“You didn’t ask, though,” and it was almost like an uncle scolding a young nephew.

“I didn’t ask Taff or Chantilly or any of the others either about what happened after the arena fell.”

“He didn’t,” she backed him up on that. “It’s like how we didn’t ask each other about the arena. Personal business. If you wanted to say, you’d say. If not...”

Shad nodded at that. “Sometimes it’s easier to tell it,” he said quietly, looking out into the darkling sky, fireflies dancing in the gathering dusk. “Keeping the pain all bottled up, it’s gonna explode someday...and if somebody doesn’t ask, you don’t feel you have to right to just give them that burden.”

Haymitch glanced at her at that. Yeah, they’d seen the trouble with that all too well. Someone always had to break the ice and make the first move. “So tell us if you want to,” she prompted him.

Shad nodded, dipping into his pocket and pulling out his handkerchief. “The bombs came first. I was with Darla then, down at the docks to get some shrimp for a gumbo boil that night in the Bayou. She was on deck. Some shrapnel or the like. Blown to pieces. She was only twenty. Our youngest.” The tears started trickling from his eyes and he wiped fiercely at them but his voice took on a fierce, determined edge.

She heard Haymitch’s soft sound of distress at that. Bombs and people’s bodies destroyed—she could imagine it all too well given the mess after the theater bombing. She knew he could too. Before she knew it his hand was in hers.

“I got back and told Lateen what had happened. Just about that time the Peacekeepers were banging on her door.” His voice never wavered, though by this time she could see when she looked over at
him that the tears were pouring down his cheeks. “She told me she’d say she’d gone down to the docks too and saw me and Darla die there, they’d never know otherwise from the…mess. Told me the rest of them were all done for, but I ought to scram while I could. So I left. Didn’t take anything but a couple things from her house in a hurry. I got past the border fence and kept going.” He sighed, as if needing to take time to calm himself down to go on. “The next few days I headed east. I figured one old man nobody had seen on television for years wouldn’t be recognized. I grew up dirt-poor for Four, probably about as bad as you two.” He gave a low, watery chuckle. “So I knew how to scrounge and to fish and all of that. Necessity does a lot to whittle away fifty years of forgetting. I got to Eleven finally and they took me in. Nobody remembered who I was and that was fine for a time. I wintered there, the people were so kind, but…nobody understood.” He shook his head. “I missed people who knew what it was like. So I came here. I think that was a bad idea. Poor Rice, I never imagined…”

It was a short story, but Johanna could read the mournful details between those spare words: the hardship, the memory of new horrors and grief to cope with, the solitude and loneliness. “It’s OK. It’ll be different in Twelve.”

Shad nodded and said, “It’ll be nice to be there, I think.” She couldn’t see his mismatched eye color now with as dark as it was growing, but he was looking at her and Haymitch as he said, “And you? If you’re willing to tell, what happened to you after the arena fell?”

Maybe some of them had gotten the details of it from the doctors and the medical reports, and the scars spoke eloquently. But they’d never really just talked about it. Somehow they did, though, about the torture and the venom, the confusion and the pain. Some things they kept to themselves because it was private between the two of them, but as they talked and Shad simply listened, handkerchief steadily at work, it felt good. It felt like purging something from herself to talk about it. When they were finally done and the silence fell, she felt better, felt calmer. He was right. It was a shared burden now.

Shad gave her a little smile. “I never got to talk much to Ced after your Games since I was really encouraged to stay away from cameras by then, but I imagine he liked you. Probably didn’t much understand you, mind, but…”

“Matthias is dead,” she told him. She’d found that out when she went home for the elections. No surprise, given they’d killed all the families of the rebel mentors.

“Not a surprise,” he said, sitting back in his chair and dabbing at his eyes again. “They shot the Odairs and the Crestas and the Robichauxs and the Westons a few hours after you blew up the forcefield. Quite the mass execution. Although strange to say, nobody under the age of twelve got executed and I know Carrick had a couple of grandkids and Mags had several little great-grandkids…maybe they didn’t want to publicly execute them. Funny, considering the Games, right?”

“Wait, what?” Haymitch demanded. He looked over at Johanna and uttered one word:

“Peacehome?”

“Shit,” she said. Of course, and they had been right there in Two, blissfully unaware. If they’d confiscated Ash and Heike as some kind of blood-price for treason and turned them into Peacekeepers years ago, of course an assorted half-dozen District Four kids of victor blood, young and malleable, would make fantastic additions to the ever-needy Peacekeeper Corps.

“We’ll be on the phone in the morning,” Haymitch said grimly. “Believe me. If those kids are alive…or if any of Beetee, Wiress, Spark, or Luma’s kin got taken…”

“They’ve got no family left here to return to,” she pointed out to him.
“They should at least have the choice rather than just languishing in that orphanage,” he said.

“They may not remember if they’ve used that damn venom on them.”

“No,” Haymitch said, hopping out of his chair and pacing fretfully on the porch, “but damned if I’m gonna just give ’em up as lost.”

“My curiosity’s piqued,” Shad’s low drawl came out of the pocket of deep evening shadow he was sitting in now, “but I have the feeling you two have some private discussing to do here. So agree me you’ll tell me the tale tomorrow night if you can and I’ll leave you to it.”

She smiled a little to herself, seeing he was giving an excuse to come back and chat tomorrow night, but that was OK.

“Tomorrow night,” Haymitch agreed, as Shad got up from the chair and made his way towards his own house.

Haymitch watched him go, leaning on one of the support posts of the porch. “Not much we can do about it tonight. We’ll deal with it in the morning.”

“Then put that away and come inside already,” she coaxed him. He shut and locked the front door behind them and followed her upstairs after she lit the lantern. Electricity was sporadic here in Eleven still and it was safer to just rely on the lantern. Besides, it brought back fond memories of winter in Twelve and the glow of candlelight.

He came up behind her, arm going around her waist to draw her in closer against him, pressing a kiss on the juncture of neck and shoulder, then on her throat. Feeling herself want to melt back against him, she managed to muster enough brain cells to say, “There’s something else.”

The easy languidness in him faded and suddenly that sharp, almost wary sense of purpose was back. “Yes?” She turned around and faced him, took his hands in hers.

“I think we need to talk about the kid thing again.”

He looked at her for a long moment, the flame of the lantern reflected bright in his eyes, and nodded. “I suppose it makes sense you’d have some pretty serious doubts. Dead kids, kidnapped kids…when all you hear about is the worst shit, it’s hardly a promising idea to bring a kid into it.” But she didn’t miss the tone of defeat that crept into his voice.

“Wrong idea,” she told him, shaking her head. “We’re due for another injection in a couple days. I think we should stop them this month. Start trying now.”

Now he did look startled. “Not that I’m protesting the notion…”

“No, I saw how you are around kids these days. You’re good with them. You’re not…afraid, thinking that every kid has to hate and fear you because you can’t keep a kid alive. And I see the look in your eyes and I know you want kids of your own.” She hadn’t missed it today with the Kitteredges. That look had been there before, she could see it now, but it had been more subtle. Maybe it was only dealing with the miscarriage that had made it come out into the open.

“Kids of ours,” he corrected her. “I want them with you.”

“I know that. And I know that’s how you are with them now because…that’s how it is with me too. Before, it was just kind of, ‘It’s a nice idea but I’m so messed up and it scares me shitless’. But I was braiding Aurora’s hair and telling stupid jokes with the boys and thinking that I want this.”
“Not afraid anymore?” he asked her softly. “I saw how you looked at them too. You looked happy, but like you were longing for more. But I thought that was just me, wanting it to be like that.”

“Terrified,” she admitted quietly, glancing away. “There’s too many ways for everything to go wrong. Once they’re born you can’t ever keep them entirely safe. And that’s even assuming I don’t miscarry again.” She wasn’t sure she could bear it again, especially if she knew beforehand, only to have that hope ripped away again.

“Me too. It’s a risk.” He reached up, hand cupping her chin, tipping her face up to meet her eyes with his. “But we’re not cowards, at least.”

“What did Galen Wing tell you?” Her fingers tightened in his shirt. “Exactly? I know he told you that you’re not on death watch, fine, you told me that. But what did he say about having kids?”

Haymitch blew out a slow breath. “That I’m in good shape, all things considered, but I ain’t getting any younger, either in terms of fathering healthy kids or living long enough to see ‘em grown. So he advised it was best to start as soon as we agreed it was right.”

“You didn’t tell me that.”

“I didn’t want to put pressure on you, and besides, we agreed in Four we were going to start in four months anyway when we got back home…” He gave her an apologetic look. “It was settled, I thought, so I figured it was irrelevant.”

“Going home is three months away still. That could be three months longer you and I have with our kid before either of us dies. What wouldn’t you do for three months more with someone you love?”

“If we’re both on a downward slope anyway when it comes to how easy it is to have kids, three months earlier could make a difference there too.”

“You managed to knock me up last time in, what, less than a week.” No matter how it had happened, at least that was a good sign in terms of their ability to have another kid.

“You were also on enough fertility drugs to breed an army,” he said wryly.

“Well, that didn’t affect you, did it? Apparently you’re just fine to father a kid.”

“And if it doesn’t work? Do we go back on the clomiphen?”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to think about that yet, Haymitch. Maybe it’ll be like other things and I’m fine with it when I make it my choice rather than something forced on me. But don’t get ahead of yourself.”

“How long?” he persisted. “I think we need to go into this with some damn clear ideas.”

“Six months. Give it six months of trying without the friggin’ drugs and if it hasn’t happened, then we talk about it. Even if it happens right now, we’ll still be back in Twelve with six months to make preparations. That’s plenty of time.”

“You might be tired and nauseous as hell, though, if you’re as bad off as Annie. And for the rest of this trip too.” That was a fair point and admittedly she wasn’t looking forward to finding out just how sick pregnancy might make her.

“I’ll manage. You might have to pick up a little of the slack. But I’ve given everything to the Capitol because they demanded it. I won’t apologize for taking something just for me, and for you. Besides,
better to be puking and tired now rather than in a few months when we have to work hard to ready for winter.”

He nodded then, looking at her almost solemnly. “I almost lost you in the Capitol, even though the war’s over. That made me start to think, all we can do is try to live while we can. And let’s face it, we could always come up with some reason the time isn’t right, the world is too dangerous, ways we could screw it up…and before you know it, five, ten, fifteen years have gone by and our chance is gone.”

“We do better when we just go right into it.” It was only in hesitating that they were lost. If they'd waited, held back, how much different would things be for them now? Would they ever have dared to come together as they had? She was relieved to hear he’d been having some of the same thoughts as her, that he wanted this as much as her. “You really think we can do this, huh?” There were still dark moments when she wondered if she was really the kind of person who deserved to have a kid.

He hesitated and then said with a slight smile, “I think you have enough faith in me, and I have enough faith in you. That covers the times we still may not much have faith in ourselves.” She heard the truth in that. Sometimes knowing he was there, that he found her someone worthy of love and admiration and trust, was enough to pull her out of her own moments of doubt and self-loathing. “And I think any kid would be lucky to have someone like you as their mother.”

“They’ll be lucky to have you as their father too,” she whispered, burying her face in the crook of his neck. “We’ll never forget her, will we?” she asked. She knew no matter how many living children they might have, they would never be able to entirely forget that first, lost one.

“No. We loved her, like we’ve loved others that went before us. So we’ll never forget her. But now we’ll live for her, and for all of them. We’ll live.” He turned his face to her and kissed her slowly and gently, and her arms went around him, holding him tight.
Interlude: Thirty-Six

The south district of Ten was a good bit different from the northern riverlands she’d been assigned to as her duty tour as a Peacekeeper, Lori was discovering. In some ways that had made it easier to try to leave Kallanthe behind, because the distance and the difference meant there were fewer reminders to tug at those recollections.

It hadn’t been easy on arriving here. Drover and Nadji had made it clear that they expected nothing less than total focus and hard work, and while none of them were unaccustomed to that, it was trying to rapidly pick up skills these southern Ten natives had been learning from the time they could walk and talk. They all rode horseback as easily as they walked, and their loping stride showed the effect of years out on the trail.

The apothecary was a remedy there because it was something she actually did well—she’d showed up trying to get something for their various cuts and bruises and strains from all the damn riding and falling off horses to boot. She’d had to fake it a bit since her medic training dealt with lab-made stuff from Three rather than the herbal remedies, but those bits and pieces of recollection that had come back to her on the walk from Twelve had stitched together to make her apparently sound knowledgeable enough that Shea the apothecary had taken her on as an apprentice of sorts. Not so much that she’d be excused from trail duty, that was made clear, but having a trained medic out there would be a blessing for everyone.

The class divides between merchants and workers seemed to have kept those walls up previously, but Shea was proving fast-adaptable in these new times. So she studied her plants and she worked with the horses and the dogs until she dropped into her bunk, totally exhausted each night. She and Jay had seemed to recover some of the old synchronicity they’d had in the Peacehome as best friends, moving to help each other through the training as they had back then. It was just parts of horse tack now rather than parts of a rifle.

The arrival of the group from District Eight, Rhiannon’s fiance Alister among them, was a welcome thing. It meant they were a little less alone in the world, because now they were eight rather than four. As for the two lovebirds, hard as Drover pushed them, their attention to the work was as focused as it needed to be, but anytime they were near each other, they practically glowed.

Working with the sturdy, short-legged dogs used in the inner pastures, commanding them after a flock of sheep, Jay elbowed her lightly in the ribs and nodded to Rhee and Terry, over working another flock under Drover’s supervision. “Wedding sometime this winter. I’ll bet you.” There would be no time before that, because the autumn work would mean rounding up the sheep and cattle not bound for the slaughterhouses to the inner pastures near Southlands Station for the winter. She wasn’t looking forward to winter, because she’d already heard that for most of the district workers, it would mean working in the slaughterhouses and tanneries, maybe a dairy or wool processing plant if she was lucky. The choice wouldn’t be hers. But then, neither had being a Peacekeeper after her parents had died and she got sent to Two. That was how life went; take the hand dealt and do the best with it possible to try to survive and adjust. At least she wasn’t a clumsy fourteen-year-old with no more memories of anything than a newborn this time.

“I’m not taking a sure bet,” she answered, smiling back at him in return as one of the dogs dodged a kick aimed its way by one of the sheep, sternly guiding the errant sheep back into the flock. “No reason for them to wait, now.”

“Life’s short,” he answered. “We saw that. And there’s no regulations holding them back now. So I don’t blame ‘em.” She was about to answer but she noticed one of the younger dogs, barely more than a puppy, had gotten the whole flock in a muddle.
“Mollie!” she called in exasperation. The little dog looked over at Lori, her intelligent, foxy face looking almost chagrined at her own failure. Lori knew that feeling all too well. Failure was still a daily reality. She already knew for sure there was no way they’d be put out on the trail without seasoned veterans to keep them steady and doing things right. In some ways she wished that wasn’t the case. It would be nice to have the privacy of space to just be among friends, without the veneer of the lies they’d had to assume in order to belong here. Fortunately the people of Ten didn’t ask many questions, preferring action to words, but the risk hung there nonetheless, clear as day.

It saved her a little bit, because she was hoping he was just making light, teasing conversation rather than bringing up the two of them. She still didn’t know where things stood there. Everything was changing so quickly, in her life and in Panem, and she wasn’t the same person she’d been six months ago by any means. She was grateful to have him as her friend again, but more than that was just too much right now.

Taking their lunch break all together, there were nearly thirty of them eating under Drover’s watchful eye. Their own handful of ex-Peacekeepers, some northern Ten folk come down to address the work shortage, and a few genuine war refugees who’d straggled in. A few more seemed to come every couple of weeks; it was nearly October now and last she’d heard, the rebels were making huge gains. She’d held her breath that none of the northerners came from any hog collectives, and there were a few of them, recognized her. She’d been lucky there. Though likewise, she didn’t recognize any of them. They’d lived in the same space but they’d inhabited different worlds.

Sitting out in grass in the early autumn sunshine, breathing in the fresh air—even the faint scents of animal and shit seemed to belong now—it could have been just a peaceful day except for those moments where she couldn’t forget that she’d begun this war on the opposite side. This was one of them. “Six is taken, it’s down to just Two and the Capitol now,” said Mardella excitedly. Red-haired and dark-eyed, she was from Five and had made her way east once Five was secured by the rebellion. “They’re saying it’ll all be done in another month.”

“Two won’t go down easily,” Marc argued, eyebrows rising abruptly, and she hoped nobody would read his tone as offended at the idea of Two being a pushover. He still fought it hardest of any of them sometimes, but being a Two native had to make that a tough task.

“A bunch of stoneworkers?” Harris from northern Ten scoffed. “Sure, they trained their arena tributes up smartly enough, but the rest of ‘em?”

“That’s where Peacekeepers come from,” Drover said in his gravelly voice. “Born and raised in Two, most of ‘em, as I understand it. Nobody Capitol would want that life, if you think about it. Soft spoiled bastards that they are. So they’re trained and they’re loyal in Two. They won’t go down without a hell of a fight.”

Eight of them sitting there were suddenly conspicuously silent, looking at their bread and cheese with almost undue interest. Lori felt a prickle of alarm working its way down her spine. “They’re vastly outnumbered by now in District Two,” Terry finally observed softly. “They can’t win.” His grey eyes looked almost somber. It was almost eerie looking at him sometimes, the stamp of District Twelve so clear on his features, and thinking about all the dead people back there. The only difference she saw clearly was the highlights that showed up in his hair in the sunlight, proving it was a very dark brown rather than pure coal-black, but if he had Peacekeeper blood that accounted for it easily.

“Nope,” Drover answered, “but I imagine that don’t make much difference to them. They’ll fight anyway. Although with one of their own victors as the military commander of the rebel forces, that’s cause enough for some to flock to our banner.”
“A victor?” Kalea piped up with interest. “Who’s that? We knew Brutus and Enobaria had joined the cause, Thirteen rescuing them and all, but I didn’t know they were back in Two already.” They didn’t see a lot of the news reports. The single women’s bunkhouse had a television in the common area, but most nights they just showered and trudged to bed. The lunchtime gossip caught them up anyway. They knew that Thirteen had rescued the six condemned prisoners and they were listed as “recovering”. Nobody had seen them on television yet, several weeks later. But given how horrible Haymitch had looked at that last interview, Lori could only imagine their recovery must be slow. Trying to reconcile that man with the hopeless drunk she’d seen last winter, the preoccupied hard-training man of the spring, and the deceptive genius who’d apparently been plotting behind all of their backs the whole time with no Peacekeeper in Twelve having the slightest clue, wasn’t easy.

“No them,” Drover answered. “Lyme. Before your time, most of you. Big, blond gal. Won the 52nd Games. Mentored for a while, but they never made a big deal about her Games, not like with Enobaria and her teeth and all.”

No, Lori didn’t remember those, of course, and the Capitol hadn’t replayed them much. Apparently they were deemed too boring. Lyme had been one of the lesser lights of Two, someone who’d won her Games but not done it in spectacular enough fashion to please the Capitol to make them wildly embrace her, the way they had someone like Enobaria.

Thinking of Enobaria and her wild popularity, she wasn’t surprised when Myrtle from Eleven ventured an awkward, “Do you think Lyme…was one of them? The ones the Capitol sold off?”

Ever since the broadcast weeks ago where Finnick Odair had told the nation about how President Snow had sold many victors as whores, it was on many peoples’ minds. It seemed a victor could barely be mentioned without someone wanting to debate whether that victor had been among them.

It was sickening to imagine the darkness ran that deep. But it made sense of so many things—there were the victors people thought had suddenly gone very Capitol and forgotten who they were, being photographed at clubs and premieres and parties hanging on the arm of some prominent Capitol citizen. “I don’t think so,” Alister answered, that look of calm thoughtfulness on his face. “The Two victors have never been as popular. It’s more expected for a Two tribute to win, so unless they’re like Enobaria and do something really unusual, the Capitol wouldn’t be that interested in them. If they were…sold off, I imagine it was a few times only, while the novelty was still fresh. I imagine some other victors were like that too. The ones that didn’t really catch the imagination, but, well, if the Capitol really is corrupt enough to buy sexual favors from victors, I imagine it’s fairly rare there wasn’t at least one person willing to pay.”

“Terry, how the hell you survived this long in Twelve is beyond me,” Drover said wryly. “You think too much and seems like you speak up too much about what you do reason out.”

“I didn’t before,” he returned evenly. “I wasn’t stupid enough or brave enough or both.”

“Sandy?” Gallo asked, speaking of Ten’s most recent victor, dead now in the arena. “You think…”

“No,” Drover answered. “Sandy was no looker, she wasn’t too bright, and she won almost by accident. I don’t think they were flocking in droves. Can’t say I’m sorry for it. Now Wyandot and Angus…”

“Yeah,” Lori said, uncomfortable at the thought of the three Ten victors she’d seen there each Reaping Day. She hadn’t known them, of course, not more than a nodding acquaintance the few days of the year she was in the district center, but with Angus and Sandy both dead, and who knew what had become of Wyandot, the notion that they had been sold like that was depressing. But they had been popular, no denying.
She tried to not pay too much attention as the discussion turned again, with those tones of shock and curiosity, to whom had been among those groups. Nobody was sure on Katniss and Peeta, but they hadn’t been victors for very long. Finnick was a given, and people assumed Haymitch and Johanna and Cashmere and Gloss and Enobaria and others were among that number.

None of them talked about it at night in their quarters. There was no need. It was just one more sign that the Capitol they had been raised to serve so loyally, that Capitol whose power was supposedly the only thing that held Panem against descent into anarchy and destruction, had been rotten and hollow at its very heart like a termite-riddled tree. They’d chosen right in leaving the war behind them, this only added to that impression, but the thought that many had died and many more would die in serving an undeserving master hurt.

In some ways, though, she was glad that they’d be headed out on the trail soon for the autumn roundup and they’d be away from the news of the war and the victors for a few weeks.

She thought ahead towards packing her medicine bag for that with everything to doctor up workers and the occasional horse too. Then she thought she’d be glad to just get out into the quiet of the wild for a time, and then she’d probably be happy to come back to the embrace of the community. She had the notion this had been how Seven was like, in the pieced-together fragments of that lost childhood, the summers out at camp in the woods and then the winters at the winter town, a life with its alternating rhythms and ways. The hard work and the laughter and the gossip around a shared campfire; it fit like a glove.

She might not be the best rider and trying to intimidate a massive bull back into the herd didn’t come easily yet. But somehow, she still thought the ways of this life fit her better than the white uniform had.

“Pack light, little lambs,” Alatau grunted, standing with them in the single males’ bunkhouse, supervising their kitting up for the trail. Jay assumed Nadji or one of the other women was doing the same across the way in the females’ bunkhouse. “We gotta move fast. Chuck wagon’s the only thing moving slower. You take whatever you can tie to your saddle and jam in your saddlebags and that’s it. Your mount ain’t taking up your slack.”

Nodding and folding another blue-checked shirt, stuffing it in one of his saddlebags, he just kept at it. As he understood it Nadji and Drover were already shitting a brick because they were behind on the autumn drive, being as so many people had left for the war and training up the new hands had put them behind. The disruption to the routine wasn’t that well received. But a childhood in District Eleven had taught a boy to just smile and keep his mouth shut, and years in the white had only reinforced it.

Little Jarrah Bellamy had been a boy that people liked on the whole but not much one they remembered, not one that much lit things up by his presence. Albus Law, much the same. It seemed like he’d made a living being a quiet and inoffensive shadow to those who burned brighter. Always been his friends that were more daring, fiercer, funnier. But then a boy with skin paler than most of the rest of the neighborhood around the citrus groves; he thought that boy did well to not invite much notice on himself. Other areas of Eleven, his skin would have fit in just fine, but on that collective, it was noticeable.

It was a clear mark that Burley Bellamy might have fathered four kids on his wife, all with the handsome walnut-dark skin of both parents, but he was no blood father to the third child of five, the one smack in the middle. The light-skinned one with a tinge of red in his hair besides—he’d only heard once, overhearing at night, that it had been the baker, Rubio Guidry, the one who’d died when
Jay was just a baby still. What had put his mama in an old merchant’s bed long enough to do the business leading to his conception, whether it was money or force, he never knew. He’d never asked and he’d never get to ask because they’d all died of fever when he was twelve and he’d left Eleven behind. His best friends had been Blossom and Pecan when they were just young’uns together. He wondered about the two of them sometimes, though only quietly in his own mind, never to speak the words. They’d be twenty-two now, same as him, likely married and parents. Maybe time and hardship had tempered their boisterous, sharp tongues by now.

After coming to the Peacehome, he’d gravitated towards the spark of Darius, who’d been there since he was little more than a baby himself. He barely remembered District Five and his district name, though it didn’t much seem to bother him, because that was Darius, usually living in the moment. Funny, flirty, cocky Darius who could take anything the world threw at him and grin, daring it to send more his way. Darius, who had flirted shamelessly with the local girls, including Katniss Everdeen—the joke among the rest of them was that unlike Cray, Darius had probably never had to pay for sex in his life. Too bad, Albus, he’d sighed with a twinkle in his eye but a slight slump of his shoulders the night Caesar interviewed Peeta Mellark, looks like she’s already got her white knight and he comes in a baker’s apron, not a Peacekeeper uniform.

That was the moment that made Jay think that perhaps Katniss had actually mattered, that maybe Darius regretted chances denied by twenty years of hard, unrelenting service. He hadn’t said anything much but remembering what a total ass he’d made of himself with Lori the weeks before training camp, how he’d lost his best friend and the girl he loved by his own stupidity, he’d just bought Darius a bottle of Ripper’s throat-searing shitty white liquor and they’d drunk it together that night sitting on the porch of one of the empty houses in Victors’ Village. After all, nobody was home in the entire Village, with Haymitch gone to the Capitol for the Games. It was the perfect place for two friends to hide, and drink a bit, and not think about their broken hearts.

Darius, as usual, bounced back from that quickly enough. But his friend had the courage to stick up for one coal miner getting flogged to death, and he’d paid the price for that. Jay didn’t hold much hope that he’d bounced back from that, because as the days went on, after enduring the bombing of Twelve, life seemed most awfully damn fragile.

It still did in some ways, though not in the same fashion as before. Dying wasn’t as much a concern here in Ten, though the old hands had made sure to cheerfully warn him that death out on the trail was quite possible in any number of ways. But one wrong word, one suspicion from the locals, and what they’d started to tentatively build here could be yanked away in an instant. In some ways the Peacekeeper white had been easier. It meant he was Albus Law, lieutenant and first tour, following his Head’s orders and trying to do the best he could, and that would be the only thing that could matter in his life until he was thirty-eight and could muster out. There had been no need to figure much else out and for an eighteen-year-old boy with his share of anxieties that had been almost a comfort in some ways. Suddenly that was gone, sixteen years ahead of schedule and he had to figure it all out again, who he was going to be and how he was going to live. Drover and Nadji might tell him how to ride and when they’d be hitting the trail, but sometimes the huge gaping spaces between those bones that he was left to fill in with whatever belonged to a man named Jarrah Bellamy were so daunting.

At least he and Lori had made things up somewhat. Nothing like what he’d wanted, back when he was a kid and desperately and mutely in love with her, what he still wanted some nights when he lay in his bunk and thought about how fucking stupid he’d been, how he’d hurt her by his own cowardice. Watching Terry and Rhee some days sometimes hurt for the wanting of something he’d probably never have. It wasn’t like they were kissing and groping each other in front of everyone, nothing like that. But seeing how easily they worked together each day as if they knew each other’s minds like the back of their hand, how wordlessly comfortable they were, and knowing each night
they went back to the cabin they shared, hurt a bit. He could already see it developing with Marc and Alayna too. But Lori was his friend again and he was grateful for that. So many had been lost already; to have one friend restored to him rather than taken away was a blessing. He ought to be grateful for that much.

“Quit the woolgathering, Bellamy,” Alatau grunted, “and get your ass moving.” Breaking out of his reverie, Jay nodded hastily and kept shoving things into his saddlebags. He heard Marc snicker a bit from across the cabin and when Alatau paced back towards the front door, he threw a balled-up pair of socks over at him. Catching it neatly, Marc smirked at him, and threw it right back. Fumbling the catch, Jay thought with a mental sigh, Dammit.

Busy was good though. Busy meant no time to think and dwell upon everything. It had helped him at the Peacehome those first desperate, bewildered weeks—well, that and Darius drawing him in as a friend. The more he kept busy the more he wouldn’t have to think about the future. Nobody had argued when he’d volunteered to serve as assistant to old Chuck with the cook wagon tonight—most of them didn’t want that job, would rather be out on their horses as long as possible. Well, Holly had smirked and said, “Don’t accidentally poison us.” He’d ducked his head in embarrassment at that. She’d known too many of his flaws, serving alongside him for several years back when she was going by Purnia. He had the sense that unlike the rest of them, “Holly” hadn’t really sunk in, and she just wore it like a coat. In her heart she was still Purnia.

“Will you leave off him?” Lori had said, though she looked startled at saying it when Jay had looked over at her. He’d risked shooting her a grateful glance. She understood. He could remember what a clumsy little thing she’d been at fourteen, so much so that she’d cracked her skull on the assessment course and lost her memory with it. She’d gotten much better since then, but he knew that feeling of ineptitude was something they both still shared sometimes.

Slinging his saddlebags over his shoulder, he headed for the stables, getting Morgan’s tack from his assigned place. The big chestnut gelding butted him in the shoulder as a greeting. “At least someone’s glad to see me,” he muttered, stroking the horse’s nose. Some days he felt like the horse was the only being born in Ten he felt was a friend he could trust. The horse was patient, didn’t judge. “Ready to head on out?” He heard the rest of the riders coming in too right behind him, and suddenly the stable was a blur of noise and movement as everyone readied their primary mount. There would be a pool of spares, of course. The autumn drive could be rough on both horses and people.

They rode out of Southlands Station, and he was quickly grateful for the hours and hours spent in the saddle that had toughened him up. Drover had already gone over the divisions last week with them so they could start working as a team. Some were chasing down the sheep, some were after the cattle. The eight of them had ended up in a pack of more experienced riders to go handle a portion of the far northwest of the range for the cattle, which sounded like the easier job. Once they set up a central camp out there, it would be going in smaller groups to round up the various herds and stragglers from wherever they had scattered out on the plains over the next days, bringing them together as one, and then driving them back south.

Simple in theory, but given that the cattle sometimes were contrary bastards who seemed to have a mind of their own, and arguing with a huge beast like that seemed foolish, Jay would have to see how it went. As was, they had a good two days’ hard riding ahead to think about it until they reached their sector post.

He quickly found out that the kerchief around his neck was damn useful for tugging up over his nose and mouth when he was riding in the dust of a half-dozen horses ahead of him. He could only imagine the cloud kicked up by all the cattle would be far worse. No wonder the old hands had
bitched about eating dust.

Setting an even pace on Morgan, knowing his ass and thighs would hate him for it in the morning and knowing equally well there would be no allowance made for it, they rode north, away from the dusty lands of Southlands into the endless sea of grass.

Marc hurried up on his dun, Dusty, reining in for a moment, falling in line beside him. He could feel Morgan pulling at the reins himself, as if impatient with the pace.

Turning around on his horse to look at the two of them, Drover just rolled his eyes and gave a deep-throated grunt that might have actually been a laugh. “Look, it’s a pack of wide-eyed droving virgins let loose on the prairie,” he mocked lightly. “Ain’t nothin’ we haven’t seen before. Go get yourself a good gallop if you’re up to it and burn the wonder off. Better be able to find your way back and keep your damn handhelds on just in case I haven’t taught you a fucking thing and you get lost.” Each of them had a small handheld radio in their saddlebags for communication. Given the territory it sounded like they had to cover, and coordinating driving the cattle back together, that made sense to him.

Marc needed no encouragement at that, and Jay was quick to follow his lead. Roping Alayna and Holly in was no hard trick. The older ones past thirty of their group, Terry and Rhee and Kalea, they resisted initially. Just for a moment there was the recollection of rank, of how it had been Major and Colonel and lowly lieutenants like them jumped to follow orders. But things had changed. The Corps were behind them now and they were just friends, bound together by the ordeals they’d been through since the war began. So with that, the deference disappeared and they razzed and teased, C’mon, you’re not that old, it’s not that far, we’ll have you back for your afternoon nap.

With a whoop, Alayna set off towards the rolling hills of the west and the rest of them followed. Kalea surprised him by outpacing everyone, but she was a more confident rider than any of them. She’d murmured something once about having riding lessons when she was a kid, but she hadn’t elaborated. He didn’t know her full story, but he knew on the whole, the only way a Capitol child ended up in the Corps was either being a poor orphan the Capitol was eager to ship off to Two, or having parents that fucked up. If she’d been riding a horse as a kid, she hadn’t been poor. So either her parents got nailed for treason and Kalea had been the price they paid, or got in over their head on debts and sold the only thing they had—their daughter.

Soon enough, though, those thoughts disappeared, and he looked over to see Lori there on her white-blazed black, grinning widely at him. He grinned back, enjoying moving with Morgan as they galloped hell for leather towards the horizon, the wind tearing through his hair as he raced the rest of them. Oh, soon enough they’d have to turn back and rejoin Drover and the rest and the hard work was still ahead. But right now this moment tasted of nothing but pure freedom, miles and miles of open prairie before him and nothing to bind him. No Peacekeepers with the vague threat of the lash when he was a child, and the specter of starvation and the risk of the Games. No hurrying to prove himself, to belong in the Peacehome, to have a place and assure his survival. No uniform, no orders or rank, no terror of answering to a tyrannical superior like Thread. No stumbling through the wilderness after the Capitol had tried to casually wipe him and every other Peacekeeper in Twelve out with their bombs, only hoping to survive. He was beholden to nobody right then and the war and everything else didn’t matter. Somehow the immensity of the endless land, how he was one small speck in the grand scheme of it all, felt comforting rather than isolating.

Right then, anything and everything felt possible, as if the entire past suddenly fell away from him like unbound shackles. As Lori reined up beside him, laughing giddily, her brown eyes alight, he had a stupid urge to lean over and kiss her, but he pulled himself back from it. Putting a hand down instead and patting Morgan’s neck, he murmured lowly to the horse.
Terry rode up, and Jay could sense the adrenaline and excitement in him too, the spark in his grey eyes. The four of them that had walked to Ten from Eight had been in a prison cell for weeks before they almost got executed. He knew that much, so he could only imagine how they must be reveling in this kind of freedom right now.

The eight of them pulled up in more or less a loose circle, letting the horses catch their wind and graze idly on the grass. The realization that they were probably several miles from the rest of the group, and the privacy and freedom of that, struck them all more or less at the same moment, from the glances they all gave each other. Any kind of conversation about the past since they all got to Ten had been hushed, stolen moments here and there so as not to attract attention.

Strangely enough, though, none of them seemed eager to bring that up given this opportunity. Maybe it was the greater distance from those events, and maybe it was how they all were obviously trying to leave the uniform behind. Terry looked them over and said, with the air of fourth-tour command still apparently coming back casually to him, “We take our orders from them, yes, but we stick together and we don’t let each other down. Because for now, until the war ends and we know what happens then, we’re the only people in this district you know you can trust, a hundred percent. Agreed?” A ready chorus of affirmative murmurs answered him.

A few minutes later they turned their horses back towards the main group. Freedom was well and good but it wouldn’t do to get lost out here. As he was watching Lori nudge her horse into a trot, Holly leaned over and said to him with a sigh, “Just go for it, Jay. No sense you looking at her like that for the next five years.”

Nodding idly, he appreciated the good sense in it, knowing losing Darius was still a wound to her, but at the same time, something in him was saying Wait. They’d repaired things somewhat already, but he’d rushed things once because time was a pressure on them before they split up for years. The memory of how awkward that afternoon up in her room had been, how obvious it was that they were just desperately and clumsily trying to get through it, was still sharp enough. After he’d dressed and left he’d gone to his room, not crying because if anyone caught him at that they’d tease the shit out of him and maybe beat the crap out of him to toughen him up. But he’d been feeling unbearably like nothing was right and he didn’t know how to fix it, because he’d hurt the one person he loved. He didn’t want to do that again. Not yet, he thought, watching Lori trot off towards the east, sitting straight-backed in the saddle. Neither of them was who they’d been then, but he didn’t know who had taken his place just yet. Seemed to him he needed to get some of that figured out first.

That night, as the rest were taking care of the camp chores and spreading out bedrolls and tending the horses, he headed over to help Chuck. He’d had to care for Morgan himself, of course—everybody was responsible for their own mount, and most of the old hands would give anyone a piece of their mind about how a rider couldn’t trust anyone with the proper care of their horse because they didn’t know the animal and its ways. But while everyone else was collecting firewood or dried cow chips, spreading out bedrolls, and the like, he had his evening chore all ready.

“Well, clearly you’re nuts,” Chuck said bluntly, hanging his battered hat on a hook on the side of the wagon, “or else you’re trying to get in good with Drover by volunteering for extra duty. They didn’t tell you cook wagon duty is punishment for whatever moron makes the worst screwup of the day? Either way, you’re probably gonna regret this in a few days when you see how tough you have it during the day.”

He’d never met people as damn blunt as they were in Ten. “We’ll just have to see,” he said noncommittally. “Until then, well, here I am, right?”

Chuck just smiled and shook his head. The next hour was a dizzy whirl of preparations: making
bread dough out from a starter, chopping meat and vegetables, cooking this, adding it to that, shoving it all over the open fire.

“Dessert, Chuck,” Drover yelled as he passed by, leading several horses by the reins from where they’d been taken down to the creek to water. “Don’t fucking forget it this time, I don’t want to hear people bitching that they’re not getting fed well.”

“Make your own fucking dessert, Drover,” Chuck yelled back, brandishing a knife in a way like he was going to throw it. At that point Jay figured if knives were going to start flying he was just going to duck under the wagon and let the two men kill each other. “Ain’t that just how it goes,” Chuck growled irritably. “One busted leg on spring drive and I get the damn cook wagon for the rest of my life.” Jay was starting to see why cook wagon duty was considered punishment. He wondered for a moment if Chuck might cheerfully sprinkle some rat poison in the rations some night just to be free of the burden. No, that was ridiculous and mean; he could see the man cared enough to be concerned about everyone in the group, he just resented that he’d lost the freedom to be one of them. Not to mention everyone seemed to bitch about the food which probably didn’t help.

Thinking fast, he mentally reviewed the supplies packed in the cook wagon he’d been carrying to and fro. Given he had two sound legs and Chuck didn’t, it looked like the cook’s helper got stuck with most of the clambering in and out. “You’ve got some dried fruit in there,” he said. “And sugar too.” They’d used honey for that in Eleven, because it was easier to get a bit of that fresh from the hive if the Peacekeepers were willing to overlook it. Almost nobody could afford sugar; not even those working the cane. That had been an area much harder guarded, from what he’d heard. “Could cook that up a bit and then put some of the biscuit dough over it? We used to do that when I was a kid.”

Chuck looked at him like he’d suddenly started speaking a foreign language. Then there was a moment’s resentment, like he’d been upstaged somehow, which settled into what might have been relief. “Yeah, OK, kid, you get on that.”

With a sigh of relief he hurried to it, and before long the blackberry slump was cooking over the fire too. Doling out the stew and biscuits, finally he grabbed a bowl and found Lori had saved him a place. Nobody ate with much ceremony or decorum here, sitting on the ground as they were around the campfire. The occasional hoof stamp and whuffling and nickering of the horses was almost peaceful. “Reminds me of Seven in the summer,” Lori said, a thread of melancholy in her voice, staring at the fire. “We used to gather every night at the campfires after the logging, make stew, sing songs.”

“You remember more than that?” he asked quietly, taking another spoonful of the stew. Bland and a little thin, he decided. But he’d eaten much worse in his life.

“A bit more than before, but it’s not like it’s all come back,” she answered him. He knew she’d been having bits and flashes more of that old life, and maybe something like Ten with those similarities would tug on them more. It might not be easy, but at least he could remember his family, his siblings—half-siblings, fine, but they’d never treated him different, for all they knew as well as him that he wasn’t entirely of their blood. All it took was one fever season to wipe them out. He wasn’t sure whether remembering or not remembering would be easier, but he could only imagine Lori’s confusion when confronted with a fractured assortment of little bits of memory, none of it adding up to much of a whole picture. She took another spoonful of stew. “This could use some more flavor, you know.”

“Chuck seems to think if you throw a pinch of salt in it, that’s good,” he told her wryly. Glancing over his shoulder at the cook, he added, “And I’m not gonna be the one to tell him otherwise.” She
snickered. “I know he’s got some other herbs and spices in there. Never touches ‘em, by the look of it.” The jars and canisters looked a little dusty.

“Well, maybe you need to throw some of those in there behind his back.” She shrugged. “I’ve got a few herbs in my medic bag that could be used in cooking too, but I’d kind of rather keep ‘em for treating people, you know?” No hard feelings on that, it was only fair.

He grinned over at her. “So if he kills me, will you avenge my death?”

“What’s a friend for?” she returned with an answering smile.

~~~~~~~~~~

Some days in the Peacehome had been hell. Training camp had been a constant cycle of exhaustion and stress. But the two weeks on roundup ran everybody ragged, and coming into it at thirty-two rather than as a fresh-faced kid, Rhiannon wondered ruefully if she was feeling it even more. At least after the first few days the aches faded and it was more just a bone-deep weariness of chasing down cattle over miles and miles of prairie and convincing the stubborn, stupid things to head back towards the main herd. Then checking with Drover as soon as those cattle had joined the main camp and chasing off after another sector to be searched and cleared.

“Just one more day,” she said with a groan, collapsing down onto her bedroll next to Terry’s. The distant sounds of those on watch singing and playing a harmonica to calm the cattle drifted through the air. She could feel the turn in the weather these last few days as they’d finally passed into October, a bite in the air at night. Everyone huddled deeper into their bedrolls.

“More power to us for surviving, huh?” he said, looking over at her with that slight smile of his. She knew he meant it as a private joke: we survived far worse than this already.

He had to be bone-tired, she knew. But he’d weathered the hardship and the new things to learn and Drover bellowing at them with his usual quiet aplomb. It was hard to ruffle him. So while he might not have been boldly aggressive as a leader like others in the Corps, that was why people had responded to him in One and followed his example. He kept calm and thought deliberately before acting. She could only imagine that for Kalea, Marc, and Alayna, having him there to help lead them down from Eight must have been such a relief. Though she knew from her own trek from the ruins of Twelve, she’d been making most of it up as she went, trying to project an aura of confidence. The three with her were so damn young, and she could tell that they looked to her. Too many times she’d felt her temper wearing thin but for the most part she’d managed to keep it.

They’d never spoken much about those ordeals. It seemed like something they preferred to just forget and try to move beyond, particularly as life here in Ten and maintaining the image of war refugees ate up so much of their focus and energy. Dwelling on the present and future was far more important. Besides, neither of them had been the sort to linger on the past. Neither of them had much of a one to look back upon.

He didn’t remember his life in Twelve, beyond occasional flashes, though he admitted he’d been having more of them lately. She noticed he didn’t ask her about his birthplace, though. What would she tell him? By the time she got there, the people had been pretty frightened and downtrodden and beaten, and then the Capitol came along and killed them all.

She wondered sometimes about District Four. Whether her mother died or just hadn’t wanted her, she’d been surrendered almost immediately to the Peacehome. So all she knew about Four was what she saw on television and what other Peacekeepers told her. The bayous, the fishing boats, the white sandy beaches, the odd twang; none of it was familiar to her, nothing instinctive that called to her
blood. But when she looked in the mirror she always saw clearly enough that she had the dark skin, dark hair, and green eyes common to the Four working class, the deckhands on large boats and cannery processors and hotel workers. The boat captains and factory foremen and hotel owners were usually fairer both in skin and hair color. Whoever her father had been, Four native or Peacekeeper, she had little enough of him in her looks.

Thinking of Four led her to Finnick Odair and his on-air confession, she suppressed a shiver there. Nine and Eight and One and then briefly to Twelve: which of the victors had endured that? Clover had been popular, once. Cecelia had dropped off the radar pretty quickly. Taffeta from Eight had been gone in the Capitol so long as Solonius Trove’s mistress that nobody in Eight even talked about her, but now she had to wonder about the nature of that relationship and whether Taffeta had actually chosen it. She was almost positive everyone in One had been through it. They were too glamorous, too attractive—their training at the Center assured it.

Then there was Twelve: Haymitch. He’d aged well, been popular in the Capitol until the point his drinking finally got a little too public. She looked at Terry, with his grey eyes and dark hair. He was almost forty, still attractive—and she wasn’t just saying that because she loved him—and while he wasn’t brash, she could imagine his quiet charm would have gone over well. If losing his family and being sent to Two had spared him the reaping and the Games and what might have come after if he survived, she couldn’t be ungrateful for that. Not to mention the thought of him as a coal miner, broken down and aged far before his time, hurt even more now that she’d seen those miners up close. Making it to forty-five or fifty was something of a feat in Twelve.

All she knew was Two and being raised for the Corps. All he knew was that too, because everything before that had been wiped out. She wondered if it seemed like he adapted a little easier than her some days because he’d had to just shut up and cope on his arrival at the Peacehome. There would have been no allowances made for his struggles. But compared to Marc and Holly and even Jay, he seemed to just tackle the transition to Ten and its ways without complaint. That was positive, as they looked to him as an example. Rank might have broken down but some habits were hard to change and they still treated him as their de facto leader. Seeing him just persist and not kick up a fuss meant they did the same, and knowing Marc and Holly’s tempers and Jay and Lori’s uncertainty, that was a good thing. Kalea, as usual, just quietly backed Terry on it, the loyal second as she’d been even in One. Coming from the Capitol as she did and having to adjust, she’d endured that as well.

“More power to us,” she agreed, reaching over and taking his hand for a brief squeeze. They’d survived so much already. She regretted leaving the Corps only in the certainty from childhood it had given her. The possibilities open to her now, though, seemed so much greater. A life with him was top of that list. She didn’t know whether Ten would be home or not, but they’d be together. After thinking he must have died in Eight, after almost being blown to bits in Twelve, that was something she would never take for granted.

“Nothing on the war today,” Drover announced brusquely, obviously having been in touch with Nadji down at Southlands Station.

Terry nodded at that, finishing the last of the biscuits. “Jay’s become quite a cook,” he said cheerfully.

“The first few nights were a little rough,” she said with a wry grin, remembering the stew so full of red pepper it was inedible, and Jay’s horror at it, babbling that it was labeled “paprika”, whatever that was. “But better than Chuck’s by far, so everyone keeps saying.” Every night he seemed to get a little more creative, even if what was on the cook wagon probably restricted his ideas.

“Good that he’s found something he shines at.” She remembered shy, awkward Albus, who’d come through training camp with a “general” specification. That was pretty much what they gave to Corps
members who didn’t shine at much of anything, and she could tell he felt like a failure. Yelling at
him wouldn’t have done much good, so having someone like Terry leading the group, who wasn’t
inclined to be harsh unless he had to be, probably did the boy a world of good while he was trying to
figure things out. “Seems to be teaming up with Lori there more and more.”

Looking over at the two young folk sitting with the contents of Lori’s medic kit, with its pouches of
herbs, she grinned. The first day the two of them came back with saddlebags full of plants along with
their cattle, Drover had almost shit a brick until he tasted the food that night and after that, he just
gave a token grumble they’d better not slack off on their work to pick flowers. “They do well
together. Marc and Alayna too.” She tempered Marc’s sometimes-volatile personality well.

“So what do you think will be up for you for winter?” he asked. “Wouldn’t surprise me if they put
you to work in logistics. They already know you’ve got a head for organization and numbers, and
Nadji’s gotta overworked like hell.” She’d specialized in recordkeeping.

“But I’m pretty ‘cepted of what you think.”

He laughed at that, attracting some attention from the others sitting around the fire. “When we get
back,” he said. “I talked to Nadji before we left. There’s some to-do about the formal paperwork.
Apparently everyone considers the district ceremony the important one anyway. The couple just gets
their papers stamped at the Justice Building during one the few days a year they’re there. But since
we’re in the middle of a rebellion,” he shrugged, “I’m really not sure anyone cares all that much
about Capitol-stamped papers anyway.”

“They already assigned us married quarters, which couldn’t have happened without those before,”
she pointed out. She knew from other districts that new quarters for married couples were given out
only once the marriage was registered. Before that, whatever district rites may have been performed
didn’t count legally. “We didn’t even have to go through their ceremony first.” That was an
astonishing kindness when she thought about it, but maybe it was a measure of Ten asserting its
independence.

He leaned in close, looking almost like he was kissing her, but instead he murmured in her ear, “And
it’s a good thing too, because a finger stick for identity verification on a marriage certificate wouldn’t
be in our favor, would it?”

No, it wouldn’t, she realized. They would be quickly found out, since in the database he was still
Theodosius Law and she was Myrina Law. “Then it’s working out well, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know if we’ll settle down here,” he admitted, leaning back as she heard a few whoops and
catcalls of encouragement from the others, “but if you don’t mind marrying here…”

She shook her head. “It’s not like anything else fits better,” she told him gently. She didn’t even
know Four’s rites. Twelve, with its first fire and toasting of bread, didn’t much belong to him either.
Two’s “wedding dance” fight might have fit before, but they weren’t Peacekeepers anymore.
Whatever Ten had to offer for a ceremony would fit just as well as any other. All that mattered
would be that it was done.

“True.”

She gave him a grin that promised all kinds of things. “I’ll be glad to get back anyway. I’m tired of
riding a horse.” The lack of privacy at the evening fire and their general state of weariness had kept
things pretty chaste. She knew some of the other couples went away for a few hours for some
privacy, usually coming back to some gentle ribbing from the others. They’d done it once, though
they’d both been so tired, and they weren’t quite sure whether the jokes about watching out for mutts were serious or not. Still, the relief and good feeling of it had been welcome. But she missed leisurely evenings by lantern light. There would be an entire winter for that, and she welcomed it. Compared to last winter when they were sneaking the occasional evening in One, and watching the district go to hell, things were looking fairly bright. Maybe she didn’t belong to any particular district, but he was her home and her family, as were the rest of them. That was something far more meaningful than a white uniform ever had been.

Though he had one of his pensive looks again and she knew that meant he was turning something over in his mind pretty hard. “Walk a bit?” he suggested, and she nodded. A few more knowing comments followed them as they pushed past the horses, away from the sound of the watchers calming the cattle. In the starlit darkness, he turned to her. “I don’t know what’s going to happen,” he said bluntly. “Either way this war comes out, I think we’re fucked. The Capitol would execute us for sure. The rebels, it’s only fairly likely.”

He was right. If the Capitol won, which was far less likely by the day, chances were they’d be executed as deserters from the Corps. She didn’t think they’d even be turned into Avoxes. The Capitol would have no mercy; if they’d been willing to obliterate Twelve and all its Peacekeepers besides, if they’d done the things Terry had told her about in Eight, they wouldn’t hesitate to line them up and shoot them.

But if the rebels won, chances were ex-Peacekeepers might not have much of a place in the Panem that would rise from the ashes. Maybe they’d end up executed for having worn the white and served the Capitol—it was the worst-case scenario, true, but one that she had to admit wasn’t entirely unlikely. Either way, it didn’t look too promising that they had some kind of bright future ahead.

She nodded at that, and felt a shiver go through her that had nothing to do with the night air seeping in through her flannel shirt now that they were away from the warmth of the campfire. “We shouldn’t get careless with that tonic. We can’t afford to have a kid right now.”

The thought was there for a moment, painfully vivid—bright and a delighted grin in a chubby little face framed by dark hair, tiny arms raised up to her, wanting to be picked up and held. Then she thought of that child taken to an orphanage, molded into whatever the Capitol or the rebels thought the child of a traitor deserved. “I’m not bringing any kid into the world and leaving them orphaned and stuck with whatever the government decides they should be,” she told him, feeling like the words tore from her throat in anguish.

He hesitated and she couldn’t easily see his expression in the dark, but she could hear the pain in the word as he said, “They wouldn’t even remember us.” Given that she never knew her parents and he never knew his father and remembered his mother only in vague wisps of memory, she knew that risk would strike both of them all the more deeply. “And I don’t want any kid of ours watch us get executed.” There was an odd note in his voice, and she waited, sensing he would tell her, that it unsettled him so much. “I have…there’s this memory, came to me in Eight when I was about to be shot by the rebels.” His voice went tight with something like panic. “I was there in Twelve. My ma—my mother—got shot in the kitchen of the house. The Peacekeeper there said it was about treason. A girl was there with her too. I think I must have had a sister, along with my brother Doug. Though Doug wasn’t there. Maybe they killed him first, some ‘accident’ out in the woods or the like. I don’t know. I don’t know anything. I don’t know why I survived. Maybe it was like Thalaea and they figured I’d be useful and they might as well get something back from a traitor’s family. But I know it’s real because it feels too damn real to be a lie. And that means everything they told me in the Peacehome about how they died in an accident, that was a fucking lie.” His eyes bored into hers, wide with anger and terror. “And I start to wonder…just how did I forget everything? What did they do to me and how much of what I thought was true is a lie now? And maybe our little Lori with her
own convenient amnesia had parents in Seven who were traitors too, huh? Maybe others too that I don’t even know about. I’ll probably never know either. Faked paperwork, I’m sure, and everyone else involved was killed off so of course they can’t tell me. I mean, is Alister even my real name?”

She moved forward, arms going around him without further thought, sensing the tension in him as he trembled from the force of what he was feeling. She could barely fathom it herself. Everything being a lie, and who had fucked with his head to make him forget, implanted all the lies there? Apparently the Capitol had something else to answer for in that case. How many more out there like him were there? Nobody talked much about their district life and it was actively discouraged and sometimes even punished if kids were too stubborn about it, so it was a horrifying prospect to imagine how many more might be keeping that muddled confusion secret. “I don’t know,” she said helplessly, holding on to him. She didn’t know what would happen to them in the future, or what had happened to him in the past. “I’m here though,” she said, holding him all the tighter. “Whoever you were, whatever your name is or was, I know who you are now. And I’m here. For as long as we have.”
Just like the abrupt bounce from the muggy bayous of Four to the thin mountain air of the Capitol, the shift from the humid fields of Eleven to District One’s center, up in the mountains, was a hell of an adjustment. But for Haymitch, there was at least a vague familiarity to it; after all, he’d been born and raised in the mountains. Still, he had that odd disconnect like he’d had in Two, seeing the bare rocky crags of the peaks here rather than trees. Maybe it was all the time away but he found he was longing for home sometimes, which was an odd feeling given that for years, it was simply the place he slept and ate and drank—too much—but hardly anywhere he belonged.

Leaving to go to the Capitol was difficult every single year but the only positive aspect of returning to Twelve was it meant that the cameras were off him, he would be left in peace, and it would be eleven months more until two more kids got taken to their deaths. But now, sending Shad off to Twelve, talking to the kids and to Finnick and Annie and others there, continuing to oversee some of the beginning efforts and rebuilding things, he felt the sense of anticipation at going back.

But before that there were still other districts to see to, and to fulfill his promise to them. Peacekeeper records to check as usual too—no sign of Ash in Four or Eleven. They would be in Seven next, so if nothing else, he knew he would pick up the trail there. He dreaded bringing the subject up to Johanna, though, and telling her that Ash had been there. Still, he tried to take the fact she hadn’t immediately pulled forth memories of atrocities and identified his brother easily as a positive sign.

Gilt and Emerald Roseby were looking much better than they had in the Capitol; the two of them had been injured pretty badly in the bombing, and they’d come to the proceedings looked pulled through the wringer anyway. From what he’d heard from Chantilly, there was good cause for that. One was in a bad way, had been for quite some time.

“There’s a lot to do here,” Gilt said frankly, shaking his hand, green eyes giving away nothing, but the lines of strain on his face were still obvious enough.

“So I heard,” he acknowledged. “At least some of your folks were gonna take advantage of the work exchange, though, and head east.”

“True, but that’s not solving things here in the long term…” He was reminded of Four and their own issues with the crashed fisheries. Still, One’s issue wasn’t so dependent on the long-term natural recovery of something; they just needed some other industry besides pleasing a Capitol that no longer had the market for supporting hundreds of artisans and all the metal miners and material processors and the like to help supply the workshops.

“No, it’s not, but we’ll see what we can do,” he acknowledged.

“Gil,” Emerald said, putting a hand on her husband’s shoulder, “they just got here, and the cameras are on. Settle down.” That was all it took. One, forced to be always so image-conscious, knew how to play a camera and suddenly just for Plutarch’s camera crew, Gilt was all easy smiles and warm welcome. He’d have made a decent victor, Haymitch thought wryly, as he moved on to greet Emerald, remembering how she’d kept it together the night of the bombing. If nothing else, the peace conference had taught every one of them that behind the mayors of Panem was a good solid spouse or family member and they were just as formidable and involved with things. Nobody had been taking that for granted by the end of things, and he’d seen just as much negotiation and jockeying going on outside the conference room as inside it—Johanna always had plenty to report.

Two surviving victors waited for them to complete the greeting session, out of nine living last
summer at the point of the Quell reaping. Cashmere and Gloss died in the arena. Five more had apparently been murdered by either Snow’s forces or Coin’s, he wasn’t sure which. One had been quick to join the rebellion but their historical allegiance to the Capitol as Careers, and a favored district, had probably bit them in the ass when it came to Thirteen. He’d never been too close to any of the others, only mentored with Jasper for a few years who’d always kept a cool distance, but he wouldn’t have wished any of them cut down callously as some kind of power play to take away any potential rallying points for the opposing side.

He greeted Niello first. He was in his early fifties now and his blond hair was definitely greying and thinning, and Haymitch liked him the more for not bothering to hide it. They’d never gotten too close during Niello’s mentoring years prior to Jasper’s victory, given Niel was twelve years older and Haymitch had been running with the crowd that snarkily dubbed themselves the “United Young Whores of Panem”. But he’d respected Niello for the bits of knowledge and advice he’d readily passed on to a clueless Twelve victor, and of course, he’d respected him as Chantilly’s mentoring partner and then later as her husband.

Niello’s handshake was firm and he managed a bit of a smile. “Not exactly seeing us at our best, you two.”

“They’re here,” Chantilly said, stepping in and giving Johanna a hug first—that was Tilly, astute. “Not like Haymitch hasn’t seen me in some pretty shitty situations, Niel.”

“Is this going to turn into a contest where you constantly remind me that you’ve got a longer history with him than I do?” Johanna said dryly, crossing her arms over her chest and eyeing Chantilly.

He hadn’t thought much about how she must feel about those years before she’d arrived on the scene, the histories he had with other people that she wasn’t a part of, given that many of the surviving victors were closer to his peer group than hers. She’d been something of a loner; the only person she was openly friendly with was Finnick. She’d had that sort of snarky, unspoken bond with him that let them lean on each other, and he knew she’d been friendly enough with Lizzie Takhar from Six. But aside from that, she’d kept mostly to herself, compared to him with his group of friends. But then, as he’d told her, he’d been lucky. There were a lot of dark horse district wins around his, and even the Careers like Brutus or Chantilly in that time had been friendlier, whereas the later ones when it was Career after Career tended to form their own little clique and shun everyone else. Finnick had been the rare exception there.

“What, you want it to?” Chantilly returned flippantly, brown eyes sharp and inquisitive now that she didn’t have to pull her doe-eyed innocent act that had been obligatory when she was a kid. “I told you. Bygones. I haven’t slept with him in over ten years. I’m married to a man I love. I don’t need your husband except as my friend. That OK by you or am I gonna need to ask permission every time I want to talk to him?”

Funny feeling to realize that she must have been feeling what he had regarding Finnick back in Four, just wanting that clarity that there were no awkward unresolved feelings and that the friendship wasn’t going to get complicated. Obviously she trusted that was true in his case, but with typically direct Johanna style, she was making sure of it on Chantilly’s end too. “Nope,” Johanna said cheerfully. “Good enough.”

“Good,” Chantilly echoed. “Then come over for dinner. The kids want to meet you.”

“Til…” Niello said gently.

“Yeah, OK, if you want to meet the kids,” Chantilly said. “And you don’t mind it being noisy and kind of messy.”
“We ate dinner all the time with Katniss and Peeta in Twelve,” Johanna said with a grin. “Try eating with them when she’s in a temper about something. I doubt a pair of seven-year-olds could be worse.” Seeing that she was OK meeting kids, being around them, only eased his mind. She’d done well with Rue’s siblings back in Eleven, and coming up on them in that orchard and seeing her braiding Aurora’s and listening to the two boys chattering on and on had just made him think about how far she’d some and how much more comfortable she was with herself, and about the kids they might have someday. Although someday might arrive a good bit sooner than he had thought.

The thought scared the shit out of him still even as it filled him with hope. Putting away the injections and the security they represented with knowing sex would stay firmly an interlude between the two of them, and one that wouldn’t change their future in unforeseen ways, had been a leap of faith into the unknown. He was pretty sure it was on her mind too sometimes in bed, the knowledge that suddenly it wasn’t only the two of them, there was a third person involved: the kid they might have. He wasn’t sure he’d say it was better or worse in any way—the mutual intimacy of it was still the same. It was just different, somehow more because that extra layer of things was now there.

Alongside the usual peaceful feeling in the aftermath, the thought was there: Was it this time that does it? He was sure she was thinking it too.

But that was something that had to be carefully kept from the foremost thing on his mind. There was so much more to focus on, as always. Addressing District One’s problems, keeping in touch with one of his oldest friends and making sure things were all right with her, checking with the painter Peeta would come apprentice with starting next year, checking Peacekeeper records as ever just in case Ash had been here—yeah, he was going to be pretty busy. Besides, when it came to having a kid, it wasn’t like they’d know immediately. No point in fussing about it right now, he told himself. Didn’t help since of course it stayed on his mind anyway; things had changed and he had to acknowledge that.

The painter, Vermilion Sturgis, he decided that was a matter for another day. Johanna was already glancing down the slope from the hovercraft landing pad at the grand vista of the town below, and he could see the look on her face, obviously impressed with the aesthetic of it. One had always been conscious of the image of things, and the town was no different given that was always on television. The graceful, soaring domes, spires, arches—it wasn’t in keeping with the Capitol tradition of always demanding something newer, fresher, more novel. They looked almost old-fashioned compared to District Fourteen’s style, steel and glass and odd angles and loud colors. This was a clean, timeless sort of elegant beauty, the sort that would still provoke admiration centuries later. The Justice Building, with its weathered copper-sheathed dome turned to a soft green, and the pale grey granite stonework, had always been something the Capitol announcers lingered upon.

He wondered if that sort of architecture was One’s little rebellion against the Capitol—they’d been forced to fall in line with most everything else and please their masters. But here in their home they’d shown a little bit of their true soul. Peeta would do well here, he thought.

Johanna nudged him and said, “I think we gotta get some of these guys for Twelve,” nodding to the buildings. “Fourteen and Thirteen architects may know better how to actually build, but shit, these guys know how to design.”

Smiling to himself because he’d seen that coming, he said, “True enough. Gonna get a meeting with some of ‘em?”

“I’ll ask Gilt.” Her eyes flashed with sudden, wicked humor. “Or get Em to ask him for me.”

“Learning to use some subtle wiles finally?” He gave her a wry grin. “Shit, I’m doomed.”

“Shut up.” She rolled her eyes, but she was smiling anyway.
They spent the rest of the afternoon on a tour of the town. Gilt Roseby’s younger brother, Malachite—though he quickly insisted, “No, no, call me Mal”—took them around. Tall, blond, and green-eyed like his brother, Haymitch judged he was about thirty-five, maybe ten years younger than Gilt. Probably the youngest of the family, and apparently he was a silversmith by trade.

Or had been, anyway—even the mayor’s little brother hadn’t escaped the entire district economy going down the crapper the previous winter. Chantilly had told him a little about it, before the Quell, but being here and seeing the lines at food distribution centers firsthand, the dusty and abandoned look of many of the workshops along the main avenues, spoke eloquently enough.

“That was mine,” Mal said, and there was a forlorn note to his voice as he nodded to a tidy shop on Silver Lane, whose plate-glass window announced in neat letters, “Malachite Roseby, MGMS, and Assoc.” Looking in, Haymitch would guess the man had barely set foot in there for a year.


“Master of the Guild of Metalsmiths, ever since I was twenty-five and got voted up from Journeyman, for what little that’s been worth,” Mal said, looking at his shop with the air of watching the slow dying of something beloved. “As for the associates? The apprentices’ careers pretty much ended when there were no orders. I had to let them go. At least the kids could still take out tesserae, bad a system as that was, but once you were nineteen and apprenticed, it was work or starve, and work wasn’t available. Not even going down the mines or the like, because there was no demand for the metals.” He looked over at Haymitch and said, “And I saw my youngest apprentice going over to Peacekeepers’ Row a few times. I tried to talk her out of it, but when I had nothing to offer her than words…” He flinched, knowing all too well what that meant, knowing exactly what it said about how bad things had been in One. “I used to think a lousy month at work was not being able to buy my kids a book or a toy or something nice, and maybe have a good bottle of wine occasionally for my wife and me. But it’s been two years in a row now that even putting food on the table’s been a struggle. Two bad winters. I don’t know we can handle a third.”

Two bad winters. Haymitch had the thought of being here during the Tour, some vague notions of things seeming a little ill at ease. But Chantilly and Niello had told him nothing, and he’d figured it was perhaps just simmering resentment that Katniss had killed both their tributes, taking out Cashmere’s girl with the help of Seeder’s girl Rue. Then how in treating Seeder’s girl with such reverence and grief in death, it just highlighted Gloss’ boy lying there too mere feet away, a child slain by Katniss’ own hand and then ignored, like a discarded piece of trash. Not all deaths are worth the same, are they? That had been what he’d figured, and he had been reluctant to prod at open wounds. Perhaps Careers won more often than not, but a dead child was a dead child nonetheless, and they had a right to not enjoy having the killer of both their tributes forced upon them in a parody of celebration. True enough Twelve had felt the same whenever the victor of a particular Games was one who’d taken out their own kids. It was human nature and so he’d chalked up One’s attitude to that. But admittedly, he’d also been focused more on Katniss and Peeta and how obviously they were slowly breaking down throughout the Tour, and trying to keep them focused and their story together.

“When did the downturn happen?” Johanna asked into the silence.

“Started turning sour in September or October of 74 when apparently the Capitol first got some rumblings of unrest in other districts and flipped out hoarding essentials and canceled most of the orders for our workshops,” Mal answered. “Particularly the ones for New Year’s gifts. We always depended on those to make it through the winter. By December, by the time you and the kids came around on the Tour,” he nodded to Haymitch, “it was bad off.”
Haymitch nodded at that, feeling the odd twinge of guilt at having not noticed it, and that Chantilly hadn’t told him. But he knew a few things about those last embers in the slow-dying fire of pride. She probably figured there was nothing he could do about it, and as a victor the claws of sudden hardship would bite less deeply, so no point worrying him. Looking down Silver Lane at the lonely row of shuttered shops, he nodded and sighed to himself. On the whole, if it diversified with the skills it had already, One would probably rebound faster than Four’s fisheries, but finding employment for so many people might not be easy.

Not to mention that he hoped like hell that lofty artistic ego and feeling above manual labor, if need be, wouldn’t come into play. Looking at a pack of kids playing marbles on a street corner and seeing the thinness of their cheeks, remembering Mal talking about some of the Peacekeepers suddenly keeping warmer beds with local women and men, he amended that assessment. They’d been through enough that he expected any notions of their former Capitol-encouraged haughtiness and grandeur had been knocked right out of them.

All in all, it wasn’t a promising afternoon, though, and they headed back to Victors’ Square in silence. “This is going to be one of the tougher ones,” Johanna said finally.

“Well,” he said, trying for a little bleak humor, “Two and Four are a mess as well, so might as well complete the Career trifecta, right?”

“True enough,” she said with a soft sigh. “Shit. I mean, it’s no worse than some other districts had it all along…”

“But it’s not easy to see, all the same.” Misery was misery all the same, and he wouldn’t have wished the desperation in the poorest districts on anyone. He had the feeling these years would be etched deep into the minds of those who had endured them here in One for a long time to come.

By the time they arrived at Chantilly and Niello’s, though, they’d managed to put that aside and put on pleasant faces. The house was particularly tastefully decorated and furnished as would be expected of this district, but there was a sense that it was a bit relaxed now—some of the furniture was a bit worn, and there were toys everywhere and bits of clutter here and there. It looked like people lived here rather than being fit for the glossy pages of a magazine. The twins, Citrine and Sardonyx, seven now, had their mother’s brown hair and their father’s bright green eyes, a striking combination.

They also asked questions nonstop. He caught a few worried glances from Citrine towards her parents, and the little girl finally blurted, “You’re here from the President. You’re not gonna take us away somewhere, are you?” Haymitch wondered just what the hell had prompted that.

“Trina,” Chantilly said, looking at her with an expression of embarrassment. “Nobody’s taking you or Donny anywhere without us.” The vehemence in her voice was all too obvious. “Besides, Haymitch is my friend.”

“Boys and girls can’t be friends,” Sardonyx scoffed. “Me and Trina are but that’s ‘cause she’s my sister.” He looked at Haymitch curiously, as if trying to figure out if he and Chantilly were somehow related.

“He’s like my brother,” Chantilly told her son, reaching over and tousling his hair gently. Yeah, a brother she used to fuck back when we were just kids, Haymitch thought wryly. Thankfully Niello and Johanna didn’t say anything about that, though both of them were well aware.

“I’ve got a best friend,” Johanna spoke up, putting down her water glass. “Finnick. He’s a boy, and he’s like my brother.” Hearing that, Haymitch couldn’t help the small spark of relief once again to her the certainty in her tone. It was over and done between her and Finnick. She sounded happy if anything, knowing his place in her life now.
The rest of the meal passed with the noise of the kids peppering them with questions and that was unfamiliar but actually welcome. It kept things from being too heavy and silent. As the twins ran off to play, Chantilly nodded towards the parlor. “Niel, Johanna, you mind if I borrow Haymitch for a few and just catch up?”

“Sure. I can show Johanna the birds,” Niello said, neatly folding his napkin and laying it beside his plate. Haymitch recalled that Niello’s talent had been breeding parrots for the Capitol trade. The few muffled squawks and calls he’d heard in the house must have been due to that.

Following Chantilly into the parlor, she gestured him to a chair. Even now, at forty-four, she still had the seemingly effortless grace to her movements that had been trained hard into her from childhood. Almost everything she did looked like it was part of a dance. Sitting down opposite him, she studied him with interest.

He did the same to her, given in the frenzy of things last year the two of them hadn’t really had much time to sit down and talk. He could see the seventeen-year-old girl that had won the 49th Games in her still, and the shy, doe-eyed sweetheart she’d had to play for years on the circuit. Age and two children had rounded her figure a bit and given her a few lines on her face, but she was still an attractive woman. More than that, she looked more at ease than she had last year—or maybe ever since he’d known her. “You look good,” he said finally, meaning it.

She grinned at him. “Flatterer. You know I was better looking when I was twenty.”

“So was I.” He knew he’d been considered a bit of a looker when he was a teenager. That hadn’t panned out to remarkable handsomeness as a man like it had with Gloss or Finnick or Wy. He’d aged better than he probably deserved, given how poorly he’d cared for himself, but he knew he’d come out just on the right side of pleasant as an adult. It had always been his personality that had kept him going on the circuit, long after those there for their gorgeous looks had faded. “But I mean it.” He wouldn’t say she looked overjoyed; there was probably too much uncertainty around her for that given what a shambles District one was in currently. But at least the Games no longer controlled her life and that had to be a huge relief.

“You look good too,” she said softly, brown eyes on him. Different from Johanna’s—Chantilly’s were darker, usually softer too, for all there was a razor-sharp mind behind them. “A bit stressed, though you always were worrying about something, but you look happy. I don’t think I’ve ever really seen you happy.” He felt a lump in his throat at that, like he was just a stupid kid again. No, she hadn’t. She’d met him as a miserable kid with doomed tributes and a murdered family, busy being fucked by anyone with interest in Panem’s newest victor and the money to pay for him. Things hadn’t exactly gotten better since then for years and years.

They’d known each other twenty-five years now and even if they’d been able to interact less once she’d been retired in favor of Cashmere and Chaff moved into position as his most consistently available friend, they usually tried to meet up in the summer at least for a meal. Back when they were scared and young they’d been sleeping together, trying to keep each other steady as best they could. That had ended a long time ago, fifteen years at least. It just hadn’t been doing either of them any good any longer. They’d both been far too well-trained by that point that a friendly fuck didn’t touch anything within them. They’d both made it clear romance was off the table for various reasons, so it had never moved to something deeper and intimate. But in some ways he thought their friendship had only improved once the clothes stayed on, and their answer to things was to talk or even just be there, rather than resorting to increasingly meaningless sex to try to assuage it. So maybe she hadn’t been too far off in what she’d told her kids: she was like his sister. The pain-in-the-ass older sister he’d never had by blood, one of the few people in the world who could still make him feel like an awkward boy scrambling to keep up.
“I am happy,” he told her, able to admit it honestly, feeling the warmth blossoming within him at being able to say it.

She nodded at that, looking pleased with that herself. “She’s a good sort for you. Clever, tough, got a sharp tongue on her too. You look comfortable together.” He should have figured she’d pick up on that. She was always noticing the details, the way people interacted. It had been her, and Niello too, that had taught him some of the most useful parts of how to read a situation and how to effectively play a role on the circuit. He’d been just a smartass country boy who could try to outwit a situation but he’d been so damn obvious—that trick with the forcefield and his open defiance had been what got him in trouble to begin. She’d helped teach him subtlety, how to seize control of the situation by acting a part that made people want him to be the boss. She’d taught him how to survive it. “So how’s the sex?” she asked frankly.

With almost anyone else he would have told them to fuck off for asking that question. But he knew her. She wasn’t just digging for salacious details, trying to compare how good Johanna was in bed with how she’d been all those years ago. Considering she’d seen firsthand how he’d progressed from a traumatized seventeen-year-old kid desperately seeking comfort to a grown man able to lock it all down and feel nothing, it was meant out of genuine concern. “Hey, how’s it with you and Niel?” he fired back, unable to quite help that first protective instinct. He knew she meant no offense but it wasn’t always easy to talk about, particularly since the sense of astonishment was still so sharp, making him realize just how cold and closed off he’d been.

She gave a little smile, sitting back in her chair. “Funny thing. I married him because it did us both a favor.” He knew that. She’d calmly explained the whole thing when it had happened. Niello had been getting his ear chewed to go get married because he was coming up on forty, and Chantilly was just getting off the circuit with Cashmere’s victory. Niello’s marrying her kept her from possibly being bought out as Taffeta had, installed as a kept woman in the Capitol. It would look good for the cameras, and if there was anyone she could trust, it was a fellow victor. “But somewhere along the way I actually fell in love with my husband. That was about the point it turned from two old ex-whores fucking to something a lot better.”

“It’s fine,” he said hastily. She lifted one dark eyebrow. “It’s good, all right? Really good. I’m not giving you the damn details, Tilly, for fuck’s sake!”

“Well,” she told him, “that says plenty. It matters enough that it’s just the two of you. You would have told me anything about it when it didn’t mean anything.” True enough, he realized. When it was just fucking someone, all the gory details were a source for matter-of-fact analysis or even humor. “Good. I’m glad for you. You always had a lot of love to give someone, even if you always pretended you were just a cocky little shit who didn’t care about anything.”

“Tilly,” he muttered, feeling flustered, “c’mon.” He knew she knew him well, but to hear it just stated that plainly wasn’t always easy. It was different from Johanna’s blunt honesty. Johanna knew him deeper, no question, but Chantilly had known him even longer. She knew too much about who he’d been and so a thing Johanna could say to him now would still fluster him a bit when a friend said it.

“Mitchie,” she mocked him gently, mimicking his tone, knowing just how much it yanked his chain when she used that nickname. He resisted the urge to roll his eyes. “You’re married and you’re happy. Enjoy it and say to hell with everyone else. I had to learn that with Niel. So you got a late start and people don’t think you’re some friendly young cutie. Not your fault. Don’t let anyone make you feel embarrassed by it. We all more than paid our dues up front, for years and years. You both deserve it.”
Thinking about what she’d been through, about the unexpected happiness she’d apparently found with Niello rather than a simple friendly business arrangement, he knew she was right. He couldn’t have known that either, back in Thirteen when he and Johanna first took up together. But he couldn’t regret it at all, that in taking the risk the rewards had been so much more than he could ever have expected. Nodding to acknowledge it, he figured he’d respect the advice by simply taking it and not arguing it. She’d been married for years now, so he expected she had some wisdom to offer a newlywed. “So what are you two going to do?” he asked her next. “I don’t know that they’re continuing pensions. Do you two…”

“We have a good bit laid by in the bank,” she confirmed. She shook her head, biting her lip—a nervous habit the Center had never fully trained out of her. But she never did it on camera, he knew that. “That’s not a concern. I just don’t know what we’ll do now.”

“You talking you and Niel here, or the kids?”

“Either. Both. I can probably continue writing and actually maybe publish something that isn’t total crap.” Her victor talent had been writing novels. Unfortunately, as she’d complained often enough, she’d ended up writing trashy pieces of smut because that was what the Capitol wanted from her. Very little plot and racy sexual details, they usually involved victors being “tamed” by a Capitol lover, or romances with rich bastards who doted on a far less wealthy girl. Given how Chantilly had read some of them aloud to him during those early years, making him snicker with laughter, he knew the characters and plots were essentially interchangeable. He’d actually helped her come up with some of them. Hadn’t taken much thought, really. It usually involved just changing the setting a little bit—a movie star became a hoopball player, for example, and changing the physical descriptions a bit. The men were always either dangerous victors in need of a civilized woman to tame them down, or arrogant Capitol billionaires who wanted a little woman to spoil and to dominate. That pretty much said a lot about the Capitol’s view of romance, he thought wryly. All about the immediate gratification of sex, and who held the power dynamic. None of the victors had ever had anything to do with the male victors he knew, and he was pretty sure Chantilly did that deliberately out of respect. He liked her all the more for it. Effie had loved the damn things; he always found them strewn around the train and the apartment.

She went on, “But I don’t see the luxury goods market exactly rebounding in a hurry, and what that means for Donny and Trina’s futures…” She sat back in the chair, seeming almost like she was collapsing in under the weight, unable to bear it. “I went to the Center when I was a kid to give my family a better life,” she told him. That perfectly trained voice was now rough with emotion. “I want better for my kids than to be poor and hungry and hopeless.”

“I know that.” Her dark hair and eyes and darker skin, so different from Niello’s fairness and green eyes, spoke eloquently enough—she was from One’s working class, not its artisans. Her family had been silver miners; she’d lost her mother the year before she went to the Center in a mining accident. Admittedly he hadn’t paid much attention to the family interviews of the final eight tributes of the 49th Games; by that point it was abundantly clear it would be another Career year. So the lack of a mother for the One girl hadn’t exactly attracted his notice. He hadn’t discovered that about her until his second year as a mentor and felt like a complete shit for just assuming that she was One and privileged and wealthy and for chastising her on it the previous summer. She’d corrected him on the reality of One right away, and rightly so, though apparently she hadn’t felt comfortable enough to tell him personal details until later. But he’d seen only what the Capitol wanted him to see.

Maybe she’d been wealthier and better fed when she was older, but those earliest memories of cold and fear and hunger stuck hard. “You think I don’t get that, of all people?” She knew how poor his own family had been.
“Do you?” she threw at him almost defiantly. “You grew up dirt poor, yeah, but you don’t know what it’s like to worry about your kids’ futures, Haymitch.”

He felt the flush on his face both from anger and embarrassment. Technically she was correct, but this was an instance she didn’t know that she’d just blundered across a touchy subject. Trying to find something so he didn’t just start shouting in temper, he sat there in silence, attempting to settle down. “Oh,” she said finally, a clear look of chagrin on her face. “Shit. I’m such an idiot. I’m so used to you being al—yeah. Never mind.” He understood that. Him being alone with no plans of that changing had been so ingrained that it was a hard instinct to change. “Don’t need to dig myself a deeper hole. Congratulations to you both?”

Seeing the awkwardly apologetic smile on her face, he couldn’t help but laugh a little, and like that, the bad mood rolled back like rainclouds scuddering off towards the horizon. “No announcement yet,” he told her. “But thanks.” He couldn’t resist a smirk and telling her, “Besides, you putting your foot in your mouth is rare enough. Let me enjoy it a little, huh?”

“Fine,” she said with a sigh, though she gave him a fond grin, relaxing a bit.

“You could come live in Twelve, you know. I mean, you can write from anywhere. And we’re rebuilding too, yeah, but it’s…different. The old Twelve’s gone. We all know it. It feels like there’s actually the chance to make something new, from the ground up, rather than just trying to change the old.” Trying to patch a bad job was harder sometimes than simply starting over. “I know there’ll be kids there. Other victors too.”

“Recruiting the repopulation already?” she asked, propping her chin on her hand. “Well, when they put you as speaking for Twelve at the peace conference that was pretty clear—you’re taking the reins on things there.”

“By default. We didn’t want Katniss doing it,” he said dryly. “Trust me.”

“Or maybe the yokels out there finally saw what I always knew, hm? You’re sarcastic and unbearable sometimes, but you’re smart, you’re capable, and you care. Can’t think of a better man for the job.”

“I’m touched.” He was, really. Not that he’d say it without the snarky edge. “But Finn and Annie are there, with their baby—Maggie. Four’s in rough shape. Shad too, you probably remember him. He actually survived the purge in Four.”

“Talked to Brutus lately?”

“Yeah, why? We talk often enough on the phone. Sounds like he’s doing well. Fussing about Enobaria and the baby, of course.” She just kept staring at him. “What?”

“Men,” she muttered irritably. “I swear, Haymitch, you can plan a nationwide rebellion without Snow having the first clue but you are so damn blind sometimes.”

Now he was left staring at her in confusion. “Care to share?”

“Of course he’s worrying. He just doesn’t want to say it. He’s married, he’s got a wife and a baby on the way, and his district is a shambles. He’s lost most of the people he cared about and respected, and you know Brute—he always does better within a system.”

“He rebelled against the Capitol, Tilly,” he pointed out. “If that ain’t bucking the system, I don’t know what is.”
“It means he felt betrayed enough by the system to fight against it. Doesn’t mean he doesn’t feel better when he’s a part of something. Right now he’s just on the outside looking in. All the other Two victors are dead. That’s been his life since he was a little kid. He doesn’t know where he belongs.”

It made sense. He hadn’t seen it when he was there, but at that point Brutus was still flush with the giddiness of his wedding, and hopeful about the future. Hell, at that point, Haymitch himself was still in a whirl trying to figure it all out. “And what, he just told you that?”

“No. Baria and I talk, of course. With Cashmere gone, I’m the only One female victor left.” One and Two had always been particularly close, so that made sense. “And Brutus has taken to calling Niello some. Since Niel’s a senior victor to him, you know. Not from Two, but in terms of Career victors who understand the situation,” she shrugged, “it’s the best Brutus is going to get.”

“Why the hell didn’t he just tell me?”

“You were never Career, Haymitch.” She said it matter-of-factly. “There were things we didn’t complain about around you, out of respect. Just like I’m sure Finnick knew better than to open his mouth around Johanna when she had it so much rougher. Brutus isn’t exactly a feelings kind of a guy to begin, and then he’d likely feel like an whiny asshole talking about how he’s suddenly feeling alone and uncertain and has nobody to turn to because everyone he relied upon is dead—because we all know that was your life, OK? But we had that support and now we don’t.”

“It doesn’t mean I’d resent you for it,” he told her in exasperation. “You lost friends in the war. Grief ain’t exactly a contest. Or at least, it shouldn’t be.”

“No, but it’s not exactly easy to bring it up to you without sounding oblivious to what you went through.”

“You are.”

“I know you, you know me. We’re good enough friends I can take that risk and assume that you getting pissed off means you’ll get over it quickly enough.” Simple words but they pretty much said it. They’d rarely minced words with one another through all these years.

“I’m not pissed off.” He wasn’t—more irritated with himself for not having figured it all out.” So have at it. Honest as you like.”

“One and Two and Four are all a mess, by the sound of it, and none of us are doing well without other victors around us. All of us have kids now, or at least on the way, to think about. Finnick and Annie already admitted it and moved. I probably would have asked your thoughts on it if you hadn’t just asked me yourself, but Niello and I will take you up on it. That’ll make it easier for Brutus and Enobaria to save face. If other Careers are already doing it, it doesn’t reflect as badly on that idiotic Two pride. You should call him. You’re a lot subtler than he is, so you know how to invite him to move to Twelve and make it sound like you’re the one that needs him. Niello can work on him as well. Johanna and I can talk to Enobaria. If it comes from her too that’ll help. I don’t know what we’ll do exactly in Twelve when we get there, but trust us, none of us intend to be a burden.”

Hearing it presented that openly, he couldn’t do much but agree. She was right. He hadn’t thought about this like a Career suddenly bereft of the entire society and family they’d existed in for years. He’d gotten some sense of the loss from Finnick and Annie and Shad, but he’d focused more on how hopelessly screwed they were in terms of Four’s future. “Yes, ma’am,” he told her, seeing her answering smile at his sarcastic tone. “Will there be anything else?”
“Did you ask Clover too?” He must have had a befuddled expression on his face because she sighed, head in her hand and told him, “I *swear* you’re kind of an idiot sometimes when it comes to understanding women’s lives.”

“I haven’t exactly had a normal life to this point to find out, now have I?” he shot back defensively. Before Johanna his entire romantic life had consisted of one girlfriend of eight months.

“You’re proving my point about it being awkward talking to you about things with how shitty you had it, Haymitch,” she told him dryly. He winced, acknowledging it to himself. “She’s widowed, the two other Nine victors are both dead—“

“I killed one—“ he interjected wryly.

“Did Chloe blame you on that?”

“No.”

“Of course not. Rye made his own choices. And she’s got a kid to think about.”

“Wait, she told you that?” He’d been caught totally off guard by Amitra, even as he had quickly figured out what Clover had never told him.

“Women tell each other things we don’t tell the men. Especially since I had kids too.” She gave him a meaningful glance. “Kids of two victors, at that. She had concerns I could understand.”

“She’s actually got three now. Her sister’s two boys too, along with Amitra.”

“You were one of Blight’s friends. Johanna’s the only other Seven victor so she knows things about Seven she could teach Amitra. Chloe’s got three kids she’s raising by herself. It makes sense she might want to not be alone?”

Wryly he had to wonder just how much he’d missed, period. He’d been forced to struggle on alone so long that he could readily pick up on the signs of it in others, but like Chantilly had said, some of them might have been trying to hide it from him. Perhaps out of pride, or perhaps out of a sense of not being able to display it around him. “All right, tell me. Just how many of them have been calling around trying to support each other because they feel like they’ve got no right to complain to me?”

“Brutus and Enobaria. Clover. Dazen. Wy sounds like he’s struggling sometimes.”

“Wy probably needs it. With Angus gone, nobody in Ten knows what it was like being a victor *and* being on the circuit.” He’d been a long-termer too, only retiring in his early thirties, given Ten’s popular rough and rugged image. “I think Taffeta’s doing OK given she’s got Cinna and Effie there. I’ll check in when I go to Eight. Rice seems to want to avoid the victors entirely, Lizzie’s pretty tied to Six given she’s married to Ed Raven, and I think Beetee always seems happier on his own.” He shook his head, annoyed beyond belief with himself. “I didn’t see it. You did.”

“You and Johanna are both too used to having to do it all on your own. They all know it and so it’s not easy to admit it to you. And maybe you need to learn how to admit you can’t do it all. No shame in needing help sometimes.”

He recalled being huddled up on the couch in his pajamas his first night as a whore, trying to decide whether he wanted to scream or break things or go have another shower. She’d knocked on the door and dragged him out on the town to go meet some of the others: Angus, Blight, Clover. He could still recall her there in that yellow dress, how her manner suddenly changed from sweetly flirtatious to utter grim sincerity: *We’re having a night out and it’s what you need right now, not being here*
thinking about it. Believe me. We’ll look out for you. Don’t worry. She and the others had kept that promise. They’d looked after him, helped keep him steady and sane as they could. Time to return the favor now that he was the one with solace to offer.

Perhaps it had always been easier for Careers to admit to each other they needed help, given they had people who had endured it, people to readily turn to for advice or support. Still a little chagrined at his own lack of realization, he wasn’t going to be too proud to admit she was right. “Are we having a heartwarming friendly moment here, Chantilly?” He couldn’t resist deflecting it a little bit with a flippant joke.

She just laughed. “Maybe it’s just me thumping some sense into you as usual.”

“Come to Twelve. You said it yourself—you need people. We’ll look out for you and Niel and your kids,” he promised her.

She looked him over for a long moment. Finally, all she said was “Thanks.” But that was all that was needed.
Niello led her out towards the room that back in Twelve she and Haymitch had designated as a future library and office, as they gave the two old friends some privacy. Johanna shrugged it off; she’d drawn the line, and she trusted Haymitch. Besides, Chantilly and Niello gave off all the signs of being happy with each other—the little looks, the way they gave off the impression of comfort and familiarity in each other’s company. Johanna was learning to recognize those signs herself from experience. But better it just be said and gotten out of the way, no hard feelings. She didn’t want a repeat of what had happened with Finnick back in Four.

Niello pushed open the door, and a chorus of whistles and squawks and a few clear shouts of “Hello” greeted him. Stepping in behind him, seeing that the natural sunlight from the numerous windows made it a warm and cheery place here just like in her old house and the current one, she could see why his pets would enjoy it. Looking around, she was surprised to see the assortment of feathers—iridescent green, bright scarlet, delicate seashell pink, vibrant blue. She was also surprised to see the birds sitting right out in the open on what looked like an extensive network of trunks and branches sawn from trees, stripped bare of leaves and twigs. “No cages?” she said with surprise.

Reaching out to one bird, a smaller, less-impressively colored one with mostly grey feathers and a bright red tail, Niello shook his head. “I don’t like caging things,” he said tersely.

She nodded at that, understanding it instinctively. He’d been put into an arena too, been imprisoned by the Capitol in the Training Center for months besides. She watched the slow stroke of his hand down the back of the little bird, seeing how the thing ruffled up all its feathers erect until it looked like some bizarre cross between a bird and a pinecone. Its golden eyes were closed in what looked like bliss. “So this is your talent, huh?”

“My family’s been in the pet business a good while,” he said with a shrug. “Dogs, cats—you usually get the base stock from Three where they can recreate what used to exist in old North America, but there’s a certain cachet—was, I should say. People wanted something actually bred rather than created in a genesplice lab. Probably so they could brag about its impressive bloodlines. So One became part of the pet trade.”

Owning a pet just for the hell of it pretty much was indication of prosperity, that was true. She couldn’t think of anyone not among the merchants or most elite artisans in Seven who’d owned one just for pleasure. When feeding kids was a struggle, there wasn’t exactly room to feed an animal that wasn’t earning its keep through catching rats or the like. Back in Seven they’d had some dogs each summer, mixes of nobody knew what, and they were usually communally fed from the evening stewpot. Nobody could take them back south to the winter town come autumn, though. The lean times of each winter meant that food had to be for people first and nobody could spare enough to bring a pet into their home for months. It meant each summer the ebb and flow of those half-wild, half-tame packs was there, some had died and some new ones were born. They’d made good guard dogs against the forest cats and other things, though. “Just another luxury good,” she said in agreement. “Makes sense.” She thought of some of the dogs and cats she’d seen in the Capitol. It seemed like the dogs in particular were bred for anything but being useful.

“Of course. I took up birds because that was a rarity. It meant I wouldn’t be competing with people who actually needed the income. Besides, when you’re a victor, they expect you to not just be humdrum. You have to do something interesting.”

The parrot had clambered up Niello’s arm onto his shoulder and now was busying itself gently grooming his greying hair with its beak. “You ever sell to people in the Capitol?”
“Of course,” he said with a sigh, picking up another bird, a twin to the first. “Here, you want to hold him?”

She stretched out a hand cautiously and the bird stepped over onto it, warm toes grasping her bare arm carefully. Raising a hand, she stroked its feathers with a fingertip, finding them oddly soft. Keeping a careful eye on the beak, she kept at it. “Not much choice, I imagine.”

“Nope.” His lips thinned for a moment, pressed together in a look of irritation. The birds continued to call for him, a mixture of words and sounds. “Though of course, having a victor-bred pet was most desirable of all. I had more requests than I could have bred and raised in twenty years. So that gave me a little power, oddly enough. I could refuse to sell to someone if I thought they’d be a jackass who just wanted an ornament. Bird’s a long-term commitment and I didn’t want to sell one to someone who’d just mistreat it. They can live as long as people, you know? Most people don’t know that. So it became a game with them. I could play haughty and exclusive and even arbitrary with my favor on it. Fit in well with my persona on the circuit anyway. And if I approved them for one of the birds, it became something to really brag about, so they let me get away with it. For the most part, of course. There were a few times I got a pointed reminder for Snow to play nice.”

“Gotta take little bits of power where you can,” she said, by this point digging her fingers down in between the feathers to give the bird a good scratch. “Nothing wrong with that. If you got to tell ‘em to go fuck themselves on even one small thing, good on you.”

“It felt good,” he answered her, though there was a dark and even fierce tone creeping into his voice. “Of course, it struck me one day. I was raising some babies out here, and I had a six-month-old son and daughter asleep in the house. Only on one of those was the Capitol considering them of enough value to be patient, to be denied what they wanted.” He gave her a bitter smile. “And you know it wasn’t the children.”

They’d never valued district children, even victor’s children, enough to be denied. It struck her anew just how fucked up things had been in the Capitol, that the life of a pet was considered of more worth than that of an innocent child. “Of course it wasn’t.” Though if Snow had let them buy the children of victors to keep as their pets, Johanna didn’t doubt for an instant they would have done it.

“I knew they’d be taken from me and Tilly,” he told her. A rough note entered his voice, and for a man trained from six years old to think first of how he’d appear to the cameras, that told her plenty about how deep his feeling ran on this. “Victor-born twins? In District One? Whoever got reaped first, they’d inevitably take the other. Because if one died, they’d want to see the other survive the next year. And if one of them survived, they’d want to see the other join them. The next Cashmere and Gloss. I could decide the fate of a handful of parrots, but there was no way I could save my own children.”

She managed to avoid the instinct to drop her hand to her own stomach, wondering if she and Haymitch had started a child there already in the couple of weeks they’d been trying. Her period was a few days late. But she’d always been so insanely irregular when she wasn’t on the contraceptive shots, so that was no proof of anything. She didn’t feel any different yet, but she hadn’t the last time either, this early into it.

There was already enough that unsettled her mind about the concerns of whether or not they’d even be able to have a child, and it didn’t stop there. Parenthood would mean a certain constant level of fear and uncertainty along with the joys. Birth just meant the worries multiplied exponentially. But at least they would never have to fear their son or daughter being forced into the arena, that their life would be considered of so much less interest or worth than the life of the little bird that was regarding her with a quizzical gaze, as if it actually understood something was wrong with her with how she’d
frozen at Niello’s words. “Sorry,” she muttered, resuming her petting duties.

“I didn’t get to choose to have them either,” he went on, not quite looking at her, more like he was addressing the big white bird now sitting on his hand, as Niello was stroking its feathers. “I was hoping they’d consider the two of us too old for it. Hell, I was past forty-five by then. But that’s how it works in One. Legacy tributes were just another export. Finally we were told we’d waited long enough and we were expected to have kids if we could. So we did it.” He still didn’t look at her, as if admitting it embarrassed him too deeply to meet her eyes, but maybe it was something he needed to confess. Without any other victors in One left, apparently a woman half his age was the next best thing, because she was a victor. “I didn’t want them. Tilly knew that too. For her, it was…different, though. They were a part of her. They grew inside her. So she learned to love them. And I’d see her touching that bump, hear her hummming to them, and I’d feel like the sorriest bastard in Panem. My own children, with a wife I loved, and all I could see was something I couldn’t deny the Capitol. So they’d never really be mine. But once they were born, I couldn’t deny them. So I loved them, even as I was wishing that somehow, they’d be just ordinary, so perfectly ordinary that the Center wouldn’t admit them. It would look bad for Tilly and me, of course, but these things do happen.”

Now Niello finally did look over at her, green eyes hard and bright as chips of emerald. “They turned six last April. The Center tested them right before Reaping Day, admitted them both as Gold-rated prospects and Chantilly and I took them there and said goodbye to them the next day. Cute, smart, charming…perfect candidates in every way—I knew they’d never belong to us again, not really. There’s not a day goes by now that I don’t count my lucky stars that the rebellion succeeded. Because they get to live with us now rather than crying themselves to sleep in the dorms at the Center for months because they’re homesick little kids, seeing their family only at New Year until finally the Center matters to them more and they stop asking to go home. They’ll get to be something other than Career trainees and maybe tributes and victors and whores, pride of District One, keeping the Capitol happy just that little while longer. They won’t be molded into some ideal role and forced to lie about who they really are. I get to tuck them in every night and tell them stories, and watch them play in my yard and build blanket forts, and I try to teach them table manners but it doesn’t always take. They get to be my children now, dammit, not the Capitol’s.”

Hearing the conviction and almost a note of anguish in his voice, Johanna couldn’t say much aside from acknowledging those feelings. She could understand them a little better herself now, having chosen to embrace that possible future herself in all its uncertainty. “They’ll never be in the arena,” she told him. “Nobody’s kids will. It was a hard fight. But it was worth it.”

He looked over at her. “It was. For all it cost.” He said it calmly but there was some unknown emotion, as she didn’t know him well enough to interpret it, raging in his eyes. She thought about the long months he must have spent in the Training Center, having watched other victors lose the protection of their lofty status, executed before his very eyes. Every day must have been filled with terror. He must have known from Haymitch how Snow would openly use loved ones to punish people. Had he feared he’d be used as a “lesson” to his wife; or her to him? Or even worse, how many days and nights had he wondered if their children were still alive or if they had been slaughtered back in One?

“It’s a terrible thing,” she said, “living in fear.”

“We learned plenty of it the winter before the Quell. I was lucky. They wouldn’t let a victor starve, and as for them,” he nodded to the parrots, “I don’t keep a large stock and birds don’t eat much.”

“Not following you.”

Another of those slight, almost rueful and gentle smiles—she remembered as a young kid seeing
reruns of Niello on television, a tall and lean and golden-haired man with a broad, beaming grin—and she realized now that this expression fit him better because this was taking off the mask. “With all of the horses and the dogs, even the cats, with no buyers for pets and with as hard as One was feeling the pinch of hunger, they were just a waste of food.” He raised his eyebrows and added, “And quickly enough figured out, no sense good meat going to waste.”

“Ah,” because now she understood—all that care and food and deliberate effort by all those pet breeders, reduced to just so much meat because the Capitol no longer valued it. Just like tributes, she couldn’t help but think.

“Not shocked, huh?” he observed.

She realized with some chagrin how far she’d come from her youth that she hadn’t immediately thought of all those animals as dead weight in a desperate district, let alone them being used as food. “We ate whatever we could catch in Seven. And if it was a hard winter, any stray dogs or cats—or rats—around the winter town might end up in the stew pot.” She cocked her head aside and echoed him, “Not shocked, huh?”

“It’s been quite the education about some things these last two years,” he said simply. She liked him better still for being able to admit he’d been ignorant of some things, for all his years as a victor.

Looking down at the little bird still so ecstatic at her attention, so innocent of how the world had changed, she had to admit, “I’m glad they made it through alive.” Sometimes we all need a little something just for pretty, she heard her mother’s voice in her mind, and couldn’t help but smile wistfully. You were right, Mom.

Niello smiled in answer. “I’ve always had more of those little fellows on hand than the others. My Greys never sold nearly as well. Not flashy enough. The macaws are bright enough,” he nodded towards the jewel-bright birds with the large beaks and long tails, “and the cockatoos,” the white and peach and pink ones, “were a blank canvas that could easily be dyed to suit the owner’s taste. They always thought the Greys were a bit too drab and boring.”

She could imagine—the grey feathers with only a slight bit of red weren’t the most eye-catching combination. Still, there was an inquisitive attentiveness to how the bird regarded her out of one golden eye, compared to the almost fawning adoration of the cockatoo Niello was holding. “You like them, though,” she guessed.

“They’re by far the smartest of the lot. The Capitol just never appreciated that.” He shrugged diffidently. “I doubt most of them had the patience to properly train a bird anyway. So long as it looked good and could maybe imitate a few sounds or words to amuse guests, they were pleased.” A look of something like discomfort crossed his face. “It was something of a moot point in some cases that really had interest only in another showpiece, since of course Avoxes would have had the most contact with the birds, handling most of their care and feeding and cleanup.”

Of course—at least some of the families he’d sold to must have been among Panem’s wealthiest and most prestigious. He’d intimated he avoided it where he could, but she was sure they’d bitched to Snow enough about the unfairness that Niello was selling to “lesser quality” people. They were of the class that liked to show off their wealth with something like the sheer expense of Avox slaves. They wouldn’t want the droll chores of caring for another living being; most of them farmed care of their own children off on servants and nannies. As for the birds, they certainly wouldn’t learn words from someone whose tongue had been cut out. She flinched at the cruel irony of it.

“And these?” By way of not dwelling on the subject she hefted the Grey, a little too quickly given her sudden unsettled thoughts, and throwing it off balance, and the bird hurriedly reached down and
snagged her sleeve in its beak to help steady itself. It also pinched her arm, but she withstood it. That was her fault.

“Sometimes they won’t shut up,” he said dryly. “Or they’ll find their way into all sorts of trouble you never even imagined they were smart enough to manage.”

She couldn’t resist a smirk. Less flashy, mouthy, too smart for his own good. “Sounds like someone I know.”

“Oh, here you are,” she heard Chantilly’s voice coming into the bird room. Haymitch was close behind her. Johanna tried to squelch that odd feeling of territoriality that still lingered just a little bit. Maybe Chantilly and Haymitch had never been romantically involved, and maybe it had been fifteen years or whatever since they’d slept together. But the woman had known him pretty intimately, still obviously cared for him, and she knew it would take time for those last sparks of jealousy to fade as she proved to herself that Chantilly was no threat to what she and Haymitch had. Payback’s a bitch, she thought ruefully. This must have been how Haymitch felt about Finnick, and Annie about her. Probably how Niello felt about Haymitch too, with all those years his wife’s ex-lover remained single and desperately and vulnerably alone, still on the circuit and being worn down more and more each year.

Sometimes she’d had the sense that if in some of her darkest moments, if only she pushed a little harder in just the right way when he was hurting himself from another summer of being whored, Finnick’s compassionate and sometimes eager to please nature would have given in and he’d have thrown his pride and his honor to the wind and slept with her to comfort her in her solitude. He’d almost done it once, battered and terrified as she’d been the year Annie won her Games. She’d been the one who put a stop to the idea because she knew he’d hate himself later, and she wouldn’t let him hurt himself, not for her sake, not when it wasn’t in any way necessary. So in a way she thought Niello must be relieved to see Haymitch married now, secure and happy with another woman in his life closer to him than Chantilly.

She ended up left alone with Chantilly, still clutching the little bird, now snuggled up against her shoulder to secure it. “He obviously thinks well of you,” Chantilly commented, nodding to the parrot, “letting you handle one so quickly.”

“And you?” Johanna fired back. Might as well make things clear.

“I’ve told you,” Chantilly said, all calm Career poise, something Johanna could never be. “I’m seriously not after Haymitch.”

“I wasn’t asking about that.” She believed the other woman by this point. “But you’re his friend and I’m his wife, so are we gonna be able to play nice?”

“I don’t see why not.” Chantilly reached into one of the cages and pulled out a macaw, ruffling its ruby-bright feathers. Its beak was nearly as big as her hand, looking like it could crush bone, and yet she handled it with a casual affection and trust. “Question back to you, dear: we’re two women who both care a lot about him. We have that much in common. I think you’re good for him. I’ve watched him grow up from a cocky little hayseed thrown in the deep end, watched him wall all the best of him away, and you’re the one that’s brought him back. But are you just going to politely tolerate me for Haymitch’s sake, or can you and I give things a try in our own right?”

Cards thrown right on the table indeed, Johanna thought. “I’ve got nothing against you. So long as you don’t try to hold it over me that you somehow know him better than I do. You know who he’s been, true. But I know who he is more than you ever will.”
“I’ve been married long enough myself to know that,” Chantilly told her with a slight shrug. “I know Niël’s heart and mind a lot better than people that met him years and years before.” She gave a soft, sad smile. “They’re all dead now, of course.”

The other victors, Johanna realized. The last few years had hit One so deeply. The poverty, the hopelessness, the death—maybe she and Haymitch had flippantly joked about completing the Career trifecta of screwed districts, but it was hard to see it in action. Particularly in Two and now here in One, both districts who had existed solely to serve the Capitol’s whims for harsh enforcement and extreme decadence most closely, that lifestyle had died with the old Capitol. District Fourteen would have no need of the training ways and total obedience and devotion of so many Peacekeepers, nor all the luxury goods they’d formerly so prized. Four’s fishing might eventually come back, but for One and Two, she sensed only the glum, grey heavy burden of a people unable to understand or predict their own future, only certain that a way of life was gone forever.

Chantilly was a victor, though, a survivor of the Games and the hell of months of imprisonment following the Quell, and that certainly counted for something. She’d never bonded well with Cashmere and Gloss because the two of them only relied on each other, and maybe on Enobaria. But her best friend had been Career, so she was hardly in a position to judge. “You miss them.”

“I miss their friendship. Their guidance. My blood family slowly faded—I was happy to bring them up out of the silver mines and better provide for them by always making the grade when term cuts happened at the Center. And I saw them well cared for after my Games. But when they barely see you from six to seventeen, and when you’re fresh from the arena and become something they can’t understand besides…”

Johanna thought of her own parents then, of Bern and Heike. She remembered the impossible distance she’d felt between the thing the arena gave back to them and the girl who’d been their daughter and sister only a month before. Nothing could ever be the same again, for as much as they’d loved her. More than once during that long winter after her Games, sleepless and hyperaware with a hatchet within reach beside her bed, she’d crept downstairs and heard her parents talking softly about their agony in not being able to reach her or comfort her. The choked, muffled sound of their tears stayed with her still. “Yeah,” she said, voice suddenly a bit rough. “I can imagine.”

“You ought to keep him,” Chantilly said, nodding to the Grey. “He’s taken a shine to you. After all, Niello and I owe you both a wedding present.”

Looking at the parrot, touched by the gesture, she said wryly, remembering those long minutes of attempted distraction in that Capitol hospital, “Thanks for that. Well, we were talking about getting a dog. Although we can’t take the little guy—”

“Girl, actually.”

“OK,” she accepted that a little sheepishly—apparently it wasn’t obvious like with dogs and cats and the like, “but we can’t take her right now.”

“That’s all right. We can bring her with us.”

She figured it out quickly enough. “Moving east, are you?”

“He asked.” Chantilly looked at her steadily. “I get the impression it was kind of an impulse on his part, so I doubt he asked you. So…if that’s all right by you.”

“Sure.” It was only fair. She’d have her best friend there, and clearly, she got the sense these two needed it just as much. Already she sort of liked Niello and the kids, and as for Chantilly, so long as
Haymitch wouldn’t be an issue of contention, she saw a hint of sass and steel underneath that feminine exterior. She had the feeling they could get along just fine now. “Between you, me, and Annie, we’ll rule the Village, easy.”

“Well, thinking of that, then can I talk you into a scheme?”

“All ears,” she said, actually intrigued now. Agreeing to help out on the Enobaria matter, she was kicking her own ass a bit for not realizing it while they were there, or when talking to her. But she understood in a way. Enobaria didn’t want to be seen as weak or needy, but if they managed to make it sound like they were concerned for her and Brutus and the baby, that would make it acceptable. Wryly, she was forced to admit Chantilly had an instinctive grasp on how to maintain and sway a whole social web that she had to envy. At least she was moving beyond the point where being as aggressive and obnoxious as possible was her default mode. She’d never learn the art of charm and subtlety, though, and that was all right. If he’d wanted that, Haymitch could have had it in the woman here in Victors’ Square.

The next day, escorted by Em Roseby, she spent most of the day chatting up the architects, drawn into their odd but fascinating world. It was probably a sign of how interested she was that her ignorance didn’t make her feel self-conscious, but more inspired to learn. It probably also helped that they didn’t condescend. If anything they seemed eager to teach—maybe it was because she was a victor, maybe it was because they just wanted motivated pupils. In any case, recruiting some of them for Twelve’s rebuilding wasn’t difficult. Given their prospects in One were somewhat limited in the future, she wasn’t surprised. But well pleased with her efforts between Fourteen, Thirteen, and here in One in having secured a good architectural team both for the district and for herself to learn from over the next years, she headed back towards the Square, talking with Em about fairly trivial things rather than dwelling constantly on One’s current state. Neither of them talked about the bombing either, and how terrified they both had been until they found their husbands still alive. There was really no need. Like victors who didn’t need to ask what the arena had felt like, that shared ordeal was something that could stay unspoken and yet understood.

Haymitch came in just before dinner with the Rosebys. They chatted business lightly over the meal, kicking around ideas to help One transition. “You’ve got your share of watchmakers, metalsmiths and the like, all used to delicate work, and I imagine they could go train in Three for some of the finer work in their gadgets,” Haymitch brought up.

“Iridia said Three got hit pretty bad with the Capitol fighting hard to keep them,” Gilt acknowledged. “All the computer technology and medical supplies, among other things?” Johanna said, shaking her head. “Damn straight they did.” Though she noticed Haymitch was looking a little lost in his own thoughts in the spaces between addressing something. It was a subtle difference, but compared with how deft and quick he usually was at these kinds of conversations, it seemed like he was putting in more effort to stay sharp.

“What about the others, though?” Emerald brought up. “Not going to be much call for jewelers, rugmakers, and the like, I’d imagine.”

“We’ll have to figure that out,” Gilt said grimly, fingers tightening around the stem of his wineglass. She noticed Haymitch had turned down the wine. Apparently he was keeping his resolve, though now and again she caught his eyes on the bottle like it was some kind of salvation. What the hell?

Walking back after dinner, she asked him bluntly, “What’s up?”
He didn’t waste time trying to pretend. “Sorry. Just…a bit off. I checked the files at Peacekeeper HQ this afternoon. Ash was here.”

“What? When?”

“Up until late last winter. He was in Six before that.” He blew out a slow breath, as if bracing himself for something. “He was in Seven before that. Around the years of your Games.”

She did the math and figured that much out for herself, as he unlocked the door of the house they were staying in and let them both inside. “Is that the problem?”

“I don’t know what he might have done there, Hanna. To your people.”

So this was what had been plaguing him—the fear that somehow, his brother might have hurt her, or hurt her people. “We knew the few genuinely rotten eggs, Haymitch. Knew their faces. Word got around quickly. I don’t remember him.” She felt lousy saying it. It felt like somehow, she should have known, should have noticed a face similar to his. But she’d had so many other concerns, and anyway, aside from the remarkably friendly or remarkably bad, they were all just white uniforms to her. “So you can rest easy on that, OK?”

Chances were Ash had done something in Seven that she wouldn’t enjoy, but if it was purely based on orders, she would find a way to forgive that, if for no other reason than not making Haymitch take that burden of guilt upon himself. If she would find a way to forgive Heike for whatever things she’d done by the force of duty, she would have to extend Ash that same grace.

He smiled ever so slightly, but she saw it was an expression without much meaning. “Yeah.”

Getting ready for bed, she was about to try to suggest they take his mind off it the best way she knew how. But by the time she finished brushing her teeth and all, it looked like he was already fast asleep. She woke up in the darkness, and heard the soft, tortured sounds of him struggling to hold it in. Moving closer, finding his turned back, she put a hand on his arm. “Tell me,” she said, voice coming out a bit more insistent than she had intended, but moved to it by the sense of dread. If he moved away from her, if he set up those cool, distant walls to keep even her at bay, she didn’t know how to deal with it. The thought of him just slipping away silently to a place he wouldn’t let her follow was almost unbearable. “Just…tell me,” she repeated, moving closer, her body curving around his, arm draped over him to pull him more tightly to her. She pressed a kiss to his shoulder. “Damn it, what hurts you hurts me already, and it hurts even worse when won’t let me be there for it, don’t you get that?”

All right, she was coming on fierce when maybe she should have been gentle, but she couldn’t just let him go. She could fight because that was what she was good at doing.

Thoughts spun wildly in her head of what he must have read in that file about Ash. What actions had been reported there that he’d kept it from her? It was his brother, not him, he’s not responsible, she reminded herself easily. Haymitch finally sighed, muscles still pulled tight, and his voice was low and brittle as he said, “They sent him to Eight. After the Victory Tour. To put down the rebellion there.”

It hit her like a physical blow. She remembered hearing about the reports of Eight’s hellish winter and spring after the Victory Tour, and remembered talking to Marcellus and Alayna about the Peacekeepers during the rebellion. Eight had more than taken back its share of blood on the Peacekeepers during the prolonged fighting there. Marcellus had said only a few were ever taken prisoner, so she immediately knew what he feared: firstly, that Ash had done something horrific and unforgivable there, and secondly, that he had died there as well. He must be feeling like he’d suddenly lost Ash all over again in every way that mattered, body and soul both. “Maybe I should have just left it,” he went on, and at least he was talking now. “Sometimes the answers you find ain’t ones you can easily stand.”
“You’d always be left wondering then, and feeling like you should have done something,” she coaxed him. “I know you.” Holding him tighter, as if she could somehow keep him safe by it, she said quietly, “I could call up Marcellus or Alayna. Ask them if they know anything…”

“The odds of that are pretty slim. Maybe someday,” he said, and now he did finally roll over to face her. His fingers touched her cheek, gentle in the dark, just a soft caress. “I can’t. For now, I’ll just have to accept he’s probably dead. Which means I’m no worse off than I was all these years already being certain he was dead.” Never mind that having had hope and now having it ripped to shreds again had to be a torment of its own, she wasn’t going to insist on proving the point to him right now. “But there’s too much going on with all of this and I owe it to them to not get lost in this. When I’m ready for that answer and what it might bring, we’ll call.” Taking his hand in hers, he pressed a kiss to her wrist. “I’ll just hope Heike didn’t get sent there too.” So did she, and the dread of it sat heavy inside of her suddenly. They’d be in Ten soon enough to check the records there. Maybe she could call Bardoka or Texel Dravid and ask them to look, but she felt like it was something she ought to do herself.

They’d gone into this knowing they might never find full resolution, but that was better than giving up and not trying. “Thanks,” she whispered, drawing him closer, wanting to give him what solace and comfort that she could, and this time he did answer it.

Of course Haymitch insisted on scoping out the painter who was taking Peeta on as an apprentice, and by morning when they headed out the door, he seemed calmer. She knew the hurt and uncertainty hadn’t gone away entirely, but it seemed to have been reduced to a bearable level. He was trying to accept it as best he could.

Vermilion Sturgis kept a studio in town, but apparently his home was in the mountains nearby. “I like the peace and quiet and the light is better,” he announced brusquely as he showed them around the studio. The painter was a man of about fifty, and his dark eyes and grey-grizzled hair showed that he wasn’t born to the artisan class—Johanna realized he must have been truly outstanding to win a place as an apprentice as a poor outsider.

“T’ve seen some of your works before,” Haymitch mentioned.

Vermilion gave an annoyed snort as if he’d been insulted. “Mindless shit produced for the Capitol.”

“Then it’s very good mindless shit, which makes me wonder what you can do when you give a damn.”

Acting like a well-stroked cat, the artist was only too happy to show off some of his paintings then. Haymitch in particular was staring at one of stream of dirty, shabby men and women walking out from into the dark opening of a cave—from their helmets, they were miners, she realized. The jagged edges of it and the sheer gaping blackness subtly suggested a twisted mouth, eager to devour everything put into it, and it was only by sheer luck that the tiny figures were escaping. “You come from mining stock, huh?”

A slight acknowledging smile appeared on Vermilion’s face. “Gemstones. I imagine you understand, coming from coal yourself.”

Haymitch let out a soft rumble of acknowledgment at that. “Yeah. If it’s for sale, I might have to buy it from you.” He looked over and raised an eyebrow. “If not, no offense given, I hope. I know not everything can be bought.”

“It’s yours, then,” he said with a careless shrug, though Johanna could see the approval in his expression. “I can’t eat art and better it goes to someone who actually appreciates it. Whatever you
think the piece is worth.”

“A lot,” Haymitch said bluntly. “Besides, like you said, an artist has to eat, and you’re taking on an apprentice who definitely eats like a growing boy.”

That earned a laugh out of Vermilion. “I saw the television special showcasing his art. I imagine he only chose the most banal paintings for that? Nothing remotely unpleasant, subversive, or dangerous?”

She remembered that special, mandatory viewing as it had been. Most of the paintings had been boring—a field of flowers, suspiciously happy and healthy-looking kids playing with kittens. It was like propaganda for the Capitol ideal of Twelve.

“Of course.” Haymitch shrugged. “Helped him go through his stack of canvases myself.” That must have been a fun evening, Johanna thought wryly, sitting there going, So how could this one potentially piss the Capitol off? It’s just a picture of a kitten!

“Then boy clearly has some talent, even when he’s painting inane stuff. Though his technique is sloppy and inconsistent at best.” Hearing Haymitch start to protest, Vermilion held up a hand to cut him off. “Look, I know there’s no way he could have learned it in Twelve. I didn’t have technique either before I won an apprenticeship off my master seeing talent she could develop. It just means he’s got a lot to learn and he’d better realize that. I can definitely give him technique, if he’s willing to shut up and listen.”

“Peeta’s a good kid. Doesn’t put on airs.” She heard the defensive edge in Haymitch’s voice and tried to suppress a smile at it.

“Then he’s a smarter kid than my two last apprentices,” Vermilion said wryly. Johanna was actually enjoying this a bit. Yeah, Peeta would do well with someone who challenged him and who wasn’t licking his boots just because he was a famous victor and Katniss’ boyfriend. He’d learn more that way too.

“Thoughts?” Haymitch said, turning immediately to her once they’d left.

“The man’s got talent.” She hadn’t had the visceral personal reaction Haymitch had, but even she could recognize the power in those paintings, the subtle details that said so much more than a blatant display ever would. ”They’ll do well together. He’ll demand a lot, but Peeta will be quick to see the value of it and won’t complain. Now, if it was Katniss, totally different story…” She snickered, and was gratified to see him laugh in answer. No matter what happened with Ash, or with Heike, they would find a way to move on and live their lives.

Heading out from the district center next, they ended up touring some of the mining areas. If the artisans were feeling the pinch of no demand for their products, the miners were getting hit hard too by not needing to supply the raw materials. The miners, dark like Chantilly and Vermilion, rugged and a little ragged and too thin, spoke eloquently enough that this was the side of One the Capitol hadn’t wanted people to see. They seemed to respond readily to Haymitch, and to her as well from growing up in in a rough industry too. Going down one of the platinum mines, Haymitch was peppering the foreman guiding them with questions as she was trying to not feel like she was trapped. That picture of the mine with its hungry mouth was sharp in her mind. She was made for fresh air and forests, not places like this entombed with miles of rock above her head. As his hand brushed hers and he squeezed her fingers for a second, her own discomfort opened up enough for her to realize Haymitch was talking to keep himself distracted.

The oppressive darkness pressed in around her, the lantern light seeming to barely keep it at bay.
That must have kept him even more unsettled. She looked at the glitter of a vein of platinum against the rough, dull rock, the light winking off of it, and thought about how little a person’s life had meant against a piece of metal. “They’ll be quicker to transition than the artisans,” the foreman told them, acting nonchalant as if he was chatting with them on the porch of his house.

“Less ego to overcome?” she said wryly.

“More or less,” he acknowledged. “They won’t feel like it’s a comedown in life to go be working farms and forests the like. Seems to me a lot of ‘em would welcome a chance to work in the sunlight.”

“I don’t blame them,” Haymitch said tightly. “So we’ll give that opportunity.”

She felt like she could breathe again walking out from the mine, yanking off her helmet, inhaling the sweetness of air not gone stale, feeling the summer breeze cooling off her sticky, sweaty body. The mine had been hotter than she expected—whether it was the depth or the insulation of the rock or both, she wasn’t sure. But it had felt suffocating. “I don’t know how the hell your lot did that every day, going down in that,” she admitted honestly to him.

“I don’t either. I did it for a month when I was twelve and it scared the fuck out of me every day.”

“I thought they didn’t work kids down the mines in Twelve.”

“They used to. Two and a half hours after school, three days a week.” His lips twisted in a grimace. “Not like we kids were strong enough to actually work the face with a pick. But when I was twelve, that was around when the main faces at Dunstan’s were finally getting tapped out and they had to find new ones. Of course,” he shrugged, “they got in the habit of sinking exploratory tunnels before they could widen them for the adults to start seriously mining. A kid was small enough to fit, you see? You’d go crawling on our belly through those test shafts, and they were so tight sometimes it’d tear your clothes, and sometimes you’d get stuck and end up yelling and hoping someone heard and would come pull you out before you used up all the air in that space you’d just plugged…have to turn off your lantern in that case since those lights were oxygen-powered. Nice and efficient on the surface, but Three didn’t understand they were fucking useless down in a mine…” His voice trailed off, and she imagined him, a terrified little boy, bedraggled and soot-streaked, stuck in a pitch-dark tunnel and screaming himself hoarse. There was nothing she could say, but it turned her stomach. No wonder he hated the dark so much, and maybe he hadn’t even admitted to himself that he’d probably hated it even before his arena.

As if snapping out of a trance, he gave a shrug that was half a shudder and said, “Some kids suffocated, some just up and died of sheer terror, I think, and some of the tunnels collapsed and killed a few more. They quickly deemed it ‘inefficient use of labor’ and sent us kids back to the surface again as shale-pickers, at least until enough miners got injured to take kids off the work rolls entirely.” He gave a wintery, humorless smile. “After all, kill too many kids off and who was going to be left to breed the next generation to keep the cycle going?”

She held his hand. That seemed to be the only thing to do at the moment. After a minute of silence, he nodded back down the hill towards the miners’ cabins. “It’s too much like Twelve was, especially in the months before the Quell,” he admitted bluntly. “The miners. Too little food and too little hope.”

“So then I know you’ll do what you can for ‘em,” she told him. She’d be the one to try to keep him from diving in too deep, though.

She woke up the next morning, grimacing at the dull cramps in her lower belly, afraid she knew
exactly what it meant. She’d figured last night it was just a stomachache, but maybe that was only what she’d wanted to believe.

Padding to the bathroom, the sight of the first traces of blood readily confirmed what she’d already known but hadn’t wanted to accept. Going back to bed, she felt Haymitch stirring, obviously having been woken up by her getting up. Neither of them slept soundly enough to stay asleep through that. She decided she might as well get it over with so that he knew and didn’t get his hopes up. “I got my period.” Stupidly, she felt compelled to add as she settled back down beside him, not quite wanting to look at his eyes, “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” he asked, brow furrowed in confusion. “It’s not your fault, Hanna.”

It was, though, wasn’t it? Last time obviously he’d had no trouble getting her pregnant, no drugs needed for him. So any failing seemed like it was from her body, not his. It was her body that had lost the first baby as well, not his. “For…” Her throat felt stuck shut with the disappointment and frustration.

He gathered her in, holding her tight as she felt the strength of his arms and chest. He kissed her brow and said, “It’s only been a few weeks. Maybe some of the drugs are still working their way out in both of us. We knew it might take some time.”

“I know.” The irony that they’d conceived so easily while they hadn’t even been trying, and that now it hadn’t happened when they actually desperately wanted it, seemed a little cruel. She shook her head in a wordless, growing misery. “But I don’t think I knew how much I wanted it to happen until right now.” It was only now she realized she’d hoped it would happen right away, that there would be no need for these cycles of anxiety and disappointment. She was utterly comfortable when a decision was made and knowing it was final, but the decision here was just the beginning, rather than the end—so much of this was out of her control.

“Then we’ll just try again. And if it never happens, yeah, I’m sure I’ll be a little disappointed right in the moment, but…I’d get over it quick enough, because,” he looked right into her eyes, “I’ve got you, and I wouldn’t ever want anyone else.”

She managed a smile at that, comforted by the words, but she couldn’t let herself fall apart because of them, even if they made the emotion surge within her all the more deeply. He loved her, whether she could give him this or not. “Not even if she got knocked up easy as anything and had a dozen kids?”

“A dozen would kill me. And yeah, kids would be great, and I do want them, but…I don’t need ‘em to be happy.” Fingers twining in her hair, he kissed her lips gently. “Never doubt that you’re more than enough.”
Interlude: Thirty-Nine

Riding back with the herd towards Southlands, the temperature was rapidly dropping as the sun went down. Lori pulled her coat a little tighter around herself and hurried along to help take care of the usual list of chores for evening camp: settling the cattle, watering the horses, establishing the camp. She waved to Jay already busy at Chuck’s wagon—it seemed the old cook had handed more and more authority over to him as the drive went on, recognizing someone who had both more enthusiasm and more talent for cooking than he did. Her stomach growled, being as she’d had only a bit of last night’s cornbread and some dried fruit leather for lunch, eating while still in the saddle. But she pushed that aside since it would do no good to fuss about it for the time being. Dinner would happen when everything was done for the night, and not before.

But they were all used enough to the routine by now, even the new hands, that it was accomplished quickly. The first watch ate their dinner quickly and headed over to keep an eye on the herd, but the rest of them lingered. The usual round of compliments and grunts of approval for the meal were directed at Jay, who acknowledged them with a beaming smile.

Licking the last of the honey off her fingers, feeling blissful over that little treat that Chuck had apparently been hiding for the homeward trip, she saw Terry coming up to her. Stopping immediately, she felt the embarrassment of a superior officer—couldn’t quite shake the last instincts of that yet—seeing her act like a little kid with a piece of candy. Though he hardly seemed to notice, but that was Terry sometimes. She’d noticed he seemed introspective pretty regularly. He and his thoughts are real close friends, Rhee had said with a good-natured laugh, and sometimes I’ve gotta pull the two of ’em apart for a little while their own good.

“Have time for a walk?” he asked, nodding towards a patch of cottonwoods nearby. The two of them were friendly enough, but being as he was something like fifteen years older and had been so much higher in rank, and his ordeal in the war hadn’t been alongside her, it was harder to grow personally close to him the way she had with people like Holly and Jay and Rhee. She understood then it was something private, something he didn’t want the rest of the camp hearing. Peacekeeper business of some sort, she deduced, although why he wasn’t including Rhee and Jay and Holly and the rest, she didn’t know. Immediately a spike of fear hit her at that, because if it wasn’t meant for all of them it had to be something she’d done, something wrong. Old habits died a hard death.

So the minute they were clear of the camp she moved to pre-empt things a little. “Whatever it was, sir,” and using that was like instinct too, slipping back into the old mindset, “I apologize, and I won’t do it again…”

He looked over at her, a startled look in his eyes in the dimming light of the fast-falling dusk, casting his features in shadow. “It’s nothing you did wrong. I just asked you here to…ask. Rhee told me you don’t remember your district life?”

She made a rueful face of her own as she sat down on a fallen log, unable to help it. She’d had to explain it too many times before, but she always knew how stupid and hopeless the way it had happened made her sound. “Fell during the physical assessment tests on the bars. Conked myself right out. They say I didn’t wake up for two days. Couldn’t remember a thing before that.”

“Yes, of course,” and there was an odd hint of impatience in his tone as if that was nothing of consequence. That was unusual. Almost everyone wanted to dwell on that part. He sat down beside her, though with a slow care to his movements—the way to move around someone not to be spooked. “Do you remember anything at all, though? Bits and flashes, maybe? What about the day your family was killed?”
She remembered then that he’d dealt with the same problem. Rhee told her that Terry had lost his memory in the accident that killed his family. She felt a surge of fellow-feeling for him, because she knew just how damn hard it had been, coming in as old as she had and totally clueless about everything. The frantic scramble to make it all fit together and forge a new life while escaping that empty, black void of the past, hadn’t ever been easy.

He was just looking for someone to talk to about it. Maybe he hadn’t ever encountered someone like her before, or if he had, he hadn’t known. Feeling oddly close to him in that moment because of it, she cast her mind back, even though that particular request was a painful one.

“Not much,” she admitted. “Just a few moments.” Most of those had come back to her on the walk from Twelve to Ten, in fits and starts.

"You lot," a white-uniformed Peacekeeper with grey-streaked blond hair stepped in front of her while her mom and dad and Max were busy bucking a log and she was struggling to keep up. “You three are moving to the northwest sector now to scout it out and fell a couple testers to check the quality. This one,” her hand caught Lori’s shoulder, hard as iron, “is supposed to get the mule cart and follow.” The northwest? That was the far boundary of the area. She didn’t think the Peacekeepers hadn’t cleared the area yet for forest cats and bears and the like.

“She’s only fourteen, that’s young for handling a cart alone,” Mom protested indignantly, straightening and pressing her hands to the small of her back, which Lori knew must be aching. “I can drive it, if needs be.”

“She’s two years past old enough to be left on her own in a Games arena,” came the reply, blunt but absolutely true. She flinched, terrified at the thought of being thrown into the arena. “And no, your orders are to report to the northwest, with your husband and your son. You’re an efficient logger. This one? Not suited for the logging life, I’d say.” She nodded to Lori. There was a smile on her face that oddly was anything but cruel. “Looks like she’s lucky she doesn’t cut her own foot off with an axe.”

Her dad let out a soft growl at that, and her mom’s hand on his arm restrained him. “I’ll get the cart,” she said hurriedly. She’d had to practice driving carts and handling the mules, every kid did, but she’d never driven one alone before. “I’ll see you in the northwest in a couple hours, OK?”

“You be careful,” her mom called as she hurried down the path back towards camp. Lori knew she meant that two ways—both that she ought to look out for herself, and that she’d best take care with the mule and the cart. Any damage to those would be considered destruction of Capitol property and she’d be punished.

She raced down the hill, the sounds of crashing timber, axes and saws, and the songs of loggers filling her ears, trying to quell her own panic and hoping she didn’t screw it up.

“I have that,” she told Terry, after describing some of the memory—not all of it, because it was hers. “And then I have what must have been a few hours later. Just a few moments of a bunch of Peacekeepers waiting for me as I drove up, telling me they wouldn’t let me go in because they were dead. Ripped apart by forest cats.” Her eyes suddenly stung at that, at her own remembered grief and horror, and she quelled them only with effort.

They rode back down the hill with the bodies of three slain forest cats in the back and the bodies of her family. They didn’t bring the bodies of her family with and she was grateful for that mercy. The middle-aged Peacekeeper, the one who’d called her a no-good logger earlier and ordered her to get the cart, had jumped in the cart and took the reins from her numb fingers. Maybe she realized Lori was in no condition to drive, or to make the long walk back. “Don’t you worry, girl,” she
murmured, that hard hand on her shoulder again in something that felt like sympathy now, “you’ll be safe. You’ll have people that’ll care for you.”

Terry sat there in silence for a few moments, head bowed, hands clasped together. “I was in Seven. Second rotation. I never saw a fourteen-year-old sent as a solo cart driver. That was usually the oldest kids. Were you stretched thin in the northwest that summer?”

“I don’t think so.” Now she was confused. The questions couldn’t be anything but deliberate.

“The Peacekeeper there, the one who gave you the order. Describe her?”

“Tall. Skinny. Early forties?” Seeing it with the knowledge of the Corps she had, she added, “Which means she must have been a lifer, so probably a Law. Blond, starting to go grey. Blue eyes.”

“Cassia,” he said, half to himself. “You’ve got some pretty good observation skills there,” now he addressed her. “Sounds like Cassia Law. She was a lifer. Came from Twelve, like me. Although obviously I come from mining stock and she didn’t. Kept asking me about what I remembered about there, since she apparently got sent to the Peacehome when she was only two or three, and I never had much to tell her.” He let out a snort of irritation. “Sorry. I’m rambling.” She waited, feeling a little off-kilter since she sensed that for Terry’s sharp mind to just start wandering on tangents was a bit unusual. But just chattering on wouldn’t help. “This was the…summer of 67?” He saw her acknowledging nod. “Yeah, OK. I was in the far north that summer, near Wolfshead Lake.” She was relieved to hear that, and to have him answer her unspoken question of whether or not he’d been there when it happened. She wasn’t sure she’d feel comfortable talking about it if so, if he’d seen her as that stupid, stunned teenage girl, even if it would have meant he could give her more details about her life.

“We were in the far northwest, almost out by Six,” she answered. The giant redwoods and cedars confirmed that in her mind.

He sighed again, looking upwards as if looking to the stars for some kind of answer to everything troubling him. “It was a real bad summer for forest cat attacks. By far the worst one I experienced there. We kept scouring the areas before sending in the crews but the damn things were everywhere, and they were particularly bold that year. I think it must have been a lean winter for them.” He sounded troubled. “Everyone fussed so much about the Mason family, of course, but they were far from the only ones killed. If not for the oddness of what sounds like you being directly kept back against usual procedures while your family was ordered out to the sector border away from the cleared zone, I’d say sure, just a tragic accident. But there’s that, and there’s the fact Cassia started drinking a lot after that. We’d have to cover for her most of the winter until Head Law caught on. I don’t know what happened to Cassia after that, just disappeared. She’d never tell us any details, would just start snapping at any of us who asked what happened and telling us to mind our own damn business. And since she was a superior officer,” he shrugged lightly.

She knew what he meant—foibles and oddities in superiors weren’t questioned. Junior officers were supposed to keep their mouths shut. “But when she was deep in a bottle she’d end up muttering about some bad deaths up in the woods that summer that obviously weighed on her and how she was glad one kid survived. I’ll bet that was you.”

“Oh,” she said. So that was why he’d wanted to talk as well, to try to reconcile his own memories of that time in Seven with what shreds she had. For a moment she resented that he had five complete years there to remember of a place that had meant nothing to him but a duty tour, while she had almost nothing of her own family. Then she told herself that was being petty and idiotic—he had nothing of his own childhood either. “One funny thing, though. My mother, father, and brother Maximillian were there. But I don’t know where my older sister was. Ingeborg. But I don’t…
remember Inge’s absence being something I noticed as odd that day.” She sighed. “Maybe she died young? I don’t even know that.”

He smiled then, but it was more like a funny, taut grimace. “Strange thing is, I don’t remember either it being all that odd that my older brother Dougless wasn’t there the day my mother and—there was this girl, maybe an older sister of mine they didn’t have in the records—got executed in the kitchen of our house.” He looked over at her, eyes suddenly burning fiercely with emotion. She couldn’t help the involuntary gasp that escaped her mouth at a statement like that. Executed? But he sounded so vehemently certain about it.

“She turned me away so I didn’t have to see. I think he was…fond of my mother. But they didn’t die in a housing collapse like I was always told at the Peacehome. They burned the house, probably to cover it up.” He took in a deep breath. “But here’s the thing that would make sense of it all—maybe that brother of mine was already off being executed for treason. And maybe they decided to clean house and wipe out his entire family. It’s more usual for them to do it that thoroughly in the Capitol, and to make a very big spectacle of it—public hangings and the like. But in some ways it would be more terrifying for the neighbors to never quite know just how this entire family died, whether it was an accident or not, wouldn’t it? And maybe they decided to secretly spare one kid, the youngest, as a treason-price to send into Capitol service. That’s what they did with Kalea, after all.”

“I know,” she said. “What you’re saying sounds….crazy. But at the same time…” She couldn’t fault the sharp logic behind it. “You’re sure about that memory?”

“Completely. I get clearer memories at times of extreme stress. That one happened while I was in Eight.” His brusque tone didn’t invite her to ask about the details of how that happened. “But it was sharp as anything I’ve ever remembered. And I’ve never remembered the accident that supposedly occurred.”

She felt a shiver work its way down her spine that had nothing to do with the night air at all. The thought of it was terrifying in all its weight—not only just that her family had been murdered, but that her entire history had been fabricated to cover for it and to keep her from asking questions. “Is that why we don’t remember anything?”

“We were quite good Corps prospects if we weren’t going to cause any troubles fussing about the Capitol murdering our families to cause a divided loyalty, don’t you think?”

She thought about that a minute and nodded. “Orphans, and you were only eleven or twelve, right? And I was already fourteen. Old for the Peacehome, sure, but the amiable older kids, the ones that readily accept the way of it, those are always considered a blessing…” Fewer years to raise a good candidate, much less investment in food and clothing and schooling, than a newborn or toddler would be. But there was the tricky problem of making them get beyond that old district life and fully accept the new reality. “The instructors always said it was such a nice change from most of the older kids how quickly I adjusted,” she said, voice barely above a whisper, feeling sick at the memory now. What had been a source of pride for an anxious teenage girl eager to please and to find somewhere to belong, now felt like a sense of something almost like violation in the fact that she’d actually been a blank slate for them to write upon so freely.

“They told me that too,” he told her grimly. “So I just worked all the harder to fit in.” He gave another of those irritated huffs. “So next question: how did they get rid of our memories to make us into completely trouble-free candidates? Just, what, whack us over the head with a big stick and hope that worked?”
It surprised her that she was starting to accept Terry’s crazy scenario, but it made a terrible sense out of so many fragmented pieces. That he’d doggedly followed the trail this far off small pieces of evidence and huge leaps of deduction was impressive—she could see why he’d been specialized as a legalist and investigator. “Oh, no,” she said. “That would be far too risky. Memory’s a tough thing. A concussion won’t usually cause that wide-ranging amnesia. That would likely cause some short-term memory loss. Total memory loss, that’s more likely some pretty specific and significant brain damage that would be as likely to kill us or leave us paralyzed or speechless if you’re just inflicting it with a random whack on the head.” As she recited that bit, she let out a rough, almost panicked laugh. “Fuck me. I’m such an idiot. I learned that in medic class and I never even questioned it. I figured I was just the weird exception because you never know with the brain—it’s such a tricky organ. Maybe by that point I didn’t want to bother asking questions anyway. I’d accepted things and my place in them, you know?” By that point she’d thought of herself as Kallanthe and she’d just wanted to fit in and do the best she could in the Corps.

“I know. So how did they do it? You’re the one with the medic training.”

It felt strange to be the one knowing more in this case, but she put her mind to it. “Surgery, maybe? There are some drugs like amptherodol or tracker jacker venom that can affect memories but we never really learned much since those would be something only a Capitol psychologist would use, not a field medic for the Corps. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize, Lori. You’ve been very helpful.”

The two of them sat there in silence for a minute or two just taking in the full burden of it, but it felt strangely lightened by having someone else with the same fears. “So what do we do now?” she asked finally. “I mean…”

“Chances are we’ll never find out who we were,” he said wearily. “Assuming whoever wins this war doesn’t execute us if we’re found out as deserters from the Corps. I imagine they covered their tracks pretty thoroughly.” He shook his head, one hand slamming down suddenly on the log in a display of temper that made her instinctively jump. “Damnit. Maybe I shouldn’t have bothered. I probably shouldn’t have dragged you into this either—what was the point getting us both upset?”

“Because it’s the truth—you’re an investigator, Terry. You know the truth hurts sometimes. So does healing. But it’s still worth it.” Sometimes that had to be put aside in the interest of doing a greater good. She’d learned lesson that the first time she’d ever given sutures. Though it hurt that the crime he was solving wasn’t theft or assault, it was whatever had been done to him, and to her. But for all the pain and the horror at her family’s fate, at figuring out how she’d been deliberately claimed as some kind of useful salvage and then manipulated and shaped to fill that role, she was strangely relieved. In a way it had lanced a deeper pain; it now made sense. It would never be complete because they were still dead and she’d still had her head turned into an absolute muddle, but at least she had some answers now.

At that moment she felt like she could let go that girl who’d thought herself so stupid and clumsy that she’d caused her own amnesia, who’d so readily done as she was told because she’d figured that was her only option. “Don’t blame yourself for how it turned out,” she told him. “For…going along with it at the Peacehome and just trying to make the best of it. We thought it was all we had, that was what they told all the kids anyway. And if we’d been problematic…if the Capitol was willing to order our entire families executed, you think they weren’t keeping some kind of tabs on us?”

“Of course they were. There were always enough external inspectors that they could have been ordered to do that along with their routine questions without making the heads of the Peacehome suspicious.” He got up from the log, offering her a hand. Taking it, she pulled herself up as well.
“I’m glad I wasn’t there,” he told her bluntly. “That it wasn’t me given the orders to…deal with your family.”

She recognized it was a polite euphemism, but at the same time realized that words like *kill* or *execute* or *murder* would probably have tugged too painfully at his own memories. “I’m glad too,” she said. She wasn’t sure she could have sat there beside him at that moment. She knew him well enough she was certain he would have done it without malice or pleasure, and the blame lay with the Capitol and not him, but she still would have wanted to tear him to pieces.

It crossed her mind to ask whether he would have done it or not, but that wasn’t fair. That gave the impression they’d had a choice. Duty was simply duty; they’d all been forced to do things they personally wished they could refuse. She’d seen that sharp as anything back in Twelve. Refusal just meant punishment, even execution, and that the next Peacekeeper would just carry out the order anyway. She was certain that, having seen the kind of man he was, given the choice he would have refused, and she would be content with that. “Thanks. I know this couldn’t have been easy for you.”

He gave her a smile and this one was more genuine. “I can see why Rhee likes you so much. You’re a real good sort, Lori.” She blushed a little at that, oddly pleased to hear it stated so openly, but at the same time, relieved he mentioned Rhee rather than whatever tentative thing she had going with Jay. Funny that this was the topic that brought them closer, but she felt now like she could trust him and even like him in a way she hadn’t before.

“My name probably isn’t even Hannalore, you know.” Like “Kallanthe”, that had to be a name they’d just stuck her with and told her to accept it.

“I know.” Somehow it didn’t surprise her that in dealing with his own side of things, he’d worked through that already in his mind. “But let’s face it—we’ll probably never know our real names. Holly and Kalea are stuck with names that aren’t theirs, Rhee and Alayna were both so young when they went to the Peacehome their district names don’t hold the kind of weight it does for Jay. So I suppose, for me at least, ‘Alister’ is as good a name as any.”

What her real name had been, or that of her parents or siblings, might remain blank forever. She couldn’t hang on forever just hoping to know. Life was going to go on in the meantime, and she’d have to make the choice to keep pace or else stay stuck on this.

“I’m gonna take a minute, if you don’t mind,” she said, nodding towards the west. She left Terry there at the cottonwood to his own privacy to process it all. She wandered out into the open solitude of the prairie under the wide expanse of the sky, the tall grass tickling her fingers as she walked through it, brushing against her legs and resisting her passage. Not so far she couldn’t see the campfires yet and readily guide herself back; she stopped when that was just a faint glow, like distant embers, not entirely lost to the darkness.

But for a few moments she wanted to be separate from that life, and alone with her thoughts. Trying to find a way to say goodbye to her blood family armed with the truth now, rather than whatever lies had been fed to her, maybe she could fully leave Kallanthe behind and find out who she was now meant to be.

~~~~~~~~~~

They’d arrived back in Southlands on a cool and dreary November day after a grueling five weeks on the trail to find out that the fighting had been frenzied while they were away. Hearing that Capitol loyalists had retaken Granite Pass a couple of weeks before, with no survivors reported, and that Commander Lyme Rathbone had been a casualty, Rhiannon had seen Holly suppress a gasp, eyes wide. Holly had been born and raised Two, so even a slightly less impressive victor like Lyme being
murdered was a point of shock. Rhee felt it in her own bones too. Lyme had died in battle and maybe that was the way any true Two citizen would wish, but the report made it sound like she’d been coolly murdered, found shot through the head. The dishonor and mockery in that stoked her temper. Lyme had deserved better than that kind of contempt.

Anyone did, thinking of the spectacle of Thread leaving people hanging on the gallows to make an example of them. Sometimes the images of blackened faces and protruding tongues and the sharp smell of piss and shit and rotting flesh from when they’d finally been allowed to cut down the hanging victims paraded through her dreams along with the nightmare images of the firebombing victims.

She looked over at Terry as Nadji relayed that news, seeing his face go grey a bit, and she knew he wasn’t thinking of Lyme. He was thinking of that memory of his own family being executed, or of being forced down on his own knees in Eight to be shot down like a dog. He kept his composure, though she moved carefully to his side and took his hand. He clung to her for a moment and then eased the pressure of his fingers.

“They took over the main mountain in Two shortly after you lot rode out, so it’s just eliminating enough of the loyalist guerillas to get a clear shot again at the Capitol,” Nadji said, eyeing them. “The Mockingjay got shot by some little Capitol ass-licker even as she was trying to reach out to the people there and get them to surrender to keep them from all being bombed to hell in their mountain. But sounds like she’s alive and well and she’ll be in the force making the final charge to take the Capitol. Brutus and Enobaria showed up in Two to help spur on efforts there. Pissed off about Lyme, I’ve got no doubt.” Rhee realized Nadji was more than old enough to remember Brutus and Lyme’s Games.

“That’s good,” Kalea said brightly. “Very good.” She gave the other woman plenty of admiration for keeping it together and acting the part, given that all of them were internally in agony of sorts hearing that news. Two might not have been theirs by birth in most cases, but it had been the closest thing to home they had, and hearing that brothers and sisters in the Corps were fighting each other now was tearing her up inside. The peaks and meadows of Two would never seem idyllic again in her mind, blood-soaked and brutally won as they were. A good fight was fine, but for those on the Capitol side, they were spending their lives so pointlessly. She grieved that waste.

Settling back in at the station, walking around and hearing the conversations, the Ten natives and those from other districts seemed less interested in the bloody civil conflict tearing Two apart except as one last obstacle to taking down the Capitol.

Still, she felt Terry doing his best, usually with Kalea’s help, to try to rally the others to put that aside, to focus on the here and now. The war was distant and pretty much a foregone conclusion, with the combined might of all the districts, save a few Two dissidents, turned upon the Capitol. The Capitol had never been known for fighters—that was what they had Two for in the first place. Rhee had the sense that once the war finally came to the Capitol’s doorstep, with the Capitol’s lack of fighting spirit and the furious inspiration that would come to the rebels with the goal now within sight, it would be over swiftly.

“It’s a done deal,” Terry said that night in their room, having already come to the same conclusion as her. “They’ll take the Capitol within a month now, if not far less. It just depends how aggressive they are with it.”

“It’ll be a good thing, finally having the war over,” Rhee replied, shrugging off her denim jacket and hanging it neatly on one of the row of pegs on the wall. If there had been any last, lingering shards of conflicted loyalty within her after seeing how little a Peacekeeper mattered to the Capitol from the firebombing of Twelve, they had died there out on the trail when Terry told her that Capitol orders had murdered his people in cold blood when he was a child and then apparently messing with his
head to make him docile and forgetful about it. Her choice was made and she wouldn’t regret it.

“For most,” he said, tugging off his boots and putting them carefully on the rug inside the door.

They’d found out that leaving them outside, even if traces of the smell of mud and animal shit still always seemed to linger after being cleaned at the gear shed, was inviting finding vermin in them the next morning. The native Tens had chuckled at their greenhorn ignorance, but quickly followed it with solid, helpful advice. “For us, it just starts to close the trap tighter, doesn’t it?”

“I know.” The sense of numbered days was there. How long a band of Peacekeepers could hide out here in District Ten without being found out was the question, and she didn’t put much faith in the long term. No matter how quietly they lived and how hard they worked, so many little things could easily tip their hand. “But it’s not like another district would be any better—probably won’t much matter we deserted, it’ll just matter we wore the uniform for years in the first place.” The only place she could think of was Two, and neither of them had any camp-kin there, no blood family to claim where they belonged, and in Two that was everything. There was a reason so many rootless Laws ended up lifers, Heads, or Gameskeepers—they had no home to go to unless they married someone with bloodlines in Two. Besides, if the new regime wanted to punish ex-Peacekeepers, being in Two would be the stupidest and most obvious place possible to find anyone answering that description.

“At least not until spring, love. Riding out of here right now? It’s winter in the north. Going into the snow would be insane. For now, we have a place here.”

“If they find us out,” he pointed out, “that place we have here disappears instantly.” He made a soft noise of dissatisfaction. “It’s a small window still where we could maybe leave, head somewhere still in the south of Panem to avoid the snow. The war chaos would mean we could still blend in easy enough with other cast-offs. But that’s pointless. The risk anywhere will be the same, and no district will be any more welcoming to us in the end if they find out. You’re right. Riding out blind with nowhere to go is just going to get us killed. And we didn’t struggle this far to stay alive to just throw it all away.” He gave her one of those faintly apologetic smiles he had. “Sorry if I’m fretting. You know I don’t like not being able to do anything.”

“Tell you one thing you can do,” she reminded him, seizing his shirt lapels lightly in her fingers and going up on tiptoe to kiss him, “you and I can start getting a wedding together, right?”

He laughed at that, and she realized between the rigors of the trail and the worries about the responsibility he felt for all of them as their former senior officer, she hadn’t heard him laugh in a while. It was a soft, muted chuckle besides, not a full laugh. That was something she hadn’t heard in even longer, maybe not since last winter in One. She wished she’d hear it again someday, be grateful for every moment of him she had, when that was an unexpected gift after how close a brush with death they’d both had. “The war’s ending,” he agreed, folding his arms around her and holding her close. “At least now we know. Our odds are still better than if the Capitol won.”

“Such a romantic,” she mocked him.

“You knew that when you got involved with me,” he teased her flippantly. “Want to change your mind? Still have some time, you know.”

“Not a bit.” They’d live each day as fully as they could, because if nothing else, the uncertainty of it meant that they’d have to seize what chances they could, without regrets. She’d waited long enough for him already, nearly lost him. She had no doubts about this.

Talking to Nadji and Drover, it took the better part of two hours with them trying to puzzle out just how the thing would be registered given that Capitol registration was a moot point now. It was usual for couples here at Southlands to apparently have their district ceremony during the long, settled winter months and register it during a trip to the district center in the spring or summer. “Are you
going to kick up a fuss if we don’t have our papers?” Terry asked Drover dryly.

“Nah,” Drover said with a diffident shrug. “Technically, before the rebellion, you two couldn’t have even gotten married housing without that stamped paper from Justice Building, but I figured you two went through the war and figured each other for dead, so fuck Capitol laws.”

“So you’re marrying here, that means you’re settling in?” Nadji asked with interest.

“Well,” Terry said easily, “Twelve’s a ruin and I’m not sure I’d make much of a fisherman in Four, and you’ve been good to us both here.”

“You’re good workers,” Drover said. “You’re not entirely hopeless now either.”

“Thanks,” Rhee told him with a wry smile, recognizing the compliment he hid behind a crusty comment. But at least by the end of the autumn drive, the tasks definitely had become far easier. Next year, assuming they were still here and their secret was still safe, she was sure it would be even easier yet.

“All right, you want to get hitched here, first thing you need is to put in an order to Centerville. You need a new wool blanket.”

“A blanket, huh?” she asked.

“It’s for the ceremony. A marriage blanket, that’s one of the few products they actually let crafters weave by hand up in Centerville rather than making us buy our own damn wool back from Eight once they make it into fabric. You both put it over your shoulders, see, as you take your vows.” Nadji winked, giving them a sly grin. “And then it’s the blanket for your bed in your new home together—even if you two have been sharing quarters for a while already.”

At least she’d been assigned to work in the breeding station rather than the slaughterhouse. Though that meant for the last few days the locals had been teasing her about the wedding. After they tried to yank her chain a little, they were surprisingly generous. Harnai and Wensley Mareno, their next-door neighbors in the married quarters, quickly stepped in to help organize things. “You’ve got no blood kin here to handle it,” Harnai said, giving Rhee a warm smile. “Thanks,” she said, feeling the pang of guilt as well as surprised pleasure at that kind of friendship so freely offered. She tried to not think what Harnai would think of her if only she knew the truth. Wensley and Harnai seemed so young, in their mid-twenties, and so warm and cheerful. She wondered if she’d ever been like that.

The blanket arrived a few days later along with the supply run. On Alatau’s advice, she didn’t unpack it yet—bad luck, apparently—and handed it right over to Nadji in a bundle of neatly folded, cloud-soft cream and green and blue checkered wool. Maybe she didn’t have the usual bride’s fidgeting on that score, but she figured a little extra luck wouldn’t hurt, given a small superstition like that.

Wensley kicked Terry out the morning of the wedding over to his house next door to get ready. Harnai set Holly, Alayna, and Jay to work in the kitchen, and she and Lori helped get Rhee ready. She smiled and shrugged off the bawdy jokes Harnai started, drawing the others in with it—the Corps had been full of that too. Besides, no reason for shame about a man she loved.

Hair neatly done, Harnai’s fingers nimble from making lariats at the tannery every winter and clucking about what a shame it was her hair was still so short, she looked at herself in the mirror. Dressed in a green blouse and a long black skirt, borrowed from people at Southlands who freely
offered them, she was grateful for that kindness too, to someone who’d come in as nothing but a stranger. Her boots were as fine as a hard polishing could make them, scuffed as they were from the trail. She had a new kerchief tied at her throat—red. Two’s lucky wedding color. For well or ill, Two was a part of her life and her upbringing, and there was plenty of goodness to people there who had been kind to her, been friends to her. They were the people who had stood by her through all the years in the Corps and through the ordeals that had happened in the last year. So she would honor that custom subtly. She wished she knew something about Four’s customs in that moment. But she didn’t, so she let it pass.

Lori grinned at her as she headed out onto the porch, where it seemed like half the Station was assembled nearby. “Think they know how to throw a party here?” she murmured as they passed through the kitchen, the smell of roasting meat making Rhee’s mouth water. If nothing else, Ten had a steady supply of beef and mutton.

“Yeah, seems like it,” she said, trying to squelch another of those flashes of guilt.

The wedding itself was a short affair. She noticed Terry had managed to borrow a green shirt and some unpatched, clean dark trousers himself—she hadn’t thought to ask what the color meant to them here. As the official, Nadji spoke first about the duties of marrying, about the partnership of it and how through the long trail of life, they would have to be there for each other, storm or sun.

Draping the blanket over their shoulders, representing their being drawn together as one, telling them to take each other’s hands, she repeated the simple vows in a steady voice, looking at him as she did it. His grey eyes stayed on hers as he did the same. Whoever he had been, whoever he would be, he was hers now, and nobody could say otherwise.

That done, the blanket was taken and folded up again, and Nadji handed it to Wensley—he and Harnai, acting as the hosts of the wedding, would apparently go put it on the bed for Rhee and Terry. Suddenly a lariat dropped around the two of them, pulled tight and holding them together. She looked over to see Drover holding the other end. “Kiss her!” came an enthusiastic yell from the crowd.

Nadji let out a chuckle at the startled looks on both their faces, and their efforts to get more comfortable. Rhee was pretty sure she was jamming an elbow right into Terry’s ribs, their joined hands caught between them. “Marriage ain’t all a smooth ride. Keep this moment in mind. You’ll be bound together as long as you live, and that means finding how your lives fit together without being a pain to each other. So Mister and Mrs. Stewart, you can kiss now.”

Terry rolled his eyes a little but there was a smile of humor on his face, and she could feel it on her own. She was trying to not laugh. It was a bit awkward trying to maneuver at first, jammed together as they were by the lariat, and the two of them were carefully muttering suggestions to each other and cautioning when a particular move cramped something too much or bent it the wrong way. Apparently this was a test to see if they could work as a team. She heard a few helpful suggestions and a few bawdy comments about hoping the wedding night was less awkward being called. Finally, he kissed her, though it was more like the barest brush of his lips, and at that instant, Drover let the lariat go slack, releasing the two of them. With that she grinned and gripped his shoulders, kissing him again. “Doing it properly,” she told him after they were finished. Cheers and approving hoots greeted that.

With that, the banjo player and fiddler started playing the music, and the call went up that the food table was open. “The only ‘dances’ I know involve weapons,” she muttered to Terry awkwardly, hearing the fast-paced music and seeing the couples already twirling and stamping their way through the dusty courtyard. “And I don’t think this is nearly slow enough for us to just cling to each other
for dear life and sort of sway in time to the music.”

“You and me both. Maybe someone will take pity on us and teach us,” he muttered back, holding her closer and watching the others.

Soon enough that happened, and before the evening wore on, she was competent enough in Ten’s dancing to have a turn around the square with her new husband and not make a complete idiot of herself. Sitting down for a breather with a glass of beer and a plate of beef barbecue, she watched Jay and Lori dancing together. Looked like whatever their issues had been, they were starting to get through them. She remembered being around them in Twelve, and the first few days after the firebombing, had been like watching two people gingerly walking on a bed of thorns.

She was about to turn to Terry and make some joking remark that between that, and Marc and Alayna who weren’t quite as hidden as they supposed while they were kissing each other in the shadows of someone’s porch, that maybe this wouldn’t be the last wedding their group might celebrate in the months to come. But at that moment she realized the musicians had stopped mid-tune, and she looked over to see Nadji standing beside them, as she straightened up from apparently telling them to quit.

The dancers stopped too, and all eyes were on Nadji. She cleared her throat and told them, “Just got the news, folks. The final attack on the Capitol began at dawn this morning. We haven’t had a brownout for a while, so you ought to be able to get the news tonight on your television.” The cheers for that fact were much louder and ferocious than for the wedding, Rhee noticed, almost a primal roar. Suddenly seeing the fierce joy on their faces, hearing the comments from a few about how hard the Capitol would go down and exactly what they deserved, these weren’t the people she’d been celebrating with only two minutes before. These were people that wanted blood and she wasn’t quite sure if hers would be on that list someday.
Octavia and Flavius dressed her in green, readying her again for the cameras. As Octavia was doing her nails, painting a design like a swirl of leaves in the wind, she said with a shy smile, “I’ve always thought green was such a pretty color.”

Looking at the still-fading color treatment in Octavia’s skin, it had assumed an odd, mottled appearance. Some areas, like the creases of her fingers and the smile lines around her lips, were almost totally back to natural fair skin by this point. Other areas were various shades of pale green from mint to seafoam. A few traces of bright, vibrant green remained on places her ears and her elbows. Johanna kept her tongue on commenting on that, knowing Octovia well enough that she was certain a barbed quip like Yeah, I can tell would cut deeply. “Always been one of my favorites,” she said instead, noticing that Octavia likewise didn’t make any comments about the arena uniforms and Seven’s traditional color of deep green there.

“It must feel good for you to be home,” Flavius chirped excitedly, fussing with her hair and sliding some clips into it.

“Yeah,” she answered. “Although… This really isn’t home. Not anymore. This is the place I came from. But she kept silent on those thoughts. They didn’t belong to these two, they were hers alone. Maybe they were projecting their own missing District Fourteen onto her here. She realized there had been a sort of fierce excitement at coming back here, but it wasn’t the security of coming back to the only place she felt she belonged. She’d lost her family here, and made a new one elsewhere. She would always bear a deep affection for this place and its ways, still so comfortable and familiar. But she’d come to the realization last winter during the elections when being back here was no comfort compared to what she’d left behind: her home was with Haymitch. What excitement she had now would be in finally getting to show him this place she loved, not as he’d experienced it twice before, a short stop on a Games-borne itinerary. He’d never really seen District Seven, he’d seen only what the Capitol had wanted him to see. She’d come to love Twelve and to understand Haymitch far better during the last winter, seeing him away from the Capitol and how he was without the pressure of the Games. She’d finally come to know so much of him beyond the facets that belonged to the victor. He’d opened his life to her and showed her that, and she wanted to watch him experiencing the same now. This is where I grew up. What made me the person I am.

The humidity here in the winter town near the shores of Lake Sawyer wasn’t pleasant, but compared to Four and Eleven, it was far more bearable. Casting her eyes to the horizon, to the small humps of the mountains to the north that had been left beautifully forested for the Capitol to have glamor shots of Seven’s district center, she couldn’t help but smile. Every other district she’d been on this trip had been somewhere she came as a stranger, waiting to be guided and taught about the way of things, but this place was hers.

There were no victors to greet here, and that struck her with an odd pang. Maybe One and Two and Four were clearing their victors out now, but at least they’d been there on arrival. This was the first district where that was the case. She was the last Seven victor left and that hit her all over again. Trying to keep a smile on her face, though, she stepped forward to shake hands with Elmar and Sassafras Luoma.

Their smiles were well intact for Plutarch too, but she could see the faint lines of strain on the two of them up close. Considering what the bombing had done to them, she knew from harsh experience what they must be grappling with right now. Safra in particular looked like she hadn’t been eating well, and she could see the puffiness around Elm’s eyes that the preps’ makeup couldn’t quite
conceal this close. But it was the Seven way to carry on without demonstration—part of why they’d been so confounded and made uncomfortable by the sixteen-year-old girl who’d totally lost it when her name was called at the reaping and didn’t snap out of it. “I expect you have the advantage of things here,” Elmar told her, “given that you know Seven so well.”

“Expect she can teach me more than a few things,” Haymitch said amiably, subtly letting her know that he was definitely letting her experience take point here. “Good to see you both.”

All of them seemed eager to get off-camera, though. For her, she didn’t want Plutarch sticking his nose in these moments between her and Haymitch where she showed him this place that was such a part of her, and she imagined the Luomas would far rather keep their grief private. “Your house in the Glade hasn’t been touched,” Elmar reassured her. “Except for, well, someone did the dusting and the like a few days ago. It needed it.”

“Good,” she said. “Thanks.” It felt funny walking back up the path to the Glade as she had so many times before. She wasn’t the kid who’d moved in there. She wasn’t the angry young woman who’d lived there alone for so many years. She wasn’t even the newlywed who’d slept there for a night during the elections. She had the thought that maybe it would have been more comfortable to stay in a different house, one with fewer memories. But it was done now and she’d deal with it. “We should clean the place out while we’re here,” she mentioned to Haymitch, glancing over at him.

“You’re ready?” he asked simply. She knew how pushy she’d been on him over the winter and early spring, needing to get rid of the darkness of his past and to set her own stamp on the house too so it wasn’t just a place where she was an interloper. But the more she’d shoved him, the more she’d come to realize, as Peeta had told her, that it was difficult for him. It meant letting go of some things that he’d clung to so tenaciously because it was all he had. It meant finally closing some doors for good.

“Yeah,” she said. “I won’t be coming back.” Whether she meant for good or simply for an occasional visit if circumstances permitted, either way, she wanted to pull up what roots she had left here and finally make that break. She had the thought then that she needed to visit the memorial trees for her parents and Bern while she was here. She would have to say goodbye to them.

He just nodded, though his arm slipped around her waist as they walked, and she leaned in a little closer to him. The key opened the lock easily as usual, and she pushed the door open, stepping into the front hallway with its wood paneled floor. It was decent grade pine varnished in an attempt to look like impressively expensive mahogany. Haymitch’s place had the same stuff. Her dad had always gotten a laugh from that—they made stuff like that here in Seven’s factories for the Capitol. It might have fooled other victors, but not one from a lumber family. She wondered, as she always did, if Eight victors rolled their eyes at the upholstery because maybe that was cheap too. Chances were the Capitol had figured a bunch of poor district rubes wouldn’t know better on the quality of these grand houses, and if they did, they’d be too grateful or too smart to kick up a fuss.

The pine flooring was good, though. It felt more homey, a simple touch like they’d had back in their old home down in Sawyer’s Creek rather than the cold distance of being thrust into an environment of total wasteful luxury. It had been dressed up fake, but underneath that, it was something simple and real. There had been plenty of times that she’d looked at that flooring and hoped that she was still true pine underneath too, that the Capitol was just a veneer.

Given she’d shipped her grandparents’ wedding bed from the master bedroom, where her parents slept, she ended up trundling her stuff upstairs towards the room where she’d slept for years. She’d noticed that too, at Haymitch’s, that he’d originally taken up one of the smaller bedrooms. Clearly he’d slept in the same room as he’d taken when he was sixteen. He’d given his mother the honor and
comfort of the master bedroom, and the thoughtfulness of that said plenty about him. It had been no easy task to get him to clean that bedroom out finally and make it their own, but moving him out of that old bedroom seemed to have done him good, sloughing off those memories.

Perhaps the fact his mother had never actually slept there had made it easier in the end, though she’d been the one to move a lot of the stuff out, because she’d known it was tough for him to handle it. She’d known once her parents died that it would never be easy for her to move into that room where they’d slept and whispered in the dark and made love for nearly a year. It would be hard now to sleep in her old bedroom that had seen so much of her own loneliness and misery, the house dark and silent except for her. The ghosts hung too close and too heavy still.

“You want to take one of the guest rooms instead?” Haymitch asked her, looking at the bedroom door she still hadn’t entered.

Finally snapping out of it, she answered, “Yeah.” Though there had only been one left empty, given that Bern and Heike had bedrooms here too. She’d ended up sleeping there last winter during the election too. Pushing that door open, she tossed down her bag on the bed and started unpacking. She could just go down the hall and pick through some of the clothes that were still left there, but not just yet.

Haymitch did likewise, neatly putting his things away in one of the drawers. Spying a wooden box on the stack of clothes, she picked it up. Pure cardinalwood—rich, blood-red, expensive as hell, and the thing was hand-carved. A product of One, she was sure. Opening it, smelling the smoky scent of tobacco, she glanced up at him. “Cigars?”

“Gilt gave ‘em to me before we left One. Told me to enjoy them as a gift.” He shrugged. “I imagine they aren’t selling too many these days, but it was a nice gesture. Those things don’t come cheap—that’s the kind of stuff they sold to the Silver Downs crowd.”

“I don’t think I’ve seen you smoking in years.” Though from when she was younger, she could remember the image of Haymitch Abernathy at some club or social event, an insouciant smirk on his face and a snarky remark at the ready, and now and again, a cigarette dangling casually from his fingertips or his lips.

He gave her a tight-lipped smile, “You ever notice that I only ever smoked on television, darlin’?”

“Oh,” that explained it all. It had been foisted on him as part of the expected Capitol image. “Wanted to make you look even more like the ‘fuck you, I’m a social rebel but not the kind of rebel that will happily overthrow your government’ sort, huh?”

He let out a sharp bark of laughter at that. “I told myself it was funny that if I wasn’t going down the mines, at least I could try to kill myself with lung disease like a proper miner. At least they usually were happy after I smoked about half of one and didn’t notice I stubbed it out and didn’t light another.” Another dark chuckle as he put some shirts in the drawer. “I figured it was best to be loyal to one major vice, see, and I found out quick enough alcohol wiped things out and cigarettes didn’t.”

“You could have told him,” she said, closing the lid of the box and setting it carefully on the dresser.

“He meant well.” Haymitch closed the drawer, stuffing the empty bag in on itself and kicking it casually underneath the bed. “And not like it’s easy to just expect people to somehow know what’s real and what ain’t from what they saw all those years—at least not with little things like that. Figured I’d just take them and if he tries to give me more, I’ll say I’m trying to quit.”

“So what the hell are you proposing to do with a box of cigars in the meantime?”
He shrugged as if he didn’t really care. “Find a good occasion to pass ‘em out, I suppose.” He looked over at her and gave her one of those cocky grins. “We’re getting enough of a population going in Twelve I could probably give them out as New Year’s gifts and people will think I’m such a generous sweetheart just handing out nice stuff like that.”

She snickered at that, unable to help it—figured he’d try to turn a conundrum into some kind of advantage. “That was nice,” she admitted, sitting down on the bed. “Not jerking Gilt up on it.”

“Are you suggesting I’m going soft in my advancing years?”

“Yeah, sure, maybe you finally get to take off that glaring neon ‘Does not play well with others’ sign.”

“This, from you? I’ll just bet you always got stuck in the corner in kindergarten for beating the shit out of other kids because they were being little brats to you.”

“Guilty. And you?”

A rueful grin answered her. “Guilty. I was a fighting little cuss. But at least you and I play well together, right?” Turning, he put one hand on the other side of her, leaning in on it to kiss her.

“Promise I won’t pull your hair or scratch or bite,” she told him as she shoved the few remaining clothes off the bed and lay back, pulling him with her.

“Aw, now where’s the fun in that?” he mocked her lightly. Still, she knew they had their limits. That was one they hadn’t really tested yet. Their wedding night was probably the closest they’d gotten, as desperate and upset as they’d both been after dealing with Snow, and that had pushed things pretty far compared to where they’d been before that. But in retrospect, she realized both of them had still been holding back, just a little bit. The idea of really entirely letting go and maybe getting a bit rough still carried an unsettling sentiment. They both carried too many memories of pain and violence that she didn’t want even hints of that trickling in and tainting what they two of them had together.

There had been people she wanted to hurt during sex, and those were the ones that she sometimes had during those dark years spiraling down ever worse, desperate to feel like she was in control of something. But those had been Capitol people. They’d never cared for anything beyond walking away with bragging rights that they’d fucked a victor—she felt free to punish them for being so very Capitol with a little pain and aggressiveness because that was what they expected from the sly, vicious bitch with the axe. That illusion of her was what they wanted. She certainly hadn’t given a damn for any one of them. So she was determined that it was never going to be like that with Haymitch. All of that had to be left far behind her.

“Just…don’t,” she told him, shaking her head, feeling stupid that a little bit of harmless teasing had thrown her off right back into the grip of the past. In some ways it was almost worse to have these occasional moments where that still happened. Early on, it was a matter of going so careful where they’d been so cautious and the issues so obvious. But now when they were finally getting to a comfortable state of feeling almost normal; not fearfully gauging every motion, it was little and unexpected things that caused troubles. Before, it had felt like carefully picking their way through a minefield with some knowledge of where to step, and gingerly edging forward bit by bit, trying to warn each other where they could. Now it felt like they were just walking along together with the casualness of being at ease and enjoying the journey, but every now and again, they got jerked out of the situation by a snare they’d never even seen.

He must have seen the solemn look in her eyes at the memories, because he simply nodded, giving her a little smile of apology. He leaned down and kissed her again and this time there was only
She slipped out of bed after he’d dozed off, tugging the rumpled covers back over him. Seeing him asleep, the lines of worry in his face seemed to smooth out, making him look younger. But at the same time, the animation and liveliness of him were missing too—this calm, silently sleeping Haymitch was someone unknown to her in some ways, gone to where she couldn’t follow. Still, his sleep was relaxed, rather than the all-too often tense expression he’d worn whenever he collapsed on the couch in the lounge of Mentor Central for a few hours, drunk or exhausted, that pretty much broadcast his stress and his nightmares like a warning beacon. Wherever he went, away from her into the realm of sleep, right now it was somewhere peaceful. That was more than enough for her. She brushed her fingers lightly over his eternally unruly black curls and grabbed her robe, slipping it on and tying the belt, padding down the hall.

For now she didn’t go into Bern’s room, or her parents’. The latter in particular would seem sad and empty since she’d taken most of their furniture when she’d been here in January for the election. Instead she pushed open the door to Heike’s room. The hinges creaked softly, given that the door had remained closed for the better part of nine years now. Looking in on the room where her little sister had slept, Johanna looked around. The schoolbooks were still neatly on the shelf, because with school out for the summer she wouldn’t have needed them. A trite book about two kids having adventures in District Ten was bookmarked on the nightstand, from where Heike had left it on the way to summer lumbering camp. Dust was everywhere, on the few pieces of furniture, the thick rug, the bedspread—purple, and she remembered Heike had been so gleeful at being able to pick even a few things of her own and to have her own room instead of sharing a bed with Johanna.

She’d loved purple, her shy gentle little sister. Standing there, Johanna wondered if Kallanthe Law still loved purple. She wondered if she’d ever loved someone. Or if she’d ever had to kill someone in the cold clarity of an execution made necessary by the Code of Conduct. *Who are you now? What did they turn you into?* she thought, looking at the silent still ruins of one teenage girl’s life, wishing bitterly all over again that they could kill Snow once more for this. Heike’s life, and Ash’s, two more lives ruined in the grand schemes of Coriolanus Snow that so loved to make somebody of use to him and eliminate them as a threat.

Even if Johanna found her, her sister would never be little Heike again. Just like she’d never again be tomboyish Hanna who climbed trees and raced boys and desperately wished one of them would notice her as more than just another friend. The past couldn’t be regained. So all she could do was move forward now, and if and when she found out Heike’s fate, deal with that as best she could. Looking at the bedroom, she gave a decisive nod, knowing it was time to give up on that dream that kept her anchored like this. It would be foolish to preserve it any longer, as if Heike would someday come back and it would be like it was before. Moving into the room, bare feet kicking up some of the dust as she walked, she started eyeing the assorted clutter of a fourteen-year-old girl who’d had every expectation of returning. She would keep a few things, from her and Bern and her mom and dad, but the rest—clean this house out and leave it behind. Maybe the next people to move in here would have far brighter memories of it than her, and make it into a home rather than a tomb for those loved and lost. Her place now, and her future, lay in Twelve.

Shutting the door again, this time she knew that she’d open it again soon enough. And she’d be strong enough to do what needed to be done, and she wouldn’t be alone for it.

The evening news reported on the ongoing proceedings of Alma Coin’s trial—apparently without the mountains and mountains of paper evidence Snow had left it was a hell of a lot of interviewing witnesses and the lawyers arguing back and forth. She was glad she and Haymitch had just been able to give written statements rather than enduring that kind of ordeal again. Snow’s trial last winter had been bad enough. Sometimes she still had memories of the cameras there, recording every moment of
her testifying about the torments and degradations, affirming the records Snow had left and turning them from mute, emotionless paper into the suffering of a human being. Dealing with Coin, and answering painful questions about the things that woman had managed to do even in the short time they’d known her, would be even worse if each witness was going to be badgered and barraged with questions. “You think they’re gonna get her?” she asked Haymitch as they sat on the couch.

He leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “I don’t know,” he said, shaking his head. “I think they’ll nail her for something. The clomiphen’s pretty well documented so she’s gonna take the hit for that. But whether it’s near as much as she deserves? The woman was canny, I’ll give her that. Mostly verbal orders, people willing to keep silent or take the fall for her now.”

“She didn’t get as arrogant as Snow. That man didn’t give a fuck if he left everything written down for the world to see.”

“I think he thought it would vindicate him, in a way.”

She looked over at him, incredulously. “What?”

“Someone that secretive, you know it’s not to openly brag about his exploits. Why else?” He shook his head, frowning in deep thought. “Besides, you know how he seemed. Always convinced of his total rightness in whatever he did. If he had to break or smash some people along the way—and profit from it too, mind—they were dangerous and had to be controlled. It was better to be harsh on a few than risk than this hellish abyss of anarchy and chaos he talked about—on and on, sometimes, and when he was laying down the law to me sometimes I’d almost get the sense he wanted me to understand that what he did wasn’t personal, that in some fucking sick way, he was doing it for my own good, to keep me from becoming this…this…” His hand waved in the air, “agent of chaos or whatever. After I messed around with that forcefield, I had to learn who was in control. In his mind, whatever he did to preserve order was right, and he wanted history to judge him like that. So he left all those papers for them to justify his actions.”

It felt funny, hearing him describe it like that, and the eerie unsettling notion that he could so easily slip into Snow’s mind and motives like that left her feeling a little sick herself. “You seem to have known the old bastard well.”

“I was his favorite pet for years,” Haymitch said bluntly. “The one that showed that even the most defiant and dangerous little hick-born brat can be retrained and harnessed to productive purposes and rewarded with privilege and riches. ‘Course, I went off the tracks a bit at the end when I started drinking too much for him to show off as his pride and joy. Oops. But, look…you can’t ever hate a man that bone-deep without learning to think some like he does, if for no other reason than to try and figure out how to be one step ahead.”

“I didn’t,” she admitted. “I just liked trying to do anything but what I was supposed to in the Capitol and seeing what I could get away with before someone would stop me.” She’d been throwing herself at the walls put up around her, determined to break them or break herself in trying. “Nobody stopped me. Probably because my little rebellions only really hurt me, huh?” she said, hearing the bitterness creep into her tone.

She wasn’t quite looking at him, staring at Virgil Ibis on the television reporting on the trial, but she felt the weight of his hand on her back and the slow, soothing rub of it, telling her that he was there and he cared. That he didn’t say anything actually helped. “Even if they don’t nail her hard as she deserves, she’s politically destroyed, if nothing else. And the rumors and accusations will follow her for the rest of her life. She’ll never be free of it. She’ll never hold power again.” There was a certain sense of justice to that. It might not satisfy everything, but neither had Snow’s death. The scope of some crimes went too far for that. But so long as Coin didn’t escape unscathed and couldn’t hurt
more people, Johanna would make her peace with it.

“Shit, that’s Quinn Allamand and Marissa Thalric,” Haymitch said, breaking into her thoughts. Focusing again on the newscast, she saw that was true—the big, dark figure of Brutus’ older brother stood beside Brocade on the presidential news conference set, as did Major Thalric of Thirteen’s military. Johanna remembered she’d been one of the few reasonable ones. Quintus looked a little unsettled, continually adjusting his bright red tie. Thalric’s posture in her dark grey suit was rigid enough to border on pure tension rather than military protocol.

“The so-called ‘Peacekeeper Question,’ as well as the conduct of the military forces of the rebellion and District Thirteen, was an issue of a great deal of discussion during our recent peace conference,” Brocade said after shutting up the press with a few shut up please gestures. “Many may have noticed when it was publicly read on July 4th that the Treaty of Fourteen Territories contained reference to ‘universal standards of accountability regarding military and police actions’ from now on. However, future accountability doesn’t erase the right to justice for past transgressions. To that end, I invited Colonel Allamand of the Peacekeeper Corps,” a nod towards Quintus’ tall figure looming over her at her right hand, “and Major Thalric of the military of District Thirteen,” likewise a nod to her other side, “as representatives to discuss these issues. I thank them for their thoughts and their patience as we discussed the matter.”

“Which means,” Haymitch noted, flashing Johanna a quick smirk, “they sat there and glared at each other until she finally told them to quit it and work together?” She laughed at that, imagining Quintus’ stony expression and Thalric’s answering scowl, and Brocade sitting there staring incredulously at the two of them.

“Most of our former Head Peacekeepers have either been executed or are currently imprisoned,” Quintus said, coming now to the microphone, nervously shuffling through his notes. “So it’s fallen to me to speak for the Corps, as much as I can. It was Capitol orders we followed, but we were the hands that carried those orders out. Didn’t have much choice, maybe, but the pain that was caused is there still. There’s explanations, sure, but they’re not really excuses. For that, I’m sorry.” He fidgeted with the notes a little, looking like he’d be far more comfortable barking orders at cadets than making a national speech. “To that end, President Paylor, Mayor Sangus and I, have talked the matter over and come to an agreement about what’s to be done about the former Peacekeepers.”

“Last I heard, she was only gonna go after the ones that crossed the line,” Haymitch remarked. “It would be a fucking nightmare to try and prosecute every single Peacekeeper out there, not to mention they’d lose Two in a heartbeat.”

“At present,” Brocade said, as Quintus moved aside to give the microphone back to her, “we’ve determined that no Peacekeeper will be prosecuted who strictly followed Capitol orders.” A roar of surprise or protest started among the reporters and Brocade silenced them only with effort. “I realize that decision doesn’t make some people happy. I understand your grief. But this decision is in the interest of being as fair as possible to all parties involved. However, as an act of good faith against their involvement with these crimes, I’d ask that as of September 1st, which is the official starting date of the newly-formed Criminal Investigation Bureau, any former Peacekeeper come forward and voluntarily identify themselves to the government as a show they’ve got nothing to hide. And for anyone in Panem who wants to pursue a job in the new law enforcement or military, they’re going to need to be clear a background check from CIB beforehand anyway.”

“Oh, they’re not gonna like that,” Johanna said, shaking her head. “What’s to keep them from freaking out and worrying that next week she’s going to execute the lot of them, and having handed their names over they’ve just helped do it?”
“Faith,” Haymitch answered her briefly, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “That this time it’ll be different, that she’ll keep her word. It’s a lot to ask, I’ll admit. Letting any government get your nuts in a vise like that and trusting they won’t squeeze…”

“I say ‘nothing to hide’ because this brings me to the other point of this initiative. As part of CIB’s duties, any citizen of Panem can report a crime that’s been committed by a Peacekeeper, or a soldier on either side during the rebellion.” Brocade’s hands gripped the lectern, shoulders squared. “In the likely lack of physical evidence, two witnesses must be willing to corroborate the details of that report.”

“To be questioned separately on the particulars to make sure they’re not just getting together with two buddies?” Haymitch murmured, smiling a little to himself. “Oh, nicely done.” Looking at his subtle amusement, Johanna had the feeling he might have discussed that particular point with Brocade himself in the past.

“Names or descriptions of guilty parties will be filed and compared against the CIB’s records. District Two has already submitted its Peacekeeper training records, and Thirteen its military records.” She looked squarely at the cameras, brown eyes full of steady confidence. “So those of you who never stepped over the line of your ordered duty, you’ll have nothing to fear by admitting your role in the past and clearing your name. Peacekeeper, Thirteen soldier, or otherwise—my aims are to solely hunt down the guilty who used their position to personally abuse others, not conduct a universal witch hunt. I’d encourage those who were involved with the military or the Peacekeepers, though, to continue to show goodwill towards the people around them as a continued sign of their willingness to atone for the past.”

“Play nice, smile if they insult you, and try not to worry the contempt of a nation,” Johanna observed, shaking her head. “Seems like it’s safer to just keep your mouth shut. But I suppose at least if they out themselves, it’ll go better than if they get exposed later. And people have seen with Snow, Coin, and the rest that she’ll be aggressive in going after the guilty ones.”

“Better to cut the wound open now and let it drain out than fester,” Haymitch said with a shrug. “She’s taking the smart course and tackling it right now. She’s asking people rather than demanding, so those that do it will look good and those that don’t will come off even worse. And those that want to try to clear their conscience are likely gonna be the ones that step forward. That’s not going to be easy but it may win them some points in the end for having the guts to admit it themselves.”

“Faith on both sides, huh?” she asked. Faith from Brocade that the former Peacekeepers would do the right thing and try to clear their names, and then answering faith from the Peacekeepers that this government would be more honorable than the last, and wouldn’t abuse their cooperation. It was a massive test of this new Panem, free will and faith rather than tightly controlled power. Though she was skeptical and she knew there was no way in hell it would work perfectly, she found she wanted it to succeed at least in part. She actually wanted it to be different this time.

“Keep in mind that you have a right to justice for the wrongs done to you. But if anyone raises a hand in vengeance against a former Peacekeeper or soldier, for any reason, they’ll pay the price in a court of law. I want justice to prevail in Panem in the future, not revenge. But rest assured that any report made to CIB will be taken very seriously. The guilty—and they know who they are and that they can’t hide behind the claims of duty—won’t evade justice forever.”

With that, Brocade shook off the questions, announcing she’d answer them in the morning. Johanna thought she saw Alayna escorting Brocade from the stage. “Well,” she pointed out, “Marcellus and Alayna, there’s two for sure that Brocade’s dealt with fairly when they came clean to her. And I’m sure there were others on her security staff.”
“September 1st is the start of the voluntary identification,” he said, turning to look at her. “You caught that, yeah? Guess that gives ’em three more weeks to figure out what they want to do.”

In truth, she’d only half-caught that reference amidst the massive things Brocade was dropping left and right in that announcement. But she quickly figured out where he was going with it. “You think they’ll report in?” That was assuming, of course, that they were still alive to do so.

“I don’t know,” he said with a heavy sigh, still looking pensive as anything with his brow furrowed deeply and a frown on his lips. “But I really damn well hope so.”

“Would make things a lot easier,” she acknowledged, moving closer to him, putting a hand on his shoulder and leaning in.

“In more than one way, Hanna.”

“That was what I meant.” It would mean she and Haymitch would know exactly where they were and that they were alive, and it would tell them that their siblings felt they had nothing to fear and that they regretted the past. “Well, to Brocade’s credit, I think that’s about the best she could do with the Peacekeepers and the Thirteen military. Can’t excuse ’em all, can’t shoot ’em all.”

“You also notice she lumped the rebel military in there too as able to be accused of war crimes? Gutsy.”

“You really think any Capitol citizen, or Two, or wherever, is going to feel like they can openly speak up against a rebel soldier?” She thought about the furious final days of the Battle for the Capitol, the reports of atrocities committed there by angry rebels finally glorying in the chance to get a little revenge for all the years of torment and oppression.

“I don’t know. But at least she’s giving them the choice.” He gave her a sly grin, pointing the remote at the television and turning it off. “I knew I made the right choice in voting for that gal.”

“Didn’t vote for yourself?” she teased him lightly, wrapping her arms around his neck and boosting herself a little, settling onto his lap, straddling his thighs.

“Shit, no.” His hands settled lightly on her hips, steadying her.

“I didn’t vote for you either,” she confessed, kissing him on the jaw, feeling the faint rasp of evening stubble against her lips. “I’m kind of a selfish bitch. I’d just gotten you all to myself. I didn’t want to share you with an entire country.”

“I didn’t know it then. But at least I know you’ll listen to me when I say you’re getting in too deep.” She’d been too unsure of her place in his life, which was odd enough given she was his wife. But she’d gotten much more certain of that now. She’d learned
that she didn’t have to be the only thing in his life to feel loved enough to matter to him. “Besides, I’m already aiming to share your attention with a noisy, diaper-craping, messy little newborn.”

He chuckled lowly at that, leaning in to nuzzle her neck. “Maybe it’ll happen here,” he offered, and she couldn’t help but hear the trace of hope in his voice, feeling the answering echo of it within herself. “You’d always have a little extra piece of Seven with you that way.”

She liked the thought of that. Knowing she was leaving here for good was no easy thing. But if she could look at a son or daughter with the possibility they’d been conceived here, she knew that would always be a sweeter reminder of Seven, a more tangible link to the family and place she’d loved. “I’m sure you’ll be aiming to do everything you can to help that happen?” she asked him, fingers brushing through his hair.

Another of his lazy smiles promising all sorts of wickedness answered her. Though he sobered a bit and told her, “I asked Safra if she had ideas for your birthday. Seven stuff, you know, since I figured she’s a woman from the lumberjack crews too? She said I ought to take you camping and it’ll be easy enough to get a weekend away when we’re out at some of the lumber camps—so, uh, I’ve got some gear getting put together. Assuming you want to go?” He gave her a slightly awkward, almost boyishly pleading look.

She wasn’t sure whether to be touched that he’d asked and aimed to try to do something to honor her Seven upbringing, or simultaneously amused and exasperated that the great schemer Haymitch Abernathy’s first response had gone helplessly running to a woman to help him out. Deciding it was more of the former than the latter, she let it go. Though if she heard about him asking Katniss or Annie about New Year’s gifts in a panic, that might be another story. “Good advice,” she said, touching her forehead to his for a moment. “That’s what newlyweds do their first year at lumber camps.” Almost everyone got married in the winter down in the winter town, but the warming weather and being still newly married meant that those couples kept plenty busy in their blankets.

She gave him a sly wink. “They usually set up their tent a ways from the rest so they’re not keeping the whole camp up with every little noise.” Not far enough that they were in the danger zone of wild animals, and not so far that they couldn’t hear the morning wake-up call. That meant it was also not quite far enough that some parts of really noisy, passionate lovemaking wasn’t still overheard, usually making the adults chuckle knowingly around the fire and make bawdy comments. The kids still too young and ignorant to know exactly what was going on tended to giggle and sometimes went to go tease the shit out of the newlyweds by making their own loud noises outside the tent.

She still remembered one time when she was eight or nine and doing that with a bunch of her friends—Franz, Rhus, Bud, and Holly, what a wild pack of brats they’d been—getting chased off by the young husband who’d burst out of the tent roaring in temper, having taken only a few seconds to throw his undershorts on as the entire camp hooted in laughter and told him to worry about going back to his wife and getting busy making a kid of his own. Good times, she thought, smiling to herself. Those years of belonging and laughter despite the punishing hard work were the days she would miss the most, not the lonely years in this house. She hadn’t been to lumber camp in years, and she found she was actually looking forward to it eagerly.

“Thanks,” she said, pressing a kiss to his forehead. “That sounds perfect.” Taking his hand in hers, gripping it tightly, she told him, “Since we’re gonna be away from here for at least half our stay in Seven, if you’re up for it, let’s go ahead and start tonight with Heike’s room.”

He looked at her for a long moment and nodded. “I’ll get some boxes in the morning.”

“It’s Seven, so it’s easy, oh dear coal miner of mine,” she quipped, trying to hide her feelings of mingled grief and relief. “Getting boxes just means going down the street to the paper mill.”
Cardboard boxes were cheap as anything here and always had been. Cardboard insulation and patches on houses in Sawyer's Creek weren't that uncommon if their annual personal lumber quota had been used up.

She felt strong enough for it tonight thinking about Heike hopefully out there somewhere, hoping that Brocade’s announcement had likewise given her little sister some hope for the future. The old guilty feeling that getting rid of all their things would also mean throwing away her old self had finally vanished. She was who she was and the Capitol had tried to take that from her and make her in their chosen image, but some of the best and truest parts of her had survived underneath that regardless. She finally felt she might start to genuinely know who she was—born in Seven, transplanted now to Twelve, a victor, a survivor, a wife, a friend, a sister, maybe eventually a mother. She’d found her Seven roots could grow in new soil, that she could graft in new things to her life, and she could thrive as Johanna Mason Abernathy. Giving away old family things, and leaving this place, wouldn’t ever change that.
Somehow, Haymitch thought with a mental sigh of exasperation, he was pretty sure the people of Seven were mildly entertained by him. Not the angry jeering as a failure and a Capitol sell-out like he’d endured for years in Twelve, or the Capitol’s voracious appetite for scandal that they’d thinly hid in the guise of concern for how he’d been circling the drain year by year. This was more of a wry humor of looking at the man one of their own had chosen to marry and probably trying to figure him out.

They’d been a week away from the winter town now, covering the wide stretch of lumber camps, from the maple and oak forests south of the shores of Lake Sawyer in the east, the wide northern swath of pines and spruces sweeping in a broad arc through most of the mid-district, and the towering cedars and redwoods of the west near to the Six border.

His head spun with each new camp, with every work crew rattling off details and logistics of how that particular lumber was harvested and then processed, seasoned, fashioned into furniture or paper or whatever. The divides here in Seven were crazy to his mind—hearing a person’s job in the winter apparently said plenty about their relative class here. The pulp millers were beneath the lumber millers and all millers were all beneath the carpenters, who were all beneath the merchie class craftsmen who made specialized furniture rather than the mass-produced shit district people had in their homes. He remembered having a dresser, a table and the like, back in that old Seam house, battered and chipped but with the Seven stamp still distinguishable on it somewhere. Of course, he was sure the craftsmen here didn’t like being reminded that the artisans in One handled the really lofty carpentry jobs for the richest Capitol citizens.

The summer jobs for the lumbering crews depended on what kind of lumber was harvested. The worst pine and the like for the pulp mills and cheap particleboard were left to the least skilled, going all the way through lumber pine, into things like oak and cedar and then finally into the handful of crews allowed to harvest the luxury woods: mahogany, cardinalwood, ghostwood and blackspire. Those lumberjacks pretty much considered themselves kings and queens of the forest, to hear tell, and in talking to them, he could sense a rough but lofty pride in their abilities, worn easily and with utter confidence. He thought of his chess set back home carved over so many hours of solitude over the years, the blackspire bow that he’d gifted to Burt Everdeen so many years ago and which Katniss had given back to him again this last winter. He’d known they were luxury woods, he’d had to order them from a workshop in One, but had no idea it was anything like this.

Lucky for him, he thought, that he had Johanna here and she understood all this effortlessly, being born to it. Otherwise he thought he’d have inevitably pissed somebody off by not respecting whatever station they’d earned. There was sheer simplicity to things in Twelve. A person was either merchie or miner, and the only difference in mines was the distance traveled rather than skill. Even the August anthracite mining up north had been decided by lots representing a work crew rather than some kind of analysis of who was suited to the job—mines were pretty much the same, to a Twelve mind. Dark, dirty, dangerous; he forced the memory of those few weeks down the mines as a kid back. The wide open spaces of the forest helped that.

Mostly, he let Johanna do the talking, because she knew what was going on and because, away from the cares he’d sensed still heavy on her shoulders in the winter town where she’d been living alone so long, she seemed to come alive in an entirely different way. This was a Johanna he’d seen only in
private, a woman who traded jokes and stories with ease, who laughed and teased and smiled, whose sass came with humor rather than bitterness. This was the woman she would have been if not for one Reaping Day ten years ago now, and all the hiding and armor that she’d had to resort to since to try to keep even a little bit of herself from Capitol demands.

She belongs here, he thought, perched on the stump of a fallen cedar, watching her talking to one of the crews, hands stretched out to indicate the size of something—to judge from the laughter, something either hilarious or bawdy—eyes merrily alight and a devilish grin on her face. She’d missed it. He would have been happy to never go back down a mine again in his life, but this to her was part of her, the rhythms of this life out in the forest, and the Capitol had taken that from her too.

He wondered if he’d taken it from her as well by asking her to move to Twelve. Would it really be enough for her to leave all this behind now that the truth was known and she could take her rightful place again? You’re getting damn arrogant if you assume you’re that good a deal for her, old man, he thought. Still...she’d chosen him. She could have had any man in the whole district. So even if there were a few amused, speculative glances his way, probably wondering just what she’d seen in a crabby bastard a decade her senior who didn’t know how to properly season maple versus oak, he tried to stand his ground on it. He had the feeling that with these people, to back down was to lose their respect. Johanna had to have gotten that attitude somewhere.

At least it helped that he wasn’t totally clueless in the woods. He knew his trees, for which he silently thanked Briar and her auntie again, and he ended up chatting with some of the lumberjacks here and there about it.

Here in the north, most of the crews looked alike enough to be cousins. Their eyes ranged from a near-black to almost half-green hazel, and their hair from light oak to deep ebony, but they all had the golden skin Johanna had, and brown eyes and hair. The men seemed to all be huge. Haymitch thought he’d seen maybe a handful of men in all the lumber crews that were smaller than him. He’d observed Seven’s male tributes tended to be a bit bigger, and Blight and Cedrus had both been solid, tall men, but he felt faintly ridiculous being about the only man in the entire forest under six foot tall.

They eyed him and made jokes about his size. He smiled nonchalantly, the polite but warningly barbed smile of Don’t fuck with me too much, I don’t have to be a giant to be dangerous. Probably remembering that he’d helped scheme to topple two presidents and had killed people, Careers included, in close combat, they gave him something of a wary distance compared with how they just embraced Johanna like a long-lost sister. He had the sense they didn’t quite know what to make of him—couldn’t just tease him like one of their own, but couldn’t treat him dismissively either.

“Spruce beer!” one of them said happily, eyeing Johanna. “We’ve got that going now that the Capitol’s not controlling every damn thing we do.” He turned to Haymitch, his bearded face split in a wide grin. “Ever had that? I know you like your spirits, but promise you it’ll knock you flat on your ass.”

“No,” he said coolly, trying to not react to the idea that he’d liked alcohol, trying to tell himself it was meant as rough but friendly teasing, another attempt to try to draw him into their circle. They didn’t know him well enough to know better. That was the trouble—they didn’t know him. “I’ve actually gone and given up drinking.” He gave them a bit of a smirk. “I’m real fun at parties these days, I’m sure.”

He caught a flash of concern and even confusion on Johanna’s face, and felt like an ass, knowing he’d baited them and knowing she sensed it. He wondered if she’d felt like this, facing down a bunch of Twelve miners, their ways so unfamiliar to her. But in Thirteen she’d stood her ground and defended him to his own people. He was grateful to see that at least Seven was more easily forgiving
towards her—they acted as if she’d never been away and maybe that was the best thing.

“Given up drinking?” the lumberjack said, shaking his head. He’d introduced himself as Rhus Amsell. “Well, I’m sure we can find some milk or the like for you…” He grinned broadly. Yeah, Haymitch readily got the joke—not enough of a man to drink so he’d end up drinking milk like a kid.

Johanna’s expression changed to one of irritation and he could see her drawing in a breath, prepared to let them have it. She might belong here but she wasn’t one of them entirely—too much time had gone by and too much had changed. He couldn’t say he wasn’t relieved to see that when push came to shove, her loyalty lay with him. If she’d taken to having a laugh at his expense, that would have cut deep. Not that she hadn’t taunted and mocked him before, but that was back when both of them tried to yank each other’s chains and made mildly cutting remarks to try to best each other, because that was how they showed respect, by not pandering. They never would have joined in on a group taunting each other, would never have genuinely made a remark they knew would cut to the bone. To have it happen now, when she knew all his vulnerable spots, would have felt like betrayal.

He shook his head, telling her, Let it go. They weren’t aiming to wound. They were just dealing with their awkwardness about him, the stranger come into their midst married to one of their own, in the only way they knew how. If she fought all his battles for him here, they’d never respect him anyway. He had the feeling that taking it stoically for a while until he’d earned the right to smartmouth them right back was the only way to handle the matter. Unfortunately, he judged they usually ended up moving on to a new area and a new crew right about when he’d have been accorded that privilege, and he had to start all over again with the mild hazing. “Water’s fine.”

“So, Hanna,” Rhus said, shouldering his axe, “how long is it you’ll be around?”

Haymitch had spied the gold band on Rhus’ hand, and remembered him mentioning two kids, and a brief mention of a wife dead several years now. But the name Hanna caught his ear readily enough. He was the only one that called her that now, the only one she’d told that secret, and for someone else to do it, they would have known her before the arena. “Old friends, you two?” he asked Rhus, taking a reasonable guess.

“Oh yeah. Hanna here,” a nod towards Johanna, “me, Franz Dekalb, Bud Thorstein, and Holly Carpenter. Our families were on the same work crew—got into all kinds of shit together as kids.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to say a damningly nonchalant and pithy, How nice. He felt a slight flush of embarrassment at realizing his own irritation at how easily the man had just sidled up to Johanna and was treating her like—well, a best friend.

“If your mom and dad must not be too happy you didn’t make the redwood crew?” Johanna mentioned.

“They died five years back, Hanna,” Rhus said, his expression tight with pain for a minute. “Yeah, they weren’t too happy when I married Laurel because she was from the trash pine crews, but fuck it, we were happy.”

“Sorry,” she murmured.

“Happens,” Rhus said curtly, though he wasn’t quite looking at Johanna and Haymitch had the sense he was struggling for his own composure. “Franz and Holly got married, you know.”

“I know.” Haymitch doubted she’d been invited to the wedding. He knew all too well how this went—the slow rift that after a few years left a person on a far shore watching old friends walk away and
move on. He knew how much she had changed between seventeen and nineteen just from seeing her at the Games. He had the feeling by the time those friends had married, like with him and Burt and Jonas, the split had been complete.

“They both died in the war. Bud died in a mill accident three years ago.” He had the feeling she’d known that as well, but by that point, couldn’t say anything about it. Well, that explained some of why he was grasping so fiercely at Johanna—she was the last one left alive of the old days. That bond was like what he had with Hazelle, and he knew they both clung to that single remnant of more innocent summers, old friends long gone now.

Still, he couldn’t help but think, And where were you, Rhus Amsell? When she didn’t have a friend in the world aside from me and Finnick and she was all alone here in Seven? Maybe she pushed you away, had to do it, but you let her go. So you don’t get to just waltz back in and try to make it like ten years of hell never happened for her. He and Hazelle had at least tackled that head-on, come to an understanding of how things were and how they related to each other now as adults rather than solely off wistful reminiscing.

Going for a walk that evening while the other lumberjacks were making up the evening stew, Johanna grinned and said, “You’re in for a treat tonight. They actually brought down a deer—that never used to happen.” Of course it hadn’t, given how closely the food supply had probably been controlled, and any weapons that could have reasonably killed a deer. Things had changed even here for Seven. “We were lucky to get enough squirrel or badger or the like, most nights.”

“Squirrels are fit only for eating anyway,” he told her with a wry twist of his lips, remembering the fluffy golden little shits and the torn flesh on his arms where one had latched on to him. “So,” he said, just launching right into the subject, “your old pal Rhus, huh?”

Something flashed dark and fierce in her eyes for a moment and her face went taut, color blooming in her cheeks. He could see the marks of temper all over her face, ready to tear into him, probably tell him it was none of his fucking business who she talked to and if he was jealous that was his insecurity. He could practically hear it. “I’m the last one left,” she finally said, looking away from him, hand braced up on the pale, black-flecked bark of a birch tree. Her shoulders gave a deep heave as she let out a heavy breath in one rapid gust. “I didn’t know that they all died—I knew about Bud but not Franz and Holly—but it explains it. He knows I’m not moving back here, that I’ve moved to Twelve. And he knows I’m not who I was then. He’s trying to…make it up to me, leave it on good terms and let the tree fall clean before it just rots, because he knows I’m not moving back here.”

He felt like an ass, any irritation withered away by the calm explanation she gave. With Briar killed by Snow’s order so many years ago and Jonas and Burt both blown to hell down the mines, he’d had that same ashen taste of grief, thinking I’m the only one left. If he’d weathered that plus losing a wife, maybe Rhus Amsell had some cause to try to lose himself for a little while in the simpler, brighter memories of bygone days with the one person left, now that he knew that her changes had been mostly Capitol-wrought. But they left their marks all the same. “All right,” he said, moving forward quietly and putting a hand on her shoulder in support, feeling her relax slightly under his touch. “All right. I’m sorry.”

“They don’t know you,” she told him, almost as if in apology. Her shoulders stiffened again, almost as if she was preparing herself for battle. “But if they don’t know you, then they really don’t know me anymore either. They let me go back then because they didn’t understand what to do with me.”

“Do you hate them, then?” he asked her calmly. Sometimes, a flash of bitter hatred for people in Twelve had pierced his own self-loathing, because he didn’t see how they could be so blind, so easily assume that he was that cheaply swayed. They gave up on him so very easily. He’d made
them do it, done what he had to do to try and burn those bridges and keep his distance because he
was convinced it was the only way to keep them safe. But in his own way he’d resented them on
occasion just as much as they’d resented and judged him.

“You’re about the only person who wouldn’t think I’m a monster for saying ‘yes’ to that,” she
answered with a laugh that hitched a little in the middle. “You shouldn’t hate your own, you know.
It’s gonna look ungrateful and bratty.”

“We weren’t theirs anymore. We were left on our own,” he told her bluntly. “What did they ever do
for us once they thought we were Capitol sellouts except judge us and treat us like we weren’t worth
shit scraped off their shoes?”

She looked over her shoulder at him, eyes fierce and bright, teeth bared in something that was half a
snarl of pain. “This from the man who’s trying to advocate putting aside the hate any chance he gets?
How are you proposing to live with the people who treated you like that, huh?”

“I’m not saying let’s be assholes to them. We started the break, they responded as planned. But we
need to move beyond it and try to let it go. They’re willing to see the truth now and admit they got
tricked. But I don’t think we have to be friggin’ fairy tale angels and just pretend that of course it
didn’t matter, that it didn’t hurt like hell that they kicked us out and didn’t much give a damn whether
we lived or died. You can move beyond a thing without just ignoring it, yeah?” They’d had to deal
with that plenty already.

“Yeah,” she said, voice a little rough. “Yeah, OK. Pretending just makes it worse in the end. We’ve
proved that neatly enough, more than once.”

He leaned down to kiss her lightly, lips on hers for just a fleeting moment. Though when he moved
back from that, she reached up and caught him, fingers gripping tightly in his hair, telling him lowly,
“I’m not a little girl, Haymitch. I don’t need just a sweet little kiss for reassurance.”

“Well, that broadcast it pretty clearly. Taking a second to think it over and telling himself they’d
walked a couple miles from the camp, he didn’t hesitate to kiss her back, spurred on by the grip of
her fingers in his hair, the clutch of her other hand on his shoulders and how she wrapped his legs
around his waist tight as he got her back against the birch tree. “Trying to squeeze the life out of me
here?” he muttered, kissing the soft skin of her throat as she laughed.

“You can take it,” she told him.

“I need more hands, dammit,” he groused at her, because trying to touch her and help hold her up
and steady just wasn’t working so well.

She laughed at that and just kissed him again. “Poor Haymitch,” she mocked him. “I promise this
works—always did the deed in a nice soft bed for all those years with those scared little Capitol
women, huh?”

He stared at her, a faint heat of anger rising within. Why the hell did she have to remind him of that,
make him start thinking about all those women, and men, who wanted to play the sweet little
innocent with him? All those years of being dangerous enough to supposedly seduce them out of
their feigned reluctance, yet utterly safe because they knew for all they were supposedly surrendering
themselves to him, he would never hurt them, because they didn’t want pain. He thought about the
lumberjacks teasing him, and he felt like she’d cut him right there with her words, reminding him
again that for most of his life, he’d been a whore and not a man. He thought about all those nights in
those gaudy bedrooms and their too-soft beds and he wanted to be sick, wanted to get away from her
because he felt like it was a fucking game all over again, her there telling him what to do, demanding
he prove himself the strong one, the seductive one, the one to fulfill her little fantasy, and tearing him
down in the process. If he hadn’t done something she wanted, why the hell couldn’t she just say it
rather than throwing him back into the past with that deliberate reminder and making him feel like
her whore rather than her husband?

“What, you need me to prove something to you, Hanna?” he demanded roughly. “Take you hard
and fast right here—hell, we’re miles from anyone, you can be as loud as you like when you’re
hollering for more, nobody’s gonna hear.”

“Stop,” she said, and he could see her eyes gone wide, pupils dilated with something that wasn’t
desire—fear. “Please, just…” She pushed against him frantically as he let her down stepped back in a
hurry, almost twisting his ankle in the process. She looked at him, shivering a little despite the
August heat circulating even through the trees. “I’m sorry,” she said. “Fuck. Fuck. I’m sorry.”

Looking back at her, seeing the nervous flinch as she struggled to regain herself, the fire within her
suddenly muted down to cold dark ashes, he tried to think what the hell he’d said or done, lashing
out as he had in defense.

_Nobody’s going to hear._ Had he actually said that, and in that tone? Maybe if he’d said it playfully,
lovingly, that would have been entirely different but he’d been pissed off and it must have come
through. An involuntary shudder worked its way down his spine, remembering those first couple of
years being passed to anyone who wanted a taste of the popular Second Quell victor, recalling gritted
teeth against the pain and fingers clenched in the pillow and a growl in his ear of, _Yes, you just keep
quiet, boy, and hold still._

But even Thalius Eland, who had relished that kind of rough trade, wanted his playthings to take
their suffering in silence. It took a particular sort to enjoy the sound of cries of pain. And he knew the
sorts that had gravitated towards Johanna, and her reputation for viciousness and violence. The ones
that wanted to be hurt, that started to come later as she moved towards the lasting role she would
have assumed on the circuit; and the ones that wanted to hurt. He could imagine some of them
enjoying hearing her screaming, and telling her that nobody would hear, nobody would care.

Like a drowning man he grasped at the only thing that seemed to make sense, trying to turn his mind
to figuring it out, who had done it. He knew the reputation of most of those who’d been in the
business of buying victors. Word got around Mentor Central pretty quickly. “Was it Rastaban Steel
that did it?”

“Fuck you, Haymitch,” she said, words a little choked, shaking her head vehemently, “does it really
matter who?”

“It matters that he got found guilty and he’s dead and won’t ever do it to anyone else.” He carefully
kept a bit of distance from her, even as he wanted to move closer, put his arms around her and hold
her, comfort her in any way he could. Trouble was, he was the one who’d knocked her off balance
here, just as she had him. “I know that doesn’t erase it. And…I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

“You were pissed and ran your mouth without thinking,” she corrected him flatly, leaning one hip
against the birch tree in a pose of almost excessive casualness, trying a little too hard, looking at him
with an expression of defiance as if daring him to deny it.

“Yeah.” Sensing that the mood was killed thoroughly for both of them, he asked bluntly, “You all
right? I’m sorry,” he added again. She nodded hastily and he breathed a sigh of relief.

Though he was compelled to ask in return, “Why the hell did you say that to me in the first place?” Crossing his arms over his chest, he leaned back against an oak himself, waiting patiently for the answer.

Now the look of defiance crumbled and something almost like mournful apology took its place with her averted gaze, the way she tugged nervously on one earlobe. Then it shifted again to an awkward uncertainty. “You’re good, OK? And most times in bed, I really love it when it’s slow and you’re that sweet to me. I never knew it could be like that.”

Those last words gave him a curious pang of some bittersweet emotion. Remembering the way she’d smiled up at him in Four that day out among the cypresses, the unadulterated joy on her face, he felt the weight of that trust and love all over again, warmer and fiercer than any moment of physical pleasure could ever be. He remembered too how it had felt likewise to give her that in return. He couldn’t help a sense of honor and pride that he’d been the first one to touch her that completely, heart and soul as well as body, but at the same time, he felt the sorrow that she’d had to wait so long, endure so much.

He wouldn’t do her honesty discredit by dwelling on that, though, given that he knew neither of them wanted to discuss that day at length. *I never knew it could be like that* said it all so neatly. Besides, that clearly wasn’t the ending point here. “I like a compliment about my bedroom talents as much as the next man, darlin’. Though there’s a ‘but’ there,” he answered instead. “I can tell.”

In some ways he would rather have answered her with gentleness fit to that vulnerability she’d shown him, but sometimes it was still too much for them both to take. Softness of actions rather than words was much easier. His light jest instead seemed to galvanize her to carry on whereas tenderness maybe would have paralyzed her. She gave him a sly smile, the left corner of her mouth lifting for just a moment. “But sometimes…” She exhaled in a quick, irritated huff. “Sometimes I really just want to get *fucked*, OK?” She punctuated the word with the thump of her balled-up fist against the tree trunk.

Thinking back over more than their share of sex that had been anything but hours of leisure, he cocked an eyebrow and asked, “And by ‘fucked’ you don’t mean just going at it in a hurry, I assume?” When in doubt, it seemed like making things pretty damn clear was the smart play. They’d found out that just assuming made a hell of a mess.

“I mean I’m not those prissy little bitches and bastards that wanted to play innocent with you! They wanted you be a bit dangerous according to their cutey script, but you know they were scared to actually let you off the leash. *I’m not them.*” She stalked closer to him, brown eyes wide now as she looked up at him. “I know what you are. What you’ve had to do to stay alive.”

He smiled at her now without any actual humor, saying simply, “The darkness, huh?” There would always be that blood-soaked part of him that he tried to keep at bay, the violence of a man whose mind and instincts had once been forcibly sharpened to a killing edge. The Capitol had made him into a weapon as a child and demanded the same again last year in another arena. That edge never fully dulled. The blood never fully washed out.

She lightly brushed the backs of her fingers over his cheek. “Yeah. The darkness. I’ve got it too. So you think I’m afraid of you?” She shook her head. “Maybe you do or say something sometimes, but…”

“But it’s not *you* that makes me flip out,” he finished the thought, or at least where he thought she was going. “It’s that moment, that reminder.” He caught her arm lightly with one hand, gratified she
stayed calm, not skittish at his touch now. The frightened moment had clearly passed. “You, I trust. Because you’ll be there to deal with it. You’ll want to help.”

“Exactly.” He looked into her eyes, clear whiskey brown with the hints of green and amber, steady and unafraid. “So sometimes,” she told him, voice going a little soft, a note of something almost like uncertainty entering into it. “I want that. From you. I want you to just pin me down and fuck me hard enough I’m leaving marks all over your back with my nails from it, all right?” She gave a sharp laugh, now looking away again. “Shit. You get your back half torn off in the Detention Center and I say that. That sounded a little fucked up, didn’t it…”

He squeezed her arm with the hand he still had there, trying to regain her attention. “It’s not you, it’s them,” he reminded her gruffly. For just a moment, though, the image of what she’d described had popped into his mind, vivid and clear. At least, the idea of her writhing against him, fingers raking his back, body insistent and demanding against his. As usual, Johanna herself, and what pleasure he was giving her, was always far more vivid in those little fantasies than his part in it. “Is it…pain you want when you’re thinking of that?” he asked carefully, hoping she wouldn’t get pissed off at him asking, but at the same time, needing to know. “Giving it to me, or taking it yourself?”

She thought about it for a moment, turning her gaze back towards him. “No,” she said, decisiveness in the word, a firm set to her jaw. “No. It’s not the actual pain I want. I don’t want to hurt you. I don’t want you to hurt me. I don’t want you to hurt me. I don’t want to bring whips or paddles or electrical wires or whatever into this. Ever. It’s…you always seem worried you’re gonna hurt me. Like you have to either be gentle or in control. You weren’t like that on our wedding night.”

He remembered that, all right, because that was pretty much where he’d gotten that image of what she’d just described as wanting from him. It had been desperate and a little rough, as if that last meeting with Snow had smashed both of them open so that even the old fears couldn’t stand up against the all-consuming need to lose themselves in each other. She nodded, obviously seeing something in his face as he remembered it. “You just let go that night. We both did. Sure, I was a bit sore the next morning,” she shrugged. “Sorry,” he answered instinctively, feeling a little mortified. He’d never meant to hurt her.

He could see by the flash of temper in her eyes that had been the wrong thing to say. “Your back hurt the next morning?” she countered. He gave a half-shrug, which he knew she’d probably assume as confirmation. He’d felt the sting of the scratches in the shower, that was true. “I didn’t…enjoy doing that,” she told him, as if trying to reassure him that she didn’t have a taste for hurting him. “I wanted to hurt some of them, punish them a little for never giving a shit and for making me into their little toy. But never you. Never.”

“I know you didn’t,” he reassured her. Both of them had just been so caught up in the moment. “I know that’s not who you are.”

“And how,” she flippantly assumed the nasal tones of Dr. Aurelius, “did that make you feel? Terrified of me?” The glimmer of something anxious in her eyes told him that the answer mattered intensely, that she was covering it with humor.

He shook his head. “I wasn’t thinking about the pain. I was only thinking about you.” That next morning he’d been startled that both of them could bear walking so close to that rough edge without freaking out, but relieved, hopeful, a bit astonished at what it had been like.

Now a delighted grin split her face. “Nice job, genius. Now you get it. I don’t want pain. You don’t want pain either. That’s fine. But sometimes I want you to take that precious control of yours off. It’s a damn collar that Snow snapped around your neck when you were a kid and it’s been strangling
you for too long.”

Maybe she had a point. For so long he’d always had to try to think ahead, to not make stupid, impulsive moves, to do as commanded. He’d been careful to try to hide that roughest, darkest part of himself as hard as he could. “And I’m not gonna be like the sadistic assholes that used to pin you down and fuck you hard?” he asked bluntly.

“No. Because you don’t want to hurt me or humiliate me because it makes you happy. Because I’m not just a prop in a script to you. I want to watch you go wild because you need me that much that you can’t hold back.”

“Makes sense,” he acknowledged, finally feeling like he understood it and what she wanted, strangely reassured. Maybe he’d held back a little on that score, because he’d been afraid to hurt her or terrify her by getting too rough. I can take it, I trust you, I know what you are and what you’re capable of doing and I’m not scared, she told him, and he believed her. Likewise, he could take that answering part of her and not fear it, tell her that it didn’t make her the Capitol’s well-trained toy if she was so caught up in things she gave him a scratch or a love-bite every now and again. It had been poorly chosen words on her part to start the whole thing, but he knew sometimes it was still difficult to initiate things by just being honest.

She shook her head, letting out a soft chuckle. “At this point, after talking about how I want to be fucked by you, most men would probably be volunteering to test it out.”

“I rattled you pretty hard there. I figured it was better to let it settle down first. Sometimes you’re in too much of a rush to prove that you can get over things.” That was usually when she got too demanding, too aggressive, and he started backing off in a hurry in an attempt at not losing it himself against that ferocity.

Something almost solemn entered her eyes, making them suddenly look much older than her years, hardened by painful experience. “We’ll never be totally all right, will we?” she asked flatly. “There’s been too much shit that happened to both of us. Too many bad memories. Always gonna be something that could set us off. We got through the big ones, but you couldn’t have known that would throw me for a loop.”

He thought that over for a minute, acknowledging she was right. They’d gotten past the obvious, major obstacles. But he couldn’t say with confidence that something she said or did wouldn’t throw him back into the grip of old, bad memories. “Probably. But we’ll deal with it together when it happens.” He reached out and gently tucked a lock of her brown hair, alight with copper and bronze in the sunlight, behind her ear. “You’ve got nothing to prove. To me, or anyone. It’s the being there with you that matters, Hanna, not how the sex goes. If we’re not totally all right, at least we’re gone a bit strange with someone who understands that.”

She nodded once, a single rapid motion, and then reached down, pressing his hand with hers for just a fleeting moment. “Then we’ll pick up on that later.”

Pushing off from the oak and following her as she turned back towards the camp, he teased her, “Does it have to be against a tree?”

She gave a quick snort of amusement. “No. However I can have you, though.” He had to admit for the last few days, sleeping in the mining camp as they had been, that hadn’t been exactly conducive to romance. He’d readily seen most people slept outside their tents in good weather, and when they couldn’t, they slept with the tent flaps partly open to air out the stifling canvas and catch what breeze they could. Not that he was especially modest—the circuit and even the antics of the other victors sometimes had made that pretty impossible. But at the same time, he liked the idea of privacy.
“How the hell do you Seven people get some time alone?” he groused, climbing over a fallen and half-rotten log, right behind her.

“Time in the woods,” Johanna said with a shrug, “if you’re into using part of a very short lunch break for a quickie. Wasn’t like you could just stop work to sneak off and get laid. Or you just close your tent flaps at night while you’re having sex.”

Remembering how hot and humid the tent had been a couple nights ago during a summer rain, he couldn’t even imagine what it would be like to close the flaps and then work up a good sweat besides. “And of course between the closed flaps and the noise, everybody knows,” he said wryly, remembering the stifled sounds and groans from one tent out at the redwood camp, and the ribbing the two men had taken from the other lumberjacks when they came back to the fire for dinner.

She shot him a quick smile, as she launched herself up and over a gnarled root with the push of one foot, and landed lightly on her feet. “Of course. Besides, we’re,” he noticed she still included herself in that, “usually so damn beat after the day’s work that generally only the horniest newlyweds are up for sex anyway.” She waggled her eyebrows and her grin turned lascivious. “Why do you think almost all Seven kids are born between June and December? They’re pretty much all conceived back in the winter town. More privacy, the winter work is less brutal, sex is a great way to keep warm in a chilly house…”

“Found that last one out, didn’t we?” he replied, giving her a bit of a smirk, remembering the long winter months in Twelve with no heat except for the fireplace. She rolled her eyes and reached out, giving him a light smack on the arm, a gesture that lingered long enough to almost be a caress.

Walking back into the camp, Rhus grinned at them from where he was stirring the stew pot, teeth showing white against his dark beard and joked, “Have a nice time out there? Hope Haymitch knows what poison ivy looks like so you’re not itching in uncomfortable places.”

He’d taken much worse in his life than some ribbing about sex. Even as jealously as he guarded their privacy on that, this was hardly going to rattle him or make him start blushing like an adolescent boy. But at the same time, he felt a sense of relief. They weren’t treating him gingerly. The unspoken words whore or sex slave and the awkward looks of pity or uncertainty weren’t there. There was a sense of equality, something like respect too, to that matter-of-fact prodding. They were treating him as they would any other man married to one of their own, rather than like a victim, something long broken and extensively mended, like they were afraid that teasing him would end up with him in a huddle on the ground crying.

Crouching by the central fire, throwing another log on, Haymitch looked at him and gave him the sort of cool, enigmatic smile that he knew tended to make people think he was up to something. “And you, Rhus? Have some fun yesterday? I thought that was a moose in rut bellowing out there in the woods—Johanna’s told me what they sound like—except moose don’t say ‘Katrin’.”

That was pure guesswork on his part, but he’d seen the way Rhus looked at the young lumberjack woman who returned the glances, and seen that they disappeared for a while yesterday, coming back just a little disheveled. Maybe other people would have missed it, but he’d learned to pick up small signs over the years, watching people come back from appointments. Rhus scowled, brows slanting down sharply for a moment, and then it melted into a reluctant smile as the others around the fire burst out laughing. Katrin, tall and with her hair in two brown braids, broad-shouldered and broad-hipped, rolled her eyes and rumpled Rhus’ hair as she passed. “OK, fine,” he said, giving Haymitch a little nod as if to say You’re all right.

Finally, before heading back to the winter town to confer with Elmar and make their report, they detoured a bit to the west along the shore of Lake Sawyer for that camping trip Safra had suggested.
Johanna let out an impatient huff as she watched him fumbling with the tent, coming over and pushing him aside a bit, "You can make insanely complicated snares but you can't pitch a tent?"

"I can make a shelter just fine. This damn thing has too many poles," he grumbled, moving aside, letting her start assembling the framework. He knew how to make a basic shelter with a stick and some fabric, but these sturdy Seven tents with their complicated frames and ties and stakes and the like weren't something he had mastered yet. Every time they'd camped with a lumber crew, the tents had been pitched already, so it wasn't like he'd gotten practice.

He made himself busy instead setting up the portable forcefield—Safra had included that in the gear, and he'd helped set up the large ones at the lumber camps. They were meant to keep the wild animals out, without the need to keep a constant watch all night. It would be nice to have privacy but not need to worry about getting eaten by bears or forest cats or whatever. Still, he couldn't help a sarcastic chuckle as he leaned down, scooped up a rock by his feet, and tossed it at the barrier, watching it get kicked back to his hand, glowing faintly with energy. "Oh, such sweet memories comin' back to me now," he said mockingly.

As she swiveled on her haunches, busy with the tent pegs and looked at him. She'd obviously heard the crackle of discharge as the rock hit the forcefield. "You want me to throw an axe at it too for the nostalgia value?" she offered flippantly.

He shook his head. "Only if you're ready to duck," he told her dryly. "It's not like the arena fields. It's a one-way barrier. If need be, you can get out, but they can't get in," she pointed out, and given she'd dealt with the things her entire life, he knew she was trying to reassure him that he wasn't trapped by it. "Of course, big thing for us was always making sure to include enough woods inside the fence for a screen for people to go take a pee during the night, or else they'd be stuck outside it until morning. Too risky to take the whole thing down and redo the circuits for one person. Or at least, that's what our parents always threatened to make us behave."

Somehow, the little joke cut the matter down to size as something mundane, and he saw it through those eyes as something protective rather than the view of a man who'd been twice through the arena and kept captive by it.

Eating dinner off their tin plates, as Johanna was reaching for one last chunk of cornbread from the iron skillet, he asked, "So, thoughts?"

His impression was that certain areas of Seven had been bombed badly. They'd seen the burned-out scars of forest fires where a year later, most everything was still twisted and blackened. It felt uncomfortably like the wreckage of Twelve for him. But they'd fared better than some because the district was so damn huge and their population had been so spread out at their summer work when the rebellion began. Unlike Twelve or even somewhere like Eight where everything tended to crowd around one large population center, Seven was harder to destroy. Not to mention the forests were still so vast, and yearly replanting helped, so despite Capitol waste the lumber supply was in pretty good shape.

The winter town had taken its share of the bombs too, so Elmar had said, but they hadn't really had a chance to tour that yet, being as they'd been rushed around from one place to the next. He hadn't appreciated just how huge Seven was, how diverse the forests were, until now.

She licked a bit of honey off her fingers from the cornbread and looked over at him. "Stop working, Haymitch, we're on vacation," she chided him, though her expression was amused rather than irritated. "Time enough for that after this weekend."
He gave her an apologetic smile in return. “Sorry.” He went to the tent and drew out his fiddle from the case. It was a way to clear his mind a lot of evenings anyway, put away some of the stress of the day. He played, and she usually spent the time listening but also reading her stack of architecture books, poring over drawings, sketching some things herself. He’d watch her sometimes, brow furrowed and chewing on a pencil as she focused on trying to bring to life whatever vision she had in her head.

They had a sort of unspoken agreement that after dinner, once the fiddle and the books came out, the work was done and it was time to relax. So that was his way of tacitly telling her that she was right. “Brought your books?” he asked.

She fetched a weighty blue-bound volume that looked like it could be used as a weapon to kill some rats in a pinch. Sitting cross-legged in front of the fire, she cracked the book open.

He started to play, going first for one of the familiar Twelve tunes that came to his fingers like instinct. Warmed up from that, watching her bowed head as she read, he figured, Hell with it.

Remembering Finnick and Annie’s happiness at their wedding when he played Four music for them, he’d made a quiet phone call to Elmar before the peace conference, asking for a personal favor. Elmar had handed him a thick roll of music sheets there in Fourteen, waving off any offers from Haymitch for repayment. Generous, considering at that point Elmar Luoma didn’t know Haymitch from an ash tree and had no cause to do him any kindnesses. But he knew he owed the man a small debt for that, and he’d repay it in time. It had been difficult trying to snatch a little practice here and there away from Johanna’s ears to keep it a surprise, but the look of astonishment and pleasure as she recognized a song from Seven was something he knew he’d treasure.

It was just a song, but she looked at him like he’d somehow handed her the moon and the stars. Another year of winter snow/Watched it come and watched it go/But now it’s a fine summertime/And the moon’s shining through the trees/Come and take a walk with me? She closed the book and set it aside, knees drawn up to her chest and he watched her as he played the few songs he’d hurried to memorize: songs about love, lumber, loss.

He was sure he probably misremembered or missed a few notes, but she didn’t fault him for it. When he was finished, he gave her a bit of a cocky grin as if to say Yeah, think nothing of it, but he told her, “Happy Birthday.”

She scooted over on the blankets to him, and leaned down, hands on his shoulders. “Watch the fiddle,” he warned her, carefully setting it aside and drawing her down to him.

“That what you call it now?” she said, voice full of laughter and warmth, kissing him.

He couldn’t give her back all the years and the innocence the Capitol had stolen. But he could give her some of the things she should have enjoyed as a grown Seven woman. A wedding dressed in blue and two marriage trees planted at their house, the songs of the home she loved, this short honeymoon in the woods. All those should have been hers still by rights, and he could at least give her that, and by doing so tell her that even if she’d moved to Twelve, he wouldn’t try to take Seven from her. He wouldn’t be the Capitol, forcing her into another image. He accepted this part of her, the part that was a snarky, tough, lumberjack from Seven, and he loved her for it. “I know what you are, Hanna,” he whispered in her ear, remembering her saying those words to him, knowing she’d hear the whole message of it: I accept you. I love you. All of you. I won’t ask you to hide or to change.

Arms around his neck, she hugged him tightly for a long moment, her chin resting on his shoulder, her heart beating against his. Then she pushed back from him for a minute, just a little space so she
was looking at his face. He looked back at her, silhouetted against the warm fire-glow with the swirl of embers like fireflies and the night sky with its thousands of bright pinpoint stars, visible here and there through the tall silent sentinels of the trees.

She leaned down again, but instead of kissing him on the lips, she nipped his neck lightly then again, a bit harder, tongue worrying at the spot as if to soothe it. He felt his heart beat faster at that, a heat entering his blood, knowing what she wanted. “I want you to fuck me,” she said, just in case he hadn’t understood, and she gave him a mischievous smile. “And yes, I’m gonna be as loud as I like.”

“Promises, promises…” He knew, with a sense of calm within him, that he wasn’t afraid of it, that he wanted it too. If it didn’t work this time, they would help each other through it and they would try again later. And if it did work, that was going to be one damn fine night. “Looks like you’ve got another gift to unwrap.”

Chapter End Notes

Tip of the cap to Trovia for some very helpful suggestions and thoughts on this chapter. Danke!
Back again in the winter town, having gotten the overview of all the lumber camps across the vast district, finally Elmar took them around on a tour of the district center. “It’s quieter now, of course,” he said, striding down the main thoroughfare, “with all the lumberjacks out at the camps. Just the millers and carpenters and the like are in town.”

Compared to the bustling liveliness of the lumber camps, the songs and hollers of the workers and the crashing of the timber, Haymitch readily conceded it was quiet here in the winter town. Almost too quiet, and looking at Johanna’s studiedly blank face, he thought about how she’d been stuck here too for years before and after each Games. Was it worse to be isolated in a virtual ghost town, or in one bustling with life?

He wasn’t sure, but he was certain that it could only have driven the spike in deeper for her, realizing the way of life she had lost and the roots that had been yanked up. Sometimes, crazy as it was, he’d wished he could say to hell with it and join a mining crew, lousy and dangerous and horrible as it was, if only to feel like he belonged still to that old familiar life. Feeling like an outsider, almost an exhibition like in the Capitol’s Pennysound Menagerie separated from everyone by bars or a pane of glass, was enough that even death and hardship wouldn’t have deterred him some days. It was madness thinking it, and of course the Capitol would never have allowed one of its precious victors to risk death like that, but isolation brought on its own kind of desperation.

Turning away from the main square with its neat cobblestone roads, Elmar told them, “Sawyer’s Creek got nailed a bit hard by the bombers.” The paving rapidly gave way to pitted and rutted dirt roads thick with mud and some lingering puddles left over from the previous night’s rain, and Elmar clambered up the three steps to the wooden walkway that Haymitch guessed was intended just to avoid that trouble. Their shoes were already squelching down into the mud.

“Useful in the winter too,” Johanna pointed out, nimbly following Elmar with the practiced grace of someone who’d spent half her life mounting those steps regularly. “All the snow.” Thinking how deep it got in the mountains back home, about having to shovel his way out the door sometimes as a kid, he had to concede that Seven had done it smart, building their houses just that bit taller and elevating the walkway like that. Of course, they had more free access to the lumber for small luxuries like that. Though as he looked, even with an eye not as practiced as Johanna’s, he could see the splinters and chips and knots and flaws—it was all the low-grade stuff that the Capitol had probably just “graciously” let the locals have rather than dealing with turning it into more plywood or paper.

He quickly saw what Elmar meant as they walked. Some blocks of Sawyer’s Creek had been entirely obliterated, like gaping holes in the town. He’d estimate at least half of it had been burned to ashes. “So few casualties during the bombing, that’s truly a blessing,” Elmar said, glancing over his shoulder with relief in his near-black eyes. “A bit crowded this winter, but everybody pulled together and opened their homes to those left homeless.” He gave a wryly humorous twist of his mouth. “We’d have been glad for some kind of police force considering people got a bit pissed off living with three families in the same small house and it got a bit heated, but…what the hell, it gave plenty of incentive come spring to pop the houses up in a hurry.”

Seeing the new houses there, bright and clean quality lumber against the tired-looking, weathered and splintered wood of the old homes, he was surprised. “Fast workers,” he complimented, estimating that in about four months they’d built dozens of homes. In the distance, down the hill, he could see small figures nimbly climbing over the skeleton of yet another house, hard at work.

“We’re good at it,” Johanna said with some pride. “You’re going to house-raisings from the time
you’re a kid.”

_Could use some more of them in Twelve_, he thought, imagining the desolation of the bare, empty lots now. Katniss and Peeta reported that some of the few Seven immigrants had gotten things started, but training in the others was no easy task. He didn’t say it aloud, not wanting Elmar to feel like they were poaching some of his people away from him. But he would definitely offer. Johanna had said the lumber prospects around Twelve looked good. They would need it to rebuild.

“Well,” Haymitch told him, “if there’s one district whose skills are gonna be in utter demand over the next few years, it’s Seven. Lumberjacks, millers, and carpenters aren’t going to lack for work by any means.”

“It’s a nice position to be in.” Elmar shrugged lightly. “We’re used to being some of the worst and least in Panem, you know.”

“I know how that goes, trust me.” A Twelve man couldn’t help but understand that mentality.

Elmar leaned back against the post for the awning of the printer’s and book bindery, another Seven trade. “We took some hits. Being involved with the rebel alliance,” a quick nod towards Johanna, “made us a prime target. But it’s such a huge district and everyone was so spread out that they couldn’t really get to us the way they could Twelve or Eight or some others. We don’t have a work shortage, nor do we have an industry that’s suddenly become unnecessary or unsustainable. So compared to others at the peace conference, Seven is in pretty good shape to give help rather than require it.”

“Hey, that’s always good to hear,” Johanna muttered with a bit of a smirk. He was inclined to agree. It seemed like Five, Seven, Nine, and Eleven were in that position, and given how rough the three Career districts in particular were, seeing a district that wasn’t struggling was something of a relief. He’d noticed one thing—even as they were bickering around the conference table in Fourteen and trying to defend native district interest and even independence rather than agree to submit to the authority of a national ideal, the districts at relative advantage had still been willing to step in and help those that were struggling. That was encouraging.

“I’m thinking of cutting the lumber season short in a week or two rather than letting it go until mid-October or early November, long as the weather permits, like usual. We’ve got a good stock of seasoned lumber laid by, even with some of the warehouses being destroyed by the bombs. That would free people up for construction crews, especially in the north districts where the building season is so limited.” Another slight shrug; and he studied the two of them as if trying to gauge their reactions. “The mills might lag for a year or two if the winter workforce isn’t there, but I figure we need houses more than we need paper or boards just sitting in a warehouse.”

“That would be a good plan,” Johanna agreed. “Twelve really needs it before winter. Haven’t been to Eight yet, but it sounds bad. Two’s in rough shape with the civil war that went on there.”

“If Six can keep the hovercraft flying and the trains running, we’ll keep building long as we can before the snow cuts us short, then move south to the warmer districts.”

“I’m sure Brocade, and people in those districts, won’t forget it. And she’ll see them fairly done for their labor.” Whether it really was a purely generous humanitarian gesture or a shrewd move to place Seven in a position of slightly greater power because of the debt that would be owed by them stepping up like this, Haymitch didn’t know. Perhaps it was a bit of both. Either way, the man was asking nothing for it directly, and in dealing with Brocade he had to know that she didn’t play favorites.
“Then consider it done. I’ll talk to the crews and get ‘em organized, see who’s willing to take a trip to do some building projects.” He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose and shutting his eyes. “Twelve, Eight, no problem. But talking them into going to Two could be tough. I’ve got no problem with Tertullia Sangus, and after the peace conference and the bombing,” he managed to not flinch as he said the word, “some of the animosity probably faded. But you know the average district person still probably has some reservations. They don’t know anything about Two but what they’ve seen on the television.”

“Let’s hope appealing to their goodwill does it, but it not, offer them extra incentive pay,” Haymitch said, deciding to just be blunt about it. “We’ll make sure it’s made good upon.” He wouldn’t ask Brocade to cover that, considering the state of finances currently in Panem. But victors had plenty of funds in the bank. In chatting with Brutus and Enobaria after talking to Chantilly about the need to subtly encourage them to go to Twelve, they’d agreed to meet up in Six before the two of them headed east on the next train. That might be a good time to try to mention the idea to them. The two of them might be leaving Two, but he knew their fierce pride in their home district would probably still inspire them to want to see those back there properly housed.

“How’s Safra?” Johanna broke into talking business, looking at Elmar with an inquisitive glance. “I haven’t seen her since we got here.”

Now with the briskness of talking tasks gone and knocked off his game, Elmar showed the fatigue again, as his eyes dulled a little, and Haymitch’s eyes were inevitably drawn to the faint greyish cast to his raw umber skin, the puffy bags beneath his eyes. He’d missed a spot shaving that morning near his right ear, and his bone-straight black hair was just a shade too long, as if he hadn’t bothered with anything like a trim since the conference. Haymitch was sure there were new lines in his face too. “She’s well, thank you,” he said finally. “A bit of summertime flu, but it’ll pass. She’s just staying in so she doesn’t pass it to anyone else.”

Less versed in Seven mentality and their emotional tells, but hesitant to believe it just off his instincts, he glanced over at Johanna who gave a miniscule shake of her head in denial. Sick like Maribelle Donner and her migraines?, he thought. Grief was a sickness, all right. It had weighed him down for two and a half decades.

“Ah, well,” Johanna said with glib cheer, “I’ll just make sure to pay my respects before we leave. After all, I probably won’t be back for a while, and it’d be a shame to miss seeing her.”

Faced with the amusing yet slightly unusual prospect of Johanna exerting subtlety there, Haymitch watched as Elmar’s face stayed as rigid as a figuring carved of wood, almost paralyzed. Haymitch had the sense of a man caught in a trap and staring at it in agonized helplessness. Then finally the spell broke and Elmar nodded. “Of course. She said in the Capitol that you two got along very well.”

Finishing up the tour and getting back to chatting about Seven and the work crews, Elmar regained his balance quickly. But the moment lingered, and it made him think of another family torn asunder, and a promise made. “I told Clover we’d check Blight’s house for anything left for her or Ami,” he told Johanna as they walked back towards Victors’ Glade. “I figured we won’t clean the place out, or anything…” That would just be too much, especially given the difficulty sometimes in cleaning Johanna’s house. He saw the look on her face sometimes as she folded up clothes or placed things in boxes. She nodded, looking at him with an expression of almost too studied calm. “That’s fine. I’d rather we didn’t clean up his stuff, or Cedrus’. If they have family left alive, that’s better left to them so they can keep what they want. But you’re right. We should check for Clover’s sake.” Gesturing him towards the third house in the circle, the brown one with green trim, she said, “He always left his
spare key on top of the door. Never could seem to remember it.”

“He usually had to have Cedrus or one of the Avoxes let him into the Seven apartment because he’d lock his key in there,” and he bit back the finisher to that thought, even before he went a bit strange.

“He never asked me.” She sighed, even as she scrambled onto the porch rail and leaned over, stretching out one hand to swipe the key from the top of the door. Blight, a large man even for Seven at nearly six and a half feet tall, could have reached it easily. “He probably knew I’d just resent him for it and bitch even louder.”

“He wasn’t perfect, especially when it came to you. He knew that.” Blight had ended up mumbling about it to Haymitch more than once after drinking too much.

Unlocking the door, she pushed it open. Stepping in and following her to the study, Haymitch spotted the clutter of a man living on his own—papers, books, woodcarving knives and the like. Not nearly as bad as his own awful chaos had been, but clearly Blight wasn’t the sort that was meticulous about leaving stuff spic and span every night before bed.

Johanna reached out and touched a now-dusty carved wooden mockingjay sitting on the worktable, flanked by a myriad of others—wolf, bear, fox, badger, rabbit, eagle, all meticulously made and carefully hand-finished. He thought back to the toys in Nine that Amitra and the boys had been playing with, the toys he’d seen Blight casually hand out to other victors for their children and nieces and nephews for years. “He was busy before the Quell.”

“Keeping his mind occupied, I imagine.”

“He always made toys for us kids. Every single kid got one.” There was an almost tremulous smile on her face at that. “I’ve still got the ones he gave to Bern, Heike, and me when we were little. I should bring them with us, when we go. For our kids.”

Our kids. As ever the words spurred a surge of emotion that almost overwhelmed him. “If you want to grab a few more of those toys to bring with us too, sounds like the Village is gonna be full of kids soon enough,” he told her. “I’ll go check upstairs, see if he left something there.” He sensed right then it was a little too much for her, confronted anew with this side of Blight far away from the awkward, fearful man she’d so openly disdained.

It wasn’t easy for him either, remembering the man who’d been his friend, but he climbed the stairs, trying to not cough at the dust. He’d been lucky. Finnick brought him back from a stopped heart. If things had been reversed, if somehow he’d ended up separated from Katniss and Finnick and instead ended up with Johanna’s group, he could just as easily have ended up the one dead on the ground instead of Blight. Wiress wasn’t the only one who would have reacted badly to the blackout zone. He thought about of Johanna and Blight, left caring for a semi-conscious Beetee and a semi-loopy Wiress after the Cornucopia, with only vague hopes of meeting up with the main group. He’d given them a hell of a task, put the protection of those two entirely on their shoulders and told them bluntly that if they couldn’t meet up immediately after the gong they were on their own for the time being.

It would have been easy for the two of them to just abandon the two Three tributes, who’d been worth their weight in gold in taking down the arena but prior to that, a hundred percent worthless in combat, and strike out on their own. Two fierce fighters like them could have gone far. But they’d kept their word to him and to the alliance. They’d done the best they could, and Blight died trying to find Wiress again and keep her safe. You left Johanna to fend for herself again, my friend, he thought with a certain sense of melancholy. But you did what had to be done.

In the end, that was more than Haymitch himself had managed. He thought of the red crescent of
Wiress’ slit throat as Gloss dumped her down on the sand, the way the sand and water around her had turned scarlet. He wondered anew if Johanna had then gone after Gloss with such a vengeance not out of personal grief for Wiress, but fury for having lost her charge after enduring so much to keep her safe.

For all the clutter on his workstation, apparently Blight had gotten his affairs in order. On his bed, neatly made, there was a large cardboard box. An envelope labeled boldly with Cedrus lay on top.

Given that Cedrus was dead, he hesitated for a good thirty seconds, debating the matter. Finally he figured he might as well, given that it was probably instructions of some kind, though he tried to shove away the nagging feeling of invading the privacy of two dead men he’d known and respected. Opening the envelope, he pulled out a sheet of paper, unfolding it. Blight’s bold, thick handwriting covered it.

*If you’re reading this, obviously I didn’t make it out. No blame. We agreed, anyone from Seven ought to make it out, it’s Johanna. I know you’ll have done what you have to do for her with the sponsors. There was no point trying to drum them up for me. When you go back next Games to take a mentor chair again, tell Clover I love her and that I wish it could have all been different, but she didn’t sign up for what I turned into. She’s had me as her burden for long enough. Sometimes I can’t believe she isn’t disgu,* the words were struck out.

*They took up again with a shakier hand. Better me than you going in this time. I can at least try to keep Johanna safe for a while, try to do better for her at least once. And Mattias needs you, sick as he is. I wish I could have met Ami but she’s never needed me, and maybe that’s better because I’ve never been good at being there for those that do,* that last sentence was struck through as well with a bold, almost angry slash of the pen. *Never mind me getting maudlin. I hope to hell you don’t ever meet Ami, because as is, you’d only meet her in the Training Center as a tribute. But if by some chance you do, don’t tell her about me. It’s better that way. She’s safer that way—I don’t want her ending up doomed to the arena as a double legacy like Chantilly’s kids will be. All I’d do for her in the end is put her in danger. I wasn’t able to be her father in any way that counts.*

*If it was Haymitch that made it out, tell him thanks for not giving up on me. If not Johanna, he deserves to be the one. The rest of us worried about our own first, but he always did his best to look after the rest of us, no matter what district. Wonder how long it’ll take some of them to forget that and go after him in there? You probably know that by now. If it was anyone besides Haymitch or Johanna or maybe Angus or Chaff, good for them for being the last one standing, but honestly I don’t much care. Might be a better thing I’m not there to see Mentor Central next year and know who the survivor is and just who they killed to get there. I don’t envy you that.*

*My best to Chantilly and Carrick too, they were always good to me. Take care, Ced, and if you can, get this box to Clover. I won’t ask you to give her my words. I owe those to her direct. Try to be sly about it if you can so nobody asks questions. I know it’s asking a lot of you to stay on keeping my secrets, but you’ve always been sound as oak on that. Thank you.*

*I hope you can at least say I went down doing something worthwhile. There’s a bottle of kirschwasser down in the cupboard by the fridge. Have a drink for me.*

**Blight**

Hefting the box onto his shoulder, he went downstairs, quietly closing the door behind him. Down in the kitchen he found the bottle of kirschwasser that Blight had indicated, and placed it on the table, staring at the strong, cherry-flavored liquor, remembering passing a bottle with Blight in times gone by.
He thought about the other victors again, about Blight dead in the arena, and thought of the booze. With the conjunction of the two in his mind, his fingers crept to the spot just below his ribs, and even though the cotton of his shirt blocked his touch, he knew all too well the look and feel of the large, ugly scar there, where they’d ripped him open further to repair the damage of Enobaria’s stab wound. Gave him a new liver while they were in there, probably because his was in such rough shape—he’d known sometimes he was killing himself slowly, could feel the slow and steady march. He just felt too overwhelmed to care about saving his own life, no point to it. He had the feeling there was no way he could have survived the tracker jacker venom with that half-dead liver.

Now he wondered, in a way he’d never let himself ponder before, just who it had been that they’d hacked open down in the tribute morgue to take their liver for him, ticking off the possibilities of who it couldn’t be with a steely, objective mindset. Chaff he’d been stripped down to little more than a skeleton, and Mags and Angus had been torn to shreds. Not Laurence or Poppy or Max because their livers were in rough shape too from booze or morphling, maybe Blight as well. Seeder had been virtually gutted at the Cornucopia by Gloss’ hookblades. Woof was probably too old. Someone young, he thought, suppressing a shudder. Strong. Healthy. They’d have wanted to give me the best so they could do what they wanted with me.

Gloss? Cashmere? Sandy? Amaranth? Maybe even Rye, who he’d killed? He knew he’d bought his own survival with Rye’s in the arena, but he would never know for sure whose death paid for his life in that way. He told himself whichever victor it had been, a bit of them survived, and he ought to live well because of that. Every day he woke up in a world at peace, every time he kissed Johanna or slept with her, every hope he might have of watching children of his grow up, was something he owed to a slain victor. If nothing else, a Twelve miner knew how to count his debts until they were paid, and he knew this was one that would last the rest of his life.

Hearing the soft creak of the floorboards as Johanna came into the kitchen, he appreciated that even though he knew it must be her, she spoke up and announced herself, knowing his back was turned. “Found something?”

Wordlessly he handed her Blight’s letter to Cedrus. It didn’t seem right to keep it from her now that Blight and Cedrus were both gone. He watched her reading it, the words of a desolate man trying to come to grips with the end of his life and all his perceived failings.

“Oh, the fucking idiot,” she said finally, though there was more grief in her voice than the sharp condemnation she’d used before whenever she spoke about Blight. “You heard how Clover talked about him. She loved him. Didn’t care what they’d forced him to do. Had a kid with him. And he just gave up his chances because he thought he owed me something?”

“He knew he wouldn’t make it out,” Haymitch told her, shaking his head, even as the emotion of it twisted uncomfortably within him. “He knew the sponsors wouldn’t go for him, knew he’d probably react badly to the arena.”

She flinched as if he’d somehow struck her. “And there I was bitching at him about it on camera. Thinking I was stuck with three useless pieces of deadweight. No wonder Clover hated me.”

“She got over it, Hanna.” He stepped forward and wrapped his arms around her. She pressed herself against him, not aggressive or flirtatious, more like someone desperately seeking the comfort of a safe haven. “And Blight loved them, but he felt like he’d never be anything but a burden, able to bring them nothing but grief.” He found he was holding her tighter too, needing her there. “When it comes to feeling all you do is bring people down, and you’re so worthless and you’ll only fail them again, over and over and over...” All bitterness and anguish of years of failure roiled within him again, proving they weren’t gone yet.
He looked at her and her skin looked a bit pale beneath the natural gold, making her suddenly wide eyes look even darker. “Is that what you wanted?” she asked, and her voice was too even, too calm, and he could tell she was forcing it. “To kill yourself?”

She’d dealt with her issues with fierce-burning rage, fighting it all the way. Maybe she would have killed them, but never herself. Johanna had never let herself be beaten down to the point she simply wanted to give up. Suddenly he couldn’t bear to look at her, knowing from the dread and pain shining in her eyes that she’d cut right to the heart of it and realized he wasn’t exactly talking about Blight Arnesson. As he glanced away, he said softly, “There’s a point you cross where even that takes too much effort to care. You just want…to stop existing somehow. Going into the arena, damn horrible as it was…it was a way out too. And a way to die doing something useful. No matter what little worth you placed on your life, might be enough for you to trade it for someone else’s survival. That seemed fair.”

She grabbed hold of him, fingers clenched fast in his shirt. “You listen,” she said, grip going even tighter. “That was then. Fine. Maybe Katniss and Peeta were so wrapped up in saving each other they were willing to let you go into the arena and take the fall for them. Maybe I won’t even blame them. You look out for your own first. But I swear…I ever hear you talking about your life like it’s just this fucking bargaining chip and all it’s worth is what you can buy with it…asshole. I need you. I need you, all right? Don’t you ever think I’m somehow better off if you quit on me.”

Hearing those words, all he could do was hold on to her and say, “All right,” voice a little unsteady. To be with someone who wanted him, needed him—it had changed everything from the despair that had characterized his life for so long. In that moment he wished Blight could have survived long enough to see this new world rather than one where all it felt like was an unending stretch of no way out. Haymitch had been the lucky one, in the end.

“This.” Slipping out of his arms, Johanna quickly went to the cabinet and grabbed a couple of glasses, poured two small drinks of the kirschwasser. “I think this qualifies under your new drinking rules.” She handed him one. “Cedrus can’t have that drink for him, so…we should.”

He nodded and knocked back the liquor, feeling the strong burn of it. Carefully, he placed the glass down on the counter. Thought about it—no, the one drink Blight had requested was enough. The pull of the loss and grief for so many friends was still there, it would always be there, but it had dulled some. Enough that he could walk away from the bottle, and he breathed a soft sigh of relief. He knew his life would be full of these tests of will, but apparently he wasn’t doomed to just give in. He looked over at Johanna, seeing the look of something almost like affection and pride on her face, knowing she was relieved too.

“C’mon,” she said, hoisting the box for Clover and balancing it carefully on her hip, “let’s get out of here. We can give this to Brutus and Baria to take to Twelve.”

~~~~~~~~~~

The next day Johanna went to go call on the Sassafras while Haymitch and Elmar had shut themselves up in Elmar’s office, debating about the details and logistics of work crews. The thought that there would be some more people from Seven coming to Twelve, at least for a time, and some likely to settle permanently, filled her with a deep sense of relief.

Maybe she’d been OK with the idea of moving somewhere else, and Twelve was home now and she didn’t regret it. The victors were her family. But knowing that some of the people who knew the life she’d grown up with, who decorated trees for New Year’s and carved wedding furniture and the like, would be there as well, eased her soul in a way she hadn’t even realized. Even Rhus had agreed to come along, with Katrin and his kids, needing a fresh start away from too many old ghosts just as
much as anyone else. That reassured her more than she had realized. Maybe they wouldn’t be the same way as when they were fifteen—both of them had been knocked around too much by life—but she thought they could try again now and see if they could come together as adults and find a way to still be friends. She’d no longer be something of an island when it came to her culture, good as Haymitch had been about it. I know what you are, Hanna, he’d told her, eyes shining bright in the fireglow. He accepted all of her—Seven, victor, survivor, sometimes maybe still a bit of a bitch.

Safra answered the door when she knocked. Johanna’s eyes quickly picked up the deeper hollows in her cheeks, the way she had her hair brushed back into a quick, lopsided ponytail. Far from the stylish mayor’s wife she’d always had to be on public occasions, she looked like she wanted to do nothing but curl up with booze and cry herself to sleep. “I came to see how you were doing,” Johanna told her.

“Just a little under the weather,” Safra said, standing there with the door half-open and her hand still on the edge. Johanna read that loud and clear—she wasn’t intending on letting Johanna in if she could help it.

They weren’t Capitol, or even polite bullshitters like in Four who could beat around the bush and never quite say something because it was considered rude. Nobody asks, Finnick told her once, bleak face and bleak voice. It’s rude to just come straight out with something. Have to tack and jib around it for a couple hours.

Like whispering behind your back is any better. Maybe that was another reason she and Finnick wouldn’t have cut it. She’d have gotten too annoyed with the way he bit his tongue on too many things.

At least here she was confident of how it worked in Seven. “Sometimes being alone is the worst thing for what ails you,” she said bluntly.

“It’s just flu…” Yeah, there was Seven too: denial, not wanting to be seen as weak or a burden. She’d wrestled with it so much after her Games. Would it be worse to admit she’d lost it and be seen as weak, or just accept what the Capitol wanted and be seen as deceptive? Either way, in a district that prized honesty and quiet resilience and endurance, she’d been screwed. It had been Cedrus’ advice of, Just let the Capitol say what they will. It’s safer, that had decided it. Sometimes she wondered if she’d have been better off insisting on the truth. But defying the Capitol’s wishes killed more than its share of people.

“You lost a baby a little over a month ago because some Capitol asshole wanted to throw a tantrum with a bomb,” Johanna decided to just lay her cards on the table. “Shit. You’re entitled to be upset.”

Something flickered in Safra’s dull, tired loam brown eyes—pain, though maybe something also like relief. “We’re dealing with it,” she said carefully, though the way she shifted her weight back a little, as if not leaning on the door just waiting to close it, told Johanna she was listening.

“Look, can I come in? This isn’t porch chat for the neighbors. If I’m in there and you want me to fuck off, I’ll go.”

A nod answered that, and the door finally opened enough for her to slip into the house. She looked around briefly, seeing the tasteful, subtle decoration of it. “I’m sorry,” she said, feeling like that had to be the first thing. “How are you…” Yeah, this wasn’t easy. She’d never been the touchy-feely sort.

“They say I’ve healed up fine,” Safra answered, closing the door behind the two of them, and turning to her. But the slight sardonic cock of her eyebrow told Johanna that she was anything but
OK. It wasn’t just about the body healing. “We should be able to have more kids.”

She remembered the hospital, the well-meaning nurse in telling her, *You’re young, you’re strong, you can try again someday.* “Like that helps right now with the one you lost.” It would have been far worse to have that future potential taken away, granted, but in that moment, people acting like it was some kind of zero-sum, as if in having another kid it would be like the loss never happened, was almost unbearable.

Safra’s eyebrows rose again, obviously waiting for some clarification on that, a strange sense in the tension of her body as if she was simultaneously holding back out of caution and wanting to rush in being so desperate to be understood. “The bombs at the Presidential Mansion in the final battle for the Capitol,” she said finally, willing herself to not look away, even as if felt like the two of them were caught in some awful feedback loop with Safra’s pain tugging on the remnants of hers. “I…the stress of the injury, the drugs they gave me for the burns…I lost a kid too.”

Something in Safra’s expression crumpled, as if the porcelain-thin mask she’d been wearing had suddenly shattered. She swayed a little on her feet as if that revelation had physical force. “Then you know,” her voice hitching badly during the words.

“Yeah.” It wasn’t easy, and the instinct of it still battled a bit with her natural instincts to stay away, stay safe. But comfort won out and she stepped forward, wrapping her arms around the other woman and holding her close in a hug. They were sisters in this kind of loss, and she’d seen with Haymitch too many times, someone who simply understood made all the difference. “You and Elmar…?” she asked, wondering if the mayor had been shutting his wife out. Immediately she realized it was too intimate. But Safra answered. “He tries. But…it’s too damn hard right now. I need time, I need…” Another rough sob. “Lukas and I were married only five months before he died. We’d started talking about a kid, but…it never…and Elm, ten years with Francheska and no kids. They tried, but she must have had issues.” Considering Elmar proved capable of fathering a kid, it must have indeed been his first wife. “When we got married, we agreed we were both getting a bit old to be sure we’d be around long enough for a kid to grow up, and with the Games?” She shook her head, still clinging to Johanna for dear life. “But the war came. And we won. So we figured…things were going to be different, so we’d try. Four months of hoping. Nothing. Then…oh fuck, he was so happy, I don’t think he even knew just how much he’d wanted a kid until that moment. We’d started picking out names. All it took was thirty seconds and one bomb.” The words and the tears were flowing fast and free now. “I’m thirty-four this fall. Elm’s already forty-eight. We’re not getting younger, and I don’t know if I can do this again.”

She might have been listening to an echo of her own fears and grief. “You need time,” she agreed. “And so does he. But just…fucking well talk about it. Chances are he wants to talk too. He probably just doesn’t know how. It’s harder for men. Their kid too, but…it happened to us and they know it. So he might be worried about overstepping, or hurting you more. But trust me, he needs you, much as you need him.” She thought about that day on the bayou, the intense relief she’d felt just finally talking about it with Haymitch, releasing all the agony of it that had been pent up. “You’ll find a way to move forward from there. Because you can’t just stay like this. It kills you slowly.”

Safra nodded, hugging Johanna tight for one last second and then letting go slowly, almost with a little reluctance. But she stepped back, dashing the back of her hand across her eyes. “We would have had a boy,” she said, eyes meeting Johanna’s, raw and red-rimmed, but calmer now.

“Did you plant a cherry tree for him?”

“Not yet.”
“Maybe you should.” The normal Seven grieving could take its course then, and have somewhere to visit, to think of their child.

“Did you plant one for…”

“Her.” They’d never know that for sure, but Safra didn’t need that technicality. “Not yet.” They hadn’t been in a position to do what, given they’d been away from home this long.

“Maybe you should.”

“Maybe you’re right.” She realized the idea brought her some comfort—something living and flourishing, planted in memory of what had been lost. She’d always be more Seven than Twelve on that, never satisfied with a block of dead stone. Spying a pad of paper and a pen, she scribbled down a couple phone numbers and handed it to Safra. “Here.”

“Who’s this?” She cocked her head aside and her brows furrowed as she looked the numbers over. “Twelve, Six, Ten, Three, Eight, and…I don’t even know this one.” It figured a mayor’s wife would know the extensions for each district.

“That first one, home telephone for Haymitch and me back in Twelve. The others, that’s where we’ll be staying the rest of this trip after we leave here. Six, Ten, Three, Eight. Assume we’ll be two weeks in each place. The last? That’s the mobile number for a shr—psychiatrist from Thirteen. Aurelius. He can be a bit of a hassle sometimes with the And how did that make you feel? shit, but… he helped both of us after we got rescued from the Capitol. So if you need to talk, you call me. Wherever I am. I’m sure Haymitch would say the same to Elmar. But if you need help...if it gets too bad…” She struggled to frame it with the right words without being either uselessly polite or offensive. She’d never been good with this. Deliberately offensive had been her mode of operation for too long.

Safra spared her that, nodding. “Thank you.” She sounded sincere about it, and she stepped forward, hugging Johanna one more time. “Sorry to lose you to Twelve,” she told Johanna with a sound of real regret. The notion of that tugged at her, the deeply satisfying knowledge that someone actually wanted her to stay. “He needs me and I need him.” It really was that simple, wasn’t it?

“Don’t blame you on that.”

“But don’t stay a stranger,” she hurried to add. “Call anyway, even if it’s not trouble. Fuck knows I’m probably gonna need someone to complain to about Haymitch’s having his head up the collective political ass.” A fellow Seven woman married to a politician probably would understand best of anyone.

“I’ve had to pull Elm’s out sometimes.” Now there was a spark of some life and humor on Safra’s face, though her smile was halfway between humor and wistfulness. “That man lived alone for much too long.”

“Tell me about it.” She turned to go and then turned back, adding, “But he ended that for you. And you ended it for him. Just remember that.”

A slight nod and a wider smile answered that. “Don’t forget how to use an axe, huh?”

“You either. Take care, OK?” She decided she’d leave it on that note rather than lingering where she might not be wanted. Seven didn’t get clingy.
Instead she walked the path from the town center, past the main paper mill with its earthy-sulfur scent telling her that the workers were processing today. A left past the sawmill and the faint scent of burned wood and sawdust, and she walked up the hill towards the Memorial Grove. It had started on the crest of the highest hill back when the southeast district had been part of long-gone places with names that rolled off the tongue, names like Minnesota and Wisconsin. Every kid in Seven could name the North American places that now made up their district—it had been on a third-grade history exam, though knowing that the redwood territory in the far west had been British Columbia didn’t do much practical good. Whatever the hell “British” even was, she didn’t know for sure. Something to do with the old countries across the ocean, but they were long dead too.

But the old sentinels of those earliest trees stood proud and tall against the sky, with a grand view of Lake Sawyer. The more recent entries carpeted the slopes of the hills. She found hers easily enough, without even needing to look at the small, palm-sized brass sign stuck in the ground with the name, birthdate, and death date. She knew these four trees by heart. Nine years old now, they would be a long time yet in growing tall and strong. She wouldn’t be here to see that.

Kneeling in the green grass, she looked up at them. Her dad’s oak: strong and solid. Her mom’s maple: tough but with that inner sweetness. Bern’s fir, for his honest nature and growing fastest for his constant energy. Then there was the cherry for Heike—a child’s tree. It was August now so all the blossoms were long gone months ago, and she saw the cherries had been picked too, probably last month. The weather here wasn’t great for it, but every year for the last several the tree had yielded some fruit. Somehow, the thought didn’t bother her. In years past, in the summer when cherries and plums were ripe and again in the fall when the apples were good, the Peacekeepers had workers collect them from the Memorial Grove and ship it to the Capitol, extras above Eleven’s fruit quota, making noise about how it had been deemed “wasted fruit” would be “selfish”. Though it seemed like a few boxes always got “misplaced” and made their way around the winter town. The cherries usually ended up handed to the kirschwasser distillers. The fact the Peacekeepers knowingly let or made that happen had been one of the small shows of decency on their parts. Nobody had much enjoyed them being there, but she knew from hearing about other districts that they could have been much worse.

She stared at the cherry tree, thinking of Heike and thinking of Peacekeepers. Not now, she decided. Instead she focused on the other three, imagining them standing there listening to her. “Maybe Haymitch isn’t what you’d have expected for me. Well…all right. Almost definitely not, given what you’d have seen on him on television. But…you’d like him. The real him. Because he’s a lot better than he pretends to be, he knows me, and he loves me anyway. Yeah, he’s a sarcastic ass sometimes. But that’s OK. I can be an ass too. So I don’t feel so fucking guilty, like I’ll never be good enough, and I’m just waiting for him to wake up and realize it.” She smiled a little bit, adding the old Seven idiom about a couple who suited each other, “We’d pull a good saw together. He’s even not hopeless with an axe. And sorry, Mom. I know you’d be telling me to cuss less.”

Taking a deep breath, she put aside the glib humor. “And if I’d known what it would cost you, I would have tried to snap out of it. I would have done anything Snow asked. Because bad as you thought it was, it got worse, and I got a lot worse. You wouldn’t have wanted to see that. But maybe…maybe now you’d see me again, your Hanna, or at least some of me. What happened didn’t wash out, but…I’ve learned to deal. To be happy rather than just pissed off. We might have a kid soon, with any luck.” Her hand crept to her stomach, wondering, trying to not hope too fiercely yet. “You’ll never be grandparents and an uncle, and I’m leaving Seven. But I miss you. Always will. I hope to hell you’d be proud of me, no matter that I screwed it up for so damn long. And I swear…I won’t forget.”

Hands down in the grass, she pushed herself up to her feet, making herself walk away. It hurt, but at the same time she knew the memories of them would always stay with her. She found Haymitch
waiting at the gate at the entrance to the Grove. “Figured I wouldn’t interrupt.” She appreciated that.

He glanced up the hill. “Told you before, if you wanted, we can plant trees in Twelve…you ought to have your place too. To go and think about them.”

It had been too much to think about in the spring while they were busy with the gruesome business of burying the Mellarks, but calmer now, she nodded. “An oak, a maple, a fir, and…a cherry tree.”

“Four?” he answered, dark brows rising, mouth turned into a twist of confusion. “Your ma, your pa, Bern…are you…” He sighed and finally went for broke. “Are you giving up on Heike?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head, and putting a hand on his arm as they walked back towards Victors’ Glade. “No. It’s for…her.” She touched her stomach, sensing his eyes following her hand.

“Ah.” The single syllable was full of understanding.

“You always plant a cherry tree for a kid that died,” she said, words almost in a rush now. “The flowers, they mean…innocence and unspoiled beauty and all of that, and you know, they bloom every spring and then die, so…it’s to make you think how short a life can be. But every spring they come back anyway.” Trying to find the words to explain just what it meant, that deep-rooted sorrow about a life cut short but also the reassurance of something beautiful and thriving faithfully year after year, she struggled with it and failed. Someone from Seven understood it instinctively.

“That sounds,” he said finally, grey eyes on hers, “a hell of a lot better for her than a slab of rock.” Relieved that he understood, she nodded. “We won’t forget, Hanna,” he told her quietly.

“You should call me ‘Hanna’,” she blurted suddenly.

“I just did. Twenty-seven’s a bit young to be going deaf, darlin’.” His tone was light and joking, but she knew the way of him, could tell that he was listening carefully, watching her for little signs of whatever she meant by it. Haymitch, analyzing as usual—she knew he’d never quit it so long as he lived, and it was oddly reassuring.

She stopped, held her hand out to him, palm up. Placing his there, he grasped it, the warmth and pressure of his fingers as ever like a lifeline. Too many people had wanted to fuck her for their own reasons, but he was the only one who’d been content to show he cared, that whatever desires or needs he had weren’t all that she was to him, and simply love her, open and honest. “I meant…you can do it, you can call me that, when we’re not alone. I’m done being ‘Jo’,” she told him. “Maybe she was what I had to be, but I’m tired of her. I want to be me.” Not the unsullied, innocent girl who’d gone to Reaping Day with her coronet braids, her black wool skirt and pale green blouse—that Hanna was gone forever. But she was going to live her life on her terms now, and try to have the life that girl had wanted—a husband, kids, a home—rather than living by the name the Capitol had imposed on her.

“All right.” He reached out a hand, shaping it to the curve of her cheek, and instinctively, she turned into it. “Hanna.”
The war ended on an early December day, with a group of rebel soldiers, both ragtag district natives and smartly-uniformed Thirteen natives, marching Coriolanus Snow with shackled hands and feet away from his mansion.

Of course, when Thirteen’s President Coin announced several hours later that he would be kept prisoner in his own mansion rather than the Capitol’s Detention Center, Kalea shot Terry a wry look, shaking her head. He nodded slightly in return, remembering that cell back in Eight. Apparently even in defeat Snow was going to be more equal than the rest of them.

The newscasters kept up a constant deluge of updates. Around all the districts where celebrations had sometimes turned to rioting, where people sobbed for joy or called for vengeance or simply gave thanks that it was all over. From the hospital where the four “victor heroes” had been taken following the dramatic camera footage of them trying to rescue a group of children Snow had been using as Capitol shields before package bombs went off—Finnick Odair had joined them there, apparently injured badly earlier.

The television kept going off at intervals as the power flickered and the brownouts rolled through as Five’s lines failed, and there were screams of exasperation and temper as it sometimes cut out in the middle of a report. He was fairly sure none of that had happened when it was all just mandatory Capitol programming, and the television worked sound as the day was long.

Nobody slept much at all that night, least of all eight quietly concealed Peacekeepers. “Keep our heads down and keep working,” Terry advised them grimly. Jay worked the mess, Lori the infirmary, Holly in the transport division, Kalea and Rhee the dairy, Marc and Alayna in the tannery. He’d been sent to the slaughterhouse for a couple weeks until they found out that the smell of blood and stunning an animal to then cut its throat made him sick to the point he couldn’t even control it. There were too many reminders of Eight there. He couldn’t stand the coppery scent of so much blood, the thick, darkly clotted pools and sheets of it on the floor waiting to be hosed away. He scrubbed his boots obsessively before going home every night, because the blood got stuck in the treads. He also found a cut-up sheep or cow didn’t look nearly different enough from severed, exploded human limbs.

He’s war-shocked, they murmured sympathetically, and they sent him to the wool factory instead. Making the clean, carded, degreased sacks of fluffy white wool ready to be sent to Eight was better, but not free of its own problems. It made him think of Peacekeeper winter uniforms, and that bombed-out factory that had made them. He wondered what factory was taking in the wool now. Still, he forced himself through it, day by day, until his hands stopped shaking, until he let his mind go numb and didn’t think of the workers in Eight sitting there working with that wool until suddenly the explosions went off. He’d seen the bombs go off in front of Snow’s mansion on the newsfeed, thinking of the factory, and he’d felt Rhee gripping his hand so tightly he swore he could feel the bones grinding. She must have been thinking of Twelve’s firebombs.

They all got by. Not like they had much better options. They were alive, and if it wasn’t always easy, at least he had the freedom that he got to go home every night and sleep with Rhee in his arms. The bad nights usually left them reaching for each other with a ferocity that was almost frightening sometimes—but that was better than the worst nights when all they could do was cling to each other.

It took him the better part of two weeks after the slaughterhouse to try to eat meat again and only then because he could feel the steady fatigue dragging through him, his body craving the lack of the nutrients. It wasn’t like he had other options. Even eggs were dear, given the transport from the north
district. With the meat so readily available, and knowing full well that so many people in other districts would regard Ten as insanely lucky to regularly have meat for eating, he knew there was no reason to just cringe. He felt a little like a monster with the first bite of the steak, but his body was ravenous for more, and the feeling soon eased. Eventually it was just meat again and he ate it without thought. He noticed that Jay didn’t ask questions; he just quietly made sure when it was beef or mutton, all of their meat was pretty well done.

Coriolanus Snow quickly came to trial, along with his cabinet. They ended up crowded around the televisions every night to watch the recaps of the day’s action in a Capitol courtroom. The litany of abuses stretched on and on, agonizing to hear. They watched a parade of victors head for the witness stand, calmly detailing everything that had been done to them and the secrets they had kept under threats to innocents.

Haymitch Abernathy, something of a redeemed titan of the rebellion in everyone’s mind now for how he’d been behind large pieces of the entire thing and then laughed in Snow’s face as a captive, nonchalantly inviting Snow to execute him. “Lawful execution? Are you really that fucking stupid to argue that? Me trying to survive the arena any way necessary was a crime? Well, shit, you’d better prosecute every single victor in that case. We’re all a bunch of killers, you know. Besides, even if you somehow spin that piece of mule crap, what the hell did a little boy, a teenage girl, and a middle-aged woman ever do to deserve to die for what I did?”

Johanna Mason was brash and heated as ever, testing and defying the lawyers, though the cracks in that angry façade showed something much deeper. “Oh, you don’t need to ask Commander Paylor to tell me to shut me up. I know how to keep quiet. Just shove a gag in my mouth like the rest of them did. Or maybe a cock. You think just because I didn’t have family I had nothing to lose? He made it clear my entire district would pay for it if I didn’t play nice.”

Finnick Odair with his scarred face sat there, the harsh pink lines of fresh scars stark against his skin. “We did what we were told, because we had examples like Haymitch and Johanna to show what would happen if we didn’t. So we smiled and acted for the cameras and we had to let our own people think we were nothing but a bunch of shallow sellouts.”

Enobaria Reska, her teeth devoid of the signature golden fangs, testified about being passed around like a party favor. Chantilly Dumas talked about her children and the Capitol expectation of legacy tributes.

The roiling fury came forth from the victors, suppressed for years behind playing the Capitol’s favored adopted sons and daughters. And yet he had the feeling, watching them testify, that he’d had talking to some victims of the more violent crimes out in the districts. He knew full well some of their reticence resulted from simply wanting to not talk to a Peacekeeper. He’d had no illusions there, though usually the desire for some kind of justice and the sense of deep betrayal at being so hurt by one of their own led them to cooperate eventually, even with an outsider. The fact he’d tried to deal fair had helped, or at least he hoped it had. But beyond the faint sense of resentment, there had sometimes been a sense of frustration, as if they were trying to put words to unspeakable suffering and emotions. They often ended up just rambling in broken fits and starts.

The victors talked like that, as if they couldn’t stop themselves, as if somehow in talking they would find a way to purge the horrors, and for the most part, Brocade Paylor let them do it. Terry watched her sitting there presiding over the trial, seeing the way she tried to keep her face impassive and impartial. But even she ended up with a look of horror or nauseated disgust every now and again. She’ll be fair, no matter what she thinks, he thought. That was the important thing. She’d been just to them in Eight when every bit of power had rested in her hands and she could have easily seen them dead.
The trial stretched on and news updates came in about Katniss and Peeta’s condition from the hospital. Nobody was surprised when Snow and his cronies were sentenced to die. Snow’s execution would be first, on New Year’s Day.

Beyond that, like everyone else in Panem, they waited to see what would happen. Some things changed. People didn’t worry about everything they said or did, and he noticed parents and children both looked as though a shadow had been lifted from them. Some things didn’t, though. The food situation was touch and go, electricity was still dodgy, supplies still utterly uncertain in the disorganized chaos left in the wake of the war with many districts still reeling and transportation networks uncertain at best. Alma Coin had stepped in to fill the power void, but honestly, Terry thought she seemed mostly interested in doling out due punishments to a long list of people, growing ever longer. Right after the major trial, Coin had announced the captured Head Peacekeepers would be next in the prisoners’ dock, and those that weren’t there would be tried in abstentia anyway.

That was unsettling enough, hearing that they’d rapidly moved on to prosecuting Peacekeepers—all of them exchanged silent, troubled glances at dinner that night, not needing to say anything. Nobody knew how far Coin’s plans went on Peacekeepers, but it wasn’t promising.

Plus Terry figured Coin would be much better served immediately dealing with the simple logistics of making sure everyone who’d survived the fighting would survive the winter. He figured it must be much worse in northern Ten and Nine, and Six, Seven, and Eight, where winters came harsh. Twelve would have been on that list but the silent dead didn’t care about bitter frost and snow.

That uncertainty left people fretting, and grumbling, and frightened. The air of discontent, of I thought when we won it would be different but we’re still begging for supplies and worrying about being hungry and cold, was almost palpable every day as he got up at dawn, pulled on his clothes and his winter coat, and walked the mile and a half to the wool factory.

Given the discontent and the fact that nobody in uniform was there now to enforce any kind of law, it didn’t take long for reports of trouble. Thefts, brawling, and the like—he wondered if it might escalate. Most people behaved given the chance and there were plenty of good people at Southlands, but there would always be some that would take advantage of a lack of consequences. “Dammit,” Nadji burst out to Drover one day when Terry walked in to report the day’s production to her, slapping another piece of paper down on her desk, “now people are to the point they’re robbing each other’s fucking houses? And dealing out a broken jaw to the woman who happened to walk in on them?”

Drover, sitting in the chair with his long legs stretched out in front of him asked matter-of-factly, “What’s Mayor Dravid say?”

“That President Coin’s fobbing her off on both supplies and some kind of police force, citing more pressing issues. Fuck’s sake, Drover, I want this shit shut down before someone ends up dead. Southlands ain’t that big, shouldn't be that tough to find whoever did it.”

“I could help.” He spoke up before he’d even realized it, and both Nadji and Drover looked up, obviously unaware he’d been standing in the doorway. What the fuck are you doing, Stewart, shut up... But at the same time, the thought of the wool factory for the rest of his life loomed large in front of him and the insistence in his mind of, I’m damn good at this, I can do it. “I did some investigating before,” he explained, recognizing the pressure to think fast and explain just how he could claim experience. “Checking into crimes and the like. Nobody wanted to talk to a Peacekeeper and have them deal with it if they could avoid it, after all.” True statements, all of them, but he knew full well how he’d juxtaposed them would give the impression of him being anything but a Peacekeeper. But he’d known local detectives of sorts had existed, and that many district people dealt with small
crimes within their own circle rather than turn them over to the Peacekeepers bound to follow the harsh punishments set forth in the legal code. It honestly had made their jobs a hell of a lot easier to not have to chase down the theft of a jar of jam or the like.

“True,” Nadji said dryly. “All right, Stewart, you’re off wool factory duty and working with Drover. Show me something good inside of a week or that’s it.”

He went home that night after dinner in the mess, quietly elated that here he had a chance to prove something, do something actually worthwhile. Rhee listened, and then looked at him, eyes the blue-green of Four’s tropical waters suddenly stormy with emotion. “You’re taking on a risk by showing you can investigate things, Terry,” she said, turning away and starting to put away the laundry with more vigor than needed, almost slamming drawers. “Not just for you, for all of us. And for what, boredom? I know the wool factory isn’t fun, at least I get to do some of the accounts at the dairy now, but…” She glanced over her shoulder at him, brushing her dark hair out of her face. “Are you doing this for them or for you?” she asked simply.

It smarted his pride to have her ask, but he owed her the honesty of a direct answer. “Maybe both. But… I have the chance to do something useful,” he protested. “Something I’m good at too. Might be that’ll help us if things get bad with Coin, more than if I’m just another mindless slob stuffing wool sacks at the factory. Besides, it’s getting worse here with the crimes. We’ve all heard it at dinner. You really think it won’t get ugly by spring if they don’t get it under control?”

“I know.” She shook her head. “Hell. I knew you were an idealist when I met you. That you actually believed in the law and justice and all of that, crazy as it seemed sometimes given the situation we were in. Should have figured you’d get the itch to help, and couldn’t just stand by. Just… be careful.”

“I will. They think I worked as just community action. It’ll be fine.” Hearing that despite her worries she believed in him meant more to him than he could say. Reaching out, he drew her closer. “I have to try to do something,” he told her. “I can’t just blindly listen to what I’m told and wait for things to happen to us. If we’d been like that, we’d all have died out in the wilderness.” Having seized that independence and freedom, he was loath to give it away again.

He and Drover started the investigation the next morning, examining the house from the broken window to the jumbled chaos within as the thief ransacked the place. It took less than a day to track the lead down. Everything from the boot treads to the neighbors who’d seen a man fleeing to questioning around about the missing blanket that had been taken as well made it a trail clear as if the thief had tied a red cord to himself to guide the way. He was a young man, barely more than a boy, who’d been involved in the rowdiness lately to boot. The two of them had found out that apparently nightly fighting went on in one of the old barns for prize money now. Blowing off steam, the young men called it. Invitation to lose what little brains they’ve got, Drover called it in return.

“Man’s gotta eat, and they just left the food sitting out,” Corbie Fleiss said with a dismissive shrug, seeing the game was up when Terry and Drover found him at work in the tannery. “I needed a blanket. They had more than enough.”

“We’ve all got it a bit lean this winter. You don’t take what’s not yours,” Drover said curtly.

“Why not?” Corbie scoffed. “They’ve always had more than me, and we saw with the Capitol— those who get fat while others starve deserve to have it taken back, make it equal. I ain’t had a new blanket to sleep under in three years and they had a stack of a half-dozen. And the rations you and Nadji are expecting me to work on? No damn better than the Capitol.”

Drover made a strangled, furious sound low in his throat. “You don’t earn your bread breaking a woman’s jaw,” Terry told Corbie quietly into the silence, sensing Drover probably wanted to break
the kid’s jaw in return.

Drover recovered himself and gave a curt nod, saying through what Terry was sure were gritted teeth, “Now, I’d suggest you walk out quiet with us.”

It had been on the tip of Terry’s tongue to tell Corbie to turn around so he could bind his wrists together. Lacking handcuffs, he’d have made do with some of the rope that was everywhere at Southlands, given the need for lasso skills out on the trail—every day he could see kids practicing after school. He realized with a flash of alarm that in following the instinctive Peacekeeper routine during an arrest that could have screwed him pretty neatly.

Corbie shrugged. “Whatever.” Dropping his scraper onto the wet hide pegged out on his table, he undid his apron and tossed that onto the station as well. He gave the two of them a mocking smile, brown eyes cool and impassive. “Nice to see nothing’s changed.”

“Where are you taking him?” he asked Drover quietly.

“Suppose we can lock him up in the cell at the old Peacekeeper station,” Drover said, pushing his hat up a bit and sighing, looking discontent. “Only really secure place we’ve got. Hate to do it, but…”

“But it has to be done, I suppose.” Walking into the dusty old duty post next door to Nadji’s office, it was more like the setup he remembered from Nine with its many collectives spread over the district than somewhere like Eight with its big central HQ. The lights still worked, and they got Corbie into the cell quick enough.

“Here,” Drover said, voice a little harsh. “Blanket for you.” He handed it through the bars. Terry found himself staring at the scene of a young district man behind the bars of the cell. He’d seen that often enough in his career, but in the silence of the abandoned post, there seemed something even more forlorn about it. Of course, his personal memories of the other side of those bars intruded heavily to boot. Searching Corbie’s face for some kind of regret or panic, all he saw was that same nonchalant impassivity. This one just doesn’t care.

Walking back into the cool winter afternoon, he looked over at Drover as he clapped his hat back on his head. “What do you aim to do with him?” Not his business, perhaps, given that he’d only been signed on for investigating, but he asked anyway. He figured Drover could tell him to take a long walk on the prairie and not come back in a hurry if he’d really overstepped.

“Well, it was just the theft…” A muscle in Drover’s jaw jumped, as if he was grinding his teeth. “But he’s gotten to the point where he attacked someone. And obviously you saw it, he’s not just a youngster in a panic who fucked up and probably won’t do it again. I don’t want the damn Peacekeepers back by any means, but I can’t in good conscience let him slide with a week or two of restitution, because he’s not sorry, and he knows there’s no law enforcement around. I… just don’t know. Gonna have to think about this one.”

“No easy answers sometimes,” he said softly, thinking of One’s desperation and Eight’s rage, about the way people across the country had come to a state where rebellion seemed the only answer left.

Drover gave a rueful little smile, reaching out and clapping him on the shoulder. “Gotta send you back to the wool factory, Stewart, but you’ve done fair good on this one. Better than I would have alone. If another tricky spot comes up…”

“I’ll help, sure.”

“Hope I don’t need you. No offense.”
“None taken.” But he turned back and looked at Drover again. “But I doubt it’s just a problem here at Southlands. Everything’s changed and we’re not keeping up with it. So…you probably will.”

On New Year’s Eve, he and Drover spent most of it breaking up some drunken brawls at the “fight barn”. He was relieved to see Jay and Marc weren’t dumb enough to get involved with this crowd. Though he saw a little red at seeing Kalea there, her darker skin quickly visible among the fair-skinned Ten workers. She was obviously accompanying one of the young men who’d been on the fight slate since she was standing in his corner and cheering wildly. After they broke it up and sent a couple of them to the infirmary for stitches and the rest to their beds to sleep it off, he grabbed her by the arm and asked, “This really what you want from your life, Kalea? Screwing a damn idiot hick ten years younger than you who gets his jollies getting his brains knocked out a couple times a week?”

Her dark eyes blazed with cold fire. “And just who am I supposed to sleep with,” she leaned in and the final word came into his ear with hot breath and a fierce snarl, “Terry? We’re stuck here for however long and I’m not like Rhee or Ally or Lori with a man right there, one who’s one of us. Holly and me, we’ve got to take what we can get while the rest of you are all so cozy. So respectfully,” her tone making it clear it was anything but, “go to hell. You’re my friend, but you’re not my boss anymore.”

“Kal,” he sighed, not wanting it to be like this, remembering that they’d spent years together in Six and then in One. She’d always been so duty-conscious, almost dreamy-eyed sometimes about her life after the Corps—the Capitol upbringing didn’t quite fade. Seeing this brittle disillusionment in her actually hurt. “Kal—Leah—I just…you should have better than this, OK? I mean…is this what you really want?” He gestured to the spatter of blood on her cheek from getting too close to the fight.

She looked at him now and the fury in her eyes had given way to a bleak loneliness, like two empty holes that were frighteningly bottomless. “No. But it’s what the world’s gonna give me. I’m a Capitol-born whose parents were convicted traitors, and a Peacekeeper who’s not Two blood, so I don’t belong in the Capitol, or Two, or anywhere else. The district folks would want to kill me twice over, Theo.” She used his Corps name too, like he had hers. “You really think any place wants me?”

“I don’t know,” he said, shaking his head. “I wouldn’t much count on it.” Matter-of-fact; the two of them always had been like that with each other.

“So we’ll make do,” she told him calmly, “you do it your way, and I’ll be doing it mine. But fine, I’ll try to avoid the fight night boys. They’re not much fun in the end.” With a brief tap of her hand on his shoulder, just a moment’s friendly touch, she walked away towards the single women’s barracks.

He felt a pang of guilt that night as he held Rhee, her body warm and relaxed against his after sex, murmuring a few careful wishes to each other that fate might be generous to them in the next year. In the morning, they woke up to a furor outside at the news. Coriolanus Snow was dead, apparently by his own hand.

Things moved in a blur after the news about Snow. It seemed like every day brought a whirlwind of news. Death by weedkiller Snow had probably dug up from his garden. Promises came from a grim-faced Alma Coin, eerie pale eyes staring holes into the camera, that she’d seek justice even harder now. She swore the other executions would take place as planned. More arrests came, moving down into the mid-level sorts.

Jay heard that Gallus Cray was on the list and cringed. None of them had really liked Cray—drunk and horny and uncomfortably fond of teenage girls—but personal failings weren’t exactly crimes. Compared to Romulus Thread he’d been easy to serve under. Don’t fuck up too badly and Cray would pretty much leave people alone—the whole thing had an element of live and let live to it.
Maybe those who’d been assigned to Twelve had bitched initially about going to Panem’s worst district, and seeing their Head was so utterly far from the sharp professional ideal hadn’t helped their rookie anxieties, standing there in their still-spotless new uniforms. But they’d come to relax in time and to learn that not everything required throwing the book at people, and to exercise judgment.

To be honest, Jay felt like he’d probably learned a lot more about being a good Peacekeeper from the likes of Cray than from Thread, though he wouldn’t have ever been stupid enough to say so. But if Cray was convicted of any number of a list of crimes they were throwing at him, obviously hoping something would stick, that didn’t bode well.

Though they were all shocked a week after Snow’s suicide when the victors came on the air with a propo—nobody had seen anything from them aside from a few fluffy society-type shots of them at the Victory Ball, and the gushing report the next morning that Haymitch Abernathy and Johanna Mason had gotten quietly married. “Pay up,” Alayna had crowed victoriously, elbowing Marc in the ribs.

“Shut up, Ally,” he’d grumbled at her. “Seriously.”

Seeing Jay’s questioning look, Alayna had smirked smugly. “I bet when I saw the two of them in the arena that it was real.”

But now a week later, dancing and weddings were apparently the furthest things from their minds. The victors sat there in a group in front of the camera, looking more like a band of warriors grimly ready for a fight than anything. Haymitch led off, his hayseed mountain twang as ever not detracting from the razor sharpness of the words. *She said that the decision of whether to punish the Capitol by holding one final Hunger Games involving Capitol children would be left to us.*

Everyone watched with rapt attention as for a solid half-hour, the victors reeled off the litany of abuses Alma Coin had apparently committed. Nobody thought to question the truth of it. Stating something like this on the air was virtual publicity suicide if they were lying, and for people like Haymitch, Johanna, Finnick, and the others who had already dared and fought so hard against Snow, why would they cheat now?

The propo ended with Katniss and Peeta and a call for an open election for president. The murmurs, first of shock and surprise and then of satisfied approval, went around the room. “Good,” Nadji said, sitting on the edge of one of the tables. “It’s about damn time we got some say-so.” She pushed off the table, landing with the soft thump of boot heels. “I’m gonna call up Mayor Dravid and see how we’re supposed to do this thing. Be ready for it tomorrow morning.”

Lori shot him a glance, smiling a little. He just shrugged. No idea how it was going to work, but he had to admit he was actually a bit excited. This was historic, right?

When they got to the square in the morning and saw Drover and Nadji there, things quickly turned sour. The two of them sat there with a locked metal box, slips of paper, and at the familiar sight of a register and a fingerstick, his heart plummeted into his shoes. “They want a blood identification,” he turned to Terry in a panic.

“Yes, thank you, Jay,” Terry said dryly. He stared at the line. “Well, best we just try to sneak off,” he told the rest of them in an undertone.

Drover called out, “Where are you lot going?” just as they had almost made it to the safety of the infirmary. Jay saw Holly’s shoulders stiffen ahead of him as she cringed.

“We’re not citizens, Drover,” Rhee called out in a smooth, easy tone of voice. “We figured we’ve
“Hell with it,” Nadji said, smacking the register with an open palm, “you rode autumn trail and didn’t quit, and you’ve been here with us on winter work. You really need the damn paperwork?”

Obviously seeing no way out, Terry glanced at the rest of them, a look of helpless frustration in his grey eyes. “All right then,” he answered Nadji, playful tone totally at odds with that hint of dread on his face.

“I’ll go first,” Jay said in a rush. “That way…maybe the rest of you…” He realized that was stupid even as he said it. As if the rest of them would have any chance of escape.

“Jay,” Lori said, brown eyes worried, mouth twisted into a frown. She reached for his hand, and he took it, fingers lacing tightly with hers.

“Relax, you lot,” there came a cheerful tone from someone passing back down the line after having cast their vote, a short, stocky woman of about fifty with flyaway grey hair. “It’s a fingerstick, yeah, but it’s nothing like the reaping.”

“Thanks,” Kalea acknowledged that. Realizing their nervousness probably looked a little strange, even given the uncomfortable association of the blood identification with Reaping Day that they’d all endured as children—even in Two—Jay tried to relax. His deathgrip on Lori’s hand eased, though neither of them quite let go. It probably looked more like the casual handholding between two lovers.

Not that they were. He hadn’t even kissed her yet. Standing there knowing he was probably doomed, he desperately wished for a moment he had. Sometimes he’d wanted to do it so badly, more and more of late. But then he remembered the Peacehome, those awful awkward minutes in her room, and mentally shook his head. Not this time. If there never would be a chance, at least he wouldn’t be guilty of repeating past mistakes and hurting her again.

Stepping up, he offered his palm to Drover, hearing his heart pounding in his ears. A small, hot sting, and he recalled Reaping Days thinking desperately, Not me not me please not me, and realized he was thinking the exact same thing now. The dread and desire to escape felt just the same, and the difference of ten years hadn’t alleviated it. Funny thing was—they must have gotten the tester from Peacekeeper HQ. He’d stuck the fingers of kids in Twelve at reapings, and now that sin was coming back on him with a vengeance. Or so it seemed.

“Hm,” Drover said, frowning and staring at the tester with a furrowed brow. “Yeah, another no result found.”

“I exist, I promise,” he burst out with the stupid joke.

“Well I can see you standing there, Bellamy, so I hope so,” Drover said dryly.

“Figure some computer systems in Three took a hit during the war and wiped some of the identification database,” Nadji said with a shrug. “You’re about the fifth one today already.”

His knees unlocked and he steadied himself, not wanting to feel like he might crumple to the ground in a relieved heap. Realizing he’d just dodged a hell of a bullet there, he looked at the two of them and said, “So what do you do?”

“Record it,” Drover said. “Spell your name, Bellamy.” As Jay spelled the letters out, Drover scribbled it in his register book, then reached out with a black marker and marked a slash across the back of his right hand.
“That’s so you don’t get ideas about getting back in line with another name,” Nadji told him, nodding to the ink. “That won’t wash out for a couple days.”

“I think I’d be pretty obvious if I tried that,” at least compared to the more anonymous Ten natives.

“Yeah, enough chitchat, let’s move on. Here’s your ballot.” Nadji handed him a clip of paper and a pen, nodding towards the locked box. “Have at it.”

He thought about it for a long minute, even as Lori nudged him aside to take a spot at the table too. Not Alma Coin, that was for damn sure. Who had demonstrated the best ability to hopefully overcome the mistakes of the past and lead Panem into the future? Deciding, he scribbled the name, folded the ballot, and dropped it into the box.

The next day, the tally of the votes was like a party—they roasted meat out on the firepits, propped up a keg of beer for the adults, and kept the televisions on as people wandered in and out, talking excitedly about the future now. The contrast to Coin’s regime was marked. People actually seemed to feel like they had at least a little power and a little hope now, and that made all the difference.

Brocade Paylor won handily—62 percent of Ten’s votes went her way. “So?” Lori said, now looking far more at ease than yesterday, handing him a cup of beer and grinning. “Who did you vote for anyway?”

He grinned at her and said, “A secret.” He was pretty sure Terry, Marc, Alayna and Rhee all voted for Paylor, given their personal respect for her.

Looking at her, the hint of forest-leaf green in her brown eyes, he saw the relief in her expression and the belief, We’re gonna be OK. “You want to go walk with me tonight?” he blurted, made bold by the idea that just maybe, he could actually think about a future.

She eyed him over the lip of her cup of beer. “Are you trying to court me, Jarrah Bellamy?”

“Maybe, Hannelore Gunderssen?” But it was stupid playing coy. Not saying things clearly had been what got them in trouble last time. “Yes. I am. If you’re willing, I mean, and you want me to, and…”

She reached out and slipped her hand in his, eyes steady. “OK.”

“I don’t want to sleep with you,” he continued, feeling like he had to make it clear that things had changed, that they wouldn’t end up feeling stupid and hurt again. “I mean, I do, but…not now, you know? It doesn’t have to be like before, where I can’t give you anything but sex. I could marry you now. And I’d want to marry you first this time.” Funny how he hadn’t realized that until he said it, but he felt the rightness of it deep in his bones. If they got to that point, he wanted that commitment between them first this time before they ever slept together, to have both of them certain they mattered enough to each other to wait until they’d made those promises. She deserved nothing less, and the thought of making love to her as his wife made him think he’d better quit that train of thought before his trousers got uncomfortably tight. Realizing then that he’d just dug himself in deeper, he rushed to say, “Not that I’m proposing.”

She laughed, covering her mouth with one hand, still snorting between her fingers because she was gasping for air. “Oh, shit. Jay. Quit anytime now, all right?”

“Sorry,” he muttered, feeling his face warm up with embarrassment in the chilly air. It felt fierce enough that even on his darker skin, he wondered if she could see it. “I just…really want to do it right this time.” He’d thought about that afternoon in her room for years, kicking himself, feeling sick as he remembered how she’d turned away from his attempts to touch her and just demanded he hurry
up and do it. He remembered how stiff and awkward she’d been, how crushed and stupid and
clumsy he’d felt, wondering if she’d actually wanted him at all or just taken his terrible joke about
not leaving the Peacehome a virgin to heart. He’d dreamed of her for years and that had been a harsh
comedown to reality. Knowing she’d believed for years that he was an asshole who’d slept with her
and then trashed her to everyone else at the Peacehome, how could he not want to do it right in every
way this time?

She smiled and stretched up, kissing him gently on the lips, just for a moment, fingers stroking his
cheek. “I know you do.” That lightened his heart more than he could say. She’d forgiven him for
being a dumb kid. She would give him a second chance. *I won’t let you down,* he promised silently,
wanting to reach out and hug her, but taking the moment for what it was worth. She’d given him that
much and it was far more than he’d dared hope. He thought he could almost feel the ghost pressure
of her lips on his still.

Things eased a bit with Paylor’s election. More supplies from other districts started trickling into the
district—things from morphling to sugar to fabric—although the quantities were limited they always
came with presidential explanations and apologies, press conferences announcing that soon they’d be
sending Haymitch and Johanna as official government representatives around the country to do a full
assessment of district status and what needed to be done to rebuild Panem strong and solid.

People seemed less desperate and uncertain. Snow was gone and they had a president who cared
about the entire nation, rather than just grasping power tightly in her fist.

Spring shearing began and everyone quit their other jobs to crowd into the shearing sheds. Jay got
shorter duty due to working as a cook, taking off longer lunch breaks and leaving early to start
dinner, but even he wasn’t exempt. The bleats of the alarmed sheep filled the air along with the odor
of sheep shit, greasy wool, and the hot tar that was slapped on the wounds of a sheep that got clipped
too close to help close it and keep the flies away.

Naturally, as new hands, their razors slipped often and left their shearing crew sighing and yelling for
the tar pot. The constant cycle of wrestling a sheep into position and gripping it with his knees,
bending over, trying to keep even smooth strokes of the razor over the uneven shape of the animal,
grabbing and throwing the fleece—it became a rhythm after a while, but one that still left him sore by
the end of the day.

At least he was damn fine in the kitchen and made up for his lackluster shearing skills with food that
seemed to make them forget most of his amateur botches. Unfortunately there was no room in the
shearing shed to daydream about making wild plum ice cream with the fresh cream from the dairy, or
just what to do with yet another tough old side of mutton from a sheep that had outlived its use.

After six weeks, as March rolled on, he was a passable shearing hand, though compared to the
natives who’d been shearing most of their lives he still looked like a sloppy kid. But at least when
they eyed his work with a grunt of, “It’ll do,” that was high praise, and he took it for what it was
worth.

After three months, he and Lori had spent more than their share of walking and talking after dinner,
though of late they’d been so damn sore that they were more like short hobbles before a good, hot
shower. Kissing her, he still felt the instinctive urge within him to push for more, but he held back.
He was happy enough with what they had.

Then right as shearing ended and they were preparing to go out on the spring drive out to the
pastures with the sheep and cattle, Marc and Alayna announced they were leaving. “I’m grateful,”
Marc said quietly as they all took a walk out among the pastures, accompanied by one of the
sheepdogs that seemed to have adopted Kalea. “We came here with nothing and they were good to
us. But I’m not a shepherd. Not in my nature.”

“Mine either,” Alayna said, and somehow, Jay wasn’t surprised. The two of them had always been more inclined to Peacekeeper life.

Marc nodded and went on. “And I should let my mother and father know that I’m still alive. So we’re gonna head for Two and see what kind of life we can make there.” He glanced at the rest of them. “You staying? Purnia?”

Holly shrugged. “Never was close to my family, Marc—they always knew I was bound for the Corps. I figure I’ll ride it out a bit longer here, because Two’s gotta be a mess. If you can, send word on how things are, and then I’ll see.”

There were no tears and no blame, just hugs and handshakes and well-wishes all around. Maybe they’d always known a parting of the ways might come eventually. But as they watched Marc and Alayna hop onto the truck to head north, Jay felt the twinge of losing close friends all over again. They’d been through a lot together in the last six months. Kalea and Terry, who’d served with them and suffered with them in Eight and the wilderness beyond, had to be taking it even harder. But they were senior officers, well disciplined, and they stood there waving goodbye without an open flicker of sadness. But he thought he knew them well enough now to know it was there just the same.

As March drew slowly towards April and the rain seemed interminable, turning everything to thick reddish mud, that was when disease came, apparently with some new recruits from outside Ten. No sense to which people it sunk its claws into, though it seemed to oddly favor the young and healthy rather than the kids or the elderly.

Within five days fully a third of the station was sick to one degree or another and Nadji had announced a general quarantine. Some were lucky enough to just throw up a bit and sleep it off in their own houses. Some weren’t, and the sight of someone being carried to the infirmary wasn’t uncommon.

Terry caught the milder version, and Rhee firmly shut the door of their quarters to everyone but the medics. Two days later she announced he’d gotten through it, though the way she looked exhausted made him wonder just how serious it had been, and if she’d maybe caught a touch of the disease herself. Asking Lori, she just shook her head tiredly. Seeing him once Rhee let them in, Terry looked like he’d been dragged through a knothole sideways, his grey eyes sunken and tired. Jay brought him some soup and left him to the business of getting well.

They carried Holly to the infirmary on the fourth day, after Kalea had found her burning with fever and drenched with her own sweat in vomit and shit-stained sheets. He tried to not think back to that dimly lit little cabin in Eleven with its hard-packed earthen floor, of waking up in the house of the neighbor lady and being told it was four days after he’d gone to bed with a headache, and that the rest of his people were all dead. He’d felt weak as a kitten, too weak even for the weight of grief just then.

He walked into the infirmary later that day to bring Lori a huge pot of meat broth for the patients and found her, Alatau, and others with rows of pallets with groaning, twitching, puking and crapping bodies on them. The way the patients contorted and writhed, as if in the throes of some kind of torture, caught him aback.

She saw him eyeing them with what must have been a look of horror and said, “You OK?” She knew his family died of fever, must have known what dread it held for him.

He looked at her, her unwashed, sweaty hair tangled and half out of its ponytail, the bags underneath
her eyes and the paleness of her skin. Yet she was beautiful to him for seeing those marks of just how hard she’d been fighting, working herself to the bone. He hadn’t even seen her since the epidemic started.

He thought about what she’d told him, about how she suspected her family had been murdered and the whole thing covered up. She had every reason to lose any faith in the world for that casual cruelty, and yet here she was, fighting to save what people she could. Risking her life in the bargain, he realized, feeling a fierce surge of admiration for that courage even as he was terrified for her.

Carefully, he set the soup pot down. “Tell me what I can do to help.”

She sighed, wiping her brow with the back of her hand. “It’s not much. It’s changing the sheets and cleaning them up and trying to get water and broth into them, and what painkillers we’ve got.” She glanced to the side, down the long row of pallets. “If we keep them hydrated enough, that helps. But some of them...” She bit her lip.

“How many?”

“Three so far,” she told him with an air of defeat. “You probably shouldn’t risk being here, Jay. It’s one thing to drop off that broth and skedaddle. It’s another to spend hours here, up close with them.”

“If you’re risking it, I am too. Enough people are sick I’m not really needed in the kitchen.” I’m tired of being a coward. She looked at him, as if trying to weight his resolve, and finally nodded.

The matter grew worse first. Most of the work was shut down and more volunteers came, Kalea and Rhee and a still easily exhausted Terry among them. It looked like the six of them aimed to stick together, through thick and thin. Though looking at Holly, who’d sunk unconscious early on, Jay wasn’t encouraged.

More patients came in until finally it reached its crisis and it was one or two people coming in rather than ten. He saw Drover lying on a pallet, face gone near to bone white, but rushing around as he was, there was little time to do more than momentarily remark on it. It quickly became a numb, constant cycle of trying to force fluids into the patients however possible, cleaning up the messes they made, and trying to keep their temperatures down with wet cloths and their pain in line with little bits of morphling.

Nadji joined them right after the epidemic peaked and told them close to two days had passed already. He could hardly believe it, but looking how much worse off Lori was, he set her to go crash on the couch for a nap.

Every time he took a temperature and saw it had spiked and come back down and felt sweat-glazed but cooling skin, it felt like victory. When they stirred, looked at him with coherent expressions and eyes that weren’t fever bright and dazed, he knew they’d be OK, even if they were kitten-weak and would need a couple weeks of feeding and rest to be up to full strength.

But not every case ended well. When the convulsions and racked, choking struggle for breath began, everybody quickly learned that was it. Early on, they just noted it, and when it was all over, checked for a pulse to certify it, closed their eyes, pulled the sheets over their faces, and moved on to the next patient, who might still survive. Later, there was time to sit there, to wipe away the fever sweat one more time and hold onto the person’s hand. They might be unconscious and probably couldn’t feel that final human contact as they twitched and jerked and gasped their way until finally their tortured body relaxed into death, but at least they didn’t die alone.

He was the one that sat there with Holly at the end. It seemed only right. He’d been the one that
served with her the longest, knew her the best. As he reached over and gently closed her wide-staring blue eyes with his fingertips, he wondered if she’d see Darius in whatever great beyond there might be. He had no kind of hope his friend was still alive, and seeing another friend lying there dead, thinking again about Actaeon and Naevia and all the others back in Twelve besides, he felt the weariness of a burden too heavy to fathom just then. Then he carefully pulled the sheet over her face, once clean white cotton but now a faded pale grey from so many washings.

Standing there the day after the last patient went home, among those still strong enough to dig in the thick reddish muck, he looked at the wooden marker pounded in at the head of that particular hole. Holly. At least if he’d died, he’d have died under a truthful name. She’d rest here in unfamiliar soil, so far from where she’d been born, wearing a false name forever. The thought strangely brought almost as much grief as her actual death. Digging the shovel into the ground with a renewed ferocity, he slung another load of mud up over the lip of the hole.

“Maybe she should have left,” he told Lori that night, after the newscast about the reconstruction tour of Panem getting ready to start in Two. He wondered if Marc and Alayna had made it and how they’d been received.

Compared to the usual evenings where the common areas were full of chatter and games and the like, everyone had headed for their quarters, obviously heartsick and weary from the sight of a neat row of several dozen wooden markers. “All she found here…” He shook his head, the grief of it welling in his throat. For Purnia to have survived everything so far and then die like that seemed too cruel and senseless to bear.

Lori looked at him, thin and tired and looking on the verge of breaking down. “Stay with me tonight, Jay?” she asked, putting a hand on his arm. She sniffled, wiping her eyes and nose inelegantly with the back of her hand.

“Not like this,” he told her. “Please, Lori.” He didn’t want ghosts in that bed with them, to have the moment that should have been only about them tainted by so much sorrow.

“Doesn’t have to be sex, I didn’t mean…just…hold me, OK? I don’t want to be alone.”

He knew from the single men’s bunkhouse just how cramped it would be trying to jam two bodies into one of those narrow bunks, but realized he didn’t care. “I don’t either.” He leaned down and kissed her brow, wrapping his arms around her, standing there in the common room where anyone else in the single women’s quarters could see them and not really caring at all.
The day was overcast when they got ready for the usual camera show at the district center snug in the crescent of a sheltered inland bay, its rugged wooded hills steeply running their slopes down to jam their way abruptly into the ocean visible in the distance. The view from the hovercraft pad and the town center was spectacular, at least in terms of distance he could see.

The electric fence that had prevented people from Six from reaching the water and fishing for their supper still hung in ragged shreds here and there from the high support posts. Though even now Haymitch looked down towards the water and saw a few tiny distant figures scrambling over the slick rocks of the shore.

It was a far cry from the balmy, sticky warmth down in Four—no sun-kissed idyll here. He would bet the waters were freezing cold, and the low-hanging grey clouds scudded across the sky in a sort of bleak, heavy blanket. That was no surprise. As Haymitch understood it, the sky was overcast or rain far more often than sun here in District Six. It seemed like hovercraft buzzed through that squally bleakness nonetheless as if it was clear as water, and as he watched, another one landed, sending up a few sparks as its gear hit the landing pad a bit rough.

“Oh, my. Did you film that?” Plutarch murmured to his crew with fascination. “That was a close call!”

Haymitch exchanged a glance with Johanna, who rolled her eyes and shrugged. Plutarch: as ever well-meaning but still somehow entirely missing the point sometimes.

Quickly enough he noticed Edsel Raven was missing, and just Lizzie stood there as the welcome party—filling the role of Six’s sole surviving victor and the mayor’s wife both. After the total absence of victors in Seven with Johanna as the only one left it was sort of a relief, but after the obligatory filming, and seeing the taut look of stress on Lizzie’s face and the puffiness to her coppery-gold skin as if she hadn’t been sleeping well, he was in a hurry to get away from the cameras.

“Ed OK?” he asked, hoping there hadn’t been some kind of injury from the theater bombing that had only cropped up now.

“Ed’s fine,” Lizzie said, walking them briskly up yet another steep slope to the mayor’s house. He realized Victors’ Hill was entirely abandoned now with Max and Poppy both dead, since Lizzie had shed the right to her house there when she married Ed and moved out. “He’s at a crash site.”

“What?” Johanna said, obviously startled.

Lizzie gave an impatient shrug, the motion tight with stress or anger or both. “Third one this month. They’re lucky. This one’s no reported fatalities.” She turned, raising her dark eyebrows in exaggerated fashion over deep, near-black eyes. “Last one? Not too lucky. Bet that didn’t make the news.” Her tone turned a little bit mocking. “Someone’s gotta keep an entire fleet of hovercraft flying to keep the rest of the country going with supplies, and if it’s on spit, grit, and chewing gum, so be it.”

Now he definitely heard the anger there as she pushed open the front door, inviting them in. “That bad here?” Old trick from his sponsorship days—he knew how to use words all right, but sometimes just a little nudge and giving them enough rope to run with did the job far better. If someone wanted to talk, chances were they’d find the way given a good opening.
She sank down into a battered armchair, the pattern of silver clouds worn away to the threads in
some places, gesturing with an outflung arm that they ought to make themselves comfortable. Maybe
a second after they’d taken a place side by side on the matching loveseat, she started. “Worse,” she
said bluntly. Raising one finger, she told them, “Steel production’s totally done for without fresh
coal,” another finger and another as she ticked off the list, “we can’t build new hovercraft or trains
without steel or fix the ones we already have beyond a certain point, Three keeps farting around
promising wires and supplies and the like that they’re backed up on as well, the iron miners are
saying why the fuck should they risk their necks when the coal miners aren’t doing their jobs, the
Capitol bombed the shit out of us and destroyed half our production facilities, hovercraft keep
crashing because we don’t have the option to refuse vital missions, the pilots are too few and they’re
beyond exhausted, and Ed and I have got a district of people that were raised on ampistim to keep us
working double shifts and then morphling to deal with the injuries on the job and to come back down
so their hearts didn’t just explode…and now that they can’t get either to get away from it all they’re
brewing hooch from tesserae grain and turning alcoholic.” He managed to suppress a wince at the
familiar specter of that last one. Another of those edged smiles, though it was more weary that
sarcastic. “Questions?” She waggled her hands, all five fingers of her left hand and three of her right
held up. “I’m sure I could come up with two more. Ten’s a nice round number.”

“Well,” Haymitch told her dryly, trying to not take offense on behalf of the coal miners, “nobody’s
ever gonna say you were giving us a sunny overview fit for a tourism brochure, Liz. ‘District Six,
where the outlook is bleak as the weather’.”

She looked at him and laughed. “Fuck you, Haymitch,” she said, though her tone was fond. There
was something to be said for someone who could be something of a blunt cynic when reality called
for it and made no apologies for it. Much as he liked the likes of Finnick and Peeta, too much
unwarranted and constant optimism grated on him eventually. There was something almost like
pleasure in indulging in a little bit of the old black humor. “There’s problem number nine for you.
Nobody knows just what to do with the old tourism bureaus. Somebody burned one down and they
took out an entire block with it before the fire burned itself out. The others have been locked up ever
since until that gets figured out, but those damn things are like a cancer.”

“C’mon, shoot for ten, you’re so close it’d be a damn shame to quit now,” Johanna urged her with a
smirk. That earned another laugh. Haymitch had the thought it was probably the first time Lizbet
Takhar Raven had laughed in a good while, by the look of her. Sometimes just acknowledging the
reality and poking fun at it was the only way to get beyond the sheer crushing burden. Too many
victors knew well, perhaps him most of all.

“The booze has killed off some people and made others go blind because it’s lousy-quality stuff,
caused a couple fires when a still went up like a candle.” She leaned forward, elbows resting on her
knees, frowning intensely now. “It’s bad shit. But just destroying the stills won’t cut it. You’re
drugged up in Six from the time you’re a little kid.” He thought about Poppy and Max and their
morphling habit, even Lizzie’s occasional temper and twitchiness, and the way nobody ever quite
asked about the reality of things in Six. They knew better to ask, and the Six victors never spoke up.
Information had to be volunteered—they had things taken from them by expectation so often.
Besides, with only three victors as an example, that wasn’t condemnation of an entire district. If
people went by him, they’d have assumed Twelve was nothing but a bunch of totally worthless
alcoholics. Every district had its addict victors; that was a simple and acknowledged fact. Everyone
just thought Six was a bit odd and left them to their own devices, lacking explanation.

“Ampistim?” he asked, suppressing a wince. “How the hell were your people working steelmaking
and hovercraft assembly on ampistim? How were they flying?” All he remembered of the stuff was
that he felt like he’d been flying all right, but it definitely wasn’t in a hovercraft, and that walking a
straight line was hard enough. Dealing with molten metal or piloting a hovercraft? That was
impossible. Lizzie studied him for a moment, brow furrowed in confusion and head cocked slightly aside. “It had a fad in the Capitol in the early 50s,” he explained tersely. “All the cutting edge sorts were shooting it as a party drug—called it ‘Amp’. Killed a couple dozen morons who overdosed and it got banned for recreational use.”

“Which really means they just dealt it underground,” Johanna interjected with dry understatement. The three of them knew better than most that anything, no matter how dangerous, disgusting, or perverted, was available in the Capitol for the right price with the right contacts.

She kept looking at him. “Early 50s, huh? Had a few patrons force it on you?”

“Yes.” In a way it was nice to not have to explain, because as a fellow victor, she got it. Some nights, every now and again, the dark canvas of his nightmares would be painted with the too-bright colors and fractured views of an Amp buzz. He remembered his first year, the first time they’d shot him up with it, and he was so damn high pain was almost pleasure, every sensation so extreme it was almost unbearable. Chaff told him later that when he and Seeder had gotten Haymitch’s shirt off him in the Eleven apartment, there was barely an inch of his back from shoulders to waist that wasn’t a raw, bleeding mess. He’d heard the whip, could hardly miss it with his amplified hearing, but he’d felt no pain, been so stupid on the drug that everything that was happening, sex and pain and all of it, was a distant blur. The sound of his own too-loud, too-fierce laughter still rang in his ears during those dreams.

She must have seen something in the look on his face, because her own expression shifted into one of something almost like alarm. He also felt Johanna crowd a little closer, her thigh pressing against his, her hand creeping behind him to rub his back a bit out of Lizzie’s sight. The small pressure of the sensation, the constant rhythm, helped pull him back into the present like a solid tether. “They dosed you up enough to send you high as a kite, Haymitch. The Capitol dose they gave the workers? That was always enough just to keep us sharp, and stave off the fatigue. Then at the end of shift they’d shoot up the morphling to make us crash so we didn’t have to spend a day or two sleeping the ampistim off.”

Constantly overstimulated and then constantly forced to crash with another drug—no wonder they were fucked up here. And deprived of the stuff that made their world go round, well, he knew better than most that alcohol made everything recede just enough that the unbearable reality of the world didn’t quite matter.

“No wonder you hate travel here,” Johanna murmured, leaning forward, chin in her hand and a faint frown on her lips. “They always spun that as just an odd quirk.” Her frown turned into a thin, sarcastic smile meant to cut. “District charm and all.”

Yeah, being drugged up and forced to work extra hours in all the steps of transportation would probably make Six long to stick around home when they could. He thought of Five, Esteban Morath and Dazen complaining about the work crews never getting to spend time with their families, and realized that had to be true here. But it was even more brutal. The Capitol had, of course, just presented the shining ideal of hovercraft pilots and train conductors and a few neat, clean, well-appointed factory assembly lines. One of the few things Lizzie had ever spoken to him about was mining, as he’d been talking with Chantilly about the ore miners in One. He’d been surprised to find out Six had that in common as well, even if he’d ostensibly left behind believing what the Capitol told him about other districts. Someone had to mine the iron to make the steel, and then someone had to make the steel, and then turn it into vehicles, and train people to use them. Six handled it all, mining to piloting, and he couldn’t think of another district so diversified and probably spread so damn thin.
The thought of a district of alcoholics was depressing enough for him on a personal level, knowing with a deep and uncomfortable sympathy that it was a crutch that was damn near impossible to shake off absolutely. Then the thought of a continuing need for coal for steelmaking, when he’d sworn to himself he’d try to minimize the coal demand in the future, was even worse. Yes, he’d acknowledged they might need some coal here and there, but he hadn’t thought about this. Trying to ask people to go back down those hellholes, especially the Twelve survivors who’d already endured so much, seemed too high a price.

The glum weather certainly didn’t help his mood. Granted, it was a far better thing that Lizzie just gave them the situation straight-up, but the whole thing here was such a tangled mess of interconnected issues that he barely knew where to begin.

Coal, he thought with a sigh, seeing Ed trudge back from the crash site, giving Haymitch and Johanna a weary greeting. “How far down is your population?” he asked bluntly. “I know you said you’ve got about fifteen thousand now.”

Ed looked at him, blue-grey eyes unwavering but dull with fatigue. “Between the war, the bombings, and the work accidents and deaths from bad attempts to get a fix since then? Pre-war we had about thirty thousand.”

Suddenly missing half his workforce to boot in addition to the supply problems—shit. “Thanks,” he acknowledged with a curt nod, not sure what more to say than that.

“How bad are we off compared to the other districts?” Ed asked, word coming swift and blunt as a hammer strike, pulling off his mud-covered boots and leaving them at the front door. “I’ve told President Paylor and she’s tried to get people in—we actually got some new workers after the peace conference. But…”

“Bad. Though you both probably knew that.”

Ed and Lizzie both took that stoically. He wasn’t surprised. If they’d been enduring this for months, they’d grown adept at coping with a constant state of near-crisis.

“Well,” Johanna murmured lowly to him after they’d made their farewells for the night, too soft for either of the Ravens to catch, “I think we found a good priority place for some of the surplus workers from One, Two, and Four. Even grain in Nine doesn’t matter if we can’t get it transported out.”

“Let’s hope they’re not too proud,” he answered her. “It’s gonna be rough work, that.” Most of the ore miners from One were keeping busy getting copper and the like for Three’s electronics. It would be mostly the former artisans stuck working mining, smelting steel, or on an assembly line. For people who’d trained for years to master their craft that would probably be a huge comedown.

“When it’s a matter of ‘work or starve’ people usually get their pride knocked out of them quick enough.” Johanna kicked at a rock in the path, sending it flying to plop back down in the pale grey mud of the path. “You look like someone stole your puppy.”

“Face facts. We’ve gotta open a coal mine again, and as quickly as possible.” He chewed his lower lip between his teeth for a moment, and finally admitted, “I knew it was coming. I just didn’t think it would be this much, and so soon. Should have figured when they destroyed the majority of the mined coal supply when they blew Twelve to hell…”

She stopped, turned to him, getting that look that told him she was about to fling a good verbal smack his way. Squared shoulders, feet spread, hands braced on her hips. “Do I have to make a dozen t-shirts, so I have one to wear every day, with ‘Haymitch, you can’t always think of
He suppressed the urge to flinch at that, and instead crossed his arms over his own chest and told her with a glib tone, “Well, the choice of location would make sure I always saw it…” He finally acknowledged it honestly. “I got too used to having to think and do it all for myself. And knowing nobody was reliably gonna have my back all the time. We all had to look out for our own first.” As the only Twelve mentor, that meant he fell down the priority list somewhat.

“I know.” She stretched her back out for a moment, looking over at him again. “It’s not your responsibility to make everything perfect for District Twelve—or the Territory of What-The-Fuck-Ever, when it does get named,” she told him, tone making it clear she would meet any argument on that with granite-solid resolve.

“You know I can’t just write it off entirely. Snow bombed them, but I didn’t think ahead. And people paid.” It had never honestly crossed his mind that Twelve would pay such a steep price. Was that because he was that desperately focused on the idea of the rebellion and keeping the kids alive, or because a duty towards the welfare of Twelve hadn’t been high in his mind for a while? It had gotten to the point where they existed in the same geographical space but virtually separate spheres of existence. What he could do for them now, he would.

“We went through this before. No grand heroics, you said. No trying to convince yourself you’re responsible for fixing everything. The coal mines were going to reopen anyway. Maybe they’ll be mining less volume, and it can be done with less danger now. But it wasn’t going to go away.”

“I know that, dammit. But I’m still the one that’s gonna have to break the news. I’ll have to issue the call that asks people still rebuilding everything from the ground up over the bones of their kin and their friends to go back down those damn pits where they lost even more people. Don’t ask me to be happy about it.” Frustrated at the inevitability of it, he set walking towards Victors’ Hill at a brisk pace, turning the matter over and over in his mind.

Volunteers only, of course, because if it was a matter of forced conscription, that made them no better than the Capitol. He would have to ask Brocade if there could be some kind of hazard pay for hurrying and pushing workers back down the mines when many of them didn’t even have a decent house to live in yet. Still, by the time they reached the Hill, and the first house in the circle on the right where the Ravens had directed them, he was much calmer. Shoving his way past the emotional connotations and accepting that it was what had to happen, and seizing on planning out the logistical realities always helped. “I don’t know near enough about mining to put it all together.” His perspective was that of a child thrown down in the mine for a few weeks, and then a couple years as a shale picker. “I’ll call up Hazelle tonight. If anyone knows who’s around the town these days and what role they had and at what mine, it’s gonna be her. And if nothing else,” he turned to her, reaching out and squeezing her shoulder lightly, “we may have gotten a shit reputation thanks to the Games, but Twelve’s tough enough to stick it out through what has to be done.” Poverty, mining, and all of it hadn’t broken them in the end. They’d endured. Even he’d managed to survive with more of his soul intact than he’d thought, despite being cut off from that steady supportive bedrock as he’d been.

So he found himself calling up Hazelle Hawthorne at number 5 in the Village that night after dinner to talk coal. They got through the usual pleasantries—didn’t take long for two people who’d grown up Seam and knew each other from the time they were snot-nosed kids. “Six needs coal,” he told her, mincing no words. “Desperately. The steel plants are shut down without it, and without steel, the hovercraft and trains are going to get even more dangerously out of repair. Everything’s fucked up then.”
Silence greeted him from the other end for a few moments. “And are you going to appeal to my better nature,” Hazelle inquired with a hint of exasperation, “and tell me that we’ll be considered national heroes if we ask people to go back down the mines when everything’s such a mess here?”

“Let’s be honest. You won’t be media darlings. Nobody’s going to buff your image to make you look real good, and most people genuinely don’t give a crap about anyone from Twelve other than those two kids. Hell, there are plenty of people that don’t even much care about them.” Which was fine, far as he was concerned: that meant they’d rebelled out of a fierce desire for their own freedom, rather than for two kids supposedly in love.

“And perhaps they care about you, now.” There was that edgy reminder, that unconscious resentment of the poor and desperate for the years he’d been wealthy and famous.

“I never asked for any of it,” he protested, fingers gripping the phone tighter. Or what it got me. There’s a thing to be said for twenty-five years of a hard life, so long as you can honestly call it your own. “You want me to come home and put on a helmet and grab a lamp and a pick, Haze? That gonna prove something to you?”

“Don’t you even dare,” Johanna hissed, passing through the kitchen now and pausing to look at him in the doorway with a glass of water in her hand and her eyes fierce. He shrugged, throwing his free hand out in an impatient gesture, not really willing to try to argue with two women at once.

“All right, Hay, all right,” Hazelle said finally, voice calmer now. “Nobody can say you didn’t do your part and then some.”

“I’m being honest. I’ll try to get some perks from Brocade if possible, but mainly it’s gonna be for the satisfaction of knowing they’re pretty much getting the entire country out of hot water.”

“Well, we’ve got one of the major planners of the rebellion to our credit, plus the Mockingjay, so we might as well stack ‘saviors of the nation’ on there too. After all, time comes due we need something and they try to tell us no, Twelve ain’t worth much…”

He laughed, sensing where she was going with it. “We do keep our debts in mind till they come due, don’t we?”

“Both owed and owing,” she answered with sharp amusement. “All right. Let me talk to them. It’s going to go over better that way. Mattie Foxbright came back from Thirteen as well, and he can probably get a work gang together.”

“Mattie…?” He hesitated, hating to admit just how out of the loop he was on things. The last he remembered, Mattie was five years ahead of him in school and his little brother got reaped in the 48th Games. What his entire adulthood had been like, Haymitch really had no clue.

“He was the face boss up at Stone Cliff,” Hazelle filled him in, obviously deciding to be patient.

Stone Cliff was about a two hour ride north from the district center, he remembered, which meant it was one of the more distant mines. Would have made for early mornings and late nights for Mattie, but to have made face boss, he clearly knew his mining. It also meant it was far enough away to have not been turned into an underground burning pit thanks to the firebombs like Dunstan’s and the other mines close to town. “Got it. A good man to have, then.” He would have the loyalty and ear of the miners more easily than Haymitch would in terms of asking them to hurry back to work.

“I’ll help organize things and I’ll even help rig the blasting gear topside, but I won’t be going back down,” she told him, matter-of-factly. “I’ve been out of the pit for too many years, the kids are still
young, and I know Corriden would throw a fit. Besides, it’s an unfamiliar mine.”

“Don’t blame you a bit.”

“We don’t have many miners, Haymitch. That’s going to be a problem.”

“Leave that to me.” He’d have to try to work with Brocade and with Gilt, Tertullia, and Wrack in order to bring the Career districts on board with their unemployed masses and thus a ready work force. That would be a neat trick. Sending them to drive a tractor in Nine was one thing, but shoving them down a coal mine would be entirely another. *Offer a settlement bonus, maybe?* he thought. *Free house in Twelve if they stay, even if they end up in another job besides mining in the end.*

He talked with her for a while more about some of the likely numbers and what safety concerns would have to be addressed before the miners would be willing to go back down Stone Cliff. The pad of paper beside the phone grew full of jots and scribbles and calculations, little notes about equipment and everything. Glancing towards the door, he saw Johanna had disappeared.

Finally, he finished up, “All right, Haze, thanks. Call me in a few days when you know how it’s looking? I’ll update you then.”

He found Johanna out on the front porch, watching the evening drizzle. “Called Brocade, phones are still active there,” she told him, nodding towards the house next door.

He should have figured she’d take her own initiative. “Thanks.” Her simultaneously reporting things that needed to be urgently addressed while he was getting a jump on having boots on the ground—or underground, really—meant it gone done a hell of a lot quicker. “Her thoughts?”

“She said she would pretty much promise them whatever they want—within reason.”

“What was it she said…be fair, but don’t give ‘em the whole bolt when a few yards will do?” He quoted Brocade’s axiom, knowing he was giving a reluctant grin as he did so.

“Yeah. She’ll be calling up One, Two, and Four tomorrow and seeing who they can spare.” She glanced over her shoulder, eyeing him. “I told her to either take care of it herself or get someone on it.” He was sure she’d been blunt as anything about it, but that was Johanna all over, not intimidated to lay down the reality even to the nation’s president. “We’ve got more than enough taking care of it from the Twelve end of things while we’re still trying to do our job here with Six.”

“Hazelle and one of the old face bosses will probably handle the Twelve side of it. Miners are gonna listen to them a hell of a lot more easily than me.”

Her eyebrows rose, eyes and mouth gaping wide in an expression of over-the-top astonishment. “Fuck me gently with a chainsaw, is this Haymitch Abernathy actually learning to delegate something?”

“Yeah, yeah,” he grumbled, reaching out and putting an arm around her shoulders, drawing her in against his side. “Sure.”

“There’s still the alcohol problem.”

“I know.” He gave a soft sound of pained amusement. “Let’s agree we’re not turning that over to Thirteen, yeah?”

“The Capitol probably knows better than anyone,” she admitted, though he could hear the reluctance in her voice. They’d seen more than their share of stories about Capitol celebrities bouncing in and
out of rehab for drug and alcohol problems. He remembered there had been a few stories about his own more public drunken episodes and careful hints that he could do with a stint in a clinic himself before it got even worse. But his Games duties as sole mentor, and getting kicked in the ass right back to Twelve once the Games were done and they lost interest in a middle-aged drunk once more, meant it never happened. It wouldn’t have mattered. They could have dried him out in there for a year and he knew he would never have stayed sober anyway, not in a world where the Games still existed.

“So we’ll call up Galen and Athena. Start from there.” He smiled at her. “Delegation,” he said with an air of mock solemnity.

She pushed against his chest, laughing, and he followed her inside, away from the rain and the cool summer night and all the problems of Six. The misery would always be there, but allowing themselves the luxury and sanity of shutting it all out for the night and entering that private world of their only concern being each other; that was a talent both of them were developing more and more.

~~~~~~~~~~

Six was a bitch of a task, and it felt like she and Haymitch worked from dawn until dinner talking with people, checking the steel factories and talking with the foremen about the necessary coal quality and supply, and she let Haymitch ramble about the need for bituminous versus anthracite and various locations of coal quality and all of that.

They ended touring yet another mine and enduring it stoically but wanting desperately to scramble to the surface. Gathering statistics for hours and filling notepad after notepad, interviewing people whose sunken eyes and tired bodies and shaking hands spoke of a problem that went far beyond fatigue.

They ended up going with Ed Raven to another still that had blown up because it was a jury-rigged job of scrap parts. Haymitch sniffed one of the bottles of liquor that had come out of it and she saw the face he made at the fumes. “And I thought Ripper’s was bad stuff,” he said tersely. “This is basically drinking rubbing alcohol. No wonder they’re going blind.” The small, humorless smile on his face and the odd, high chuckle he gave sent a shiver down her spine. His mind went somewhere she couldn’t neatly follow, and obviously he wasn’t of a mind to tell her, and frankly that scared the shit out of her for a moment.

When they went to go greet Brutus and Enobaria at the train station, all he said to Lizzie was, “If you’re going to cut off the liquor supply...wait until you have a doctor there. I’ve got a couple coming from the Capitol to set up a detox clinic.”

“Don’t need Capitol doctors swanning in here now and telling us what to do when they didn’t give a damn all these years about the drug problem they foisted on us. We’ve had to deal with ampistim and morphling detox before,” Lizzie said, face tight with anger and concern. “They sweat and scream for a few days and feel like shit, but...”

“Alcohol detox can fucking well kill you, Lizzie, so just shut up and let the doctors help so you don’t lose even more people, all right?” Haymitch said with a snappish tone, turning on his heel and stalking up the hill towards the train station, back straight and tense and fists clenched. Johanna could hear the squealing screech of its overworked brakes even more than a block away.

Lizzie looked at her. Johanna shrugged slightly. Of course she hadn’t been there when apparently Peeta dumped all the alcohol after Snow read the Quell card and sent Haymitch into a detox spiral. He’d never been seriously drunk since then and never needed to endure it again, so she hadn’t had the opportunity to observe firsthand. He’d told her nonchalantly that Hazelle looked in on him, but
he’d never said just how bad it had been. Watching him walk away, knowing the fury and pain he was obviously suppressing by choosing to just disengage, she had the feeling now she knew. The memory of him screaming and raving in that cell came to mind, and she wondered if it had been that bad. For him to react like that, it had to have been pure hell.

By the time she caught up to him, he’d relaxed again, though she suspected that a brightly painted wooden sign at the exit of the station directing Capitol tourists towards the “Panem National Hunger Games Museum!!” hadn’t been quite that broken prior to about two minutes ago, given that the other splits and cracks and chips in it showing the underlying bare pine were more weathered. Spying a smear of carmine red on the edge of his right hand, she stared at it for a moment, before reassuring herself it was just paint and not blood.

“You wanna…” She felt stupid right then. She’d known about the alcohol thing, impossible not to when it was all over national television. But she felt like she really hadn’t understood it. It hadn’t just been a matter of him being forced to dry out and then later deciding to shelve the bottle because his life had improved, like her deciding that she had no reason to screw strangers to feel in control again. It had gotten its claws into him far deeper than that, and she felt like a blind idiot for not understanding.

“Not really,” he said flatly. The total rebuff stung, just when she was trying to get a grip on the whole thing and be there for him. He must have sensed it because he looked over at her, grey eyes going from throttled storm-cloud rage to a look of regret and apology. “Not right now, OK?” he told her, reaching over to touch her hand. It was just for a moment, the merest brush of fingers, but the reassurance given and taken in it meant a great deal. Maybe neither of them would be the best with words, but after how hard they’d fought for this, after simple human touch was something either denied to them in their solitude or even an instrument of pain thanks to the patrons, that would always be a way they connected easily. Still here, still yours, it said, loud and clear.

She relaxed at that. They would be all right. Brutus and Enobaria exited the train, Enobaria gently pushing Brutus’ offered arm away as she headed down the steps. “Not helpless,” she reminded her husband with the curt tone of something she’d probably had to say previously.

Brutus got an apologetic hangdog look, following Enobaria. Johanna looked the two of them over. Brutus had put on a few pounds since she’d seen him back in April, she thought, though his tall, broad frame carried it quite well. Seeing the way Enobaria’s blouse curved against the growing expanse of her belly, knowing the Two victor must be about six months along now, she leaned over and said to Haymitch, “Brutus putting on a little sympathy weight there?”

His low, appreciative chuckle made her smile. “Stumpy,” Enobaria said with a trace of a smirk, holding her hands out to Johanna. “Fangless,” she answered, stepping in and giving Enobaria a firm hug, working her way around the awkward obstacle of baby Allamand. “And hi to little Fangless Junior,” she nodded, hearing Enobaria’s rich laugh at that.

“Here,” Enobaria said, suddenly grabbing Johanna’s hand and putting it on her stomach. “Kiddo says hi right back.” Feeling the sudden gentle ripple of movement underneath her hand, she felt herself go wide-eyed. She’d been too young to really remember her mom pregnant with Heike, and pregnant women around her as a kid hadn’t interested her too much beyond the obvious curiosity of Why are you so fat? By the time she’d been old enough to take interest in the topic, she’d been too busy pushing everyone else away, so it wasn’t like anyone had shared the joys and trials of being a mother with her. Between this baby and Maggie Odair and Donny and Trina Dumas and Amitra Anden and how the female victors had shared their kids and their relationships with her, she felt a bit
like she’d finally been drawn into something she’d long been missing. Whether or not she and Haymitch had kids, or even if they’d chosen not to try, she felt like at least finally like a woman in her own right, among other women, that it was a choice rather than just being left standing out in the cold.

She saw Brutus and Haymitch over chatting in low voices, too low for the two of them to hear. “What’s that about?”

“We helped the families—what ones there were left—clean out Victors’ Mountain before we left,” Enobaria told her, dark eyes troubled. Johanna suppressed a wince herself, with recent experience there to draw upon from having cleaned out her own house with Haymitch, and how many wounds that had opened up. She hadn’t even touched Cedrus’ house, and Blight’s had bad enough memories just from checking there on behalf of Clover. She knew the twelve houses at Mountain had been almost full. “Lyme had left some stuff there for Brute, letters and the like that she asked him to forward if she was killed.” She spoke of her husband’s former lover without a trace of jealousy, but Johanna supposed having to live alongside Lyme for years, respecting her as a fellow Two victor, was different from her own years of quietly resenting Annie Cresta. The fact Lyme had died a war hero probably didn’t hurt that respect either. “I don’t know the whole story, I didn’t read her letter. It was apparently from some of our people she dealt with who were helping her strategize to defend Granite Pass and gain that last bit of ground to open up the route to the Capitol. Suppose she figured if they lost and the Capitol’s forces found those letters, wouldn’t much matter since all the writers would be dead anyway.” Killed in battle or executed, Johanna understood.

“And?”

“One of them was addressed to Haymitch.” Enobaria shook her head in confusion. “No notice of the sender, but…it’s not possible his brother knew? Or that he was writing to the one man he knew was from Twelve to try and find out more about where he came from?”

Ash? She had also thought that immediately but just as quickly discounted it. Ash had been in Eight at that time. Though she had a sudden suspicion of one other person in District Two who might write to Haymitch Abernathy, and she wasn’t about to share that with the class. That was private.

“Not sure,” she said nonchalantly, hating keeping secrets from a friend but at the same time knowing instinctively her first loyalty was to Haymitch in this case. “Have to see.” She smirked. “Maybe it’s just an admirer who liked his fighting technique.”

“Oh, shut up,” Enobaria grumbled, reassuring Johanna that the joke didn’t go too far awry given that she and Haymitch had done their level best to kill each other. “I’m gonna get a nap here.” She rubbed the small of her back. “Junior wears me out sometimes,” she admitted frankly. She looked at Johanna, a hard, searching glance. Enobaria Allamand, Johanna realized, was never going to be the sort for openly gentle and comforting. Her culture and her years as a tribute cadet had assured it. There would always be something of hawk-like keenness to her. “You OK about the kid thing and all? I can shut up about it if need be. Can’t exactly make the bump disappear, though.” Her hand drifted down to rest on her stomach and she gave it a soft pat.

“Yeah. Haymitch and me, we’re doing all right on that.” That was even true now. “We’ll catch up tonight, hand off the stuff for you to take to Twelve tomorrow on the hovercraft. Go get your beauty sleep, huh? You need every bit of it.”

Enobaria flipped Johanna the bird left-handed and headed off towards the Hill, with Brutus at her side.

Seeing Haymitch standing there with a large manila envelope in his hands, she went to him. “Let’s
get out of here, huh?” he said, staring at it dubiously like it was a ticking time bomb, like he wasn’t sure if he opened it if something like tracker jackers would come flying out.

“From Fog, you think?” she ventured carefully, as the two of them headed down the hill.

“Can’t much think of anyone else that would be sending me a letter from Two,” Haymitch answered her. “Not that I have much notion what the hell he’d want to bother me for at this point. Bastard,” he muttered, mostly to himself, but Johanna still heard it.

She walked with him down through the town along the streets that were even steeper than those in the winter town sloping down towards Lake Sawyer, past the bombed-out ruins of the destroyed sectors where the Capitol bombs had done their work. Close to the water, it was almost nothing but ashes, broken fire-scarred brick and twisted, scorched metal where several huge, slum-like apartment buildings had been. The people had lived here down towards the water, far away from the more pristine areas and high on the hill that had always been “safe” for the Capitol to film.

Climbing past the ruins of a portion of the fence, they walked along the rain and spray dampened shoreline, where the rocks abruptly dived into the sea in sheer drops rather than in gentle sloping sandy beaches like in Four. He sat down back on a drier boulder, and she kept herself amused walking the edge, looking down into the water and seeing the occasional flicker of movement as a fish swam by. Now and again a great heaving white-capped surge of water came up onto the rocks in some places. There was a sudden loud huff noise, and a tall triangular black fin that she’d judge was almost as tall as her sliced up from the water’s surface not a stone’s throw away. She couldn’t see what was below, but another fin joined it, and then another, and another in great wheezing gusts of spray-laden air. Some fins were shaped tall and straight like the first, some a bit more hooklike. Finally, she had the glimpse of a rounded black head and a startling white patch on its cheek as one peered above the surface for a moment, and then the whole pack of them pushed on towards the open ocean in the west. She watched until they faded out of sight, and found that she was grinning at the sight of the whales, oddly entranced. Finn’s going to be so jealous when he hears this.

Catching herself, remembering why she was down here in the first place, she looked back over her shoulder, seeing Haymitch standing there too a few feet away, obviously watching the whales himself. She hadn’t even noticed him joining her. Just how long had she been staring anyway? But he looked calm, and that was a relief. Her eyes went to the paper clutched in his hand.

“There’s a letter for Ash too,” he told her, tone of voice giving her nothing, though he held the paper out. Seemed he wanted her to read it. “Your thoughts?” he confirmed it.

Taking it gingerly from his hand, though if he wasn’t exploding in rage it probably wasn’t that bad, she sat down on the rock he’d vacated. Glancing up to see him standing there on the rocks, back to her and hands in his pockets, looking off into the distance, she looked down at the paper again.

Phineas Fog apparently didn’t fuck around when it came to getting down to business.

What you’ll want to know is Ashford is alive. I managed to convince President Snow to spare him because of his age and because he was my son. But the price was he got sent to District Two to become a Peacekeeper. It’s not unusual for district orphans. Talk with Mayor Sangus, she’ll probably help you with what you need to know. Part of my agreement with Snow was having no further contact with him, but I’ve got friends who would make a few inquiries now and again.

His name now is Theodosius Law. The last location I had for him was District Eight as of this spring, being seconded from District One. There was an uprising in Eight, which finally made the news when your girl Katniss went there so you’ll have heard of that by now, but that means he got thrown right into the shit.
He’s a survivor, though. He’ll have had to be to make it through this far. You two have that in common.

I argued for your mother, and for Brian Wainwright, or at least I tried. But I expect you know full well yourself that Snow isn’t swayed from what he wants. Always thought you as a cheerful Capitol-lover was too odd to pass muster, but I know better than to ask questions. Still, even I didn’t know how deep it ran until Finnick Odair’s broadcast.

Once he feels you owe him something, once he’s got something he knows you’ll submit in order to keep safe, that’s it and you’ll pay for it, again and again. I bought Ash’s life but it was made clear that I’d failed in my duty by being with a district woman for eighteen years and being “unduly influenced by her to neglect my responsibilities to enforce the law”, so I’d damn well better shape up and start doing it by the book.

I may have made things worse, since telling him I had kids only seemed to make him more eager to claim what he could from both of you as the Capitol’s due for me breaking the rules. But I had to try. Maybe it would have been fewer people paying for it over the last couple years I was in Twelve with Snow breathing down my neck, but you don’t realize that until it’s too late.

I loved her. She loved me. Believe that or not as you like, but it was true. It started out as necessity on her part. I admit that. But I told her she was free to leave, that I’d never use my position to force her into it. She was smart enough to keep things quiet. Doing it for money to feed her kids was something the Seam would accept, but they’d have made her a pariah for coming to see me willingly.

And while I’m no fool enough to think you’re sitting there all teary about this, however much you hate me, it can’t compare to knowing for twenty-five years I had to give the order to kill the woman I loved and a girl that was dear to you. That’s my legacy. If it was just my life that would have saved them, I’d have made that trade. But it wasn’t. If I died fighting it, the next person in line would have been given the same order, and probably some others would be punished as well as an example. They were dead no matter what. So it was just a matter of how many people I was willing to sacrifice in addition by defying Snow.

They died bravely. You should know that at least. Your mother was tough as ever.

Too damn old for a rifle, but at least I can help with information and plans. However this turns out, at least people are finally telling Snow they’re not going to just knuckle under. Might be they love that little girl, but I think a man who’s been through hell and still calls out his enemy right to his face for the world to see is far more worthy of honor. You get that kind of courage and endurance from Magnolia.

Luck to you, Haymitch, and I’m sorry. The other letter is for Ash if you do find him.

Phineas Fog

She carefully folded the paper up again, her fingers a little unsteady. Her mind turned it over and over, the image of a man all at once trying to tersely justify actions that had apparently been necessary—she couldn’t fault his logic—but at the same time clearly haunted by them as well, and by the image of a woman he’d admired as well as loved.

Looking over at Haymitch, thinking of how deeply he took his perceived failures to heart, especially at not protecting people, she thought he’d gotten something of his father there. She wouldn’t say so, not to his face.
Joining him again, Haymitch glanced over at her and said neutrally, “So?”

“So I think he wants you to find Ash.”

“And?”

“I think he wants you to forgive him, or at least understand he had to do it.”

Haymitch nodded tersely, hands clasped behind his back. “All those years,” he muttered, chin sinking down as he frowned. “All those years I figured, I knew, that she was just a convenience to him. That she hated every fucking minute of it but did it to keep us alive and fed. I wondered if she looked at Ash sometimes with how everybody knew he was Peacekeeper blood and saw him.”

“You were just a kid. Of course you didn’t understand.” He would see only the mother struggling desperately to keep it all together. From what he’d told her of his childhood, he’d felt the crushing weight of responsibility so early, the guilt at feeling like he always needed to do more in order to spare others. If his mom had been keeping it quiet so as to not end up shunned by all her people—she wondered how much confusion and guilt the woman must have had at times, falling for a man who had to occasionally come down hard to keep appearances and keep everyone safe by it, keeping it secret even from her own kids, let alone her friends. She thought about how devastatingly lonely it must have been. “And then you were a whore yourself and all you could see was that single tree rather than the whole forest. She was a woman, not just your mother. From what you tell me, she was on the lowest rung of the ladder in the poorest district in Panem, had a shitty husband who smacked her around. You gonna blame her for taking what comfort she could?”

“With the man who eventually ordered her killed,” Haymitch said dryly. Seeing her about to speak up, he waved her off. “All right, all right, I get it. Fuck knows I know a thing or two about the might-have-beens at this point. Not a day goes by I don’t wonder if I could have done something in the arena to keep more people alive, done something to help save Twelve.”

“You think he’s lying?”

“About my ma?” Haymitch crossed his arms over his chest, shoulders hunched a bit as if trying to sudden curl up and make himself smaller. For a moment he seemed like a confused child. “No. Eighteen years is a long time to be selling yourself to one man just for the cash. She could have remarried to avoid that. I figured it was because she didn’t want another man smacking her around, but…maybe that wasn’t it. When I was old enough to be out in the woods or working odd jobs, it wasn’t a matter of us needing the money to keep from starving, but no question, it made life a bit easier.” He frowned again, brows drawing together. “He’d try to give Ash and me candy sometimes. Be nice. I always gave mine away. And sometimes we’d end up with little things I didn’t bring home. Extra candles. White sugar. Tea. Not nearly so much that anyone would notice. Books. Ma loved to read, and she kept claiming she got them from a man at the Hob who was sweet on her…” He cleared his throat, still looking utterly troubled.

“What would either of us have done?” she asked, voice gone a bit rough at the thought. “If it was you and me in the arena as the last two, knowing that one of us had to die and that if we refused to fight, other people would suffer until we did what Snow wanted?”

“I’d have offed myself first,” his answer came without any hesitation, eyes flashing fiercely with the conviction of it. She didn’t doubt it for an instant.

“But if that wasn’t an option? If you had to kill me and live with it the rest of your life?” It was bad enough to have lived with killing other kids she’d never met before. It had been worse still to have killed other victors—she dreamed about Sandy and Gloss sometimes. She couldn’t fathom having to
kill Haymitch and how much it would have cost her to live with that.

He gave her a sad, slow smile, turning to her and gathering her in close, squeezing her almost too tightly. His hand stroked its way down her back. “I’m glad we blew that fucking arena apart and never had to find out how it would have ended.”

She pressed closer to him, feeling the warmth of his body against the chill on this place. “So do you forgive him?” she asked, curious. More distant from the matter, maybe she could take a clearer position on it. It hurt for what it had cost Haymitch, but she couldn’t blame a man for doing what Snow forced him to do, and when it obviously tormented him the rest of his life. Besides, he was half the reason Haymitch even existed. Even if he’d been bad as Snow that would have been one thing Phineas Fog had done right. Maybe she wasn’t going to claim him as an angel, no question he’d done some awful things, but the fact he had such regrets told her plenty.

“I don’t know.”

“You’re not him,” she reminded him gently. She tucked her chin into the hollow of his shoulder, breathing in the familiar scent of him, trying to reassure him with her presence.

“I know that. And I’ll never get to ask him or Ma about any of it, so maybe I’ll never know the whole truth. For most of his stay in Twelve, he was pretty easygoing. Occasionally handed out a flogging, even to me, but that means he was smarter than Cray, he did just enough to keep the paperwork coming and Snow off his back…”

“I didn’t ask if you thought he was a good Head Peacekeeper.”

“I think…he was a man. Not the uniform I always saw. But if she loved him, that meant there was something good in him along with whatever bad. So he was human, doing the best he could with the situation he had. And at least he cared enough to write me about Ash. Couldn’t know that Snow would do a little deathbed bragging and I was already aware.” He stepped back, hands on her shoulders. “I can’t forgive him. Not just yet. But I’ll think about it.” He nodded back up towards the hill. “Want to take the rest of the afternoon off?” he suggested softly. I need you, his eyes told her. She thought about this on top of the alcoholism and the coal mining, that broken sign in the train station. At least in his sheer stress he was reaching for her rather than a bottle of booze.

She stretched up and kissed him, resolving to do the best she could to make him forget, to shut it all out and just give each other a few hours of unapologetic happiness. “Race you back. First one there gets to be on top.” She heard him chuckle at that and breathed a quiet sigh of relief.
It was just about the last place in the world Haymitch wanted to visit. And yet tourism was part of Six’s industry, and it had to be dealt with one way or another. He and Johanna had sat there over breakfast, mulling it over and trying to commit one way or another. The fact that Lizzie was coming along as well had decided it. They wouldn’t be cowards where another victor had lived with the shadow of that fucking museum on her doorstep for close to twenty years, had lived with Capitol tourists filing in and out of the Six district center to be escorted on arena tours.

So they stood on the imposing granite steps of the Hunger Games Museum, Ed pulling the keys to the locked iron gating in front of the glass doors from his pocket. “I know this isn’t a cinch for you by any means,” he said, glancing at the three of them from his light brown eyes. “But I figure…if anyone should have the right to see what they made of it and decide the fate of this place, and the arenas, it’ll be you victors.”

Haymitch sensed easily enough Ed hadn’t wanted to make Lizzie face it alone, so that was why it had waited until now. The question hung there of whether to just blow the whole damn place up or see it preserved forever as a testament of the Capitol’s legacy. There were days he went back and forth between both choices, indecisive. Part of him easily wanted to see any trace of the Games and all the arenas wiped out, to clear the taint of them away. But another part of him thought they should stay just where they were, so that people would see what had become of a society that went to hell so badly. So they could look it straight in the face and know exactly why they had to say Never again.

The key turned and the heavy bolt tumbled with an audible thump. Ed pushed the gate, rusted a bit from a years’ worth of snow and rain, to the side as it creaked in protest, and unlocked the glass doors as well. It said something that nobody had vandalized the building, even with paint or the like. He remembered the graffiti on Games Central back in District Fourteen clear as day. Apparently for the people of Six, the place held too much malevolent dread even now. He had the feeling they were the first people to venture here since Six rose in rebellion.

The lights still worked, and the dim gloom suddenly lit, and he breathed a sigh of relief as it cast away the shadows. There was more than enough darkness here already. “Don’t turn everything on, Ed,” Lizzie said, a faint crack of stress in her voice. “I don’t want the video or interactive displays or sound or any of it.”

Edsel nodded and left the rest of the switches alone. Johanna came back from where she’d been looking at the information booth. She held out a folded map to him with a thin, sarcastic smile. He looked at it—an advertisement for the various arena tours. She looked at him and he shook his head. Not yet. In some ways, seeing exactly where his tributes had died throughout the years, knowing where the arena was, would be too much for him to be able to walk through this place afterwards. She took it with a slight nod, putting it back down on the counter.

“Well, hey, let’s get this party started,” he said wryly, gesturing to the large red arrow indicating the start of the museum tour.

They walked into the room for the first decade of the Games, and somehow, a tour guide would have made it far more awful. He was sure somebody down the hill had worked as one, knew how to give the whole act on command so that they could have gotten the whole experience, but the thought of it was too awful to bear. The ordeal spoke for itself. He didn’t need a tour guide to try to tell him how the Capitol thought the Games had been like. He, and Johanna, and Lizzie, had all lived it. He couldn’t stand that fake veneer over the stark reality.
1st Games—a display case with a life-size replica of Trajan Shulikuk from Two, a tall, well-built boy with near-black hair. The three-dimensional photo replicas the Capitol made were remarkable—he could see the shine in Trajan’s blue eyes, the slight blotchy unevenness of skin tone that spoke of a seventeen-year-old boy who’d probably endured pimples shortly before the arena. The notes told him that replica-Trajan held the machete the actual Trajan had used to win and a precise recreation of his clothing. The only sign of him being a Two tribute was a small “2” on an armband. Moving through various pictures of the Games “highlights”, the displays explained, “In these days, long ago, things were very different from the modern Games we know now! Did you know that in the 1st Games, tributes were not allowed to have any survival gear?”

2nd Games—Hal Redcrow from Five, burnished bronze skin and clever, thoughtful dark eyes, a crudely made bow and arrow in his hands. Statistics: 19 of 24 tributes died on the first day. Apparently they’d learned well from the 1st Games and wanted to just get it over with as quickly as possible.

3rd Games—Chalcedony Alvarez from One, green eyed, olive-skinned, and lithe. Her greatest hits included taking on a savage tiger-mutt, and her replica showed the claw wound on her thigh that had cost her the leg.

4th Games—Nualla Clearly, his predecessor, the woman he’d never met. He looked at her. A generation back from his own birth, there was some blue along with the grey in those eyes, but otherwise, she was pure Seam, could have been his own cousin. They’d put her with a torch in her hand, probably because she hadn’t actually killed anyone by taking up a weapon. Nobody had. The cheerfully colorful display told him, “The 4th Games were notoriously problematic due to efforts on the parts of the tributes to sabotage the proceedings.”

Johanna gave a snort of sarcastic amusement. “Trust those fuckers to get upset that the tributes didn’t want to play along that year.”

He nodded idly, seeing the birth and death dates listed on Nualla’s biography plaque. Dead 24 years before his own birth, “apparently got lost in the woods and unfortunately never returned, becoming a victim of the dangers of the wild”. He wondered sometimes what it would have been like if she’d been around, if she could have withstood it for so long. He knew full well what a few decades of hopelessness were like, though.

Mags was the 8th Games, and he knew it was coming even as he reached that point in the circle of displays. Young, strong, sun-darkened, lean, red hair flying away loose from her ponytail, bracing her harpoon with steady hands and her sea-glass green eyes glittering with ferocious intensity as she probably stared down towards the bear mutt that nearly killed her then. The same mutt whose twin actually had killed her, 67 years down the road—come back to finish the job.

He lingered there until he felt the touch of Johanna’s hand, pulling him towards the sight of a fifteen-year-old skinny brown-haired Woof in the next display case with a broken brick and a knife in hand. They moved on to the next room for the next ten years, and then the next and the next.

Actual uniforms with district colors came in with the 14th, the long-dead Perseus Frank wearing Two’s dark red as a vest over his shirt. Sponsors came in during the 18th with One’s Carmine Rossen.

The weapons got deadlier until by Cedrus in the 22nd carrying a pair of carefully crafted hatchets and a wary, keen look in his hazel eyes, it was clear it wasn’t just a random assortment of crap thrown into the arena for whomever could get to it first. “In this, the first year weaponry was allowed as a sponsorship gift, Cedrus Ollenheim’s sponsors took full advantage of the rule change!”
Johanna lingered, staring at Cedrus for a long time, at the backdrop of his display showing a thick pine woods. He stood back and watched as she raised her hand, pressing it to the glass as if she could reach out and touch the statue of the boy as she thought about the man she’d known, and known so little. Then she turned, almost too abrupt, and he saw the smudges of her handprint on the glass as they left Cedrus behind them. “Bye, Ced,” she murmured lowly.

By this point Ed and Lizzie had separated from them. That was all right. It was better this way. The two of them could be alone together, free to let out whatever needed to be said or done without fear of being observed by others, and it gave him and Johanna that same freedom.

Right after Taffeta’s place of “honor” standing among the rubble of a ruined city, the First Quarter Quell got twice the space of a normal Games display—more artifacts, more pictures. That seized him with dread, knowing what would come when they reached the Second. Harvest Anderson in an amber-orange jumpsuit for Nine stared out from suspicious, hooded eyes, wheat-gold hair spilling over her shoulders. He’d probably look at the world that way if his own neighbors voted him away to die.

Now they began to pass more and more names that he knew, the people he’d laughed and drunk and sometimes tried to not cry with during the Games, faces of world-weary adults caught forever now in a glimpsed moment as children at the moment the last of childhood was ripped away, the moment of so-called victory. Seeder. Max. Beetee. Poppy. Georgette. Laurence. Luma. Niello. Carrick. Dazen. Angus.

At the 44th, Blight, and right next to him the next year was Clover. Johanna’s breath caught in a sharp gasp at that. He put a hand on her shoulder, even as his mind turned back to those two when he first knew them and he felt the fierce twist of grief in his heart. Big, cheerful Blight, and Clover with her well-meaning bluntness.

They moved more slowly past the next few—a glazed-eyed Wiress with her yellow shirt hanging almost in rags, Chaff with blood-soaked rags torn from a blanket wrapped around his infected hand, a defeated-looking Albinus whom nobody remembered because that was the tornado year. Chantilly, in a pose graceful as a dancer with her wooden riot batons raised and ready to attack, or defend.

Johanna’s touch, the brush of her fingers against his hand, startled him more than he liked to admit. The reminder of the living in this house of death was almost a shock. “Ready?” she asked him, eyes troubled but her jaw set with determination.

“No. But we should see ‘em all. We owe it to them.” So she took his hand, and they followed the arrows to the next room for the 50th-59th Games.

The oh-so helpful information on the display told him that Haymitch Abernathy—“barely 16, just 5’6” and 120 pounds at the time of the Games!”—had defeated four older, talented larger size-opponents in close combat during the course of his victory “by virtue of his intelligence, speed, and fighting skill”. The life-size shapes of dead teenagers were helpfully painted on the walls next to the display case to show the museumgoers the visual of the size of Twelve’s “remarkable victor, the first in 46 years” against that of his major opponents.

16, F, 5’9”, 140 pounds, the shadow painted in District Four blue-green—17, M, 6’1”, 182 pounds done in deep Two red, and so on. No names, of course; dead children didn’t matter the moment that cannon sounded, but he remembered Esca Flores, Remus Thread, Aurelia Fawkesworth, Sapphire Des Vouex. The stats of the poor kids from the non-Career districts that he’d had to kill weren’t even listed—Lea Rostov of Eight, Vetch Kieffer of Nine—not impressive enough, just put under a blanket of “and two additional kills”. There was a brief mention of an “effective but of course ultimately tragic alliance” with a nameless Twelve girl, and that was all the attention Maysilee Donner received.
He stared at his child-self—twenty-six years younger, four inches shorter, about fifty pounds lighter than the man standing there, and wondered, had he ever really been that small, that young, or that ignorant of consequences? The slash across his stomach was a red line soaking his black shirt and grey tech vest with blood, but his guts weren’t visible, stayed neatly where they belonged. Like most other gruesome injuries in previous victors where he knew the horrifying reality, the wound on the replica was cleaned up enough to give a shiver of vicarious battle drama to the viewers but not to be disgusting.

The replica stood before a backdrop of that fabulously gorgeous meadow with the beautiful sky and the stunningly scenic mountain in the distance. His feet were on the edge of a cliff, eyes keen rather than dull with shock, half-turning agilely as he had the knife in his left hand and raised that axe in his right hand, the one he’d supposedly miraculously caught in order to fling it back at the girl who’d thrown it.

The knife in his replica’s left hand was the real thing, and he knew the ornate scrollwork in the blade like the back of his own hand. He felt drawn to it like they were two magnets, as if they recognized each other, all at once both repulsive with the deaths of multiple children but reassuring in how they’d worked together. They never let victors keep their weapons, and he’d heard some carp about having to give it up to the museum—not so much trophy-keeping so much as wanting to keep it for reassuring security in a post-Games life. They shouldn’t have been surprised, as the actual wishes of a victor never mean anything against the methods of the Capitol’s adoration.

Lies, more lies, and the truth twisted and excerpted and selectively presented until all there was left was the sight of this small dark-haired sixteen-year-old child in Twelve black. The part of him that would never escape the arena was depicted right there in front of his face, large as life: a boy with weapons raised, eternally fighting for his life, eternally held prisoner behind glass walls. “Maybe they got it a little more right than they intended,” he told Johanna dryly, even as he felt himself shuddering.

Her hand was firm on his shoulder again. “Let’s keep going.” They turned towards the next display of Brutus in his dark red parka, his tall imposing figure silhouetted against a backdrop of pure, blinding white snow and ice. Haymitch knew that of course Larkspur Taylor and Dean Gordon wouldn’t even get a mention there. He was thankful the circle of televisions that formed the center of each of the “decade” rooms stood there silent and dark. He knew that they would have been playing analysis, recaps, clips, and the like for the associated Games—the control panels had “Did you know?” questions for children and invited them to push buttons and learn more about that Games.

The displays, along with the focus on each victor and the arena they had been in, recounted the genius of each new Gamemaker, traced cultural trends, discussed Games broadcast records, fawned over innovative “firsts” about weapons and mutts and tributes.

He stopped at Lizzie’s display, the 58th with its peaceful lake hiding aquatic mutts, and wondered if she and Ed had been by yet, or if they would be able to do it at all. Lizzie half-crouched in the sand in a swimsuit of Six’s bright red, the hair of the replica treated so that it seemed to glisten with a wet sheen even now, with a rough driftwood club held at the ready. Her right ankle showed the livid wound where one of the lake’s mutts had gotten a tentacle on her.

The sixty-six were next, and he remembered every single year of them as well. Four’s Lateen Solis, Cecelia, Enobaria—they’d given her a bloody-mouthed grin to show off her most striking asset as a victor—Cashmere and Gloss. Finnick, gangly at fourteen, clutched his trident. 66th Games was next, and the background of the garden maze showed the neat hedges and gazebos and ivy-draped marble columns of it. They even had a picture of Johanna lying in wait on the roof of one of those gazebos, ready to leap down on the last opponent standing, the Two boy. He didn’t remember, would have
just thought of the kid as *Brutus’ boy*, but he had absolutely no doubt in his mind that she remembered his name, the sounds he made as he died, and every moment of it. He didn’t ask.

Johanna’s replica was dressed in a deep green tank top, deliberately tight to better show off her figure which had been starting to show as attractively curvaceous even at sixteen. The flowing linen tunic she’d had as well at the start of the Games had long since been torn into strips by the end, worn around her wounds as bandages and around her forearms and hands and knees as protection against the rough scrape of bark when she’d started climbing the arena’s trees for shelter and as scouting positions. Her long brown hair was in a messy ponytail. Her hatchets were ready in her hands and her face wore an expression of deliberate, almost cunning malicious glee. The vicious, sly girl who’d deceived them all with her weakness stood there clear as day. He wondered how many small children had been frightened by the face of that girl in the glass case, or even how many adults. Even those who’d bought Johanna’s body had wanted that danger in her, gotten a rush out of the risk.

“That’s not you,” he told her, seeing the way she stared at the replica with a look of both anger and despair.

“It’s what they made me into,” she told him, and he reached out to her, glad that she let him do it, that she came into his embrace rather than shoving him away. Her fingers tensed and knit in his shirt restlessly, as if she was unsure whether she wanted to cling to him or push him away.

“That’s *not* you,” he reminded her. “Not ever, not now.” This girl, the Capitol’s fantasy—not who she’d been inside all those years, not the woman who’d had the courage to reach out and touch him in his loneliness, not the woman who slept in his arms and told him to call her “Hanna” and spoke about hopes for the future.

“I know.” She cleared her throat a little hastily. “I know.” But she hurried away towards Rice next.

They were so close to the end that they finished it anyway, especially with the room for the seventies less than half full. The display case for the Third Quell was ready to go, with signs advertising “Coming soon! Look for this amazing new addition in August 75!” in neon letters.

With that, they stared bleakly at the signs for the second floor. They promised an exciting array of interactive exhibits. A lifelike replica of Central Command where people could take the role of a Gamemaker including a “create your own mutt” station, a Mentor Central where children could act like mentors and survey their “tributes” in the arena and carefully choose sponsor gifts for a tribute based on their budget. There would be a recreation of the tribute training gym where they could “gain the full tribute training experience.” Another sign directing them to the museum gift shop breathlessly promised souvenir parachutes and victor action figures and Games videos and replica uniforms and weapons.

“Oh, fuck, I’m gonna be sick,” Johanna whispered by his side, and he watched, feeling almost paralyzed as she bolted for the bathroom nearby. Staring at the signs even longer, thinking of Johanna throwing up at it, he felt the churn of nausea in his stomach too, fighting fiercely to keep his breakfast down. But he tasted the bitter, slimy, hot bile at the back of his throat and that was that. At least he managed to make it to the toilet.

Though it would have satisfied a little bit to puke all over the floor of this place, even if the floor was dusty rather than spotlessly Capitol-clean as he imagined it had been for all those years. But someone from Six would have to clean that up so that defeated the purpose. Rinsing his mouth out with water from the tap, splashing it on his face, he looked at himself in the mirror. Somehow he was relieved to see the face of a grown man a bit in need of a shave, eyes bright with pain and misery and fury, rather than the face of the child he’d seen inside the display box.
Finishing up, he headed back out and found Johanna there, looking unsteady herself. She told him, voice oddly flat, “Anyone seeing this place is probably going to want to ask why we let any of these people live.”

“Because we’ve killed enough people already.” After throwing up as he had, his voice sounded a little rusty to his own ears, and he gave a quick cough to try to clear it up a bit.

“I know that. But maybe they don’t. They haven’t seen it. Haven’t felt what it’s like to carry the weight of deaths on you. It’s easy to condemn from a distance, mm?” She leaned back against the information booth, ankles crossed, arms folded. “I think…there’s absolutely nothing worth keeping here, Haymitch. Nothing at all that the country or anyone in it can learn from a single thing that’s in here. If there’s going to be a Hunger Games Museum, let’s damn well make it about what counts.”

It didn’t take but a moment, because he was inclined to agree with her. All this place would ever show was the most unsettling, oblivious, disgusting parts of the Capitol mentality. This place would be no memorial to the dead and the survivors if they were to keep it like this. It would be only an invitation to the ghoulish sorts who would revel in the sheer perversity of it. “Not getting any argument from me on that.”

“And me,” Lizzie said, coming to join them with Ed right behind her. He didn’t ask where she’d been or what she’d been looking at while she was here, because her expression didn’t invite that. “Let’s gut the place, I say.”

“You even want a Games Museum here in Six?” Haymitch asked Edsel, who stood a few steps back from the little knot of three victors, as if separated by them by a physical barrier rather than a mental one. But this was his district in the end, and it would be by his say-so or not.

He didn’t hesitate, now suddenly speaking up with a confidence he hadn’t possessed a minute ago. Probably because now he was sure this was a question he had the status to answer. “No. I’ve had enough people forced to work in this place over the years and doing the arena tours, and I’ve seen what it’s done to them. I want the Games gone from my district. If there’s going to be a Games Museum, District Fourteen can have that little reminder sitting on their doorstep far as I’m concerned.”

“The arenas?” Johanna said, holding up the brightly-colored arena map she’d slapped back down on the counter earlier. “What do we do about them?”

“That’s probably going to be a national decision,” Lizzie pointed out, leaning on the information counter and neatly unfolding the map. “I mean, if you look at this…” Her hand swept the expanse of the poster-sized map a few inches above the paper, indicating its full size, “…the arenas, where they’re located? None of them are in a district boundary, of course, they’re all in the borderlands, but that means no district really has jurisdiction over them.”

“Not unless the territorial boundaries are redrawn, and Brocade’s been talking to me about that,” Edsel mentioned, coming up behind Lizzie and touching her lightly on the shoulder. “But maybe that’s a decision ought to get made before that.”

He looked down at the map, the cheerful colors and advertisements for various lengths of tours, from a three-day two-arena trip all the way to a five-week tour of a full quarter-century of arenas, making him feel unsettled and ill again.

“Here,” Johanna said softly, putting a finger down in the borderlands between Eleven and Four. His eyes followed and he saw the bright red numbers: 50. “And…here.” Another spot, between Three and Six: 66.
He’d never known where it was before, but he remembered it had been a long flight that morning, even given that his nerves had probably made it seem even longer. Even victors weren’t made privy to the locations of the arenas, though there was usually some kind of guesswork by the mentors based on how long the hovercraft flight was and how early they had to get the tributes up for it. 74, he noticed, was close to the Capitol, a rather short flight. He was sure it had been extremely popular in the year they’d run tours there.

“Here,” he answered equally quietly, tapping a finger right to the side of 75, between Four and Five in the far, far south.

He stared at the numbers pockmarking the map like they were some kind of disease, ranging everywhere across the entire nation. They were far more common in the larger expanses of western borderlands, maybe only a dozen or so east of the big river, but nowhere proved immune from the shadow. He even saw 49, Chantilly’s arena, in the borderlands between Eight, Ten, and Twelve.

“Maybe we need to see what they’ve done with the arenas,” he ventured, hating the suggestion even as he made it, “before we decide. If there’s anything worth keeping for the future to learn from when they see it.” He’d heard about the arena tours, of course, but nobody had ever seen what an arena was like except Capitol people, Six tour guides, and maybe some Peacekeepers for security. Ash had been in Six, he remembered. Had he walked in the arenas, stepping over places where kids had fought and died in order to keep order among some oblivious Capitol people and their squalling brats who treated it all like it really was just a game? The thought of his brother in an arena, for any reason, seized at his heart with a sort of dread. The things had poisoned everything they touched.

Johanna and Lizzie both stared at him. “Are you serious?” Lizzie asked.

“Don’t think I’m suggesting it for fun,” he said, hearing the harsh defensive edge in his voice. “Fuck knows I’ve been in two arenas and the thought of going to a third and seeing what a harmless joke they’ve made it makes me sick. But before we just blow the things to hell, I want to know if there’s anything worth keeping there so that people will always know. So the Capitol, and all of us, can never forget.”

Lizzie’s face stayed as hard and controlled as if it was carved from granite. “I get what you’re saying, but I’ll leave that to you two. I’m out, Haymitch,” she told him. “I’m sorry.” That was when he understood. She’d tried to move on from that swimsuit-clad, club-brandishing girl and taken on other, stronger ties. That was her way of coping. Her loyalty was first to Six and to Edsel, and the shadow of the Games and the arena haunted this district perhaps most deeply of any other, because it had been year-round for them. She was a victor, but she wanted to minimize that identity as much as she could in her own mind. Lizzie simply wanted to forget more than anything, whereas he’d found strength in the other victors. He couldn’t blame her for it—whatever got her through it. “I’d just as soon see them all destroyed.”

“That’s fine,” he answered her. “Johanna?”

“I’m in,” she said without hesitation, her eyes telling him, Wherever you go, I go. He nodded slightly to acknowledge it, feeling the reassurance once again that neither of them would leave the other abandoned to endure anything alone.

“I know you’re hard pressed for it,” Johanna said, turning to Edsel, “but can we get a short hop on a hovercraft?”

“Where do you want to go?” Edsel said, stepping in and looking at the map. Haymitch wryly was glad he’d brought the reading glasses with today because otherwise he’d have had to lean in a bit and squint to see the map clearly. Trying to look at all those information panels on the displays, even
skimming them cautiously as he’d been, would have induced a massive headache. Still wished with a little bit of childish resentment that Galen Wing hadn’t been right, but he couldn’t deny the damn things had made a big difference. “I mean, I can’t make a cross-country flight happen. Your arenas are probably within r—”

“No,” Johanna said, voice too loud and echoing suddenly through the empty entrance hall with the force of a shout. “Fuck, no.” He appreciated that. The thought of going back to his own arena was something he just couldn’t face. Not today, and maybe not ever.

“Are there any of the early ones before 35 or 40 close to Six?” he asked Johanna hesitantly. He scanned the map even as he asked and saw that no, they tended to be in a tight cluster east of the Capitol in the massive open expanse of the Two-Nine-Five-Ten- Capitol borderlands, back before the Games turned from sheer efficiency in punishment into a freakish carnival seeing the ever-more novel and exotic. Maybe it would be far better to go see one that neither of them had any investment in. But then again, the most recent ones would probably be more representative, and they were closer.

Closest of all to Six’s district center, he saw the red letters, barely beyond the eastern district border. 73.

He glanced over his shoulder at Edsel. “73’s right on your doorstep?”

“The tours got so popular and they bitched enough about hours-long rides to even the closest ones to start their tour,” Edsel said dryly, though his jaw was tight and his eyes fierce with a resentful anger. “I had to keep passing the comment cards on to the Games Committee as part of my reports. So finally they built an arena nice and close as a first stopover so the tourists wouldn’t get too bored.”

“Then we’ll go there,” Johanna said, though he could hear the forced calm in her voice and knew she was on edge already. “It’s close, it’s going to be well-maintained, it’ll represent the latest and fucking greatest.”

Folding the map up neatly and laying it down on the counter, another useless act in a life that had been so full of them, he followed Johanna outside into Six’s usual thin attempts at sunshine. “I can have a pilot ready in an hour,” Edsel called after him. He acknowledged that with a wave of a hand over his shoulder, not trusting words.

This place—it was no fault of Edsel or Lizzie, but it was too much. Everything seemed geared to yank his chain: the weather, the hovercraft repair panic, the demand for coal and how that placed weight on the sorry remnants of Twelve, the drug and alcohol addictions, and the inescapable pall of the Games that clung to the place like a noxious poison. It would be a long time before this place recovered. Six just felt so crammed full of glum despair down to its very bones that he felt it tugging on his own melancholy too readily, and he wished for somewhere with sunlight, and something like a shred of hope. But he was going into an arena instead.

That damn letter from Fog didn’t help either, even if that had nothing to do with Six it was simply one more weight on the whole stack. Some part of him wished he’d hopped that hovercraft with Brutus and Enobaria and headed towards Twelve, where things were still unquestionably lousy but at least cautiously optimistic. Another few days, he told himself, inhaling slowly and trying to calm his jangling nerves. The doctors will be setting up rehab, they’ll be trying to get coal from Twelve, they’ll close this fucking travesty of a museum. It’ll be a solid start and I can get the hell out of here, did my best by them to get the ball rolling. Duty done, nothing owed. Leave it to Edsel. He’s got the knowledge and the temperament for this place.

The hovercraft set down with a surprisingly smooth landing in the early afternoon at the landing pad
outside the 73rd Games arena. Haymitch suspected Edsel had given them one of his best pilots and his best hovercraft compared to some of the rough jobs he’d seen crashing down ever since he arrived in Six. Wouldn’t do to have to report Brocade Paylor’s representatives on reconstruction duty had died in an avoidable hovercraft crash. “Ready?” he asked Johanna, feeling the stupidity of the nervous word even as it left his lips.

“No,” she answered, staring at the arena like it was a living, breathing thing that might tear her apart, “but really, I never will be.” *Ain’t that the truth.*

Getting into the giant glass dome that had permanently replaced the forcefield was enough of a trick, given the power was out and the damn doors didn’t want to open. Probably some of the first lines shut down by Five during the war had been those that led to the arenas. But eventually, they made it in. “And I thought I was known for trying to break *out* of arenas, not break in,” Haymitch said, slipping through the crack in the door.

She felt the nervous snort slip free from her lips. It was funny, but not really that funny. She could tell he was only saying it because he was unsettled too, and it was Haymitch—when he was uneasy, he started making even more snarky, dark jokes, slipping back a little bit into the skin of the man he’d been before. “Yeah, well, I told the pilot if we’re not back before dark, come and find us.” Not that she was worried that something in this place would kill them. If they let Capitol parents-and-spoiled-brats groups in here, it was the only time she would ever use the word “safe” in reference to an arena.

Mostly she was just worried the damn pilot would find them flipping out somewhere, unable to bear being here. They’d both mentored these Games, both lost two tributes early. Plus this was the arena for Sandy, whom she’d killed at the Cornucopia, and that gave it yet another nightmare angle to endure. “When were you out of it that year?” she asked. Not the best way to bring it up, but they were going to end up talking about the dead tributes while they were here. It was inevitable. “Before Blight and me, but…”

“One day, ten hours, seventeen minutes,” he said with the quick ease of a man for whom that figure was burned forever into his brain. “Not my worst year by any means.”

She nodded. “Eight days for me. Better than I expected.”

“That’s right. Your boy…” He hesitated, looking over his shoulder as they passed the One golden yellow marker with the photograph of a fierce-looking blond girl showing where Angora Fielding, 18, District One Female, 2 Total Kills, Exited on 7th Day, Final Placement 7/24 Tributes, Defeated by Troilus Masnath (District Two Male), had died near the edge of this arena. Neither of them glanced at it too long. His apologetic glance told her he didn’t know the name of the male Seven tribute that year. Why should he? They hadn’t been his responsibility.

“Tamarack Luthjen. He was seventeen.” She’d gotten him in the initial alliance with Sandy, because he’d been big, strong, and smart. She didn’t know him, his family was from the southernmost crews working on oaks and maples and the like. But he’d had a chance. “Gloss’ boy,” whose name she didn’t remember, “killed him. Tam got 4th place. It was your girl that made it longer, right?”

“Fern Matthews. She was fourteen. Jimmie Aberforth, fifteen, well…he died at the Cornucopia.” He let out a sharp, painful bark of laughter. “And Effie was there on the train fussing at me about how embarrassing they both were, how savage, sitting there eating with their hands and gulping it down, how they wouldn’t impress anyone and manage to earn sponsorships. And they were just sitting there in their chairs, two tiny little Seam kids looking like they wanted to melt into the floor. They
knew they were going to die and she had to berate them, shame them, and that was what I couldn’t forgive. She talked about them like they weren’t even there. Like they weren’t even people to her. Because they weren’t. They were just two little inconvenient brats willfully keeping her from being promoted. And I…just wanted to snap that skinny little Capitol neck of hers.” His hands made the motion like snapping a twig unconsciously even as he said the words with the fierce growl of temper. “I wanted it so fucking much. Hell, I’d killed before, right? For just a second, I realized it would have been so easy. So I told her to get out and not talk to them, or me, until we reached the Capitol.”

He rested a hand against a rough stone pillar, hung with a sign like those that were everywhere warning *This arena is continuously maintained for your safety, but be careful of sharp edges!*

There were no trees in this arena—the entire thing was a bare expanse of dark, shiny volcanic rock. Easily she remembered that the tributes had all worn leather gloves and heavy boots and trousers with reinforced knees, but the scalpel-sharp edges of it had still left most of them with small cuts here and there. Some of them had even used the rock as weapons. She could see the edges on the rocks were carefully blunted, and some of them even covered over with foam padding.

It was actually a small arena—Caesar and Claudius had helpfully told the world that—with few places to hide. The high ground, unusually, was at the edges, and she could look down into the bowl-like crater that formed the majority of the arena and see almost all of it from up here. Nice reversal for fucking over the usual Career strategy, because them holding the Cornucopia meant being utterly visible from the advantage of the high ground whenever they ventured out to go find another tribute to kill. The view was pockmarked here and there with more death-markers. Here and there a larger display showed the placement of some kind of more important exhibits—in the distance she could see what looked like two tiny figure fighting, which she would bet was a recreation of one of the major battles of the Games.

“She manage to shut up that long?” She knew his opinion of Effie Trinket had changed somewhat since then, though she had the feeling the woman would always have the capability to annoy him. Somehow she wasn’t surprised. After all, she’d dealt with an escort too, and Gemma Waltz had been every bit as offensively self-centered.

“Yeah. But there I was, sitting there, and I realized that she’d pissed me off enough to make me climb out of the bottle and start to think about a couple of kids who were still just as doomed. I gave them some more cakes, told them to enjoy the food as long as they could and I’d deal with Effie. Then after training, I told them it was best to run for the Cornucopia and just make it fast. It was…the best I could do for ‘em. Jimmie did it. Fern, she surprised even me when she ran and hid and picked up some of the rock for use as a knife. I’d started to think…maybe…” His voice trailed off. “Well. Starting to hope too much too soon always was my flaw, yeah? 11th was better than I expected. But just as dead.”

“At least you cared. I told my girl—Willow Tate—to just run for the Cornucopia.” She realized she’d claimed the dead kid with the words *my girl. My girl. My tribute. My responsibility.* “Told her it was hopeless. I even tried to talk Finn into getting one of his kids to make it real fast. I scared her so much she…” Her breath caught in her throat.

“I know.” He’d been there in Mentor Central watching as Willow became the first casualty of the 73rd Games. “Was that…an accident? Shaking hands, got a bit too unsteady?”

He hadn’t had Willow’s feed in his headphones, of course. He’d been listening to his own tributes. Looking down over the bleak expanse of the crater, where even now there was no living thing, she looked at the thick cluster of death-markers near the Cornucopia. “No,” she said, voice high and rough, heavy with what might have been the weight of guilt she’d never have admitted to anyone.
She said ‘Bye, Mom’ right before she dropped that wooden ball and set off the mines. She said it. *I heard it.*

If they felt the wave of guilt and loss at failure brought on anew by being right here, at least they felt it together. They ended up holding on to each other for a long, long time there on the edge of the crater. No tears; even now, she wouldn’t let another arena have that from her.

The Capitol had helpfully constructed numerous sets of stairs down into the crater and laid down tidy, level safe footpaths to the Cornucopia. It didn’t take long for them to get there compared to how tributes had struggled and bled in this place.

The Cornucopia was full of toy weapons and a clear open space nearby, away from the cluster of nine death-markers, and a sign challenged people to test them out in mock combat, told them which tributes had used which weapons. Another sign near one of the tribute pedestals posted the race times for the fastest tributes that had made a break for the Cornucopia and invited people to test their own speed.

Another set of stairs descended down into the stockyard of Sandy Marchand. They’d only preserved the prep room of the victor, of course. The other twenty-three didn’t matter; she’d actually heard that in the arenas, the other stockyards were turned into a massive underground kitchen meant to cook the meals that would be served at the lavish picnic area behind the Cornucopia. People could watch their kids pretend to fight to the death and shout encouragement while they ate a delicious, hearty meal near where kids had starved to death. At the end of it all they could walk away, step out the door and leave the arena behind.

She was grateful she’d brought a flashlight, because without power the dark gloom of it would be too much. Down below, it was all about Sandy’s experiences in the Games. Plaques listed her stats, and a darkened television covering one entire wall had probably showed some of her Games moments or maybe her family’s interviews. A photo mural of Ten, Sandy, her family, and the Games covered the other walls. A replica of Sandy herself stood in the launch tube, ready to go in her uniform: the leather gloves and hiking boots, the heavy trousers, and a canvas shirt in Ten’s bright blue.

_Flash of bright blue out of the corner of her eye as a totally useless Wiress cowered as Johanna yelled at her to move her ass, and she turned, lashing out with an axe without thought. The ripe thump of it hitting Sandy’s skull, like throwing axes at pumpkins during the competition at the Harvest Festival, made Johanna want to retch for a second._

Sandy had lost two fingers and an ear, and apparently she’d taken a bad enough head injury in the final fight that she’d been a little shaky when to say things and when it was better to shut up. Such a shame for a girl who’d been so winning beforehand, the Capitol clucked in sympathy. Both of those spared her the interest of even one Capitol patron. A smart, cute girl with the image of a Ten cowgirl would have been hot stuff for the circuit. A maimed girl who just didn’t get it sometimes? It said plenty that when the 74th rolled around, they hadn’t rotated Angus Wahlstrom out as mentor and replaced him with Sandy. It said even more than neither Angus nor Wy had trusted her discretion enough in order to clue her in on the rebellion plans.

But still, Johanna hadn’t had patience for her, even in her limited experience in the days leading up to the Quell. Remembering how she’d gleefully observed that Finnick looked good and she was surprised how handsome Haymitch was, Johanna remembered rolling her eyes and thinking, _Fucking inane twit, we already get that from the Capitol, don’t you get what’s going on? Got any more brains than a chicken in that head of yours?_

The next morning she’d killed Sandy. As she had at the museum, she ended up looking at the
replica, the girl trapped in that tube. “I think we’ve seen enough,” she told Haymitch. He didn’t argue.

Finding the markers for their four tributes, neither of them said anything out loud to the dead kids. It didn’t matter. They would remember.

“My thought,” Haymitch said finally as they climbed the stairs back to the rim of the crater and the exit, “is we keep the arenas.” The sound of his voice, after so much silence, startled her. “We get rid of the Capitol signs, but…if we can put the markers that turn this into a place where the Capitol slaughtered twenty-three innocent kids and ruined one more, rather than some little make-believe carnival…”

“You really want to keep them around?” She gripped the railing a little bit tighter.

“Not really. But the thought of them tearing this down—I mean, what are they gonna do with the open land? Build a fucking movie theater here?”

She saw his point. If they were keeping the grounds of the arenas as something nearly sacred, a place nobody ought to ever build over, they might as well keep the damn arenas themselves as the proper memorials, and mute testimony about the dangers of what could happen. There was nothing in the Games Museum worth keeping. The Museum was all about the Capitol’s view of the Games. But walking these grounds, and seeing the markers where children had killed each other for the whims of an indifferent tyrant and his people, spoke eloquently with an untainted voice. The arenas could still speak for the victims.

Taking one last long look at the view, she agreed, “All right. I can see that. The tributes deserve it.”

Taking his hand in hers, gripping it tight, for the first time in their lives, they simply walked out of an arena. As he followed her through the gap in the door a step behind, she let out the breath she’d been holding, as if fearing that at the last moment, some kind of barrier would throw them back in there and keep them captive. When it didn’t, she felt a curious sense of freedom.

Back in the district center, Lizzie didn’t ask how the arena visit went. Neither of them would volunteer information either, Johanna knew that. “We’re recommending,” Haymitch said over dinner, his eyes intent on Edsel’s face, “that we keep the arenas. As memorials.”

“But custody and maintenance are going to be Fourteen’s responsibility. Not Six,” she added, anticipating the likely objection. “They built them. It should be their job to take care of them.”

Reaching for a piece of the somewhat sour tasting Six bread, Edsel nodded, and his voice was surprisingly calm. “I can agree to that.”

Looking at Lizzie, Johanna had the sense she wasn’t thrilled, but she’d hold her peace on it. “So, you guys get one of Panem’s most famous as of next fall,” she said, trying to inject some humor into the conversation.

“We’ll look after her,” Lizzie answered, and her expression lightened, her face relaxing as she sat back in her chair. “Hope she enjoys rainy weather?”

“Well, she won’t be here as often, I’m sure she’ll be out in the field with the surveyors more than anything,” Edsel said, reaching again for the water pitcher. “And they’ll be glad to survey more than arena sites, trust me,” he said dryly, apparently unable to resist one little jab. “She’ll work her ass off but she’ll be in good hands, don’t worry.”

More than that, Johanna had the feeling the surveyors wouldn’t make any allowances for Katniss’
fame, and that would be a good thing. Once the hovercraft and trains were more reliable, and they probably would be by next fall, Peeta wouldn’t be that far away in One. They’d be fine. Though she wondered, looking at Haymitch, how he’d cope with letting those two go out into the world. Maybe by then they’d have their own kids to worry about, and she had the feeling that would ease the break of those two growing up and leaving home somewhat. Thinking about twenty years or so to when their own kids might leave home—well, she’d tackle that when they got there. And probably tease him just a little bit if he looked teary-eyed. She reached for his hand under the table, gratified when he gave her a slight smile, as if knowing what she was thinking.

“Ah! Reminds me,” Lizzie said. “Got something for you in the study once we’re done eating.”

“They were digging through the archives in Fourteen,” Edsel explained in the study, after they’d turned down after-dinner coffee, “since Brocade’s calling for an extensive survey and redrawing the territorial borderlines and all of that. The survey team found a lot of old maps there, back from the days of North America, and they’ve been working on going through the records, seeing what’s in them about any of these places.”

He held out a roll of paper, strangely yellowed, as if with age, but it wasn’t brittle or flaking. “Here. This is actually a scanner copy. The original was in rough shape. If you compare the features to the Panem map, it’s the area around District Twelve. A land use map.”

Unrolling the map and weighting it down in the corners with a coffee mug, the pencil holder, a paperweight, and a book, she leaned in to study in. The rugged spine of the Appalachian Mountains and the smaller Allegheny Mountains ran in a line through the area, as did various rivers. “District center’s about here, by my measurements,” Edsel piped up, tapping the map in the southern part of West Virginia.

“Lots of coal, what a surprise,” Johanna observed dryly, seeing the crossed pickaxe symbols peppering the entire area.

“Lots of trees, what a surprise,” Haymitch returned just as smartly, as she elbowed him in the ribs.

“Yeah, but if you go just a bit east of the mountains, you’ve actually got some very nice farmlands running pretty much all the way to your northern border. That’s technically within your district borders already.”

“They fenced it off right outside the town and aside from the Games, you only left on a hovercraft with Peacekeepers headed right to a mine,” Haymitch said. “Not much opportunity to explore.”

“Well, I imagine you have some immigrants coming from Nine, Ten, and Eleven, so they ought to be able to make use of it. Here,” Edsel’s finger now tapped Shenandoah Valley due east of where he’d marked the town, “and pretty much all the way up to here,” tracing a northeastern route. “Some nice coastal waters too, and some more old farmland on this peninsula, if your boundary goes east to the ocean shore, and it will.” He gave a wry grin. “Trust me. Rough territorial boundaries will be done by the end of the year, but that’s gonna be yours.” Considering there was nobody between Twelve and the sea, Johanna imagined nobody would fight too hard on that score. Now, the scraps for how to divide up the borderlands that were between three or four districts could get interesting. She could see how the old maps and the like would be useful there.

“Somewhere to fish? Finnick would be happy,” Johanna observed, looking at Chesapeake Bay. He’d probably complain it was cold, but he and other Four immigrants would welcome the opportunity to keep at their native trade, she was sure.

“I figured it might be useful for you two to start making some plans for the territory’s future,
“Who says it’s on me to plan the district future?” Haymitch asked. Yeah, Johanna knew sometimes he wondered if that was getting too presumptive. But considering nobody else wanted to step up and do it, or else they just recognized competence and seemed to assume he was the best man for the job, it seemed to happen that way anyhow. People in Twelve seemed happy to trust him on it, and about fucking time, far as she was concerned.

Lizzie raised an eyebrow at him. “Come on. You’re not going to just do all this and then go sit on your front porch and whittle, Haymitch. You’ll be bored out of your mind.”

“Fine,” Haymitch grumbled. Johanna couldn’t resist a smirk. “When we get back, if there’s the chance, wanna take a quick little trip with some of the farm folk to check this place out?” He poked the Shenandoah Valley. “It’s close to home. Might as well scope it out and start planning for spring.”

Looking at Lizzie, the older victor gave her a wink. Johanna thought she understood what was meant by this gesture with the map and discussing resources and boundaries and all of it. She and Haymitch had worked hard and done what they could to get Six back on its feet and give it a good start on those first shaky steps towards its future, tried to help get the Games out of the district for good. This was Edsel and Lizzie returning the favor and trying to give Twelve some of the tools to spread its wings beyond being the tiny little pathetic poor coal district.

Favor returned, debt paid—she had the feeling Haymitch understood that full well. Might as well take advantage of the kindness, she decided. Anything that got Twelve away from the misery of pure coal mining was an opportunity she wanted to pursue pretty hard. Farming, forestry, fishing—they’d all be useful.

Looking at Haymitch, she thought she could sense that live spark of fresh energy in him again that had dimmed while they were here, the excitement at a new challenge and some hopes to explore. “Most romantic vacation you’ve ever suggested,” Johanna said dryly, but she was smiling as she said it.
Interlude: Forty-Six

The long stretch of the spring drive was brutal, behind schedule as they were and with fewer hands to ride the trail between the war and the epidemic. But once it was done, and by and large, they’d heard that the summer settled down into a routine of cycles—out on the range for two weeks to check on the welfare of the livestock, back in Southlands for two handling the domestic duties they’d been on all winter. It kept enough people out safeguarding and herding the stock, while still getting things done back in the south.

So aside from the punishing conditions of spring and autumn drive where necessity demanded every able rider, the schedule really wasn’t so bad. Of course the Ten natives noted wryly that they’d been driven harder in the old days, that conditions rather than arbitrary Capitol numbers now drove their work. “Barefoot, ten miles, uphill, both ways,” Jay said with a wide grin, keeping a sure grip on the reins with one hand and leaning across from his own saddle to keep his voice low.

Pushing him lightly on the shoulder, but not nearly so hard as to upset his balance, she laughed. “Through the snow.” The worst they’d seen the entire winter was a slight dusting that had melted a few hours later. Compared to her vague memories of childhood and drifts that children could get lost in, and the hellacious winter they’d passed in Twelve with the fierce blizzards, this was actually mild.

Lori noticed with relief that this second drive, tough as it was, still came more naturally than the first one had. Her skills were sharper, her mistakes fewer, and her instincts better. She felt less like a bumbling greenhorn just waiting to piss people off with her screw-ups. Funny to think how that had changed from her days in the white, always feeling stupid and clumsy and among the least effective of the entire Corps. She’d spent so many days just waiting for a rebuke from a senior officer, a reprimand from the Head.

She hadn’t thought about Cornelius Horn in a while. Not since he’d been sentenced to two years in prison. That had been one of the lesser sentences for a Head Peacekeeper, and that mainly because Horn had apparently occasionally been grifting off the top a bit when it came to the food supply and making extra demands on the workers for their rations. If he’d just stuck to the Capitol’s laws he’d probably have gotten off entirely, but in taking that little bit of supposed “initiative”, which he’d admitted he’d done to try to keep the Capitol happier with increased production, nailed him. She’d never known. She’d always thought that he seemed decent and even considerate of the people in Ten. But there were ways to hurt and abuse that didn’t involve whips or gallows, she supposed. Still, compared to the terrifying specter of Romulus Thread? Her face grew hot with more than the midday sun. She hadn’t thought about the poultry collectives in a long time either, tried to put it all out of her mind. She’d tried to put Kallanthe out of her mind, and tried to put Naevia and all the others aside too. It would have been all too much. Right now she needed to stay steady and strong.

This was a quiet life they had now, and one full of hard work, but it was a good one for all that. She and Alatau kept improving the infirmary, even as Nadji’s requests to Mayor Dravid for better supplies from Three kept getting answered with the fact that Three was behind in production. Still, it came in now and again. A crate of morphling here, some monitoring instruments there—slowly it was turning into more than just herbs, sutures, and fervent hopes. Fresh sheets and clean bandages came to them courtesy of District Eight. Terry and Kalea managed to not flinch at that, she noticed. Short of a trained doctor from the Capitol or Thirteen, it was about as good as anyone in the districts would get. Looking at the infirmary, she felt the pride of having helped built it up. Maybe they couldn’t save everyone during the epidemic, but those who had lived owed their lives in part to this place, and to the people who’d stepped up despite the risk to their own safety.
The reports on the news looked promising. Newscasts and programming usually were intended to keep people optimistic and looking towards a brighter future. For the first time that she could remember, people talked openly on television discussions with each other about how things were and what they really thought. “Did you ever think,” she asked Terry one night in the common area, looking over at him curled up on the couch with Rhee, “people would be able to talk like that?”

“No,” he said, staring at the debate about grain production himself, a trace of a smile on his lips. Given the bickering in debates between people from different districts, there was a lot of talk of the approaching peace conference in the Capitol, ready to start in late June. All kinds of questions about where the country was headed, particularly whether it ought to be a group of loosely affiliated districts all keeping their fierce independence or if there ought to be a strong central authority. “We got a strong central leadership with the Capitol,” a firebrand factory worker from Six snorted derisively at a beet farmer from Eleven. “You really think we want to submit to that again?”

“If we’re ever going to work together as a country, rather than turning this into one big mess of a dozen different self-interests, yes. Going our separate ways now keeps us as divided as we were underneath the Capitol.” She shook her head at that, smiling herself. Ordinary people sharing their opinions and having them heard—might be hope for Panem yet.

When the conference came, the newscasters reported its coverage had the highest ratings of anything since the trials of Snow and his cabinet. After the initial hullabaloo of someone trying to ambush-question Johanna Abernathy on some old dalliance of hers at the introduction press conference and pretty much getting shot down decisively, nobody expected anything to quickly top that.

But a direct apology from a Capitol citizen, well, that was something new, almost shocking in its sheer power. The Capitol, finally admitting they were wrong. It was all anyone talked about for days afterwards.

Granted, part of that was likely that there wasn’t much to report. Reporters quickly found that the conference delegates stayed notoriously tight-lipped about what was going on in that room. “Don’t want to talk about things left half done, now do we?” Haymitch offered with a cheerful smirk as he headed in one morning.

They headed out on the range again for their next trail rotation, and in a way, the quiet was a welcome change from the television coverage. The serene vastness of the prairie grass waving and bobbing gently in the night breeze below the starlit sky left her time to think, and a sense of peace of mind. To some others, maybe it would have been frighteningly large, and they would have felt lost in it. But she’d spent so much time feeling crowded by things from the Peacehome on—the constant expectations and rules and strictures and pressures. Out here, she could just be and not worry or apologize for it. Maybe this was what contentment felt like.

She and Jay took their evening walks again, as they had back in Southlands. Scruff, one of the sheepdogs that had taken a particular shine to Jay, tagged along, and they alternated throwing a stick for him to fetch. Watching the eagerness in the black-and-tan dog as he eyed the stick, pacing back and forth and then bolting before it was even thrown, she couldn’t help but laugh. “Life’s pretty good here,” Jay said, hand resting lightly on her shoulder, watching Scruff grab the stick and without even pausing, make an abrupt turn and start racing back to them to do it all over again.

“Yeah.” She had the infirmary. She had Terry and Rhee and Kalea for family, and even some tentative friends—she tried to not worry what they’d think if they knew the truth. She had Jay, and she understood deep in her instincts they were drawing close to that point where one or the other of them would take that next step, and the thought didn’t unnerve her like it would have months ago. Maybe she’d never know who she’d been and what had happened, but so long as this place in the
world held its shape for her and didn’t collapse in, she thought she would be OK. “We could get a wedding together, you know, when we get back.”

“Wait, are you asking *me* to marry you?” he said with that slow, deep laugh that she loved.

“It’s a new world,” she answered him, turning and grinning. “Who says I have to wait for you to do the asking, Jarrah Bellamy?”

“Well, nobody,” he said finally, expression turning a little sheepish. “I waited a little too long, huh?”

“No,” she told him, shooing Scruff away back towards the camp. She liked the little dog, but trying to hold a serious conversation with a puppy hopeful for attention just didn’t happen easily. “No, just…” She knew Jay too well. He’d have tried to do it perfect in his own mind, probably waited for some really romantic moment to give her a heartfelt proposal. That kind of patient meticulousness served him well in the kitchen, but there was such a thing as being a little too finicky on some things. Trying to find the right words, she just stepped in and kissed him instead.

He answered her back, hesitation quickly melting away to eagerness. Even going slow with it as they had, they’d been stepping out for months now, and it moved beyond a sweet goodnight kiss soon enough. Seemed like she was usually the one urging him on and he was usually the one to eventually step away and call a halt.

They’d talked about it, of course. *Do it right this time, don’t want to rush it.* She knew he’d hinted he’d rather wait for an eventual wedding night, something special. But soon enough there they were with her back against a cottonwood, her legs wrapped firmly around his hips and their shirts quickly rucked up. Her hands impatiently roamed the solid muscle and soft skin of his back, his chest, his shoulders—while she felt the contrasting sensations of the night air and his tongue and his fingers on her breasts, and the press of his arousal between her thighs. “What are we waiting for anyway?” she asked him, whispering in his ear and nuzzling his neck.

He braced himself with a hand beside her head, breathing like he’d been running hard. “I want to do this…”

“Right, I know,” she answered him, though the feel of him against her and the remaining barriers of clothes made her want to scream in frustration. “But…what’s ‘right’ anyway? I mean, do we *have* to wait a couple more weeks? I’ve been taking tonic lately. Just in case.” Given how things had been going, she figured it was better to be safe. “So we’re OK.”

He was silent for a minute, though his one hand was still on her, his fingers warm and callused. “I’ve always called it off. Because I don’t want you to feel like I’m pushing you, all right?”

“You’re not. I want you. I’ve been frustrated as hell when you call it off, OK?” She gave a soft, slightly edgy laugh; feeling her own heart beating in her ears as she felt invincible, felt bold enough to just throw caution to the wind. “Get these jeans off me, touch me, and see for yourself if you don’t believe me.” She heard the soft groan he made at that, probably imagining it, and if anything the thought of him doing it made her burn hotter. Her nerves were a little frayed, throwing herself into the unknown like this, but she was certain, and confidence made her bold enough to press on despite the lingering shyness. “I want you,” she told him again. This time she wasn’t a teenager, allowing herself to get caught up in the pressure of her doubts and fears. “You want me?” Yeah, the evidence of that was pretty obvious, but that was purely physical. She wanted him to say yes.

He raised his head and looked at her, eyes wide in the fast-darkening twilight. “Yeah. I’ve wanted you for years, Lori.” It struck her suddenly, feeling the faint tremors in him, caught on that edge of indecision, that he was nervous as her. After all, he only had that one rotten experience to go on,
didn’t he? She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and kissed him again, gentler, trying to convey that for her it was every bit as much loving him as well as wanting him. However this went, it would be all right. “So…let’s just be clear. You’ll marry me?”

“Yeah. Of course I will. So will you just get your clothes off already?”

Letting her down from the tree, he tugged his shirt over his head without even unbuttoning it and promised, “That night? I want you in a bed—our bed, OK—and the lamp on so I can see every single inch of you and we’re taking our time, I swear.”

“Good. I want that too.” She really did, she realized, imagining his dark skin against the sheets, those grey-green eyes looking at her in the lantern light. “But right now I want you, not promises for later.”

“Oh, damn,” he said, open astonishment in his voice a few minutes later, “you weren’t kidding.”

“Nope,” she said with a little cheerful satisfaction, reaching down and carefully guiding him into her, hearing the soft catch in his breath. She hadn’t wanted to touch him then, wanted to just lay there and hope it was done quickly. She had grown used to bearing pain stoically in the Peacehome, but it had hurt that first time from start to finish, especially dry and unready as she was. Feeling how easy it was this time, how good it felt, she let out a breath she hadn’t even realized she’d been holding, relaxing a little.

Smiling up at him a little giddily, seeing him grin back at her with that same love and relief, it didn’t matter that the prairie grass was actually a little prickly against her back. It didn’t matter that they were a bit clumsy and their rhythm still uncertain. It didn’t matter he finished quickly and apologized in a sheepishly endearing way; still seized by that elated feeling that she could dare anything, she took his hand and showed him how to touch her until she too shivered with pleasure under the summer stars.

Caught up in each other as they were, it wasn’t until after her mind cleared from the dreamy haze of a very successful second effort that she said, “Oh, shit, we’ve got watch pretty soon.” Scrambling to get dressed, they hurried back towards the camp.

Up-front as they were about sex in Ten, a few appreciative chuckles and hoots greeted them, and Lori realized that it must be pretty obvious from their clothes, hastily donned in the dark, just what they’d been up to. Picking a few bits of prairie grass out of Jay’s dark hair now that she could see them in the firelight, she tried to just ignore it.

“Have fun, kids?” Kalea chuckled lowly, sauntering back from her own watch over the sheep.

“Like I haven’t been heading for the kitchen at the ass-crack of dawn and seen you sneaking out of Drover’s cabin,” Jay scoffed, though she could hear the hesitation beneath the projected nonchalance in his voice. Crossing verbal blades still wasn’t his thing, or hers, but at least they were getting a little better at not just blushing and mumbling, completely thrown for a loop.

Drover and Kalea? Shit, that was new, and she’d had no clue. Kalea was always back in the single women’s quarters by the time Lori woke up, though as she was no morning person, she tended to time it to the last possible minute of sleep that she could. Even as rationally she knew it was a little dangerous for a former Peacekeeper trying to lay low to take up with the forewoman’s second-in-command, she couldn’t help but be happy for her friend, and laughed as Kalea smirked and planted a smacking kiss on Drover’s cheek. Drover’s arm went around her shoulders, and that was confirmation enough that it was true. “Yeah, and?” Kalea challenged them.

“And we’re getting married,” Lori told her. “So everyone should get ready for a party.”
That livened up the mood a good bit on the southward journey, and if she and Jay took some good-natured ribbing still, the hours spent together learning about making love from each other made it more than worth it. A bed sounded enticing, but she thought she’d never forget these first nights out on the range.

Though when they arrived, the news was a mixed bag. Some nutjob of a disgruntled Capitol actor apparently tried to blow up a theater while the entire peace delegation was there as special guests. Shocked as they were, nobody made the obvious wisecrack just yet that maybe he hadn’t liked the choice of musical, a new one about the rebellion called “Flight of the Mockingjay”. The humor was a little too insensitive, even for irreverent District Ten.

Surprisingly, the casualties were few, given that close to a thousand people had been in that theater. But every dead person was one too many these days. People banded together to save those trapped in the rubble. Most of the peace delegation pitched in, district squabbles forgotten. Some reunions took place—a reporter caught a picture of a battered Haymitch and Johanna wrapped up in each other’s arms, holding each other so close and both so mutually covered in blood and ghostly pale rubble-dust, that they seemed melded into one single being. Some reunions didn’t—and people sat beside a blanket-draped corpse or continued digging frantically. Mayor Dravid’s husband was still in the hospital, having lost both his legs at the knee.

Even if the dead had almost all been citizens of the newly-dubbed District Fourteen, the images of that night said it stark as anything: even Capitol people bled and felt pain and terror and grief at the whims of a few people with a mind to inflict punishment. Maybe the nation hadn’t responded to that idea in the heated fever of war, when Capitol losses didn’t really register as anything but a hit taken by the enemy. But seven months later, it was different, and the taste for punishment apparently died down a bit after that.

July 4th, formerly Reaping Day, seventy-seven years ago the day where the Capitol forced the districts to sign the Treaty of the Treason, and long ago the day when one of the nations of North America celebrated their own independence, dawned sticky and boiling hot. But at noon everyone opened the windows in the common rooms to make it more bearable so they could turn on the television and watch President Paylor read the terms of the new treaty. Lori had the sense everybody was praying the electricity held and if it went out, the television might die a bad death out of the frustration of so many people.

It packed a punch right from the beginning. From this day forward, all citizens of Panem are endowed from birth with equal rights and dignity. These include the freedoms of life, education, immigration, justice, and a voice in government. No citizen shall be arrested without due cause. No citizen shall be punished without a fair and impartial trial. No citizen shall ever be made to pay the price for the accused crimes of another. No citizen will be made to endure a state of slavery. As part of the guarantee of these rights and freedoms, this delegation declares void all the terms forced upon Panem by the Treaty of the Treason.

The words and the ideas behind them were almost too big to fathom yet. The notion of rights and guarantees and freedoms was still more like some kind of child’s belief in magic than their new national reality. But they watched and listened anyway, knowing this was history in the making.

~~~~~~~~~~

Watching Jay and Lori dancing, Rhee just grinned in acknowledgment of how caught up in each other they were and reached for her mug of beer. “You should have seen those two last spring,” she told Terry softly, keeping her voice pitched low since of course Rhiannon Stewart supposedly hadn’t known either of them a year and a half ago. “ Barely could look at each other. Awkward as hell. If it
had been anyone but Thread in charge, I’d probably have suggested they get moved to different duty squads.” As a major, with years of experience behind her, her word would have carried some weight with a compassionate Head who just wanted to keep things running smoothly.

“It sounds like the entire situation was awkward enough.” Terry sipped at his own beer, that pensive faraway look on his face. She’d never asked exactly what Eight had been like. In turn, he’d never asked exactly what the firebombing in Twelve had been like. But sometimes from the mutters of his restless dreams and the few hints he let slip, she knew that being in the occupying force in Eight had been hell.

She was sorry she’d brought it up, really. Stupid way to crash the mood on a wedding day; she’d just been caught up in the grateful realization of how far those two had come, and how happy they were now. “Well, young people,” she teased him, reaching out and rubbing his shoulder lightly, trying to reassure him. “Bet you had a few bits of idiocy when you were that young, huh?”

Now that earned one of those half-smiles of his and his eyes showed his amusement clearly, silver-grey and alight with energy. “I may or may not have.”

“There’s a fine piece of equivocation.” She rolled her eyes dramatically, knowing he was watching. “Shit, it’s all right I wasn’t your first, you know.” She knew he’d had a handful of casual things before her, just like she had before him. Neither of them had really gotten around that much compared to some others around them, but she wouldn’t have expected anyone to remain entirely celibate throughout all those years of Peacekeeper duty, unless they really had no interest at all in sex.

“You’ll be the last, though, and the only from now on.” Somehow that practical, matter-of-fact declaration touched her more than flowery romanticism would. Blame a Two upbringing.

Turning around on the bench to have a better view of the dancing, back against the table, she crossed her legs and picked up her beer again. It was a beautiful day, even if the sun baked all of them. The poor fair-skinned types would be boiled red as the Four crabs she’d seen on television.

She suddenly wondered what one of them tasted like. She’d never really missed Four because in truth she’d never known it, but that sense of curiosity now reared up sometimes. Maybe it was spurred on by Jay and Kalea sometimes talking now with wistful nostalgia about the memories of their childhoods that they’d had to pretend to forget—Capitol and Eleven, which couldn’t get much more disparate. But she was like Lori and Terry. She had no idea. It hadn’t been taken away from her—she’d simple never had it. Brought to the Peacehome as a two-month-old infant and that was that.

Blame too that Haymitch and Johanna Abernathy had been in Four a few weeks ago so the newscasters were all over that, and she saw pictures of the place constantly. They all burned into her memory in a way they hadn’t before, because then she hadn’t let herself pay attention. It couldn’t have mattered to Major Myrina Law, so why bother?

“Maybe we ought to go to Four sometime,” she blurted. “And Twelve.”

“Not much of Twelve to go to, you know that well,” he pointed out, draining the rest of his drink, but she knew from the worried pucker of his brows that he wasn’t being dismissively glib.

“They’re rebuilding.”

“Not sure it’ll bring back any memories, Rhee,” he told her softly. “It’s all gone.”
She couldn’t give him that gift either. To say she hadn’t exactly seen Twelve at its best was something of an understatement. Maybe there had been parties and music and everything else to try to alleviate some of the grinding hardship and poverty. She didn’t much imagine the people of Twelve would have survived so long under such harsh conditions if they hadn’t found ways to laugh and love and find pleasure in what small things they could. But she’d seen none of that. All she’d seen was the silent weary fear of people who knew their every move was watched, and knew they stood upon the brink. There hadn’t been even a flicker of joy in the entire district, and looking here at Ten, she knew even in the Capitol years, they’d had their good days. They joked and laughed anyway. They hadn’t in Twelve, and what way of life there had been before was gone, obliterated by the bombs.

Sounded like Four was in dire straits too, given that Finnick and Annie Odair were moving to Twelve and the fisheries had closed. Might be that there was nothing there for her to visit either, except the last gasps of a dying culture. “Maybe,” she said, reaching over and taking his hand in hers. “Dance with me?”

She nodded to the circle, wanting to put away the melancholy mood for both of them. Their friends were getting married. Kalea laughed at something Drover said, her face alight with love and laughter. She and Terry had spent months as wife and husband that they wouldn’t have had in the Corps, and if luck had been just a little on the other side, they’d never have had at all. It ought to be a happy occasion.

Joy never seemed to come without sorrow taking a bite out of it, though. Passing by the graveyard, too dim to see into it as it was out of the lanterns lighting the square, she thought about Purnia. No need to call her by a fake name in the privacy of her mind, even if it was the name on her wooden marker. If she went anywhere, maybe it ought to be to Two, to tell Purnia’s kin, if they were still alive, what had happened to her. Until then, they all followed Ten custom. Purnia’s grave, like most of the others, had a cluster of small rocks on it now, for the memories they had of her as her friends. Every memory, the natives had explained in those days after the mass burial, you leave that rock there to let them know you’re thinking of them, and to lighten your grief by just that much weight. She’d seen Jay there the most often, laying another stone on the grave with a look of quiet pensiveness, but he’d known Purnia longest. It seemed he’d been there almost daily to begin. At least he had a grave for his friend. Sometimes she wished she had a place for Actaeon and others, when their memories pressed in too heavy and too dark.

But life went on, as best it could. In August, though, they got stunned again by Paylor and Colonel Quintus Allamand. Those who knew the Corps knew Quinn Allamand was a four-tour veteran, one of the head trainers at Eagle Mountain Camp, and the fact he was brother to a victor, even one of Two’s lesser lights in the arena, certainly didn’t hurt. The instinct to listen up and respect that kind of man was still alive and well in her.

In the moment, she only knew she was staring at the television. Report in…show you have nothing to hide…those who did only their duty have nothing to fear…

It was a chance for the future, and it was a terrifying risk, all rolled into one. Two sides of the same coin, and she didn’t know which one would come up if they flipped that thing and let it fall.

Looking over at Terry, his expression intense, he made a slight hand gesture to them all, telling them, Stay. Popping up like corks now and rushing off to go discuss would look damn strange, she’d admit, and for all the months of care they’d taken to not screw it up, this wasn’t the time to lose it and panic.
“Well, Peacekeepers are absolutely fucked in some places,” Drover said, leaning on the arm of the overstuffed chair Kalea was sitting in. Kalea’s face, just for a moment, was a mask of terrified despair as if he was too close.

A snort of amusement answered him. “Anyone in Eleven pipes up to say they wore that uniform, they’re likely to get dragged to a tree and strung up.” She stole a glance at Jay out of the corner of her eye. His face was perfectly impassive, almost too calm.

“You heard Paylor,” Nadji said, shaking her head. “Don’t fucking get all vigilante about it or it’s your ass on the gallows as well. I’m not gonna have people running around this place screaming ‘Shit, it’s Peacekeepers!’ and whipping up a mob.”

“They weren’t so bad,” Drover said. “For a bunch of palies. Pain in the ass with the barking orders at me, but they usually seemed to realize I knew more than they did and let me do my job.”

“Like we could actually sneak off and butcher a cow without them noticing. Shit. But at least the ones they threw on horseback to chase after us on the range could keep up,” Harnai chuckled. “Eventually.” Sitting there, she tried to keep calm, tried to remember the kindnesses Harnai had done her for her wedding, rather than this moment. At least it was just mockery, though she wondered if the mockery was concealing something uglier.

“There were some that weren’t too bad. They’d say sometimes that a perfectly sound animal had a broken leg and ought to be put down. Probably because they wanted a steak that night too.”

“Why not? Their rations were shit anyway,” Jay blurted. Heads swiveled to look at him. “I mean… it’s…I saw that they didn’t eat much better than anyone else? Not really.” He looked chagrined the moment the words left his mouth, giving Lori an apologetic glance. With luck people would assume he was feeling flustered at defending Peacekeepers.

“That’s true enough. They were always looking to make a trade for some meat in Twelve,” Terry said easily, sitting back in his chair with the nonchalance of a man totally at ease. It had actually been Jay that mentioned it months ago one night making rabbit stew, joking that his national claim to fame was that he’d often bought rabbits off Katniss Everdeen. It figured that Terry’s sharp mind would remember that and use it now. Terry gave a faint smirk; that expression of his that usually meant he was about to pop out with something dryly sarcastic. “I know y’all love your meat here, but the other districts aren’t so lucky with the supply.”

“True,” Nadji acknowledged. “Still don’t want ‘em around,” she went on bluntly. “Maybe we had it better than some, but I ain’t giving too much praise for them just not screwing things up. Overall? Useless as tits on a bull, and sometimes their little ‘just following orders’ bit gave a big hit to some good men and women.”

The general mood wasn’t fiercely angry, but it wasn’t exactly welcoming. Soon enough they ended up on a walk together, and Rhee knew it wasn’t going to be pretty.

Grouped up in the moonlight behind one of the dairy barns, the soft lowing and mooing and stamping of the cows within helping cover even the sound of lowered voices, Jay burst out first, a defensive look on his face, “Look, I shouldn’t have, all right, but…”

“Don’t worry about it,” Terry told him. “I don’t think they thought anything of it. And obviously we’ve got bigger problems.” She realized then that the rest of them still looked to him, and somewhat to her. Not because they’d been the senior officers, but because throughout the year here in Ten, Terry usually proved the one able to think coolly under pressure and to make the reasonable decisions. Perhaps he wasn’t their boss, but he’d become their leader, and as the one who challenged
him and found the flaws in his reasoning and generally tempered him, they accorded her that same respect.

“Thoughts?” She looked around at all of them. Jay and Lori suddenly looked so damn young and uncertain it almost hurt.

“We probably should have left with Marc and Alayna,” Kalea said unhappily, leaning one hip against a post of the barn.

“We had nowhere to go,” Lori pointed out. “We’re not Two blood.”

“They seem to have landed on their feet, though,” Rhee mused. They’d seen the two of them on the television during the peace conference.

“If I know those two,” Terry told them, “they would have told Brocade Paylor exactly who they were and how she saved their asses. So…Paylor, I still trust her on this.” Given he was the only one who had any experience with the woman, Rhee trusted his judgment. His respect for her was obvious.

“We’re not in District Fourteen with Paylor to protect us,” Jay said, voice harsh with the blunt words. “We’re here. We have to deal with being here.”

“Are we seriously worried about them trying to kill us?” Lori asked.

Kalea shrugged, throwing out her hands in a *search me* gesture. “Right now I’d be more worried they’ll make our lives a constant miserable hell. But hey, who’s to say if they’re in a bad mood someday and want someone to blame…five ex-Peacekeepers in their backyard might look pretty damn good.”

“You and Dro…” Kalea cut Lori’s gentle, tentatively sympathetic question off. “Let’s just not talk about me and Drover right now, yeah?” All the hiding, the half-truths and lies, seemed written there in the misery on Kalea’s face. She loved a man who might well hate her if she admitted the truth.

“Reasonable point, anyway,” Terry said, circling back to the matter after a moment of awkward silence. “I don’t think we’re worrying about being shot on sight. But if life here is intolerable…”

“Like it’s going to be any more tolerable if we *don’t* take the chance to speak up now and say we’re not war criminals? You think they’ll be any more charitable later if they find out and we’ve kept on lying? We look even worse at that point!” Jay was shaking his head vehemently, making it obvious what his decision was.

“We could take the horses. Go to another district and turn our names in there.”

“And where do we live then, Lori? You think District Four or Nine or Eleven is really going to just cheerfully welcome five people who march in and announce they’re ex-Peacekeepers? At least here we’ve earned our places with hard work.”

“Kalea, back off, let’s not turn on each other, OK? My thought,” she cut in, “is that we need to stick together on this one. If some of us want to turn our names in and some don’t…”

“Won’t work,” Terry picked up the thread of her thought easily. “Some of us admit it and some don’t, the ones that wanted to keep quiet are screwed because nobody here is stupid enough to not at least suspect the others. And if some of us leave for another district to do it and try to leave the rest
here in peace, a couple outsiders sneaking off near Paylor’s deadline is going to look mighty suspicious. We can’t have it both ways.”

“So we all agree to keep our mouths shut,” Kalea said.

“Or we all agree to turn ourselves in,” Lori argued, a hint of temper entering her voice. “You think I want to admit I was actually a Peacekeeper here in Ten? They’ll probably hate me the most for that. So easy for them to talk to people in the north district that they know and find out if anyone has anything to say against me, even if it’s made up.” Her voice wavered a little, but she pressed on. “But I don’t want to live my life always looking over my shoulder.” Realizing that she was right, and Lori probably had the most to fear immediately, seemed to sober all of them.

“Purnia’s stuck with the lie. She died under it. I don’t want it to be like that. If we have kids, what the hell are we going to tell them? Do we even want to risk that if we’re always afraid we’re gonna pay someday? That’s not living. If we come clean, we put it where it belongs—on the Capitol. We say we’re not that person and we leave the white behind for good. I don’t want to live on their terms,” Jay added, voice fierce with conviction. “I want to live on mine.”

“Rhee?” Terry said, glancing over at her. “It’s a choice made with our backs against the wall either way. I don’t like it. And once it’s made, we’re stuck here with the consequences, aren’t we? So I don’t feel like we can pressure each other into it right here and now.” Mostly she knew she didn’t want Kalea, already outnumbered and feeling like the outsider, the fifth wheel between two married couples, to get the sense her concerns didn’t count. In a way she was more vulnerable than the rest of them as well. Anyone she had a relationship with, whether Drover or anyone else—wouldn’t naturally be in on the secret. Rhee felt a wave of gratitude that at least she had Terry, because it made a world of difference.

Terry gave a low, gruff sound that she knew meant he was thinking. “Are we really stuck here?” he said half to himself, fingers tapping his lips as he pondered.

“Two isn’t in great shape, and if Marc and Alayna didn’t stay, chances are there’s really nothing for us,” she answered. Nothing would have made those two abandon Two for the Capitol if there had been any place for them, she was sure.

“The Abernathys,” Terry said suddenly. “Fuck. That’s it, isn’t it?”

“Huh?”

“They’ll be here in Ten on Paylor’s deadline,” he said, voice and gestures now animated with that excitement she knew came from him having solved some particular puzzle. “And who’s consistently been noted for having talked about giving a fair deal even to the Capitol? They’ll probably be fair to Peacekeepers.” He raised an eyebrow. “Jay? Thoughts on Haymitch? You spent the most time around him.”

Jay spread his hands. “He was drunk most of the time, Terry, and then he was training his ass off for the Quell and apparently planning a national rebellion in his spare time. We didn’t exactly socialize much. He was…decent, I guess you’d say? Even when he was fucked up. Used to try to give me and Darius,” only a slight catch in his voice at the name, “a few bucks or the like if we ended up escorting him home and tell us to stay out of trouble.”

Terry looked at her and Lori next. She shrugged, having nothing to add to that assessment. Her experience of Haymitch was even more limited, given that once the Quell training began the man pretty much kept things to himself, and the two kids. “It’s a stretch,” she admitted. “But he’s been
decent so far to the people others want to shoot. And it seems like Johanna’s the same.”

“Everything is a risk these days,” Terry muttered, but loud enough that they all heard him anyway. “My thought—there’s a third route. We volunteer our names on the deadline, because we’ll be on stationside rotation then. We tell Nadji if she really wants us gone, we’ll try to claim asylum in Twelve when the Abernathys come down here on their reconstruction tour. That’s only a few more days. I don’t believe Nadji’s gonna just throw us to the wolves, but that gives her an out if she resents us being here. No guarantee Twelve is going to be a piece of cake, I know it’s a mess there, but…at least it’s a potential escape to somewhere with favorable people having some clout if the situation gets too hot here.” He winced, seeing the look on Rhee’s face, knowing she was thinking of the firebombs. “Sorry. Sorry. Bad choice of words.” He looked carefully at her, at Lori, and Jay. “You three. Could you go back to Twelve? Be honest. You almost died. You lost friends there.”

“I didn’t do anything there that they ought to call me out on,” she said calmly. “Doesn’t mean they’ll love me if they recognize me.” She knew that wasn’t exactly what he’d meant. But as to the other, she just nodded, not trusting her words. It wouldn’t necessarily be easy. But in a way, the place being destroyed might help. Fewer echoes of misery and hopelessness—assuming they’d cleaned up the mess from the firebombing. It seemed like any place would be a little haunted for her anyway. Twelve would likely be a bit difficult for him as well—Actaeon, and the ghosts of those dead family members in his fragmented memories.

Jay and Lori quietly agreed. “Lea?” Rhee asked, looking over at her.

Kalea stood there, looking torn. “It’s probably my best chance, isn’t it? At least I know they’ve been fair to Capitol people and Peacekeepers both. And if we help rebuild Twelve, maybe they’ll accept us a bit more than just walking into an established district like this.”

Standing there in the moonlight, it felt like all of them were a little afraid to break up the meeting and make the decision inevitable and final. It was the best option of a bad lot, but the pressure and the sense of the unknown hung there anyway. “All right,” she said finally, knowing they’d all wrestle with it for the next few weeks. “Let’s go get some sleep.” If we can.
Arriving in the district center for Ten, creatively so-dubbed “Centerville”, it was a collection of red and white painted livestock barns and long, low corrugated tin sided warehouses for storage, presumably of meat and dairy products, as well as the raw wool, down, and leather that Ten exported up to Eight for use in the garment factories.

But aside from the houses of Victors’ Ranch overlooking the big river, midway on its journey down from Seven and here winding its leisurely way towards its end way down among the Four bayous, there were surprisingly few homes. Capitol television had cheerfully informed every Panem child that Ten people lived out on their farms and pastures, “wild and free, as comfortable on horseback as on their own two feet.”

Wy had rolled his eyes once and muttered to Haymitch that he grew up on a chicken farm in the mid-district and had never seen a horse before his Games, and Angus being obliged to teach him after that, but for driving wagons with crates of chickens and eggs. Apparently the hog, goat, and turkey farmers were like that too—it was only the sheep and cattle ranchers that fit that image.

Haymitch had the thought now and again that if any other district could have made the jump to Career status, if they were willing to play along as One, Two, and Four had, it would have been Ten. Eight’s factory workers, Seven’s lumberjacks, and Twelve’s miners were considered “hard workers” at their most complimentary. Even for the other farming districts, Nine’s fields of wheat and Eleven’s coffee beans just couldn’t compare, solid and steady rather than whimsical or romantic. Ten’s tributes had always gotten a little more attention than most of the other pathetic districts, simply because that rugged cowboy image appealed so much to the Capitol imagination, much like Four lied through their teeth and pretended everyone in their entire damn district was a born fisherman out on the water using a trident for getting their supper.

There was an undeniable sexiness to that lone ranger ideal that had made Angus and Wy both miserable as victor-whores, and if Sandy hadn’t been “damaged” enough to avoid it, she would have been snapped up readily too. He’d noticed they seemed a little more matter-of-fact, though, about the whole business of sex. Maybe that was being raised among constant animal breeding, even if some of it was apparently frozen embryos from Three rather than the usual natural route.

He caught some of the local men leaning along the split-rail fences near the hovercraft landing pad, giving Johanna an openly appreciative glad eye as they passed by, heading for the shed Plutarch had designated as prep. He smirked at them, tempted for a moment to conspicuously slip an arm around her waist or the like, but knowing there was no need. The only good opinion that mattered in the end was hers. “You’ve got some admirers here,” he told her.

She snickered at that. “I must be losing my touch if they’re gawking rather than worrying I might rip their cocks off them for looking at me.”

They must have been responding to the changes they’d seen in her. The angry young woman she’d been had lost none of her aggressive edge when it came to fighting for what she believed was right, but the better parts of her showed more readily now too. He was the recipient of most of that, in the privacy of the intimacy between them, and what he’d seen, he’d cherish knowing full well from his own reciprocal gestures the sheer cost of that vulnerability. But opening up as they had done had left its effects, and even snippets here and there on television that the average citizen would have seen showed some of it. They weren’t simply the bitch and the drunk anymore.

She looked content, he thought as he looked at her. Actually, he’d say she was more than content—
lively, happy, almost radiant in a way; though maybe that last word sort of implied a quiet serenity that would never apply to her. She was pure energy and drive and grit. “You’ve never looked better,” he told her, and she probably knew he didn’t mean her physical appearance.

She reached over, a hand on his chest that was half a playful light shove and half a caress. “Like I didn’t notice some of the girls checking you out here too like a prime stallion.” He glanced back over his shoulder, surprised. Was she kidding? “Bet they wanna take you out for a good gallop.” She grinned over at him knowing. “Should I tell ’em all that I got you in bed about half an hour after I met you and let their jealous little imaginations run wild?”

The first instinct, as ever, was to react to jokes about being little better than animals meant to be used at will, and the reference to how they’d met didn’t help. But instead of beating himself with the old club of uneasy guilt and shame as usual, he looked over at her. Seeing the look in her eyes, the expression of something almost pleading and uncertain, he realized she wanted him to laugh, to finally agree that afternoon was far behind them.

Back in Four he’d finally heard that she’d been simmering with some unacknowledged anger about how he’d let her down after that. But maybe he’d done that because in a way he’d resented her too—he could finally admit that. Resenting a scared teenage girl wasn’t exactly his finest hour, but there it was. Johanna might not have even realized it but she had some talent for manipulation herself, and she’d known exactly who to plead her case with to get the desired effect. Blight had simply asked him to look after her out on the circuit. She’d been the one to ask for far more than that, latched onto the old broken-in whore, far too used to being used by people to get what they wanted, used to being unable to say “no” to what people wanted from him to the point he just didn’t say it anymore. Maybe she’d sensed that by that point, being of use to the other victors and trying to protect them where he could was the one point of honor he had left. Maybe she’d figured he was so accustomed to getting laid and having it mean nothing that one more notch on the bedpost wouldn’t matter to him.

It had mattered, because he’d seen her naked in far more than body, raw still from the arena and its ordeals, vulnerable and ferocious all at once. It bound her to him. Nothing as tritely romantic as taking a piece of his heart, but what tired wreckage of his soul was left, she had some claim on it. Because subtly she’d become his responsibility. And as he watched her go slowly to hell even as he slipped further along that path himself, it just hurt all the more that here was one more person who’d foolishly hung their hopes on him and for whom he couldn’t do a single fucking thing to give aid. The tributes always died quickly and he could do nothing more than suffer the agonies of more self-loathing on their behalf, and Finnick had at least had Mags, Carrick, and the rest to help him, and he knew they’d mattered far more to Finn than Haymitch ever had.

Instead, Johanna persisted and defiantly stood alone, except for that claim she had on him, which she’d never acknowledge to the point of openly asking him for help. But she always came back to him in the end, insistently shoving her way into his space with her need for snark and drinks and the comfortable bleakness of someone equally screwed up, especially after Finnick dashed her hopes so utterly.

In short, she put her mark on him and she never quit. She just wouldn’t do the decent thing and go find a way to seize what little happiness she could and leave him the fuck alone; instead she seemed to revel in trying to become just as much of a mess as him and coming back to him again and again when she needed a drinking buddy to help her cope with it all when she couldn’t bear to be alone, driving the sharp spike of his own self-hatred deeper into him. She was unquestionably his friend and at the same time some days he couldn’t bear her because all he could see was what she’d become over the years, and thus his own failure to somehow protect her. There were days back then he’d wished he’d never met Johanna Mason. There were certainly days he wished he’d met her in Mentor Central, simply victor to victor, rather than at that apartment as whore to soon-to-be-whore.
They had both changed. He wasn’t that man who’d become so accustomed to being at best an object of use that all he could see was the panicked need to lie and act in order to please—and sometimes pleasure—those in the Capitol who could hold power over him, and to do anything he could for the fellow victors who were the only ones who gave a damn anymore whether he lived or died. His life had expanded far beyond simply hating himself at the idea of a column of impossible self-imposed debts of honor, with nothing held back for his own well-being as preservation or pride.

He could say “no” to her now, sex and otherwise, and not feel that stabbing sense of panic and failure. When he took her to bed it was from desire rather than the well-trained inability to refuse and the fierce, guilty need to help a fellow victor. She was by his side not because they had nobody else to turn to who hated themselves quite as much, but because she wanted him to be there as the one closest to her. This bond between them now had come about in spite of that day, not because of it.

So he let it go, forgave the manipulative girl she’d been, forgave the resentful bastard he’d been, and felt lighter for it. She was right. The best way to deal with it was to make it insignificant, the point of lighthearted mockery. “What can I say? You never did dither around. Had your pick of any of the victors in the entire stable and you wasted no time, came right to the best one first.”

He heard the mingled humor and relief in her laughter. “You always were the best,” she told him, and her hand slipped down to take his, fingers squeezing his gently. He knew exactly what shades of meaning she put into those words. In the end, she’d chosen him. This time, the only thing that touched his heart with its ferocity was the love he felt, rather than the old familiar sense of blame. Maybe some parts of the past would never entirely quit, but some of them could be laid to rest.

Bardoka Dravid stood there, tall and slender, olive-skinned and blue-eyed, looking almost like a cousin of his. Her wild dark hair, as opposed to all the years on television it had been neatly sleeked and straightened, probably by Capitol expectations, hung loose and free now, held back only by a headband. He noticed Texel wasn’t there—when he and Johanna had left Fourteen, the mayor’s husband had been bound for Three to get fitted for his prostheses. “How’s Tex doing?” he asked her as he shook her hand.

“How’s Tex doing?” he asked her as he shook her hand.

“Still in Three doing physical therapy, but he’s just about done. Keeps promising he’ll be back soon kicking ass and getting back in the saddle,” she said, a proud smile on her lips, but the lines of worry around her eyes told him that two months without her husband were bad enough after his injury. Adding that worry to losing his support as she was trying to deal with leading a district in the mess of the postwar situation just probably made it all the worse.

“Well, he’s not alone, at least,” Johanna said. Too many war injuries still in Three these days, trying to recover.

Bardoka’s smile grew a little brighter, a hint of puckish mischief in the dimples that suddenly appeared in her cheeks. “He keeps telling me Primrose Everdeen keeps trying to buck him up by telling him look at what Peeta’s done with one artificial leg, so with two, he’s going to be twice as amazing.”

Yeah, that sounded like Prim Everdeen all over. Sometimes it was almost impossible to believe she and Katniss were sisters. “He say anything about how Prim’s doing?”

“Not much change, I’m afraid. But she’s taking with sheer guts. We’ll talk in the morning, I’m sure. Less work to do here than some others, but once the cameras shut down I’ve gotta get back to shoving paper and making phone calls, if you don’t mind.”

He didn’t get the sense of evasiveness, just the no-bullshit attitude of someone stating the truth. Ten was a sprawling district to begin, as he understood it, a veritable hive of dozens of stations and
collectives. That task plus managing the nutritionally critical supplies of utterly perishable things like meat and eggs and milk couldn’t be easy by any means. “One thing quick?” Johanna asked.

“Name it.”

“September 15th is coming up. The date for former Peacekeepers to step up and register.”

“Yeah?” Bardoka shook her head a little impatiently. “Can’t say I’ll be disappointed if I don’t have too many of ‘em skulking around here. Doubt it. We were one of the first districts to win our freedom, and we kicked the Peacekeepers out in a fucking hurry.” There was a note of fierce triumph in her voice at that, and Haymitch couldn’t quite blame her.

“The reports will have to come through you to be forwarded to CIB, yeah?” An answering nod—he already knew Hazelle and Corriden were answering to that purpose in Twelve, in case any ex-Peacekeeper somehow had ended up among their company. “Can we leave you two names we’d like you to watch?” They’d already contacted all the other mayors and made the same request. Every one of them had readily agreed without too many explanations. Haymitch assumed they thought he and Johanna were looking for those two particular names for some particularly heinous war crimes and at this point he wasn’t inclined to correct that notion.

If Ash and Heike were out there, and reported in, they would know it. If they were in a district he and Johanna had already visited, he’d probably want to kick his ass mentally a bit for having missed them, but two people among thousands, and two who very likely didn’t want to be found?

“Oh course. Just write ‘em down for me so I have a record.” She gave them a rueful expression, and a slight shrug. “If I don’t have it written down, chances are I might forget, you know?”

Saying their hellos to Ten’s sole surviving victor, Wyandot Ingersoll, was brief enough. Not out of a lack of warmth—Wy, victor of the 58th, fell smack in the middle of himself and Johanna in terms of peers, so both of them had related pretty well to him. Haymitch would admit he’d perhaps had a slightly warmer friendship with Angus Wahlstrom, who’d died in the arena, due to the sheer extra number of years of acquaintance, but Wy was a good sort. He was a quiet, good-natured man of thirty-five with the fair skin of northern Ten, weathered by long hours outdoors, and short-cropped light brown hair. A far cry, Haymitch thought, from the bold and dashing cowboy the circuit had forced him to play.

“Come over for dinner and I’ll fry you two up some chicken,” he said, looking them up and down with steady dark eyes. “You both look like you’ve been losing some weight again. Tough travels?”

“Been a long few months,” Johanna told him.

“I’ll say,” Wy answered with a faint snort of amusement. “Been away from home for five months now, right? Sure you ain’t cut out for life on the range if you take a yen to leave Twelve?”

“You don’t want to see me on horseback,” Haymitch said dryly. His only real experience with anything remotely like horses was those few months as a kid trying to lead stubborn mules by their crude rope halters from the stables at the mines to help hitch them to the carts. It sounded like Johanna’s experience was just about comparable at the lumber camps.

“No worries,” Wy replied with an air of nonchalance. “Any case, welcome to Ten. The situation here isn’t too bad, but you’ll be traveling a lot and probably checking out some of the more distant areas where trucks aren’t gonna go, so congratulations, chances are you’ll have to learn to ride a horse where you like it or not.”
“First person to laugh gets an axe in the skull,” Johanna muttered irritably. “And no fucking cameras.”

“Oh, you know I won’t let Plutarch near that. I’ll be teaching you. We start this afternoon,” Wy told them matter-of-factly. “Get you a good appetite worked up for dinner.” And with that, as he ambled off with a cheerful wave, apparently they’d been officially welcomed to Ten.

After slinging down their bags at Victors’ Ranch—which was whimsically constructed with a fenced-in pasture and stables in the middle where the Village had its green and the pond, he hefted the heavy box that had accompanied their baggage ever since District Thirteen. “You want to come for this, or OK if I go it alone?” he asked Johanna. He’d let her handle Clark Saunders in Five’s cemetery by herself, because he knew he had no place in that. Johanna’s connection in this case was tenuous. For Haymitch, the matter lay closer to the bone than that.

“Could use a nap,” she admitted as if it pained her to acknowledge it, fingers pinching the bridge of her nose as she winced lightly. “Fucking jet lag is really killing me.”

That was the truth. All the cross-country flying got rough sometimes. More than once they’d barely made it through the meet-and-greet and basic orientation before collapsing for an hour or two to let their inner clocks catch up. “We did fly over half the country here from Six. Small wonder.”

“You’re fine?”

“All the coffee.”

“You’re supposed to be the tired old fart, not me,” she said with a mock scowl. “Fine. Wake me up when you come back, all right?”

He headed back towards Centerville. The tribute cemetery here was like any other—the same stone wall, the same white marble markers, the same even rows. Capitol vision stamped down universally on every district, regardless of how it fit, because that didn’t signify. The message of utter control, even after death, was everything.

Too many markers here in Ten, just as in Twelve, and he weaved his way through the rows, able to find the exact spot of the 50th not by searching, but by mental comparison with the layout of its Twelve counterpart.

The lawn was neatly mowed, which told him that the people of Ten had maintained its care. Back in Twelve, Peeta had told him that some flowers had finally appeared in the tribute cemetery as families were finally allowed to leave their personal marks of mourning. The few parents or siblings or friends of dead tributes who had survived the firebombing and returned to Twelve—he tried to not think of them right at this moment, even as their faces appeared in his mind, twisted in anguish and anger as he handed over a gaudy Capitol coffin. There were no flowers on the graves here. Instead there were stones, of all shapes and sizes, from pebbles to ones nearly as big as his two fists put together. Some were still bare, most of the earliest ones, probably because they had no kin left.

Channi Boggs, reaped as tribute in the 50th Hunger Games. He’d seen the tape now, the little fifteen-year-old girl from a hog collective in Ten blue, with striking pale blue eyes and light brown hair. Saw her get ripped apart by those cat mutts too, the ones that he’d fled from into the darkness of the arena, ending up praying like hell the things couldn’t climb a tree.

Kneeling down in the grass, he opened the box. Placing the stones Corriden had given him for himself and his brothers in a neat carpet, giving back the weight of all those memories of the little sister they’d been forced to leave behind two decades before when they escaped to Thirteen, he looked at the marker again. To a sixteen-year-old boy, Channi Boggs had been just another nameless
tribute, a face briefly remarked upon in the sky. He had forty-six of his own to remember. He knew he wouldn’t forget her name now.

“I didn’t meet your other brothers,” he started off, sitting back a bit, hands resting on his knees now. “Probably should have asked before I came here. Sorry. But they made it to District Thirteen. Corriden, him I know pretty well by now. He’s changed some from the kid you knew, but at the end of it all, he threw over all that Thirteen discipline no matter the cost. Guess you Ten folk are a little wild at heart no matter what. Good man. Think he’s gonna end up marrying my friend Hazelle, and her kids adore him. They both lost a sister that summer. He lost you, and well, she lost her sister Briar. Not in the arena.” *Because of me,* the words were right on his lips, and he forced them back down, tried to throw off the old sense of guilt. “Because of Snow.”

He managed a slight smile. “He’s talking about keeping some chickens and pigs now. Good military man, but I think he’ll be happier with some peace and quiet. Probably ran into you at the training gym at some point, but, well, forty-eight of us, and it didn’t pay to get too close. Wish maybe I had. So I’d have something to tell him about you in those last days.” He knew that memory would have been precious to Corriden just the same. “I’ll look after him best I can. I don’t think he’ll be back, but he won’t forget you. Never has. Never will. You don’t forget your siblings, no matter how long they’ve been gone.” His mind went to Ash, and as ever, the clear memories were of the child Haymitch had known rather than the nebulous figure in those Peacekeeper files, close-cropped hair and an official, sternly impassive expression.

He had one memory he was certain now was of Channi Boggs. The interview line was more like a rough cluster with twice as many kids crowded into the space, and just for a moment one of the girls stepped aside, smoothing her hands nervously down the skirt of her red dress. Haymitch, slouching back against the wall, hated his ridiculous and neon-bright too-large clothes, hated that he’d go forty-eighth when nobody was going to give a shit anyway, hated waiting. “I’ve never worn anything this nice before,” she said, mostly to herself but loud enough that even that far back, Haymitch heard it and counted forward from himself. Ten girl, he reckoned.

Four girl standing right nearby—Esca Flores—rolled her eyes. “You never will again either, you know.”

“Can it, fish-breath,” Channi snapped back, eyes suddenly fiercely alight. “Nobody asked you.” Haymitch had smirked to himself, enjoying someone having the guts to tell a Career to shut their trap.

Now he picked up the single stone left beside his right knee, the one he’d brought himself, and placed it in the pattern he’d made. There—his mark for the memory of a girl who’d tried to be brave in the face of impossible terror.

With that, he left, duty to the dead and to the past completed. Right now he really wanted the company of the present, living and full of potential, so he headed back for the Ranch and Johanna, tired enough now that a nap sounded wonderful.

~~~~~~~~~~

September 15th dawned hot and clear down at Southlands. Somehow Terry thought it would have suited his mood far better if it was a lousy, miserable rainy day, lightning slashing across the sky and everything. No such luck.

They were a week into stationside rotation now, and the buzz around the station was that the Abernathys would be visiting in three days. Already people were making sure things looked just that little bit better than usual, aware that of course Plutarch Heavensbee and his crew would be filming
wherever they could. They didn’t stand on ceremony much here in Ten, but he’d come to understand them enough to realize they didn’t want to look bad. Their pride wouldn’t permit it.

Too bad he didn’t understand them well enough to confidently predict just how this would go. Eleven, well, that was certain. Kalea—fuck it, Thalaea, they were giving up the pretense today—had asked Jay just once if it really was going to be that bad in Eleven. One awkward silent look from Jay had been answer enough.

Three days. Just enough time, to his mind, to hold out and throw themselves on the mercy of their visitors and get the hell out of Ten if the situation turned ugly. Maybe it wouldn’t, but he’d seen plenty about what angry men and women were capable of doing back in District Eight. At least he was pretty sure this wouldn’t end with him seconds away from getting executed on camera.

Still, his nerves were frayed as anything, to the point eating breakfast was impossible. Rhee picked at her food too, occasionally glancing up to meet his eyes. “Let’s just get it over with,” he said finally, forcing himself to drink the rest of the coffee and feeling it settle in his stomach uncomfortably. “The waiting’s the worst part.”

Somehow he wasn’t surprised to see Jay, Lori, and Thalaea sitting on the front porch when he and Rhee came out the front door. He didn’t ask anything so silly as Ready?, because of course they weren’t.

The walk to Nadji’s office felt all at once unbearably long, but when they reached the steps it suddenly felt like it hadn’t been nearly long enough. For a moment he had the thought it wasn’t too late, they could turn around and keep their mouths shut and just pray their luck held. The last year here in Southlands had been the most peaceful time he could ever remember, and he didn’t want to lose that. He’d earned it, done everything they’d asked of him. But they’d be left looking over their shoulders either way, wouldn’t they? At least this way they’d have the benefit of honesty on their side, and maybe a little more good feeling purchased by it in the end.

Knowing they looked to him, feeling Rhee’s hand light on his shoulder in reassurance, he inhaled lightly and climbed the steps, boot heels thumping on the wood as usual, his heartbeat in his ears. Knocked and got the usual impatient “Come in!”

Drover was there as well, probably discussing morning reports. The usual expression of faint impatience was on his face. He’d griped to Terry now and again about how damn smothering Nadji could be with her sheer efficiency and the precision of her orders, leaving him no independent latitude as her second-in-command. Just following orders, Stewart, every fucking day. She’s a good woman, but… He’d laughed grimly inside, remembering some Head Peacekeepers he’d known, and sympathized with him. “No crimes for you and me to check out today, Stewart,” he said affably.

He almost came to parade rest instinctively before he could help himself, the old routine of initial report and recognition. Sir, Captain Theodosius Law reporting in, transfer from Nine… Shaking that off only with an effort, he managed to say, “It’s September 15th.”

“Yes,” Nadji said wryly, dark eyes studying him. “Are you anticipating some trouble tonight?”

Tongue-tied for a moment, he just stood there and stared, trying to find the words. “I’m afraid,” he said finally, locating that small center of ruthless calm amidst the turmoil, “we might actually be the trouble.”

Nadji’s eyebrows shot up practically to her hairline. “Oh, fuck. All five of you?” A pause and she added with a look of helpless amazement, “Plus the two that left this spring, and the one that died in the epidemic?”
He held out a piece of paper to her, relieved his hand stayed steady. They’d written it all down there. Names, ranks, service numbers, locations and dates—they’d agreed a few days ago that would make it easier than trying to stand there and report it verbally. This just made the whole thing quick. Painless, well, that was another matter.

“Kalea?” Drover said quietly, and Terry didn’t look at the man, hearing the way the name tore from his throat, rough and painful. Seeing his expression might be too much to bear.

“Thalaea, Drover,” she answered him, her voice barely more than a whisper, but without a tremor. “My name’s Thalaea Thistledown.” He heard the sound of her boots on the floor and the loud bang of the door and knew she’d run for it, probably before she lost it in front of him. He didn’t blame her, because at least he was standing there with Rhee’s hand in his, trying to not clutch her desperately like a lifeline.

“CIB shouldn’t have anything on us, but I know this puts you in an awkward spot. We don’t want to cause trouble—I know you’d probably rather we get out of the district. So when they’re here, we can ask the Abernathys if they’ll allow us to leave with them for District Twelve,” he told her, striving to still keep calm, keep in control, and just get the words out quickly.

Then he realized he didn’t know just what the hell they were going to do until then. He hadn’t really thought much beyond this moment, and offering her the saving grace of telling her they’d get the hell out of her district. “Should we…go to work?” he asked, feeling awkward and clumsy as anything.

Nadji looked up from the paper finally, looking as if she’d been stunned senseless. “I think,” she said, “maybe you’d better just keep to your quarters for the next couple of days while I report this in. I’ll have someone bring your food.”

He could almost sense Jay’s embarrassed shame at being kicked out from his job right there. “We’ll have Thalaea come stay with us,” Rhee said quietly but firmly. Good call, he thought. Getting her out of the middle of the single women’s quarters would only do her good. It wouldn’t even be too crowded, as they had a spare room in their cabin. Most people in Ten used it once the kids came, but that wasn’t a consideration for him and Rhee, hadn’t been for all the months they’d been married. They knew it couldn’t be while everything was so uncertain. At least one way or another now they’d know for sure.

“We’re sorry,” Lori said, her voice trembling a little. Sorry for what, he wasn’t exactly sure. Sorry for being an inconvenience now? Sorry for causing a fuss? Sorry for being Peacekeepers?

They left, and Rhee touched him on the shoulder, nodding towards the single women’s barracks. “Let Lori and me go deal with Lea.”

He looked at Jay. “Now what?” the younger man asked, a look of trepidation on his face.

“Now we wait.” He believed Nadji would keep order. Even if there might be some inclined to make trouble about the sudden revelation of five Peacekeepers in their midst, she wouldn’t stand for rioting or violence. It was just going to be a very tense, long few days.

And, well, he’d just try to not flip out at the idea of being confined to one small area, and he’d hope the food wasn’t poisoned. If someone had spit in it, that was no worse than that holding cell back in Eight. Though he realized he and Thalaea were the only ones left here who’d endured that particular ordeal. Marcellus and Alayna had left for Two, ended up in the Capitol. Purnia was dead but the other three had all been in Twelve, which probably presented them their own little set of nightmares to confront in this interminable wait.
He had his own fractured memories of that kitchen execution to worry over. Looked like, Thalaea aside, maybe they all had some ghosts to deal with on the notion of returning to Twelve.

He tried to not give a bark of sarcastic laughter at the idea that the place none of them really wanted to go because of its reminders would likely end up their new home. Life genuinely was a bitch sometimes.

Settling down in the chair with a book, he started to while away the long hours, and tried to not feel like a prisoner again.

~~~~~~~~~~

The first days in Ten actually went pretty smoothly, though Johanna had felt her stomach heaving at the smell of a hog barn to the point she’d managed to sneak away and puke up her breakfast. At least Haymitch looked pretty green himself, which made her feel a little better. The locals must not have smelled it from living there for so long, but the stench produced in the blazing heat of the last hurrah of a hot summer by so many animals crowded into such a small area constantly eating and shitting was almost unbearable. She was grateful to get far away from the barn and the large pool the waste drained into before being pumped out. “I’m not in a mood to eat pork for a couple weeks here, not even gonna lie,” she mumbled.

The next day on one of the smaller hog farms out in the open meant for providing fancy pork to Capitol chefs so they could brag about its quality brought her appetite back a bit. The chicken farms had the same contrast—the horrible smell and crowding of the general farms that were the large-scale reality, and then the farms with green grass and placid animals that were what the Capitol always filmed for Ten.

Riding lessons with Wy progressed well, although the Ten victor kept joking, tongue-in-cheek, that if they rode that slowly out on the trails of southern Ten, they’d finish a livestock drive in about six months. “Shut up, Wy,” Haymitch grumbled, tugging at the reins of his brown gelding, “I ain’t here to be a cowboy, I’m here to learn to ride this ornery thing well enough to get around down south.”

Ass and thighs and calves hurting from the unfamiliarity of it for the first few days, eventually it grew easier and the rhythm more instinctive. She started to actually enjoy it a bit, and the calm nature of the horse, far more friendly than the bad-tempered mules she’d dealt with up at the lumber camps.

The farms were in good shape this spring, though they were apparently a bit low on beef cattle. But all in all, Ten had some of the fewest problems of any district they’d been to yet. They’d seized their freedom quickly enough that the casualties and destroyed infrastructure were pretty low. If anything, people from Ten had then further supported the war by going and fighting for other districts. They had enough workers, and their industry was still pretty solid. More than anything, like in Seven, she was just grateful to see someone doing pretty well, to the point where they shrugged and said not only did they not need much help, they could still afford to help out others.

September 15th came along, and while they knew the reports probably wouldn’t come in until later in the day, the two of them spent most of the day not paying nearly enough attention to the workings of goat farming. She nodded and smiled and pretended to pay attention to the process of raising angora for One and all the while her stomach was churning, wondering just what was going on out there. The chicken sat ill on her stomach and she ended up losing it about an hour after she ate. Fucking nerves, she thought with angry embarrassment, but told herself that this warranted some inner turmoil. She hoped wherever Heike and Ash were, if they were alive and well, that they were OK, that CIB wasn’t already issuing a warrant for their arrest.

The nightly newscast reported some rioting in Eleven and Six—to be expected, as those two had felt
the Capitol’s boot on their throat the most consistently. Casualty reports weren’t known yet. Two had such a backlog of reported Peacekeepers in their borders that they were pleading for Brocade to lend them a couple of people to help funnel the information to CIB.

She turned off the television and went to Haymitch, turning her face into the hollow of his shoulder and just holding on to him. The anticipation of what they might hear, and the potential disappointment of hearing nothing or hearing bad news, was definitely the hardest part right now.

Getting him upstairs was no hard task, because he seemed to need the distraction just as much as she did tonight. She wanted to not think about their siblings right now. That matter had held a heavy weight on them for the last nine months ever since Snow decided to give them that last little fuck-you parting gift of knowledge, and there was no promise even tomorrow would bring relief.

They could make each other forget, and for two people who’d spent years haunted by the past, that was a gift she thought she’d never underestimate. Straddling his hips, settling herself on him comfortably with a low sigh of contentment, she braced her hands on his shoulders and said with a grin, “Stallion, remember?” She couldn’t measure how grateful she was that he’d laughed about that long-ago afternoon now, that somehow they’d finally put it behind them. He hadn’t said anything, but she had the feeling, looking at his face in that moment, he’d finally let go of some feelings on his own on it, maybe more than the guilt he’d always worn and which she’d always instinctively struck at when she felt the urge to lash out. If he’d been angry with her at all for the whole thing, apparently he’d dealt with it, and she wouldn’t demand he tell her about it. They could just move on, finally and for good. “So…g’yup.” They’d spent enough of the last week saying that to the horses.

“You’ve gotten such good practice these last few days,” he said with an answering laugh. “Not too sore?”

Her thighs gave a little twinge here and there, to be honest, but the burn of that didn’t matter. “I’m fine. Slow and steady until you’ve got the hang of it,” she imitated Wy, smiling as she heard Haymitch laughing in earnest.

Though when he reached up, hands running over her shoulders and collarbones down to her breasts, then she let out a hiss that was pain rather than pleasure. “Not now, OK?” Any other time of the month she loved when he did that, but the few days before her period, her breasts always felt tender enough that his touching them was a no-go.

He was used to her letting him know about that, so she didn’t need to explain. “Ah,” he said, staring up at her. It took her a moment to realize exactly why he was looking at her like that. Shit. Fuck. A few days before her period, right? She hadn’t been keeping close track, but then, she really couldn’t count weeks, as she’d never been all that regular off of the shots. That wave of crushing disappointment hit her again, just like it had the last time, the feeling of failure.

He wrapped his arms around her, tugging her down to him. He didn’t say Next month or anything like that, though she’d seen the moment of wistfulness and disappointment on his own face. “It’s all right,” he said gruffly into her hair. “I keep telling you. Don’t be so fucking hard on yourself.”

“This, coming from you? I learned from the best,” she couldn’t resist needling him a little, because that gave her a bit of space to try to scrape herself back together. But even that was enough for her to manage to put it away and lock the door, and she reached up and lightly stroked his cheek with her fingertips as she looked into his eyes. “Thanks.”

The way he trembled lightly at that, eyes sliding half-shut, it seemed like that little bit of contact meant more to him than his cock inside her. It probably did. She knew full well that sex itself could mean as little or as much as a person wanted it to mean. And with him, it meant a hell of a lot. But
for someone like him, and her, who’d lived so many lonely years, simply to be touched for the sake of it was something else entirely. There had been times she thought she’d have given anything, all the victor wealth, without any question for the single touch of a friendly hand to let her know that at least to one person she was still human, still worthy of that gentleness. “Love you,” she told him, leaning down to kiss him now, certain that whatever happened in the next days, she could bear it with him beside her.

The next morning Bardoka pulled them into her comfortable shabby office again, and said without preamble, “Yesterday I got a few dozen Peacekeeper names to pass on to CIB. No damn clue I had so many of them hiding out here, and funny enough, those two particular names you asked me to flag were on there.”

Feeling the tingle of sudden hyperawareness going down her body, Johanna asked, “You’re sure—Theodosius Law and Kallanthe Law?”

“The same, I kept ‘em written down like I said,” the mayor confirmed, eyeing the two of them with an expression of confusion.

“Where are they?” Haymitch asked her, and she could see that keeping his excitement in check was a tough effort for him. For her part she just about wanted to punch the air with elation, because they were still alive, and there were here in Ten.

“Southlands Station, down on the sheep and cattle ranges. My forewoman down there called the names in. Apparently there’s a bunch of them down there,” and she didn’t sound particularly pleased at that fact. “If I can ask, if it ain’t some big national security thing—and if it is, trust me, I’m not happy they managed to stay hidden this long—but what the hell did these two do that you’re that interested?”

“It’s not what they did,” Johanna answered her, shaking her head, “it’s who they are.” Are, not were, because she trepidation suddenly sliced into her joy as she hoped like hell that something left of the kids they’d known remained still within the adults. At least they’d turned their names in, and that had to be a promising sign, right? But how had they ended up here in Ten? What had happened to them during the rebellion?

She looked over at Haymitch. Nine years for her, almost twenty-six for him. Given how he’d been almost resigned to the fact that Ash was likely dead after being sent to Eight, she knew his own feelings had to be unsettled as anything. She hadn’t even checked the Peacekeeper records here in Ten to see Heike’s file—she’d intended to do that if there had been no news at the deadline. At this point, there was no need to go pry. She could ask Heike that herself. Heike—not Kallanthe. In two days they would find out just who their siblings had become, and that thought reset the anxiety all over again.
They had managed to leave Plutarch behind on this one by agreeing to some pure fluff shots of the two of them riding horses with Wy back near Centerville. Haymitch didn’t want the man and his cameras anywhere near this, and whatever price he had to pay in wheeling and dealing to make that happen seemed well worth it. Because he knew if Plutarch fucking Heavensbee got a single whiff of what was afoot in the lives of Haymitch and Johanna Abernathy, those cameras would be right there in southern Ten to immortalize the moment.

Southlands Station was one of the larger collectives they’d seen, though given this was pretty much the only permanent settlement in the whole southern third of the district—that was no wonder. The rest of it was the open range for the sheep and the cattle, both of which they saw from the windows of the beat-up old truck they caught a ride in down from Centerville. Plutarch tried to insist they take a hovercraft, but mindful of the stress on the Six work crews, and knowing the truck would exclude the cameras, the two of them put paid to that idea pretty quickly.

If not for the uncertainty of what lay at the end of the dirt track winding south, it would have been a pleasant journey. Good weather, beautiful sights of sprawling open plains and the little knots of livestock, men and women on horseback visible here and there. “Keeping the stock out at summer pastures,” their driver, a leathery middle-aged man named Karakul yelled over the too-loud rattle of the ancient engine. There was no such thing as working air conditioning, so they’d kept the windows rolled down to catch the cooling breeze of the truck in motion. “Fatten ‘em up on the plains grasses before the autumn drive back to Southlands, and the slaughterhouse for some.”

It rained the last few hours. Finally the truck wheezed its way to a stop in the large collection of buildings at Southlands. Karakul rattled them off—dairy barns, slaughterhouse, tannery, warehouses, shearing sheds, quarters, tack and supply, and so forth. More of the low ramshackle corrugated tin buildings here, though rather than the black earth further north, here it was the bright ochre red that reminded him of blood, particularly turned into mud as it was by the pouring rain.

Hurrying to get out of the rain, though at least it was a warm summer shower rather than icy cold downpour that would have so readily brought back bad memories of that Capitol cell, he surveyed the place from the porch of the forewoman’s office. His vision was a bit obscured by the rain, but he thought the whole place here looked about as large as the entire town back in Twelve—but then, Ten’s population had been about three times as big as Twelve’s before the war.

Running a hand over his damp hair to shed some of the water, he glanced over at Johanna. She looked tired so often these days, and he thought it wasn’t just the depressing lack of spirits they’d both had in Six, though they’d thrown themselves right from that into this situation and he could tell it was wearing on him too. Still, he’d thought, maybe even started to hope—well, never mind. She’d told him she wasn’t exactly regular normally, and he trusted knew her body much better than he did, and she would have said something. The look of disappointment on her face a couple nights ago when she’d told him her breasts had once again become a temporary no-touching zone had come across loud and clear. Time to put that aside and focus on the present; there was always next month and this required all his attention right now.

She gave him a slight shrug, though he could see the flicker of anxiety playing around her face in how wide her eyes were and the tightness of her mouth. Her own hair clung to her in damp tendrils and spikes. “Well, we’ve looked better,” he said to her with a faint smile, trying to cut the tension. “They’ve seen us look worse,” she reminded him. “They must have been watching the Games last year.” Steadied by that thought, they went in.
Nadji Ross was a dark haired, dark-eyed woman he’d estimate as just on the far side of fifty, and she introduced her second-in-command, Drover Crozier, equally dark in coloring and probably ten years younger. “Not the best day for arriving,” she said.

“Been through harder times than getting a little damp,” Johanna shrugged nonchalantly.

He wasted no time getting down to business. “Mayor Dravid gave us the heads-up that you’ve got some Peacekeepers reported in here?”

“You here with some kind of initiative from CIB that you’re asking?” she asked back, eyeing the two of them from over a thick stack of paperwork. He could see the one beneath her hand was apparently a shipping manifest for sheep. “Probably some of ‘em in every damn district in Panem.”

“Not in Eleven,” Drover muttered, looking strangely pained. Haymitch suppressed a wince. He’d seen the newscast reporting despite Brocade’s warning, two ex-Peacekeepers had been executed by the riot mob. He had the feeling if any others were in Eleven, they would be leaving in a big damn hurry.

“Our interest is in two specific names that rang the bell. Theodosius Law and Kallanthe Law.”

Nadji glanced over at Drover. “That’d be Stewart, and the Bellamy gal,” he supplied. The names meant nothing to him, but recognition dawned on Nadji’s face as she obviously put the names to the faces. Apparently she’d known them well enough that she could do it, and the sudden urge to just start questioning the hell out of her came over him. He suppressed it only with a good deal of effort.

“And I’m gonna ask again,” Nadji said, sitting back in her chair, “your particular interest in those two? What’d they do?”

“Oh, hell with this noise,” Johanna muttered, half to herself. “His brother, my sister, Coriolanus Asshole Snow told us they were dead and secretly shoved them into the Peacekeeper Corps as his own little amusement and to have something to mess with us if he needed it, it’s been years and we thought they were dead, so can we fucking well talk to them already or do you really wanna sit here and try to screw with us on this some more?”

Nadji blinked, tensing in her chair for a moment, but then her body eased a little. “Well. Didn’t expect that, I’ll admit.” She took it surprisingly well, perhaps sensing their impatience. She glanced over at Drover. “You wanna go…”

“Fine,” he said tersely, not quite looking at her. Either the man figured he might get tainted by associating with Peacekeepers or perhaps there was something else going on.

“Ah. Fine. Look, I’ll clear out…gotta go do some inspections anyway. I mean, you’re here for assessing the station too, right?”

“Of course,” he told her, not wanting her to think they’d come all this way only for personal reasons and to neglect the job Brocade had given them.

Sitting there waiting, listening the rain hammer on the tin roof seemed like some of the longest minutes of his life. Longer even, somehow, than the interminable sixty seconds of the Games countdown he’d endured twice in his life.

~~~~~~~~~~

There was a knock at the door, and Lori jumped up to get it. Too late for breakfast, too early for lunch, and there was a definite impatience to it besides. Right next door to Terry and Rhee and now
Kalea as she and Jay were, they’d tended to spend the day in one cabin ever since reporting in to Nadji.

It made the wait to see what would happen just a little bit easier, sticking together as they did. They’d made it this far by looking out for each other. Somehow she felt like it was only if they got ripped apart to fend for themselves alone that they’d really be in danger.

Drover stood there in the rain. “Abernathys asked for you,” he told her. “And Stewart too,” he addressed Terry over her shoulder.

“And the rest of us?” Jay said, his voice soft and even.

“Didn’t ask for you three.”

She felt like she’d been kicked in the gut, barely able to breathe. Did that mean someone had reported in on her, made some kind of accusation? She’d figured being here in Ten, when she’d served on a collective up north, might stir up some shit, but she’d hoped against hope that it wouldn’t come true.

“Tough,” Rhee said. “We’re all going. Whatever they’ve got to say to Terry, they can damn well say to me.”

Drover threw up his hands in impatience. “Fine. Have it your way. I’m not gonna stand here for ten minutes arguing with you. Nadji said bring you two, if the rest of you three want to come along, guess that’s your business.”

“Drover,” Thalaea spoke up, and there was a tone of such longing in her voice that Lori hurt to hear it. “Can we at least talk?”

Drover stood there, getting more wet in the rain, and the spatter of it rained down on Lori’s bare feet. He crossed his arms over his chest tight, leaned back a bit as if he was about ready to turn and walk away without a word, then leaned back in just the same amount as if he wanted to walk in and sit down and talk. “Don’t want to keep your crew company here?” he asked her brusquely.

“You OK handling this without me?” Thalaea asked the four of them.

“Yeah,” Terry told her, voice a bit gentle. “We’ll be all right.” In some ways Lori would rather all five of them went, but she couldn’t fault Thalaea for leaping on the one chance she’d had since the whole thing went down to try to talk to the man she loved and see if it somehow couldn’t be salvaged from the wreckage. Solidarity was fine and well, but they couldn’t expect her to give up everything of her own just to support them.

“You OK handling this without me?” Thalaea asked the four of them.

“Yeah,” Terry told her, voice a bit gentle. “We’ll be all right.” In some ways Lori would rather all five of them went, but she couldn’t fault Thalaea for leaping on the one chance she’d had since the whole thing went down to try to talk to the man she loved and see if it somehow couldn’t be salvaged from the wreckage. Solidarity was fine and well, but they couldn’t expect her to give up everything of her own just to support them. “Can walk ourselves over if you want, Drover,” he added. “Or do you really need to escort us to make sure we’re not gonna steal the horses and make a break for it?”

“Suppose you could have done that any of these past three nights,” Drover said in a dry tone. He didn’t quite look at Thalaea, but the fact he wasn’t just telling her to go to hell was at least a start. “All right, all right.”

“Drover?” she spoke up before she could think better of it. “You know what they want with Terry and me?”

He hesitated, turning his well-worn hat around in his hands. There was a flicker of something indefinable in his face just for a moment, but it was gone before she could identify it. “Yeah, but I think it’s better said coming from them.”
That at least gave a little steel to her nerves. If someone had made an accusation, he’d probably be looking at her with total disgust, insisting on escorting her over. Whatever it was, it wasn’t the worst. She felt Jay’s hand on her shoulder and the reassurance of that made her relax even just a bit. He’d be with her for this, because he wasn’t the kid who’d been so cowed by Tiberius Law. He’d proven he was strong enough now to stick with her no matter what.

She risking giving Thalaea a tentative “good luck” thumbs up as she closed the door behind them, and saw her quick, nervous smile in return as Drover took a seat. Dashing through the rain to Nadji’s office, she knew they all looked a mess, wet and with mud-spattered boots and trouser legs from hitting some puddles along the way.

Not much to be done for that, so aside from taking a moment to try to shake a little of the water off and scrape their boot soles on the rug, they were about as presentable as they were going to get today. Pack of half-drowned rats, really. Though when Rhee knocked and then immediately pushed the door open and she saw the two figures within looked plenty soaked themselves, she simultaneously felt a little better that they looked about as rough as she did, and worried anew about what the hell was so urgent they hadn’t even bothered changing clothes first.

Haymitch was on his feet first, looking at them. “Didn’t ask for four of you?” he said, looking strangely confused for a moment. Then it quickly faded and then he said half to himself, “Yeah, that explains it.”

“Uh, explains what?” Johanna said, staring as well. Then she suddenly burst out with, “Fuck me, you’re married?” Considering she was looking right at Lori as she said it, Lori assumed that was addressed at her. Looking down, she saw her left hand had ended up on Jay’s arm, the gold wedding ring easily visible there.

“You were in Twelve,” Haymitch said next, looking directly at Jay with a fiercely intense stare. “Darius’ good buddy…Albus, wasn’t it?” Apparently even when he was drinking himself stupid, the man had noticed Jay enough to be able to identify him now. Whatever Haymitch had been like while she was in Twelve, first the pathetic drunk and then carefully distant during his Quell training, this was an entirely different man. She couldn’t help but get a sense of something shrewd and dangerous in him, the mangy scrap-heap stray turned wild wolf. It was as if the barriers between him and the world had eroded and now he was right there, missing absolutely nothing that went on and ready to seize hold of it and possibly use it to his advantage.

Still turning over Johanna’s wide, shocked eyes and how familiarly she’d addressed Lori, she had to wonder—had Johanna known her, before? Was that why they’d come here and asked specifically for the two of them?

“Apparently this whole getting married thing is a big surprise for you two, but can we really just get to what’s going on here?” Rhee spoke up, shaking her head impatiently.

Terry’s voice, strangely even and calm, cut through the confusion of the moment, and she had the feeling he was keeping it that way only with supreme effort. “I’d say they know me and Lori, or know of us, whichever…is that why you’re here?” He addressed Haymitch at that, standing between the Abernathys and the three of them, taking the lead subtly as usual.

All of them were dripping water on Nadji’s floor by this point. Haymitch’s face looked curiously vulnerable for a second in how open the emotions showed on it, looking at Terry with a tired smile she couldn’t quite read. “Hell, you always were a smart little cuss, Ash.”
She was all grown up now. In her mind, Johanna had realized that, and even the picture of Heike at eighteen headed for District Ten confirmed it. But seeing her standing there, Heike was now unquestionably a woman rather than a child.

Her hair was shorter, but she would have had to keep it short as a Peacekeeper, and even a year out from the rebellion, it still hung just below her shoulders. As opposed to the timid way she tried to melt into the background as a kid, she stood there, meeting Johanna’s eyes. Not defiantly, but with a sort of quiet confidence. No recognition though from her own sister, only a polite inquisitiveness, and that hurt like hell. Had she imagined Heike would see her and suddenly it would all come rushing back? Logically, of course not, but maybe some secret, stupid part of her heart hoped for it anyway.

Heike was married. What was the last name Drover had used? She didn’t even remember, and it suddenly seemed hugely important. The gold ring and the way she had her hand on the arm of the young man next to her—maybe Five-born with the hint of red in his hair and that tawny skin?—the way she kept close to him, confirmed it. Why not? Heike was almost twenty-four now, more than old enough to marry. If she’d been in Seven she’d probably have married years ago. Maybe this man had been a sweetheart of hers in the Peacekeepers. But it felt overwhelming just the same. Grown up, steady and confident, married—this woman was suddenly a stranger. Though maybe even if Heike had remembered her, she wouldn’t have easily recognized her sister given all that had passed since then.

Mind and emotions in a muddle, she looked at Ash next. Married too, and she’d bet the woman with him was from Four. Ash’s wife looked like a shorter, curvier version of Annie, and the way she stood there, lithe and tense, it was damn clear that she’d fight tooth and nail if she felt like her man was under some kind of threat.

Looking back and forth from Haymitch to Ash, she could see the resemblance easily. Haymitch was probably an inch taller—that she chalked up to the Capitol growth drugs they’d forced on him. But the same unruly dark hair, even wet as it was, same grey eyes, and the same way they obviously were checking each other out and running all the data through their heads furiously to come to some kind of conclusion. Ash was calmer, a sense of cool and patient purpose to him whereas Haymitch had that fierce, almost intimidating energy.

“So you do know me,” Ash said, nodding at Haymitch, eyes narrowing a bit with intense interest. “Ash?” He tested the sound of it with curiosity.

She looked at Haymitch and saw the very rare sight of Haymitch Abernathy rendered virtually speechless. Twenty-six years gone and here was a ghost standing in front of him—of course it was overwhelming. Sensing he needed a moment, she reached out and brushed his hand with hers, just a quick little “I’ve got it” gesture. He might have to take over for her with Heike, because the emotions might be too much for her, threatening to choke her. As was, looking at the brother of the man she loved, seeing the familiar echoes of Haymitch in this other man, was tough enough. “Ashford,” she managed. “Ashford Abernathy. That’s your name.”

“Henrika Mason,” Haymitch said, recovering finally and addressing Heike. “Though they always called you ‘Heike’.” He pronounced it a bit odd with his twanging accent, the initial vowels longer—“Hay-kuh”, like the first syllable of his own name, rather than the “High” a Seven native would have used. “You’re Johanna’s sister.”

“Wait, you’re Inge?” Heike blurted, staring at Johanna with a shocked expression.

“Who the fuck is Inge?” Johanna asked her in utter confusion.
"You're his brother?" the Four woman said, looking at Ash and then at Haymitch with her dark brows drawn together.

Haymitch cleared his throat noisily, which was polite considering his method of getting Mentor Central to settle down had usually been to bark for them to shut the fuck up already because he couldn’t hear himself think over them chattering like a bunch of shit-witted birds. Usually that had been when they could tell he had a killer hangover from the way he winced and squinted, and he stumbled his way to the lounge and his couch to sleep it off a bit in the darkness. “If y’all wouldn’t mind shutting up for a minute, maybe we’ll make some sense of this?” All right, maybe he hadn’t exactly lost all his rough edges. In spite of herself and the awkward situation, she found she smiled anyway.

They listened up; she’d give them that, actually listening as intently as if their lives depended on it. Though from how they took the news, glancing back and forth at each other with more aplomb than she’d have expected, either they had the best damn poker faces she’d seen in a while, or they’d at least suspected something was rotten. “We’re just filling in some gaps, aren’t we?” she guessed, addressing them. “You already knew something was weird about whatever official story they told you?”

“No cause to question things for a good while, especially when we were encouraged to not fret about our old lives,” Ash said matter-of-factly. “Though Lor—Heike,” he carefully corrected himself, looking obviously awkward at the name, “and I started thinking it was funny, the bits here and there we sort of remembered, and how it didn’t make much sense against what we’d been told happened.”

She sensed Haymitch wanted to ask just what Ash remembered, but something made him hold his peace. Likewise, she wondered just what Heike remembered. But the fact she hadn’t exactly greeted Johanna by name with a scream of enthusiastic reunion said plenty. In a way it was a relief to see that the two of them were sharp enough to have worked through some of it already, and that she and Haymitch weren’t just dropping a massive weighty revelation on them in its entirety.

“You’re actually taking this rather well,” Haymitch said wryly.

“He’s had to learn to deal with having no past,” Ash’s wife shot back defensively, moving a little closer to him. “We dealt with the war, and walking here to Ten, and worrying for months that if we slipped up people here just might want to kill us as the enemy. You think a few personal revelations from you about when he was a little kid are gonna make him curl up and cry?”

“Rhee, it’s OK,” Ash murmured quietly. It was so subtle that probably nobody but Johanna could read it properly, but the slightest flinch from Haymitch told her plenty, and it sparked her temper. Ready to turn right around and let the other woman—fucking hell, her sister-in-law—have it, she only stopped when she saw the look on the other woman’s face and realized it was fear for her husband and a desire to protect him, same as it was for Johanna herself.

“Sorry,” Rhee muttered, looking towards Haymitch with an expression of chagrin. “Shit. It’s been a rough few days. I’m Rhiannon, by the way. That’s Jarrah—Jay.” She nodded to Heike’s husband, Temper still up a little as it was, Johanna had to give her points for cool thinking right there.

“They treat you all right after you reported in?” Haymitch asked, and Johanna saw the nervous half-clench of his fingers, the way he was lightly balancing on the balls of his feet with suppressed energy, wanting to simply do something.

“Nadji asked us to stay in our quarters until she figured out exactly what to do with us,” Jay spoke up. His voice was soft and even, the last hints of one of the southern accents there—she wasn’t sure which. “I think she doesn’t quite know. Though Terry—um, Ash—sort of gave her an out, had a
bright idea.”

“Jay,” Ash said with a sigh, hand going to his forehead in a gesture of exasperation. “Not really the time.” Jay gave a sheepish grin.

“Not the time for what?” she asked him.

“Might as well ask,” Jay piped up again. “I mean, you wanted to talk to ’em.”

“Yes, thank you, Jay. I’m not quite ancient enough yet that I’m just starting forgetting things,” Ash said with a tone of exasperation, the first hint of temper he’d betrayed. She felt herself wanting to smile again because it was subtler and maybe a bit more formal than Haymitch’s open snark, and there was only a trace of that mountain twang, but it felt strangely familiar.

Rhee shrugged, obviously seeing Ash’s hesitation and stepping forward. “Fine. This is awkward for him, and Heike now too. So I’ll ask. We were going to request that if Nadji’s not a fan of us sticking around here, you let us move to Twelve.”

Haymitch didn’t even hesitate. “Shit, of course you can. I wish you would. It’s your home, Ash, and I mean, yours by rights too now, Heike.” Then he looked almost panicked for a second, as if afraid he’d overstepped his boundaries by calling a place Ash Abernathy hadn’t been for nearly three decades and obviously didn’t even remember his “home”.

The silence felt as oppressive as that glass-domed arena just outside of Six. What to do now anyway? Thank them, turn around, walk out, and leave them to their own devices—what had she expected, that somehow, that the pieces would all just fall together and they’d spend hours and hours catching up and laughing warmly, like nothing had ever happened? Trying to think and act right now was just overwhelming, and the colossal fear of making some kind of epic blunder was right there. None of them seemed to know quite what to do right now.

“I think,” she told them carefully, “maybe it’s gonna be better that we all take a little time to let this sink in here? And I mean,” now she addressed Haymitch, seeing him glance towards her as if coming out of a trance, “you and I still have work to do down here for the district.”

“Of course,” Rhee said, shooting her a look of what might have actually been gratitude. “We shouldn’t keep you from helping everyone else.”

“We already look bad enough around here,” Heike muttered with a baleful sigh.

Haymitch hesitated again; she felt it. For a moment she saw some of the old, world-weary, self-hating man he’d been, standing there tangled up in sheer indecision out of not wanting to probe further where he wasn’t sure they’d want his presence. “Then fuck ‘em,” she said bluntly, looking at her little sister directly. “If they don’t want you all of a sudden, their loss.”

“And you know that you want us?” Ash asked quietly. Haymitch would have added a sarcastic arch of his eyebrows and a sharp edge to that question. In some ways the understated calm cut deeper in its sheer unadorned sincerity, accustomed as she was to Haymitch’s ways. “You don’t know a thing about what we’ve done, who we are now.” If he’d intended it to hurt, if there had been a shred of mockery in his voice, she’d want to spring at Ash and claw him to pieces, because of all things she knew Haymitch felt rejection so keenly when he’d opened himself up like that. But he said it with an expression carefully concealing whatever he might really be feeling, though the sense of tension she got from him said plenty. It was honestly meant, a question rather than an attack.

Finally Haymitch roused himself enough to say, “I know you came forward to clear your names when it might have gone much easier to keep your mouths shut. Tells me you don’t have stuff
waiting to catch up with you, and that you’re willing to risk people being pissed off in the interest of being honest. So that says a good bit.” He glanced over at Johanna, and while he was keeping himself composed, she knew he had to be as much in turmoil right now as her. “She’s right. We should give y’all some time here. Besides,” the corner of his mouth twitched upwards in a reluctant smile, “we’re all a bunch of drowned rats here. Best get you into something dry right quick.”

“Dinner,” Ash said after a moment’s awkward pause. “If you’d like. It’ll mean coming to our cabin, of course, but…” It was a graciously made offer, and probably well-timed. That would give them the better part of the day to mull it over, and for her and Haymitch, some time to think and some time to get to work. Waiting and stewing on it until tomorrow morning might be too long and make things even tougher.

“We’ll be there,” Haymitch answered quickly. The four of them retreated first, given they were closer to the door. Heike looked at her for a long moment before heading out, giving Johanna a bit of a smile. Whether that was encouragement or apology, she wasn’t quite sure.

~~~~~~~~~~

As if by unspoken agreement, neither of them said anything as they hurried across the mud-spattered ground to the cabin they were to stay in. It was small, he thought, realizing then with a moment of chagrin and a wince that it was probably bigger than the Seam house he’d grown up in. Years of the Village had obviously skewed his perspective there. But cozy, for all that. Johanna studied the walls, the warm glow of the varnished wood, murmuring faintly in approval about the construction job, though he heard a comment or two about things the Ten natives could have apparently done better.

“If you’re done contemplating the merits of their joins?” he asked her dryly, knowing even as he said it that it was just her way to trying to center herself again.

She peeled off her wet shirt, looking at him after she managed to get the fabric over her head. “It could have gone worse.” Arms folded over her chest, she shivered lightly, hair stuck to her forehead and her cheeks. Finally they felt the heat loss of being soaked through, and added to the disquiet in his soul right then, he had the curious feeling like he’d never quite be warm again.

He didn’t know exactly what he’d expected, but standing there speechless and with the sensation of being an interloper had stung. Maybe Ash and Heike weren’t exactly going to thank them for the news. Maybe they’d have been happier staying in the dark. Though the fact they’d realized something was screwy told him maybe that wasn’t the case.

Trouble was, he just didn’t know, and stumbling through the blind morass of it, forced to do nothing but wait and see what happened, he apparently had impatience to match Johanna’s. Nine months he’d been waiting for this meeting to come to pass, after twenty-five years of grief, and now it had come and gone.

What to make of Ash? When he thought of Ash he remembered skinny limbs and scabbed-over knees and solemn eyes; a boy not necessarily fearful, but sometimes too methodical and cautious. The man of nearly thirty-eight he saw still had some of that quietly thoughtful air, but there was a confident boldness to him now in the way he stepped up to meet things directly, rather than the need he’d had to pause and turn it over and over and examine every facet of it. A grown man, a husband to the Four woman—Rhiannon—and didn’t she look a tad familiar? For that matter, maybe Heike did as well and he felt a pang of guilt at that. That was stupid, Peacekeepers had been thick as fleas on a cat before the Quell and he hadn’t paid attention to any of their faces, having far deeper concerns.

Grabbing a couple of towels from the bathroom, he tossed one to her and started shucking his own
The matter thwarted him and that was the unbearable part. He had too much memory of Ash to come at this meeting with the blank slate of a stranger, but too much time and experiences had gone by to simply know the man standing there in Nadji Ross’ office with rapid ease. This Ash existed in a half-formed kind of twilight, a man seen as blurred outlines and vague impressions of detail only. All at once too close and too far, and the sheer imbalance of it was no comfortable thing.

“They seemed curious at least,” he observed, briskly rubbing down his skin. “You made a good call there. Giving ‘em some time to come to terms with the notion.” He didn’t doubt even now they were back in their own cabins furiously discussing the matter.

“She’s married,” Johanna said, shaking her head. “I mean…” Grabbing the tightly-woven woolen blanket from the bed, he wrapped it around both of them. “They’ve had a whole life without us.”

Said baldly as that, he couldn’t disagree. Ash had far more years away from Haymitch than he’d had with him, and a sliver of doubt lodged itself in him. “Shh,” he said, holding her close. “Time for it later. It’s up to them now.” For the minute, just holding on and letting the shivers of both cold and emotional extremes subside would be good enough. Even if it came to the worst and Ash decided he wanted nothing to do with the brother he couldn’t remember, Haymitch would still have Johanna, and Tilly and Niello, Finnick and Annie, Katniss and Peeta, Hazelle and Coridden, and others. His life was rich enough in its blessings now. Desperate for scraps of affection and belonging as he’d been for so long, he wouldn’t get so greedy now as to expect even more than he’d already been given. He would hope—oh, how could he not? But he would hold those hopes hard in check, as much as he could.

After a little while, warm and calm, they got into dry clothes and headed out. Quickly directed to the mess hall, apparently the center of things for mid-day, they arrived just in time for the noon meal as the workers filed in from the slaughterhouse and dairy and tannery and all the other locations they had been working for the morning.

“Chuck’s cooking sucks,” he heard one tall woman grouse as she accepted a plate of what looked like beef and mashed potatoes.

“You’d seriously rather have your stuff cooked by a palie, Harnai?”

“If the kid wanted to poison us, he’s had plenty of opportunity over the last year,” Harnai pointed out with an irritated sigh. “Besides, they’ve worked hard. Kept their heads down and didn’t cause a fuss with anybody.”

“Hiding guilt, I don’t doubt,” came the answering mutter.

“They did good work during the epidemic. Lori—or whatever the hell her name really is—really didn’t quit. Could have got herself killed treating all the sick.”

He saw the chance, almost like it stood there before him spelled out in glowing neon, and he pushed aside the sudden upwelling of excitement. Oh yes, he knew how to do this—long years of practice. Sure, his master stroke had been the 74th and 75th Games, but this was no less of a challenge, was it? “Well, her name is actually Henrika Mason,” he said, seeing them turn quickly to see who’d spoken up. “And she’s my wife’s sister.” He smiled at the two women, accepting a plate of his own as they stared at him in something like shock. “Ladies.” Keep them curious with bait like that and they’d want to hear, in spite of themselves.

Sitting down to a meal with Harnai Moreno and her husband Wensley, he saw Johanna smoothly caught on to what he was doing and joined it without a hitch. It made him think for a moment that they’d have made a hell of a mentor team together. Then he mentally slapped himself. Not like he
wanted to long for the bad old days, it was just force of habit.

Getting some feedback about the status of Southlands—uncertain supply lines, but almost an excess of workers now for the supplies needed by a population cut by a third thanks to the war—he felt the relief that they were actually in good shape. They’d apparently weathered an epidemic that spring but bounced back. Along the way Harnai and Wensley readily supplied tidbits: Ash had worked with Drover investigating some of the occasional rash of petty crimes that cropped up, Rhee was known for a gift with numbers and accounts and Harnai had helped arrange their wedding last fall, Heike had become a reliable field medic and she Jay had been married barely two months, Jay apparently made good cheese now after several disastrous attempts—he heard Johanna laugh at that and he reveled in the sound. Seemed like Harnai and Wensley here generally thought well of the little group of ex-Peacekeepers, even if she made a few jokes showing that she grappled still with the idea sometimes.

He thanked them and seeing Nadji and Drover at their table, he and Johanna headed over for some chat and coffee. Glancing at Harnai and seeing her turn to chat with someone else, he smiled to himself. Working like a charm, he thought. “Thanks for indulging us in taking a little personal time,” he told Nadji cheerfully. “So down to business.”

Sometimes patience was the hardest part, and he hated having it out of his hands. But he’d managed the trick, turned a sullen little brat who didn’t give a fuck about anyone besides her own few chosen people and a boy so pathetically confused about love that he thought his foolish obsession with a mirage was worth dying for, into Panem’s sweet little darlings. Over the last year, he and Johanna saw their stars rise, the matter turned topsy-turvy from the disgrace they’d known for years, simply because of how they’d been presented. Nobody would have listened to the bitch and the drunk, let alone greeted them with hope and warmth.

Better than anyone, he damn well knew the value of a deft touch here and there towards spinning the right publicity. While he was sure from his own experience it pleased nobody to be depicted as a victim, he’d given District Ten a sympathetic image to counter that white uniform—Snow’s victims, torn from their families as children and forcibly brainwashed and molded and threatened into compliance. To his mind, it was cruel as the Games in its way, just another way of the Capitol claiming a supposed due. It wasn’t death, but Snow and the demands the Capitol placed on the Peacekeeper Corps stole lives just the same. Neither he nor Johanna had needed to fake their vehemence about that.

Drover glanced at Nadji. “You need me on this, boss, or…”

“Got it,” Nadji said with a dismissive wave of her hand. Normally Haymitch would have expected a look of irritated displeasure or embarrassment at being so obviously told he wasn’t necessary on such a big job as this. Oddly enough, Drover seemed in a hurry to escape off to somewhere. It struck him that the man hadn’t come back with Ash and the rest. And hadn’t Nadji mentioned five of them when it came to Peacekeepers? Interesting.

“So we heard a bit about troubles with the milk and meat storage and transport,” Johanna piped up, throwing more cream into her coffee and eyeing Nadji.

“Refrigeration system in storage is dying by inches, and the cooling trucks need some of the damn mechanics from Three too—we never were allowed to repair ‘em ourselves. So we’ve been making a lot of cheese and drying jerky and making smoked and salt meat,” Nadji admitted with a frown. “That’ll keep much better. Ain’t ideal, I’m sure, I’ve got people bitching at me about how they need the fresh stuff. But better a load of jerky than throwing good meat and milk out when it spoils.”

“We’ll call Three, see what we can do to get someone out here in a hurry,” he assured her. It was
their last stop on the trip, but he was sure if he called Brocade, who could call Iridia Crick and talk her into it, the matter would get done a lot faster than Nadji trying to run it up the chain of command. “Also try to get ‘em to train some of your folks in while they’re here.”

“Good,” Nadji muttered. They’d learned a lot on this trip, him and Johanna. So much of it was just listening to people who had a need to complain about hardships or get their fears out there a bit by griping, and let them know the concerns were heard and yes, Brocade Paylor gave a shit and would see it addressed. Oddly simply, but it was a winning strategy, showed people that things had changed from the Capitol days when it was just a matter of sucking it up and making do, because to protest invited getting slapped down hard.

After the coffee they headed back to the privacy of Nadji’s office to discuss it more, and he tried to do his best to pay attention to the concerns of the entire area rather than thinking about matters far closer to the heart. At least he’d always been good at ruthlessly shutting it out when absolutely necessary.

~~~~~~~~~~

Ashford Abernathy. He turned the name over and over in his mind, the sound of it echoing like a pebble falling down a well—falling down into that empty blackness of those lost years. Ash. It tugged at nothing directly in him, no overwhelming bloom of returning memory. There were a few stray wisps, various voices saying the name in that twanging accent Haymitch had, and they felt like they belonged.

Dried off and in fresh clothes, they reconvened back at his and Rhee’s cabin. He noticed Thalaea wasn’t there. He wondered if that meant things with Drover were going well or poorly, and it cost him a moment’s anxiety of that separateness, worrying if they needed to go try and find her. They’d stuck together as a group for so long that to have her cut off from it right now felt strange. But at the same time, this wasn’t quite her personal matter, and she’d said she would be all right. He didn’t want to interfere in her business like he’d tried to at New Year’s, particularly when he had big matters of his own.

In usual Two fashion, nobody wasted time on preliminaries. “All right. First question: they telling the truth?” Rhee asked first, sitting sideways on the arm of one of the plump leather-covered chairs, feet braced on the floor. He didn’t think she had serious doubts. she was just taking the role of kicking off the topic here and throwing it out in the open.

Review the evidence. Cool, divorced from emotion—that was the only way to handle this. “We look enough like them to make it very possible. But they’re known skillful liars,” he admitted. “Haymitch in particular.” The man had outplayed Coriolanus Snow masterfully, as well as tricked the entire nation by making them think he was Katniss’ father. Motive, though? “But I don’t see how it profits them to come here claiming that if it’s a lie. I mean, unless they’re playing some elaborate con trying to draw us in and get us to admit to something they think we’re guilty of doing. And that’s really getting paranoid.”

Lori—no, Heike now—shook her head impatiently, dark auburn waves flying in a mess. “What does your gut tell you?” she asked him, brown eyes with a hint of green studying him. Less sharply intense than Johanna Abernathy’s, but similar enough that he could buy them as sisters. “Maybe we don’t remember much. But there’s something there.”

Uncomfortable as he was relying on that uncertainty, he looked into that fragmented mess. Looked at the boy he’d thought was named Dougless, trying to grow him up to a forty-two-year-old man. The face, the mannerisms; it fit. A dead mother, a dead girlfriend who would have been the girl he’d been lost trying to explain, and his brother’s absence from that kitchen execution now explained—couldn’t
just execute a victor like any district worker. “It fits,” he admitted, looking at her. “You?”

“Fits,” she answered, lips barely moving as she seemed to have to force the word out. “It makes pretty neat sense of everything, doesn’t it? Everything we suspected.”

In some ways not knowing had been more comfortable. The reality of it, a brother for him and a sister for her standing right there explaining it all? The weight of trying to grapple with it and make sense of where it might belong in his life felt too daunting to bear. Ashford Abernathy. Who the hell was he? And to have blood ties to those two in particular, having sudden ties to that kind of national prominence, felt uncomfortable to say the least—and yet. Family to claim for their own, and family standing there with just as much awkwardness as they had on their side, but bursting out with a generous offer of a place to stay.

Felt like a bizarre irony that the very request he would have made was the one Haymitch had hurried to offer up. Did he really belong in Twelve, though? In some ways that made it tougher; coming in with some kind of expectation that it was his true place. He could see the potential for becoming the dark shadow to a national hero: the black sheep, the Peacekeeper, the lesser Abernathy. Time might come that Haymitch might resent the burden, and time might come that Terry—Ash, dammit—himself resented living hopelessly in the shade of the competence of an older brother he could never quite match.

That tugged at the emptiness again, another stray fragment of instinct, and without having to examine it further, he knew that was how it had been. Haymitch had led, and he had scrambled to try and follow as best he could. But still, better than here in Ten where Nadji didn’t even want them going out in public right now.

A knock sounded at the door. One of the younger kids was there with lunch. He didn’t know the girl’s name, but as soon as she handed it over, she looked at them and asked excitedly, “Seriously? It’s all over the mess hall. Did Snow really kidnap you two when you were just kids and torture you and drug you to make you forget Haymitch and Johanna?”

“Apparently that’s the case,” he said dryly, not wanting to correct the massive assumption that torture had been involved. So far as he could remember, it hadn’t. “Thank you.” He closed the door, not sure whether he wanted to just start laughing or swearing at this latest development.

They all picked at the meal. Jay murmured to Heike that she needed to eat more, and she responded half-heartedly. “What was that all about?” Jay finally asked.

“I think,” he replied, “our newfound kin are engaging in a little good publicity for us.” In spite of himself he wanted to smile, at once touched but also made unsettled at the sudden sense of being far more into debt to this man he barely knew than he could withstand with comfort. He didn’t want to owe Haymitch Abernathy, brother or no, wanted nothing he didn’t deserve on his own merits.

But already the ledger was getting far into the negative. The two of them had offered him and his people here a place to come live, and now they were trying to create a chance for a bunch of ex-Peacekeepers. They must have known how fleeting fame could be, given what a low opinion the nation had of them just last year, and yet there they were, readily working on the people here and dropping words into the right ear, hoping some of their own bright luster would rub off and do their siblings some good by association. It could have easily backfired, particularly given they were newly arrived, but they took the risk all the same.

Mentally he added another tally to that ledger and felt even more ashamed and grateful. He wondered if there was any happy medium between being seen as a Peacekeeper demon or Haymitch’s poor victimized little brother.
“Well,” Heike said finally, “we were planning to go to Twelve anyway. And, I mean, they want us there. So it’s looking more promising than yesterday, right?”

“Probably, but let’s just not make decisions in haste here,” Rhee replied tiredly, shaking her head. “Just…no offense, but let Jay and me step in and call for some space if we feel like they’re pressuring you too hard, OK? I want what’s best for you, for us,” she told Ash, looking over at him with determined green eyes. “If that happens to be what’s best for Haymitch and Johanna Abernathy as well, that’s a real nice bonus, but if it’s not, you take first priority.”

“Agreed,” Jay chimed in levelly. Ash had the thought of how much he’d grown up over a year here in Ten, from being almost afraid of his own shadow. He wondered for a moment if Haymitch had seen it as well, given that he’d recognized Jay from his years in uniform. “We’ll get it figured out,” he told Heike, patting her gently on the shoulder.

The rain continued, drumming mercilessly on the cabin. Mostly, they let it sit quietly for the rest of the day, trying to let it sink in and not make any rash decisions. They would wait and see where to go next, but he admitted his curiosity was getting the better of him. Even that strange awkward eagerness he got from Haymitch, which did as much as anything to convince Ash that this was real, didn’t dampen his need to find out what he could now. He could try to run from the truth, or try to learn as much as he could and make the best choice he could at that point. He had a brother, and uncomfortable as that bond was in some ways, in others he admitted it called to him.

There was a knock on the door as darkness was falling, and he went to go answer it, needing something to do besides play yet another game of checkers with Heike. Thalaea still hadn’t come back.

The rain was pissing down in a miserable spitting drizzle as he opened the door to see Haymitch and Johanna standing there. Seeing Haymitch in his jeans and a battered old waxed canvas coat, he had a sudden bright flash of memory.

_The almost-new coat hung far too loose on his brother’s skinny frame, a coat meant for a man rather than a boy of twelve. Ash knew Haymitch had traded on the Hob for it, and it probably belonged to one of the miners that died last week. Blown to bits, nothing to bury—sometimes he worried that his ma would die down there too and they’d get sent to the community home. Caught up in that horrified image of Peacekeepers coming to the door to take him away, Haymitch nudged his shoulder. “C’mon, runt! You’re eight now, same as I was when I started out in the woods. Ain’t time for daydreaming, we’ve got a full day of traps to set here.” He shoved the too-long sleeves up over his wrists and determined picked up the loop of cord for a snare. He grinned over at Ash wryly. “You’re smart, you’ll pick it up fast.”_

“Shit, you’ve had that coat forever,” he blurted before he could hold his tongue.

There was a flare of surprise and excitement in Haymitch’s light grey eyes. “You remember that, when we were kids, huh?” he said, tone carefully even in a way that didn’t match that flicker of momentary elation.

“Just had only a few seconds of it seeing you now,” he answered, shaking his head, trying to tell him, _Don’t get your hopes up_. Haymitch nodded, seeming to understand the message.

“Oh, apparently you’re off house arrest and you can come eat dinner with all the good girls and boys,” Johanna said, leaning in from where Haymitch had paused to fill the doorway, giving them a wry little wave of greeting.

“I’d suggest not wearing white,” Haymitch said with a smirk. The irreverent humor earned a few
chuckles. Better to laugh about it than stand there frozen by the burden.

As they grabbed their own coats against the rain, he hung back a minute, bringing up the rear with Haymitch. He knew he probably shouldn’t ask, but it was on his lips anyway. “Why?”

Haymitch chuckled low in his throat. “Some things don’t much change, do they? Look at you, always having to know why a damn thing happens.” That tugged at another echo of memory, Haymitch getting exasperated, telling a younger Ash that it was good enough to just know what use it was, wasn’t it? For a moment, Ash felt the warm glow of fond affection at that easy brotherly teasing, though it wasn’t enough. It faded into the gulf of two and a half decades and left him feeling the sorrow of its passing.

He kept silent, knowing from questioning prisoners that often well-chosen silence earned more than wasting words, and also certain Haymitch knew exactly what he was asking so there was no need to explain. Finally Haymitch sighed, looking aside a little. Ash had a sense of shyness coming from him, odd in a man who generally gave an impression of saying whatever he pleased and not giving much of a fuck what anyone thought. He wants me to like him, he realized. Maybe he needs it. Maybe Haymitch held Ash’s future in his grasp, but apparently it wasn’t a one-way exchange. He wasn’t sure what to think about that, power and responsibility all rolled into one.

“Because, little brother,” Haymitch finally said, tone going gruff and awkward, “I know what it’s like living where people would just as soon you never set foot outside your house again.” There was a world of suffering in that plain statement, years and years of pain that Ash glimpsed suddenly, years he’d spent dismissing Haymitch Abernathy as just another wasteful disgrace like everyone else. The shame hit him heavily from that. Maybe it was only the image Haymitch had felt he’d needed to project, but he’d bought it just the same as everyone else. As if he’d revealed too much and it made him edgy, Haymitch muttered, “So let’s just go eat some dinner and can you stop asking your damn questions about why, all right?”

“All right,” he agreed softly.
District Ten: Forty-Nine

Southlands, when it wasn’t a rainy muddy mess, had a certain charm to it. Back in the north everything was now starting to turn to autumn colors of fire and then to die off, but here the grasses and plants still shone a lush, verdant green.

Still, Johanna still felt almost disoriented by the lack of trees, by the wide open spaces of it. To the south was the river, and in all other directions, looking out from the station onto the prairie, she could see for miles and miles. Sometimes she felt that tingle of awareness down her spine and had the thought $\text{Everyone can see me and there’s nowhere to hide or escape.}$ It was just too vast and too open for her to feel comfortable. Seven tributes had never done well in arenas like this.

Working with the people here on their various issues, they’d still made some time over the last few days to try and spend time with Ash and Heike, usually making it pretty conspicuous and public. The fifth of the Peacekeeper group, Thalaea, seemed to have something going on with Nadji’s manager Drover, because Johanna noticed the two of them carefully ate their meals separately and then suddenly both of them would be gone, and Thalaea, while polite, never quite engaged in the conversation to the degree of the other four. Probably trying to keep it quiet and understated, she thought. Occasionally Drover would sit with them as well, making vague excuses about chatting about station business over a meal. He and Thalaea never sat next to each other, of course.

“Thistledown?” Haymitch asked, reaching for his coffee. “Your ma wasn’t Antiplaea, was she? And your pa was…shit, what was his name?”

“Jorestes,” Thalaea almost muttered, and though her dark skin hid it, Johanna was sure she was blushing. “Yes.”

“Got executed back in…mm…” He tapped his fingertips on the tin coffee cup, looking thoughtful. “53, wasn’t it? Last big public treason Capitol execution until, well, the one Johanna and I were gonna star in last year.”

“Yes. I was nine.” Her voice grew crisp and terse. With a startle, Johanna remembered him telling her about that execution the night before they were supposed to die. He’d been nineteen, he’d said, and it was one Capitol girl’s idea of a fun social event. A well-placed politician who’d pissed Snow off somehow, wasn’t that it?

Haymitch’s eyebrows rose. “Sweetheart, don’t think I’m judging. Anyone whose parents were convicted of treason against Coriolanus Snow...what they did to you after that certainly ain’t your fault.” She could tell he spoke just a little too loudly so that people passing by overheard it. Johanna hid a smirk. There he went again. She would bet that little tidbit would be all over the station by dinnertime.

Ash shot Haymitch a look and a half-smile of amusement played about his lips for a moment. Brains obviously ran in the Abernathy family, because Johanna would lay good odds the man knew exactly what his brother was doing. Clearly he wasn’t going to interrupt either. She’d seen enough to guess that Thalaea was a close friend.

They never quite relaxed, though. Their manner was a little easier than earlier now that they had been let off the leash and back into public, but none of the five of them looked totally comfortable. She always got the sense of an edge of wary hyper-vigilance to them, as if afraid at a moment’s notice they might come under attack. Any victor could recognize that attitude a mile away, same as they knew sneaking up unannounced on another victor was sheer oblivious idiocy, and that some of
them just really didn’t want to be touched at all without clear invitation. *They still don’t know what to expect,* she thought. Though raised to the tough life of a Peacekeeper as they had been, none of them would show it openly.

That afternoon, Haymitch was busy doing paperwork downstairs, while she felt like a lazy ass going to take a nap again. Couldn’t seem to shake the fatigue—did she have the flu or what? It wasn’t like it was the doldrums of winter where doing nothing but sleeping extra hours seemed like a fantastic idea.

She’d lost her lunch again too, barely managed to scamper out of Heike’s sight to toss it up behind one of the barns. Too much rich, fatty meat, maybe? She was more used to lean game and the like. Not to insult Jay Bellamy’s cooking, because it tasted fantastic, but every now and again she just lost the whole meal shortly after eating it. At least the cheese she’d sampled in the dairy barn that morning stayed put.

Lying there, it finally clicked. Continually puking? That was the one thing she’d heard women grouse about the most. *Couldn’t keep a damn thing down…felt like I was living on cornbread and berries for the first ten weeks…yeah, but then you made up for it with a vengeance, right?…hey, I’m eating for two now!*

But the rest? She ruthlessly tried to mark just what was different from normal, ignoring the impulse to excuse it off with jet lag, restlessness, her period approaching, or the like. The continual fatigue, the way little things seemed to try to send her emotions into a spiral, the constant need to pee, the way her breasts hurt like hell—was that part of it too? They never covered the topic much in school, Capitol-controlled as the curriculum was. About all they’d gotten regarding sex was a ten-minute lecture on anatomy and a warning from their teachers that having sex before their final reaping, since none of them could afford contraceptives anyway without a job, was much too big a risk. She’d learned all about her period from her mom, like most girls did. Presumably, when the time came she’d have learned about being knocked up from her too, or from friends, or Bern’s eventual wife, safe in that circle of fellow women and their wisdom. They’d have told her what to expect, what to watch for, and what to do. But she’d had the benefit of none of that knowledge—neither had Haymitch, come to think of it. He’d been entirely closed off from the lives of women since he was sixteen, and he occasionally quipped about that jokingly when she got pissed at him for not quite getting something about dealing with her.

She’d killed seven people up close and personal in her life. She didn’t even know how many she’d fucked. She’d helped plan a national rebellion. But in that moment she felt stupid and ignorant as any teenager. Maybe part of it was that she’d been afraid to hope too soon. Even now the thought of letting herself start to believe it only to be swiftly crushed hurt too much.

Staring down at her stomach, she prodded it almost curiously, as if somehow expecting something to feel different, or have some kind of sign. *You in there, baby?* Of course there was nothing.

Laying back, hands over her eyes, she tried to think. Who to ask? Everyone said Heike was a superb medic, and it sounded like she’d even delivered a few babies over the winter. But that somehow cut right into the middle of that odd space between them, where a gesture that might bring them closer together felt like it might be grasping for too much, too soon. She couldn’t consult Heike simply as a medic, but as a potential aunt as well, and Johanna didn’t know if they were ready for that just yet. Not to mention if Johanna was just crazy or wrong, she really didn’t want her little sister knowing that.

Other women—Annie, Chantilly, Enobaria, Clover? They’d either given birth or in Enobaria’s case, were damn close to it. They’d know the signs very well from experience. They’d probably even be
sympathetic to Johanna being clueless because they knew her situation all too well. But if she was wrong, or if she lost the kid later, she didn’t want knowledge out there in their social circle. It was all still too private.

Well, fuck. She had one more thought. Grabbing her shoes, she headed for the door. “Going for a walk,” she yelled to Haymitch.

Rising from his chair and putting aside the notebook he’d been scribbling in, he looked at her. “Want company?”

“Nah, I’m good.”

He smiled, leaning on the doorframe with his arms crossed over his chest, shirtsleeves pushed up. “Feeling better?” For just a second she thought she saw the spark of hope in his eyes, but maybe she was imagining that too.

She nodded at that, and quickly made her escape before she ended up just rambling out the whole business to him. Heading to Drover’s office, she told him bluntly, “You wanna go take a half hour with Thalaea and I won’t tell, if you let me use your phone? If anyone comes I’ll tell ’em you’re off inspecting the tannery to report that to me.”

His eyebrows shot up abruptly, but to his credit, he didn’t ask questions. Gesturing her to the desk, he muttered, “No need for me to inspect, Nadji’s got that all covered.”

She waited for the door to shut behind her, and sat down, reaching for the phone half-buried amongst the papers. Dialing quickly, it rang three times before the other end picked up. “Doctor Athena Wing.”

The rich, dark-toned voice, calm as it was, was almost reassuring. Wasn’t that a fucked-up state of affairs, where she’d confide first in someone from the Capitol?

“I think I’m knocked up,” she blurted. Then she realized what a great opener that made, and that the good doctor also probably had no idea who’d just let that statement fly. “Uh, this is Johanna. Johanna Abernathy.”

“Mnhm. I thought it might be you, from the accent.” The irritable urge to bark, You have the accent, not me, crossed her mind, but she shook it off. “So tell me, what are the symptoms you’re experiencing that you’re suspecting you’re pregnant?”

Trying to not just start babbling, she listed it off, wondering if she sounded like just a paranoid moron listing every little thing possible, even things she’d normally ignore.

“And when was your last menstrual period?”

“Uh,” she had to think back carefully, trying to place it. “That was when we were in District One. So that’s…like, six or seven weeks ago now? Not that I’m regular by any means.”

“No, but even so, with those symptoms…are you two using any kind of contraceptive, or are you deliberately trying to get pregnant?”

Feeling her cheeks heat up, she forced herself to not feel like a horny teenager caught in the act. It was sex, she had every right to have sex with Haymitch and not feel embarrassed, and she didn’t when she was with him. Blame the fierce need for privacy in that area. “Actually trying. We quit the shots about two months ago.”

With a bit of wonder, she realized Galen Wing apparently hadn’t blabbed about his chat with Haymitch to his wife that Athena didn’t know that she and Haymitch were actually planning on
trying for a kid. On the one hand, she cynically thought, *Yeah, Capitol people are good at keeping dirty little victor sex secrets.* But on the other, she felt an intense wave of relief that the man kept strictly professional enough to not even make idle conversation with his wife about it.

“Without a test it’s hard to say for certain, and—where are you?”

“District Ten.”

“Probably not going to get one there. You’re going to Three soon, yes?”

“Eight first, then Three. So it’ll be another few weeks.”

“Well, given the timing, you’d be about due for an ultrasound in a few weeks anyway, and you can get one in Three—that’s where they develop the technology anyway. I’d really strongly recommend it anyway since you’ve previously had a miscarriage. So we can skip the test and go right to the ultrasound to confirm it.”

“I’m due for a what?” She stared at the phone, trying to not wince at the mention of the miscarriage. But Haymitch had mentioned the Wings had been on the team that took care of them, and Katniss and Peeta, after the bombing. Of course Athena knew about that first baby.

She sensed the awkward pause as Athena apparently realized she was dealing with someone who’d grown up without the benefit of Capitol medicine, and deliberately kept ignorant of it besides. Even being a victor wasn’t a guarantee of knowing that kind of thing. Feeling even more like an idiot, she listened while the other woman explained exactly what the whole ‘ultrasound’ thing was.

Finally Athena asked, her voice concerned, “Do you have anyone in District Twelve who’s a trained medical professional, beyond folklore and herbs? I know Galen said discussing building hospitals and the like was part of the peace conference, but…”

She let out a tight, shaky laugh, forehead pressed against the wall. “I don’t think we have any of them in any of the districts. Except, you know, apparently in Three.” Even Heike’s Peacekeeper medic training wasn’t up to that standard.

“Damn,” there came the mutter over the phone. “I didn’t realize…” A deep sigh, and Johanna got the sense Athena was mentally clearing the board and trying to start over. “We’ll get to that issue. My colleagues and I are going to have to have a chat. For now, when you get to Three, you get that ultrasound set up and give them my name as your primary physician.”

She found herself scribbling down what seemed like a long list of things to do, things to not do, things to try to eat, a whole litany of “Call me if”. Compared to the normal pregnancy in Capitol-controlled Seven where Johanna had the impression a woman pretty much ate whatever was available and worked as best as she was able virtually until she gave birth, and just hoped for a healthy child, it was almost overwhelming, maybe even felt a little too cautious.

But at the same time, it felt almost comforting to know here was another woman who gave a shit and was firmly on her side. Not because this was the child of two victors, but simply because it was a child. Through it she steeled herself, knowing she wanted to keep this baby safe, whatever it took. This one was going to be OK if she had anything to say about it.

“Johanna?”

“Huh?” She snapped out of the daze, all at once a little overwhelmed at how suddenly everything had changed. “Guess I’d better go break the news to him.”
“Good luck.” There was a distinct hint of pleased amusement. “Remember, this is a happy thing, all right? I know it’s a lot. But it’ll work out.”

“I don’t want people knowing about this, until we’re sure it’s all going OK,” she blurted out. “I mean, you can tell your husband, fine, he’s another doctor and him knowing that if he’s talking to Haymitch or whatever is probably good, but…” The panic rose within her swiftly. She was pregnant and she couldn’t bear the thought of this one going badly, and especially having to face people who’d known.

“I won’t tell anyone else. And it’ll be all right. You’re both tough. You’ll both make wonderful parents.”

“Thanks,” she murmured, touched at the sentiment, particularly from a woman who’d lost a child of her own. Hanging up the phone, she pushed up from the desk and headed back to the cabin, feeling like the news was big enough she couldn’t contain it within herself alone for that long.

She found him there still writing, lost in thought. Taking a minute, she just looked at him, smiling a little to herself at the sight of him with his mind turned fiercely towards whatever problem he wanted to conquer. She loved that Haymitch, compared to the one who’d been so thwarted by forced helplessness and sorrow that he’d had to drown himself in liquor to blunt that passionate drive to care, to fight, and to succeed. Neither of them was perfect, but he’d do whatever it took for this kid, and so would she. She knew that, and it comforted her.

“Back?” he asked, not even looking up. She wasn’t surprised he’d heard or sensed her there. That same awareness she’d sensed in their siblings was alive and well in the two of them, and probably always would be. They’d probably always enter a place and instinctively see what or who was in it and what threat they might be, and look for ways out of it. Well, guess that’ll make us attentive parents if nothing else.

“Yeah,” she said, glad when he stood up and came over to give her a kiss. It might have looked like a casual gesture to most anyone else, but the promise and trust in that one small expression of affection touched her, as always.

She thought about that night on the rooftop of the Training Center, the first time she’d told him about a child of theirs. Or rather, he’d figured it out. It was sticky September heat now rather than a December chill in the mountains, and this was a child that was still there and one that they’d planned, but she found herself just as tongue-tied. Not out of grief and rage and uncertainty like back then, but the words just wouldn’t come.

So, looks like you managed it and knocked me up, was too flippant, even if to try to make a joke about it was her first instinct. She could tease him about other things, but this deserved more than that. But the simple unvarnished words of I’m pregnant or We’re having a kid stuck in her throat too. They changed everything, inexorable as they were, and somehow, plain and honest as they were, it was too much.

Seemed like a lot of times they did all right without the need for open speech—she remembered the long nights in Thirteen where they’d learned to read each other in silence when words were far too hard to manage, slowly coming to trust him with her body even as, unawares of the change, she started to trust him with her heart. So she took his hand in hers and placed it there on her stomach. Feeling the splay of his fingers there, warm through her shirt, she willed him to understand.

Looking up into his face she saw his eyes go wide and startled. She saw the unasked question there in his stunned expression. Really?
She knew him too well, certain that the moment he figured something out he would start to think of all the ways it could go wrong. *Be happy,* she thought silently, pressing his hand against her with her fingers going even tighter, *we’ve got months and months to worry about every little thing but right now please just...we need to be happy about this. We never get that.* Joy always came mingled with grief or suffering of some kind. She nodded in reply, still watching him, knowing her expression was probably a bit anxious.

He gave her a slight smile, one of those sweet, rare smiles of his that meant far more than his far more obvious smirks or even a grin, because those usually accompanied some kind of amused sarcasm. This was an expression of pure happiness, a halcyon moment where he let himself forget all the worries and simply take in the delight. For this instant, she knew nothing existed for him but the two of them and that news.

Gently he tugged at her hand to get her to let go, but he did it only to pull her close into an embrace. Standing on tiptoe, leaning into him with her head tucked into his shoulder, she held onto him in turn, feeling now like it really would be OK. They would be together and face this together.

However long after he finally spoke, she didn’t know, but she’d given herself over to the quiet contentment of just standing there in each other’s arms. “I’d wondered,” he said softly in her ear. “But I wasn’t sure if that was what it all meant, and I didn’t want to ask...”

Caught oddly halfway between laughter and tears, she shook her head, telling him it was all right, she didn’t blame him. “I don’t want to tell anyone yet,” she told him, suddenly terrified again that now that he knew, something would go wrong and it would kill him every bit as much as it would her. To her mortification, she felt the tears start running down her cheeks at the thought.

Stepping back a bit, hands on her arms, he looked at her and then slowly nodded. “It’ll be all right,” he told her soothingly. “Darlin’, whatever you need, I’m there.” She knew he didn’t give that promise lightly, and that he wouldn’t quit just because it got difficult.

She grinned at him and poked him lightly in the stomach. “That’s all right, we can gain a bit together. You’re looking too thin these days anyway.” It wasn’t meant as criticism. But she knew he was pushing himself too hard. She looked forward to getting him home, where maybe she could feed him up a bit and also get him to relax more.

He made a face. “Capitol newscasters say I haven’t looked better in the last ten years,” he said with a clear sense of mockery.

“Fuck ‘em.” She shrugged. “Actually, I always thought you looked good with a little weight on you.” Surprised even as she said it, she knew it was true. He looked good even now, even if possibly a bit strained. But another ten pounds would help even more, she thought; they’d make him look a bit more at ease and comfortable with himself and with life. Maybe that was the district mindset speaking where extra weight meant the good life, but she’d never had much attraction for the desperation that seemed inherent in the Capitol fear of anything but skin tight over the bones. It spoke of simply trying too hard.
He quirked an eyebrow at that, looking confused. “You were the one saying in the arena that I looked a hell of a lot better with the weight off.”

“That was the arena, Haymitch, and the cameras. We both said a lot of shit that wasn’t true.” Her temper rose, more quickly than usual, like a pot thrown right onto a hot burner, surprisingly even her with how quickly her emotions turned now. “It wasn’t ever the weight that was the problem anyway.” It was the air of neglect around him, the shaggy hair and rumpled clothes—though probably as a holdover from his whoring days he was always scrupulously showered—and the almost palpable air of depression, the sense that he’d gotten to the point where caring hurt so damn much he couldn’t even care about keeping himself alive and healthy.

“All right, all right,” he said, waving it off. “I’m sure when we get home Peeta’s going to be stuffing us both full of cakes and other shit anyway.” He grinned a little sheepishly. “We’ve gotta feed you and the little one up, you know.”

“When I can think about eating again,” she grumbled. At least she wasn’t puking nearly as constantly as Annie had, which was probably part of why she’d dismissed it.

There was a knock on the door, and Haymitch let her go finally to go answer it. To her surprise, Heike followed him in, carrying a mug of something. “Here,” she said, handing it to Johanna. “It’s ginger tea. I figured you could use it.”

Startled, she looked up at her little sister, who looked back at her with a steady gaze.

“Know where Ash is?” Haymitch asked Heike, glancing at the two of them. “I had a couple things to chat over with him anyway.”

“Saw him over towards the dog runs,” Heike answered.

Haymitch nodded his thanks. Heading back into the bedroom for a minute, she heard him rummaging through his things and then he came back, giving the two of them a farewell wave. She thanked his sense of timing in leaving the two of them alone. “You have to get back or wanna take a seat?” she asked, nodding towards the little table. Nobody ate their meals there since apparently everyone ate at the mess, but it was the closest to a kitchen table these cabins had.

“No rush,” Heike answered. She gave a rueful smile, and in that moment, Johanna could still see a glimpse of the uncertain girl she’d been. But this woman now was someone totally different. Her shy apologies now had become a quiet confidence, her flighty clumsiness become steady certainty. She doesn’t need me to protect her, she realized with a sense of amazement and disappointment. But she’s still my sister.

“We used to pick ginger roots in the wood,” Johanna said, taking a sip of the tea, gratified it was spiked with sugar to cut the spiciness of the ginger. Chewing the root fresh wasn’t exactly easy. “You remember that?”

“Here and there. I remember Mom and Dad sometimes, and M—Bern.” Heike fiddled nervously with a pencil on the tabletop and there was another slight echo of the girl Johanna had known. “But it’s just a moment here and there.”

“I visited their trees when I was in Seven. I’ll plant some for them in Twelve too.” It would be good to have a place for them, and that cherry tree too for the baby. Somehow the thought brought less pain now. It wasn’t that this new child had replaced the other, but she’d let herself try to move on from the grief and the guilt.

Eyes so much like her own lifted and held Johanna’s. “Jay thinks we should go back to Twelve.
That the opportunities will be better there. But he spent the most time there, and he’s got people that, well, I don’t know that they like him, but they’ll at least know he was no criminal. I know it wasn’t perfect then but compared to how it was when I got there…”

“Yeah,” she said wryly. She’d heard plenty about the last months before the Quell. Heard plenty about the firebombing too, for that matter, and the thought of what Heike must have endured in that, and in walking the whole way to Ten, haunted her. The devastation had been bad enough. But it spoke of reserves of strength in Henrika Mason that she’d drawn upon to make it that far and to survive so long here in Ten. Whether it was the Peacekeeper training, the ordeal of it all, or just greater maturity that brought them out, Johanna had to acknowledge her sister was now formidable in her own right. “And what do you think?”

A half-shrug answered her. “I’m not sure yet,” she admitted frankly. “I’ve built a good infirmary here and all. But I suppose Twelve could definitely use some help too. I can’t go back to Seven either. There’s nothing there for me. And unless I miss my guess, I’m going to be an auntie sometime next spring?”

Johanna smiled a little at her using the Seven term “auntie”, whether she’d done it deliberately or out of unconscious instinct. “Caught me,” she admitted. “I’d like you and Jay,” because she liked him, quietly earnest as he was, “there for the kid. But only if you want to be.”

“What’s it like there? Now?”

No point mincing words given that Heike had been there for the initial horror of it. “They’ve got it cleaned up. The bodies were all buried months ago. People from Seven are headed there even now for building houses. I’m reading up on architecture and I’ll be studying with some of them that’ll be moving there to help make some better buildings.” She blew on the tea in an attempt to cool it down a little, grateful to feel it sitting easily in her stomach. “So far I think we’ve got some people from every district moving there—we’ll see about Three and Eight. You honestly probably wouldn’t recognize it from before. The only things left from that are the Justice Building and Victors’ Village.”

Heike nodded at that. “I lost friends in that bombing,” she said quietly. Johanna tried to not flinch. She hadn’t really considered the hundreds of dead Peacekeepers who’d died right alongside the Twelve natives, but the horror of the thought once again that Heike might have been one of them cut deeply.

“I lost friends in the arena,” she returned. Maybe not close friends, but still, they’d been fellow victors, and friends inasmuch as she’d allow most people to be back then. “The best you can do for them now is go live your life. However you want. Wherever you want. They stuck you in a uniform and didn’t give you much choice, but what you do now…”

Heike nodded at that. “We’ll let you know, but I don’t think we should decide in a hurry,” she said gently. “Nadji’s said we can stay if we want, so it’s probably worth taking some time to see how things are here and weigh all the possibilities. But either way… I’d like to keep in touch.” Johanna’s heart lifted at that, and she found herself reaching out, folding Heike into a hug for the first time in nine years.

She tried to not think too much on the last time, at Seven’s Justice Building. She’d been seventeen, heading for her first year as a mentor, grateful beyond words Heike hadn’t been reaped. Neither of them had any idea how a month’s time would change everything for them both. By that August their parents and brother were dead, she’d slept with Haymitch and lost two tributes and been turned into a whore, and Heike was a would-be Peacekeeper without any memories. But she wasn’t seventeen and Heike wasn’t fourteen. “I’d like that,” she said, letting her sister go only reluctantly. “You picked a good one, by the way,” she teased lightly. “He’s nuts about you. Anyone can see it.”
“Could say the same to you,” Heike answered with a smile. “And if you want more tea, just let me know. I’ll send some with you when you leave.”

Standing at the door watching her sister head back towards her own cabin, Johanna shook her head. Heike looking after her—who the hell would have ever expected that? But at the same time, things coming full circle like that felt right. “You’d be proud of her,” she murmured to the three Masons who hadn’t lived to see what that awkward teenage girl had become, and tried to be able to bear letting go once again if it came to that.

~~~~~~~~~

Haymitch thought it was actually good to go try to clear his mind a little, because the news still rattled around up there, stunning in its sheer force. They’d made a kid together. He was going to be a father. All at once elation and sheer terror turned within him, two sides of the same coin.

So many questions and worries to be addressed yet, but so much wouldn’t be known for a while yet. They’d simply have to do the best they could, and trust that they’d become strong enough to handle this. They’d agreed they would do anything they could for their own child, and even as the panic of being responsible for a child, someone so dependent upon his protection, threatened to drown him, he tried to keep it at bay.

Of course, maybe going and dealing with another child he’d been responsible for and been unable to save wasn’t the best idea. Though this one he’d lost to a white uniform rather than to the grave as he’d thought. But thinking of family and future as he was, and recognizing the Mason sisters needed some time alone, he figured now was as good a time as any to try to have a solo chat with Ash.

Surprised as he was that Heike seemed to have figured it out, maybe he shouldn’t have been. The woman had the medical knowledge he didn’t, living apart from everyone as he had all those years. So it seemed only fair he let Ash know that, along with everything else. But Chantilly and the others already had their places in his life. Ash deserved to know what was at stake. If his brother wanted no part in that, fine—well, it would hurt, so maybe not quite fine. But if Haymitch let him know and Ash refused it, that was fair. Better than keeping it from him.

Besides, he had the letter tucked in his pocket. He didn’t know what Phineas Fog had to say to Ash, what might be different from his letter to Haymitch, but he would see it delivered just the same. Funny thing, all at once telling a man about the blood ties of the past and the future.

He found Ash at the dog runs as Heike had said, patiently training a short-legged brown and white dog. “Who’s your friend?” he nodded to the dog.

“This is Rusty,” Ash said, leaning over to scratch the dog between its upright ears. “The corgis only work the inner pastures, though, and the home paddock. None better for that.” He offered a faint smile. “Poor things couldn’t run all the way to the farthest outer pastures, or out on the range. We use the collies there.”

He couldn’t help but laugh at the idea of the poor short-legged little thing trying to keep up with riders on horseback for miles and miles. “Looks like you’ve got a good touch with ‘em.”

“I’ve picked up some here and there.” Rusty padded over and sniffed Haymitch’s boots. Leaning down, Haymitch gave him a scratch himself, and the dog rolled over, obviously wanting a belly rub.

“Good touch yourself, looks like. Ever had a dog?” Ash asked curiously.
“We didn’t have the food to spare when we were kids,” Haymitch answered, wondering if he was telling Ash what he already knew.

“Figured.”

“And after,” he shrugged awkwardly, “I didn’t much want to be responsible for anything I didn’t have to, you know?”

“You mean you didn’t want to get attached to anything. That’s…understandable.” Shit. Cool words like that scored a direct hit, and it was an uneasy feeling to see how quickly Ash could read him. “Given what happened to Mother—Ma,” he corrected himself, “and Briar. And what you thought happened to me.”

“Yeah, well, two tributes dead every single year, and there was also the matter that it didn’t pay for Coriolanus Snow’s little problem child to get too close to anyone who might pay if I fucked something up.” He shook his head, angry with himself for the biting sarcasm of it. “Maybe the best thing that could have happened to you was to go to Two. Otherwise, you just might have found yourself pulled in the reaping some year only so Snow could prove the point to me all over again.” That would have been just like the man. Let Haymitch think he was safe and then come up with some kind of bullshit excuse to shove him down one more time. There had been a few years he was sure the Gamemakers had gone after Twelve tributes with a vengeance, probably on Snow’s orders for no other reason than to prove once again to Haymitch Abernathy just how powerless he was.

“Pretty fucked-up world if you think I was safest far away from you.”

“Reality, little brother.”

“So tell me,” Ash said, leaning back against a fence post and studying Haymitch with cool, assessing grey eyes, “if it had been a choice to send me away, would you have done it?”

“To keep you safe? No question.” He shook his head, frustrated that it even had to be asked. “I lied and cheated and fucked and bled, just to keep people who didn’t give a damn about me safe only because I didn’t want to see them hurt on my account. You think I wouldn’t do anything for my own brother?”

“And what will you do now if people give me shit? Step in and tell them off? Send me away to keep me safe?” Ash shook his head, crouching down himself to give the still-blissful Rusty a pat on the belly. “Don’t get me wrong. I appreciate that you’ve made a chance for us here by giving us some good publicity. You didn’t have to do any of that, especially not for someone who, on paper, was your enemy. But I’m not eleven, Haymitch. I can’t live in your footsteps the rest of my life and you can’t fight all my battles for me. I’ve had to do it for myself for years.”

It hurt almost like a physical blow, carrying the hint of rejection as it did. But he forced himself to try to back off and look at it with objective clarity. Was it a Fuck off, I don’t need you rejection, or was it a man sounding the situation out? “You’re my brother,” he said finally. “And I always fight hardest to protect my own. That’s how I am.” Brutus had seen that clearly enough, and for as long as he’d been in Two, maybe Ash would understand it better phrased that way. “But I know you’re not a little kid. I’m not sixteen anymore either. You’ve made your life.”

“I’ve made the life the Corps let me.”

“And now you’re not in the Corps.”

“I’m still an ex-Peacekeeper in a country that at best tolerates me and at worst wants to hang me.”
“Oh, come on. I wrote the fucking book on years of the nation hating me. I managed to turn it around by finally taking the chance when I saw it to act and showing them they were the idiots for counting me out, not by moping. So you just gonna walk out on the prairie and blow your brains out or what? You didn’t quit when you were a kid with no memories shoved into the Peacemine. Didn’t quit either when you were in the middle of the fighting in District Eight. Didn’t quit here—and don’t think I don’t see that you step up to protect the other four of ’em. So here’s your chance to turn it around and make your life on your terms. You gonna piss and moan, or are you gonna find your way?”

Ash’s eyebrows rose as Haymitch delivered that brisk little lecture. “Are you always this inspiring?”

“Damn straight. How the fuck do you think I got through to Katniss Everdeen? Polite requests? Girl’s still a total pain in the ass, just imagine how bad she was two years ago.” He saw the reluctant smile on his brother’s face, feeling the grin on his own face in answer, and relief washed over him as Ash started to laugh. He couldn’t help but follow. Rusty stared at the two of them in abject confusion, rolling over again and eyeing the two of them like they were demented. “All right, look. You’re a grown man. I respect that. Ain’t my intent to treat you like a snot-nosed kid. But if you do want to come to Twelve, I think your chances there are gonna be better in the end.”

“How so?”

“New start, people coming in from all over the place, and we’ll have to figure out what this new territory will be like given that mix. It’s not like you walking into an established situation here and just having to fit it. Besides, what have they got you doing here? Sure, I know it’s useful, but Nadji’s buddy Drover was telling me you had a little sideline in tracking down crimes and you were damn good at it.”

He eyed Ash with a smirk. “Got a bit tired with stuffing all those wool sacks, did we?” Ash blushed and grimaced. Haymitch just laughed, tapping his temple with his fingertips. “You’re too smart to spend your life chasing sheep, Ash. You’re an Abernathy. We don’t do well when we’re bored, see. We start thinking. Dangerous thing, thinking, because then we start making trouble.”

He earned a chuckle in reply for that. “All right, so you won’t smother the hell out of me. Can’t help that I’ll be Haymitch Abernathy’s brother, though.”

“You will be no matter what district you’re in, unfortunately.”

“It’ll be worse in Twelve with you right there.”

“Probably. But you can hide from reality here with the wool sacks, or you can make your place somewhere on your own terms. Wherever you are, I’ll be as involved, or not, as you want.”

Ash gave him another of those half-smiles. “Well, Jay and Heike seem to think you’re all right. I think you terrify them a bit. Rhee likes you well enough.”

“And you?” The question was out of his mouth before he could help it, and immediately he wished he could snatch it back.

“I think you’re a good man.” At least he got that much, and he understood Ash couldn’t reasonably offer more than that yet. “I’ll think about it, all right? You won’t be back to Twelve for a while yet.”

“Another month after we leave, yeah.”

“All of us will have an answer by then, I’m sure.”
Haymitch nodded, willing to accept that. It was a decision better not made in haste anyway. “Two things,” he said. “First…you should know. Johanna and I are gonna have a kid. So you’ll be an uncle, no matter what district you end up in.”

“Congratulations.” He got a wistful smile in answer. “Maybe Rhee and I can think about kids now that we know we’re not gonna get executed, right?”

Recognizing it as vulnerability couched in black humor, Haymitch couldn’t help but appreciate that. “Well, hurry up and maybe they can be playmates,” he joked. “Other thing…” He pulled the letter out. “This letter is for you. From Phineas Fog.”

Ash took it. “And who would he be?”

“He would be Head Peacekeeper in Twelve from a couple years before I was born, until I was eighteen. He would also be our ma’s…lover,” he finally settled on the word, acknowledging it, “and our father, both of us.” Pa was simply too familiar. Seeing the highlights of rich mahogany brown in Ash’s hair glinting in the sunlight even now, he couldn’t help but think of Fog’s hair, just the same color. But there was so much of their ma in him too, and he knew without question that Magnolia Abernathy would be glad he was alive, and wouldn’t fault him for wearing that uniform. “Also the man who oversaw Ma and Briar’s execution and who called President Snow to keep you alive.”

Ash’s fingers clenched in the paper, crinkling it slightly. “You dragged this letter along just hoping you’d find me, huh?”

“His letter to me asked me to give it to you if I found you. So I did. I keep my word.” He thought about it for a minute. He still wasn’t sure he could forgive Fog, not entirely. For him, the Peacekeeper uniform was too distant to easily embrace. Maybe Ash would understand the man who’d been their father more than Haymitch could. “I don’t say I fully forgive for what he did. But she loved him, all those years, and she was no weakling or a fool. So there must have been a fair bit of good in him too. And he fought for you, best he could. So I may not love him, but I know he really had no choices. Neither did you. You both did your duty and you tried to minimize the damage where you could. So, for what it’s worth, you did the best you could. That’s about all anyone could do under Snow. Someday, more people will probably see that.” Probably once the distinction was better made by CIB between those who’d gone beyond the rules and those who had tried to stay as decent as possible. Right now, he knew it was all still a muddle for everyone.

Leaving Ash to read the letter in privacy with one last pat on the shoulder, he headed back towards Nadji’s office, figuring he’d keep himself busy with work for a while now.

But at least he felt a bit calmer about everything than he had before—whatever happened, it would be all right. He had a brother and a sister-in-law, he would have a child soon enough. Some things he couldn’t change, but he thought his future seemed bright enough that he’d allow himself hope. Granted, hope had been a foolish luxury for so long that he still had to actually permit himself to feel it, unbar the gates rather than simply let it well up as automatic instinct. But it felt good to at least try and believe in something better than all the barren, dark years he had known.
September in District Eight was already carrying a crisp, cool hint in the air, and Haymitch thought the first nip of frost would happen soon. There were no trees in the district center for him to see the changing leaves as they had in northern Ten. Eight instead featured just massive blocky factories and the high-rise slum apartments rising in towering columns towards the blue autumn sky. On television, that and the women’s headscarves had always been the only color on Reaping Day; the entire district seemed just various shades of grey, depressing in its way as Twelve.

Even the Capitol had a hard time trying to find something lovely or appealing to feature in Eight—usually they hurried to get the cameras into the factories and talked about the efficiency and production and energetic, clever fingers of the workers.

But things had changed a little. The tenements still looked just about ready to come crashing down in a heap with a good stiff wind, but the locals had defiantly painted on the dull grey stone. One or two murals made him think perhaps One’s artists ought to be calling here to find some apprentices. But for the most part it was just bright, appealing colors and designs. Compared to the garish, over-the-top style of the Capitol which would have drenched every single square inch of the place in gaudy hues and called it beautiful, the locals instead had painted with a dash of red or blue to outline a window, or a design of leaves and vines mimicking ivy there on another apartment’s front face. Overall, it called attention away from the bleakness of the ramshackle building, carefully drawing the eye to something pleasing without overwhelming the viewer.

He shouldn’t be surprised at that. Eight had been the first to rebel, and even from Ash’s sparse words where he knew most of it wasn’t said, he knew the war here had been particularly hellish. Beyond Twelve, no other district had suffered more wartime losses. The triumphant Eight natives clearly wanted to set their own stamp on their home and claim it for their own now that they had chased the Capitol out, and he couldn’t blame them for it.

Corduroy and Kersay Yasbeck’s greetings were brisk and cordial, but not as warm as they’d received some other places. Remembering Johanna had said that being left to nearly last of the districts to get that attention towards rebuilding had rankled Kersay during the peace conference. He wondered if that was some of the cause. Or perhaps it was that they’d already spoken to Brocade Paylor as one of their own, someone who’d lived and fought through the worst of the war here, and thus felt less need for an outsider to assess conditions to report it to the president. Perhaps too there was some frustration—outside of Twelve, Eight had earned the reputation as one of the most hopeless districts with uninspiring tributes. But whatever their reasons, they weren’t proud or stupid enough to reject help when it was offered.

“Taffeta asked that you come see her for dinner,” Kersay said, a tall and stately woman wearing a summer-sky blue headscarf today. “We put her up on the Row, of course, and you’ll be there as well.” So despite having been forced to live in the Capitol as a politician’s mistress for decades, Eight had at least given its last surviving victor her place on Victors’ Row as she deserved.

“She didn’t make it for the meet ‘n’ greet?” Johanna queried, looking surprised.

Corduroy rubbed the back of his neck, looking suddenly awkward. “She asked if it was all right if she opted out. I don’t blame her. Any of you certainly has the right to keep off-camera if you want.”

True enough, but Haymitch had the suspicion that something else was perhaps in play here. Taffeta Locke was one of the strongest people he’d known in the two and a half decades since they’d met, and she could handle the filming here if she’d wanted. Whatever was happening, it set him ill at ease.
—was she sick?

“I suppose you’re reported most of the situation here to Brocade, and she’s familiar with it anyway.” They might as well get that acknowledgment out of the way right now, he figured. “But Johanna and me, we’re here trying to compare it against all the other districts, so if we can go through it again anyway?”

“Of course,” Corduroy said, nodding. “Would you want the tour now?”

He glanced over at Johanna, waiting for her to tell him whether or not she needed some rest. She gave a slight nod and said, “No time like the present, Corduroy.”

“Roy,” he said with a wave of his hand, gesturing for the two of them to follow.

Walking through the narrow cobblestone streets between the tall apartment buildings, he felt the strange sense of being boxed in and unable to escape, a sense like he’d never had in the forest for all that sometimes it had carried echoes of the arena. The shadows they cast, though, were total in nature, glum and heavy, rather than the dappled, alternating light and dark of sunlight filtered between the trees. The solid stone of the apartments contrasted to the space of the trees that still gave the woods an impression of openness. Six had been oppressive in its way because of the attitude of its people more than the structure of the buildings, but just the same, Eight felt like it weighed on him. Don’t like it here, he thought, a little embarrassed by it, given he was here to try to help out.

They walked, and Roy pointed things out here and there. Mostly it was sites related to the war, told to them with a sort of defiance and pride and a stirring of residual anger. Here’s where they held off the Peacekeepers for forty-eight hours. This is the factory the bastards blew up. So many women and kids in there, no warning. This is the hospital they bombed while the Mockingjay was here.

Standing on the western edge of the city, at a piece of ground with patchy grass, he saw someone had begun carving or writing names into boards hung crookedly on stakes. Seeing the long list there, a bizarre garden of name-boards littering the site, he asked quietly, “What site was this?”

“This is where they made us bury the dead from the uniform factory,” Roy said, green-gold eyes shining with a fierce rage. A year and a half hadn’t dimmed it. Haymitch had the feeling that five, ten, fifteen, even fifty, might not do the trick. It would burn like the coal fires back at Dunstan’s in Twelve, smoldering underground, mostly hidden except to those who got closed and looked for it, but burning hot as anything. “No mourning rites. No proper burials. Just thrown in a trench they made us dig. Blown to bits, most of them. We had to bury the dead from the hospital in a mass grave too. Hundreds more there.”

“We had that kind of issue in Twelve,” Johanna said, eyes scanning the names—hundreds of them.

“Too many people were dead to bury them individually. Thousands. Too many too badly burned to identify,” he said wearily, remembering all at once the gruesome sight in the Mellark bakery. That had been the entire district. To try to deal with every single person as an individual would have been physically and emotionally impossible. “They’re buried now in a mass grave in what used to be our meadow. At some point you’ve gotta accept that your district needs to live for the living, not the dead. You bury ‘em and trust that they would understand why you couldn’t do it proper as you’d like.”

“We understand the reality,” Roy said, hands stuffed in his pockets, that bleak rage still in his eyes. Finally he looked at Haymitch as if for the first time they had some kind of understanding and fellow feeling between them, both having endured these kinds of catastrophic losses where funerals weren’t even possible. “But believe me when we say that we’ll never forget.”
Compared to the other districts they’d seen, who were trying to rebuild and forget, Eight wore its scars openly. Rather than trying to cover them up or raze away the rubble and build something new on the site, they labeled those places as if they would do so from here to eternity. *We won’t forget,* Roy had said, and he could see that was so. Eight would dare the world to try to forget by making sure these places stayed there as a reminder for all to see, a lesson to everyone. Considering they’d advocated keeping the arenas after they were made over into a memorial to the fallen tributes rather than a Capitol carnival, he could hardly argue Eight’s right to keep its own memories in the way they wanted.

But there was an underlying rage and vigilance to it that bothered him. Twelve was trying to move on and make itself anew—perhaps because it had been wiped out so cleanly they had little other choice. Eight wasn’t. There was no attempt at peace and trying to come to terms with what had happened here. The wounds of war stood out like bold, scarlet-painted signs of accusations.

District Eight had transformed from the place of the quiet, helpless city-dwellers who always failed at the arena. They had stepped up and fought, and he had the sense that they would never be seen as simply weak or meek or compliant again. They would fight now, he thought. As they toured, he saw teenage kids running laps through the city street, uncomfortably reminded of the military training in Thirteen, wondering if this was the new District Eight—one where every kid trained to be ready to fight in response for all those years of having no training, no knowledge, and no hopes.

Johanna’s energy obviously came back from the usual morning lull as she stepped briskly ahead of him, as they turned towards the north side of the city. The green kerchief tied over her hair had a subtle paisley pattern in it, he finally noticed. He wondered how much she’d grumbled about having to cover her hair here in Eight with respect to district tradition, but at least Cinna and Effie’s wardrobe hadn’t pushed her to wearing the full native headscarf. Probably in part because the preps had no idea how to manage the complicated knots and wraps of one—the Capitol had never let an Eight female victor or tribute wear her scarf on camera. He knew from chatting with Taffeta and Georgette and Cecelia, and even Woof that it was considered a humiliation tantamount to stripping them naked, but that was the Capitol.

_A quaint but barbaric and oppressive custom detrimental to our district’s women,* Linsey Hirschbein, heroine of “Splendor in the Mills,” had declared as she ripped off her headscarf while on the factory floor, defiantly letting it fall among the scraps of the shirts she’d been sewing. *A woman’s beauty should be allowed to shine!*

This coming from the place that dealt in bizarre wigs and body alterations, he’d always thought wryly. But then, the Capitol hadn’t particularly been known for self-awareness or a sense of irony. Or good films, for that matter.

Suddenly the city just _ended,_ and they stood on the edge of a landscape of broken and burned cinderblock and the twisted remnants of steel support beams, rubble strewn in the blackened streets with their heat-cracked cobblestones. The fires had burned so intensely that even the buildings still standing had scorch marks most of the way up the sides nearest to the flames. Their doors had iron grates installed over them.

“Condemned,” Roy said, nodding to them. “They’re too structurally unstable to live in now, with one side that compromised. They could collapse easy enough.” He gave a thin, painful smile full of unspeakable memories. “We’ve dug through enough rubble already for the living and the dead. I’m not doing that again.”

Stepping carefully among the ruins, climbing atop a heap of the rubble probably fifty or sixty feet high, he was careful to not turn his ankle by getting his foot caught in a gap between stones, or step
on anything sharp. Standing on what looked like half of a steel door, the remnants of what looked like a child’s marker doodles below his feet, he and Johanna surveyed in all directions. As far as the eye could see, there was nothing but ashes and char and rubble throughout this entire sector of the city. “How much of the city is this that you lost?” Johanna called down to Roy, her voice suddenly unsteady.

“How much of the city is this that you lost?” Johanna called down to Roy, her voice suddenly unsteady. “About a third,” Roy called up as they picked their way back down to safer ground. He’d seen enough. No need to tarry up there longer—it tugged easily enough on all the uncomfortable reminders of Twelve when Snow had forced him to walk through the devastation only three days after the Quell. All it lacked was the bodies. He wondered if they had recovered them all somehow, without the heavy excavation equipment like Six had loaned to Twelve, or if the bodies had just rotted through the spring and summer to the point there was no longer any smell. That seemed far more likely to his mind. Staring at the rubble piles, imagining them as tombs—for how many?—he suppressed a shudder. “They dropped the bombs in…October.” He gave a dry, coughing laugh. “They must have figured Eight was due one more little fuck-you while they still had some bombers.”

“We didn’t know,” Johanna said solemnly, arms crossed over her chest, slowly shaking her head as if in a daze trying to take in the scale of it all.

What had they been doing in October? Finnick’s wedding, trying to capture the last of Six and dealing with issues in Two, and training for the assault on the Capitol. There had been no word of a further attack on Eight.

“Coin probably didn’t let word get out,” Haymitch remarked. It would have been like her to control the information that got presented to the public, or even to people supposedly in the know such as the victor-trainees of the would-be Victory Squad.

“Brocade of course begged for aid, but President Coin informed us that as Eight was already in rebel hands, it was an unfortunate incident, but the war and news efforts were better served elsewhere while the fighting was still active.” His voice dripped contempt with every word and Haymitch could hardly blame him. To be told that deep problems and suffering weren’t important was to experience a casual cruelty. “She did thank us for informing her of the devastating power of this second deployment of napalm bombs.”

Napalm—the same bombs they’d used to destroy Twelve, and the same bombs Coin had eventually turned on those Capitol kids, trusting it would be laid at Snow’s door. The trial would end any day now, had dragged on far too long already, and he hoped like hell they had enough to hang the woman. Johanna gave a sharp bark of sarcastic laughter. “Of course she did. She had her own plans for that napalm, didn’t she?”

He thought of the slick spots of napalm burns on her skin and his, where they’d helped drag those kids to safety, some of them already burning. Remembered the acrid smell of the flames, the same whiff that had been there in Twelve in the July heat. Remembered the panic gave him just enough of an adrenaline rush to overcome his pain and his exhaustion, so that he could throw Peeta over his shoulders like an unconscious rag doll, even as despite the December chill he sweated from the sheer unbearable heat of the nearby flames.

He’d been touched by that fire and it burned like nothing else, worse than the electrical wires and cigarette butts he’d experienced in the Detention Center. To die that way was a notion that still haunted his nightmares, and sometimes it mingled in that dream-confusion with the burning house in the Seam where everyone his sixteen-year-old self loved lay dead, with the volcano from the Second Quell, and with the flame-jet sector of the Third Quell arena. In those dreams the mountains around Twelve suddenly spewed napalm and set the entire area aflame, as he could only watch everyone he
now loved burn to death, screaming in agony—Johanna, Finnick, Chantilly, Katniss, Peeta, Shad, Taffeta, too many. He woke up terrified anew of fire and temporarily unsettled at the thought that now he had so many people to lose.

He looked at the wreckage here and forced himself to shrug off the unease and the connotations. This wasn’t about his nightmares or what Twelve had endured. This was about Eight. “You couldn’t get excavation equipment?” he asked, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

Roy raised a greying eyebrow. “Are you kidding? Twelve got first priority on that.” He kept his voice even, maybe a little too much so, perhaps to hide some anger and resentment.

“He couldn’t get excavation equipment?” Johanna said. “We can chop at it for hours with a hatchet or we can just saw the damn thing down. Yeah, Twelve got first crack at it. Probably because the entire district is fucked, and probably also because yeah, the four of us that lived there over the winter are pretty well known, and the destruction’s pretty public knowledge. Six isn’t just sitting with their thumbs up their asses, you know, screwing you over. It’s rough over there as well and they’re having a hard time keeping their hovercraft and their machinery in repair.” Funny how seeing the situation in each place and hearing everyone’s complaints and issues let them see how it all worked in tandem. The Capitol may have tried to divide and isolate them, but Haymitch rapidly found on this trip that all the districts depended on each other, and if one district was in deep shit, it probably had far-reaching consequences. Six’s struggles in particular were a tough blow to take.

“Well,” Roy pointed out, giving a deep sigh of resignation, “no point now. Winter’s coming and we can’t do any cleanup under a few feet of snow.”

“First thing in the spring we’ll get you that work crew,” Haymitch promised. He knew it was rash for him to speak for it like that, and Brocade must have been well aware of the problem here. But she’d held off and let the work crews go to Twelve first. Probably because of greater need, yes, but he also sensed that if she’d pushed for Eight there, it might have looked like favoritism towards her home district rather than the national impartiality she so desperately needed people to believe she possessed. He reckoned that was also why she hadn’t spoken much about the situation here, trusting him and Johanna to form their own judgments rather than be guided by hers.

Looking at Eight’s mayor, he thought he saw the first hint of a thaw at that. Glancing over at Johanna, she looked at him and gave a hint of a smile, that enigmatic expression that told him that she had something on her mind she’d tell him later.

“First thing in the spring we’ll get you that work crew,” Haymitch promised. He knew it was rash for him to speak for it like that, and Brocade must have been well aware of the problem here. But she’d held off and let the work crews go to Twelve first. Probably because of greater need, yes, but he also sensed that if she’d pushed for Eight there, it might have looked like favoritism towards her home district rather than the national impartiality she so desperately needed people to believe she possessed. He reckoned that was also why she hadn’t spoken much about the situation here, trusting him and Johanna to form their own judgments rather than be guided by hers.

Looking at Eight’s mayor, he thought he saw the first hint of a thaw at that. Glancing over at Johanna, she looked at him and gave a hint of a smile, that enigmatic expression that told him that she had something on her mind she’d tell him later. “All right,” he said, surveying the devastation one last time and wanting to leave it behind, “what’s the situation here? Overall?”

Corduroy cleared his throat, eyes looking warily hopeful now. Maybe that was all it had needed—to openly give a damn. Hopeless District Eight, always so easily savaged in the Games and then mercilessly broken down over and over during the war, always knowing nobody would help them. Even Brocade Paylor couldn’t do nearly as much as he imagined she wanted, because her hands were tied now. “Half-destroyed, overcrowded, undersupplied, and unnecessary,” he summed it up succinctly. Nobody could accuse the man of avoiding brevity.

Eight had lost nearly half its population, but given so much damage to so many buildings, he imagined they were probably crammed in breathing each other’s stink. “How overcrowded?”

“Capitol days, it was one family to an apartment. So,” he shrugged, “you, your spouse, your kids, maybe your parents if they were still around—that meant anywhere from two to, well…ten, or whatever. We’ve had to jam two families into most apartments now. The tempers are up because of it, and,” he made a face, “so is the disease level.”

“Undersupplied?” Johanna asked next, moving to the next point.
“Medical. We’ve got a lot of wounded left from the war, and a lot of illness this year packed in as we are. It’s only going to get worse over the winter. But of course the supply’s limited, so…” He gave an impatient shrug. “The raw materials aren’t coming in. We’re getting some wool and leather from Ten, they seem to be in good shape, but Eleven isn’t sending much cotton and silk cocoons.”

“Eleven’s kind of a mess,” Johanna told him wryly.

“I’m sure. So people don’t have much in the way of jobs to go to at present, most of the factories are barely working because they were either damaged or sabotaged. And let’s be honest, in terms of being unnecessary, we’re not very much in demand.” Another of those swift shrugs. “We weren’t exactly top of your list for essential industries.” Haymitch could hardly deny that fact. Brocade had admitted as much in making the trip schedule. “Nobody’s gonna be buying something like silk for years to come anyway. Even cotton or shoes aren’t a certainty. Hard times like these, people simply make do rather than buying new.” True again, and there was an edge of despair beneath the matter-of-fact tone.

So maybe that was why the people were out training in the streets, or at least part of it. It took their minds off things, gave them something to do. He didn’t doubt that the sense of isolation and lack of ability to rely on anyone else had something to do with it as well, but there were a lot of pieces to this particular puzzle.

“Well, we started laying the groundwork for it at the peace conference—work exchange and the like. It’ll at least give your people somewhere to go for a few years to get steady work while Eight rebuilds.” And apparently like Four, tried to figure out what to do since it couldn’t exactly depend on a sole industry anymore. He had the feeling, looking at them, that they didn’t want to be helpless, merely accepting a handout. Eight refused to be anyone’s victims now.

Some part of him wanted to call Ash up down in Ten and ask him more about Eight, painful as the subject probably was for him. Having another thought, remembering Fallow’s vehemence on the subject, he asked, “Since you’re having some crime issues—I assume you and everyone else will refuse to have any ex-Peacekeepers here as part of a new police force?”

“Absolutely. We’ll accept Thirteen natives if need be for the job, but I’d prefer we train up some of our own for the job. I only wish we’d killed the whole damn lot of the ghosts when we had the chance.”

Feeling the flare of temper and defensiveness on Ash’s behalf, having heard the story from Thalaea when Ash wouldn’t tell him, he wondered if he could have helped these people if they’d executed Ash. Probably, he acknowledged with an inner sigh. After all, he was helping Capitolites and Peacekeepers and all other kinds that he had no natural cause to like. The situation wasn’t written in black and white, and he wouldn’t condemn an entire district for the actions of a few. That was a classic Snow move, with his damn firebombs on Twelve because of Haymitch’s rebellion. Still, he would have found it very hard to forgive, and he knew when they passed by the Justice Building, he would look long and hard at the stage where his brother had almost died to the roars of an angry mob.

But he could understand the mob’s rage as well, and their lust for vengeance against the soldiers who’d been ordered to invade their homes and put down the rebellion as harshly as possible. Perhaps they’d followed their orders, but those orders cut deep. But Brocade had apparently shown her wisdom even then in saying that death should never become a spectacle.

Walking back through the rest of the city towards the Row, really looking now at the people on the streets, he could see that while they didn’t look pinched and starved like they might have before the Capitol’s downfall, hunger wasn’t the only issue out there. Their clothes were faded and patched—
expertly so, but some of them were wearing little more than an assortment of stitched-together rags. There was a wary vigilance to Eight’s people, their eyes too sharp, even as their shoulders held that slight forward roll as if they sagged forward in fatigue trying to hold up the weight of the world. These people carried the war with them still—not the aftermath and its healing scars, but the war itself, fresh and bleeding.

Given that there had been plenty of days he felt like the arena would never scab over, prodded constantly as it was by his miserably pointless daily existence and the annual ritual of the Games, he understood that well enough. They didn’t feel safe yet. No wonder they trained and acted defensively and wouldn’t trust a Peacekeeper or Capitolite as far as they could throw them.

The months of Peacekeeper occupation in Twelve came back to him, and the knowledge that only his victor status kept him from being a potential target, so long as he didn’t do anything too drastic. Even their Quell training had him terrified initially that Romulus Thread would take a whim to punish them for it, as it was technically against the rules. Apparently the man considered it entertaining, which was almost more disturbing, but at least it didn’t end up with them in the stocks, the whipping post, or even the gallows.

That said something, didn’t it? Twenty-four years he’d lived knowing that no matter how badly he might end up hurt, how terribly he might be abused physically and psychologically, the killing blow would never come, because a victor’s life was almost sacred. But in those desperate months under occupation, he wasn’t even sure any longer that his status as a victor would protect him if Thread called up Snow and said Haymitch was being an issue. It sure as hell hadn’t kept him from a return to the arena, ostensibly to die. Besides, there were three Twelve victors. One could always have been executed as an example to the others. Maybe even all three of them, and Snow could have just reaped two more from the surplus from the other eleven districts to fill in the open slots. Didn’t much matter to Snow how it happened, so long as Haymitch ended up dead and stopped being a potential threat, right? Maybe it wouldn’t even be a public hanging courtesy of Thread. Maybe there would have been an “unfortunate accident”, how very tragic.

In a way, he understood Eight instinctively in a way he hadn’t with the others. The hell of it was there was no easy solution to this one. They could, and should, work on medicine and jobs and rebuilding, but only time and constancy and years and years of peaceful safety would probably help. It wouldn’t undo everything. Eight had changed from what it had endured, and it couldn’t go back.

He acknowledged with a sigh that this wasn’t going to be an easy one by any means. Perhaps Seven and Ten with their nonchalant Nah, we’re pretty good here attitudes had spoiled them a little bit. It reminded him too much of uncomfortable times in Twelve, but he would have to face that.

Bidding Roy goodbye for the time being, he knew he and Johanna would have a lot to mull over this afternoon. Probably better that they do that before meeting up with Taffeta, because right now if he went to her house the woman would probably say he looked like someone had died.

Johanna figured quickly enough that District Eight wasn’t something that could just be fixed with blankets and chocolate and some jobs and syringes of antibiotics. The war had made this district burn and bleed in a way that no other had. These people had been invaded, occupied, devastated, for months and months, enduring humiliations and shocks and losses almost beyond reckoning.

Haymitch went silent, which was bad enough. But he had that carefully blank look on his face that told her he was having a hard time coming to terms with it. They’d been occupied in Twelve too, for months and months, and nearly wiped out entirely. She wondered if the uncomfortable echoes of that tugged on him even now. It seemed likely, and that unsettled her. She knew he loved her, trusted her,
but the past was always there just the same. Maybe it didn’t have the power anymore to swallow them entirely into the bleak darkness where there was no hope of escape, but it still could hurt like hell, like prodding a half-healed wound and watching a trickle of blood start anew. Not nearly enough to be dangerous, but enough to keep it from healing fully. Pushing himself too hard again, she thought with a sigh.

Making some of Heike’s ginger tea for herself, making sure her stomach didn’t get any chance to start acting up, she watched him putter around likewise fixing a cup of coffee. She’d found out quickly over the winter he liked it dark as coal and bitter as anything—maybe it had helped cut through the hangover or something. In any case, she was all right with the tea. The thought of coffee made her stomach roil a bit, and she quelled it with stern effort.

Sipping the tea, thinking of her sister down in Ten and trying to not get her hopes up on that score, she looked over at Haymitch. The two of them just sitting there at the kitchen table, ostensibly at peace, though she thought the silence was as attributable to glumness as purely companionable. She watched the steam curl out of his mug for a moment, the silence finally stretching until it was unbearable. “So cozy and domestic,” she mocked him lightly, trying to prod him into some kind of action or animation, and wipe that tired, strained look off his face. “It’s been less than nine months. Have we really reached the stage already we’ve got nothing left to say to each other? Ouch.”

“Some days I wonder if you can stand fifteen minutes of silence,” he mocked her in return, though he said it with a fond smile.

She looked away, curiously stung by the words, even if they weren’t meant as a rebuke. So maybe she didn’t shut up easily. Maybe she’d been aggressive in her words and in getting in people’s faces and spaces. She’d liked unsettling them and making the exchange happen on her terms, true, because it was a small taste of power. But with so many months all alone every single year, it had been more than that. Pushing her way in like that, she’d been demanding they acknowledge her. I’m here, I’m alive, don’t ignore me. She’d been alone, or ignored, too much—she’d needed to be seen.

Stupid desperate kid, though, busy forcing herself into peoples’ lives like a dog jamming its nose into their crotches. Too afraid to open up enough to let herself belong, but wanting too much to just write it off entirely. How the hell had he lived for it for so much longer?

She knew why. Where she cut them with her words and laughed, keeping them in a place where they couldn’t get close enough to hurt, he’d crept in quietly and made himself their friend, so he’d had a welcome place with them. Sarcastic bastard as he could be, there was a good, genuine heart underneath it—one that would do anything for those he loved. They must have seen that.

“So cozy and domestic,” she mocked him lightly, trying to prod him into some kind of action or animation, and wipe that tired, strained look off his face. “It’s been less than nine months. Have we really reached the stage already we’ve got nothing left to say to each other? Ouch.”

“Some days I wonder if you can stand fifteen minutes of silence,” he mocked her in return, though he said it with a fond smile.

She looked away, curiously stung by the words, even if they weren’t meant as a rebuke. So maybe she didn’t shut up easily. Maybe she’d been aggressive in her words and in getting in people’s faces and spaces. She’d liked unsettling them and making the exchange happen on her terms, true, because it was a small taste of power. But with so many months all alone every single year, it had been more than that. Pushing her way in like that, she’d been demanding they acknowledge her. I’m here, I’m alive, don’t ignore me. She’d been alone, or ignored, too much—she’d needed to be seen.

Stupid desperate kid, though, busy forcing herself into peoples’ lives like a dog jamming its nose into their crotches. Too afraid to open up enough to let herself belong, but wanting too much to just write it off entirely. How the hell had he lived for it for so much longer?

She knew why. Where she cut them with her words and laughed, keeping them in a place where they couldn’t get close enough to hurt, he’d crept in quietly and made himself their friend, so he’d had a welcome place with them. Sarcastic bastard as he could be, there was a good, genuine heart underneath it—one that would do anything for those he loved. They must have seen that.

“He touched her hand lightly. She gripped it tightly in hers. “I know.” Then he let out a low sound of amusement. “Did you stick your hands in the freezer or what?”

“Oh, shut up,” she muttered, knowing her fingers were a little cold. Her entire body was, for that matter, and she was about ready to go grab a sweater. Pregnancy seemed to be throwing her temperature all out of whack, in addition to the other indignities. It seemed like in the space of ten minutes she could be warm enough to throw all the covers off, and then suddenly need not only the original covers, but a couple extra blankets to boot.

Looking over the table at him, seeing the solemn lines in his face, she got up and moved to his side. She fit her hand to his cheek, gratified he didn’t flinch at the cold. Bending down, she kissed him. Another thing—she felt like she couldn’t get enough of touching him. Not like she hadn’t been greedy for it before, even just the slightest brush of fingers, because it meant so much to be touched out of love. But that seemed redoubled now and it wasn’t even a surge of desire so much as the
longing to be close to him, feeling his solid warmth and breathing in the scent of him, curling up
together with his arms around her. *Baby,* she told the kid wryly, *you’re making me a gooey idiot.*
“Wanna go upstairs and keep me warm?” she whispered to him, fiddling with his tie.

The surge of heat in his eyes gratified her, because it shattered that gloomy cast to his features,
bringing life back to him. But he paused suddenly just before he kissed her. “It’s all right?” he asked
carefully.

“I’m pregnant, not made of glass,” she said with a roll of her eyes. For a moment he looked almost
boyish, shyly uncertain. Once again she remembered that smart as he was, some things had been
denied to him, and dealing with intimate details like this was one of them. “I asked Athena,” she told
him. “She said as long as there’s no pain, we can go for it pretty much right until I go into labor.
The kid will be just fine.” She gave him a teasingly triumphant smile as she pulled his tie loose. “Though
once I start really showing, you don’t get to be on top. Too much weight pushing down on Junior,
you know.”

He shrugged nonchalantly. “Always love the view with you on top, as I keep telling you.”

She laughed at that. “I’ll spot you this one and let you on top since you’re at a disadvantage in a few
months.” She wasn’t even going to try to think ahead to the point where her stomach got big enough
to make even her being on top sort of awkward. She grinned at him. “If I fall asleep in the middle of
things, I swear, it’s not ‘cause I’m bored stupid.”

“Good to know nine months into this marriage you’re not reduced to contemplating the ceiling in
boredom.”

She brushed the backs of her fingers against his cheek, leaning in closer, craving that intimacy.
“Never,” she said simply. With him, she’d never contemplate the ceiling, or anything else, in
boredom, merely enduring.

He was adaptable, and patient; and that came in handy that afternoon as they figured out some of the
limitations of her changing body. She’d told him in Seven that sometimes she just wanted to be
fucked, but today he was sweet to her and she reveled in that, feeling loved, enjoying the sensation
of being adored. Gooey and stupid she might be, and he must sense that change that she was more
content to lie back and take it gentle and slow, holding him close. But he loved her rather than
laughed at her. He looked at her, moving inside her as his fingers gripped hers, and she knew with
him she would never need to worry about being invisible or insignificant.

She fell asleep afterwards, tucked up against him, warm and secure. When she woke up, he was still
there, though she could see by the diminished sunlight in the windows that at least an hour had
passed. “Time is it?” she murmured, burrowing closer against his chest.

“Hour or so before dinner,” he answered, hand on her back in slow, soothing strokes. Propping
herself up on her elbows, she looked at him, relieved to see he looked relaxed now.

“Too many reminders of Twelve here?” she guessed. He wore a look of momentary surprise, but it
quickly passed and he nodded. “Figured.”

“We had a nice break from it in Seven and Ten, but maybe that got us a little bit of a false sense of
security. And….we knew it was bad here, but…” He shrugged slightly.

He couldn’t have known how direct the reminders would be. “You need to tell me about it?” she
asked simply. She hadn’t lived in Twelve before that. She hadn’t been marched through the smoking
ruins by Coriolanus Snow, smelling only death and fire, seeing twisted corpses with charred skin and
cooked flesh. They shared plenty between them in unspoken understanding of mutual shitty experiences, but that particular nightmare was his alone. She still remembered him screaming about it sometimes in the Detention Center, and the delirious ravings had sent a shudder down her spine.

“No,” he said. “No. Just…you’re here. You’ll be here through it all. That’s more than enough.”

“Don’t push yourself too hard. You always care too much.” Even when he hadn’t wanted to care, he had. That seemed to be the one thing Haymitch never managed. He’d finally forced himself to feel nothing at all when it came to sex in order to cope, locked away any kind of desire or enjoyment. But she knew for all he pretended he didn’t give a shit, his tributes every single year put him in agony, and she’d taunted him with that sometimes. He held no hope for them, but he couldn’t just disengage. He’d made sure he had nobody he loved, simply so it couldn’t hurt to lose them. For her part she could admit she’d kept herself alone as much to deny Snow that power over her as out of fear of loss.

“It’s one of your best parts, though,” she admitted, remembering Peeta saying that to be loved by someone who had been that beat up but could still love that deeply felt amazing beyond words. “We’ve had more than enough of smart people who don’t give a fuck.” Yeah, he was a damn cunning genius, but Snow and Coin had been nobody’s dunces either. Even Beetee and Gale had made a horrifying weapon that killed innocent kids simply because their abilities with their brains hadn’t been matched by their ability for empathy. His snarky intelligence amused the hell out of her, and she’d be honest enough to admit she couldn’t have loved him half so well if he’d been mentally far less deft than her. But it was Haymitch’s heart that made it all come together. It gave him lines he wouldn’t cross, but it gave him a passionate drive that made him all the more formidable.

“You never give up,” he answered. “That’s one of your best parts.”

She laughed wryly. “I’ll keep going and beat my head against the wall until the brains come out, yeah.”

“Don’t be so damn hard on yourself. How many other kids would have died in that arena rather than scraping themselves back together? Or just given up and taken to the bottle or the syringe after everything you went through? Even I gave up and started the booze, because I couldn’t bear reality. You don’t give up. Total pain in the ass sometimes, but hell, sometimes I really need that so I don’t just freeze up and go away again, because I can’t stand it.”

She looked at him, at the heavy-lidded eyes with their dark lashes, the smile he gave her. “I need you too,” she told him, voice catching a little at the words. “Because I think sometimes it hurts too damn much, and I just want everyone to pay.” She shook her head, hair falling in her eyes, making her brush it back behind her ear. “If I hadn’t had you,” she admitted, feeling strangely calm as she said it, “I think I would have voted for those Capitol kids to go into the arena. Because I would have had nobody. Katniss had Peeta, Finnick had Annie, but I’d be the one nobody could stand to love, as usual. The angry bitch they made me into. So I’d have nothing but the desire to see them suffer, like they’d made me suffer. I’m not like you. I’m not…kind.”

“Darlin’, of all the words out there, ‘kind’ is not the one most people apply to me.”

“They don’t know you.”

“They don’t know you either. You risked everything for people you had no reason to give a shit about their lives, and don’t tell me it was just to fuck over the Capitol. I won’t believe you. You ran into that fire in the Capitol too, just to pull those kids out. So you would have voted that way, had things gone different. But you made the choice you did, Hanna. Give yourself credit for getting to where you are.” Hearing him simply dismiss it, accepting that darkness in her rather than being
repulsed by it filled her with relief. “We’ve both fucked up a lot and we’ve moved on.”

She could handle that, she decided, emphasizing the progress made rather than the shitty place they’d been at to begin. Sometimes it was still far too easy to focus on the latter and give little credit for the former. “Yeah, OK. Moving on from the touching life lessons, what do we do about Eight?”

“The best we can, and trust it’ll work itself out in time. Hurry up and get done what’s possible for the winter.”

“Maybe the majority of them should relocate for the winter to districts with a need for workers. If it’s really that bad.” It would avoid the overcrowding and spread of disease during the harshest months of the year, plus if there was no work anyway, that seemed to just make sense.

“You try convincing Corduroy Yasbeck of that necessity.”

“Think I can’t do it?” she challenged him teasingly.

“Pulled it off in Four, so I think so. And you don’t quit a fight, remember? They may call our sweet Mockingjay the Girl on Fire, but sometimes you make the girl look like a tame little lantern. So my money’s all on you,” he assured her. He smirked. “A passionate sort like you? Always makes things so interesting. In bed and out.”

She glanced at the clock and groaned, covering her eyes, feeling the fatigue still permeating her entire body. “Can we just get Taffeta to bring us dinner in bed? Make it something I can eat lying down.”

“And give Effie Trinket something new to gossip about? Hell no.” He kissed her brow, carefully rolling her aside so he could slip out of the bed. “Catch a few more minutes of sleep. I’ll go get your clothes together, and I’ll come wake you when I’m done in the shower.”

Giving him a grateful smile, rolling back up in the blankets and resting her head on the pillow that still smelled of him, she was out like a light in what felt like mere seconds.
Comfortably drowsy, Johanna reluctantly dragged her ass out of bed at Haymitch’s gentle shaking of her shoulder to wake her again, looking up to see him there. The nap and the shower cut through some of her fatigue, even though part of her looked back at the bed with yearning, wanting to do nothing more but curl up again. It was all right—once dinner was over, she knew Haymitch wouldn’t judge at all if she just went straight to bed. He’d been solid as cardinalwood on his word to cover for her if need be, even if she felt a guilty twinge at the perception of not quite holding up her end.

Still, as she wrapped the towel around herself and padded from the steamy warm bathroom back towards the bedroom, she paused in the doorway and watched him for a moment. He was still getting dressed himself, and she saw the assortment of scars on his arms below the sleeves of his undershirt, mingled burns and cuts both.

She noted the slight hesitation and hitch as he lifted his left arm to put it through the sleeve of his blue shirt—the weather must be seeping into his bones today. They’d dislocated that shoulder for him in the Detention Center and then yanked it back into place a few days later and she knew it gave him grief sometimes in the cold and damp.

The first time they slept together all those years ago she’d gotten what she wanted in her sheer determination to seize what little escape she could from Snow’s plans, and her seventeen-year-old self didn’t know what to do with him afterwards in the painfully raw new reality of that intimacy. She’d been just a desperate kid, but it was no less selfish in a way; she hadn’t wanted him to matter to her, to be an ordinary man who did up his buttons one by one and sat down to lace his boots and who must have had his own thoughts and feelings about what had just happened. In a way, she’d been like his patrons—she’d wanted him to just be a whore, a convenience who would give her what she demanded and then discreetly disappear in a hurry.

Regret for that swept over her and she thought about how even today he’d let her go back to sleep, started the shower and left her a towel, had coffee ready, how he picked up the slack of her baby-induced fatigue without complaint. The old Johanna, Jo with all her sharp and angry edges, would have complained that he was pandering to her and making her look weak, afraid that in accepting that kind of attention that she’d become too soft to protect herself when it counted.

It struck her that the blond girl he’d allied with in his first Games had been the one to say goodbye in the end, probably because Haymitch couldn’t bear to do it himself, and he’d still instinctively run to try to protect her when she screamed. That was Haymitch—he looked out for other people, snarky and irritable as he might seem, and even when he couldn’t manage to care about himself, he’d still tried to look after others while expecting no kindness in return.

Now she realized he did those little things because he loved her enough to want to make her burdens that much lighter, and so for that she sat down beside him on the bed, smoothing down his wildly rumpled dark curls, fixing his half-turned collar, rubbing that bad shoulder lightly to ease the ache, caring for him in order to love him right back. She breathed in the clean scent of him, telling him, “Thanks for picking up the slack,” letting him know she appreciated it.

He shrugged dismissively, pointing out with some wry humor, “You’re taking on rather more than fifty percent of growing the kid, so it seems fair I make up for it.”
“Strictly speaking, ‘fair’ would be you doing a hundred percent and me lounging in bed all day,” she scoffed back, now in good enough humor to fondly pick at him a little.

“You’d go crazy in less than a day of that, Hanna,” he teased her right back. “But I’ll do what I can,” he said, all seriousness now, and she sighed in regret as she saw she’d inadvertently struck his giant center of guilt.

“I know,” she told him. “You already do.” She’d seen how he stepped in to do more of everything, without complaint. Some part of her wanted to bark at him that she was pregnant and not helpless, but her weary body appreciated being able to take it easier, and she could admit to herself that she kind of enjoyed him spoiling her a little, knowing herself to be loved. Whether that was the raging hormones or just changes in her perception of things, she wasn’t quite sure. “They say the fatigue eases up after the first trimester,” she offered hopefully, “and what, three months in—that’ll be over soon enough?” Though she realized by that point she’d be getting the ballooning belly which would make her clumsy. Still, that seemed a better trade than being exhausted all the time. Apparently growing a kid was taxing business.

She wondered how the hell her mom had managed to work every single day while she was pregnant, and that thought more than anything kept her from just telling Haymitch to go handle it for the day and sleeping for hours and hours. She didn’t want to become lazy and useless.

Heading out into the autumn evening, the walk was only two doors down. He knocked on Taffeta’s door, the same eight-panel model she’d seen in Victors’ Glade and Victors’ Village and Victors’ Mountain and Victors’ Bayou and everywhere else. Taffeta’s was brown and pale buttery yellow, to match the wood siding and trim. Even here among the apartments, the victors had actual houses, an odd incongruity. Then again, it seemed like the victors’ enclave in every district stuck out like a sore thumb against miner’s shacks and logger’s cabins and farmer’s homes.

It was Cinna Locke that came to the door first. She hadn’t seen him since January, when he’d headed for Eight with Taffeta and Effie, and she and Haymitch and the kids headed for Twelve. His hair was shorter, and he’d left off the gold eyeliner Katniss used to reminisce about. Though he looked a little tired and strained, his smile of welcome had subtle, quiet warmth like stepping up to a cozy hearth. “Come on in,” he said. “Mom’s waiting.”

Cinna’s quiet greeting contrasted neatly with the flurry of energy by his side as Effie Trinket burst forth from the open door to grab onto Johanna first and give her a fierce hug. Instinctively she wanted to back off and put up her hands to fend the woman off just a little and keep some protective space—it was simply too much, too close, too fast. But conscious of the cameras as ever and seeing how damn excited the woman was, which was weird considering Effie had never been thrilled to see any victor, Haymitch in particular. Haymitch had practically made a hobby from griping about how she’d always been a bossy pain in the ass. As Effie attack-hugged him next, she saw he sighed and let it go, for now, and Johanna forced herself to relax as well. There would be time for talking about boundaries and whatever soon enough, but he didn’t feel a need to embarrass her so thoroughly that she felt like Johanna was absolutely repulsed by her. Yeah, maybe she’d hated Gemma Waltz and maybe she thought Effie still probably had her idiot moments, but the woman had paid hard for getting involved with Plutarch’s group, and she would respect that. Haymitch said she’d been opening her eyes gradually to reality, so that was worthy of some respect too.

“You’re looking so well,” Effie beamed. “And of course District Eight will be so glad of your being here—I’ve made a list of some things that I’ve noticed and overheard that could use your attention.”

“Oh, of course you have,” Haymitch said in a tone dry as Five’s red deserts.

Johanna elbowed him lightly in the ribs. “Pink,” she muttered out of the corner of her mouth,
nodding towards Effie’s head.

Miss Effie had taken to wearing the elaborately wrapped and knotted headscarf that native Eight women did. Given the loss of her ridiculous Capitol wigs—she’d always sarcastically been “Pink Wig” to Mentor Central, even if only in mutters, just like Gemma had been “The Tattooed Wonder”—she’d probably adored the idea of this new head adornment to cover her hair. Of course, it was bright pink. Johanna tried to remember how many pink wigs she’d seen Effie wearing over the years, in every shade from blush to magenta to neon.

Well, you could take the girl—woman, actually, she was at least five years older than Johanna herself—out of the Capitol, but you couldn’t take every bit of the Capitol out of the woman. Still, if it was just about the luxury of a little bit of colorful silk rather than celebrating and enabling annual child murder, Johanna wouldn’t bitch about that.

Every Eight woman could be considered “guilty” of that one, with how they obviously competed for the most elaborate and colorful headscarves. She was fine just wearing a fairly plain kerchief herself to cover her hair, even if of course it was silk rather than cotton like she’d always worn for things like lumber crew our out in the backyard in Twelve for planting their garden. She had the feeling that was Effie’s doing given the woman did most of her wardrobe.

Bustling already, Effie efficiently herded them in like the dogs they’d just seen working the sheep and cattle down south in Ten. “Cinna, make sure the bread is out of the oven, and I’ve set the peas on the warmer, and…do you think we should have gotten more butter?” She kept up the constant flow of chatter of enumerating all the tasks that needed to be done yet before the meal.

“Yes, dear, we’ve got it,” was Cinna’s calm response, and surprisingly, with that acknowledged, Effie quickly shut up and flashed Cinna a cheerful smile.

“Now, Johanna, do you mind if I steal you for a moment?” Effie didn’t even wait for an answer, tugging on Johanna’s arm to guide her somewhere, the expectation of her wishes being obeyed made obvious. That plus the casual touching without asking grated on Johanna’s nerves, and given how wobbly her emotions seemed lately, it touched off her temper readily. It was still too thoughtlessly Capitol.

“I’m not your dog to pet and come when I’m called, Effie, so let go of me,” she snapped, yanking back her arm.

At that moment, she noticed Taffeta had showed up, leaning on her cane. Staring at the cane so she wouldn’t have to look at anyone’s faces, she decided she thought it was maple, well-turned and rendered silk-smooth. Eyes tracing the swirls and lines of the grain, she knew she couldn’t apologize—dammit, she wasn’t exactly wrong—but she still felt guilty and embarrassed all the same for the explosion of temper. “I’m very sorry, Johanna,” Effie said finally, the words painfully slow and formal, as if she fell back on something learned by rote, her voice with the tinny flat sound of a wind-up doll, “of course I shouldn’t have…please, will you all be so kind as to excuse me?”

Temper had been Johanna’s armor. Manners were Effie’s, clearly, and Johanna watched her retreat up the stairs—deliberate, calm, unhurried, not rushing or crying. Though Johanna would bet the tears would start up the moment she had the door closed.

Looking at mother and son both, she felt like an ass, and felt the emotion welling up hot in her too. She was embarrassed and exhausted and overwhelmed and she wanted to do nothing more right then than go home and go back to bed. But she was no coward. Forcing herself to stand her ground and try to deal with it, she said, trying to keep irritation out of her voice at her own sheer discomfort, “Uh, does somebody need to go give her a handkerchief or what?”
“Give her a few minutes first,” Taffeta said, looking upstairs with a look of quiet concern in her eyes. “Sometimes that’s what you really need.”

“She was so excited to see you both,” Cinna said, and she hurt a little to see the look of apology on his face for secondhand actions. “I’m sorry if…”

She held up a hand, tiredly dismissing it, not wanting him to abase himself over it. “We’ll deal with it.”

“She’s pregnant,” Taffeta broke in suddenly.

“Mom,” Cinna protested, a whole new type of embarrassment coming over his features as he rubbed the back of his neck, giving Haymitch a sheepish look.

“Well, they were going to find out soon enough at dinner,” Taffeta pointed out with some asperity. She made a face. “Not that I favor the idea some people have that pregnancy turns a woman into some raving lunatic who can’t control her emotions and she ought to stay home until she’s ‘well’ again,” and there was a dark anger there that made Johanna wince at the thought that she now had the idea how Solonius Trove, or others, had dealt with Taffeta herself when she was pregnant with Cinna. “But you do have days where every little thing hits your emotions about a thousand times as large as it really is.”

“I think we can cut Effie a little slack, yeah,” Haymitch answered quietly, and she was grateful he didn’t pipe up with their bit of news as well. Though if Effie was pregnant, given how obsessive she apparently was with details and organization, one small thing like Johanna not cooperating and giving her a hard rebuke could shatter her little neat world.

Wanting to turn the conversation from the awkwardness, she nodded to Taffeta. “It’s good to see you again.”

She remembered the few nights they’d spent hiding in Taffeta’s apartment in the Capitol on the way to Snow’s mansion, and the way they’d talked about Taffeta’s forced job as stylist to the victor-whores.

“How’ve things been here in Eight?”

Apparently that planted the conversation square into a giant pile of mule crap again because both Taffeta and Cinna were silent for just a second too long. “Well enough, I suppose,” Cinna said finally, mustering a careful smile. “Effie and I certainly aren’t lacking for work these days, so that’s a definite plus!”

“Good,” Haymitch answered. “Well, they all know from Katniss’ clothes what you can do, and Effie, she’s actually got a much better eye than I’d have given her cred—uh.” He cut himself off with awkward abruptness, probably suddenly realizing this was Effie’s boyfriend or perhaps fiancé, stopping whatever snarky comment he probably had about Effie’s former fashion sense.

This felt like it was turning into an awkward staring contest. “I’m just gonna go check on her,” Johanna said hastily. She’d probably rather be locked in a cage with a giant silver-tipped forest bear, but she figured she’d set the woman off like that so she’d better try to clean up the mess. Bitchy Johanna would have reveled in causing people that kind of consternation and said it was their problem if they weren’t tough enough to take it, but she figured this was part of growing the fuck up and being the woman she chose rather than the one dictated by Snow’s terms. Besides, she had some sympathy for the loose leash on emotions thanks to hormones.

“I’ll go finish up dinner, she asked me to,” Cinna said equally hastily. She figured that left Taffeta and Haymitch to talk, and given they were the two with the closest friendship and longest association, that was probably as it ought to be.
Climbing the stairs, she poked her head into an empty room and what looked like Taffeta’s room before she found Effie and Cinna’s room at the end of the hall. Minimal pink, thankfully, aside from the clothing—the only bit she could see was the pillow Effie was clutching as she huddled on the bed, curled around her own body. She recognized that posture too—she’d found herself in it some nights, protecting the little life growing within her.

“Can you quit crying already? It’s awkward as hell for us both.” Yeah, that went over well—nice and sensitive. Sighing, she sat down on the bed with a faint creak of bedsprings. “Taffeta told me about the baby. Congrats. How far along are you anyway?”

Effie glanced up at her, and Johanna gave her points for utter steel-tough poise. Those blue eyes, although miserable, were dry. “About four months.” No wonder she was wearing a loose blouse. But the way she was positioned on the bed, it pulled the fabric tighter over her stomach and Johanna could see the faint curve already starting to show.

“You’re both happy about it, I hope?” She didn’t know Cinna Locke as well as Haymitch did, but he didn’t strike her as the sort that would be appalled by the responsibilities of fatherhood. She was a little surprised they hadn’t gotten married, actually, but they were both Capitol-raised, and things were different there. Like so many other things, they took marriage a lot more casually.

Effie sat up, her headscarf a little askew, showing a few wisps of plain brown hair. “Of course we are. And Taffeta’s quite pleased too.” She glanced down at her hands. “I don’t know what we’re going to do, though.”

“Cinna said the work’s pretty steady?” Compared to a lot of people across the nation, that wasn’t too bad a position to be in right now.

“We still have great visibility thanks to Katniss and Peeta, so I’m not particularly worried about our financial security, Johanna.” She quelled her temper again at what to her ear sounded like the unconscious condescension woven through and through those crisp Capitol tones. “But…well…”

“Well?”

“I know we can’t go back to the Capitol, of course. That was part of our agreement with President Paylor, and of course Cinna and I will honor that.” Effie chewed her lip, as if deciding whether to say it outright or not. “But they hate us here. They even hate a sweet harmless old woman like Taffeta, even if she was born here.”

Considering she had taken lives when she was fifteen, hidden five renegade victors in her apartments, and gone out into the war-torn streets of the Capitol with a pistol in her pocket, Johanna thought “sweet harmless old woman” might not be the best description for Taffeta Locke. Though what the hell, she probably prioritized different qualities in a woman than Effie. “They think she’s gone too Capitol?” she guessed. Until last year’s Reaping Day, so Haymitch told her, Taffeta hadn’t been back to Eight in well over thirty years. “And you’re too Capitol, you and Cinna both.” No point not being blunt about it.

“Yes, that’s about the way of it.”

“This doesn’t strike me as a district to be very Capitol-friendly,” she said with dry understatement. Maybe they should have thought of that back during the winter when Haymitch was so worried about saving their lives, but she figured back then they’d been full of hope that somehow it would work and things would change. “I mean, you came here because it’s Taffeta’s home, right?”

“Precisely.” Effie shook her head. “When we came here…I thought it was a new chance. And things
were very good for a while, really. Even if I couldn’t…we couldn’t. Not for a while.” That delicate reference, Johanna understood, was about as much as Effie wanted to discuss the particulars of what torments she and Cinna had endured in the Detention Center. Raping ex-whores like herself and Haymitch probably wouldn’t do much good in terms of effective torture, but turning formerly privileged Capitol citizens into dehumanized sexual playthings would have done a number on them both. “But he’d been through the same, and well, you know Cinna. He’s so kind. Patient. Unlike…”

“Unlike Haymitch?” Johanna said dryly, knowing that was probably what Effie had politely refused to say. She stuffed back the irritation at the unintended insult even as she found herself smiling. No, clearly the woman didn’t know Haymitch Abernathy at all. The hidden sweetness to him was something only Johanna knew fully. The only thing Effie had ever let herself see was the impatient drunk sarcastic bastard she had to nag.

“Unlike other men I’ve known,” Effie answered. She huffed out a sound that might have been a muffled sob. “He asked me to marry him that first night.”

Trying to give them the privacy of not imagining the details, she could still understand easily enough. Probably in big part because the image of herself and Haymitch was so clear, the many nights spent on the long way back from the frightened and broken things they’d been. She could still easily remember that growing sense of victory and elation at having reclaimed that part of herself, at having been the one to help him do it as well.

“But you didn’t get married.” She’d seen the lack of a ring on Effie’s finger.

“Not at the Justice Building. I think by that point he and I realized how much people resented our presence here and it just didn’t seem…appropriate. So we had a binding instead. For their wedding, District Eight people bind their wrists together with a bit of cloth they’ve both embroidered on. It’s quite a lovely custom—”

“You’re getting into tour guide mode again, Effie,” Johanna prodded her.

“Oh. Yes.” She bit her lip. “I wish it was as obvious as stones through the windows and rioting in the streets and demands that we leave,” she confessed, looking past Johanna to some point on the wall.

“They wouldn’t do that to you,” Johanna replied. “They know you have powerful friends, and it would cause too much trouble besides.”

Effie gave a laugh that sounded surprisingly bitter. “Of course. But instead, it’s small things. Graffiti on the house—poor Cinna’s had to repaint it four times. When I go shopping the stores are often magically ‘out’ of things that I ask to buy, or I know they make me pay more. Or it’s poor quality. I’ve had half-moldy bread. I bought some milk last week that went rotten within two days. Children call me names in the street. They’ve thrown things sometimes.”

Thinking of Rory Hawthorne’s awkward apology and Haymitch’s embarrassment, and how she’d wondered how much he’d had things thrown at him over the years by kids, Johanna winced. He’d never really discussed it with her, but she knew the shame in him well enough that he’d become a man the district held enough in contempt for that to happen. Kids hadn’t done that to her in Seven. They just feared her. Her heart ached, though she wondered if it was more for Haymitch than for Effie. “Yeah, sounds about right. If they can’t scare you out by making you afraid for your lives, then they’ll try to make you miserable enough to leave.”

“I don’t want to have our child in this place,” Effie said miserably. “They’ll hate him.”
She could imagine that well enough. Kids could be cruel little bastards if they put a mind to it, especially if they saw the adults around them being unkind towards the parents of that kid. Baby Locke was pretty much destined to become a pariah in Eight. “So why haven’t you left?”

“Cinna and I are paroled criminals,” Effie pointed out with some asperity, as if irritated now that Johanna hadn’t been swift enough to understand. “Immigration for us now apparently requires presidential dispensation, Johanna. Cinna and I can’t just gallivant wherever we please.” Her tone turned defeated. “There’s plenty as would say we’re only getting what we deserve anyway.”

She couldn’t argue that the people of Eight didn’t have some right to resent it. They’d suffered hard at the Capitol’s hands, and having two people involved with the Games, paroled or not, dumped in their backyard probably felt like a deliberate offense. Cinna and Effie probably were trying as hard as they could, but like Johanna had seen when she’d walked in the door, they still clearly had their Capitol moments. Not to mention their sole surviving victor was as much Capitol as Eight by this point.

Dealing with Heike too, and the Peacekeeper issue, remembering Six where the shadow of the Games hung so heavily, probably gave her a better understanding of how grey these things could get. The people of Eight were making their displeasure known in non-violent ways. Maybe it wasn’t admirable, but the world wasn’t made of demons and saints. Eight’s deep scars were utterly real, and their bitterness was entirely human and understandable. And in return, Effie and Cinna were doing the best they could in this new world. Right now Effie was a woman afraid for her future and for her child’s well-being, and any district woman could relate to that problem. The fact it was the issue of teasing and bullying rather than the arena didn’t lessen that fierce protective instinct.

Sighing, she reached out and put a careful arm around Effie’s shoulders. “We’ll figure something out for you, OK?”

She’d have to talk to Haymitch, but she didn’t want to make promises she couldn’t keep. She knew he cared for them, but to ask if he could live side-by-side with them might be another thing. Not that he couldn’t forgive them, because clearly he could—but if they would be a constant painful reminder of the Games that had so damaged his life, she wouldn’t push it. Her loyalty was to him first. She wouldn’t apologize for that.

“Thank you,” Effie murmured, her voice a little thick and awkward. “I know you’ve got no cause to like me.”

“We’ve all fucked up. We’ve all gotta keep trying to do better to make up for it.” It didn’t fully dismiss what she’d done, but perhaps it at least gave her some hope.

“Oh,” Effie said, pushing up off the bed. “This was what I was trying to, ah…”

“Drag me off to show me?” she said dryly. “Here’s a tip. Don’t ever do that to a victor. We don’t like being grabbed and ordered around.”

Effie straightened, spine stiff as an oak board for a moment, and there was a flash of temper on her face. But then her eyes met Johanna’s. “I’m trying,” she said with a painful honesty. “Truthfully, I haven’t interacted with many people lately, so I probably was a bit…overeager. I’m sorry.” Johanna hurt a little just to hear that. Yeah, she understood isolation and aggressively shoving her attention on people too well. It was like looking at a bizarre prim, slightly pretentious, pink-loving twin of her own experiences.

Handing her a cardboard box, Effie said, “Your birthday was last month, so I’m sorry it’s late.” She added apologetically, “I’m sorry the wrapping is such low quality.”
Suppressing an amused snicker at how Capitol it was, apologizing for presenting it in a cardboard box rather than some kind of gift-wrapped velvet-lined thing, she opened it. Her fingers touched the slick coolness of silk. Pulling it out, seeing dark green, she unfolded it, finding out it was a robe. The rich green, almost black, was near the hem, the spires and tufts of tall pine trees, rendered in enough detail to see the shading and some of the needles here and there. Mountains rose behind that, rolling and covered in trees and mist, and above the waist of the garment, the sky was rendered in the purples and blues of the night sky, pinpoint stars in constellations on the back and shoulders. “Haymitch said you liked watching the evening sky over the mountains,” Effie said a little bit shyly.

She stared at it, trying to process all the work and care that had gone into the design of this thing.

“Am I supposed to…hang it on the wall?” she said awkwardly. Did Capitol people hang clothes on the wall? They used to put all kinds of weird shit there, really, but this wasn’t pretentious or dumb by any means. It was too beautiful to be anything but art, at least to her mind.

“No, you’re supposed to wear it,” Effie said, digging in the box and handing her another bit of deep green silk. “That’s the nightgown.”

“Well, you’re not meant to wear it for seducing Haymitch,” Effie said with a bit of a knowing smile. “Besides, the man never seemed to have much appre——” She coughed, looking embarrassed. Johanna would at least be grateful that she was trying to censor herself. “It’s meant to make you look beautiful. Hopefully to…feel beautiful too. You seemed to love your dress for the Victory Ball, so I figured perhaps you enjoy lovely things? Even if you pretended sometimes you didn’t.”

“Thanks,” she said, recognizing the value of that gift. If it had been meant to make her look sexy for Haymitch, it would have bothered her. But a gift like this, woman-to-woman, and especially one that was elegant and pretty rather than trying to stuff her back in the dominatrix shit they used to wear, said a lot. It said that Effie actually saw her for herself now. She really was trying. “Well, I’ll be sure to remind people that my wedding dress was from you and Cinna.” She’d neglect to mention that for all she loved that dress and it was hanging in her closet in Twelve even now, it had ended up in a crumpled heap on the floor in her haste to get undressed, needing Haymitch far too much on their wedding night. She had the feeling Effie would probably shriek in horror at the casual mistreatment of the dress. Some things the woman just didn’t need to know.

“Thank you,” Effie said with an answering smile, a gleam of gratitude in her eyes. “I don’t suppose there’ll be cause for one for Katniss soon?”

Johanna suppressed a groan, even if it would have been mingled with amusement. Some things would just never change.

Cinna disappeared into the kitchen and soon enough Haymitch heard rattling from dishes and the like. “He have it handled OK?” he asked awkwardly, nodding towards the kitchen door.

“Oh, he’s fine,” Taffeta said, waving one arthritis-knobbed hand. “He always needs something to do, alone, when he’s bothered. Better to just leave him to it.”

Nodding to acknowledge that, he leaned back against the post of the staircase. “How are you, Taff?” He figured she knew she didn’t need to mince words with him. She’d been the first other victor he’d ever met, and the one who told him some hard but necessary truths about the circuit. He’d respected her for that ever since.
“It is what it is for me,” she said with a shrug, gesturing him towards the parlor. He noticed she was using a cane these days. “Don’t worry about the cane, Haymitch, I just twisted my ankle last week.” He blushed guiltily, stupidly wondering for a minute if she could read his thoughts.

Sitting down, he looked over at her. The headscarf seemed to cast the fine bones of her face into high relief, offsetting them even more. When they’d met, her dark brown hair didn’t have any traces of grey at all, though he wondered if that was Solonius insisting on her dyeing it. By the time she hit fifty, he would have bet almost anything on it. Even last winter it had been perfect pure brown. Now he couldn’t see her hair at all, wondering if she’d let it grow out, entirely grey as it likely was by this point. He wondered too if she was looking at him also, noticing the fits traces of silver in his own hair. He was forty-two now, same age she’d been when they first met. “So?” he prompted.

“We came here because we had nowhere else to go, really,” she answered. “I think Eight was the wrong choice, though. They don’t know what to do with me, Capitol as I am by now, and they really don’t know what to do with poor Cinna and Effie.”

He sat back and listened while she explained all the small indignities and resentments, the ways Eight made it clear they didn’t want them here. He had a momentary impulse to march to Roy Yasbeck and demand they do something about it, but quelled it. This wasn’t his district, and after touring the place, after hearing Ash’s account about the winter rebellion and Roy’s remarks about the war, he couldn’t blame them. To force the issue meant causing Eight more pain by forcing them to accept these remnants of the Capitol, and maybe inviting more troubles for Taffeta, Cinna, and Effie.

Sometimes simply admitting it wasn’t going to work out and calling it quits was the smarter play than stubbornly pushing on for no good reason. Starting over again wasn’t easy, he knew that full well. It was hard sometimes for him, getting a late start on it as he was in his forties, and she’d endured twenty-six more years of a victor’s various traumas. She’d been away from Eight for so damn long, forced to live in the Capitol as a politician’s prized pet, that it was small wonder she didn’t seem to quite know what to do what to do with this place now, and they didn’t know what to do with her. The addition of her half-Capitol son and his pure Capitol fiancée couldn’t much help the impression that the Eight girl who’d gone to the 24th Games was long gone.

“So come to Twelve,” he told Taffeta, “and bring Cinna and Effie too, we both know they’re not doing well here.” He couldn’t help a rueful smirk, adding, “Seems like we’re getting quite the crowd of people who don’t much fit in elsewhere.” True, there were some people who immigrated out of a shining conviction that former-Twelve would be carrying the banner of a new Panem. But mostly it seemed like the people whose own lives were a little hopeless came there with the wish that somehow it would be a fresh start away from the pain. Well, that was all right—he could deal with those that were a little broken and bent far more easily than starry-eyed dreamers.

She thought about that for a minute, and her green eyes with their gold flecks, the eyes her son had inherited, were quietly thoughtful. “It’d be nice to have some peace and quiet and be near both my boys now that they’re settling down,” she said finally.

He looked at her quizzically—she had only Cinna, just the one kid. Then it finally clicked and he felt like a flustered teenager for a moment, but the acceptance and love in that warmed him through as he remembered all the years she’d been there for him too.

She smiled slightly as he sat there, lost for words. “Thanks,” he said, clearing his throat around the sudden swell of emotion. He’d lost his ma and he’d lost Seeder too, but Taffeta was still there. “So, you’re gonna be a grandma, I hear. Congratulations.” He’d tell her later, when he and Johanna knew for sure the baby was OK. It could wait a few more weeks until she saw that doctor in Three.

“Thanks.” She smiled warmly. “I’ve got a few months yet to get some baby clothes made, although
the old hands don’t want to cooperate.”

“I’m sure you’ll find some helpers in Twelve,” he said with a smirk.

“How difficult will it be for them in Twelve?” Taffeta asked him directly. “Or me, for that matter? Let’s face it, we’ve been city dwellers all our lives, and the two of them, well, they’re used to…”

“Culture and social life?” he said wryly. “Nightclubs? Museums? Theaters that hopefully don’t explode?” Jolly Frill’s trial was schedule for after the conclusion of Coin’s. “We’re still working on making houses before winter, Taff. Ain’t gonna be the likes of an art gallery for a good while. We’ve got trees and mountains. It’ll be tough for them. Maybe for you too—open spaces and all. But at least there’ll be other people coming in with an adjustment to make.” She was right, though. It would be a huge change from the bustling life of the Capitol. But they couldn’t go back there, and at least in Twelve they might have a chance of carving out a place for themselves while they were still forming exactly what that new territory would be like. “I mean, we’ve got lumberjacks, farmers, engineers, soldiers, Capitol people who did I don’t even know what—we’ll all have to learn to make it happen together.” He shrugged slightly. “Won’t be easy, but it’s probably the best chance out there right now.”

“No forced hikes to toughen them up or anything, Haymitch. I mean it.”

He grumbled irritably, “It ain’t a fancy restaurant, Taff. Everyone’s gonna need to pull their weight. They should at least learn to work a trapline.”

“Can you seriously imagine Cinna skinning a rabbit?”

He tried, and failed miserably, and the image was sort of hilarious. “No,” he admitted. He couldn’t resist a grin. “I could see him having fifty uses for the fur, mind.” She laughed in acknowledgement of that. “Fine, all right, I’m sure they’ll contribute in other ways.”

“Will Johanna be OK with it?”

“I’ll check, but don’t see why not.” Personally he thought she’d be more worried about him having issues with it. So long as Effie didn’t go crazy with it and drive him nuts with her damn schedules and chatter, she’d probably be all right. “I’ll talk to Brocade—I assume there’s some paperwork for Cinna and Effie, there’s always paperwork. Shad’ll be glad to have you as a neighbor, I’m sure.” It would help her having a victor around her own age, he thought, rather than just being surrounded by people a generation or more her junior.

Sitting down to dinner, he was surprised to see that apparently their relationship had done both Cinna and Effie some good. Her organization and chatter kept his dreaminess focused, while his quiet patience seemed to settle her down and keep her less insistent on her damn schedules and the like. Clearly, they were happy. Compared to his interactions with her, which had been resentfully irritable at best at each other’s qualities and downright bitter at worst, the two of them complemented each other. But then, they were both Capitol-raised with that same mentality, facing that hard transition into the world after the Games and all the regrets and awkwardness of being ex-Capitol with so many things to answer for to the entire nation. They understood each other like he and Johanna understood each other, and while he couldn’t share that, he was grateful they had it.

Washing dishes with Cinna, there was a companionable silence between them. He always appreciated a man who didn’t feel the need to talk simply to hear his own voice. “Thank you,” Cinna said, handing him another plate. “I realize you didn’t have to do it.”

Haymitch didn’t have to ask for what. “You tried to save people nobody twisted your arm on either,”
he pointed out. “Because that’s who you are. You’re your ma’s son, no mistake. Not your daddy’s.” He only hoped he could say the same about himself. “Katniss’ll be happy to have you there, trust me, at least until she leaves next fall for Six.”

“We can continue working on her fashion design talent further,” Cinna said with dry humor. He smiled ruefully. “Between you and me, I honestly think she’s almost colorblind, but that’s all right, her talents are in another direction.”

He thought to ask him about Portia, but held back. The fact Cinna was with Effie, married to her at least by Eight custom, and expecting a kid said enough about where his life was at now. Haymitch had spent enough years living for ghosts and with ghosts. He wouldn’t call them up willingly now if he could help it. Still, he felt a prickle on the back of his neck at the thought of Portia, being taken out of his cell with her unseeing eyes and blood-spattered turquoise braids, and didn’t turn around to see if a venom ghost stood there in the corner. Briar didn’t haunt him anymore, and he hoped Portia no longer haunted Cinna. If you’re there, we won. Be happy for him if you can, he thought.

That night he and Johanna curled up on the couch, reviewing the Eight situation and where to go and what to recommend immediately, even before they went to tour more of the district. She wore a beautiful nightgown and robe made of out of silk, and when he asked about it, she muttered, “Birthday present from Effie.”

Everybody stayed up late that Friday, because word was the jury was due back on Alma Coin. The trial had dragged on and on and if he thought Snow’s trial had taken forever and the lawyers had bickered, obviously he’d had no inkling of how much people could debate whether or not something someone said ought to be allowed or not. Snow had really done them all a favor putting it on paper.

Johanna dozed off shortly after nine, head pillowed on his thigh. Glancing up at the television now and again, he kept up the paperwork. Mostly it was looking over the numbers for the food and housing and medicine requirements for Eight, trying to mentally juggle which districts needed how many more workers, and thinking about One and Two and Four who also needed their workers redistributed. What a mess, he thought with a sigh, but he didn’t put it aside. Someone had to get it done and if he could at least throw some preliminary figures at Brocade, that would probably help.

The jury came back shortly before midnight. He nudged Johanna awake. Yawning, rubbing her eyes, she halfway sat up, fingers laced through his.

Coin stood, straight and colorless and stark as ever. She might as well have still been in Command for all the expression she showed, though he knew the woman well enough to be sure the faintly veiled contempt for what she saw as the weakness of the rest of the world was alive and well within her. They read through the charges, and the jury answered. Guilty of inciting soldiers to commit crimes against civilians, guilty of execution of civilians, guilty of wrongful imprisonment, guilty of torture…the list went on and on. He listened attentively, and heard Coin pronounced guilty of forcing pregnancy on women without their consent. Johanna’s fingers gripped his tightly. “At least they got her for it,” she said huskily, though he saw how her other hand strayed to her stomach, fingers splayed almost protectively as if to keep this child away from Coin.

This baby didn’t replace the first one, and it didn’t erase the hurt and the damage. The guilty verdict didn’t wipe the slate clean either. But it was justice.

It wasn’t all a clear victory, though. The jury foreman hesitated on the count of execution of victors. “We find the case not proven,” he finally said carefully.

“Which means they think she’s guilty as fuck but can’t prove it,” Johanna said grimly.
“At least they showed that,” he pointed out. They could have said not guilty but they’d made certain their verdict reflected that they didn’t think she was innocent. He didn’t even recall that option being in the Code of Conduct, for all he’d read it back and forth, and maybe he’d have to ask Ash, legalist that he was. Thirteen’s Major Sabetha had been chosen as judge, probably to give the appearance of fairness towards Coin, and she didn’t protest the “not proven” verdict, so apparently it was entering their new system of law.

Not proven too when it came to the napalm bombs at Snow’s mansion. He was disappointed, but not entirely surprised. Even Beetee admitted they couldn’t chemically distinguish Capitol or Thirteen napalm. With the bomb squad conveniently dead, killed by the Peacekeepers on the spot, and no written orders by Coin to carry out the attack, all that was left was suspicion rather than proof, words that could mean one thing or another depending how the lawyers argued. It stung, and it felt like defeat, but he had to admit it was fair. “Let’s just hope she doesn’t sue the crap out of us for accusing her during that propo,” he said with black humor.

“I think she knows the game’s over,” Johanna replied, shifting position a little and pressing herself closer to him. “So they didn’t get her for everything. It’s still more than enough to see her dead.”

Sabetha confirmed it only a few minutes later. Alma Coin would face the firing squad in a week’s time. Privately, rather than turning it into a media circus like Snow’s execution would have been, and of course there was no mention of using Katniss Everdeen to strike the fatal blow. “Wonder if anyone’s going to slip her a nightlock pill in the next week?” Johanna mused.

“If she has a friend on the inside, maybe? Though I imagine after one president cheated execution, they’ll watch her like a hawk.” He shrugged. “Either way, she dies for it.”

Like with Snow, it didn’t much matter to him whether it was a poison pill or a government execution. Coin would die within a week. Victors knew full well that that death came to everyone and it all ended the same.

Looking at Johanna, holding her close, he knew it didn’t matter how a person died. What mattered was how they lived.

Chapter End Notes

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)

I owe the Scottish legal system for the notion of the "not proven" verdict. ;)
Much like in Six, Three’s district center sat on the coast, steep elevation overlooking a huge bay, but the weather here was sunnier and less dismal by far. In the distance, Johanna could see what looked like the remnants of an utterly massive steel bridge busy rusting and falling down towards the water with a slow, inexorable slump. Probably a remnant of whatever this place had been back in the days of North America—she doubted District Three had been allowed to use that bridge for any kind of transportation.

She wondered what it was like for people here to stand here up on their hills and look out on that crumbling symbol of the way things used to be. Back in a time when people apparently owned an automobile and could just unthinkable drive it all the way across the country just for the hell of it, without worrying about getting shot by the government or killed by mutts in the vast wilderness. Heike had said a few things about what lay in the borderlands between Twelve and Ten, and Johanna’s impression was that it was an eerie sight. Looking at that depressing, decaying bridge, she could well imagine.

Iridia Crick and her husband Wattsen, tall and slim and with that ashy-golden skin, did the greeting honors. Thankfully, they didn’t complain about being last on the list. “I realize we’re lucky, because the Capitol didn’t destroy us,” Iridia pointed out wryly. “We held too much that they needed—researchers, technological production, medicine, hospitals, and the like. We were fortunate that we defended ourselves quickly and capably enough because of it. They couldn’t even bomb us because of the potential of unleashing biological agents on the whole country.”

Sensing Haymitch standing there awkwardly, she realized just like her, he was likely thinking of all the people and the industries the Capitol had deemed expendable enough to attack with full fury. Coal miners’ lives had been worthless enough to try to exterminate the lot of them—presumably they would have plucked a new bunch of workers from other districts and sent them to go break rock underground to get that coal. But scientists here in Three had been too precious to murder, even if Three had been clearly part of the rebellion. Trying to not resent it and let the wedge be driven in, mindful of Two’s wary pride and Eight’s wounded fury and how easy it would be for it all to fall apart by letting the districts be divided again, she let it go. What the Capitol had inflicted on any district, or not, wasn’t that district’s fault. “So you’re in a pretty good position, huh?”

“Fairly,” Iridia acknowledged, “so that’ll be a positive thing in the next few years. I’m sure there’ll be a need for our skills.”

“Definitely,” Haymitch said. “Gotta talk to you about sending some extra meds to Eight. They’re hit pretty hard right now.”

“Of course. We’ll talk business soon enough. But I imagine Beetee’s been eager to see you.” Iridia smiled and let them head down toward Three’s last surviving victor. Looking at the slender, slightly stooped old man, she tried to remind herself to not call him Volts, the memory of being electrocuted in the Detention Center sort of helped her resolve. She also tried to not remember the napalm bombs he may or may not have had a hand in, considering that Coin had been executed last week now. The news had moved on from that fairly quickly. It seemed like everyone wanted to just forget Alma Coin if at all possible.

“Beetee,” Haymitch said, shaking the older man’s hand.

“Very good to see you both,” Beetee said. Johanna thought he looked like he’d gotten even older in the nine months since they’d parted last in the Capitol, and more distracted besides. “They’ve made a
place for you on the Vista, naturally, and I’m sure you’ll be quite busy with all the facilities to tour—
did they get you on the schedule for Area 51?”

“Aren’t 51?” she asked.

A slight smile quirked Beetee’s thin lips. “Formally it’s ‘The Panem Center for Transgenomic
Research’. But they call it ‘Area 51’ as a joke because apparently the old American government used
to store some of their highest-clearance projects there, and they simply took over the facility. Well,
and some people in Three just call it the ‘Mutt Factory’, though they never called it that in the
hearing of anyone Capitol. It’s out in the desert, near to the Five border. Even I don’t have security
 clearance to go there—my skills aren’t in genetics, after all—and I was curious if they’d actually let
you see it.”

“Hadn’t asked, to be honest,” Johanna said, not sure whether or not she really wanted to see a place
where they made all the mutts. Sure, that meant plenty of innocuous things like faster-growing corn
and coffee beans that could grow in Eleven’s climate, but it also meant nightmares like the arena
mutts and the forest cats. “Guess we’ll see.”

“Well, no matter how busy you are, I’d hope you could stop in for dinner sometimes,” Beetee said
quietly. His hope at that was almost painfully obvious, and Johanna felt an ache at it. He was a
lonely old man. That was obvious. Much as she didn’t personally love him, twitchy and geeky as he
was, sounding like a schoolteacher all the time, she sympathized with that, and so she nodded in
agreement. She didn’t know whether or not he’d want to move to Twelve, but while they were here
they’d keep him company.

Victors’ Vista stood on one of the hills overlooking the bay, and they settled in quickly enough.
“Last stop,” Haymitch said, finishing unpacking his things into the drawers of the blue-painted
bedroom, looking over and giving her a smile of open anticipation. “It’ll be nice to sleep in our own
house again. Our bed.”

She couldn’t keep a smile off her face imagining their home—the walls they’d painted together, the
warm yellow kitchen with the table and chairs they’d made, that stupid green couch of his that she
really didn’t mind now that she knew he would choose to sleep beside her every night. “We’d better
get planning a nursery in a hurry,” she said, giving her stomach a pat. She’d seen the swell of it
finally in these last couple of weeks, openly showing the spark of life growing within. It was still
well-hidden by her clothing, but she and Haymitch both knew it was there, a secret between the two
of them. “Green?” she suggested, thinking of the cool canopy of the forest overhead.

“Green,” he agreed. He gave her a wry grin. “Are you planning on making the crib yourself?”

“Damn straight I am.” She gave him an answering smirk. “You can help. You did a good job on the
 table and chairs.”

“Aw, I’m touched. Thanks for permission. I’ll try real hard to remember which end of a carving
chisel I need to hold.” He kissed her lightly on the brow as he passed by, and she knew he
understood that she’d made it an offer, and told him that she wanted him to share that project with
her. She felt better at that. They would be home soon, and she had to believe the kid would be all
right. He or she was growing within her still. The idea of that ultrasound made her a little nervous,
though. She didn’t know what it might tell them.

The next morning they started bright and early at Three’s medical research facility, right near the
Justice Building. She’d seen it shown on television now and again and it was usually in some kind of
a propo about how critical Three’s research was to the success of Panem. She wondered wryly if
most of their research had been geared towards fat-suction and tightening crepey wrinkly skin. But
chances were this was the place that had figured out rapid healing and that sort of thing, so she owed them a thing or two in the end. Had those advances not been in place, she might have died of the infection she’d gotten in her first Games. She might have died from the treatment she’d gotten in the Detention Center. She might well have died from inhaling chemical smoke from the napalm bombs, as well as the shock of the burns.

The research director, introduced as Doctor Dendria Work, was a willow-slender woman with a no-nonsense bun oddly coupled with a cheerful smile. “I’m excited for you to see what we’ve been doing here,” she said, already gesturing them to the elevator. “First floor is just intake, supply and storage, really.”

Soon enough Johanna realized that this was the place where the hard task of coping with the reality of an injury-altered life began, in the cases that couldn’t just be fixed by a couple doses of rapid Capitol healing. Somehow Johanna wasn’t that surprised they put this rehab facility in Three—yeah, it was where they were doing the research anyway, but the Capitol wouldn’t have wanted them there anyway, as they’d have considered the constant reminders of physical imperfection ghastly beyond words.

Touring the wards, seeing the patients with burns, amputations, brain injuries, and the like, and she understood why it was apparently full to overflowing. These people were flotsam caught up in the violent tide of the rebellion, come here now with the marks of war written forever on their bodies. Their struggles would probably be life-long. If Katniss and Peeta had been fit enough to be moved, she didn’t doubt they’d have been moved here rather than kept in the Capitol. Besides, the newscasters probably wanted their precious little Mockingjay right where it was all happening rather than tucked out of sight in the west.

“You’re working with research and rehab spinal injuries here, yeah?” Haymitch asked Dendria as they passed through the burn ward. Johanna remembered Prim was here. She had the thought he was distracting himself from the sight and smell of burn victims, and admittedly, her now-touchy stomach wasn’t enjoying it all that much either.

“Yes, that’s up on the ninth floor—I assume you’re asking about Primrose Everdeen.” Dendria smiled broadly enough it crinkled the corners of her eyes, and it lightened up her somewhat severe features once again. “She’s doing quite well with her new situation, actually—tough little girl.” Continuing the tour of the rehab facility, Dendria nodded towards another ward on the sixth floor where a knot of a dozen people were droning something to their instructor in an oddly flat tone, saying with obvious pride, “Here we’re working with implant notes in the larynx and the mouth to restore speech capability to the people the Capitol made into Avoxes—this is the first volunteer group. They’re currently in pretty extensive speech therapy, and, well, we admit it won’t be quite as articulate as normal speech with a tongue. But we’re confident they’ll finally have a voice of their own again.”

Haymitch’s hand grabbed Johanna’s arm hard enough to startle her, almost as if he suddenly had to steady himself, and he leaned in to say in a rough whisper, “The two redheads there in the middle… you see ‘em, they’re really there?”

She glanced over and looked at the almost ghost-pale woman with her long straight dark red hair, and the untidy brighter red mop on the man sitting next to her contrasted with his slightly darker skin —by the looks of it the two of them were animatedly signing and talking to each other. “Yeah?” she said, a bit troubled because it had been a while since he’d needed to express doubts about some particular point of reality, and he sounded genuinely off-balance by it. “Hey, can we have a minute here?” she asked Dendria casually, wanting the woman to back off.
So she wasn’t all that surprised when he kept staring at the two young Avoxes and muttered more to himself than her, sounding almost panicky, “I saw them both die, they electrocuted her and they tortured him to death right in front of me, cut off his fingers and his toes and worse piece by piece and then they finally cut his throat, I lit a friggin’ candle for the man back in Five because he’s dead…”

Listening to his litany of what was in his head as the truth, she knew it had to have been in their stay at the Detention Center—hadn’t he mentioned that they’d executed the two Avoxes serving in the Twelve apartment and turned it into a little show for him? She’d perhaps heard the strangled screaming from his cell, but of course she would have assumed it was Haymitch, being unable to see what was going on. Gripping his wrist tightly to get his attention she told him softly, “Breathe, dammit—you thought they were dead because you were fucked up on tracker jacker venom and they probably made you think that to mess with your mind even more. You’re not just seeing ghosts—they’re really there. I promise.”

She could feel the tension draining out of him like poison from a wound, and he relaxed beneath her touch. “OK,” he said finally. “OK.” But she could see the lingering worry in his expression of a man who once again had to doubt the security and soundness of his own mind. “That was just last fall where they messed with my mind,” he said, looking at her. “Everything since then…?”

She remembered him telling her on that dark desert night in Five that sometimes he was afraid he’d wake up and find this whole life of theirs was just an illusion or a dream, and he’d be thrust back into the nightmare of his reality. The thought of it terrified her as well, and she tried to not let his balancing on the edge of doubt let her topple over into that abyss as well. I think sometimes it’s too good to be real, he’d said that night. But you always bring me back. As he did for her, when she had her moments of the darkness looming over her.

“You’re not gonna wake up again in that cell, or anywhere else but next to me,” she promised him, voice still barely above a whisper. “You and me, together, we’ve come a long way since then.” She took his hand and pressed it to her stomach, letting him feel the gentle swell there once again right there in the hallway, not quite caring if anyone saw it. “Our kid. We have that now.”

She willed it to bring him back, to let him fight free of whatever fog of confusion and doubt might be gathering in his mind. Finally he nodded decisively, grey eyes calmer. “This is real,” he agreed with her. “And you’re right. They must have made me think they were dead just to mess up my head even more. I have to wonder if some of the ghosts I saw of them in that cell might have actually been Darius or Lavinia, for real, put in there for a minute or two just to screw with me.”

She didn’t doubt it was possible that they’d added some special little tricks like that just for him. They hadn’t killed anyone in front of her, which told her that the tortures had been pretty specific in some of their details. Putting her next to the man she’d claimed to love on arena cameras—the man she’d started to love for real in those endless weeks—and hearing him tortured had probably been part of tormenting her. They’d tried to hurt her by denying her the one thing that mattered to her, and making her privy to his suffering. “I think…they recorded you screaming and played it for me sometimes when they were actually giving you a break,” she admitted to him. She’d never told him that. “It went on too long sometimes. Long past the point you should have passed out or died. And then later, it was less screaming, but I think you’d actually say things…”

“Things?” he said, looking concerned.

Now she remembered, or thought she did—the voices in the darkness that still haunted her in her nightmares sometimes, the ones she’d always assumed were her mixing her fears at being left alone in the blackout zone with her other, deeper fears and doubts. But maybe it was voices in the darkness
in her cell bleeding over into her dreams. Had it ever been dark in that cell? She’d thought it was round-the-clock light, because she never got to sleep with the lights out, but she’d been flying so high on venom sometimes there was no telling. Maybe they’d shot her up and dimmed the lights and gone to town with the audio.

“Finnick, Blight, my family…but it was mostly you. I thought it was just in my head, but I think now it was them actually doing it to me.” The uncertainty of that was terrifying. They might never fully know what had been done to them. She licked her lips a little nervously, remembering the whispers in the black. Do it to her instead, whatever you want, hurt her, cut her, fuck her, just leave me alone. She’s a great lay but she doesn’t matter. Sneaky little thing, as if you could trust her. I did it as an arena strategy, that’s all. And she felt for it. Nobody cares about her—how could they? Little slut. Nobody wants to get seriously involved with a girl a thousand others have had first. Look, you’re as likely to go to bed with her and end up with an axe in your back. There’s some female insects that just kill their mates after they’ve done the deed, you know. That’s pretty much Johanna Mason in a nutshell. Bitch. Do you think if by some miracle they came charging in here with a rescue team anyone would bother coming for her? Oh, stop it with me already and go bother her. We’ve had enough fun today. And she likes pain, you know.

They’d known her will and her mind were the things they had to break, and they’d tried to do it by confusing her, turning her would-be lover into her torment and her betrayer. She could still remember, or imagine she remembered, that cynically amused voice drawling those insults so casually and a shudder ran down her back. Likewise they’d known Haymitch’s heart and his mind were his two greatest assets and his most dangerous ones, and they’d deliberately sought to try to break both of them by tormenting people right in front of him.

Suddenly she felt the touch on her wrist. It was just a light touch of his hand—nothing hard or restraining or painful like the pressure of leather restraints or the cutting edge of shackles, or other things that would send her down further into memories of pain and terror. But it was enough of a presence that it startled her out of that spiral. “We’re not there anymore, Hanna,” he said quietly. “We’re not there in that cell, we’re free.”

He stood there, looking at her with a look of soft understanding on his face knowing where her mind had gone, and it countered those false voices in her mind. He would never have so casually dismissed her, and he’d stood by her through countless trials and nightmares. He knew that for the rest of her life she’d remember it, and he didn’t judge or grow impatient for it. She mattered to him, and as he put an arm around her, she felt that even more acutely. “Well, they had plenty of audio of me,” he told her. “And Finnick, and Blight, and even your family too.”

Recovered now, she gave a sharp, incredulous bark of laughter. “Volts even said it to us with the jabberjays, didn’t he? It’s a fucking school project for kids here in Three to make audio of people saying stuff they never did.” It would have been easy as anything for them to create sounds for her to listen to, and she burned with humiliation and rage both as she imagined someone sitting there with the equipment, deliberately selecting the words they thought would damage her the most, forcing Haymitch’s voice to utter them to her. In a way she almost preferred the electrical wires. Somehow that felt more honest.

“Whatever they made you hear,” he told her, “that wasn’t me. It wasn’t real.”

“I know,” she said, throat suddenly tight, “but it’s felt like it whenever I dream about it.”

“Then whenever you wake up, you ask me how I feel about you. I’ll tell you the truth.”

“And what’s that?”
She expected some kind of cheerful sarcasm to help chase the heaviness of the moment away, but instead he looked at her, admiration and affection openly written in his eyes. “That I love you and you’re the best damn woman I’ve ever known.” Simple truth, a little gruffly stated, but it touched her all the same, blossoming into bright warmth that chased out the dark words. She hugged him close, needing that contact. “And I’m not ever leaving because all my stuff’s there and I haven’t moved in twenty-six years and I don’t want to move now because it’d be such a chore, besides, Katniss would be a total pain in the ass with the ‘I knew it’, all right, so let’s not give her a chance to get all puffed up with righteousness again.” She laughed at that, helpless to do otherwise, glad he gave the moment a little bit of humor.

“Yeah, OK,” she told him, holding on to him for just a moment longer, telling herself once again it was the hormones that made her linger like that.

“Hey, you two want to get a room?” There came the sound of a man’s voice, a light mid-pitched tenor, behind her back. There was something slightly off about it. “The last time I saw you cuddling something like that, it was a bottle of Ripper’s best.” Now she identified it. The pitch was just a little too flat, and some of the sounds were a bit mushy, like someone missing teeth. She let go of Haymitch and turned to see the red-headed man there, grinning at her. He had an interesting face, all angles—a long nose, a broad forehead, square chin, wide-set brown eyes.

“Fuck off, Darius,” Haymitch grumbled. “I won’t even tell you to shut up, I know you got shut up for long enough.” He paused and then asked, “Ah…it’s still Darius? Or are you going by Rodderick?”

“No offense to my mom and dad, but…I can’t see myself as a ‘Rodderick’. Darius suits.” He shrugged. When he spoke, his voice was slow and careful, and she could see he was exaggerating some of the motions of his mouth and throat. His tongue was definitely gone, and she could see the silvery nodes of some of the implants Dendria had mentioned. “I’ve picked up my old last name, though. Too many Laws running around Panem.”

“Darius,” this voice was female now, light and delicate as lace, with the same vocal oddities. “Stop teasing.”

“Vinnie,” Darius said, grabbing the red-headed woman around the shoulders and giving her an affectionate squeeze, “I’ve got to have something to keep me busy and practicing my talking, right?”

Johanna looked at the girl, who had Capitol written all over her with that porcelain-fine skin and white teeth and willowy build. She tried to imagine a Capitol girl letting herself be called “Vinnie” rather than the elegant “Lavinia,” failed, and laughed to herself about it. So maybe this girl was far less Capitol than she’d been. She held out her hand. “Johanna Abernathy.”

“Lavinia Wentworth.”

“But it’s soon to be Lavinia Vicheron,” Darius said with another crooked grin. “Once we finish our therapy and settle down somewhere, she’s sworn she’s making an honest man out of me!”

Lavinia rolled her eyes and made an abrupt sign to him that Johanna figured meant Shut up already. Then she took Johanna’s hand in her own slim-fingered one. “I’m…very pleased to meet you.”

“Lavinia Wentworth.”

“You don’t sound foolish,” Haymitch spoke up. “I can understand you just fine.” Lavinia turned to him, looking horrified as if she’d just realized, or remembered, he apparently understood some hand
signs. Obviously mortified, her hands flew to her mouth, her pale cheeks coloring abruptly, and her blue eyes readily showed her mortification.

“Oh, you know each other,” Dendria said, choosing the right moment to come back, carrying two cups of coffee. “That’s wonderful! Darius and Lavinia are two of our top students.”

“We should let you get back to your class,” Johanna said hastily, wanting to give Lavinia an escape before Dendria decided to cheerfully talk about her, “but are you allowed out for visits to come see us for dinner?”

“This isn’t a prison,” Dendria protested. “But Avoxes have some particular needs when it comes to meals because of the lack of a tongue…”

“We can tell them about…the issues, Doctor Work,” Lavinia cut her off with cool aplomb, and Johanna sensed the wounded pride of someone who didn’t want to be treated like a helpless patient forever. “We would be happy to help cook as well.” Johanna caught Darius looking at his fiancée with fierce pride at her assertiveness.

“Good. Victors’ Vista, Wednesday night?” Haymitch said cheerfully, as if totally oblivious to the tension that had been in the air just moments before. “We’re in the green one with black trim, third on the left from the entrance.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” Lavinia said, and even if her vocalizations were a bit awkward, her smooth Capitol social graces were still well intact. She gave Johanna a slight smile, the tight-lipped close-mouthed kind done back in Seven by the elderly and those with bad teeth. Realizing it wasn’t about her teeth but her lack of a tongue, Johanna felt a pang of sympathy. They all carried their scars —hers were just beneath her clothes as well as in her head.

~~~~~~~~~~

The ninth floor, designated for amputations and paralysis, was painted a cool pale aqua, Haymitch noticed, as opposed to the color schemes of other floors. “It’s for all of us, really,” Dendria explained, noticing him staring at the paint. “That way if the staff is in a rush and the elevator stops on the wrong floor, they recognize it quickly rather than racing to the wrong room and costing time. As for the patients, sometimes with brain injuries or drug-induced cognitive impairments, it’s easier for them to remember their room is on the green floor, or the blue.”

“Makes sense,” he acknowledged, trying hard to not think about the time when he barely knew up from down, and that sometimes reality versus drug-induced nightmares was still shaky.

She led them to the common area. Quickly he spied Texel Dravid, with two crutches with arm-cuffs leaning on the couch he sat on, playing another patient at chess. Peeta had a crutch like that for a few months, while the cameras weren’t looking—when they were, they’d put him on a cane instead. Canes were sympathetic. Crutches like that were ugly. Seeing the smooth dark skin of the one-armed man and hearing his triumphant crow at having captured another piece of Tex’s, the miserable hot feeling of remembered grief welled up in him. Whoever the patient was, clearly he was from Eleven, and maybe he’d lost his right arm and further up than Chaff’s left had been, but the echo was there just the same. He knew after talking to Zinnia it was finished and he’d have to deal with it, but the poison of grief took its sweet time working its way out.

Johanna saved him by calling to Tex, “Your wife said to get your ass back home fast as you can.”

Tex laughed at that with a wave of acknowledgment. “Bardie misses me, huh?” he said with a broad grin on his weathered face, brown eyes shining with merriment. “Seems like when I’m there she’s
telling me to scat and go out for a ride so she can get some work done.”

“Hey, you’ll get a nice reunion,” Not-Chaff said with a rich laugh low in his throat. Haymitch saw the cane on his chair, and figured one of the two legs hidden by his aqua hospital pajamas—helping the staff quickly identify a patient’s home floor—was made of metal. “Just don’t try it standing up.”

“Oh, shut up, Sy, you’re just jealous ‘cause you’re stuck with just your good right hand,” Tex snorted.

“Left actually,” Sy said with another snicker. Then he glanced over towards the corner and said apologetically, “Uh, sorry, Prim.”

“Crap,” Tex mumbled. “Sorry, Prim,” he called loudly, and Perulla Everdeen in her nurse’s uniform gave them a dismissive wave. Prim, sitting in a wheelchair, didn’t even look up from her books, lost in another world.

Heading over, he spoke to Perulla first. She’d gained a little weight since last winter, and some of the lines had eased from her face. He couldn’t imagine having a kid paralyzed from the waist down made life simpler, so it had to have been the work she did here that gave her that quiet glow of certainty that he remembered from a young Perulla Banner. “How’s it going, Perulla?”

“She’s doing well, thanks,” Perulla said, glancing at the two of them with a soft smile.

He’d actually been asking about Perulla herself, figuring to ask Prim directly, but maybe that was being a parent—thinking always of the kid first. The notion hit him with a curious pang realizing it would be his own reality soon enough. “And you?” Johanna added quickly.

“I’m keeping busy enough,” she acknowledged. “There’s always plenty of work to do here, but it means I’m earning my keep.”

“It also means,” Prim still didn’t look up from her book but Haymitch thought he saw a faint smile, “you keep busy like you need rather than having nothing to do but fret about me, Ma.” At that moment he thought there was a clear difference again between the two Everdeen girls. Katniss probably would have made some sharp aggressive comment about Perulla’s depression, whereas Prim showed a more delicate touch.

Finally Prim closed the cover of her book, a weight tome about biology. “You could always throw that thing at people if they piss you off,” Johanna said dryly.

Prim laughed. “I’ve probably got the arm muscles for it.” Compared to her legs, which looked thin and wasted even concealed by her pajamas, her arms and hands looked firm and strong. Pushing back from the table, she grabbed the wheels of the wheelchair and came over. “How are you, Mister Abernathy, Missus Abernathy?” she asked politely.

“Doing well enough,” Johanna answered her. “Wanted to come to see you while we were in the neighborhood.”

“How’s Buttercup? And Katniss and Peeta?” Trust her to ask about the demon cat first—Haymitch had to try to not smirk a little at that.

“Buttercup’s fine.” Katniss bitched about the cat every time on the phone and complained Peeta was feeding him treats. As if he didn’t know she actually adored the stupid thing. “And your sister and Peeta are doing well. Twelve’s making good progress by the sound of it. Still going to be a bit of a rough winter, but much better than the last.”
Prim nodded, brushing her blond hair back behind her ears. “All right then. I want to go back to Twelve.”

“Prim—” Perulla protested, holding up a hand as if to somehow hold her child back from her own words.

“Ma,” Prim said, glancing up towards Perulla, and the two of them looked like a two-generation mirror of each other. He thought that only bit of Burt Everdeen he could see in Prim was that slightly aquiline nose rather than Perulla’s more pert, upturned one. On Burt it had been turned out as a hell of a beak that they’d always mocked, but on Prim it gave her face some strength and character. “I’m done here. They’ve tried everything they can for me. They’ve even tried experimental stuff. It’s not working. I don’t want to stay here for the rest of my life. I need to go start living again, and they need to spend their time and money on someone who actually has a hope of walking again. So I’ve accepted reality. I’m not gonna walk again. But I can do most anything anyway. I can study and cook and use the toilet by myself. I can even milk a goat if we get another one. And I’m gonna paint my wheelchair blue. If I’m going to be using it for years and years, I’d at least like it to look nice.”

The calm recitation left all of them speechless. There was a cool streak to Prim Everdeen. But he remembered now that nervous as she’d been, she’d still tried to march her way to that reaping stage, silent and resolute. It had been her sister screaming in hysterics. But then, Katniss couldn’t keep her emotions hidden worth a damn. Prim was something entirely different. She was like air, almost invisible to the eye, opposed to her sister’s raging fire. Cool, calm, clever, able to try and think clearly without tangling her emotions up in it—she actually reminded him a bit of Ash, both the boy he’d been and the man he’d now met again. He remembered the girl who’d told off Rory Hawthorne with some conviction, when even Haymitch himself wouldn’t speak up to fight for himself. At the time it felt like no more than he deserved, and to have a champion like her had been a shock. He was pretty sure even Katniss wouldn’t have hurried to his defense like that. She’d felt she owed him, so she kept the booze coming and made sure he hadn’t died in the week or whatever since they last saw each other, but he’d been well aware she loathed so much about him personally. It was in every line of her body and every word she said whenever she’d seen him that winter.

Whether it was Prim’s nature, the war, or the long months of rehabilitation, Prim sounded like she was a wise, well-aged forty rather than fourteen. But then a glimmer of something uncertain came over her features and the girl she ought to be showed through. “Please, Ma,” she pleaded softly. “They’ve all been so nice but I’m so tired of hospitals. I’ve been in them for near to a year now. Let’s just go home.”

Perulla sighed, arms crossed defensively over her chest. “What if you need medical attention?”

“It’s likely we’ll be getting a doctor established out there before winter,” Haymitch answered her on that one. Apparently the Wings had resolved to come set up Twelve’s first clinic. Whether they were in the mood for a new adventure, trying to pay back some perceived debt to him and Johanna, or just sincerely interested in trying to get the districts better off than they’d been, he’d been startled and grateful for it. Prim shot him a grateful look and Perulla looked exasperated.

“Well, then you’ll have someone to work with,” Prim said cheerfully.

“And your education? They have good schools here, and I know you want to be a doctor. This will be the best place for it for a while—no offense, Haymitch.”

“You and I both know the education in Twelve was nothing to brag about,” he said dryly. He wasn’t going to take offense at simple truth.

“I talked with Doctor Aurelius while he was here again last month,” Prim said matter-of-factly. “I
think he’s helped me as much as any physical therapy has. He’s the one who helped me see I need to just start accepting my new reality and becoming who I want to be based on that rather than just pretending it’s like it was, you know? So I want to do that. I want to help heal people’s minds because that’s every bit as important as their bodies. He’s said I can study wherever I am, and he’ll send me the books I need, until I’m ready to go somewhere for starting to study psychiatry, and that won’t be until I’m nineteen.”

Perulla ended up staring again, and Haymitch couldn’t help but feel it as well. Presented with the implacable force of her daughter’s resolute life plan, what the hell could the woman say? It didn’t even sound like youthful whimsy. Prim said it with the conviction of someone knowing exactly what they wanted and how to get it.

Johanna surprised him by clearing her throat a little awkwardly and saying, “World could probably use a few more people trying to help people who’ve gotten their minds a bit screwed up. It’s not the easiest thing.”

Much as they’d mocked Aurelius sometimes because that was easier than admitting they were messed up and maybe he was helping, the man had done them some good. He still sometimes recited that litany to himself in the silence of his own mind or aloud: My name is Haymitch Abernathy. I am forty-two years old. He heard Johanna saying her own version too at times. Sometimes he caught himself using the techniques and visualizations Aurelius had taught them, even as he’d derided them at the time.

True, the two of them had probably done more for each other than any shrink could. But that was because they instinctively understood. They’d been through the same deep cesspool of crap time and again over so many years, and endured all of it together for more than a year now. But if he hadn’t had her, he had to think he’d be far more of a mess than he was. He’d probably be drinking himself to death again in Twelve right now, because he’d know he was useless again because Katniss and Peeta had each other, and their love would always be for each other with only a few leftovers for the drunk asshole mentor they didn’t really need anymore. And hadn’t she just admitted in Eight that without him as someone who could be gutsy enough to not turn away that she’d probably still be full of nothing but bitterness and rage? But not everyone was lucky as they were to have someone who understood all their dark and fucked-up parts so neatly. For that, more shrinks would be just as valuable as more doctors and more morphling. “I think that sounds like a good plan,” he told Prim.

“We’ll have to make sure the house can accommodate your wheelchair,” Perulla said, surprisingly swift to see she’d lost the battle and to stand by her daughter now steadfast as anything. “No elevator, so your bedroom will have to be downstairs. You’ll need an entrance ramp to the porch.”

“We’ve got plenty of carpenters working there right now,” Johanna pointed out. “I can give a call to one of the foremen and they’ll get it done real quick too. Quality work at that. Seven won’t stand for less.”

Prim grinned, obviously sensing she’d won. Perulla finally gave a smile of her own and said, “It’ll be nice to go home and to spend New Year’s with Katniss.” She raised a blond eyebrow, giving Prim a sharp blue-eyed stare. “But if I honestly feel like it’s too difficult for you right now, or the doctors coming to Twelve, we will come back for more therapy and training for you, young lady. And you don’t protest. Is that agreed?” The solid resolve in her voice put him in mind of a mountain, enduring and stubbornly immobile stone. A wind could find its way around in time, perhaps, but there would be no simply knocking the damn thing over.

“Yes, Ma,” Prim agreed hastily, her own voice all agreeability now and her expression cheerfully amiable but not openly victorious—Haymitch had the feeling she was cheering loudly inside. He
couldn’t blame her. She’d been in hospitals over ten months now, ever since she’d been shot in the back. That would be enough to grind on even the most patient person’s goodwill and sanity. That she’d apparently borne it stoically and with a positive attitude rather than turning nasty or resentful said plenty about her strength of will. Being insanely courageous for thirty seconds was one thing, but enduring the unbearable for the long haul was something else entirely. The endless whoring and mentoring had been far harder than charging into that clearing in the arena to face three Careers had ever been.

“Well,” Perulla said, good humor creeping into her tone, “we’d better get planning.”

“Hey Mister Dravid,” Prim teased gently, “you’d better hurry up. You don’t want me going home before you or I win and you owe me a pair of goats, remember?” Tex snorted but smiled, moving another chess piece and Haymitch sensed that Prim had become the darling of the ninth floor. Not because she was Katniss Everdeen’s famous little sister, the one protected from the reaping by her sister’s impulsiveness, but simply because she’d impressed these people with who she was in her own right.

Somehow he had the feeling a pair of goats from Ten would probably show up in Twelve, regardless of whether Texel Dravid left the hospital before Prim or not. He also had the feeling Annie would like her very much, given they shared that same quiet calm resolve, plus Prim’s desire to help people with mental problems.

"Oh, Rory Hawthorne says hi," he mentioned, remembering a promise to the boy to mention it, recalling the shy awkwardness of a teenage boy obviously trying to come to terms with liking a girl. For once it made him amused and even hopeful for someone else rather than causing nostalgic pangs of grief for Briar.

"Did he ever apologize to you?" Prim demanded. Haymitch nodded. She gave a little snort of acknowledgment. "Good. Maybe he's finally growing up enough that I can talk to him without wanting to smack him upside the head." He tried to not laugh his ass off at that pronouncement from a little girl like her. He remembered he'd been too old for his age at fourteen too.

On Wednesday, the knock came at the door for Darius and Lavinia coming to dinner. He felt weirdly like it might have been a bad idea. The former Peacekeeper and the town drunk—what did they have in common anyway? It reminded him the last time Darius saw him, he’d been tied to a chair and Darius had been strapped to a table screaming wordless animal moans of pain. His eyes flickered down to Darius' hands. There were two fingers missing—both pinky fingers. He wondered if the slight hesitation in the younger man’s step here and there was because of the balance issues of some missing toes. They’d started on his feet, or at least that was his impression.

He could imagine how it happened. They’d shocked Lavinia and stopped her heart. She was slender, frailer than Johanna, so they’d probably screwed up their estimations of the voltage. He was almost positive that had been real. Obviously they’d revived her, but seeing how her dying in front of him had fucking with his head, they’d done a number on him with Darius. Hack a couple fingers and toes off while Haymitch was high on venom to start his mind thinking the boy was being cut to bits in front of him, maybe play some recorded screams, maybe shove him into the cell once or twice while Haymitch barely knew his own name and would think he was a ghost—perfect. They’d always have him available to kill later if need be to really mess with Haymitch’s sanity.

But they didn’t talk about that. Johanna was the only one who knew and he preferred to keep it that way. I spent the last year thinking you were both dead might really kill dinner conversation anyway.

Sitting at the table, he noticed they cut their food small to begin, and chewed it quite thoroughly. Probably because without a tongue, it took more effort to effectively chew and swallow, and they
risked choking if a bigger piece of it ended up in the back of their mouths. They also made sure to thoroughly swallow whatever they were eating or drinking before speaking, and he could sense he and Johanna soon grew used to the rhythm of silent eating broken by bits of conversations. “Your buddy Jay—uh, Albus,” he corrected himself, “will be happy to hear you’re alive.”

Darius brightened like a lit candle. “Al’s alive? No kidding! Where?”

“Ten,” Johanna said, reaching for another biscuit. “He walked there after the firebombing.”

“It’s a hard wilderness out there,” Lavinia said, her voice still often barely above a murmur. He could see the look of awkward distaste at the faint metallic edge to her voice, and her slow speech.

“She walked all the way through it,” Darius told them, almost glowing with pride at that. “After she escaped the Capitol.”

Lavinia ducked her head. “My older brother Wilbur and I. He was killed on the outskirts of Twelve when the hovercraft found us.” It was the longest speech he’d heard from her yet.

He could hardly imagine a Capitolite trekking across the length of Panem, and surviving in the wilderness. “How did you ever end up there?” he said in astonishment.

She flushed a bright crimson, obviously not wanting to give a long story. He thought he saw Darius leaning towards her, expecting he was holding her hand under the table to give her strength. He’d have told her to sign if she wanted and he’d interpret for Johanna, but her jaw tightened beneath that flawless porcelain skin and she looked determined to do it. “My parents owned a shop. We sold mostly quality leather goods from Ten. But like everyone in the Capitol they dreamed of being richer. So they gambled. They lost badly on the 72nd Games.” Darla Jiminez, an unexpected win for Four. Everyone thought Two had it in the bag that year. “They had an offer out for the only thing they had left—that was Wilbur and me. Someone very wealthy, as I understand it, had a club that could have used a couple more teenagers to grace the guests.” She blew out a slow breath, quiet for nearly a minute before continuing. “They smuggled us onto a train heading east. I found out later they were executed, of course. Wilbur and I hopped off somewhere just past the Ten border and started walking. We were starving and almost delirious by the time we reached Twelve. We didn’t know what was safe to eat. I thought to myself…that this must be how the tributes feel.” A normal person’s voice might well crack under the emotional strain, but hers stayed even and steady. But the agitation on her face was obvious.

“So I went from being a potential prostitute to being a tongueless slave,” she said bitterly. “In all ways.” He knew Avoxes were generally considered fair game by the wealthy people that owned them. He’d had a few patrons that liked to involve them in their sexual games. Far more convenient to grab the household slave and fuck them than have to go out on the prowl. “But at least I was obedient and attractive enough they selected me for the Training Center. That meant a month a year where it was different and nobody bothered me.”

What a hellish life that the Games were the highlight of her year in some ways, but he could understand that, awful as it sounded. It had been a source of some shame for him that even as he loathed and dreaded everything about the Games and the patrons, he’d looked forward to seeing the other victors again because they were the only people to treat him like a human being. “I’m sorry,” Johanna said to her, her voice a little bit rough.

“Well,” Lavinia said, looking down at her plate, her cheeks still fiery red, “I suppose victors like you, of all people, know what being silenced and being a slave is like.” When she looked up again, she’d struggled enough to regain some of her composure. “I wished sometimes they’d killed me along with Wilbur. But I’m glad they didn’t. It meant I met Darius.” Again, not all the emotional warmth was in
her voice, but her expression and her bright eyes as she looked over at the tousled redhead next to her said it all.

“She just couldn’t resist me,” Darius said with a bit of a wry grin. “Redheaded men—we’re the most virile, didn’t you know?”

Johanna gave a snort. “I’ve had some redheads, sweetie. Coal-black’s been the most man for me, no question.” She reached over and ruffled his hair to show her point. He rolled his eyes for the audience, even as he reveled in the affectionate touch and gentle teasing.

“It was the hair and the Avox uniform, Darius,” Lavinia told him with a wry smile. “Two redheads in red? We just had to commiserate.” Haymitch couldn’t help but chuckle at her dry humor.

“Easier to keep clean than white, you’d never believe how much of a chore it was to clean those Peacekeeper uniforms,” Darius joked right back. He shook his head. “I’m never wearing white again. Or red.”

“You can’t get married all in black,” Lavinia piped up, finally loosening up a bit and smiling. “I won’t have you looking like it’s a funeral. Can we say no monochromatic outfits?” The polysyllabic word was a little bit of a trial for her, but she got it out without looking too embarrassed.

“Fine, love,” Darius answered agreeably, looking at her like she hung the moon. “So I was thinking of asking,” he addressed the two of them. “We need somewhere to go after we’re done with our therapy in a few weeks. I’ve got nowhere left in Two, Vinnie doesn’t want to go back to the Capitol, people in Three are really too weird, and I don’t know anybody in Five. I submitted my name to CIB for clearance.”

“If they give any grief, you’ve got people that’ll speak for your character,” Haymitch said.

“That’s good. But any place for us in Twelve?” Well, they’d gained the Everdeens back for Twelve today, adding a few more might not hurt. He gave Darius points for being the one to ask boldly rather than waiting to be invited. It was nice to see people weren’t treating Twelve like the ass end of the earth anymore, really. “I have such fond memories about the charms of Seam shacks and Ripper’s best paint thinner passing as booze, you know, that I just have to go back,” he said, and Haymitch knew he was jokingly covering the fear and uncertainty over his future. It was a common enough state throughout Panem these days, and an ex-Peacekeeper and an Avox struggling still with speech had more cause for concern than many people did.

Johanna chuckled, leaning back in her chair. “We’ve got lumberjacks, stockmen, weavers, miners, fishermen, farmers. Takes all kinds. Besides, they let in a scary bitch like me. I imagine an ex-Peacekeeper’s no problem. If Jay and Heike move there too, I imagine he’d be glad to have you there.”

“Oh, who’s Heike?” Darius asked in confusion. “No, wait, Jay’s got a girlfriend? I figured he’d never get over Kally—Kallanthe, she was this girl at the Peacehome, see, and he was crazy about her from about a week after she got there…”

Now Haymitch laughed. “We’ve got a little story for you too, boy.” Maybe he’d have to dial up Southlands and see if Nadji or Drover would let Jay get on the phone and talk to his old friend. “But let’s get dessert on the table first.”
Occasionally they ate with Prim and Perulla, or Darius and Lavinia, and sometimes the two of them really just needed time alone. But Haymitch always made certain to try to get some dinners in with Beetee. After all, the others would definitely be coming to Twelve, so there would be plenty of other opportunities to mingle with them in the future.

As for Three’s last victor, Haymitch wasn’t sure. But there was no question the man’s insight was valuable as to Three, as the three of them sat over a dinner of chicken stew and fresh, crusty bread and discussed impressions. “Seems to me,” Johanna said, “your brainiacs are thin on the ground.”

Beetee gave a shrug in his usual twitchy way. “In this district, everyone serves science and technology whether they have an aptitude for it or not. Those that don’t have the ability to become a researcher become lab technicians, and the least capable become support staff—janitors, cafeteria workers, and the like.” He eyed them owlishly through his thick-lensed glasses. “It’s not as though we could recruit outside talent.”

Haymitch remembered how genuinely pleased Beetee had been to work with Gale, nurturing an intelligent young mind that had been left languishing in Twelve for lack of opportunity. Too bad the boy hadn’t had the heart to match his brains. “You’ve probably got plenty of clever people here,” he pointed out, “who just aren’t inclined to science.”

Beetee nodded in acknowledgment of that. “And it’s my hope that some people here will establish more research facilities further east, and that Three natives will have opportunities for other jobs.”

“There’ve already been some asking me about working in Nine or Ten, and a couple artsy types asking about One,” Johanna mentioned. “Seems like the ones out in Area 51 really want to get away from that. They even talked about shutting the place down and moving the genetic research elsewhere.” Haymitch couldn’t help a rough shudder as he remembered touring the place. Some of it was just crop and livestock stuff, entirely useful and innocuous as anything. But the horrible vision of the mutt section filled his mind—abandoned projects to make ever-more gruesome horrors for the arena or for helping control the districts. Some of them had just been in the proposal phase. Some were half-grown in tanks. Some of them had made it all the way to a prototype that had been photographed and quantified and everything.

But down to the last scrap of fur, scale, or feather, Three had slaughtered and incinerated all those nightmare murder-mutts months ago, locking up the mutt research section as if to cleanse their district of the taint of having produced such grotesque killers by specific design. Iridia told them it was during the rebellion that they’d done it, one of Three’s first acts of open defiance. “We knew if we lost the war the Capitol would make us pay double for that,” she said, “but it was worth it.”

Haymitch watched Beetee’s eyebrows rise sharply, like a continuous, thick line of black ink across his brow. “I imagine,” he said carefully, stirring his spoon idly through his stew, “that given some of the projects the Capitol induced them to work on—and being scientists of course they would have given it their all—it would be good for them to gain some distance.”

He had the feeling the man wasn’t talking entirely about geneti­cists. Beetee looked tired these days, a bit listless. Maybe he needed some distance from those napalm bombs too. “Nobody’s going to judge them,” Johanna said, reaching for the ladle in the stew pot and helping herself to another spoonful of stew. “Especially if they’d rather work on helpful mutts now.”

“Oh, I’m sure that’s the case,” Beetee agreed. “You’ll have no trouble recruiting some of our top
minds. Engineers as well—they have less baggage, perhaps, but the challenge of helping build a
district from the ground up will prove irresistible to them.”

“Anyone who wants to come,” Haymitch said, shaking his head. “Not just the geeks.” He had no
intention of making anyone from Three feel like they weren’t welcome just because they weren’t a
scientific genius. Everyone potentially had something to contribute to Twelve, even if it was janitor
work. Hazelle Hawthorne hadn’t been too proud for that job in his own house, brutal as it had been.

Seeing how casually Beetee dismissed those others, though, he had the notion that was how it was in
Three. In Twelve it was coal miners versus merchies, in Four the canners and hotel workers versus
the fishing boat crews, in One the metal miners versus artisans. Every district they’d been to had its
social class divisions. Three was no exception—it was simply that like in all the inner six districts, the
skilled elite class was the one the district rested its industry on, as opposed to the Outer Six where the
unskilled labor was the greater part. It simply caused different pressures, different resentments. At
least out in Twelve being a miner meant being in the majority in a place where it was pretty much
impossible to do any better and escape the pit, whereas a janitor here in Three probably felt the scorn
of being bottom of the heap simply from lack of ability.

He thought about Three’s tributes over the years—all four of their victors had been remarkably
intelligent and clever with their hands, and used that as their survival tactic. He wondered just what
the district opinion had been on the worth of a security guard’s kid getting reaped as opposed to
some young prodigy like Beetee had been. Volunteers were rare, though, so it wasn’t like they’d had
a system in place in case that happened.

“Of course,” Beetee acknowledged, shooting him a look that might have been apologetic. Beetee
typically didn’t show much in the way of emotion, at least not openly. Haymitch had always found
him a hard one to read—Spark Fortescue had been far easier once he replaced Beetee as the male
mentor. Thinking of Spark just made Haymitch think of Johanna admitting she’d fucked him back in
those days of desperately trying to show everyone how little she cared, and then think of how the
man had died. Neither was a particularly pleasant thought. He didn’t blame Johanna for the one-night
stand and preferred to just move past it, and Spark deserved to be recognized for his bravery in
throwing himself wholeheartedly into the alliance, but he felt no desire to dwell on either
circumstance at length.

“You could come too,” he mentioned, trying to keep it casual. “Got most of the other victors there
already, you know.” Never mind that Beetee had always kept to himself for the most part, and
Haymitch would readily admit there wasn’t much anyone in the surviving victors who qualified as a
direct peer for Beetee in terms of personality or scientific aptitude. Haymitch was a bit surprised he’d
been so eager to eat with the two of them, but loneliness did damn funny things to a person. And of
course, they might not be exactly like Beetee, but they still shared the common thread of the arena.
At the end of the day, that probably meant more than anything.

“So you had mentioned,” Beetee nodded, scraping up the last of his stew with careful strokes of his
spoon, as if calculating in his mind how to most efficiently do it. “I’ll have to consider it.” He gave a
wry smile. “Though I’ll admit I don’t imagine with how things have turned out, there’s much here
for me anymore.” Well, if Beetee was ready for a new challenge in his old age, he’d certainly be a
good addition to Twelve.

The elephant in the room was right there, and he knew they all felt it. None of them mentioned Gale
or Coin, or the bombs. Given that Coin’s execution had been so recent, Haymitch was sure Beetee
had seen the news coverage that day, even if it was far more muted than the near-hysteria that would
have attended Snow’s execution on New Year’s Day. Given how deeply he’d gouged his own
wounds of self-blame, he was in no mood to bring it up to Beetee just then, aside from trying to tell
him, “We all should try to move on, you know. Put our screw-ups behind us.”

There was a hint of life now in those dark eyes and another of those small smiles. “It looks like you two are doing nicely with that. You both look much better than you did for all those years in Mentor Central, and I imagine it’ll be next spring for your baby?” Johanna’s hand dropped to her stomach and the expression on her face was like a kid caught in the pantry with the jam jar. “Don’t worry. I won’t tell.” Beetee said with a dismissive wave of his hand. “And clearly you’ve got some excellent plans for District Twelve. You’ve managed to recruit people from all over the nation to help enact that vision too, as well as helping in the repair of the other districts—that’s to be commended.”

Uncomfortable with the direct praise, Haymitch downed the last of his glass of water and muttered, “Thanks.”

“I think you’ll do well in the future,” Beetee said, a sort of a faraway look in his eyes. “Very well indeed.”

“Who’d have been willing to bet on that two years ago?” Johanna said wryly. That was true enough. Nobody would have given them a second glance, let alone looked at them now with respect and even esteem as they did. But things had changed and were still changing, and Haymitch continued to allow himself the stirring of hope when it came to imagining the future. He wouldn’t say anything seemed possible—he was no naïve dreamer. Though even if he had been, all the compromises and griping at the peace conference to hammer out that national cooperation would have been an eye-opener. But the world was so much wider and open than it had been that there was plenty to work with given that new latitude.

Heading home that night, the taste of chicken and herbs still on his tongue, he just hoped that Beetee might buy into that vision as well. If a cynical broken bastard like Haymitch could come to believe, and become the man he was now, surely there was room for Beetee Chen to try and find a new start. It wasn’t like Taffeta and Shad were spring chickens either, but they were going to give it a shot.

He woke in the middle of the night at the feel of Johanna’s hand on his shoulder, gently shaking him. “What is it?” he said, thought his sleep-muzzy tongue rendered it more like a thick Whaszit? than anything.

She was silent for a little while, and utterly still. “I’m glad you’re here,” she whispered finally. “That I’ve got you.”

He thought of Beetee alone in his bed that night, like every night. Haymitch had heard references to a couple of boyfriends and girlfriends in Beetee’s past, but the man never married. Grateful for what he had now, he knew what she meant. It didn’t even have to be a night of terrified dreams to be glad of the constant presence of another human being. Sleeping together, really sleeping with all the trust and intimacy it implied, was a thing that might well never lose its wonder for him. He hadn’t known that the first night he accidentally fell asleep in her bed in Thirteen, and woke up with her in his arms. But it said something that part of the reason for having sex was just to have the excuse for falling asleep in each other’s arms. Moving closer to her, curving his body around hers, he told her, “Glad I’ve got you too.”

Of course he couldn’t see it, but he could imagine her smiling in the darkness, as she reached back and her hand rubbed his arm in a slow, rhythmic caress. Then she wriggled her hips a bit where her ass was snugged back against him, raising one leg to hook it over his and push against him even more. He shut his eyes instinctively and pressed against her in turn as he felt the way it roused him, his sleepy body suddenly all too awake. His hand slipped beneath her t-shirt by instinct, before he once again remembered her breasts were too tender these days for him to touch. Instead he cradled the gentle swell of her stomach beneath his hand for a moment. Obviously feeling she was
succeeding, she made a soft, inviting sound low in her throat that was halfway to a purr, “Mmm?”

Well, he wasn’t going to wait for the engraved invitation there. Half-asleep still, they didn’t even bother moving from their position spooned together, just dealing with their pajamas. But he could hear her occasional grumbles of frustration at how slow he kept the pace. “I think this one’s better for morning, when we’re in the mood to be really, really lazy,” she said, letting out a hiss of breath between her teeth as he thrust into her again, grabbing his hand and guiding it down between her thighs. “It’s…shit, touch me, will you? I need more.” He complied with that, glad he at least had his hands free to do so. That was a plus for him with this position, but he could easily see how this way frustrated her some.

“We’re probably going to be doing it like this in a few months when your stomach gets bigger,” he pointed out. Then he added somewhat reluctantly, “Or…it’s you on your hands and knees.”

She turned her head back over her shoulder again, because he heard her voice more clearly for it. “Not a fan?”

“I always like it better when I can see your face,” he answered, startled at his own sudden candor. The idea of just casually saying I like or I want to her so openly wasn’t fully familiar yet, though at least he didn’t instinctively cringe like he had before.

It took a few seconds for her to ask, “That a personal preference, or something you need?”

He paused what he was doing, thinking about it. Months ago he would have said it was a necessity, a security measure that he had to see exactly who he was with so he could reassure himself. But he knew her so well now, every sight, taste, smell, sound, and feel. He couldn’t even see her properly in the dark and there had definitely been a point where that would have been too much for him to handle, where he had to see her. It wasn’t like that now because he knew her, knew her voice and her scent and how she moved against him. He knew exactly who he was making love with tonight, couldn’t have mistaken her for any other woman in the world. “Preference,” he answered her honestly. “I like seeing your face. How fierce you get when you’re focused on it. That little victory grin you get when you’re on top or you’re about to do something you know will drive me nuts. And right when you come, and the look on your face when you do, and I know it’s me that did it. Then after, when you’re looking at me…” With how she looked at him in that moment, he felt simply, totally loved. He cleared his throat. “The hands and knees thing…we’ve been treated like animals,” he told her quietly. “I really don’t feel the urge to fuck you like one.” He squeezed his arms a little tighter around her for a moment. “At least like this, I get to hold you like I love you.”

She stretched out, drew away from him. It wasn’t just his cock that protested the loss; it was his entire body, suddenly bereft of her soft warmth. That puzzled him—they were far from finished. Had he said something wrong? The flash of light as she turned on the lamp was blinding for a moment. She turned over back towards him, facing him now, reaching out and touching his face. Then she rolled onto her back, holding her arms out to him. She smiled that little proud victory grin of hers and told him, “Then c’mere and you can watch me all you want, then. We’ll enjoy what we can for now and figure the big-stomach thing out when we get there.” We’ll figure it out. Strangely enough, he had total faith that they would. It seemed like just trying to say things to each other, and feeling able to fail and move on, had become easier and easier as time went by.

The next day they spent discussing the future of crop genetics and crop treatments with the agricultural scientists, several of whom stubbornly made it clear most of them liked the security of the Three status quo. “It’d really make more sense for you to be out in Nine and Eleven,” Johanna pointed out in exasperation. “You’re farmers.”

“We’re scientists,” one of the old men corrected Johanna sharply. “And if our scientists leave, how
Haymitch resisted the urge to roll his eyes at how the man just couldn’t see beyond the tunnel vision of the old ways. “You have thirteen other districts whose people can now become scientists,” he pointed out, doing his best to hide his exasperation. “That’s a pretty big recruitment pool.”

“And we’re farmers and scientists,” a younger woman argued, her name badge informing Haymitch that this was Thiamyn Mori, “and Johanna is right. How much work is it to try and precisely replicate the soil conditions found in Nine and Eleven here in test plots? It would be much easier to just do on-site research.” She looked over at Johanna. “I’ll go,” she said, chin lifted slightly as if daring someone to fight her on it. “I’m just a B-grade anyway. If I go I’ll have the chance to do something useful. Everybody in this room knows if I stay here I’ll spend the rest of my career taking orders from A-grades that are more interested in protecting their position than anything.”

“Meeyow,” Johanna muttered to him with a smirk as the table exploded into an argument. “Girl reminds me of me. I like it.” Haymitch couldn’t resist a smile at that.

By the time their formal recruitment drive for the other districts had ended, they’d seen the same kind of argument with the engineers, the chemists, the medical researchers, the biologists, the ecologists, and more. Almost across the board, some of the younger junior scientists eagerly leaped at the chance to go do something novel in a new place, rather than just sitting in Three crunching reported numbers or trying to duplicate conditions from a place they weren’t allowed to visit. Only the geneticists, and some of the other scientists whose expertise had been tapped for the Games, seemed quietly ready for all of them to pack up and move the hell away from Three. It was pretty much as Beetee predicted.

Heading over to Beetee’s again for dinner, he sighed to see the man had left his door unlocked again. Back in the day that was no issue because anyone robbing a victor’s house would end up paying for it pretty severely, but now, without law enforcement really in place yet, and with some people resenting the victor wealth—man ought to know better than that. But that was Beetee, absent-minded as anything.

The house was dark, though, rather than finding Beetee in his well-worn armchair reading some ridiculously intellectual book or poring over engineering diagrams. Maybe he was still asleep. But as he told Johanna, “Looks like it’ll be cold supper here. Get the lights on down here, I’ll go wake him up,” he saw the look she shot him, not exactly buying his final statement there. His own heart started to pound with a sense of dread. He probably was just sleeping, that was all.

But as he flicked on the light in Beetee’s room and saw the still form on the bed, not even beneath the covers, he saw it was worse than he thought. As he crossed the room to check for a pulse just to be sure, he saw there was no need for that. The bubbling froth that dribbled a little from Beetee’s lips was dark purple, nearly black—the precise shade of nightlock berries. The precise shade of a suicide capsule like the one he’d worn in his field grey Thirteen uniform jacket, in a small pocket on the inside of his left biceps for easy access even with bound hands—a little bitter pill that, once crushed between the teeth, would kill a person in seconds.

“Oh, hell,” he said, resisting the urge to just let his legs go out from under him and sit right down on the floor. He must have stood there longer than he thought, because he heard the creak of Johanna coming up the stairs behind him. For a moment he had the wild thought of telling her to not come in. But it passed. She’d seen death before, bloody and up-close. She’d killed, just as he had. She wouldn’t be incapable of handling it.

Then she was by his side, looking at Beetee. “Damn,” she said, little more than a whispered exhalation. “Why?” Now her voice was a bit stronger, a fierce edge entering her tone.
He shook his head wearily. “Unless he left a note, we’re probably not gonna know.” He sighed, admitting, “But I could guess. He was going on last night about how we were moving on and it was nice to see. Maybe he felt like he couldn’t. Like there was no place for him in that future.” He’d seemed so nonchalant when they’d proposed him coming to Twelve.

She took another step forward, taking up another yellow, brown-borderered wool blanket that hung on a wooden rack near the wardrobe, unfolding it. He moved to help her, and together they draped it over Beetee. “You think the bombs played a role?” she asked bluntly.

“Probably. He took it hard. I thought he was doing better, but…seeing that Coin paid for her part in things, even if not directly for the bombs, and knowing Gale died too…he was the last one left who had a big hand in that project. Maybe he thought this was him paying what he owed.” He shook his head, frustrated now with himself. “Dammit. I should have called him more. I should have…” He hadn’t, because Beetee was hard to know and always gave off the impression of not wanting the intimacy of close friendship, so it had slipped his mind.

“You are not gonna blame yourself for this,” Johanna told him in a fierce tone. “You hear me? It’s not all on you, damn you.”

He nodded, trying to convince himself of that. But looking at the last victor of District Three lying there dead, knowing that this meant the passing of an era and the loss of all the potential Beetee could have had to help this new Panem, he still felt the sting of failure. The other victors had supported him when he wanted nothing more than to not exist. He hadn’t managed to do the same here. “You’re probably gonna have to remind me of that,” he told her as calmly as he could. He would admit that, and confess to that weakness, because if he didn’t let her help him through it, he’d end up drowning alone in it. Beetee had died alone, in the end. Although…had he? “Maybe he was waiting to see what happened with Coin, but…I think he waited for us,” he said in a hushed voice, eyeing the blanket-draped form. “For us to come to Three.”

“You’re probably gonna have to remind me that,” he told her as calmly as he could. He would admit that, and confess to that weakness, because if he didn’t let her help him through it, he’d end up drowning alone in it. Beetee had died alone, in the end. Although…had he? “Maybe he was waiting to see what happened with Coin, but…I think he waited for us,” he said in a hushed voice, eyeing the blanket-draped form. “For us to come to Three.”

“Why?” she asked, her own voice equally quiet.

“I don’t know. He spent a lot of time with us. Probably more than he did in all the years of the Games. Maybe he wanted to say goodbye?” He ran over the night before in his mind, trying to see if there was anything there to give a hint. “To…” He turned his eyes away from the bed. “If it was me,” he told her, “if…if…I’d ever just said ‘Fuck it’ and decided to quit everything…”

“I want to want other victors there if I could have ‘em. The closest thing to friends that I had left, because…I’d know they’d look after me. They’d see me buried proper. They’d…maybe not miss me personally, but…they’d notice in a way the district wouldn’t. They’d treat me with respect.” It was an awful, dark abyss that he stared into right then, old ways and all the weight of unbearable depression and guilt. But he thought he understood Beetee better for it. He looked at her, silently willing her to not judge one old man who couldn’t overcome his mistakes, and all the more grateful now that somewhere, thanks to her, he’d found the grace to believe that he could start anew.

“Sometimes people just can’t go on living with themselves, Hanna.” They weren’t all like her, able to fight until the bitter end if for no other reason than to say she’d never quit.

Arms hugged tightly to her chest, she nodded slowly, and he saw the pity written in her expression. “We’ll look after him,” she said. They’d done it in the tribute morgue so many times for too many children, so washing and preparing a body was almost instinctive to them by now. There were no wounds to stitch, so it was almost easy, and it meant Beetee could go on to his funeral without the indignity of the loss of body functions after death. They wiped the purple froth from his lips besides. But seeing the wrinkled, aged vulnerability of Beetee compared to the sad youthfulness of dead kids was a sharp contrast. Dressing him in a black suit that hung in the back of his closet, Haymitch spied his glasses folded neatly on the nightstand. He’d never seen the man without them, but it would look
strange to have them on his face. Still, he couldn’t see sending Beetee off without them—they were such a part of who he had been. So he folded them, neatly tucking them in the breast pocket of the suit.

They waited downstairs after calling Iridia to report Beetee’s death. A half hour later, a doctor showed up to certify it—that was something Haymitch wasn’t exactly used to seeing. Back in Twelve people had reported a death to the mayor for the records and that was that.

The doctor came back downstairs. “You probably shouldn’t have prepared the body before my examination, you know,” she chided, but gently. She was a woman of about sixty, petite and with a nimbus of short silver hair that stuck out wildly from her head. “It interferes with determining cause of death.”

“Are you seriously implying we killed him?” Johanna said with irritated impatience.

“No, Mrs. Abernathy, I think it’s a pretty clear case of suicide. There was still the purple residue of nightlock poison on his teeth and tongue.”

Haymitch looked at the doctor. “Is there any chance of you writing it down as a natural death?” he inquired quietly. The doctor looked at him, a bit puzzled. “The news reporters are going to run with it regardless,” he told her, weary already at the mere thought of it. “The last victor of District Three is dead. If it gets out that he killed himself, it’ll be a news frenzy like nothing else. If he just died in his sleep…he was an old man, after all. It’s just an ordinary tragedy rather than something juicy for ‘em to drool over.” He looked her right in her dark eyes. “No dignity or privacy in our lives for too long. Give Beetee some now that he’s dead.”

After a moment’s hesitation, the doctor nodded. “Death due to natural causes,” she agreed.

“Thank you,” and he sincerely meant it.

They actually managed to keep the news vultures beyond the fence in the park the next day as Beetee’s body was interred in Three’s cemetery, or whatever they called it. It was really more of a park with rolling hills and then rows of tall structures of stone and steel, housing small niches where a body was laid down in its coffin and then walled up behind an engraved steel plaque. Each one was ten high and fifty across—he’d counted. He tried to not think of it as reminding him somewhat uncomfortably of a gigantic filing cabinet. This was Three’s way of burying its dead and he’d see it done.

They’d debated what to put on that plaque, and whether or not Beetee would have wanted his victor status noted. The fact that someone as generally meticulous as Beetee Chen hadn’t left any directions at all on how he wanted his body taken care of after his death told Haymitch more than he wanted to know about the state of the older man’s mind and soul. He knew that notion would haunt him, like looking at a mirror of his former self. How he’d escaped that and learned to start living again was something that would never fail to fill him with utter gratitude.

In the end, they’d put the odd symbol Iridia told them represented an engineer, and the words on the plaque read, Beetee Chen, March 4 15 – October 16 76. Survivor of the 33rd Hunger Games. “Survivor,” not “victor”. They’d decided it was time to call it what it was, and that it had held too much sway on Beetee’s life for them to not say anything about it, pretend it hadn’t happened.

It was a quiet ceremony, and the workmen quickly closed up the plaque on Beetee’s niche. Only he, Johanna, and the Cricks were there to bury Three’s last victor. But at least he’d been cared for and seen off with respect.
Held at bay by the tall wrought iron fence, the newscasters were waiting like ravenous lions when the four of them exited the memorial park. “Mayor Crick! How does the death of District Three’s last surviving victor affect your people?”

“We’ll mourn the loss of Beetee as a brilliant mind whose inventions helped revolutionize the national communications system,” Iridia said. “But no, we won’t forget the Games, or the lessons we’ve learned from them.” Haymitch was relieved she’d spoken about him as a scientist first, even if perhaps his mind, and the things it had led him to do in Thirteen, had been what killed Beetee, far more than the Games ever had. But he’d never tell anyone that.

~~~~~~~~~~

“Johanna!” Joy Cloudmist waved a hand, flapping it in the air like a schoolgirl wanting the teacher to call on her. She beamed excitedly, and Johanna noticed she was wearing silver eye shadow again, even if her hair was no longer dyed platinum blond. “Rumor has it you’re expecting a little visit from the stork!”

Stunned, she stared at Joy. Furious that either they were directly spying on her to know the symptoms she displayed, or someone had actually ratted her out, or someone had been spying and called the newscasters to let them know that suspicion, she thought about how Haymitch had begged that doctor for privacy and dignity for Beetee. He was right. Victors got none of it, even now.

She resisted the instinctive urge, almost a compulsion, to put her hand over her belly, as if to protect that spark of life within from these people who wanted to claim it and make it theirs. She imagined that ultrasound splashed all over the news, people speculating on whether it would be a boy or a girl. She remembered Finnick making a bargain in Four for them to take a few photos of Maggie to have a day of privacy on the beach. “When I want someone to know if I’m pregnant, I’ll tell them. I don’t feel like telling you, Joy, or the entire country. Any children Haymitch and I do have,” she said between her teeth, “I want the news to stay the hell away from them. No news stories, no photographs. That is our child—ours, not yours—and you can’t have him or her, is that crystal fucking clear to you?”

If there had been an axe in her hand at that moment, she felt like she would have thrown it at one of their cameras, trembling in rage as she was. They wouldn’t even let them have this as their own. Beetee’s death, and the first officially acknowledged two-district-victor child—it was all just news to them. Haymitch’s hand was on her shoulder then, a reassuring lifeline. “I seem to remember,” he said archly, “terms in the new treaty that specified victors are entitled to expectations of privacy. You may be following the letter of that staying outside the park for a funeral, but you’re sure as hell not understanding what it means when you’re breathing down our necks like this.”

“Who’s enforcing that anyway?” one of the reporters called impatiently. “There’s no police force and besides, we have a right to investigate—”

“Yeah, and I have a right to put my foot up your ass, so how about we see which one of us wins that one, sweetheart?” Haymitch said bluntly. He shook his head in disgust. “A man’s dead, and all you lot can think about is the next lousy story. Real nice to see things have changed.” With that sharp rebuke, he turned and walked away, and she was glad to go with him and escape all of it. 

Surprisingly, the reporters let them go, some of them looking a bit chagrined. She wasn’t stupid enough to believe that would be the end of it. They were just temporarily shamed or stunned into compliance. It would be an ongoing struggle with them, and she swore grimly that she’d do whatever she had to do to keep them the hell away from the kid.

Victors’ Vista seemed lonelier for knowing they were the only two living there, and she wondered who would empty out Beetee’s house. After taking care of Cedrus’ and Blight’s, she didn’t think she
could stomach handling one more, at least not today. They had a few days left in Three, and maybe by then she could wrap her mind around it a little more.

The phone rang pretty consistently throughout the afternoon. Trying to sleep, she left it to Haymitch to answer it, and some growls and irritated half-threats she faintly overheard told her some of the calls were reporters. But some of them weren’t, and she knew when he was talking to another victor. She wondered if some of them back in Twelve had assumed Beetee would join them, and they felt the loss of his place.

They had asked her and Haymitch to bring flowers to the funeral for them all, because they couldn’t make it to Three. So one of the black iron stands near Beetee’s particular burial niche now held a brightly colored wreath from all the surviving victors of Panem. No roses, of course—they’d vetoed that suggestion right away. But woven into the design were a lot of little blue forget-me-nots, and at Iridia’s suggestion, they had placed several sticks of black-colored incense into one of the racks built into the stone strips separating the burial niches. The incense made a fan shape, and as they lit it, the scented coils of smoke rose into the sky. It was a surprisingly light, sweet scent, rather than something heavy like she’d have expected at a funeral. But looking towards the sky, maybe that was why—it was meant to be something so earth-bound. Maybe it meant the soul’s freedom, rather than the grieving of those left behind.

Whatever had tormented him enough to make going on unbearable, Beetee was free now. But he had been one of their own and with one district now entirely bereft of victors, something had come to an end. It meant the end of the Games for Three, that was true, but she felt like something had been lost between them all just the same. Given how much more keenly Haymitch had felt things in the victor social circle, she knew it had to be worse for him.

It made her think of the other victors still living, and how she’d had little time for any of them in the past. She’d done better with that, true, but right then she wanted to make some of those relationships more right. Never knew exactly how much time she might have, after all. Beetee had been so isolated. She had too, and she knew unless she worked at it, all she would have in the end was people bound to her by acquaintance and the mutual status of being a victor, but not much in the way of actual friends. She’d had to relearn everything with Haymitch. Time to try to expand that more—she’d felt the tentative groundwork of that laid down most places she went, with the others generally willing to give her a second chance.

She’d never been good at relating to other women, though. Always felt far more comfortable with the rough-and-tumble simplicity of the boys, and she’d complained about that to her parents. She remembered another bit of advice from her mom, as the two of them were tending some herbs in their pots that Petra Mason had brought home from lumber camp—who had she been? Ten or eleven, she thought, too young for tesserae, but not far from it.

"Well, Willomina Storgis asked to study with you last week, as I remember."

"Mina’s hopeless at math, Mom," Johanna said with a snort, carefully watering the wild garlic. "She probably just wants to sponge off me because she knows I'm good."

Her mom sighed, shook her head, and with a steady hand and a paring knife, she cut off another few leaves of basil to flavor the stew. "Hanna. Not everyone’s going to ask you to go climb trees to show they want to spend time with you. The scent of crushed basil rose in the air, sharp and slightly earthy. "Friendships are like gardens. You have to make sure you tend them so they thrive. And if you stomp them down at the start, nothing will ever grow."

She’d been doing a hell of a lot more stomping than tending. Besides, knowing that other female victors had faced the fears that Johanna’s own future held made her think that she ought to embrace
them more. Willamina Storgis had tried to reach out to her for help and Johanna had brushed her off. She only hoped the women of the victors wouldn’t be so impatient. Heike might be her sister by blood, and Johanna prayed fiercely that relationship could somehow be mended, whether Heike stayed in Ten or came to Twelve. But she had plenty of sisters in bond as well. She reached for the phone, feeling stupidly nervous.

Annie told her that Maggie was growing livelier by the day, and sheepishly admitted, though not without joy, that she was already pregnant again. “We think it’ll be sometime around next June.”

“Didn’t waste time, did you?” Johanna said dryly, but she was smiling as she said it, imagining Finnick probably deliriously happy at the news. “Well, maybe ours can play with yours.” She could imagine that—two little kids playing together in the Village.

“Really?” Annie said with interest. “Oh, congratulations to both of you!” Hearing the warmth in Annie’s voice, Johanna’s tight grip on the phone relaxed.

“Yeah, well, thanks to the news assholes, everyone’s going to be speculating on it now so I figured I might as well beat them to t—“ She shook her head, not wanting to gripe. “I wanted to be the one to tell you,” she admitted, knowing it was true. “We’re thinking May or June?”

Chantilly and Clover both offered sound practical advice, Enobaria griped about being huge as a mountain and due to give birth any day, Taffeta reminisced about Cinna as a baby. Effie happily said she was learning how to knit for her own baby, and would make something for Johanna’s. Hazelle told her that Posy had been incessantly bothering her and Corriden for a little sister, and joked that if the two of them trying for it didn’t work out, maybe a cousin could be good enough for Posy.

She asked them to not tell Katniss and Peeta yet. She didn’t worry so much about Peeta, but she had the feeling Katniss could be awkward about it, given how she still seemed alarmed by the idea of Haymitch married and regularly having sex. She also suspected that having finally adopted Haymitch as her uncle or foster father or whatever, after losing her own dad as she had, Katniss could be loath to give up the security of that position to a baby who held stronger claim and more demand on Haymitch’s affection and attention. Katniss definitely had her moments of warmth, but sometimes Johanna wanted to smack her for being kind of a selfish bitch, and she could say that because she’d readily admit she’d been one. She was tempted to call Katniss up anyway and tell her to just deal with it so it wouldn’t cause Haymitch any grief, but maybe a slightly more delicate touch would be a good idea there.

Besides, knowing Haymitch, and knowing how those two had essentially become the kids he’d never thought he’d have, he’d rather break the news to them in person. For a moment the old worry crept back that Katniss and Peeta would always have stronger claim on Haymitch by the guilt and ordeal of the arena than Haymitch’s own kids might. Then she dismissed it. That was irrational and she wasn’t going to let it dig any kind of roots and start to grow. She’d seen what she meant to him, and she knew with him, she would come first, and so would their kids.

In each case, it got a little easier to say: *We’re having a baby.* And somehow along the way, hearing all of them congratulate them and express their happiness and offer their support, some of the fear loosened its tight grip on her. She hadn’t wanted to tell them because she was afraid—maybe as much of what they might think or how they might not care as about trying to explain a potential loss of the baby if something went wrong. But they embraced her and drew her in as she reached out to them. She felt more secure, supported by the myriad strands of the web of family that they were weaving. This child would always have a place to belong, and a world without the Games. That felt like a pretty damn good start.

She went to bed that night feeling more at peace than she had in a while—the fears hadn’t
evaporated, but they had shrunk. Talking with other women who had been afraid and overwhelmed too by having a kid helped cut it down to size. She wasn’t alone in this. She’d never be alone again.

Heading to the clinic the next day with Haymitch, she gripped his hand tightly as a little of the worry came back. She didn’t even know what the hell this ultrasound thing would tell them, and she just prayed everything would be OK.

Twenty minutes later, she ended up lying back on a leather-padded table, trying to not have uncomfortable reminders of annual health exams with Sixleigh. At least there were no stirrups and they let her keep her clothes on, though they’d pulled up her shirt to a point just beneath her breasts and tugged the waist of her pants down low on her hips. The technician, whose nametag told Johanna that her name was Silica, wore loose scrubs in bright Three yellow that didn’t flatter her ashy-gold skin. It honestly made her look sallow, as it had for most Three tributes Johanna had ever seen.

Her hair was black, stick-straight, gathered into a no-nonsense bun, and her expression was no-nonsense as well. She didn’t stare at the expanse of scarred skin that was Johanna’s belly for more than a moment and a slight raise of her eyebrows. That was the standard medical personnel reaction, Johanna had decided after being in several hospitals—they noticed and instinctively reacted, but they didn’t gawk. If she had, Johanna probably would have wanted to rip her eyes out and bark that yeah, she’d been tortured, and did Silicia want to see the rest and maybe take a picture for the newscast?

But instead she tried to calm herself and looked down at her stomach, seeing that little swell rising there. Even crisscrossed with a network of still-silvering fading scars as it was, that belly had life growing in it. That felt like a triumph over the Detention Center, where they’d tried to give her nothing but pain and confusion and eventual death. She’d not only survived, she’d beaten the bastards by living and loving and now trying to give life to another human being.

She couldn’t suppress a squeal of protest as Silicia slapped some kind of ice-cold gel all over her stomach, while she explained that it would help conduct the signal for the ultrasound. Pulling out a black and chrome wand, she kept going on, “And this is the actual probe I’ll use to conduct the exam.”

Johanna stared at it, having the thought that it looked more like some Capitol sex toys she’d seen than anything. Glancing over at Haymitch, she saw him eyeing it too with a look of confusion and curiosity and just knew he was thinking the exact same thing. She smirked at him and he grinned back and said, “They make those in Three too, darlin’, don’t forget.”

She snickered as Silicia’s back was turned, fiddling with a monitor attached to the probe. “We make what here?” Silicia said.

“She snickered as Silicia’s back was turned, fiddling with a monitor attached to the probe. “We make what here?” Silicia said.

“Nothing,” Johanna said with feigned innocence, reaching a hand out to Haymitch. He took it in his.

Silicia started up the probe and Johanna tried her best to not make a wisecrack about the fact that yes, it vibrated. Not nearly enough to do any good as a sex toy, though. But the impulse to make snarky remarks faded as what looked like a whole bunch of nothing on the screen suddenly gave way to a somewhat recognizable shape and Silicia said, “Oh, there we go!” The technician’s voice was anything but business now, and Johanna thought there might be a grin on her face, but she couldn’t bear to look away from the image on the screen.

She stared at the curled little crescent that already had a head and tiny arms and legs that it now kicked and flailed in irritation at being jostled by a sudden sneeze from Johanna. The puking and fatigue and the hormones out of whack and how she constantly ran hot and then cold—yeah, those had been signs something was going on, but it had all been hidden from her to this point. Real, she
thought, resisting the urge to touch the screen or reach down and rub her stomach with all its scars right there for the tech to see. Seeing the kid on that screen, alive and moving independent of her, made it all irrevocable in some way and the entwined fear and elation of that filled her.

She thought of the kids she’d killed and the kids she couldn’t save—not exactly a great track record to cite for parenthood. The moment their baby was born it would be like having part of her own self always tied to her but wandering around on its own and how the hell could she ever make sure they’d be safe and OK when it was like that? How could she protect them always from the worst of the world, when she felt like she couldn’t bear the thought of even seeing them scrape a knee, and the thought of someone hurting them made her want to go and do murder? She loved this kid already with everything in her, and the force of that terrified her. She felt Haymitch’s hand gripping hers a little too tight and knew that he was struggling with it too. Silicia looked up at the two of them with something of an odd look. “You’re very quiet…everything’s all right, you know,” she said, giving them a wide smile, “looks fantastic.”

“Thank you,” Haymitch answered, squeezing Johanna’s hand again, and they watched the rapid flutter of a tiny heartbeat that had suddenly become everything to both of them. She felt her own heartbeat settle down from feeling like it beat as fast as the hummingbird-fast fury of the baby’s. They would do this together, and they’d have friends and family with them for it.

“Looks like ten, maybe eleven weeks by the length,” Silicia murmured.

Doing the math, remembering they were in One then, Johanna shook her head. “I was having my period right then,” she said. Not that either of them was particularly squeamish, but blood carried uncomfortable reminders, and trying to think about sex and blood together was far worse. During her period, the whole thing was usually mentally too uncomfortable for any kind of arousal. Yeah, they’d managed it in One because she was upset enough about getting her period that they’d both needed the comfort. But even if biology classes had been crappy in Seven, she was pretty damn sure women didn’t get knocked up during their period. It was usually a couple weeks later, wasn’t it?

“Do you remember the exact date your period started?”

“No. First week of August, though.” She could probably figure it out from their travel agenda if she really tried, but honestly she never paid that much attention to the dates of her period. Usually she just wanted the damn thing over with as quickly as possible.

“Pregnancy duration is calculated from the last menstrual period. You sort of get the first two weeks for ‘free’, so to speak. So that means actual date of conception was mid to late August…”

“Seven, mm?” Haymitch said quietly to her, giving her a bit of a boyish grin. Happy Birthday to me, she thought, remembering the times they’d made love in Seven. Chances were she wouldn’t know which one had done the job, but it didn’t really matter. The idea that they’d made this kid there gave her a distinct pleasure—she’d always have a little extra bit of Seven with her because of it.

“Which means you’re due around mid-May. Too early to know the gender…”

“We’d rather be surprised on that, I think,” Haymitch said, looking at her for confirmation. She hadn’t even known the damn ultrasound could tell that, but she nodded. This kid would come into the world as an individual, without them trying to push preconceived notions onto him or her. Boy, girl, didn’t matter—so long as the baby was healthy. She thought once again of that first baby, the one they’d decided would have been a girl, and decided to let herself shed the guilt of her own sheer happiness at this new child. We would have loved you so much, she thought wistfully, certain of that fact now. It just wasn’t meant to be, sweetie. Maybe if souls can come back…you’ll find us again. Maybe it’s you growing in me right now. And this time I promise we’ll be ready for you.
Silicia went on, dumping even more advice on them. Between Athena Wing, other mothers, and now this tech, Johanna had pretty much gotten a flood of advice, but she knew she’d listen up and do whatever it took. That little bean she could see alive and kicking within her was worth it.

They’d been killers in the past, and the scars of that would never quite leave them. But in that moment, she knew they had chosen each other, and the future, come what may. They wouldn’t give up like Beetee had, alone and ashamed—they would find a way to struggle on. They’d tried to deal with the worst of the past, with the worst of themselves, and tried their best to balance the scales. First they’d chosen to save lives, and now they had come together and actually created a life. **Best thing we’ve ever done together**, she thought, pressing Haymitch’s hand in hers again as they left the clinic.

She was grateful for the opportunity to have seen the whole of Panem in all its brokenness and its struggle, and its resilience and its potential. That was a privilege nobody else had known. But they’d been around the country and helped start to guide it back on track as best they could. They would turn in their report to Brocade and she’d take it from there, and chances were Haymitch would run for leading the new territory come spring. The work wasn’t over yet, but they’d done their duty by everyone and then some. Now was the time for them to think of their future.

He was smiling as he turned to her, arm slipping around her shoulders while they walked back towards Victors’ Vista in the autumn twilight, painting the waters of the bay in all the colors that Peeta probably would have had individual names for, but which she simply saw as one collective thing of beauty. “Let’s go home,” he said. **Home.** Her heart felt at peace when she thought of it, and she knew where she belonged.
The waning days of October were upon them by the time the hovercraft touched down again in District Twelve. Stepping out the door, Johanna could feel the chill in the air, sensing the nip of first frost and then the first snow wasn’t that far away. In the distance, the mountains blazed with the last defiant flashes of autumn color, though the patches of browned leaves and even bare branches said that winter was coming, and soon.

Haymitch stood beside her, looking it over. “They’ve spruced up the old place,” he said with gruff amusement, raising a hand and gesturing towards where she could see the freshly constructed houses sitting in neat rows.

She smiled in satisfaction, folding her arms over her chest. “Told you Seven crews don’t fuck around.” She didn’t ask him exactly what part of town used to be there. It was really better to not make him dwell upon it, and she’d seen so little of the district on her Victory Tour. It was far better for them to look on what had changed, and the signs of life coming back.

Beyond the new houses, some completed, some still unpainted, some still half-finished timber frames against the blue autumn sky, she could see jury-rigged tables of boards, probably knocked down at the end of the day, in the square around the Justice Building. Presumably that was Twelve’s market for the time being, until such time as new shops were actually constructed.

She saw then that they hadn’t arrived alone either. The news cameras weren’t here for this one—the trip was over and they’d moved on to the next big story. But the people here knew when she and Haymitch were coming back, and so there they were: Hazelle and Corriden, Chantilly and Niello, Brutus and Enobaria, Finnick and Annie and Shad, Dazen, Taffeta and Cinna and Effie, Clover, Wy, and Katniss and Peeta. Brutus, the tallest of them by a good three inches, raised one hand in greeting, and she heard Haymitch chuckling softly beside her. “Damn if they didn’t all show up,” he said. “Probably to complain about the accommodations here.”

“Finn, Annie, Shad, and Daze are probably going to bitch about the cold, poor little hothouse flowers that they are,” she agreed with a grin. Unable to help a smile, warmed by the gesture of them all showing up to welcome them home, she let herself go to them and accept the greetings and hugs and the like, as she never would have before. These people were part of her family now. So she let Brutus babble and Enobaria smile indulgently as he talked giddily about their newborn son, Paul. She hugged Annie without, for once, wondering what might have been if Annelle Cresta had never been reaped or survived the arena, and asked after baby Maggie. She noticed Dazen’s hand slip surreptitiously into Clover’s. She noted how Taffeta and Shad stood close to each other too, but differently—the support of old friends. She saw how Katniss and Peeta had grown even a bit more in the months since she and Haymitch had seen them in Four, another bit of childishness left behind.

At that moment she spared a thought for the three left outside this circle. Beetee, lost forever because he couldn’t connect to them beyond shared victor status; Rye, who was actually harmed rather than helped by their company, and Lizzie, whose other ties gave her more strength. She hoped that Rye would be all right, and knew that Lizzie would be. “How’re things?” Haymitch asked Finnick.

“Cold,” Finnick said, making a face that pulled at his scars, and huddling his shoulders beneath his thick sweater. Johanna repressed a snicker and elbowed Haymitch in the ribs. “And some of the workers plan to head back to their home districts before the first snow.”

“No reason not to,” Haymitch acknowledged that with a shrug. “Not gonna get any building done during winter.”
“But I think we’ve got about two hundred folks here, all told, ready to tough it out through the winter.” She noticed Finnick used the word we, and used it casually.

Haymitch must have noticed as well because there was a slight smile on his face. “Good,” he said. “Plenty of work to do starting bright and early, I’m sure, but let’s have me and Johanna get settled back in.” Johanna tried to suppress a groan. The other women assured her that her energy would come back after the first trimester, and she looked forward to that almost desperately. She felt like she’d been born tired at this point, and knowing so much remained undone for winter fired her initiative, which ran headlong into her fatigue and came into a screeching halt. At least with more people here it would be easier than the hard, constant daily work of the previous winter.

So about all they accomplished that night was getting unpacked, sitting down with a few final details of their report to Brocade, and turning in early. She could tell he was tired as well—it had been a long journey all the way from Three, and they’d been away six and a half months.

So much had changed since then. She was in no way the same person who’d left District Twelve that April. She’d almost lost Haymitch, to a bomber in the Capitol and to her own silence in Four, but they’d survived it and they’d come back stronger, ties to each other deeper than ever. She’d faced the miscarriage alongside him and finally dealt with it, and chosen to try to start anew with this baby. She’d found her sister, and she knew Heike and the others agreed that Ten in winter was slow enough they’d rather come stay in Twelve to see how they liked it and how they could help—they could promise nothing more permanent than that right now, but even the thought of four or five months with Heike filled her with pleasure. She’d found friends, ways to reach out to other people, helped the other districts get back on their feet. She could feel the shift in perception of her. Maybe they’d never see her as exactly cuddly and fuzzy, but there was respect and warmth now rather than freakish curiosity and fear.

It felt good to sleep in their bed together, surrounded by the familiarity of this place, their own home. Lying there curled up close to him against the chilly night, Haymitch lightly rubbed her sore back. “Good to be back,” she told him.

He made a soft sound of acknowledgment at that. “No regrets?” he asked her.

She wouldn’t have thought that this place and these people would be home and family to her. Little Hanna Mason would never have imagined her life would turn out this way. “Shit no, Hay, you’re the one given to looking back too much,” she told him, though she was smiling in the dark as she leaned in, kissing him lightly on the brow. They would always look back somewhat, because the past had been too profound and painful to entirely shed it. But now she could live her life on her own terms. So she’d live for the future, not the past.

The next evening, they had the kids over. They’d debated a while now just how to break the news. “Our Katniss isn’t always the most perceptive about some things, I’ll give you,” Haymitch said wryly as they prepared a stew with a chicken they’d bought from the makeshift Exchange down in the square from someone raising the things in their backyard, “but I’m pretty sure she’s gonna notice something in the next six months?” Not to mention thanks to Joy Cloudmist running her mouth, Johanna was pretty sure even Katniss might be suspicious.

Her heavy sweater hid the slight swell of her stomach and her larger breasts nearly. For now, anyway—he was right, give it a few more months and even that would be pretty damn obvious. “You mean if I end up puking I can’t just blame her cooking?” she asked him with wide-eyed innocence.

“She’s not that bad,” he said with a snort of amusement. “She spent a few years doing a fair share of the cooking for her family before her reaping.”
“She definitely makes it edible, yeah, but that doesn’t mean it always tastes really good,” Johanna pointed out. And given her newly-sensitive sense of smell and taste that was a far more important consideration. She was lucky; compared to remembering Annie in Thirteen she was nauseous far less, but she’d still puked enough to not want to provoke it. “Good thing we’ll do the cooking tonight. Hotbuns can bring the bread, though.”

He leaned down and kissed her, one hand touching her belly lightly for a moment. Hoping that this baby was all right and still growing strong was something that was on her mind daily—his too, she was sure. But at least Athena had said most problems happened in the first months, and she was passing out of that danger zone. She knew both of them were breathing a sigh of relief on that, which was rapidly giving way to more of that mingled joy and trepidation of Oh shit, oh wow, we’re actually having a kid? “Pass me the knife, then.” He smirked. “Gotta stick to my talents.”

Peeta brought over fresh bread to go with the stew and the taste of the warm, soft, slightly sweet bread with rich, creamy butter with a hint of salt, brought some kind of craving roaring to life in her and she kept eating the damn stuff like she was afraid she’d never get a meal again. She only realized she’d downed half the loaf when she looked up and saw Katniss eyeing her with a curious expression, as if she was trying to figure it out. “Yeah, Kittycat, he knocked me up, we’ll be having a kid in six months, now will you pass the butter, huh?” she said, reaching for another slice. It was easier this way, to just make it something snarky and even flippant. That way whatever her reaction was, it wouldn’t hurt.

She heard a low chuckle from Haymitch at that as he reached for the butter and handed it to her. “Really?” Katniss said, sounding stunned.

Johanna looked over at the two of them, seeing Haymitch trying not to grin. “Hotbuns, what have you two been doing for a year sharing a bed? I figured you two had gotten more than far enough to not believe in the stork or finding babies underneath willow trees.”

“Considering how frisky you two got this last winter,” Haymitch told them, though she could see his grey eyes alight with a snarky delight, “I’m pretty sure they’re well aware.”

“Oh, that’s right.” Teenagers—they hadn’t quite learned yet that little things like taking ten seconds for locking doors and closing windows made a huge difference on keeping their sex life private. Not like she and Haymitch hadn’t gotten up to plenty on their own, but they kept it fiercely between the two of them. Blame those years of forced fucking, of people sometimes watching either on a camera or sitting right there. “Well, here’s a surprising little fact for you, Kittycat—Haymitch and I, we’ve had sex.” She leaned in as if confiding a particularly delightful secret, adding, “More than once, actually … pretty fantastic sex, in every single district in Panem.” There were more than a few satisfying memories there.

“Hanna,” Haymitch said, glancing at Katniss, looking flustered and staring at her stew with intense interest. He looked a little uncertain himself, as if Katniss’ embarrassment at him being forty-two and having sex and fathering a child meant the whole thing had suddenly taken on a tinge of shame and ridiculousness, whereas half an hour ago there had been only happiness and hope in him. She thought about the awkwardness of their early nights together, and the ease and joy there was now. Like hell she was going to let him feel like him wanting her, enjoying being with her, wanting a family with her, made him into some kind of embarrassment or a joke. They’d already had to deal with more than enough feelings of being shameful and filthy and damaged. This, with him, was the one good thing she’d had and she was going to defend that fiercely—she was going to defend their kid fiercely too, right from the start.

“She needs to get over it,” Johanna told him bluntly. “Mess With Katniss” had been funny for a
while given how prudish Katniss could be, but she realized she was getting tired of teasing, because she was tired of someone feeling like there was anything discomforting with her and Haymitch. “If she’s old enough to be fucking her own boyfriend, she’s old enough to not get embarrassed at other people having sex and having kids. So you’re not twenty anymore—so fucking what? You deserve to have a life now, and I’m not letting anyone try to make me feel ashamed of what we have, dammit.”

“It’s mostly because it’s like imagining your dad or your uncle having sex and having a kid, Johanna,” Peeta interjected gently. “That’s all. It’s just…awkward.” All right, she’d give him that. She assumed her parents had gone on walks in the woods for some privacy during the summer lumbering months, and they had tried to chase her, Bern, and Heike out of the house for a few hours in the winter, or else kept quiet as they could. But it was a small house, like every other one in the winter town, and muffled moans and creaks of the bedropes sometimes carried a little. When she was old enough to realize, old enough to have the stirrings of desire herself, she’d felt embarrassed too.

“Didn’t stop you two from letting me walk in on you this last winter,” Haymitch pointed out, taking a sip of water from his glass. “A half-dozen times. Heard you plenty of times too because you’re both damn noisy and you insist on keeping the windows open, Peeta. You think that wasn’t a little awkward considering I remember seeing you both around the district with your parents when you were both still crapping your diapers?”

Now both the kids were sitting there looking a little bit red-faced. Haymitch just sighed and shook his head, sitting back in his chair, one arm thrown around the back of it. “Look. It’s fine. You ought to be enjoying it, everything you’ve been through and all. But,” she felt his hand on hers underneath the table, lacing her fingers with his and holding on, “Hanna and me, we’re having a kid. So we figured you ought to know you’re gonna be…well, I guess you might as well say you’re one of the aunts and uncles.”

For fuck’s sake, she thought towards Katniss, just be happy about it. She wasn’t sure she’d realized until now just how much he needed that from them, because they were his family. Granted, they were hers too, but she could recover from it better. She loved them, but that bond of that close Twelve mentality and Haymitch’s mentorship wasn’t there between her and Katniss and Peeta. She also hadn’t endured as many years of rejection as he had. It mattered a little more for him and it probably always would.

Finally Katniss looked over at the two of them and nodded. “Congratulations.” Her expression brightened and she actually grinned in satisfaction. “If the kid’s half as smart and stubborn as you both, this could be really great. And I’m not getting roped into diaper duty, by the way.”

“Duly noted, sweetheart,” Haymitch said dryly, but she could see the relief obvious in his eyes, and how the faint tension in him eased. She squeezed his hand one more time and then let go.

“Have you thought of names yet?” Peeta asked, blue eyes almost excited now.

The two of them exchanged glances. “Not yet?” Haymitch ventured. They’d mostly discussed those few hell no, absolutely not scenarios all the way back in Four: no dead people, no symbols like Hope and Victor and Mockingjay. She had the feeling they’d kind of been holding their breath waiting to make sure it would all be OK before they ventured into coming up with a name. “We’re working on it,” he said, more confidently. “After all, gotta be something that works for both Seven and Twelve.”

The electricity finally came back a few days later with the lines patched and a rough power relay built to convey from Ten. A ragged cheer went up across the town as Milo, the foreman from Five, tested the connection and suddenly the twilight was alive with the soft glow of electric lights shining through the windows of the dozens of homes. Given the streets were still illuminated by flickering
torchlight, it made for an odd contrast, but it was comforting. They would still be prone to brownouts and the like, and they would still use candles and fireplaces as well, but at least they could have some reliable light and heat through the long winter. Standing there in the fall evening looking at the glow of lamps and ceiling lights up the hill in Victors’ Village, she nudged him in the ribs. “All twelve of ’em taken,” she said, tracing her finger in an arc to indicate their little tribe up there: victors and friends, family all. “Never thought you’d see that, did you?”

She could imagine him for all those years, looking out a window or standing on his porch and seeing nothing but darkness in the other eleven homes. Last summer he must have wondered if anyone would ever live in this place again. But they’d defied Snow again by bringing Twelve back to life. That thought satisfied her—one more Fuck you towards the old bastard, one more thing he’d failed to destroy.

He slipped an arm around her shoulders. “Nope. But it’s a nice sight,” he agreed softly. They stood there for a long while, watching the warm light, before heading back up the hill. She enjoyed a couple hours of heat that night radiating into their bedroom, even if snuggling up close to him kept her more than warm enough anyway. Being able to switch on the light in the bathroom when she inevitably needed to get up in the middle of the night was a damn fine blessing, though. Last winter she’d have been left lighting a candle or else just fumbling around in the dark.

More and more people arrived each day, swapping with the work crews heading out, drawn by the lure of open housing and a fresh start. It seemed like someone was always knocking at the door, wanting to run some question by Haymitch or her or make some kind of report. That could range from the utterly complex stuff about engineering—which usually had them baffled and saying who it would be better to ask—down to hunting regulations. “Go hunting,” Haymitch told the red-haired Five woman with shy dark eyes, waving his hand out towards the woods. “Get what you need to get you and yours fed. Have yourself a partner, though, ain’t a good idea heading out there alone. I reckon someone from Ten probably knows a thing or two about rifles and hunting?” He frowned. “Come back tomorrow, actually…”

They spent the night working out the details of hunting and trapping instruction. She might be too damn exhausted right now for a long trek in the woods, but she could certainly show people a few things. “Heike and Ash will be here in a couple days,” she mentioned, as Haymitch muttered and jotted a few more notes on his scrap of paper.

“Yeah?” he said idly, reaching up to scratch his chin and leaving a smear of ink. “What, were you thinking dinner?”

“No, I was thinking adding the Peacekeepers to the instructors’ list. We’re already hurting for experienced hunters to teach people. They’ve been out in the woods recently and survived it. They know how to handle a rifle. They had to handle live targets in Ten during the livestock drives. And let’s face it, that’s probably gonna do better for them, getting involved and being helpful to people. If they’re just here as our siblings, they’re not going to have much of a place.”

He looked over his shoulder at her with a slow grin. “Cunning plan, darlin’. I like it.” She could only think wryly that what he’d deemed “cunning” so approvingly in her, other people had called “deviousness” and “slyness” with the air of judgment. “We’ll pitch it to ’em when they get here.” His smile turned a bit sarcastic. “And we’ll hope nobody wants to go hunting Peacekeepers. They aren’t officially cleared yet.”

Apparently the Peacekeeper registration was going well. The CIB had announced a six month period for investigation of reports. If a Peacekeeper didn’t match up with any atrocities by next March, six months after the registration date, they’d be issued an official certificate of clearance saying that
they’d pretty much just done their duty as a Peacekeeper. Not to say that any reports emerging later might not change things, but Johanna hoped those late identifications would be few.

By and large, it would at least let the former Peacekeepers move on and hopefully find jobs and the like. It would be hard enough for them already, and some places like Eight and Eleven were damn near impossible for them to go.

He shrugged, rolling his shoulders carefully as if they had knotted it. “Needs someone to take charge,” he said, eyeing the stack of paper. “I mean, people have handled things admirably, all things considered. It’s a lot further along that I expected. But it’s one person handling building and another trying to handle getting more lumber and another trying to figure out where to build, other still working on a secure food supply…” He clucked his tongue in a soft sound of irritation.

“Needs someone central to look at the big picture,” she agreed. “Especially for coordinating importing supplies.” Raising an eyebrow, she smirked at him. “Guess who they elected? The guy who’s just been all over the whole country looking at the big picture.”

“Shit,” he muttered, leaning back in the chair. “Sure you don’t want it?” he joked. But she knew he was drawn to the job, and he’d do a damn good job at it. He had the brains and the heart for it, and more than that, he seemed to have the peoples’ trust now. So if he’d found his calling, she wasn’t going to be the one to drag him back down into boredom, helplessness, and depression. Damn straight she’d try to get him to keep his priorities straight, though. She and the kid ought to get what they deserved from him, and if he ever forgot that, she’d remind him. She wasn’t the woman she had been, afraid that to speak up and say that things between them mattered so much to her but it wasn’t quite right would mean somehow losing him. They’d grown stronger than that.

“You know I’ll end up dragged into it,” she said dryly. She’d keep busy enough with their baby, and with helping out on buildings and architecture, but having had a taste of the business, she knew she’d be involved. The mayors’ spouses all did the same. Haymitch might be better at it than her, and certainly better at not immediately wanting to tell idiots to take a hike. No wonder he’d managed to pull together a victors’ rebellion so carefully while her plan had simply been to go out in the biggest “Fuck you” style possible. But she knew he wouldn’t deny she’d done more than her part on the reconstruction trip.

He made a face. “Sorry.”

“Nah. It’s good that you want to ask me for advice.” Being involved in his life, and knowing that he trusted her and her opinions best, brought a steady reassurance. They always made better decisions together anyway. She couldn’t resist one teasing jab as she added, “You definitely need it, old man.”

“I ain’t doddering yet by any means, girl—want me to prove it and see who wears out first?” he returned smartly. She smirked at that, glad of the crisp comeback. Too often before he would have sighed and glumly said that yes, he was old. She’d know what he was thinking: too old to be of use and too old for her. “Old man” coming from her was fondly meant, meant to prod him a little and tell him that yeah, he was a bit older than her and that wouldn’t change, but that didn’t matter. She made it almost a term of endearment. Coming from him, about himself, it was nothing but condemnation. So if he could snark right back at her instead, that was for the best.

“I’m knocked up and I’m always tired,” she complained, “that’s hardly a fair contest.” But she was grinning as she said it, which probably spoiled the effect. “Finish your paperwork first, Mister Unofficial Mayor,” she nodded to the stack, “then we play.”

His deliberately over-the-top groan of disappointment followed her, and she gave an extra sway of her hips as she walked away, sure he was watching. “I’m gonna nap so I’m up for it,” she called,
waving over her shoulder. She needed the sleep anyway.

The hovercraft arrived late in the afternoon. Fresh supplies of lumber and food and medicine and little things like books. Haymitch muttered, “We’ll have the next delivery better organized—I already know we didn’t get bandages on this one. Work crews are using rags.”

“I hope they’re well laundered,” she said, instinctively cringing. The two Wings had arrived only a week before Haymitch and Johanna, and taken over medic duties with a vengeance. Perulla Everdeen, who’d flown back from Three with them, neatly slotted into that. Johanna had the feeling Heike would spend her share of time there too. “That takes a lot of firewood to keep boiling water constantly at the infirmary.”

“Oh, they’re already burning through the disinfectants we brought back from Three,” Haymitch said with a sigh. “Names long as my damn arm on those bottles. I suggested lye soap might do the trick—shit always worked like a charm on everything from hands to dishes to floors to laundry when I was a kid—and Athena about took my head off saying no, this place was going to have a top class medical facility.”

“Well, that’s a good thing, yeah?” She kept her hand from her stomach, but thoughts ahead of what giving birth would be like intruded for a moment. She knew it had killed more than its share of women in Seven when she was growing up. Whatever cut down those odds, she firmly supported.

“Oh, of course.” He shook his head, chuckling. “I still gave ‘em a couple cakes of lye soap. Told Perulla she could try to sell the good doctors on it. I reckon it’ll be interesting to see what falls out from all that—bet you some of Perulla’s herbals will still be around.”

A crowd of a dozen new settlers disembarked, unfamiliar faces from Three and Two and Ten by the look of them. Immediately they were directed towards housing by her old friend Rhus and his girlfriend Katrin, who seemed to have volunteered as housing coordinators, as well as overseeing some of the building. Seeing the two of them briskly going about their business, she felt a swell of pride in Seven and its capabilities. She’d taken a look and seen that those houses had been built quickly, but utterly correctly. Nobody would complain about drafts and gaps letting it the winter chill, compared to the crappy shacks the miners had endured before.

Then she saw Heike, in jeans and a heavy coat, her sleek auburn hair done in a neat twist. “Welcome to Twelve, or whatever the hell we’re gonna call it,” she said, stepping forward and gratified that Heike readily hugged her too.

Ash, Rhee, and Jay soon followed, and she saw that Drover had apparently followed up on his dissatisfied mutterings about being bored in Ten and come here with Thalaea. Could use a stockman, the Six maps said there might be some decent pastures in the northeast...

Seeing Rhee, Jay, and Heike standing there taking it in, probably remembering the firebombing, and Ash’s grey eyes scanning as if searching for a flicker of remembrance, she knew this must be awkward for all four of them. Only Thalaea and Drover looked relatively curious in the usual manner, without confused feelings. “Well,” Haymitch said with hefty self-deprecation, “I’m sure the old place has improved a lot since you saw it last.” That was applicable for all four of them, she realized. The last Ash Abernathy had seen, and apparently he remembered some of it from the look on his face, it had been that depressing, dirt-poor mining district.

“Looks good,” Rhee said, the first one to pipe up. Her shoulders squared, as if ready for some kind of a parade, or maybe facing a firing squad. Her green eyes scanned around with interest now rather than trepidation. “Looks a lot different.”
“I imagine that’s a good thing,” she said. “C’mon. Let’s get you settled in.” The houses in the Village had all been claimed by victors and some of the first to arrive back, but there were more than enough houses available that each couple could claim one for the winter. She would have invited them to stay at their house, but she sensed they needed their space, and maybe she also hoped that a place of their own, rather than guesting with someone for months, would make them feel more at home and make them want to stay.

Right before dinner she found a basket with a cloud-soft green baby blanket and a stuffed toy wolf with a green ribbon around its neck sitting on the doorstep, and a note in Peeta’s handwriting saying, *Let me know if you’d like something painted on the walls of the baby’s room.* She sighed, shook her head, and muttered, “You’ve got six months before the kid gets here, kids, no fucking rush.” But that was like them, Katniss especially. They would have wanted to drop off the gift, and the implicit apology, and not make a big deal out of it, particularly with the Abernathys having guests. It might be more painful for Peeta besides, to know that Katniss’ sister had survived and Haymitch and Johanna had found his brother and her sister, but both his brothers were still gone. In that, Johanna understood him very well—Peeta had lost two older brothers, and she’d lost one herself. Heike might still be alive, but that made the loss of Bern no less painful for her. She resolved she’d try to talk to him a bit about it later. That was something neither Haymitch nor Katniss could understand like she could. Fingering the note, she thought, *Well, we were planning on painting the nursery green anyway…maybe he could paint some trees, and some animals…we could talk.*

With that she closed the door against the chill and headed inside, to where she could already hear Jay and Lea laughing about something, and Haymitch and Rhee were animatedly talking something about supply logistics. She treasured private time with Haymitch, and even a bit of time alone by herself. She wasn’t a social butterfly, but every time she went somewhere, knowing she belonged there, and heard the liveliness and life of people enjoying each other’s company and wanting her there, it felt good. She’d had more than her share of prolonged silence and solitude.

~~~~~~~~~~

Bright and early, Haymitch made sure of one reunion over the breakfast table by inviting two more guests. He figured the ex-Peacekeepers wouldn’t mind one more of their number. The moment he stepped through the door, Darius broke into a broad grin at seeing Jay, and he didn’t even seem to care that it showed his lack of a tongue. “So you finally grew a pair of balls and groveled enough to her, Jay,” he said cheerfully, nodding towards Heike.

“So you finally grew up enough to want to settle down with one woman, Dair,” Heike said wryly. But Haymitch saw she was smiling a little. Then she reached her hands out to Lavinia. “And you must be Lavinia—Vinnie? Johanna told me about you. It’s good to meet you.” Watching Heike, Haymitch was struck again that she had the oak-solid Mason strength too, but steadier and calmer than Johanna’s fierce passion.

“I figured we might go hunting,” he told Ash after breakfast. It would be a good chance for the two of them to just spend some time together. “Meat supply’s always a bit short—we have some chickens and a few hogs, but we don’t have cattle here.”

“Yet,” Drover supplied laconically, finishing his coffee, and giving a conspirator’s smile to Thalaea. Haymitch had the feeling those two were firmly on board to move to Twelve.

“Yet,” he agreed. They’d check the lands to the east and northeast later that week, along with others from Nine, Ten, and Eleven to see if starting some local agriculture there next spring would work. “But it’s getting towards later autumn and the game’s gonna get scarce.”

Ash nodded, standing up. “Then let’s go to it.” Haymitch had a couple rifles ready. He could use the
old blackspire bow, true, but the rifle was easier, especially when hunting for necessary food. And for the people being trained soon to hunt for their dinner, firearms were easier than the extended training and practice necessary to produce a good archer.

“You know how to handle…?” Ash’s eyebrows rose as they slipped through the remains of the fence, and he nodded to the rifle slung over Haymitch’s soldier by its carry-strap. He noticed Ash carried his like an old veteran, as if totally accustomed to it. “I remember you using a bow from when we were kids, but…”

“I did military training in Thirteen,” he answered brusquely.

“Oh, yeah. The propos,” Ash said, half to himself. “Some of us weren’t sure if that wasn’t just a publicity stunt.” Oh, Haymitch remembered the propos of him and the rest of Victory Squad in Thirteen field grey, standing around and shooting windows and trying to look inspiring.

“It was real,” he said, between his teeth, remembering the agony of pushing himself through training so soon after recovering from torture. He’d never forget the venom ghosts he’d endured on the Block, and how Thirteen had deliberately mind-fucked him there in a way that would have done the Capitol proud. Tobias Homes’ headless corpse, Finnick’s maimed face, Gale’s exploded remains, and the burn scars he, Johanna, Katniss and Peeta all wore said it was utterly real. They hadn’t just put on uniforms as costumes and pranced around. They’d gone to war and they had paid for it in blood and nightmares.

“We knew that once we saw the kids at the Presidential Mansion,” Ash said quietly. “It was hard to know what was real and what wasn’t at that point. Both sides were putting so much on the television.”

Realizing Ash was explaining and even apologizing, Haymitch calmed down. Being right in the middle of it, highly placed as he was, he’d known things he couldn’t expect others to know. That was particularly true when the Capitol was carrying on its own propaganda campaign. Nodding in acknowledgment, he said, “Well, we’ve got some traplines to check, and let’s see what we can shoot, huh?”

They made short work of the trapline, and apparently Ash still remembered some of the basic knots. The trapline was mostly a bust, just one fox that wouldn’t be great eating because fox meat was always tough. But they couldn’t be picky and anyway, Jay in particular apparently had ways of working with tough meat to tenderize it. Then their luck turned—Ash also managed a quick shot that brought down a buck.

As they walked the woods, it wasn’t exactly the same—too much time had gone by and neither of them were the same as they’d been as children. They were grown men now, but Haymitch wondered if despite the tracker jacker venom Ash still remembered something of those days in the woods when they were kids. There was still something of the same dynamic there: Haymitch wanting to get down to the business at hand, and Ash interested but asking all sorts of questions anyway. The fact the questions were now about the future of Twelve and that sort of thing rather than identifying a plant didn’t change that, and Haymitch couldn’t help but smile as he almost wanted to say, Can you shut up with the questions and focus, runt? like he would have all those years ago.

“I’m going on and on…are you going to tell me to shut up and stop pestering you?” Ash’s voice punctured through the reverie as they tracked the blood trail of the deer, and Haymitch looked up at him, startled that Ash seemed to share his thoughts so closely.

But given the smile and the quietly joking air to Ash’s voice, Haymitch knew he was being teased, so he answered, “Yeah, and I’ll tell you to beat it, go home, and threaten to shove you in a creek to
Ash laughed at that, and it was the sound of a man who actually shared the joke rather than one just laughing politely. “I remember some,” he ventured cautiously. “Just bits here and there. But…maybe I’ll get a bit more.”

“Even if you don’t…” He wondered whether You’re still my brother was too pushy. Ash had to choose this for himself, but it was confusing as hell to know where he ought to reassure and extend that hand, and where it might be presumptuous.

Ash seemed to sense it too and said almost too brightly, “So Johanna says you’re running for mayor?”

“So it would seem,” he said dryly. It appeared he was pretty much functioning in that role anyway. But he was damn good at it, he thought fiercely. He’d do them a lot of good and apparently they actually believed in him enough to think that. The sheer change of that from how they’d viewed the drunk, worthless wreck he’d been startled him. But then it startled him that he could think of himself like that now, with confidence and hope. “Someone’s gotta make sure it’s done right.”

“And here I figured you for a speech about a golden utopia where we can all live in peace. That’s the theme these days, right?”

He let out a bark of incredulous laughter. “Me? That’d be like slapping a coat of horse-shit on some broken-down old shack. Lousy, doesn’t fix the problem, and it would stink besides. Look, I believe we can do it better. You look at what’s been accomplished already, people from all the districts coming together…yeah, that’s the way it ought to be. But we’re not all gonna be friends just because Coriolanus Snow is suddenly gone.” He shook his head. “Scratch the surface of anyone and take a look. There are no born saints out there, Ash, just humans, and there’s more than a bit of the animal left in us. We can all do ugly things.” He’d killed people in the arena to survive—innocent people whose worst sin was being thrown in there with him and being told the only way out alive was through slaughter. “If we were all brothers and sisters at heart, they’d have all sat down at the Cornucopia every year rather than kill each other. The Capitol would never have been able to ignore the suffering in the districts. Nobody would ever have paid for a starving district whore, or a victor. There wouldn’t have been angry mobs in Eight, or rapes and executions in the Capitol. There wouldn’t be people pissed off at each other right now and jockeying to look out for their own people first.” He shook his head. “It’s when it’s chaos that the ugliest comes out—you’re a damn legalist, that’s why laws exist, ain’t it?”

“True.” Ash gave a bleak little smile. “Sometimes it seems like people readily give in to the worst of themselves rather than the best.” Haymitch imagined nobody who’d lived through the Capitol and its deprivations and depravities, and the war and all its suffering, would be able to listen to some golden, unrealistic dream.

“Most people out there don’t want to lead. They just want the reassurance of someone in charge who apparently knows what the fuck they’re doing, has some vision of where to go, and will tell them what they need to do. If it’s someone who encourages the best in them and wants to see everyone do better, and makes sure under law everyone’s got some basic guarantees and expectations like we made in that treaty, that’s a damn good place to start. Tell ‘em how this is gonna make us better and why we ought to do it, and chances are most people will agree. Just tell ‘em we’re all supposed to get along, and see how long that lasts.” He shrugged. “And fuck it, if that’s me being a cynic…”

“It’s being realistic. And solid plans are more of what people need than lofty rhetoric.”

Well, it had worked with the propos during the war too. Just telling the truth rather than some
overblown Capitol speech had been far more effective. “We’ll see if it’s what people want to hear.”

“Well, you get my vote, for what it’s worth,” Ash said, and while there was some humor in his voice, Haymitch didn’t think he was teasing.

*Assuming you stay,* Haymitch thought, looking over at him but not saying it.

Ash nudged the deer with the toe of his boot. “We ought to get this thing gutted soon…”

Haymitch shook his head. “I…don’t gut any of the large animals myself,” he said gruffly, hoping that Ash could figure it out and he wouldn’t have to explain about his Games and how deer guts felt uncomfortably familiar.

Ash looked up at him, a chagrined look on his face as he said, “I can’t either, I lasted a only week in the slaughterhouses at Ten before they kicked me out to go work in the wool factory.” He didn’t explain, but Haymitch could imagine the war in Eight had been bloody and brutal. Hearing about the factory bombing had been more than bad enough.

The two of them looked at each other and then down at a dead deer that was necessary meat for the survival of their families for the winter, and neither of them could stand to field-dress the damn thing without probably flipping out from bad memories. Deciding it was better to joke about it than to beat themselves up for having those scars, Haymitch started laughing, saying, “Let’s agree on this, you and me—no more deer hunting if we’re by ourselves, because carrying the damn thing intact all the way back to the fence is too much work, right?”

Leaning back against a tree, Ash laughed too, a look of relief on his face, telling him, “Look, let’s get it back to town and we’ll get Jay to gut it.”

“Should have figured seniority has its privileges with you Peacekeepers,” Haymitch said with a smirk. But then he said, “Hey, I’d have put the job on Katniss,” and the two of them cracked up all over again.

All of the former Peacekeepers, Darius included, agreed to be firearms instructors, and soon the Meadow was full of people shakily learning to handle a rifle. The patchy grass over the mass grave spoke eloquently to where the dead of Twelve resided, and Haymitch had the thought that putting up a memorial marker would be a good idea. But alongside the dead, the living thrived as new residents doggedly learned how to help ensure their own survival. Looking at the line of shooters and the hoot of joy as a target was hit, hearing Ash’s warm praise for the shot, Haymitch thought that was a snapshot of how things had changed: a Peacekeeper training district people to use firearms.

Johanna felt up to a walk of the trapline that day herself, so they went out together. “I think my energy’s starting to come back,” she told him. “I’m so fucking tired of being tired.”

“I know.” For someone like her who usually was such a live wire, it had to hit even harder.

Two hares and a fat badger went into Haymitch’s rucksack, not a bad haul for the day. Then he heard a frantic shrieking and honking noise nearby. Johanna’s brows creased in confusion. “Sounds like a goose.”

“Well, the snares probably wouldn’t get ‘em,” he said, “or the deadfalls. Must be a lynx or something got hold of it.” He shrugged. “Sounds close. We get there, we can probably chase the bastard off, bring home a bit more for the stewpot.”

Though when they breached the clearing, there was indeed a tawny bobcat there, and a wounded black-and-grey wild goose with what looked like an injured wing as well as several bloody claw-
rakes along its back. But there was also another goose currently engaged in beating the shit out of the bobcat with its massive wings, charging and flapping and hissing.

The bobcat gave it up as a bad idea and turned tail, scurrying away in a blur of motion. Haymitch’s hand went to his rifle, but the cat was too quick and pretty scrappy too by the looks of it. The uninjured goose waddled its way back towards the injured one, and it hovered nearby.

Quickly enough, he realized the guardian goose wasn’t going to fly off, its job done. He ought to shoot them both, really. That much meat to hang in a smokehouse was a blessing.

But it had defended the other goose—its mate? And it obviously wasn’t going to leave. If an animal could be called “anxious,” that probably suited, as it huddled closer to the injured goose. “Aw, shit,” he muttered, staring at the two of them. “I can’t shoot the damn things, you know.”

“I know,” Johanna said, her own voice quiet as she watched it too. “I can’t either. Anything that does that…” Anything that would readily charge into the face of an angry predator to defend its own, and would then stay there beside its injured mate rather than leave for safety, was something with too much heart for him to kill. He’d seen people with less compassion and devotion than that, for fuck’s sake.

“The injured one’s probably gonna die, though,” he observed. “He—she—hell, I’ve got no damn idea with birds. It can’t fly south. And they’re both sitting ducks—geese—for the next bobcat.” It seemed like a damn tragedy to him. He looked at the birds and thought about how Johanna wouldn’t have abandoned him either, how she’d fought for him.

“Fine, shoot ‘em if you have to as a mercy rather than leaving them to die, but…I think if I try to eat that for dinner I’ll actually throw up,” Johanna muttered. “And I don’t want to know who does eat them.”

“Feels like they deserve to live, doesn’t it?” he said, shaking his head, feeling a bit odd about having such profound feeling for a pair of animals. But he’d seen too much suffering and abandonment and abuse and death in his life, the worst of human nature, and seeing anything to the contrary would never fail to touch him. And as he’d told Ash, there was a lot of the animal still in humans—maybe there was something higher, something almost human, in some animals.

Of course, by the time he and Johanna had managed to snag the pair of geese and secure their wings so they weren’t flailing and hurting themselves or Johanna or him, he growled, “I swear catching Katniss’ asshole cat was easier than this.”

Covering the birds’ eyes helped, but walking back to town with a couple of dead rabbits and two pissed-off, trussed-up geese who kept giving honks and hisses of protest, Johanna said flippantly, “We must be a pair of idiots keeping these two alive when they don’t appreciate it and just complain.”

“Oh good,” he said grumpily, as he was carrying the uninjured one with its more vigorous flailing, “then let’s go ahead name the damn ingrates ‘Katniss’ and ‘Peeta’. You didn’t have to deal with them for a year before the Quell like I did.”

The sound of her laughter ringing out through the woods made it all worth it, and he smiled over at her. It was pretty hard to hide the live geese as they walked back into town, and the questions came quickly. Whether people thought the two of them a bit cracked for dragging an injured wild animal home to heal it, rather than eating it, Haymitch wasn’t sure. Although Katniss’ comment, with a sigh, was, “Yeah, you and Prim are gonna get along just fine, Haymitch.”
By the time the rabbit and badger were roasting in the oven and Galen Wing had dealt with his patient, taking it like a good sport and cheerfully knocking the goose out with a bit of ether besides, word had apparently spread about the Abernathy’s odd new pets.

Drover had apparently rounded up both Heike, who’d been a Peacekeeper on poultry farms, and an old buddy of his named Shadrina, who had been an overseer there. The three of them were already debating about converting an old supply shed off the Village green into an enclosure, whether domestic goose feed would work, and all other manners of animal husbandry.

When they turned to him and Johanna, Haymitch held up his hands defensively. “Got nothing for input, just tell me what you think we ought to do,” he assured them. “Hell, I’ve never even had a dog.” As a kid there had never been enough to spare, and as a victor he’d never wanted to get attached to something he would inevitably lose.

“He either,” Johanna muttered. “The camp dogs and town dogs don’t count.”

Shadrina shook her head, looking whether she wasn’t sure whether to laugh or chew them out. “Good luck,” she told them.

Johanna glanced over at him. “Can’t be harder than a kid,” she muttered. “How is it you always pick up the strays, dear husband?”

He shrugged, looking at the crowd gathered around to check out the geese. Most of them had been the ones that didn’t quite fit in. Whether they were just dissatisfied back home and wanted a fresh start, or felt like they had nowhere else to go, they’d ended up here. District Twelve apparently had become a haven for either the hopeful or the hopeless, and not much in between. “Guess strays recognize their own,” he told her. He and Johanna had been that, for certain. But at least they’d come together as something stronger, and now they’d managed to draw others in too as part of something bigger.

Even if that was for something so odd as goose-gawking, he thought with a smirk, hearing another hiss of rage from one of their new pets as it told someone to back off. Fiercely defensive of their own and willing to speak up and let people know where things stood—yeah, he and Johanna might have found the right animals here.
District Twelve looked so different, and for Heike, that was a profound relief. Even the scorch marks on the marble of the Justice Building, Haymitch remarked, had been scoured away. She couldn’t have arrived here in the middle of clean-up, walked among the rubble and even the dead bodies, and handled it. As was, she still moved through the paths and streets, and sometimes she would wonder if this was where Naevia had died. True, it seemed like few people here hadn’t lost somebody thanks to the war, or the long years before.

But somehow it felt like she had less right to say, My best friend died in the firebombing and grieve for that, when both of them had been here wearing Peacekeeper white. So if sometimes she visited that scar of earth out on the Meadow, knowing that must be where Naevia now rested, she didn’t say much to anyone about it. She wondered sometimes what became of Euskal back in Ten, but he must know by now that she’d died. In death, she thought, looking at the grave and the fresh first fall of snow dusting it in the November chill, there was no distinction between Peacekeepers and Twelve natives. They all died in pain and betrayal, and they rested there together now. Maybe that was a little easier than trying to live together. The firearms training helped her, and her taking up with the clinic did as well, falling back into the familiar rhythms of a healer’s life. She figured two Capitol doctors pretty much had to have iron nerves giving up their life there and coming here with the intent of sticking around and changing things.

Perulla Everdeen didn’t know much beyond herbal folklore, but she proved a quick study, and Heike herself could speak for the effectiveness of some of those herbs. So between the four of them, they drew together by those bonds of aiming to heal the sick and injured, which seemed to transcend origins. Not always—there were times one or another of them said something that pissed the others off. But they got over it, treated everything from sutures to frostbite, delivered the first children born to this new district, and all in all, did the best they could.

Walking back from the infirmary again in mid-November, she paused again at the Meadow because nobody else was there to see. Her life had changed in so many ways since she’d come to Twelve the first time, shy and bumbling thing that she’d been. She had so much more in her life to be thankful for—reconciling with Jay and moving forward as adults rather than kids, first of all, and the miracle of Johanna too, as well as finding out about that lost past. She had more friends who were family to her now. But she still missed Naevia like crazy sometimes, wanted to turn to her and make some teasing remark about Jay. Rhee and Lea were good sorts, Rhee was even technically family by marriage to boot, but they were ten years older so sometimes it was a little harder. Jay had picked up with Darius as if the two of them had never been apart. No, that wasn’t quite right. Both of them had changed a lot. They’d just found the core of their relationship and resumed it. And sometimes she felt like Lavinia might become a good friend, but the Capitol girl was still more poised and reserved than Naevia’s sharp wicked tongue had been.

“Who did you lose?” She turned abruptly, seeing Haymitch standing there, hands shoved in the pockets of his coat against the cold. Didn’t he have gloves? Rich as he was, he must, and she knew he wore them for the long hours while he was out hunting. But for just errands around town—she’d seen the Twelve kids with bare fingers or ragged mittens. Maybe it was still like that in his mind, that he simply ought to endure the cold. “If I can ask?” His voice gentled a little.

“You tell me first,” she said, startled at her own temerity, to demand something like that, but the need to defend, even keep him away, overrode everything else. “You’re the one interrupting.”

He gave a gruff chuckle. “Yeah, you’re a Mason, no mistake,” he told her dryly, though there was
fondness in his tone as he obviously thought of Johanna. Crossing his arms over his chest, he regarded the grave with a solemn expression. “I lost everything and nobody, all at once,” he said finally. “If that even makes sense.”

“I was here. I saw how it was between you and them.” It had been perfectly obvious Haymitch lived there, but he wasn’t a part of the community in any meaningful way. Still, it had been the place he grew up, and they had been his people. So while he’d lost nobody specifically close, he’d still lost almost everyone he knew.

He grunted in acknowledgment of that, breath coming out in a misty white puff like a dragon’s smoke from a children’s book. “You?”

“My best friend,” she finally admitted, feeling it tug on the knot of loss still within her. “Naevia.”

“I lost mine in the arena that same day,” he told her. “Chaff.” When she thought about it, Chaff had died only about an hour before the firebombing, the very last casualty of the Games. She hadn’t seen Naevia’s body, but having seen others while they were scouring the edge of town for supplies, she could well imagine. But not having seen her friend specifically, there was still a thin veil of saving grace to it. She wondered if he’d ever seen the tape of how Chaff had died. He sighed heavily again. “I don’t even know where he’s buried. What they did with his…body.” The catch in his voice told her that yes, he knew that there hadn’t been much left of Chaff McCormick to bury.

The two of them stood together, sharing that sense of loss. When she thought about it, Johanna hadn’t lost Finnick, who seemed to be her best friend, so Haymitch understood this better than Heike’s own sister. “Anyway,” Haymitch said, stuffing his cold-reddened hands back in his pockets, “I was thinking of us putting a memorial here.”

“Even for the Peacekeepers?” she asked sharply.

“The Capitol murdered them just the same, yeah?” Haymitch returned. “They’re buried here.” He shook his head. “I don’t know that we’ll ever have all the names, though…”

“There were so many transfers to Twelve,” she agreed bleakly. “And records here in Twelve maybe weren’t the best, for the natives. I think it’ll be enough that they have a memorial, names or no.”

He nodded at that, a single brisk motion. “Good. Maybe you need to be on the committee to design the thing. I figure we’ll get some people together and make sure it works for everyone who died here.”

Startled, she looked over at him. “Me? But we’re not even sure I’m staying here, Haymitch,” she protested weakly, feeling like he was trapping her a little bit with that.

“I know that. But your friend is,” and that statement was almost cruelly blunt in its honesty. “So whether you actually stay or not, you’ve got as much investment in this as anyone.” He smiled bleakly. “I’m staying hands-off on this one, Heike. Doesn’t seem quite fitting that the man who pissed off Snow enough to cause the bombing and didn’t think ahead enough to expect it is the one to design the memorial. Kind of hypocritical. Besides, there are people who actually lost their own far more than I did. Thinking I’ll tap the boy—Peeta, I mean—for it too. Lost his whole family. Buried ’em in the cemetery this spring, but they’re just as dead, and he’s an artist besides…”

“That’s fine,” she said hastily, almost wanting him to stop talking, because it hurt to hear him talking like that.

“Do you know where you buried your friend out in the woods?” Haymitch asked quietly. “Actaeon,
was it?”

She tried to block out the memory of Teon’s slow death. “No,” she said honestly. “To the west of the fence, a ways into the woods. It’s been over a year now, the grave’s probably indistinguishable, and we had other things on our minds besides remembering that.”

“Every time I go out trapping or hunting with Rhee or Ash they’re keeping their eyes open,” he said. “I figured they probably won’t ever find it.” He gave another of those bleak little smiles of his. “Guess Ash lost his best friend too, and he wasn’t there for it either.” He reached out, giving her a careful pat on the shoulder, deliberately turning away from the grave to leave. She had the sense he was waiting to see if she’d walk with him, and so she did, trying to turn her mind away from Naevia and Actaeon and all the others, and towards the living people that still needed help.

Their mood seemed to lighten with each step, casting away the worst of the pall of grief and gloom. “We’ll remember ‘em,” he said, “but we’ll also move on. Let me know if you need anything more for the infirmary. You and Perulla are probably a bit more practical than the Wings. They’re not used to roughing it like this.”

She laughed in spite of herself. “They’re trying, you know. We finally convinced them that lye soap works wonders as a disinfectant.”

He laughed in return. “I told ‘em so,” he said with satisfaction. He walked her back to the house she shared with Jay, and she knew her husband would have something delicious cooking, as he always did. He and Darius had apparently gone trapping today. But she paused a moment and watched Haymitch head up the hill towards Victors’ Village, and saw the spring in his step as he turned towards home and his wife. Reconciling him with the man she’d seen here before was difficult, and Johanna was nothing like the woman Heike had seen on television for years.

But Johanna was like those vague memories of her sister—tough, often blunt, impulsive, but fiercely protective and caring. Little Heike had sometimes thought of her sister as a mother bear whom she could depend upon for safety, and even if as a grown woman she didn’t need to hide behind Johanna, those qualities were still there. The woman Heike spent time with now tugged on those memories and brought them out in a way Johanna’s bitchy, angry, promiscuous Capitol persona never could. No wonder she’d never made the connection in all those years.

As for Bern, all she had of him was whatever Johanna’s recollections and photographs could bring forward, and alongside Naevia, she now grieved that loss too rather than the vague idea of somebody named “Max” she didn’t need and didn’t remember. Bern was real now to her, and she remembered how he’d been flighty as Darius in love, how he always tried to hog the last of the maple syrup, how much like their dad he had looked. She knew Johanna mourned him as well. Finding each other meant each of them had filled some of that aching loss, but there would always be a shadow where big, funny, overprotective Bern should have stood.

She’d lost, and she’d gained. Most of all, she’d survived, and that meant figuring out where to go now. Ten had been amiable enough after the Abernathys came to town, but she felt the pull of actual ties here, even that meant facing the horror of the firebombing she’d endured. Still, she’d had to grow up a lot in the last year and a half. The strict Peacekeeper command structure had given her plenty of space to hunker down and avoid making decisions and forcing confrontations. She’d spent so long hiding and running from everything, and she was sick of it. Whether she stayed here in Twelve or not, she told herself it would be making the best decision for both her and Jay—it wouldn’t be because they avoided confronting the issues.

Yeah, damn straight I’m a Mason, she thought with a faint smile, as Haymitch disappeared in the distance and she opened the door to the mouthwatering smell of dinner.
Content as Johanna would have been to just stay put for a while after so much journeying, there was one more trip to take before the snow, and given that it was coming up on mid-November that might be any day now. Thankfully, it seemed like her energy finally had come back, and as she threw some things in a bag to prepare for the short journey east, Haymitch commented on it with a grin, “Looks like you’re back to blazing high, huh?”

She threw a sweater at him without even looking. “Not a moment too soon,” she told him. Though she’d be honest and admit that facing this winter looked so much easier than arriving here in the dead middle of January last year. Twelve’s population now stood at five hundred and nine, given some latecomers from Four, and everyone had pitched in for winter preparations. It seemed like once she and Haymitch had gotten back and helped organize things a bit, the whole matter took off like a shot. It wasn’t that anyone was incapable. It was probably in part because having lived so long under a regime of No, and do it and die, and having been pigeonholed into one very specific job, the initiative and flexibility had been lost. They’d needed someone, as she told him, to see the big picture and start delegating. Once that happened, people started making strides, taking on more and more of their own volition. It was like they were crawling out from one of those dark Twelve mines to finally stand tall in the freedom of the sunlight.

So some people hunted with their snares and rifles, and surprisingly, Ash’s wife Rhee had stepped up and taken the headache-worthy post of food distribution, both the supplies sent by Paylor and the extra meat donated by the hunters to the communal cache after providing for their own families. She handled everything from badger meat to flour to bullets to thread with a sharp eye. “I’m good with numbers and accounts,” she said with a shrug when she volunteered for the job at one of the community meetings they held on a weekly basis. “I worked with the quartermaster department for years.” Drover Crozier had spoken up, saying she’d played more than fair in Ten with their books at Southlands Station, so people had reluctantly let her take the job, mostly because nobody else wanted the headache. Johanna thought this was Rhee aggressively making her own opportunity here, and she appreciated the nerve it took.

Johanna had seen a few people argue with her, claiming they were being cheated by an ex-Peacekeeper. But apparently Rhee Abernathy wouldn’t take shit from anyone, and that usually ended up with the complainer getting dragged to go over the books and see in excruciating detail that they weren’t being bilked of their fair share. Johanna hadn’t seen anyone complain twice.

There were the hunters hard at work to get a good supply of meat laid by for winter, and carpenters still working on furniture, and weavers making blankets, people dipping candles, tailors making warm clothing under Cinna’s direction, lumberjacks getting huge stacks of firewood. Any number of tasks the four of them had all needed to handle last year were delegated out now, and she could tell that while it wouldn’t be the easiest winter and there would still be hard work, everyone would at least be decently supplied and comfortable. That was far more than could have been said during the Snow regime.

Their party met at the town square the next morning to await the hovercraft to take them east to assess the new lands assigned to their territory. Drover came along as the livestock man, and slim dark Potash and burly brown-haired Maizey were there for the agriculture, and the Eleven man and Nine woman were already bickering a bit. “Either they’re gonna run each other with a tractor, or they’ll be shacking up by the time the snow hits,” she muttered to Haymitch, jerking a thumb at the two of them.

Haymitch gave a soft chuff of humor. “It’ll be a cold winter for Tash—Maizey’s more used to the snow. He’ll probably be asking her for advice soon enough.” He nodded to the last member of the
party, Marsh from Four. “She’ll be bored to tears before we reach the bay, of course.”

“I hope they didn’t get their hopes up too much,” Johanna said. “Those were old, old maps Six gave us. Nothing to say the farming or fishing will be any good.”

“No, but we can hope. Whatever they might have done to the land—or the water,” he added with a thoughtful look towards Marsh, “it’s had over a century to recover.”

She pulled her coat tighter around herself, and when the boarding ramp lowered, headed into the warmth of it. Maybe it was the whole cross-country journey that had busted the fear, but the old anxiety about getting into a hovercraft wasn’t there, given the only hovercraft journeys she’d taken prior to a year ago had been all arena-related.

It was just a short hop to the east—it barely felt like they’d lifted off before they touched down again. If the railway built out to here, she imagined it would be less than an hour’s journey from the center of Twelve to this place. Stepping out of the hovercraft, she looked around the valley where they’d landed. Haymitch was right; a century of being undisturbed by human hands meant it had grown wild into rolling meadows and patches of forest. But there was a clear-flowing river and the spine of the mountains arose to the west, thickly covered with old-growth wood. To her eye at least, this Shenandoah Valley was a beautiful place, calm and peaceful. That was even true with the brown barrenness of late fall. In spring or summer, it would be even more beautiful.

“Looks pretty,” Haymitch said. But Tash and Maizey were already at work pacing the ground, digging up some soil samples and bickering about the look of the dirt. “So fine, it ain’t that plains blackland dirt like you’re used to,” Tash said impatiently.

“Well, it’s not that lousy red clay you were trying to grow things in either,” Maizey retorted, “how you Elevens ever consistently scraped anything out of that is a compliment to your farmers.”

“Was that a compliment?” Tash drawled, teeth showing white against his ebony-dark skin.

Johanna glanced at Haymitch and Marsh and shrugged. Drover was already wandering off too, obviously trying to stake his own claim on some good pasture grounds, and she could just imagine the arguments between the farmers and the rancher about what ought to be done where. Looking over at Haymitch, she gave a slight jerk of her head back towards the hovercraft. “We’ll let y’all play in the dirt a while yet,” Haymitch told them wryly. “We’re gonna head east to drop Marsh at the coast to check it out.” The three of them barely acknowledged that, absorbed already in their plans. Johanna knew they had locator beacons on their belts to press to recall the hovercraft in an emergency.

Perhaps an hour to the east, the hovercraft touched down again, and this time the thick mud, salt, and sulfur smell of a marsh filled her nostrils. The cold meant it wasn’t nearly as bad as it had been in Four’s June heat, but the tang was still there. The dry stalks of the marsh grass rattled in the breeze. Marsha lived up to her name, already with a pair of thick rubber boots on, walking the marsh shoreline and mumbling happily about oysters and the like.

She finally looked up at them, green eyes alight with glee. “Water quality looks good and clear, and there’s lots of oysters—that’s a real fine sign. The records said the fishing used to be really good here before it got dirty and overfished. Hopefully it’s recovered. I can’t say much more without putting a boat out there and throwing some traps or lines.”

“We don’t have the stuff yet to really build a fishing community,” Haymitch said, hands stuck in his pockets, sounding almost apologetic. “It’s a bit far from the town and all.”
“Yeah, I know that,” Marsha said. “But if you can even let us store some skiffs out here, build a camp or two to live in, a dock, and a boat and gear storage shed…if we can get out here even some weekends during the year, well, chances are we’ll keep some fresh seafood coming.”

“Hanna?” he turned to her, obviously willing to admit she knew a lot more about wood and construction.

She did the figures quickly, guessing that a “camp” was basically a small cabin on the water like they’d seen in Four—she’d confirm that with Finnick. “Doable,” she said quickly. “Pretty easily.” For about fifty people from Four currently, it was a relatively big project to haul the lumber out this far, but in the grand scheme of things, it wasn’t going to be that bad. And if it let the Four natives feel like they could still pursue some of their way of life, it was more than worth it. She could imagine the look of pleasure on Finnick’s face at hearing that chances were next year he could sometimes take a boat out here on the Chesapeake Bay and do a bit of fishing for the community and for his own enjoyment. Hearing that Marsha mentioned only some weekends, she realized that compromise had been offered as well. They’d be realistic in their expectations, rather than demanding a full town be built here for them with large-scale fishing boats. They’d accept less than they probably wanted in order to hang on to a piece of something they loved.

“Done,” Haymitch said. “We’ll get construction going in the spring.” He shrugged. “Hopefully the fishing pans out, but if it doesn’t…” It would be hard to justify the hovercraft trips out here without that, she knew, but they’d address that when the time came.

Standing back a bit, looking out over the waters of the bay towards the vast, open expanse of the ocean, she didn’t have the same sense of coming home that Marsha obviously did. But as a flock of ducks flew overhead, she could appreciate the wild beauty of this place all the same.

Rounding up Marsha, and then stopping back in the Shenandoah to get Tash, Maizey, and Drover, she knew all four of them would probably be heading back to their factions to start making spring plans. The three agriculturists reported with satisfaction that they thought the site looked promising for some farms and some livestock. “Looks like that’s where our future is going. It’s a pretty name too, Shenandoah,” Maizey said, brown eyes thoughtful.

Given the optimistic report about the place’s beauty, and that a good portion of the population was from Nine, Ten, and Eleven, Johanna wasn’t that surprised when “Shenandoah” the next community meeting’s topic of naming the territory quickly rejected anything related to the misery of coal mining. “Appalachia” was debated and rejected too, since it was rightly pointed out the mountain range by that name also ran into Eleven and Thirteen. The Fours briefly tried to rally for “Chesapeake” but quickly gave it up as a lost cause. By the end of the evening, “Shenandoah Territory” had become the frontrunner, and while it would take until March’s elections across the nation for each territory to officially select a name and a governor, she was pretty sure they’d made their choice tonight. Even she’d admit it rolled off the tongue pretty well, and the hurry to leave “District Twelve” behind was on everyone’s mind.

The first snow fell towards the end of November. Everyone started talking about New Years’ celebrations. She heard about Five’s candle-lighting, and Ten’s special chicken dish, and so on. It seemed like neighbors enthusiastically got into it, swapping ideas and recipes and everything.

Jolly Frill’s execution passed as quietly as Alma Coin’s had, and she was glad of it, though she called Safra Luoma that day, and congratulated her when Safra confided she and Elm were expecting again. “You won’t replace your kid,” she said, reaching down to rub the growing swell of her own stomach, “and you’ll never forget. But you’ll love this one for who she’ll be, not who that little boy might have been.” The next hovercraft held a beautifully made set of wooden toys for the
baby, for when they were older, and she knew exactly who had sent them. Carefully she tucked them away with the three wooden animals that Blight had made. She stroked the badger he had given Heike with a fingertip, feeling the satiny-smooth finish of it.

The next day she had Heike over, and handed her the badger toy. “This was yours,” she said. “And your kids should have it.” She knew assuming Heike and Jay would have kids was maybe overstepping, but she doubted it. Leading Heike up to her and Haymitch’s bedroom, she also gestured to the dresser. “I hope you don’t mind if Haymitch and I keep the bed. But…the dresser was Mom and Dad’s wedding project.”

Heike either knew or remembered enough so that Johanna didn’t have to explain, and she stepped forward, lightly touching the carved cherry wood with her fingertips. “I always knew I’d likely never get any heirloom furniture, you know,” she said. “Because Bern would get one, and you’d get the other.” Well, apparently she remembered that much. Johanna thought about Bern’s bear toy.

“They’d want you to have it.” Johanna took a deep breath. “And I want you and Jay to have it. It’s yours.”

“I think I’d rather still have Bern here, and Mom and Dad,” Heike said, a look of painful earnestness on her face.

“Me too,” Johanna said, feeling her emotions, always a little off-kilter, trying to slip her grasp. “Every day, little sister. Every damn day.”

She went into the closet and pulled out the wooden box, dusting it off from where it had sat for over a year. She’d have to talk to Haymitch about carving something together for their holiday tree—since they’d basically eloped last year and made no holiday plans beyond trying to keep mind and body together through the end stages of the Snow drama, this really was their first New Year’s together as a married couple.

But now she sat down with Heike, going over the ornaments, remembering what each of them had meant. And even if some part of her reluctantly gave some of them up, saying bitterly that this was part of what little remained of her family and she ought to keep them because she knew what they all meant, she gave them up anyway. It was Heike’s by birthright too, and if she denied her sister that heritage, she’d only have herself to blame if Heike rejected it in the end.

The memories came slowly, and it felt like Johanna was doing most of the talking to begin, awkward as that was. But here and there Heike would quietly volunteer something, and Johanna would confirm it, and in that moment she’d feel the bond between them, tentative but growing stronger. They laughed some, and both claimed it was just the dust at a few tears at thinking about that last New Year’s together, before Johanna’s Games. For a little while, even with the holes in Heike’s recollections, it was like their parents and Bern were alive again in those shared memories. “You got blue ribbons,” Heike said. “I was so jealous of that. I…kept begging to borrow them, didn’t I?”

“Yeah. And I kept refusing because I knew you’d probably lose ’em.” She looked Heike over, seeing the quiet, warm young woman of twenty-four rather than the thirteen-year-old girl pestering her sister about hair ribbons.

“I probably would have,” Heike admitted, giving her a wry, apologetic little smile. She looked at Johanna, brown eyes steady and sure in a way the teenager she’d been couldn’t have managed. “You were in Seven just a few months ago. What…what was it like?”

“It’s the same,” Johanna told her. For good or bad. “Still living by the lumber, still taking it all as quietly as they can.” She talked about the weeks she’d spent there, the good memories and the
comforting familiarity of camp stew and ribald jokes and the sounds of logging songs and the rasping bite of saws. It felt good to talk about it, and she could see the flash of recognition at some points on Heike’s face again. “But it’s not home,” she concluded softly. “Not anymore. Not for you either, I imagine.”

“No,” her sister said without any hesitation. “I’ve changed.” She gave Johanna another searching look. “We both have, Hanna.”

“True enough.” Seven hadn’t altered; it was them, the two Mason girls, who had grown apart from it and forged different paths. Nobody’s fault, really—except maybe the Capitol’s for having thrust both of them apart from Seven to begin, with Johanna as a victor and Heike as a Peacekeeper. But that was simply the way things had happened. They’d found new ways and new people, and while she would always take pride in her Seven upbringing, she didn’t miss it with the soul-deep longing she’d feared that she might when she first knew she’d leave it for Twelve to be with Haymitch.

“I wouldn’t mind visiting someday,” Heike murmured. “Just to see it. And to see Mom and Dad and Bern’s trees…”

“We’ll go together,” Johanna promised impulsively. “No matter where you are. I’m planting trees for them in Twelve as well. I...need somewhere for them.” Thinking of trees, looking down at the ornaments spread across the table between the two of them, she put her mind to something happier. “We should go find our holiday trees together this weekend,” Johanna told her impulsively. “Let’s face it, neither of the men we married would know a good holiday tree if it thunked ‘em over the head. But we’ll bring them with so they can do the lifting.” She smirked, and Heike laughed at that.

That Saturday, Jay and Haymitch grumbled and huffed their way through dragging two likely pines back from the woods after Johanna and Heike spent hours trying to find just the right one. It wasn’t just vanity, she knew. After so many years of not bothering in her solitude, and after so many years of Heike being denied that tradition in the Corps, they wanted this New Year’s to be done right. She had the feeling their husbands complained and moaned mostly for show, but they actually understood, bonding with each other along the way. Haymitch obviously tried hard to include Jay and reach out to him—she had the feeling he intimidated the hell out of Jay sometimes, so the younger man wouldn’t make the first move. But he surprised both Haymitch and her by offering to cook New Year’s dinner for the four of them, plus Ash and Rhee. “I’d extend it out to closest friends, since they’re practically family,” he said, grey-green eyes apologetic, “but we’ve got so many of those, next thing you know it’s suddenly dinner for fifty, you know? And I don’t want to invite some friends and not others.”

“Sticking to just blood kin is fine, Jay,” Haymitch assured him. “Sometimes you need to keep it small and quiet. I figure we all need some more time together anyway.” He didn’t say it, as he shouldered the tree up again with a grunt, but Johanna knew what he thought: This may be the only New Year’s we have together anyway. If that might be the case, all the more reason to do it up as well as they could.

They put the tree up in the parlor of their house, and she knew likewise, Jay and Heike did the same down the hill in their own home. Once it stood there, filling the room with its crisp, resin-laden scent, she looked it over. “Here,” she said to Haymitch, holding up one last ornament, a piece of tiger-eye maple hung on a blue ribbon. The design was like the table and chairs they’d made together—her oak and maple leaves, and Haymitch’s interlaced spirals, the ornament for their first New Year’s together. They hung it together in one last open place, prominent and in the front of the tree, and she stepped back to look it over.

“Next year we’ll be able to carve an ornament for Abernathylet’s first New Year’s,” she said as he
wrapped his arms around her from behind, resting his chin lightly on her shoulder. His hands came
down to cover hers where they rested on her stomach, fingers gripping hers lightly.

“Abernathylet’s a mouthful,” he said in her ear with a slow, deep laugh. “Though what else it would
be…Aberna…we’re having a little Abernathing?”

“Hell, you should have taken my last name, would have been easier,” she scoffed jokingly.

“Not like I’m that attached to Abernathy,” he told her. “Technically I’m either a Dearborn or a Fog
anyway, ain’t I?”

“You’re just you, not them,” she told him simply, figuring the two of them, and Ash and Rhee,
would make whatever the hell they wanted of the Abernathy name, unencumbered by Blair
Abernathy. She looked at the tree in satisfaction. She’d haggled with Pecos from Five for a few
strands of the white holiday lights they apparently used in their New Year’s traditions, and they
twinkled on the branches among the pine needles like pinpoint stars. Granted, they could only light it
up for a little while given the electricity restrictions, but the lights made it look beautiful, glistening
off the twisted, icicle-like tin strips of the tinsel, and illuminating the various curves of the wooden
ornaments with a satiny glow. It felt like home just that little bit more by looking at it.

A small heap of presents grew underneath the tree, brought over by everyone from Finnick to
Chantilly to Hazelle, and they likewise handed out their own gifts to their neighbors in turn. She
knew on both sides it was nothing like the lavish stuff in Capitol holiday movies, small gifts like
handmade mittens or a set of carved checkers, but seeing the pile of gifts they gave and got, and the
warmth and affection behind it, she knew they belonged to these people as friends and family.

New Year’s Eve was fairly quiet, given that the big event was always the next day. But it was their
first anniversary. “Lot more peaceful than it was for us a year ago,” he said with a wry grin to her as
they washed up the dishes after breakfast.

She wasn’t sure whether he was referring to the tension of planning to take down Coin, the business
of confronting Snow and then slipping him that poison, hearing about Heike and Ash, or any of it.
“Still was a real night to remember,” she said, nudging his hip with hers as she handed him a plate to
dry. She’d always look back on their wedding night fondly.

He took a moment to dry it and put it down on the stack with the rest, but then he kissed her, his
sudsy wet hands landing squarely on her hips. “Happy anniversary,” he told her softly. “Didn’t get
you a rare blue diamond, sorry.”

She laughed, remembering the commercials for lavish gifts of jewelry as proof of love. District One
must have loved how well those went over with the Capitolites, given how that had helped keep their
district economy afloat. “I’ve got what I need,” she told him, shaking her head, draping her arms
around his neck. “Every day you’re here.” That meant more than any material object ever could have.

“Me too,” he murmured gently. Then his grey eyes lit with amusement, and he grinned almost
boyishly. “Are we getting all soft and sentimental, Hanna?”

“I get to blame it on the hormones,” she said dryly, but she chuckled anyway.

“So if my fine self,” and she thought he would have said “my sorry ass” with utter self-deprecation
before, “is all you need, I can just take that nice big piece of slate I got some of the Two folks to get
for me and have ‘em haul it back to the Rockies?”
“Slate?” She didn’t get it.

“Framed it and hung it up in your workshop,” he told her. “I figure you’re going to be scribbling blueprints and equations and the like, you need somewhere to plan.” He snickered. “Your scraps are getting everywhere.”

“Like you never jotted stuff on a napkin,” she retorted. Fine, so maybe she scribbled ideas and notes and sketches about buildings on napkins and notebook paper and the like.

“Mind like a steel trap,” he said smugly, tapping his temple with his first two fingers.

“You never jotted stuff on a napkin,” she retorted. Fine, so maybe she scribbled ideas and notes and sketches about buildings on napkins and notebook paper and the like.

“Yeah, maybe when you can wing it with vague ideas that you get to flesh out later,” she shot back, but she was smiling as she did it. This was the fun kind of testing each other rather than any actual argument. “Me? I’ve got a need for total precision.”

“I know that,” he said. “So, slateboard. Got you some drafting supplies as well.”

“Like you never jotted stuff on a napkin,” she retorted. Fine, so maybe she scribbled ideas and notes and sketches about buildings on napkins and notebook paper and the like.

“Be still my beating heart,” she said, clutching one hand to her chest. “The man knows what gets me fired up.” She scowled. “Uh, I knit you a sweater?” It came out almost as a question. Taffeta assure her it looked great, and she knew the charcoal heather color would look good on him. She just hoped it fit.

At the surprised but gratified look on his face, she realized it had probably been a good while since anyone actually made something for him with that kind of care. “Happy anniversary,” she told him, and he echoed the sentiment, kissing her again.

The sweater fit well, and he wore it late that evening after the countdown to the New Year on television. They lit a candle in the window and prepared some of Peeta’s cookies for visitors. It wasn’t long before they showed up, singing songs, and she could hear it down the hill as well as in the Village. After Katniss and Peeta showed up as their first visitors of the New Year, she and Haymitch got on their coats to go next door to Chantilly and Niello. But Katniss and Peeta tagged along to say hello as well, and then the Dumases came along to go greet the Odairs, and before long the whole thing had just turned into one big social out on frosty winter air of the green, with people coming up the hill to join the gathering.

“Couldn’t have done this before, that’s why it was always us going to the next house and then just going home,” Haymitch said, shaking his head and looking around at it with an expression of wonder. “Too many people congregating together—would have made the Capitol nervous.”

“Trust me, we know,” Ash observed dryly. “Groups of more than eight that weren’t a specific work detail were actually illegal except for government-sanctioned events like Reaping Day, or under a special wedding or funeral permit. Ostensibly some law about ‘safety and obstruction hazards’, but…” He shrugged his broad shoulders. “It’s nice to see,” he said softly.

She looked as well to see it—kids shrieked with joy, running among the chatting adults to throw snowballs at each other. She watched Clover’s Ami, Chantilly’s Donny and Trina, and Kinze Kitteredge’s Aurora making snow angels with two kids from down the hill. The candles in the windows stayed lit, but people brought out lanterns and lit them on the porches to provide a soft glow. Before long, Peeta and Jay had taken on the task of providing cookies and hot tea and cider so that the gathering could go on.

“If we hang the lanterns up next year,” she said thoughtfully to Haymitch, “it’ll work a lot better.”
“We’ll plan it,” he agreed, and Johanna watched Wy Ingersoll carefully approach Lissa and Mitty’s shed, probably to check in on the two geese. Riffing off their joke about naming the geese “Katniss” and “Peeta”, they’d privately dubbed them “Brainless” and “Smitten Idiot”, courtesy of some old nicknames they’d had for the two kids. Mitty’s wounds were well-healed, and he and Lissa now ruled their tiny kingdom of a converted toolshed, intended as winter shelter, with fierce determination. Enobaria had made a few remarks about the pair throwing “hissy fits,” and only Brutus had laughed. Two humor needed some work, apparently—well, at least they were trying. But she and Haymitch were about the only two that the geese tolerated yet. Apparently they’d been accepted as part of the flock. But given that Wy was used to poultry, maybe he could charm the contrary geese a bit. Hearing there was no sudden honking and hissing, maybe he’d even succeeded.

Thom Coultree and Delly Cartwright came up next, the dark-haired young man tall and lanky, the blond young woman short and round. She’d heard that Delly actually showed a peculiar knack for working with electrical wiring and the like, to the point where she’d been overseeing wiring up some of the houses by late summer.

Delly excitedly announcing she was pregnant, beaming. “I’d like us to get married,” Thom said. “And, well, you and Missus Abernathy are Delly’s guardians for a few more months, so I suppose we need your permission…”

“Who the heck is marrying people anyway, Thom?” Delly asked, shaking her head. “I mean, we’ve got no mayor.”

“I’ll look into it,” Haymitch assured them, and the happy young couple wandered off, Delly snagging a half-dozen cookies from Peeta’s tray and sticking her tongue out at him playfully. Johanna knew they’d both lost all their families in the firebombing, so maybe being in a hurry to start their own family was understandable. The two of them looked almost radiant together.

Moved by the spirit of camaraderie and fun, she talked and mingled freely, letting herself enjoy it and laugh. She dumped some snow down the back of Finnick’s collar for good measure and as he bellowed in shock she told him with a wicked grin, “There, you’ve been properly dunked in Twelve waters now, Finn.”

“I’ll get you back for that,” Finnick grumbled, but he smiled and just reached for a cup of tea to warm up. Annie met Johanna’s eyes and grinned mischievously at her. Annie wasn’t really showing yet underneath her heavy coat, but it was nice to have someone to share the highs and lows of growing a kid by doing it at the same time. She hoped their kids would be friends too—maybe they’d have to try to find a beach on Chesapeake Bay someday for them to play around.

Finally, reluctantly, the lanterns extinguished and the tea supply stopped, people drifted back to their beds past two in the morning. The silence of the Village green was startling after so much liveliness and cheer in the winter night, but it didn’t feel oppressive. It was a temporary absence, not ending or eradication—like falling leaves in autumn, that good feeling would come back again. She knew there would be other gatherings like that, all of them coming together as neighbors.

Holding on to Haymitch and trying to warm up, he made his usual token grumble about her jamming her cold feet up against his legs, but he put up with it. Bundling the covers up around them, she felt that odd sensation in her stomach that had been there for a few days now. At first she’d thought it was just gas. But then it kept coming, a faint but regular flutter, and she realized what it must be, remembering that tiny shape twisting and kicking on the ultrasound. “Well, I think Abernathing’s moving,” she said. “I don’t…I think you’ll feel anything yet. It’s pretty faint, even for me. But they all told me soon enough you will.”

He laid a hand on the bump of her stomach gently anyway, giving it a soft pat. “Happy New Year,
kiddo,” he said softly. “‘77’s looking to be a good one. We’re looking forward to meeting you.”

New Year’s Day was full of good food, courtesy of Jay, and laughter and warmth of family. The little grey parrot Chantilly and Niello had given them, which they’d wryly dubbed Merry for Miss Merry Sunshine, because she always seemed to get going in the morning far too easily, chattering and singing, suddenly became a minor star. Flapping down from her perch, she tried to go climb on the tree, probably because it was tall and had lots of shiny things on it and fascinated her, and that ended with Rhee nabbing Merry toddling across the carpet before she could get into mischief. Given how fascinated Jay and Lori were with the bird, Merry blissfully letting them pet her even as she stayed shyly silent around fairly new people, Johanna had the feeling Niello might have another pair of customers there. “Be careful what you say around ‘em,” she advised them wryly. “She’s too damn good as a mimic.” Merry had already let loose with gems like *Surrounded by morons,* recognizable as Haymitch’s frustrated mutter, or *Pretty obvious, dumbass,* in Johanna’s voice.

“Imagine what fun Lissa and Mitty would have had with that,” Haymitch said, nodding to the holiday tree and smirking.

“We’d never get near the tree again,” she said dryly, imagining the two geese claiming it as theirs to defend.

Looking around at the six of them, warm and comfortable in the parlor with a roaring fire and the security of looking forward to a year without the Games or the worry of survival, it was a mellow, happy moment. She could think of those that weren’t here, but it was more wistfulness than pain at this point. She could be thankful for what she did have now, and think about the coming year and how life could be made better in those months. After all, there was still a lot of work to do.
Winter in the former Twelve was milder than Ash had expected that year, milder than Heike and Rhee and Darius and Jay’s recollections of the shitty winter they’d endured two years prior, milder than Haymitch and Johanna’s comments about the winter they’d been through with just the two of them and Katniss and Peeta there.

Milder than his own growing remembrances of deep snowdrifts, of being grateful of sleeping next to Haymitch for the warmth of a shared bed, stuffing rags too threadbare for any other use into little chinks between the weathered, splintery boards, after spying the sugar-fine white dusting on the floor where a gap in the wall or the ceiling had let the snow and the bitter cold in.

A pair of mittens that were too big and more darning than the original green wool—chances were their mother had got them used from the Hob or a neighbor whose child had outgrown them, even before Haymitch had them first. There had been old shoes with rags in the toes to make them fit, the cracked alligator-skin uppers barely holding together, clinging desperately to the sole with string or glue or tape.

They had been desperately, grindingly poor even for the Seam so many times. He could remember chilblains now, and nights of watery soup made of withered vegetables. The soup had been lukewarm too when their coal allowance was almost out and there was none to heat the stove too high.

Usually after nights like that, he and Haymitch had discussed, Haymitch’s far clearer memories being more helpful, their mother came home late—always in time to wake them up for school, though. And often there would be little improvements. A new pair of shoes, albeit already worn by someone else; a small, precious bit of sugar; a bit of meat; some extra coal. It was never enough that the neighbors would notice and wonder. But usually Magnolia Abernathy would laugh and hug them, her happiness obvious, as she bragged about what a deal she’d gotten at the Hob.

They usually said nothing, knowing exactly how—or how they thought—she’d earned the money for those extras. Now he could look back and see that General Fog himself had probably given them to her, and some money besides. It was the best the man could do while keeping her, and Haymitch and Ash, safe from discovery.

His feelings on reading that letter were maybe more decisive than Haymitch’s. But he’d lived that life, just as Phineas Fog had. He knew what it was like having done things that weighed on the soul in the name of duty. He knew that what was right and what was lawful didn’t always tally, and doing what was right often had to be furtive and half-assed to keep it safely hidden. He could remember nights with Rhee in One and wanting so much more, and trying to imagine taking that even further to keeping the relationship a total secret as his father and mother had made him ache for both of them. It hadn’t been a forgiving world for either of them, especially how it had ended. He didn’t doubt that being helpless to save the woman he loved had preyed on Phineas Fog until the end of his days. He had tried, though, and he had saved Ash’s life. For that, he’d be grateful.

Maybe Haymitch wouldn’t understand and forgive Fog as Ash did. But then, Haymitch had never worn the white. Just like Ash would never pretend to know what demons Haymitch carried from the arena, Haymitch would never quite understand what it felt been like to look back on everything that happened in District Eight. They’d done what they had to do to survive, and that left its share of
bloody fingerprints on the soul.

Surprisingly enough, though, people here hadn’t been as aggressive as he’d figured. Maybe turning his name in to CIB helped, maybe it helped that Haymitch and Johanna had garnered them a little sympathy by letting people know what had been done to them, portraying them as child-victims of the Capitol, even if instinctively it made him wince a bit. But there was legal guilt and there was moral guilt, and CIB was only addressing the former. True, there were a few insistent demands initially of, “Got anything that’s gonna cause problems later if we find it out?” as he introduced himself around the district.

He usually answered those calmly as he could, “Nothing CIB’s going to want to follow up. Do I have some regrets about what doing my duty sometimes meant? Yeah. But we saw during the war—a lot of good people can do a lot of lousy things. But at least I didn’t choose it. I did what I did only under orders.”

He didn’t hide from it, or defiantly tell them that they ought to fuck themselves if they thought they could judge him. His last remark pointedly reminded them that not only the Capitol and the Peacekeepers had committed atrocities. He had never gone off the chain and just raped or murdered or tortured for his own gratification. When he had finally disobeyed orders, it was to desert the Corps.

Seeing that he wouldn’t defy them but that he wouldn’t be cowed by them, people seemed to accept that. He stopped worrying that people might just “accidentally” shoot him in the woods. Being the ones to train in firearms and give people that means for survival probably helped their reputations, and it certainly didn’t hurt either that Jay readily cooked for people, Heike set up shop with Katniss’ mother and the two Capitol doctors to provide medical care, Darius and Lavinia lent a hand wherever they could and their Avox voices proved they’d suffered at the Capitol’s hands enough, Thalaea and Drover were already excitedly planning the livestock farms for the spring and training recruits, and Rhee proved herself as their provisions manager with her recordkeeping. People might not always love her if they didn’t get what they wanted, but nobody could deny she was absolutely scrupulous and absolutely fair. She played no favorites—even in their own home, she and Ash didn’t get anything choice secretly held back.

That left him and what he would do. It seemed like he’d slipped back into the role he’d had in Ten easily enough. In a place where people from every corner of Panem jostled each other and tried to make ready for winter, the tensions and conflicts were inevitable. One, Twos, and Fours got accused of being lazy and pampered, Eights got accused of freely playing the “entitled victim” card,Twelves crossly reminded everyone else that they were the newcomers, Eights and Elevens hated Twos, the Twos complained nobody would give them a chance when they were the ones doing the majority of the successful hunting, and pretty much everybody panned Thirteens and Fourteens for Coin and Snow.

Johanna’s comment on that to him, with a wry smirk, was “Well, you can throw a bunch of dogs from different packs in the same room, but expecting them to get along until they figure out the pack…”

Given working with dogs back in Ten, he readily understood that metaphor. The New Year’s celebration helped, but as the winter wore on and tempers grew shorter, he’d recruited Darius and ten other men and women as sort of a system of watchmen—that surprisingly included Kinze, the father of the little Eleven girl killed in the 74th Games. “Sick of the damn fighting, I want my babies to know some peace and happiness,” he’d muttered, shaking his head and sighing mournfully. Maybe it was as much seeing an Eleven man side by side with a former Peacekeepers that did it, but it seemed like their efforts to step in and mediate things helped. Kinze in particular held a special respect,
almost like a symbol of reverence. If he stood with his former enemy and called for people to figure out how to work together, they tended to listen far more than they would to Ash Abernathy.

Haymitch saw the gang of them at work one day at the impromptu trading post that had sprung up, working on a dispute there. He looked at the group of them with amusement as he gathered up his purchases from an old Eight woman in her headscarf—sewing needles and thread, some brightly colored cotton. “Looks like you’ve got yourself a bunch of actual Peacekeepers, Ash,” he said, giving them a faint half-smile, before he turned and walked away, whistling as he presumably headed home to Johanna.

Maybe it was stupid, but hearing the approval in Haymitch’s voice tugged on those old feelings of desperately seeking that praise. Maybe those feelings of childhood and brotherhood mingled with realizing he’d gotten a nod from the de facto leader of the territory for a job well done, but as the wisps of memory faded, he felt pride in it for his own sake. He’d done it on his own initiative, with these people who’d agreed to stand with him and try to make this place safer. He hadn’t needed Haymitch’s orders or Haymitch’s influence.

There were some fistfights and some petty thefts which were quickly dealt with, but by the end of January, things ran pretty smoothly and people seemed to be mostly all right with the idea of a security force rather than unnerved. It probably helped that summary beatings and executions were a thing of the past, and words were usually the first tactic rather than handcuffs.

When one of the security officers, Sorghum Tallis, got involved in a drunken brawl with a couple of busted jaws and noses, he spent the night cooling his heels in the rough security post along with the rest. To their credit, though there were no bars or locks preventing their leaving, the drunks actually stayed put until morning. “Lay off overdoing the rotgut, Sorg,” Ash advised him wearily after releasing the other four bleary-eyed, hungover troublemakers, “if you want to keep the job, even if you are good at it.” He sighed, adding truthfully with some reluctance, “It’s not your fault, but you know the old Peacekeeper reputation is in play here. We all have to be accountable for our actions and as much above reproach as we can be. They need to trust us, not fear us or disdain us.”

Sorghum nodded, and Ash saw a blush creeping into his fair, winter-chapped skin. “Yes, sir,” he acknowledged.

Sighing and shaking his head, Ash headed for Haymitch’s. Somehow he shouldn’t be surprised that black market liquor had started up. He didn’t know who had the still or who was selling—Sorg could probably tell him, but that wasn’t the important thing right now.

He found Haymitch in the living room, casually sprawled on the couch, with a notepad in hand as usual as he scribbled notes on whatever topic. “Hanna’s out working on the design for the school,” Haymitch observed. That little smile of his appeared again. “She keeps saying that there’s already enough kids to make holding classes in the Justice Building difficult and they’d damn well better get a move on it because she wants that school built before our kid comes up ready for kindergarten.”

Knowing Johanna Abernathy and her fierce will, Ash didn’t doubt that school would probably be well in progress by next winter, let alone in a few years when his niece or nephew started kindergarten. “How’s she today?” he asked.

“In fine form,” Haymitch said with some humor. “Complaining that she’s getting too big for her winter coat, but...well. She’s good, the baby’s good, we’re all doing well.” Ash thought he sounded surprised, almost bashful yet in his happiness and the idea of doing well.

Distracted by the noise, Ash’s eyes drifted to the television. Haymitch had obviously turned it on for the morning programming. “I know it’s probably a waste of power,” Haymitch said apologetically,
“but with Hanna out...sometimes the noise helps me think better, right?” He let out a soft grumble. “It was too quiet here most times,” he said half to himself.

Ash had never really been alone, ever since the Peacehome. But he could try to imagine the awful silence. “Looks like you’re the star,” he answered instead, pointing to the screen as Joy Cloudmist spoke about the status of their as-yet unnamed territory and showed Haymitch at work in what Ash recognized as the forests of Seven.

“Aw, fuck,” Haymitch muttered, tossing the notepad aside and sitting up, elbows resting on his knees. “I should have figured they’d be like a cat on a ball of string with elections in six weeks.”

“I think you’re basically running unopposed,” Ash pointed out with some humor.

“That means either they think I’ll do better than them, or that I’m the only sucker stupid enough to take on the job. Anyway, what’s the visit? Not that I ain’t glad to just have you drop by, but you looked like you were here on a mission.”

“The black market alcohol trade.”

“I’m passingly familiar with the subject, yeah,” Haymitch replied with a voice dry as Five’s red desert bluffs. “This about that little dust-up last night? Look, Ash, you’re not getting rid of the booze. It’ll always crop up again.”

He shook off the surge of irritation at Haymitch’s assumption. “I’m as familiar as you are about how easy it is to get black market liquor, Haymitch.”

“Just familiarity from the other side of the fence?” Haymitch said it lightly, but his eyes studied Ash keenly.

“I know the trade will always be there. So I want whoever it is regulated and selling openly. That way there’s some accountability and some control on it.”

“You suggesting we open a distillery?”

“Why not? More jobs. Nine knows alcohol because they ran the beer trade, so they can start a brewery. One knows how to make the deluxe stuff. Anyone wanting to contribute to making a district-specific alcohol can get a job there too. That way it’s not just selling rotgut shit under the counter that might make people go blind. Legit, licensed, controlled. It may not kill off the moonshine trade but it’s going to lessen it a lot. And that kind of plan has to come from somewhere more official, not just the security force.”

“So you want an old drunk to help you regulate the local alcohol trade. Ain’t that like letting the fox into the henhouse?”

“You tell me,” because the Abernathys didn’t even serve wine at dinner—Ash noticed that easily enough. At first he’d assumed that was because of Johanna and the baby, but he’d started to wonder if it was Haymitch’s addiction as well. He’d noticed Kinze Kitteredge had no alcohol in his house either—removing any temptation?

“I got sober before the Quell, yeah, but I pretty much quit for good about six months back,” Haymitch said bluntly, but he didn’t quite meet Ash’s eyes, as if still embarrassed by the topic. “And you’re right, just letting it run wild ain’t the answer, because it was a problem here and I saw in Six that the moonshine trade’s popped up and it’s hitting them damn hard. Just don’t blame me for thinking life’s fucking full of ironies,” he concluded with a hint of sharp mockery. As Ash started to protest, he put up a hand and cut him off, “Don’t worry, I’m in, I’ll help with the plans...but I may
ask Clover or somebody else to take the public face of this. Let’s face it, could look a little hypocritical coming from me.”

“Fair enough,” Ash acknowledged that, relieved that at least he hadn’t taken some view like saying that alcohol was nobody’s business.

With barely a hitch, Haymitch asked, “Just curious. You and Rhee given any thought to your plans come spring?” Surprised, Ash looked over at him again. He’d run his share of questioning sessions, and he picked up on the attempt to seem nonchalant—the too casual tone, the loose posture. But the tension in Haymitch’s shoulders was there anyway.

“We hadn’t yet. Not really.” They’d talked about it a little, and to be honest, it looked like they were both inclined to give Twelve a chance since it hadn’t been as harsh as they’d feared. It also seemed like the opportunities were more open. They wouldn’t be the handful of Peacekeepers at Southlands—they’d be some newcomers amidst a large group of them. Even the native Twelves weren’t exactly coming home, given that their home no longer existed as it had. But he wasn’t willing to commit to that yet, and feeling like Haymitch was subtly pushing him with the question, he pushed right back, defensive of his space.

Studying him for a moment, eyes steady on him, Haymitch nodded slightly as if coming to some kind of a decision. He moved back on the couch, clearing more room. “You mind sitting down a second? There’s something you maybe ought to see.”

Quelling the prickle of irritation at the thought of having something used as emotional leverage, he decided he’d at least give it a chance. If it turned out to be some obvious ploy, he could just leave, but to refuse up front would make it look like he was trying to find excuses to shove Haymitch away. It was confusing right now, that was all. Bad enough to have a brother he barely remembered, but one so nationally prominent, and so visible here in the territory as well—he was still figuring out himself, let alone what place Haymitch might have in his life.

So he sat down gingerly, not letting himself sit back into the cushions or get too relaxed. Haymitch must have noticed, because one eyebrow rose briefly before he got to his feet and went over to the television, starting a tape.

On one side of the screen was Caesar Flickerman, in his studio. On the other, his mother and his eleven-year-old self, seated on chairs in what must have been a room in the Justice Building, with a live link between the two.

He remembered those chairs—rock-hard. His ma—mother—had told him quietly to stop fidgeting while the mayor, tall and blond—what had his name been?—fiddled with the equipment to establish the link. The Donners, mother and father and twin sister, were waiting outside for their turn next.

Sorry, Mrs. Abernathy, I’m a bit rusty. Been a while since we’ve had to do one of these Final Eight interviews, the mayor quipped nervously.

He looked at himself on screen, seeing the neatly but obviously mended clothes that must have been the best he had. He was scrubbed totally clean, hair neatly combed, but the thinness of his cheeks was obvious. Magnolia Abernathy, with her dark curly hair and worn cotton dress was just the same. There were threads of grey in her hair and some lines in her face that a Capitol woman nearing forty would have loathed, but Phineas Fog had loved her even then, hadn’t he?

But they looked poor. The kind of desperate poor where any attempt to polish up for a special occasion as a point of pride just subtly underscored how little they had. Still, the two of them sat there in that too-nice office and said how proud they were of Haymitch, how confident they were
that he could make it till the end.

“Now, Ashford…” Caesar said from his end, smiling.

“Ash,” he interrupted, politely.

“Ash, yes, of course. This is the furthest a District Twelve male tribute has made it into the Hunger Games in twenty-four years. It’s a remarkable achievement, of course.”

“But the rest weren’t Haymitch,” he said decisively. “He’s smart. He’s tough. He’ll surprise all of you.”

“Right on that, little brother,” Haymitch muttered next to him with a low huff of laughter.

“Not to be an ass, but what’s the point of reliving old Hunger Games stories here? I don’t remember any of this.”

“I know you don’t,” Haymitch said, pausing the tape. “And I could show you the rest. I come home, you run and try to hug me, I flinch for a second before I can take it—you came at me too fast, see.” For a moment Ash had a thought of moving carefully around his brother who startled so easily, of sleeping in the same bed with his mother because Haymitch’s thrashing and screaming terrified him.

“Then there’s this very touching tribute the Capitol had to you and Ma when you died in an unfortunate accident.”

“I’m still not following.”

Haymitch flicked the button to turn the television off. “I’ve watched that tape probably a dozen times since I got back to the territory trying to figure things out between us,” he admitted frankly. “And then I realized—that’s who you were. But it ain’t like that now. Not even how it was back then when I came back. You were actually kind of scared of me by the time you supposedly died. No blame for that, watching your brother kill multiple other kids and then come home all fucked up is pretty heavy stuff for an eleven-year-old.” He shrugged awkwardly, hands worrying at each other as if he needed something to do to burn off some of the fretful energy. “Truth is, last time you and I both knew who we were and what we had between us was when we said goodbye in the Justice Building. You probably don’t even remember that.”

Ash searched for it in the darkness, but even with the prompt, nothing came forward. He shook his head. “No.”

“By the end of that August, both those kids were gone. I didn’t come back from the arena the same. You got a lot taken from you at the Peacehome. On top of that, it’s been twenty-six years besides. Neither of us is who we were back then by any means, and we can’t go back. So…I can’t expect us to just pick it up from there. Point is—I can’t hold you here by making you hang on to the past and hoping it’ll come alive again. Even if you remembered it all, it wouldn’t matter. Stay if you want, but stay for you and Rhee and your future. Don’t feel like you have to stay for me.” He made a face. “I’d hope likewise you ain’t thinking of leaving because of me and feeling stifled by that. Either way, you’ve got a brother if you want one, or even just a friend if too much time’s gone by. If you don’t…well. That’s fair. I’d sooner see you happy than obligated.”

It made sense, and the freedom he offered to choose his own way, and to not be held by a past he could barely remember, filled Ash with a sense of relief. But something about Haymitch’s attitude warned him that his brother expected him to just pack up, leave, and never call or write. “You don’t expect much for yourself, do you?” He said it before he could think better.
Another of those self-deprecating half-laughs answered him. “I’m working on it. Old habits die hard.”

He thought about that kid on the television, so confident and even fierce in his affection and loyalty to his brother. He’s smart, he’s tough, he’ll surprise you all. Maybe Haymitch Abernathy hadn’t entirely changed since then. Maybe Ash Abernathy hadn’t either. “I can’t promise you anything right now. I’ll talk it over with Rhee. But…thank you.” He thought he didn’t have to explain the nature of the gratitude. Cutting through the web of old guilt and obligation meant a lot. It would mean whatever they might have together would be on the right terms, for the sake of the men they were now rather than the boys they’d been who were long gone thanks to the arena and the Peacehome.

“Welcome. There’s one more thing. Whether you stay or not, there’s a favor Hanna and I would ask from you and Heike.”

“Yeah?”

“We spent the last couple months tracking down some kids. Relatives of the obvious rebel victors that the Capitol executed.” He shook his head, grey eyes flashing with emotion. “Damn glad they didn’t pick up on Chaff, Seeder, and the rest being in on it…anyway. Sorry. They executed the adults, but we found out from Shad that oddly enough, most of the younger kids weren’t killed, but disappeared.”

“Peacehome?” he guessed. “Not unusual for a traitor’s kid to end up there.”

Haymitch nodded, though his mouth pressed into a tight, unhappy line for a moment before he added reluctantly, “Yeah, but only two of ‘em that I know of had their memories wiped.”

“Oh, shit,” he followed the train of thought swiftly and wished he hadn’t. The sudden absence of everything had been horrifying and knowing that Heike had endured it was bad enough. But to hear there were even more of them now, kids the Capitol had intended on turning into Peacekeepers too, stung deeply with its own kind of horror. “How many?”

Haymitch shook his head. “Nobody from Twelve and Seven, at least. But from the Three and Four victors…there’s twenty-four of them that the Capitol hid away as ‘war orphans’,” he told Ash with his voice weary and his face suddenly looking old and tired beyond his years. “Two to fourteen years old, everybody from Spark’s son to Mags’ great-granddaughters. Tertullia Sangus finally tracked ‘em down.”

“Where are they going to end up?”

“Here,” Haymitch said decisively. “They’ll be coming here in the spring. We’ve got enough Four victors, and, well, no Threes left after Beetee,” and Ash heard the hesitation and pain in saying that name, “but…this is where they belong, with the victors. I asked their kin to volunteer for the rebellion. I got the war started, really, so it’s on me to see their kids provided for now.”

“So you’d want me and Heike to work with them if possible.” Maybe he didn’t remember his childhood in Twelve, but he remembered those early days as a boy in the Peacehome all too well. There was so much fear and uncertainty, desperately grasping for anything that made sense, anywhere to belong—anything at all to help counter the frightful emptiness within his head. Objectively now he could realize, as he’d told Heike, they were probably easy converts because the Peacehome made them feel safe and gave them an identity and a future, replacing everything they’d lost. He’d needed those ties and that security, and he could imagine for these kids, being uprooted again and told things about people they would probably never again remember completely would be tough.
Haymitch nodded, holding up a hand to halt objection. “I ain’t saying you need to stay here. But…if you’d be willing to talk with them, if nothing else. You’re the only ones who know exactly what it’s like.”

“Yeah, of course. I’m sure Heike will too, if Johanna asks. I’m glad they’re still alive, but I wouldn’t wish that on anyone,” he said with bleak humor.

“Well, we victors always said the lucky ones died in the arena,” Haymitch said with an acerbic laugh. “But…at least for me, I’d rather have you alive.” He immediately gave a wry little smile at that as if realizing he’d said something openly sentimental.

“Thanks,” Ash acknowledged quietly. “Same for you.”

“Come on back tomorrow if you want? Can have some lunch and we’ll figure out the alcohol regulations,” Haymitch suggested.

Well, that was a good plan. Ash thought it would certainly be certainly easier to work with Haymitch on issues of the future, and thus getting to know the man he was, rather than focusing on the boy he couldn’t really remember or the Capitol persona Haymitch needed to fake for all those years. “I’ll be there.”

He went home then to Rhee, to the house they were making their own in small ways, from the rag rug at the door to the new paint in the bedroom to making friends of their neighbors. “You know, I’m starting to think staying isn’t that bad an idea,” he told her casually as he hung up his coat, and her head shot up from balancing her ledgers, green eyes wide with surprise and hope. Yes, he’d say he’d like to wait it out until spring and make sure the sweeter humor stuck around with the other people, things had changed a bit. The choice would be theirs, not his or hers alone, but he thought some of his final reservations about staying may have lessened. He knew she’d be happy to hear that—he could tell she wanted to stay, that she’d overcome her own demons from having been here before. Rhee wasn’t exactly subtle, and he smiled as he thought it looked like he and Haymitch both had a taste for women who could kick ass and take charge.

But they’d led a vagabond existence for too long, between the Corps, the deserter period, and Southlands. He’d enjoyed the people there, but he wasn’t a ranger at heart. So he would admit he was ready to put down some solid roots, maybe raise a family. They could at least start talking about kids and about their future—and that said plenty about how things had changed. “Let’s get a coffee break and talk, huh?”

The last few weeks of February were an example of winter’s full cruelty, as if it gave one last howling, defiant blast before yielding. The bitter winter winds roared down from the mountains and it seemed like all the snow they hadn’t had to that point suddenly fell in the space of ten days. It got to the point where people were snowbound for days on end. Shoveling paths through the knee-deep snow was no treat, especially when the wind hit any exposed skin with stinging crystals of ice, freezing to hair and eyelashes and the men’s beards and mustaches.

Aside from any necessary trips out, Haymitch was glad to stay inside and just listen to the wind and the tinny noise of ice lashed against the windowpanes. There was plenty to do, and in between phone calls and law books and the like for the territory at large, he made certain to have time for the important things here at home. The nursery slowly came together. There were more than a few evenings of working on a crib together with Johanna in the room she’d claimed as a workshop—her increasing belly meant that bracing and holding things to fasten them was tougher, but her hands were steady as ever in the shaping and carving. He loved her hands, he thought—like her, they
weren’t frail or delicate. Her hands were strong and square, deft and quick, with little scars here and there, and the gold wedding band still bright on her left hand.

Finally the crib was together, the walls painted—with Peeta’s contributions as well—and it seemed like they had more diapers, blankets, baby clothes and the like than they knew how to handle. “Guess we’re ready,” he told her, slipping an arm around her waist and studying the room. All they needed now was the kid.

“Ready? Really?” she said with a snort of amusement. “Shit, tell me you’re not terrified.”

“Yeah,” he admitted quietly. “All the time.” Advice could only carry them so far, and there were mornings he still woke up convinced of all the ways he could only fail. The thought of a child, so vulnerable and dependent, relying on him still had the power to scare him.

She nudged him lightly in the ribs. “Still…how many kids are we guardian to anyway at this point?”

“With the Threes and Fours coming in for the spring? Officially, we’re on the books for fifty-seven.” But that was different. A lot of them were older teenagers, who largely looked after themselves and just needed someone there for material security, or for legal matters. “Guardian” wasn’t the same as “parent”, to his mind, and while some of the younger ones from Three and Four would need parents, all of the victors would pitch in on that.

“Big family,” Johanna commented with a low, rolling laugh. “Are we compensating for being alone too long or something?”

“Well, hey, it’s nice to only be alone when you choose it.” He laughed in spite of himself and said, “But let’s get through the first one here before we talk about breeding up our own hoopball team.”

“Damn straight, I’m the one that’s waddling and having to pee every ten minutes.” Though he could sense something in the air changed after the snarky remark, and he wasn’t entirely surprised when she said, voice suddenly very soft, “I don’t know what’s gonna happen, though.”

“I don’t either, Hanna. But…we knew what would happen then. Every year, same as the last—we’d be totally alone, people would shun us, and we’d go watch two kids die every summer. Not knowing the future means at least now it’s ours to determine, doesn’t it?”

She stood there in silence for a long moment then flicked off the light switch and the nursery suddenly fell dark. “Yeah,” she answered, turning to him, pressing against him as best she could, and kissing him lightly on his unshaven cheek. He could smell the lemon-and-spice scent of her soap, and her hair brushed against his cheek, cool and silky. “And we’ll make it a damn good one.”

March came, as mild and forgiving as February had been harsh. All the melting snow left the dead brown grass soggy, and made mud puddles that the younger children played in, shrieking joyously.

Mid-month, Taffeta called them up to tell them, voice warm with pleasure, that she was a grandmother now. Little Calliope Locke was already dressed in a lacy pink sleeper by the time he and Johanna came over the next day. The birth had been hard on Effie, that was clear, but without her tall wigs and ridiculous heels, she really was a pretty tiny woman. But tired as she looked, she still fussed and cooed and smiled in a way that Haymitch hadn’t seen in her before. Cinna too seemed content, and the dreamy look in his eyes was filled with love for his wife and daughter now rather than his latest fashion design. “You know she wanted a girl,” Johanna remarked as they squished their way back across the soggy footpaths to their own house. “I mean, imagine if they’d had a boy and she had all that lacy pink shit she just couldn’t use.”
“She’d probably dress the kid in it anyway,” he joked, though he was actually half-serious. “Cally’s so tiny,” he remarked in return, hands stuck in his pockets. Maggie hadn’t been that little, and Brutus and Enobaria’s Paul was a study boy. But then, he admitted he’d met them a good bit past one day old. Still, he hadn’t been around babies that much. She’d looked more like a wrinkled, bald red peanut than anything. Then again, he’d probably be acting like an idiot himself whenever Junior showed up.

“Yeah, well, this one probably is tiny too, but they feel huge,” Johanna said wryly, pressing a hand to her stomach as she pulled off her coat inside the front door. She grinned in delight. “Oh, is someone pissed off in there now?” She grabbed his hand in hers and put it on her stomach, letting him once again feel the bump and nudge of the baby moving around and kicking.

“Looks like we’ve got a fighter who won’t just take it lying down,” he told her with a grin as he took her coat and hung it up.

Mitty and Lissa ventured out of their coop more, and one Saturday morning he caught Donny Dumas and Chelon Kitteredge running across the yard screaming with Mitty in hot, angry pursuit. Chelon didn’t quite escape, snagged on the ankle by Mitty’s beak, and only his rugged jeans saved him from worse injury. But he sighed and told Johanna to call Perulla while he went to go try to calm the agitated geese.

Mitty was agitated even around him, though, hissing and eyeing him. When he crouched, keeping away from the entrance of the coop, he peered in and saw Lissa sitting down on a heap of straw, twigs, feathers the geese probably plucked from their own bodies, and the like. He couldn’t see beneath her, but he was almost certain that the smooth curves of several eggs would be there, as she kept them warm. No wonder they were so tetchy right now. “Congrats, Ma and Daddy,” he said, unable to help a smile as he glanced from a cautious Lissa over towards the proud father. Mitty hissed slightly, wings half-raised, but then he relaxed as he saw Haymitch holding his distance respectfully. “I ain’t going after your kids,” he told the geese. “Believe me. I saw enough kids get taken away in my time. Don’t blame you for guarding them like this, or you,” he nodded slightly towards Mitty, “for defending her while she’s growing ‘em. I’d do the same.” He smirked. “Well, maybe I wouldn’t bite, but…you never know. Maybe you and Baria would get along?”

Backing off carefully, with no sudden movements, he left them alone and watched as Mitty disappeared back into the coop to keep watch over his mate and their babies.

Perulla was there when he came in the door, and Chelon lisped, “Hi, Mister Abernathy,” between a missing front tooth, which was shown by his wide grin. Donny gave a sheepish, guilty grin and waved hello from where he sat in a kitchen chair. Johanna had pulled out some cookies for the kids, though she was happily having one herself, sitting back in the chair and surveying the first aid with clear amusement.

“Lissa’s sitting on eggs,” he reported, snagging a cookie himself. “That’s why Mitty got so pissed at the kids poking around the coop.”

“Well, Lon,” Perulla said, “you’re lucky they didn’t do worse for you! When you mess with someone’s babies,” and she growled and pretended to take a bite out of Chelon as he laughed in delight, “they’ll fight back.”

They hadn’t for all the years of the Games, though. Facing fatherhood himself and feeling it so acutely, he could only imagine how all those parents had felt at their helplessness to defend their kids from the Hunger Games. Shaking it off, he instead noticed how good Perulla looked—pink in her cheeks, light in her eyes. He hadn’t seen her that happy in a long time. Seeing how comfortable and familiar she was with Chelon, he couldn’t help but wonder if Kinze and Perulla might have seen a
little more of each other lately than just as neighbors. True, he’d noticed Kinze seemed happier too, but he’d thought it was because of getting away from Eleven, and having a job on the security force that he was good at and which challenged him.

Until they said something, he decided, he didn’t know anything about it. Although of course he’d share the suspicion with Johanna. Still, it was good to see life coming back to the people of the district. Wounds were healing, grief finally becoming lessened, broken families come together in new ways. Perulla and Kinze now, and he’d already seen Dazen and Clover out for some long walks together, and they’d become trapping partners as well. Amitra, Alfie, and Barl seemed to adore the quiet, dark-skinned Five victor. Hazelle and Corriden had gotten married just before New Year, and while he imagined Corriden would never father a child after enduring that epidemic in Thirteen, the three Hawthornes seemed more than enough children for him.

Even in the muddy gloom of the dug-up Meadow, a mass grave for thousands of Twelve’s dead, he could see as the first bits of grass began to grow again. Maybe there would even be flowers yet this year. There would be a memorial placed there soon enough, but it was good to see life coming back. The scars remained, but the rawness and some of the pain faded.

He looked over the Meadow and those first stubborn, persistent shoots of green. The echo of Coriolanus Snow was in his mind, taunting Haymitch as Snow forced him to look at all the devastation. Have you lived all this time believing someday the chance would come for you to prove yourself the phoenix that would rise from the ashes?

“I’m no phoenix, old man,” he said fiercely, looking back towards the town and the houses and the people there. “Because I don’t burn.” Maybe he was more of a river, far less obvious and impulsive than fire, with plenty of things hidden in its depths. It was only when Snow dammed him up, diverted him to his own use, and kept him from moving forward that he started to stagnate and die by inches. He froze to ice, in the end, didn’t he, immobile and cold? It was Katniss’ fire that got him going as a mentor, but Johanna’s fire that had helped bring him back all the way as a human, as a man. “But I’m back all the same. And we’ll be rid of you in the end, one way or another. A hundred years from now, you’re just gonna be the likes of creatures in a ghost story told to naughty kids.”

Scheduled for April 1st, the nationwide Election Day loomed closer. They’d agreed back in Fourteen that Brocade would serve a five-year term before another presidential election—it would do no good to have a president for only a year. But all the territorial governorships were up for grabs. Not that he imagined most of them wouldn’t go to the previous mayors. They’d all proven a capable lot in such a turbulent period. By mid-March, Plutarch had apparently decided to lend a helping hand in the form of a propo tape for the “Abernathy for Governor” campaign. He watched it, not sure whether to laugh or to groan, and reached for the phone. Plutarch answered on the third ring.

“Really? ’My name is Haymitch Abernathy and I approved this message?’” He shook his head, again resisting the urge to roll his eyes, “Plutarch, seriously, I appreciate you sending the tape all this way and whatever, but I don’t need a propo—you do realize we’ve got only about four hundred people here in the territory and they’ve got better things to do most of the day than watch the television anyway?”

Plutarch gave an irritated huff on the other end of the phone, saying, “I was only trying to help, and you know you have to give them some kind of message, Haymitch, about who you are and what you plan to do—and I figured saying the message was approved by you was something you’d want after…”

After years of having his image shaped and warped and twisted by Capitol expectations, he thought, which Plutarch didn’t quite say in full. Realizing the man meant well, but as ever he didn’t deal with
some realities, he said, “I’ll stick to seeing ‘em face-to-face—as to the rest, they know who I am, I don’t have to tell them.” He actually had some confidence in that now, given how they seemed to have put some faith in him by this point, which they never would have with the broken-down drunk disgrace.

“Be ready to state it clearly,” Plutarch warned him, “and tell them what you intend to do for the territory—immediately, over the next three months, six months, year, and really, your five-year plan for your entire elected term.”

“I ain’t a naïve little dreamer, I deal in realities, you know,” he said, but given Plutarch had been reading those weighty books about politics and government back in the old days, he figured that bit of advice was something solid and he’d best take it.

Hanging up the phone, he looked up to see Johanna standing there with a sly grin. “Tell them who you are—what, like ‘My name is Haymitch Abernathy and I’m running for governor…I like blueberries, cheese, justice, fiddle music, the color black, cheerfully fucking my amazing wife, outwitting presidents, and generally making smartass remarks’?”

He gave her a smirk in return, telling her, “Well, I’m thinking it sounds a lot more like me than that cute little hero-superman thing Plutarch slapped together. He didn’t much learn from the whole thing with Katniss—people really need a human being in the end, not a symbol.” He looked at her face as she looked at him with amusement and affection in her brown eyes, and the gentle swell of her stomach where her hand instinctively rested, and thought about that and all the others around him, the people he’d fight for and the people he feared for, the people he’d lost along the way as well. The things that made him a man like any other…yeah, they’d relate far better to that.

He didn’t do anything different, aside from presenting that plan Plutarch talked about, with clear goals for the future—a hospital, for example, better railways, cooperation with Three and Six to find a way to make steel with lesser dependence on the coal miners up at Stone Cliff. He’d had more than enough in his life of lies and glad-handing with the sponsors, and he figured with the people of the territory, his actions would speak for themselves, or not.

The second time around, the elections were more low-key. Perhaps it was because they were territorial, perhaps because they were fairly one-sided. But it was important anyway—nobody ran unopposed, and thus the people actually chose their leaders rather than having them simply Capitol-appointed. Perhaps it was the same faces as before, but the distinction was an important one, and people chose the names of their territory now rather than just a bleak number imposed upon them.

There were a few surprises, though. Old Wrack Solange retired as Four became the Gulf Bayou Territory, and Juncus Dufours, the shrimp boat captain Haymitch and Johanna had met, took the position. Esteban Morath in the new Sonoran Territory of the southwest vowed to keep going strong in honor of his brother’s memory, and apparently a new boyfriend by his side set the Capitol gossipmongers speculating about the former mayor’s rejuvenated spirits.

Elmar Luoma kept his place as the Northwood Territory’s new governor, but he noticed Safra beside him as they showed footage of them at the polls, with a definite swell to her belly again. “Safra told me when I talked to her at New Year’s,” Johanna said, beaming with pride like a proud auntie. “Made me promise to not spill the beans, even to you.” He’d congratulate Elmar and Safra for both the election and the baby, then—knowing what they’d lost to Jolly Frill’s cruelty, and knowing how hard it had been to move on for Johanna and him after the miscarriage, he was glad to see they’d done it.

When it was all said and done, they’d elected him their first governor, and the suggested moniker of “Shenandoah Territory” had stuck. “98 percent of the vote?” Johanna muttered. “I ought to beat the
“Never gonna get everyone to agree,” he said, still a little stunned as Virgil and Joy moved on to cover Thirteen’s results. He’d thought he had a fair shot at winning, but those numbers, and the faith they implied, amazed him—humbled him, even, in a way that almost overwhelmed him. *They believe in me, apparently.*

As if reading his mind, Johanna told him gruffly, “You remember this when you start moping about how much you think you’re messing it up.”

“Thanks,” he murmured quietly to her, knowing she’d been the first to do so, and he would never forget that. Leaning over and kissing her, pressing her gently to him for a moment, he realized, “Ah, shit. I’ve got a speech to go write, don’t I?”

“You’ve got three months for that!” she said in exasperation, smacking him lightly on the shoulder. The new governors would start their terms on July 4th, the newly-dubbed Remembrance Day.

“You’re right, you’re right,” he agreed hastily. Though he added slyly, “And you’ve got two, three months before you can really work more on the school, so no sneaking off to your workshop tonight.”

“Fine,” she said with a mock scowl, though when he reached for her hands, lacing his fingers through hers, she held on in return. “I suppose they’ll be here in about five minutes wanting an interview. Historic occasion and whatever, you know there’ll be news footage. You don’t want people in fifteen years telling Junior his or her dad looked like he just got done scrubbing dishes.”

“Fine, I’ll put on a damn tie,” he grumbled, already heading for the stairs. True, there was so much work to do for the district, but the challenge of it excited him rather than daunted him. Because now he could actually do something about it, try and make it better—even if he wanted to knock peoples’ heads together sometimes.

Funny thing about freedom was that of course it freed up some people to be selfish asses, troublemakers, or pure idiots, but that was still preferable to the terror and oppression they’d lived under before. It just meant he’d keep his tongue sharp on their little follies now and again, and he supposed it would keep him from getting too complacent.

If he’d been startled by April 4th the previous year, with three other people who loved him there to make some notice of him officially getting older, this year was a stunner. If the weather hadn’t been favorable enough to eat out in the backyard, the house would have been packed to the rafters. Snagging another piece of the barbecued pork, hearing Tens and Elevens and Twelves still arguing about it as a favored topic, he looked out over the crowd. Yeah, he was sure maybe a few had showed up just for free food or for the luster of rubbing elbows with Shenandoah’s new governor. But most of the people who came were here because they knew him, cranky and flawed as he might be, and they somehow cared anyway. He watched Posy, Trina, and Aurora playing tag, Molly Jackson chatting with a teenage boy from Ten with a smile on her face rather than her usual guarded look. It seemed like he noticed the kids more these days, thinking about what future they might have.

“Cheer up, Mitchie, you look too solemn. Turning forty-three isn’t the end of the world,” Chantilly said, joining him on the porch and squeezing his shoulder. “You’ve got a lot to look forward to now.”

Looking at the people there, who’d all come together in the belief they’d make something better out of the ashes of District Twelve, he knew that was true. But he ended up looking at Johanna, leaning against the brick wall and laughing at whatever bad joke Wy was telling. She looked fierce as ever,
but the ferocity now was enthusiasm rather than rage. He remembered the scared, angry girl she’d been, and felt a fierce pride in her now for the woman she’d worked to become in spite of all that, and proud too that she’d chosen him to share that journey. He thought about the kid they’d have soon enough, hopefully the best of both of them. “Yeah,” he said, still looking at Johanna. “I do.”

Ash found him after the kids had gone to bed and they lit lanterns to keep the party going. “Heike’s telling Johanna, but I figured I’d come see you. Rhee and I, we’re staying.”

“Good,” he said, resisting the urge to hug the life out of his brother or to grin like a total idiot. “I’m glad to hear it.”

Ash gave one of those quiet, shy smiles he’d had as a boy, the ones he still clearly had as a man. “Happy Birthday, Haymitch.” With that, he hurried back towards Rhee and Haymitch watched him go, not inclined to chase him down or call him back. It wasn’t everything, not a total mend of everything lost or torn between them as brothers, but it was a solid start.

Johanna went to bed while he helped some of the clean-up, thanking people for coming, and the like. When he finally headed upstairs, he felt the warm glow of contentment from knowing his place in things in a way he hadn’t since he was barely sixteen. He couldn’t have gone back to the old ways anyway. He’d long ago moved beyond the Seam, beyond Twelve—the Games forced him into a much larger world than one sleepy valley in the Appalachian Mountains. But now these were his people, and he belonged to them.

Johanna stirred when he slipped into bed beside her. “Happy Birthday,” she murmured, cuddling up closer, obviously now awake again. “Stomach’s just too clumsy, sorry, so I owe you at least one good blowjob next birthday.”

“All right,” he said, laughter bubbling up inside him at that. She’d already gotten him some more fiddle music from the other districts—that gesture had been more than enough, and he already knew he’d transpose them into his Grandpa Tad’s music journal, just as he had with all the others. But he enjoyed the teasing joke between them. “I wasn’t up for it last year, you aren’t this year. Next year we’ll get it right.”

“Well, I didn’t say I wasn’t up for sex, birthday boy,” she told him with a wicked smirk, unbuttoning her pajamas. “Take it as slow as you want.”

He woke up in the middle of the night, roused once again by an unsettling dream about the Quell, dreaming of bloody water and candy-pink birds. But she was there, murmuring and occasionally twitching a little in her sleep, with the two of them together skin on skin. His hand rested on her belly, and he thought he felt a faint bump from Junior, not a solid kick, maybe just a restless twitch like Johanna herself. Bad dreams would never entirely leave, but on waking, he had this—his family, everything he loved, safe and asleep in his arms. So he lay back down and closed his eyes again, reassured that it was OK.

The farmers and ranchers departed east for the Shenandoah that Friday to get a start on establishing their crops and livestock, and April grew milder with each day, blessed with a good amount of sun. The mid-month train had a car full of saplings, for the Seven immigrants among them. He’d seen plenty of immigrants beginning to mourn their dead in their traditional ways, obviously feeling safe to do so here—there were incense fans for Three, rock memorials for Ten, candle racks for Five, and lanterns on the water for Four, among others. This was Seven’s chance to finally have their place, and he could see Johanna felt better for having that place to go. What future generations might do for their rites of grief, he didn’t know.

The edge of the Meadow became the site of a new memorial grove, and he and Johanna planted their
four trees there: Gunnar’s oak, Petra’s maple, Bern’s spruce, and the cherry tree for their first child. Nobody asked about the cherry—apparently Seven had its own etiquette about these things. Remembering the brass tags she’d told him about from Seven, ones they’d get made as soon as possible, he asked her quietly, “Do you want a tag for…” He nodded to the cherry tree. They’d never named that little girl, but it seemed wrong to just let it stay that way.

She wiped the back of her hand across her eyes, sniffing, not even bothering to complain it was the hormones. “I was thinking ‘Holly’, maybe?” He already knew the names they’d chosen for this baby: Walter for a boy, Juniper for a girl, names that would have worked for either Twelve or Seven. I won’t name my girls for flowers, Johanna had said decisively. They're so fragile. They just get easily picked and they die. Trees--trees are strong.

“How,” he agreed, putting an arm around Johanna. With that, it felt like they could finally let the grief go, with proper honor done to that lost child, and not let the shadow of Holly carry over to the living child they’d soon have.

Later that week, he removed the stone marker from the cemetery, taking it from what he’d thought was Ash’s grave. It was honestly too strange having his living, thirty-eight-year-old brother there alongside a stone marker for a dead eleven-year-old. He realized he’d probably never know what dead, starved Seam child Phineas Fog had used to cover up Ash’s survival. But he’d put another marker up all the same for the memory of a child who’d lived hard and died far too young. “You’ll still look after them, won’t you, Ma?” he murmured to her marker. “Even if he or she ain’t yours by blood?” Guardian for fifty-seven kids—he must have gotten that impulse from her.

April stayed busy, between work around the district and the last frenzied preparations for the baby. It seemed like there was always something more to do, and he faced the fact that they could never be entirely ready. Finnick and Annie, due in June, sheepishly admitted as such, and that it wasn’t much easier the second time around. But at least they knew Johanna and the baby were both healthy. The Wings had assured them of that fact, monitoring the whole pregnancy. She was young and strong and tough. He had to believe she’d be all right.

So eventually, all there was left was to wait. But when she told him to get the doctor late on the last day of April, right as Peeta pulled biscuits from the oven, obviously the waiting was over. Shooing the kids back home and getting Athena, then it seemed like all there was to do was a lot of waiting yet again once Athena informed them that yes, Johanna was in labor, but the process was taking its own sweet time. As the hours wore on and on into the long night, and he sat there seeing her grow more and more uncomfortable, it wasn’t easy. By the time it was almost dawn he couldn’t help it—hearing the hiss of breath and the low whimpers she was making, trying to not cry out with the pain, the memories came flooding back. Exhaustion, thirst, and never-ending pain from the cuts and burns and bruises, but the worst times were sitting in a heap on that hard slab that passed for a bed, trying to not move when even breathing seemed to hurt, and hearing the sounds of them working Johanna over right next door. She’d resisted as long as she could, as had he, but they always screamed in the end.

She was in pain and he could do nothing to help her, and just like then, he’d helped get her to this state—the line between past and present blurred so thin that he was surprised that he could actually look up and see her rather than a blank concrete wall. Glancing around in panic, he half-expected to start seeing venom ghosts again, and he must have showed some sign of being riled up as Athena said, “Maybe it would be better if you waited outs—“

“Don’t you leave me alone, dammit,” Johanna said, eyes flashing fiercely even as the words were a whimper of pain, and she reached a hand out to him. The sheer vulnerability of that startled him.
She needed him and that, more than anything, helped get through to him—she couldn’t escape this ordeal, frightened and in as much pain as she was, and if he left her in panic it would be nothing but his own cowardice. This wasn’t torture in the Detention Center, this was their kid she struggled to bring into the world right now; and hard as it was for him to see her as the only one suffering, she needed him, and he needed to be here for this.

Breathing deep and trying his best to live firmly in the present and shove away the grip of the past, he reached out and took her hand in his, so they’d be together in this. “Still here,” he reassured her with the old words of comfort, settling down in the chair beside her again, “I ain’t leaving,” and he said it to her rather than Athena, watching Johanna’s eyes shine bright at that and seeing how she relaxed, knowing she wouldn’t be left alone.

“Settle in then,” Athena said with wry humor, “because it’s probably going to while yet.”

They played cards and talked as a distraction. He sang to her when the pain got to be too much. She squeezed his hand tight enough with the spasms of pain that he thought she might grind his bones to powder. But he wouldn’t leave her.

Finally, as the clock steadily ticked towards noon, in a sudden rush after so many agonizing hours of slow progress, it was all over, and he caught the tiny, slippery baby himself as Johanna gave one last fierce push. “We’ve got us a Walter,” he announced to her, feeling like he couldn’t withstand the sudden rush of emotion.

“Hi, Walt sweetie,” Johanna said, and he wasn’t sure whether she was laughing or crying or both. After dealing with the afterbirth and tying and cutting the cord off, Athena tended to Johanna, and Perulla helped him clean the baby—his son—off. He looked at the blood on his hands and on Walt, managing to keep calm about that and tell himself that this blood was about life rather than death. I hope this is the most blood you’ll ever have on you, son, he thought, gently rubbing the baby’s skin clean. We fought for this world to be better, so your ma and I both hope a hell of a lot of things for you.

Yes, Walt was wrinkled and red and tiny, had a few soft wisps of dark hair, and as he opened his eyes and glanced around solemnly, whimpering a little in confusion at suddenly being thrust out from warm safety into an unfamiliar world, Haymitch knew with undeniable instinct that he’d do anything for this child. Kill for him, die for him. He just hoped the world would be kind enough that he wouldn’t need to do so.

Swaddling Walt up to keep him warm, putting him in the fleecy green blanket Katniss had given them, Perulla handed him back. Walt felt far too light in Haymitch’s arms to carry as much sudden weight in his life as he did. “Congratulations to you both,” Perulla said with a warm smile.

“Get some rest,” Athena advised Johanna. “You’ve had a long night.”

“I want sleep, but I want to see him first,” Johanna said, her ferocity returning now in full force. He sat down beside her on the bed, and handed Walt over with only a twinge of reluctance. Watching the two of them, Johanna’s face shining with such love and happiness as she looked at their son, he couldn’t help but smile. Maybe they were killers, but they could give life and protect it as well as take it. They’d chosen this path now, and he wouldn’t regret that. Like Taffeta said, they’d finally found a way to have faith, and so from that, they could dare to hope.

He put an arm around Johanna’s shoulders, holding on to her. “Welcome to the world,” he said, lightly touching Walt’s cheek with his fingertips. “It’s still a tough place, son, but believe me…we’re so happy you’re here.”
Chapter End Notes

Only the epilogue to go! :D
Johanna woke up with a startle, feeling Haymitch start with a low gasp, the abrupt movement and sound flinging her out of sleep as well. She turned over and opened her eyes to see Tammy standing there by his bedside, eyes wide in the moonlight. “Got monsters under the bed, sweetie?” Haymitch said with a yawn, and she felt both of them relax, knowing there was no danger.

Tammy shook her head, shyly looking away. By now Johanna knew plenty that she hadn’t known when Walt was born. Sometimes the crying was about hunger or disgusting diapers, simple material needs. Sometimes it was just pure crankiness or demanding attention and it was better to not indulge that too much. But sometimes there were those whimpering that had nothing to do with boredom or physical needs—it was simply recognizing total isolation and the sharp fear of nobody ever coming back. It was the terror of being left to face the world abandoned, alone, unloved. The thought of it readily tugged on all the pain of those dark and lonely years she’d endured when she genuinely had been abandoned, alone, and unloved. It had been no way to live, it was just mere survival.

Tammy—Tamarack—was the sweetest and gentlest of the kids, Johanna didn’t doubt that someday she’d grow into her own just like the rest, strong and independent, sometimes a contrary pain in the ass, and she’d be just fine sleeping in her own room, probably jealously defend her own space to boot. But for right now, she’d cherish these moments of closeness, of being able to reassure everything by simply being there and loving her daughter. “C’mere,” she said, rolling back over and scooting back a bit in order to clear a space—Haymitch helped Tammy scramble into the bed, and she settled down in between the two of them. She went to sleep quickly, a faint little snore telling Johanna she was out like a light as she cuddled up close to Johanna, small, soft and warm.

She felt Haymitch’s hand on hers in the darkness as he reached over, and she squeezed his fingers in hers. “Still here,” she said softly, her voice thick with sleepiness, and she too went back to sleep soon enough, knowing that restful feeling of being safe and secure and loved, knowing and finally believing that tomorrow night and every night she’d feel that way rather than desperately fearing someday it would all be taken away.

When morning came, Haymitch carried Tammy back to her room, not even waking her up. By the time Johanna went to help her get dressed, she was awake again, her grey eyes happy as she hugged Johanna good morning, clinging for a moment not out of last night’s fear, but simply because she was affectionate like that.

At three, Walter had been quiet—too quiet, it turned out—and watchful, a thoughtful child. June—Juniper—had been energetic and inquisitive. Robbie and Nicky, the twins, had just about killed both her and Haymitch with their knack for troublemaking. Given that Tammy had been a late surprise, and what a handful the twins still were, it was probably a good thing she was a sweet little girl who seemed to just want to look out for other people and make them happy.

She’s too nice, are we sure she’s ours? Haymitch had wisecracked more than once. Though she hadn’t told him so, she thought Tammy was unquestionably his daughter. It wasn’t just the riot of curls and grey eyes alongside brown hair and that stubborn Mason jaw. He might cover it with bluster and sarcasm and grumbles, but that sweetness and care for others was in him too. She just prayed that Tammy would be able to withstand the roughness of the world that could be cruel to those who met harshness with kindness.
Five kids—they’d planned on three, but life held some surprises at times. Difficult as it had been with five of them arriving in nine years, plus still routinely taking on guardianship for teenagers, it seemed like never a day went by without some kind of parenting crisis. At least she had ample experience dealing with teenagers now, which would only be useful, but with their kids, everything was still so new. It felt like one of them barely grew out of a difficult phase before the next one down jumped right into it, she wouldn’t trade any of them. It could be worse, she thought with a smirk as she did up the buttons on Tammy’s shirt. She could be like Finnick and Annie with eight kids and a ninth on the way, even if Annie swore they were done after that. She’d gotten plenty of fun out of giving them shit about “annual spawning”, but she knew they were helping replace all their losses with that large family.

But that was the world now. The population was still too low and the scars of grief still too fresh, so people looked to their children to help assuage both problems, to help make the future brighter. At least it meant even orphans were usually quickly snapped up into a family these days.

Heading downstairs, Haymitch had coffee brewing, and she smelled bacon cooking. Grabbing some of both, she kissed him quickly, and he grinned. “Don’t dawdle too long, Hanna,” he said, “you’ve got a hovercraft to catch.”

“Just overnight, I swear,” she promised Tammy, as she stooped down and kissed her, and then managed to corral Nicky and Robbie long enough to do the same as they fought over the raspberry jam, then June and Walt. Grabbing her plate, she filled it up and hurried to eat.

Walt rolled his grey eyes good-naturedly and promised, fingers flying quickly even as he said the words, “I’ll help Dad, don’t worry.” Almost twelve, going on forty, she thought.

It was just an overnight hop out to Lakeland Territory to help with the architectural plans for a new research facility there. The former District Eight had come a long way in a dozen years. So had she. The chance to build things, to see a building she’d helped plan and create standing strong and proud, becoming home to a school or hospital or government dedicated to making the world a little better, still filled her with contentment. “I’ll say hi to Cadie and Cam for you,” she said, plowing through her scrambled eggs.

“Tell Brocade she was smart to get out of this job after eleven years, I’m starting to question my sanity after two,” he said dryly, grabbing a slice of bacon himself and biting it even as he kept cooking eggs for the kids.

“Table manners, Dad,” Robbie sang out.

“You’ve been listening to your Aunt Effie too much again,” Haymitch grumbled, pointing at him with the slice of bacon. “I can da—dang well eat my bacon however I want. I’ll issue a presidential proclamation if I have to.”

“On official letterhead?” Nicky piped up, raising his head from attacking his toast, brown eyes sparkling with sudden interest.

“Official letterhead,” Haymitch agreed dryly. “Gonna call it the Bacon Proclamation.”

“Don’t get ideas about getting a sick note for school on that letterhead,” June told the twins, and the matching scowls told Johanna that was exactly what they’d planned.

Finishing her plate, she took just a moment, sitting there drinking in the sight of the kids. Work might take her away some nights, same for Haymitch, but she always missed this. She couldn’t exactly call them quiet moments, especially with the June and the twins always butting heads, but the ordinary
warmth was something she always cherished.

Hopping up, she went for her suitcase. Haymitch followed, opening the door for her. She kissed him goodbye, all the more warmly because the kids weren’t there to see it, fingers clutching his shirt for a moment to hold him closer, and told him, “I’ll call you tonight, OK?”

They always called when either of them was on the road and talked, usually about little things, what the kids were doing, what they’d like to do to each other when they got a night alone. Like she’d found years ago during Brocade’s election, it was good even to hear his voice and stave off the loneliness.

She took just a second to look him over, lingering in the parting as ever. She playfully ruffled his largely-grey hair, secretly cherishing seeing him grow old with her, even as his vitality and enthusiasm for life flowed unabated. It was quite a trick that he seemed to make it effortless for the cameras, considering even she felt herself slowing down as she rapidly approached forty. “How the hell you make fifty-five look dignified and fuckable is beyond me,” she said dryly, but she was grinning as she said it.

“It’s a talent and we’ll explore it more when you get back. Hovercraft, Hanna, ten minutes,” he reminded her playfully. “Go play with blueprints. Wear that damn sexy hardhat of yours. Boss some people around.”

“All right, fine. You go save the country again.” One last quick kiss goodbye, then she hoisted her bag. Slinging it into the backseat, she took one last look at the house. Granted, the new Presidential Mansion wasn’t theirs in the same way the house back in Shenandoah was, because they knew it was only a temporary residence.

Sliding in the backseat, she wished grumpily that she could just drive herself rather than having some security black-suit do it, even if it was Alayna Toth.

Passing through the gates, she looked back one more time at the house. True, she’d helped design it, and as ever it felt satisfying to help build something rather than only destroy. But it really was Haymitch and the kids that made it feel like home. She missed them already.

~~~~~~~~~~

Nights on the road meeting with governors and other dignitaries, or nights Johanna had some kind of research or construction trip, were always the lonely times. During the day, he kept busy with ten thousand things at work. Once the kids were home from school there was always something there as well—homework, little issues, spats that needed to be addressed, dinner, getting everyone to bed.

But after that, and even after more work sometimes, the quiet descended where he was alone. That was when they called each other. Tonight was no exception, and he knew they probably talked for close to an hour. No work was always the rule. They didn’t want to talk about the things that kept them apart that night. It was necessary and there was no blame for that. They’d known that for years. But they didn’t want to emphasize it. They could talk about the work trip when they were together again. So he told her about the drawing Tammy made of a dog and how they’d probably end up pressured to get a puppy soon enough. She talked about catching up with Brocade and Cambrie and their three kids.

He was happy she was doing well with the architecture, often in demand, had been ever since she got tapped for the team designing the Presidential Mansion for the new Capitol. Still unnamed capitol at that, four years after major construction finished up—the popular proposal to name it “Centralia” as Panem’s new government center and thus its new heart got shot down when he discovered a town
by that name on the old North America maps, within Shenandoah’s new boundaries. He’d dug a bit deeper and found out people had to abandon the place about three centuries ago because of a coal mine fire. The place was overgrown with forest, but the coal mines were still burning and steaming when he visited the place during a territorial survey led by Katniss about five years back. Only a Seam sense of humor could probably appreciate that situation, but the two of them had stood there and watched the steam rising from the cracks in the half-collapsed earth with burning mines beneath and laughed till it hurt. They hadn’t abandoned what had once been Twelve like had happened to that place. They’d built it back, better and stronger.

Katniss still jokingly asked him how things were in “New Centralia” every time they talked. Full of hot air, was his standard answer. Took her long enough, but she’d gotten a good sense of humor—as well, since she and Peeta were finally having a kid.

He and Johanna talked about it plenty back when her career took off, considering even as Shenandoah’s governor he was on the road some himself. Family came first. They agreed on that immediately. But they both knew they would grow restless and bored without other challenges and other ways to grow. They would be at their best for each other, and the kids, this way. So when Brocade announced she was stepping down after two terms, the year his second term as governor ran out, it had actually been Johanna that suggested he run to become Panem’s second president. You’ve proven you can be a good husband and father even as a governor. And let’s face it, you’re going to be unbearable if you just try to retire. What are you going to do, whittle all day?

There was more than a little satisfaction in knowing he held the same office that Snow had, and that he used it to do something good rather than to terrorize. Power didn’t corrupt—a desire to overpower others did.

Finally he and Johanna hung up and he got ready for bed, switching on the lamp, putting on his reading glasses, and sitting there to re-read a proposal from Juncus Dufours about resuming some limited fisheries down in Gulf Bayou territory. Yeah, he knew people were still pissed about the high prices of seafood and the limited availability. Might be worth looking into that, or else expanding operations out on Chesapeake Bay—wouldn’t be the same kind of fish, but at least people with a taste could indulge without breaking the bank.

He read and took notes on that, decided to give until he could barely keep his eyes open. That was how these nights went. He always slept far easier with Johanna there, so he had to help get tired enough to just drop off in these cases. The bed felt too big and too lonely.

Most of the next day was spent on conference calls with Hazelle, Shenandoah’s second governor, and then Cordelia Twain, head of the Reparations Committee. Cordy Twain may have taken her mother’s last name, but everybody knew who her grandfather had been. She worked fiercely to make up for her family’s sins and shed the legacy of Coriolanus Snow. He was fairly sure that from that propo that Coin wanted a Hunger Games with Capitol children, fifteen-year-old Cordelia Snow had been smart enough to realize she’d have been first in line.

We all have our scars still, he thought, fingers unconsciously tracing along the inside of his left forearm as Cordy talked about ongoing efforts. The only way it ended was when those old enough to remember it died. Trouble was, figuring out how to tell it to those too young to make sure it never happened again.

That preyed on his mind as he went home that night. Walt would be twelve in a couple of weeks. His firstborn, his smart, observant son—he would have been up for reaping this July, had the 89th Hunger Games come to pass. Deaf tributes never lasted long, mostly because they were poorly educated and they made a poor impression at interviews with nobody to interpret what signs they
could make. Plus not being able to hear the starting gong or someone approaching didn’t help.

Things had changed. They’d waited until Walt was old enough to help decide, because they’d both seen victors have surgeries forced on them to help “improve” their “defects”. They wouldn’t do that to their own son. But when Walt was ten, he’d chosen to have the implant. Still, Walt looked and watched the world far more than he listened, he grew frustrated when people spoke softly or too quickly, and his speech had its peculiarities that even all his hard work at speech therapy at Darius and Lavinia’s school for kids with disabilities would never quite erase.

Haymitch looked at him and thought how bright he was, how inquisitive, straight A student sharp as a tack with how he looked at people and could spot a liar a mile away. How he faced the challenges in his life with quiet courage, how much he looked out for his younger siblings and all his cousins and honorary cousins, as sternly responsible for them as Haymitch had been for Ash. Imperfect, a Capitol audience would have thought. Damaged. Worthless. He might have died at twelve years old, all his potential gone with his blood flowing red on green grass or white sand or black rock or blue water, and something in Haymitch would have died along with him.

Almost twelve—there were no more Games but someday he’d have to explain to Walt, and June, Robbie, Nicky, and even gentle Tammy. They knew too much already with reports on the television and rumors at school. But they couldn’t shelter them from the shadow of the Games forever. It was all public record. High school students took field trips to the arena memorials even now, spent weeks talking about all aspects of the Games. But it wasn’t just near history for the Abernathys. For them, it would be utterly personal. Someday, his sons and daughters would know that he wasn’t just their father, the man they’d idolized as young children—he’d been a killer, a drunk, a whore. All his worst and ugliest moments would be laid out for them to know. They’d know about Johanna’s darkest days as well.

Maybe part of growing up was that disillusionment and recognizing flaws, and thus human frailty, in parents. He’d finally grown up from the ossified mindset of a grief-stricken sixteen-year-old child on that, come to see that with his own ma and Phineas Fogg as people who’d done the best they could in an impossible time.

But most other kids didn’t have parents with such yawning dark chasms in their pasts. Their flaws were small and petty and private. And unlike his parents, chances were he’d be alive for his own kids to be let down, to demand explanations or answers. He didn’t look forward to it, and he knew as smart as they all were, that day would come all too soon. Walt and June both already asked far too many questions and were obviously frustrated with the lack of answers. He and Johanna would have to agree to talk about it openly someday, before they got the answers elsewhere. He only hoped when that day came that they could somehow look lightly upon his sins and not be too embarrassed by him.

Still, difficult as it was, he felt the overwhelming gratitude at looking at his two eldest as they got the younger kids to the table for dinner. Eleven-year-old Walt with brown curls and grey eyes, ten-year-old June’s black hair and brown eyes, both of them signing and talking to each other at once, working as an instinctive team. He could already see the promise of the formidable man and woman they’d someday become, hidden just below the surface, like a butterfly in a cocoon. Said something, he thought wryly, that he could once again use that comparison without wincing, or watch June as a younger kid chasing butterflies in the Meadow without wanting to snatch her up in protective terror.

He would never need to fear that beautiful butterflies might be a trap to kill the kids. He wouldn’t have to beg for money from indifferent Capitolites to save their lives. He wouldn’t have to watch them die to the roar or groans of a Capitol audience, complete with Caesar and Claudius’ commentary. On every July 4th, they could go to a picnic and watch fireworks and celebrate a life
with all its promise, rather than fear the sound of their own name.

The twins at seven and Tammy at three were less certain, but he looked forward to seeing what kind of people they would become. Though he was pretty sure Robbie and Nicky would always be a handful and Tammy would always be a sweetheart. Looking at his children, he saw the different mingled combinations of brown eyes or grey, brown or black hair, curly or wavy, olive or golden skin, the way facial features combined. They were Seven and Twelve together, in their blood and their names and their looks. True, he might have some Two blood, or whatever parentage Phineas Fogg actually had, but he looked Seam, had been raised like it too.

It was in looking at his kids, and other cross-district kids he now saw everywhere, that he saw the old ways and the old ironclad divisions of district eroded. They weren’t just the children of a miner and a lumberjack. They were the future in more ways than one.

June was cheerfully chattering to him about a pair of turtles she'd found on the way home from school and decided to adopt while Walt did his best to see just how much chicken he could cram in his mouth to keep it full, rolling his eyes a little. Hearing the front door bang open and Johanna’s muffled exasperation as she wrestled with her bag, Robbie yelled, “Hi, Mom!”

Obviously just dropping her bag in the hall, Johanna came in. Five kids later, forty this coming August, she still barely missed a step. Her brown eyes flashed as fiercely as ever, and she fought hard for something she believed in or wanted. But he could tell in her, like in him, there was that deeper sense of security, of lacking that frantic fear that all good things in their lives would be lost.

Life still wasn’t always easy. He welcomed the challenge of knowing there was work to do, that it would never be perfect. But sometimes as president he still felt like he was effectively beating his head against the wall trying to get something to move forward, or trying to get fourteen governors to agree on anything. He had a new respect for Brocade Paylor's patience now in those earliest, tumultuous years. Even sometimes as a husband, or a father, it felt more like taking a step back and trying to learn from it rather than pure success.

Still, it wasn’t nearly as bad as it could be. He learned from the hardships and mistakes, and came back better for it. And given what his life had been, he couldn't complain about all the good things he had now. Given access to the formerly restricted Capitol book archives, there had been a boom in pre-Panem “classics”. He'd read a book by an author from centuries ago, one including a wry quip that life was, in fact, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short. A cynical, soul-tired Haymitch of fifteen or twenty years ago would have laughed sardonically at that and agreed wholeheartedly.

True, he’d been poor as anything as a boy, and as for nasty and brutish, his experiences as tribute, victor, mentor, sex slave, and Capitol prisoner spoke pretty eloquently as to how shitty people could be to someone they had under their power. Even now, in this supposedly enlightened era of peace and freedom, people still did genuinely lousy things to one another. He knew Ash and Heike both encountered too many victims and too many things they didn’t want to discuss about it.

He prayed life wouldn’t be short. He’d seen far too many taken far too young to know that it was often the case. Living as long as he had was more than a Seam miner would have expected, but the way he felt now, he hoped he had decades ahead yet, whereas before he’d wanted nothing more than to stop existing.

But solitary—oh, that was where Thomas Hobbes had gotten it wrong. Life didn’t have to be solitary. It shouldn’t ever be solitary, really, because forced isolation was probably the cruelest of punishments. He’d argued just last week against solitary confinement in prisons for that very reason. Maybe he’d pushed it a little too far because he knew he’d gotten a bit emotional about it. That had been a bad night at home, one with old nightmares. It still happened sometimes. Some days, and
some nights, the naked terror showed up again, slipping through in a weak or unguarded moment. But when that happened, he and Johanna had each other, and the kids, to show them that things had changed.

They were never as strong as when they were all together, and so seeing her back again, rejoining the family, he felt the relief of everything settling back into place, safe and secure. “Pass your ma the chicken, Junebug, she’s probably hungry as anything,” he requested. Starving was a word never used lightly in their house—the kids learned that pretty quickly. He couldn’t resist smiling at Johanna as she sat down. “Good to have you back again, darlin’.”

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to all of you who have followed this story through HID here to AFAF, commented, and encouraged me. Seeing that you were invested in a story this long and involved, and in Haymitch and Johanna as characters and as a couple, was always really wonderful.

This more or less officially completes the tale, but if you want to leave some prompts for me for "A Life Full of Color" taking place post AFAF, particularly involving H/J's experiences as parents, you can prompt me at whiskeysnarker at Tumblr, or deathmallow@gmail.com.

Thanks again, you guys. It's been an honor. <3

(I'm probably going to do a editing read over the next few weeks for any lingering typos, small continuity errors, etc. Don't expect major changes, just tiny cleanups. If you want to download the file now to read it, that's totally cool, it won't change substantially, but you may want to redownload in November for the "clean" copy.)
Chapter 58

Just a quick note: for those looking for the "clean" copy of HID/AFAF, I'm still working on it slowly--it's a pretty huge project for copyediting and I'm juggling this between several other things. So for those reading either or both of the stories, please be merciful on any small inconsistencies and typos. Hopefully they're few and far between--and I'd say any edits to be made don't affect the story in any major way, so feel free to read it as-is. It's more just satisfying my Type A need to have things done right. :)

I'll update again once it's done and ready to be downloaded in a finalized form. Thanks again to all of you who've stuck with me for HID and AFAF!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!