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I do hope you enjoy it. Have fun.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

The lot of them tumbled on the beach, he and Katniss clutching at each other not to slip and break a leg in the moving sand under their feet. It was only when they were on slightly harder ground that Haymitch let go of the girl and sat down, his toes still in the water, before slamming his fit in the wet sand once.

“Dammit!” he shouted, feeling the need for an outlet to this helpless rage he was feeling.

“You’re such a poet, Haymitch.” Jo mocked with her usual bitter snark, stumbling a little further on the beach before dropping on her back, arms and legs spread wide while she regained her breath. “I would have gone for: fucking arena, fucking Capitol and fucking Snow.”

“Fucking and Snow should never go in the same sentence.” Finnick countered, helping Beetee out of the water with a grace Haymitch envied. That boy was practically a fish and if this arena wasn’t a clear way to advantage Four, he didn’t know what was. “You’ll give me nightmares.”

That triggered a round of snickers and chuckles and Haymitch lied down on his back, following Jo’s example. He ignored Katniss’ puzzled expression faced with their apparent aloofness and tried to relax a little, too wired up from their new brush with impeding death and the new dead friend to add to the list.

To be fair, he hadn’t expected the Cornucopia to start spinning.

To be even fairer, he hadn’t expected to find himself in the Third Quarter Quell either.

He could still remember the instant of hesitation when Effie had called out Peeta’s name at the Reaping, the second of dread that had made him want to take the coward’s way out and stay put like the boy had asked him to do. And then he had met Katniss’ eyes and he had stepped forward, volunteering in a quiet bored voice.

It had been almost funny how their escort had frozen, her wide blue eyes searching his as if he had finally gone completely crazy. He liked her eyes. It was probably the only part of her she had never hidden in the name of fashion. Bright blue like the sky over his head and just as blinding as the glaring sun if you happened to look at the right moment...

Pushing those memories aside for now, he inspected his left arm where Enobaria’s knife had caught him. The cut wasn’t that deep but it was stinging and there was sand in it. With a sigh, he sat up and resigned himself to rinse it with salt water. Once clean, it didn’t look so bad. He deeply regretted not succeeding in gutting Two’s victor. Although he supposed he owed his life to Finnick and his trident because he was certainly not up for a fight against a Career. He had been a burden enough as it was, causing Johanna’s axe to miss Cashmere by an inch.

“We don’t know in which part of the arena we are,” Katniss said, clearly frustrated. “I shouldn’t have said anything about the clock.”

“You had to, brainless.” Jo retorted with less venom than before. She was warming up to his girl, Haymitch mused.

“At ten the wave will crash and we will know for sure.” Beetee cut in.

“Let’s hope it doesn’t wash on us.” Haymitch snorted.
“Yeah, ‘cause hope is our thing.” Finnick snorted.

“I’m hungry.” Johanna said suddenly. “You’ve still got any bread? It’s been a while since our last sponsor gift.”

She said it casually but Haymitch glanced at Finnick all the same. Four’s victor shrugged and turned to Beetee whose face was pensive and, maybe, a little worried. He knew what they were all thinking and that nobody was willing to mention for fear of alerting anyone : there should have been a bread shipment earlier indicating how many days and hours were left before the attack.

Their knowledge of the plan was pretty basic : protect the Mockingjay at all cost, stay alive, when the bread gave the signal fry the force field with the wire, and, of course, don’t forget to dig the trackers out of their arms first. The sudden lack of bread communication wasn’t a good sign.

Oblivious to what was going on, Katniss suggested tapping a tree since there was no food left.

“It’s my turn.” Finnick sighed. “I will go.”

“It’s okay, I got it.” the girl insisted. In the end the two of them headed toward the trees, bickering like two children.

Haymitch resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

They were still far from the edge of the jungle when the announcement chime made them all freeze where they were.

“Attention, tributes!” Claudius Templesmith’s voice boomed in the arena. Haymitch and Beetee locked eyes, instinctively glancing at the Cornucopia because such announcements almost always meant a feast but they had just had a fight at the Cornucopia and it made no sense to start another...

“The Games committee would like to inform you of a change in staff. Our estimated Head Gamemaker Plutarch Heavensbee resigned earlier this morning. He is replaced by new Head Gamemaker Alyn Torenson who wishes you all the luck. May the odds be ever in your favor.”

It was lucky that Haymitch hadn’t been standing because, like Finnick, he would probably just have dropped on his ass out of pure shock and dismay. Johanna immediately started raging, kicking at the sand and sending it flying everywhere in a childish tantrum. Beetee simply buried his face in his hands. Haymitch closed his eyes and immediately started thinking up of schemes that had absolutely no chances of succeeding. They could go on with the plan, fry the force field but then what? Without a rebel hovercraft to pick them up – and there was no assuming a rebel hovercraft would show up if Plutarch was out – they were well and totally screwed.

“Why do we care?” Katniss asked with a frown.

It sent Jo in a hysterical fit of laughter that prompted her to kick more sand everywhere.

“Why do we care!” Seven’s victor repeated. “We care because...”

“Jo, shut up.” Haymitch growled. “They may be trying to play us. We don’t know what’s happening out there.”

Maybe Plutarch had been arrested, maybe he hadn’t. They had no way of knowing. And they couldn’t afford to say something that would get the Gamemaker in more trouble than he already was.

“Please!” Jo scoffed. “Resigned is code name for dead. We’re busted.”
“What’s busted?” Katniss insisted. “What’s going on? Haymitch?”

He rubbed his face, thought about Peeta and the girl’s family and wisely kept his mouth shut. “Never mind that, sweetheart. We don’t want to worry the boy, yeah?”

It was lucky he and Katniss always seemed to understand each other without actually having to say the words because after a second, she seemed to realize whatever he had to say could mean trouble for Peeta and nodded her understanding.

There was a long silence during which no one was looking at anyone.

It was Finnick who asked the obvious question. “What do we do?”

It deserved to be asked, Haymitch supposed, even if the answer was equally obvious. Without any certainty of ever leaving the arena, they were back to square one and square one meant... In the corner of his eyes, he saw Katniss pocketing the spile before letting her hand hover no so subtly near her bow. Johanna’s hands had already closed on her axes and she was watching the girl like a hawk. He, Finnick and Beetee didn’t move but that didn’t meant they weren’t attentively studying each other.

Friends didn’t matter in the arena.

As Finnick had so aptly put it right after they had managed to get away from the bloodbath, they weren’t going to hold hands and wait for someone else to kill them. Although...

“We don’t have to fight each other.” he said.

Every eyes turn to him. Finnick and Beetee looked hopeful, Katniss and Jo disbelieving.

“That’s your idea?” Johanna sneered. “We wait for mutts and the Careers to get us instead?”

He opened his mouth to answer but Finnick was quicker. “He’s right. If we don’t fight each other, we win either way. We might die but we die as us.”

Katniss looked at him and Haymitch saw in her eyes what he was thinking. That was something Peeta could have said. She cocked her head to the side, silently seeking his opinion because she still didn’t trust Finnick despite the fact that the boy had saved him twice from a certain death and despite Mags’ sacrifice. He didn’t blame her for her mistrust. Even though he knew those people were his friends, the arena made him highly paranoiac.

“Let’s get some water.” he suggested, getting to his feet to follow Katniss to the jungle. Finnick fell back to talk with Johanna. Once they were far enough and she started making the necessary preparations for tapping the tree, he lowered his voice. “I can’t tell you.”

“I get it.” she grumbled. “I don’t like it but I get it. I knew something was weird anyway. It doesn’t change anything, you and I stick together.” Her grey eyes briefly glanced in the direction of the group. “Are you sure about this? Because I think we should take off now, take our chance out there.”

Despite what he had just said, he considered it. It would have been easier to let Finnick and Jo deal with the Careers because they were probably the only ones who had a chance in defeating them but then what? Then it would mean there would be the two of them, Beetee and Chaff out there to outlive. The Gamemakers would find a way to get a showdown and...

“I know them.” Haymitch replied.
“Well enough to be one hundred percents certain they won’t betray us?” she insisted. “They could be planning a trap right now. It’s three against two.”

He shook his head. “Beetee can’t fight.”

“But he can think.” she argued. “And he’s clever.”

“He’s clever but I’m smarter.” Haymitch shrugged. Beetee was practical and used his brain toward practical things. Haymitch wasn’t afraid of thinking outside of the box and he was a very good strategist.

“You’re not exactly at your best right now.” she scoffed, nodding at his shaking hands.

He smirked. “I’m well enough, sweetheart. Good thing your boy insisted on drying me out.”

She tossed him a dubious look but was distracted by the water suddenly trickling out. She drank her fill and then gave him her place before signaling the others over. They had just finished making some water provision and were back on the beach when Beetee frowned.

“It’s been an hour, there should have been a canon.” Three’s victor remarked.

They looked around but they could see no sign of activity in any of the sectors.

“New Head Gamemaker, new rules.” Finnick declared with some bitterness.

There was another ping that usually preceded announcements and everyone minus Katniss glared at Finnick.

“You had to say that and jinx us, didn’t you?” Jo snarled.

“Attention, tributes.” Claudius Templesmith’s voice was so cheerful Haymitch wanted to strangle him. “Rule change. Every tribute has been allotted a human token.”

“What?” Katniss shouted, obviously confused.

“Shut up!” he and Finnick said at the same time, dreading what would come next.

“Human tokens do not have the status of tributes and cannot win the Games. The last tribute still standing will be crowned victor regardless of how many human tokens are left alive. However, it is left at every tribute’s discretion to decide if they want to protect their token or not burden themselves with the liability. Human tokens can be killed and used as bait. May the odds be ever in your favor!”

It was funny how loud silence could sometimes be.

“Is this a joke?” Katniss asked. “They can’t do that, can they? They can’t just give us a random person and...”

“They never said it would be random.” Finnick cut her off, his eyes growing dark with worry. He bent down to pick up his tridents and headed straight toward the jungle.

“Wait!” Jo called after him. “Wait, you don’t even know...”

“And who else are they going to use?!” he snapped back over his shoulder. “Annie!”

His call remained unanswered so he tried again and again disappearing between the trees.
“Shut up, you idiot! You will get yourself killed!” Seven’s victor shouted.

Johanna grabbed her axes and ran after him and, after a second of hesitation, Haymitch helped Beetee up and nudged Katniss in the direction they had taken.

“What’s going on?” the girl growled. She saw him clutching his knife and took a hint though, she notched an arrow just in case.

“They want us to turn against each other.” Beetee explained from behind them, out of breath.

“They won’t assign us random people.” Haymitch spat. “They will get people we love and those people will be targets on our backs.”

“Well, for you and me, that’s going to be tough.” Jo cackled, tossing him a look over her shoulder. “I’ve got no one out there.”

“Peeta.” Katniss breathed out and, suddenly, Finnick wasn’t the only one giving away their position by bellowing at the top of his lungs because Katniss joined right in, screaming for the boy.

“Shut up!” Haymitch hissed, shoving her hard enough that she stumbled against a tree. He pinned her there by a hand around her throat. He made sure not to squeeze or hurt her, it was just meant to make her silent. “Jo, get this moron to shut up too!”

Finnick wasn’t easily deterred though and it took everything Jo had to contain him against a tree in a similar fashion he was holding Katniss.

“Look, we will find them, okay?” he told the both of them. “But we can’t go about it like that.”

“I’m leaving.” Beetee declared in the resulting silence.

“What?” Haymitch frowned, his attention shifting from the girl to his friend. “Don’t be stupid!”

“Look, I know who they will send.” Three’s victor declared. “And I also know you and Finnick and Jo... And I have a good idea of just how far this girl will go to protect a loved one, I watched it on TV last year. This will turn us against each other.”

“We don’t need to kill human tokens to win, didn’t you fucking listen?” Jo scowled.

“If you think that will stop any of you from killing for your token then you’re an idiot.” Beetee scoffed. “I’m taking off now. I need to find him.”

“Who?” Haymitch frowned. “Look, we’re going to go for Annie and the boy. Jo’s right, I have no one out there and she doesn’t either so that’s settled. Let’s just stick together and look for them. We can look for your token too on the way.”

It was so obviously the best plan he didn’t get how Beetee couldn’t see it. Three’s victor shook his head.

“Sorry, Haymitch.” his friend said. “We both know what this rule means. We lost. I need to find my nephew and protect him.”

“For fuck’s sake, let him go!” Jo snarled, while Finnick tried to struggle free from the vice-like grip she had on his throat. “He will get killed out there and that’s one burden less.”
Haymitch didn’t manage to convince Three’s victor.

And, naturally it was just after Beetee had limped out of sight that the arena seemed to burst with life. They heard the deafening noise of the wave crashing on the beach right at the same time the thunder boomed in another section and, closer, the distinctive little cries of the monkeys. Everything was happening at once.

There was a piercing scream nearby.

Finnick kicked Johanna’s leg and ran in that direction.

“Annie!”
Chapter 2

Running in a jungle was not easy.

Running in a jungle after a crazy young man waving tridents while keeping an eye on a crazy archer who wanted to head her own way to look for her not-quite boyfriend made the whole experience even worse.

The third time Haymitch stumbled on a root, he let out such a vivid curse even Jo slowed down to shoot him an impressed look.

Of course, nothing was made easier by the woman screaming bloody murder.

Haymitch couldn’t be sure if it was Annie’s voice or not but Finnick seemed certain and that was good enough for him.

“Be careful of the force field!” Jo reminded them as they were starting to get really far from the beach.

Her warnings were sound but unnecessary. They soon stumbled upon Four’s other victor, seemingly unhurt but sitting on the ground, hugging her knees and rocking back and forth, screaming her head off despite the fact that no danger seemed to be lurking...

And right next to her, holding her shoulders and trying to calm her down...

“Prim!” Katniss cried out, completely panicked, shoving Haymitch aside in her urge to get close to her sister.

Finnick tossed his weapons and dropped to his knees next to Annie before gathering her against his chest, whispering in her ear and petting her long brown hair until she stopped screaming.

Haymitch watched the scene with the growing urge to punch a tree. Katniss stared at him over her sister’s head, she was clutching the girl to her chest, absolutely paralyzed with horror.

“She’s a kid.” she said so softly he had trouble hearing her. “How can they do that? She’s just a kid...”

“Did you forget how the usual Games go?” Jo mocked.

Unlike Finnick and Katniss, Johanna hadn’t dropped her weapons and was scanning their surroundings with open mistrust. “I don’t like this place. Let’s head back to the beach.”

“We need to find Peeta.” Katniss argued, still holding her sister so tight Haymitch was afraid she would smother her. “If Prim’s here for me then Peeta is somewhere for Haymitch, right?”

That question was directed at him. Even Finnick turned his eyes to him without ever stopping murmuring sweet nothings in Annie’s ear.

“Well?” Jo prompted. “You’ve got someone else they could use?”

He shook his head. “No. The boy must be out there.”

“I didn’t see Peeta.” Prim cut in, keeping her arms firmly around Katniss’ waist. She looked scared but she was holding on well. As stubborn as her sister this one, Haymitch mused, hoping she
wouldn’t be as difficult to protect – because there was no question Prim needed to be protected at all cost. “We were all in a big room before they sent us here. Peeta wasn’t there.”

The girl and Annie were wearing the same kind of tight jumpsuit they were.

“You’re sure, kid?” he frowned, anticipating the next question Katniss was going to ask. “No, there’s no one else. It must be Peeta.”

“How many people were there in that room?” Jo asked, rather too abruptly for Katniss’ tastes if the way she pushed Prim behind her was to be believed.

This will turn us against each other, Beetee had said.

Haymitch was afraid he was right.

“Nine.” Prim answered anyway. “I don’t know who they were, we weren’t allowed to talk. I recognized Annie from the Reaping.”

“Anyone else you knew?” Jo pressed. “Fucking think, girl.”

“Don’t talk to my sister like that.” Katniss growled.

“Nine means one for each of us still alive.” Seven’s victor snapped. “You get it yet? What...”

“Brutus’ wife.” Annie piped up suddenly. The words were muffled because her face was pressed against Finnick’s neck but she sounded certain enough that Haymitch didn’t question her.

“We need to get the hell out of here. We’re exposed.” Finnick said, lifting Annie up. “Jo, take my tridents.” His sea-green eyes fell on Prim. “Give one to the kid. She needs a weapon.”

“I can protect her.” Katniss hissed.

“He’s right.” Haymitch declared. “Everyone needs to be armed. Trident’s too heavy for her though. Here, take this.” He handed Prim one of his knives and lead the way back to the beach. They fell in line without anyone having to word the order. Prim behind him, then Katniss, then Finnick carrying Annie and Johanna at the rear. They were halfway to the beach when he glanced back at the kid who was awkwardly clutching his belt not to stumble and was keeping a tight grip on the knife with her free hand. “You’re sure you didn’t recognize anyone else? Anyone I know from home?”

She shook her head, her blond hair flying around, her blue eyes wide with fear. “I didn’t know anyone else.”

They reached the beach unscathed but, clearly, everyone wasn’t that lucky. They could hear faint screaming in the distance as well as strange roaring.

“How are they going to get away with it?” Jo asked.

Finnick had sat down with Annie, still holding her tight, and Prim who was shaking flopped down on the sand after a brief hesitation. Katniss remained standing right behind her, her bow at the ready. Johanna took a similar position behind Four’s victors leaving Haymitch to look around for eventual dangers.

“The kid’s the Capitol darling!” Jo insisted, her eyes running around the edge of the jungle. “People love her...”

“I had to say I volunteered for the cameras.” Prim explained.
“I did it too.” Annie added. “They came yesterday... Yes, I think it was yesterday...”

“Definitely yesterday.” the kid nodded. “By hovercraft. They said it was for interviews but... They made us say we were volunteering for a Game addition instead.”

“Awesome.” Jo sighed. “So, nine people you said. You’re sure you didn’t know anyone else?”

Again, they both shook their head.

“But it must be Peeta.” Katniss argued. “Haymitch has no one else!”

“The people there with you, can you describe them?” Haymitch cut in.

Annie started rocking again and Finnick glared at him as if he was responsible for having upset her, as if she wasn’t upset by being back in this fucking place, as if Mags hadn’t volunteered to spare her in the first place and had now officially died for nothing...

“There was Brutus’ wife.” Annie repeated. “I’m sure I recognized her.”

“Okay, one housewife. Shouldn’t be much of a danger.” Jo scoffed. “What else?”

“There were two kids around my age.” Prim said. “A boy and a girl. The boy was a little chubby, I noticed because we don’t see many chubby children in Twelve... And the girl... The girl looked scared but she also looked strong and she was tanned like she spent a lot of time in the sun...”

“I think it was Blight’s daughter.” Annie whispered. “But that makes no sense, that makes no sense, no sense...”

“Shhh, calm down.” Finnick murmured, pressing a kiss in her hair. “You’re fine. I’ve got you. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Calming down with Johanna sneering at you was a feat though, Haymitch mused.

“What do you mean Blight’s daughter?” Seven’s victor spat. “Alyssa? Why would they get Alyssa? Her dad is dead. Who cares about the kid now?”

There was a resulting silence, nobody daring to voice out what they were all thinking. After a few seconds, Katniss rolled her eyes. “You said they had no one to use but maybe you were wrong.”

She looked almost pleased about it, as if it was a tiny victory over Jo.

“They’re wrong.” Johanna scowled. “Let them kill the kid for all I care. I barely know her.”

Katniss stared at her with disgust, Prim simply looked shocked, the rest of them knew better.

“Anyone else who stood out?” Haymitch said, feeling the need to get them back on tracks. “You’re absolutely sure there was no one else from Twelve, kid?”

The twelve years old shook her head. “If there was, I didn’t know them.”

“Where’s Peeta?” Katniss asked. “If they don’t send him then where is he?”

Haymitch shrugged his ignorance but Johanna wasn’t as tactful as he was.

“He’s already dead probably.” Jo shrugged. “This is retaliation. All of this...”
Katniss took a step back as if the words had physically hurt her.

“Jo.” Finnick chided her harshly. “Ever heard of something called diplomacy?”

“They won’t have killed him. They can’t.” Haymitch objected. “If they wanted him dead, he would be here. How would they justify it?”


With each new possibility, Katniss got paler and paler. Prim reached for her hand and squeezed, trying to comfort her but the girl’s face became stern.

“Retaliation against what?” she asked, glaring at Johanna. “You said retaliation. Against what?”

Jo wordlessly waved at Haymitch to explain before dropping on the sand next to Finnick. Everyone was looking at him now.

He pondered what he could and could not tell. It was obvious by now that the Capitol knew almost everything. Plutarch being removed from his position as Head Gamemaker, their loved ones tossed in the arena as punishment...

“There was a plan.” he finally admitted. “I can’t tell you the details but... If everything had gone according to it we would all have been safe and sound by tomorrow night.”

“And they punished my sister because of it?” the girl hissed. “I had a say in this, Haymitch! You couldn’t tell me before?!”

“No, I couldn’t ‘cause you’re the worst actress, sweetheart!” he snapped back. “And...”

The boom of a canon interrupted him. It sounded almost like a tribute’s canon but not quite and it wasn’t the canon sound that had previously signaled the passing of hours. This one sounded off, almost out of tune.

“What was that?” Katniss asked, lifting her bow in position.

Finnick slowly detached himself from Annie and picked up his tridents.

“Human token canon.” Four’s victor figured out. “It makes sense. They have to signal their death but they’re not tributes...”

“But why would anyone kill a human token?” Prim asked. “They have their own people to protect! Why would anyone...”

“There are animals out there and mutts.” Jo cut her off. “There are traps. Venomous plants. Poisonous berries. If there’s one thing that comes easily to most people, it’s dying. A human token dying doesn’t mean they have been murdered.”

“I hope it’s not Alyssa.” Annie offered, reaching out to squeeze Jo’s wrist.

Seven’s victor shrugged her hand off with a sneer. “Maybe it’s Haymitch’s token. Still no idea who that could be?”

He shook his head. Aside for Peeta...

There was another boom of a canon, a tribute’s one this time. It was followed a few minutes later by another altered canon that Finnick thought to mean a human token’s death.
“Well, that’s going fast...” Finnick commented.

“Let it be the Careers...” Prim whispered.

“Yeah, don’t be too hasty to wish that.” Haymitch frowned. “Once the Careers are gone, it means there are only the lot of us left.”

“But we won’t attack our human tokens.” Finnick cut in, holding his eyes before looking at Katniss. “We make a pact now. Human tokens are out of bounds.”

Annie let out a distressed sound and Katniss studied her for a couple of seconds before nodding. “Agreed.”

Johanna rolled her eyes when they turned to her. “I told you already, I don’t care about mine. But I’m not about to kill the crazy fish or the kid, okay? Give me some credit.”

When they looked at him, it was his turn to roll his eyes. He didn’t even gratify that with an answer. He wasn’t going to swear to not killing Annie or Prim. He shouldn’t have to.

“What do we do now?” Annie asked. “What do we do?”

Thunder boomed up ahead on their right and lightning fell on the tree in that quarter. Soon after, a heavy rain started pouring on that part of the jungle.


A woman screamed and, for some reason, it chilled Haymitch down to the bones.

“Human token or tribute?” Katniss asked.

“Does it make a difference?” Jo sneered.

There was another scream and Haymitch took a step in the direction of the next quarter, where the blood rain was slamming down on the jungle. The beach seemed safe enough anyway.

“Haymitch?” Finnick asked.

Someone tore out of the jungle greenery and stumbled on the beach, running blindly in the direction of the water, still screaming.

Suddenly, Haymitch was running too.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

If anyone had asked him, Haymitch would have said he didn’t know why he was running.

The woman who had escaped the jungle kept stumbling and screaming. He couldn’t see her face, he didn’t know who she was for certain and when she finally tripped, crashed on her stomach and stayed down, he skimmed on his knees next to her, grabbed her shoulders and hauled her up.

She started screaming murder again, struggling against his grip.

Haymitch wasn’t sure. She was covered in blood as badly as Johanna, Beetee and Wiress had been when they had found them. He let go of her shoulders to frame her face, trying to make her hold still so he could see her features properly. And yet, even when she stopped fighting him, he wasn’t sure.

She had blond curly hair matted with blood and tangled with leaves, the tears were leaving clean trails on her cheeks, washing some of the blood rain away... It wasn’t until their eyes locked that he felt something drop to the bottom of his stomach though.

“Fuck.” he spat under his breath.

“Haymitch...” she sobbed with a mix of relief and despair.

She tossed her arms around his neck and he embraced her willingly, cradling the back of her head in his hand, unable to shake the feeling of surreal and the guilt because if she was here...

“Who’s she?” Johanna asked behind him.

He glanced over his shoulder to find both Johanna and Katniss, weapons at the ready. Finnick had fallen back to protect Prim and Annie.

“My token.” he replied simply, tightening his hold on her.

Why they had chosen her, he couldn’t tell. She truly wasn’t the obvious choice. Maybe Jo had a point, maybe Peeta was dead then... Maybe they had been forced to compose with whatever they had and he didn’t have many close friends out there who weren’t already in the arena...

“You had a secret girlfriend on the side all those years?” Jo scoffed, disbelieving.

Apparently, being called his girlfriend was enough to ride off the shock of finding herself with a front row seat to the Hunger Games.

“Don’t be preposterous!”

Without wig and make-up, covered in blood, Effie Trinket was a formidable sight if there ever was one. She slowly let go of Haymitch and wiped her cheeks with shaking hands, obviously trying to collect herself. She didn’t seem hurt which was always a plus.

Katniss’ eyes were wide as saucers. “Effie?”

She forced a smile but her lips were wobbling. “Hello, Katniss.”

Haymitch stood up and helped her to her feet, keeping a tight hold on her arm. Talk about a
liability... They could expect Annie to defend herself in a fight – yes, there was a fifty percent chance she would collapse in hysterics but she was a victor, she could hold her own – Prim was tiny and could probably run fast... Effie, now...

“A Capitol?” Jo exclaimed, just as stunned as Katniss but probably not for the same reasons. “Have they gone mad?”

Effie lifted her chin but leaned against Haymitch’s side. “I volunteered.”

Her voice cracked with the obvious lie.

“Yeah, yeah... We know the song, sweetheart, don’t bother.” he mumbled. “Let’s go back to the others.”

“Do you know where Peeta is?” Katniss asked before they could move.

Effie shook her head. “I was alone when... He hadn’t come back to the penthouse yet. I never saw him after.”

“That’s a good thing, right?” the girl asked him. “Maybe he escaped?”

“Maybe.” he shrugged. He didn’t know and there was no point worrying about something he had no control over.

It was obvious Effie had been scared out of her wits in that jungle. With each new step he was afraid she would collapse, her eyes darted everywhere in fright and she stopped dead in her tracks when she caught sight of Finnick with his tridents. The young man wasn’t a danger though. It took him only a few seconds to recognize her. “Effie?”

She was welcomed with a hug despite her protests that she was covered in blood. Being around Finnick, Johanna, Katniss, Annie and Prim was good for her though. She slipped in her usual role, fussing over everyone and pretending nothing was amiss with her, annoying everyone with her obvious self-denial of the conditions they were in. He was relieved when Katniss offered to help her clean up because he had been about to snap.

He averted his eyes when Katniss and Annie helped her out of the jumpsuit so they could clean it up too. It hadn’t bothered him to see the others in their underwear but Effie... That was another can of worms entirely, one he had been happy to always ignore and one he thought he was over with when the pod had deposited him inside this arena the day before.

“They will say she volunteered to be my token.” Haymitch agreed. “And it will remind possible Capitol dissidents that they’re not completely safe.”

“Who will buy that you care about her?” Jo shook her head. “That’s stupid. Everybody knows you...
hate each other.”

The sound of laughter caught his attention and he turned to the water in time to see Katniss playfully pushing her sister underwater. The two of them were near the beach, water barely reaching Prim’s waist. He didn’t think the kid knew how to swim. Annie and Effie had wandered further down. Annie was just as at ease in the water as Finnick was and she was making a quick job of helping his escort clean up.

“I kissed her.” he confessed, despite his best intentions because there was no point hiding it anymore. It had been nothing anyway. A spur of the moment thing. “Before the interviews. They must have caught it.” He shrugged. “And she was all about matching tokens, showing we were a team...” He turned the bangle on his wrist awkwardly. “And we don’t really hate each other anymore. We play it that way for the cameras. We’re sort of friends. Allies.”

“Sort of friends or sort of lovers?” Finnick teased. “Because Chaff...”

“Chaff always had a big mouth.” Haymitch cut him off harshly. “I don’t sleep with Capitols.”

Even though he would, maybe, have gladly made an exception for her – but that was something he kept to himself.

“Well.” Jo sighed. “At least now we have someone to throw to the wolves when shit hit the fan.”

His eyes were cold when he turned them to her. “What do you mean?”

She shrugged. “I mean we’re not going to waste a breath on a Capitol. She keeps up, fine. She doesn’t, too bad for her.”

“Jo...” Finnick winced.

“You just swore you wouldn’t go against one of our tokens.” he growled. “That goes for Effie too.”

“I swore I wouldn’t attack Cresta or the kid.” Jo retorted. “I never said anything about your escort. I’ve been dying to strangle her for years.”

“Johanna doesn’t mean it.” Finnick tried to intervene.

“Doesn’t she?” he hissed.

Beetee’s words came back to haunt him. *This will turn us against each other...*

Had that been the Capitol plan in sending Effie rather than Peeta? The sudden tension had caught the others’ attention and they wandered back. Katniss kept a hand on Prim’s shoulder and quickly slipped her quiver back on, her other hand closing on her bow. Annie and Effie were slower but, Haymitch couldn’t help but notice, Finnick was just as quick as Katniss in signaling his girlfriend over to him. And Effie stood there, in her damp underwear, her teeth chattering, apart from the main group and obviously confused.

“Trinket, get dressed and come here.” he ordered.

“What is going on, Haymitch?” she asked, her blue eyes falling on everyone in turn with entirely too much trust. Nobody would look her in the eyes either.

“Do as you’re told.” he barked.

She bristled and pursed her lips in extreme annoyance, tilting her head to the side. “Don’t be rude. I
am not a child for you to scold.” she chided him, before grabbing the abandoned jumpsuit the girls had cleaned as best as they could and putting it back on. He only relaxed slightly when she uncertainly walked back to him.

He reached for one of the knives he kept at his belt but the move was miscalculated on his part. Katniss raised her bow, Finnick lifted his tridents and Johanna adjusted her grip on one of her axes.

“Haymitch, what is going on?” Effie repeated.

“Finnick...” Annie equally pleaded.

Finnick shook his head, looking awfully sorry. “It doesn’t have to go down this way. I promise I won’t harm her.”

“Harm who?” Katniss cut in. “What is going on now?” She had nudged Prim behind her, shielding her sister with her body. “Haymitch?”

Haymitch was stuck with his hand on the handle of his knife, knowing he couldn’t pull it out without starting a crossfire he would be too slow to take a part in.

“I don’t trust Johanna with Effie.” he spat.

“I don’t trust Johanna with anything.” Katniss replied. “You’re the one who absolutely wanted her.”

Johanna snickered. “That’s funny, brainless. Did you notice he’s the only one who didn’t swear he wouldn’t hurt your sis?”

Katniss didn’t even bat an eyelash. “I trust Haymitch.”

Jo’s snickers turned into a sneer. “Even with his girlfriend around? Too bad you’re stupid then.”

“Again, I feel compelled to point out there isn’t anything remotely romantic between Haymitch and I.” Effie snapped, wrinkling her nose.


“Oh, so, tell me, Trinket, you never kissed Haymitch then?” Johanna sneered.

Haymitch rolled his eyes. “Remind me to never confide anything in you.”

“You told Johanna Mason?!” Effie gasped, a little flustered. “It was only once! And it wasn’t even that good a kiss!”

“Why, thank you, Princess.” he grumbled.

“Not that I’m not interested by the romantic drama but can we all put our weapons down, now?” Finnick intervened. “Look, I won’t harm Prim, I won’t harm Effie, okay?”

“But Cresta’s your priority.” Jo snapped. “Just like Katniss’ will be her sister. And I’m interested to know where Haymitch’s priority lies because it was the girl until now but I have a feeling it just changed.”

Haymitch deducted that her real worry was that she was no one’s priority. And it must sting, he could understand that. At another time, in another place, Johanna could have been his priority but now... He didn’t like ranking his friends in order of importance but survival required what it required and the truth wasn’t pretty.
Katniss looked at him uncertainly but then her face became sterner. “It doesn’t matter. Effie’s my escort too. We’re a team.”

“Oh, Katniss!” Effie whispered, clasping her hands in an obvious demonstration of emotions that Haymitch could have done without. First rule of the arena: don’t give away your weaknesses.

“You’re all making me sick with good intentions.” Jo mocked. “I thought you had made a vow to protect the kid, Haymitch? Isn’t that why you volunteered? That’s what you said anyway. You took Peeta’s place…”

“To protect Peeta.” Katniss snapped. “He did it because I asked him. To protect Peeta.”

“Such a clever Mockingjay you make…” Johanna’s laughter was harsh and cruel. “Let me tell you something, brainless. Maybe Haymitch volunteered to protect your lover boy but once he was in the Quell, it was all about you, keeping you alive. That was the plan. And he would have done anything to protect you and, I guess, your sis, but now? Now you’re on your own, stupid, because if you think he won’t protect that slut over you or your sister…”

“Enough.” Effie snapped, stepping from behind Haymitch to stand in the no man’s land between the four victors.

“Trinket.” he growled.

Surprise, surprise... She ignored him.

“This is ridiculous.” she declared. “And there is no need for name-calling, Johanna. This tendency of yours for vulgarity is most unbecoming. Everyone put their weapons down. Now.” Nobody moved. She pursed her lips with an annoyance that was only more striking without the heavy make-up. She slowly walked back to him and placed her hand on his. “Someone has to make the first move.” He didn’t obey and she sighed, locking eyes with him. “I trust them, Haymitch.”

They couldn’t remain like this forever anyway, he figured.

“Take the knife.” he instructed.

She frowned. “Don’t be preposterous, the only use I could ever have for a knife is to cut my meat.”

“Human flesh isn’t so different from meat.” he snorted bitterly. “Take it. I want you armed.”

She hesitated but nodded so he took his hand away. She wedged the knife in between her belt and her waist with many precautions to avert cutting herself.

Finnick slowly lowered his weapons. Katniss and Johanna were locked in a stand off until Annie wandered to Seven’s victor and gently pressed her arm. Jo grumbled and cursed but finally stopped threatening them with the axes.

“Katniss...” Prim said but she was ignored in the general chaos.

“Mark my words, I’m not risking my life for that bitch.” Jo warned.

“Language!” Effie hissed. “There are children present!”

Johanna and Katniss rolled their eyes at the same time.

“Maybe Beetee had a point when he took off.” Haymitch mumbled under his breath.
“Katniss!” Prim insisted, scrambling back toward the water and dragging her sister with her.

They all caught sight of what had alarmed the twelve years old at the same time. The fog that had killed Mags was back, quickly enveloping this quarter of the jungle.

“It will stop at the jungle edge.” Katniss said. “Just like before. It won’t touch the beach. Right?”

New Head Gamemaker, new rules...

Haymitch reached out and grabbed Effie’s arm, forcing her to move back toward the water like Prim was instinctively doing. The salt water had helped with the chemical burns before...

The first tendrils of smoke licked the sand, spreading fast around them, fencing them in that portion of the arena. Everyone ran for the water at once. They stopped when they couldn’t touch the bottom anymore.

“I can’t swim!” Prim squealed. “I can’t!”

There was a small conundrum when Annie offered to help but Katniss wouldn’t let go of her sister. It took Finnick promising that Annie was an ever better swimmer than he was to make her relent.

Haymitch wasn’t really paying attention, like Johanna, he was staring at the fog, praying it would stop at the water edge.

Needless to say, he wasn’t really surprised when it didn’t.

“Back!” he ordered. “Back!”

“We have to swim across!” Finnick shouted.

They all started swimming without a single moment of hesitation, even Effie, and it occurred to exactly none of them that he wasn’t the fittest of the group or the best swimmer and that reaching the Cornucopia earlier that day had already been a feat. Never mind swimming across the whole arena.

Still, the memories of the fog’s chemical burns and of Mags’ screams were incentives enough for him to get a move on.

He glanced behind him every so often and realized it was hopeless. A lost fight. It was a race against death and he was too slow.

When the others reached the Cornucopia, he was only halfway there and the fog was gaining on him.

They were having some sort of altercation but he couldn’t hear what it was about. Leaving him behind probably. Katniss wouldn’t come back, he knew it at once. She might have done so in the jungle the first time the fog had crept between the trees but it had been different. Prim hadn’t been there then. Finnick would stay away for the very same reason : Annie would come first.

And it was alright with him really.

Yet, someone dove back into the water and started swimming in his direction.

The others called for her to get back but she wouldn’t listen.

He wanted to say he was surprised she was so recklessly stupidly brave.
Somehow, he wasn’t.

And when Effie’s hand closed on his arm, urging him to hurry, he shook his head and pushed her away because it was already his fault she was there in the first place, he didn’t want her to die because of him too.

“Stop this nonsense, Haymitch!” she screeched. “I am trying to help!”

But there was no helping him.

Not when the fog was slowly catching up with them.

Chapter End Notes

I warned you this story should be called the evil cliffhanger story ;) So what did you think of this chapter? A lot of information, a lot of things happened... What are your theories now?
“Faster!” Effie urged him as if he was just dawdling for laziness’ sake. She was swimming backwards, keeping her eyes on the fog slowly making its way toward them.

“I can’t go faster.” he panted, spitting some water. Swimming and talking at the same time weren’t as easy to do as she made it look. “Get out of here!”

A glance over his shoulder told him it would only be a minute or so before they would be run over by the fog. He knew exactly how it would go. The chemicals in the smog would paralyze them, they wouldn’t be able to keep themselves over the water line and they would drown. It would be painful and ugly.

“Go!” he insisted. “Effie, don’t be such a stubborn bitch and go!”

“It figures you would keep insulting me as we are about to die.” she retorted. It sounded so detached he wondered if she was still in shock. She was terrified, he could see it plainly, but there was also a sort of cold aloofness to her. “Do you think it’s like a wave?” Her brow creased into a frown. “I think it is. I think I can see the beach behind the fog and it looks clear…”

They were almost at the Cornucopia. But then what? The others were long gone, being wiser than she was, well on their way to reaching a safer portion of the arena. Reaching the Cornucopia wouldn’t help – if he reached it at all.

He pushed harder with his arms and his legs but he lacked technique and swiftness. She stopped moving and waited for him to catch up with her.

“Effie.” he begged. “Effie, please, go.”

She could still make it. She was quick in the water, she must have spent hours in a pool when it had been fashionable to do so after Finnick’s victory, she was fit and young... And he absolutely refused to see her die in that fucking arena.

Instead of listening, she caught his arms and forced him to face her. All he could do was kick his legs to keep his head over the water, too aware that the fog was a wall about to slam into them any second now.

They were close, close enough that he considered kissing her again, just for the hell of it. It would be a good death. She squeezed his arms with urgency, her fake nails digging painfully into his flesh.

“We need to dive.” she told him.

It wasn’t what he had been expecting.

“Why?” he mocked. “You want to drown quicker?”

She waved that away with obvious irritation. “Fog doesn’t reach underwater, have you never paid attention in class? If it’s a wave, we need to dive and wait for it to pass!”

He opened his mouth, either to tell her it was a brilliant idea or to declare their cause was doomed.
anyway – he wasn’t sure which yet – but he didn’t have time to say anything. The fog was there, its
tendrils dangerously licking at his arm and he simply gave a brisk nod, gasped as much air as he
could and dove.

She never let go of him. They clutched each other, trying to remain underwater and not to waste any
oxygen with unnecessary movements, trying to guess how long it would take for the fog to pass...
Haymitch’s sight was blurry and the salt water stung his eyes but he needed to see even though there
wasn’t much to watch apart from Effie’s face, so close to his, her eyelids shut tight, her nose wrinkled,
her hair forming a sort of floating halo around her head...

How long did they remain like that? A minute? Her eyes opened suddenly in panic and she started
kicking as if to move up but Haymitch wouldn’t let her, fighting to keep her where she was,
knowing it hadn’t been long enough that it would be safe to surface. When bubbles started escaping
her mouth and she clawed at his arms to get free, he did the only thing he could think of. He shared
whatever oxygen he had left by crashing his lips against hers and forcing her mouth open.

It wasn’t an efficient way of sharing oxygen.

They both broke the surface with sudden gasps, coughing water when they weren’t trying to get air
back into their lungs, as painful as it was.

Neither of them started screaming in agony before drowning. A look confirmed the fog wave was
passing over the Cornucopia.

“Seems like you were right.” he panted.

“Don’t always sound so surprised by that.” she retorted.

The fog dispersed after it had reached the Cornucopia, leaving them free to swim to the small island.
The others were anxiously waiting on the shore, on the other side of the arena, and waved at them in
obvious relief as soon as they spotted them. Effie waved back with an almost hysterical grin.
Haymitch simply collapsed against the side of the metal structure.

“You’re hot?” he asked.

“Haymitch!” she rebuked. “Now is not the time for your crude comments!”

“Not a comment, sweetheart. Genuine question.” He rolled his eyes but couldn’t help the smirk. Call
it post-near-death syndrome but he felt entitled to a bit of leering and if it hadn’t particularly struck
him on Jo and Katniss, that jumpsuit was very tight. “Although...”

“Haymitch.” she warned, turning back to him, her hands on her hips.

“Can’t help it.” he snorted. “I’m not blind.” He waved at the general area of her face. “I like you
better without all that crap.”

“Well, I like you better sober.” she deadpanned, before pulling on the collar of the jumpsuit with a
groan. “It is rather hot.”

“Now you’re only trying to turn me on.” he teased. The glare he got in return was answer enough.
And it was hot. Stifling even. It hadn’t been like that the day before. The arena had been hot, true,
clammy, but... When night had started to fall it had become chilly and if he judged by the sun, night
couldn’t be very far away. “I don’t like this. Let’s get back to the others before the other shoe drops.”

He didn’t quite fancy the idea of taking another swim but he would rather join the rest of the group in
case something happened. He could rest later. The feeling of foreboding he felt couldn’t be good.

She must have shared some of his concerns because she headed to the water before he even moved. She stepped back abruptly with a wince.

“The water is too hot.” she declared with a touch of panic.

“What?” he frowned. He crouched next to the water edge, dipped a finger and immediately regretted it. It wasn’t exactly unbearable but it was hotter than a hot bath had to be to be comfortable. And the temperature only seemed to be increasing.

“Do you think it might be a reaction to the fog?” she asked.

He shrugged. “Or another Gamemaker’s trick. I don’t know, sweetheart, but we’re not going in there.”

“I rather thought you would say as much.” she cringed.

They sat in the small shade the Cornucopia offered and they waited. They remained silent like they rarely ever were. If they weren’t screaming at each other, she was usually happy to fill their time with chatter.

It became obvious very fast that they weren’t out of trouble just yet.

A first bubble ripped the surface of the water, then another and soon enough it wasn’t just hot or stifling, it was impossible to breathe. The water was boiling as if the arena was nothing more than a pan and yet the water level remained even. He could see, in the distance, that the others had sought shelter at the edge of the jungle. They appeared to be having dinner, something Katniss had hunted down probably.

Haymitch was a little too aware that the Gamemakers could decide to make the island spin at any moment.

“Are they trying to cook us alive?” Effie asked.

“You’re awfully blasé about everything.” he commented.

“Would you prefer it if I screamed in terror and collapsed in tears? Because I am itching to do just that.” she replied and that was the end of that. Fish started to wash on the shore of the small island and she kicked one of them dubiously with her boot. “Do you think they are safe to eat?”

He shook his head. “I wouldn’t risk it.”

“Alright.” she accepted easily enough.

They soon shuffled away from the Cornucopia. The metal was starting to heat up and between the structure and the steam it was really getting difficult to breathe. After half an hour, Haymitch stripped out of his jumpsuit, not caring at all about dignity anymore. Effie chided him but only resisted ten minutes more before doing the same thing.

She was gorgeous and he wished he had been in a shape to appreciate it. As it was, he didn’t even manage a gibe faced with the black sports bra and matching panties. He just closed his eyes, lying down on the unforgiving hot sand, waiting for the inevitable heat stroke to come.

Breathing was hard and he felt awful. He could feel a headache developing behind his eyes, he was
nauseous and he couldn’t quite lick his chapped lips because his mouth was dry...

“I think Cinna and Portia are dead.” she whispered at some point. “They never came back after the launch.”

“What happened out there?” he asked.

She didn’t answer at once, it was several minutes before he felt fingers brushing his. It was too hot to hold hands and it wasn’t something he was fond of anyway. He still found himself turning his palm upwards so she could entwine their fingers. He owed it to her to comfort her if nothing else. It was his fault she was in that shit to begin with.

“Cinna and Portia never came back. Peeta was nervous but he wouldn’t tell me what was happening.” she explained. “I don’t think he even quite knew himself to be honest. Then he simply vanished, I couldn’t find him anywhere. I was weary at first but... Well, Peacekeepers kindly asked me to follow them to the Head Gamemaker’s office who wasn’t Plutarch Heavensbee anymore although it hadn’t been announced yet and it is sufficient to say I found myself quite distracted from that mystery.”

He squeezed her hand. “What did they want with you?”

“Information, I think.” He heard her try to swallow but if her throat was as parched as his was, it didn’t come as such a surprise that she didn’t manage it. “It doesn’t matter, they quickly ascertained I knew nothing. It wasn’t exactly pleasant.”

“What happened to Heavensbee? Do you know?” he insisted.

There was a long silence before she sighed. “He followed in Seneca’s footsteps.”

Dead, then.

He wanted to feel sad about it but he had lost entirely too many friends those last few days and he might very well be on his way to the grave himself so he estimated he didn’t have time to grieve properly and pushed the feelings down.

“And Peeta?” he asked.

“I honestly have no idea.” she confessed. “I am sunburned. My skin isn’t meant to be so exposed...”

“Night will fall soon.” he promised. Hopefully. If that wasn’t another rule change from their new friend Head Gamemaker Torenson.

The water stopped boiling before night fell.

It didn’t matter much either way, they were both red as lobsters and feeling so sick, they didn’t make any attempt at getting dressed or at moving. They remained on their back, staring at the quickly darkening sky, feeling as if they had just been steam cooked.

“I’ve never seen stars this bright before.” she mused when the night was dark enough that the stars and the moon started peeking out.

“A bit extreme, going in an arena for stargazing, sweetheart.” he joked weakly.

“I’m thirsty.” she complained, reaching out to test the water temperature. “It’s still too warm. And I’m too tired, I don’t think I will make it to shore.”
“We’ll rest for a while, yeah?” he replied, closing his eyes again. “We’ll try in a while.”

A while stretched into an hour. When Panem’s sigil appeared, they had yet to move.

“That’s going to be a long one.” he mumbled.

And long it was.

The first face to appear was Gloss, quickly followed by Cashmere – which was news to them – and by the face of a stranger, a man in his fifties, marked with a District One and the words HT over his head.

“I think it’s their father.” Effie frowned.

There was another stranger in Two, probably the kid Prim had dubbed to be chubby.

“Enobaria’s younger brother if I’m not mistaken.” his escort helpfully added. He wondered if she knew the ancestry tree of everyone involved in the Games. It wouldn’t have surprised him. She never forgot a face and she was good at keeping tabs. “What do you think happened?”

“Best guess?” he hesitated. “Cashmere got Enobaria’s brother by accident and Enobaria killed her. Her father tried to retaliate and got himself killed for his troubles.”

They watched the rest in silence. There were no other surprises there but he had to catch Effie up on what she had missed while she was otherwise busy waiting to “volunteer”. Panem’s sigil appeared once more and then they were left to stare at the night sky again.

“It is cooler now.” she declared eventually.

There was a soft splashing sound and, soon, he was drenched with water. He wasn’t expecting it and he cursed, sitting up to defend himself. She didn’t relent though. She wasn’t happy until they were both soaked in an attempt to “cool their bodies down”. He scolded her about possible shock but she was determined to have it her way.

“We should go back to the others.” she suggested, chewing on her bottom lip. She gave the beach where the others had set camp a longing gaze.

“Yeah, I’m sure they miss us very much.” he chuckled with some bitterness. “I saw how they rushed back to help when we were in trouble.”

It was unfair, of course. He wouldn’t have wanted any of them to come back anyway, not for him at least, but they could have stopped Effie from diving back.

The semi-darkness didn’t prevent him from seeing the disapproving pout on her lips. “They are our friends, Haymitch.”

He doubted very much that Johanna would have consented to be called her friend but they had certainly all known each other for long enough to warrant the term.

He went back to sit against the Cornucopia, keeping his eyes away from her face, unwilling to see the pain his words would cause.

“You’re in the arena now, sweetheart.” he reminded her without any gentleness. “You have no friends in the arena, only allies and those usually have an expiration date.” He heard her opening her mouth to argue but he didn’t give her time to speak. “They have other priorities than you or me,
Effie. And that’s good, I have my priorities too. But don’t expect them to act like your friends anymore. That’s over. No friendship outlives the arena.”

She was silent for a moment and then she sat next to him, closer than he would have liked given that they were still both in their underwear.

“I am still your friend.” she argued. “And you are still mine.”

“That’s different. You’re my token.” he countered.

She sighed. She drew her legs closer to her chest and propped her chin on her knees, watching the dark water, lost in her thoughts.

She was keeping it together much better than he had expected her to. He was surprised she hadn’t become hysterical yet. But, he figured, she was a very good actress and if she had given to theatrics and panic, she would have given them exactly what the Gamemakers were after: comic relief. An escort in the Games? How utterly absurd. The audience must have been waiting for her to lose it from the first second she appeared on screen.

He was proud of her, he realized.

Proud and sorry.

Because he suspected there was only one reason she was there at all. To punish him. Maybe they had caught the stolen moment before the interviews and extrapolated that they had managed to keep an affair from the public eyes all these years. It had truly been just a kiss though. She had been upset because of Katniss’ wedding dress – because of everything really – he hadn’t been particularly overjoyed by the prospect of walking back on Caesar’s tributes stage... She had been struggling to keep the tears at bay and... He had just kissed her. Spur of the moment. Unplanned. He hadn’t think it through, he had just acted, thinking he would probably die the following day so what the hell...

And someone must have seen.

There had always been rumors – there were always rumors about mentors and escorts – that kiss probably was everything they needed to confirm it.

“It’s my fault if you’re here.” he admitted after a little while.

She turned her head to look at him, resting her cheek on her knees. “How so?”

“The kiss...” he started but she waved him off.

“I know you are quick to blame yourself but it has hardly anything to do with that.” she declared. “I publicly chose a side. I chose the children, you. We are a team.” She stretched her legs in front of her and leaned back against the Cornucopia, their shoulders brushed. “I don’t blame you.”

“I do.” he snorted.

“When don’t you?” she joked without any humor.

The air had cooled down and they were starting to shiver with the abrupt change in temperature. She reached for her jumpsuit and he was almost sorry to see her get dressed again but when she tossed his at his face he followed her lead. He settled back against the Cornucopia but she lied down to stare at the stars. He wondered if it was truly the first time she saw them properly. After a few minutes, she shuffled closer and used his thigh as a pillow.
He hesitated, his hand freezing in mid-air, and then started petting her hair slowly. He had never seen her without a wig before and he didn’t know if he was surprised or not that she was blond. It suited her somehow. The curls were tangled and full of sand but they still felt soft.

“Why did you do it?” she whispered eventually. “Kiss me, I mean.”

He tried to swallow but his parched throat wouldn’t comply.

“I needed to know.” he confessed with some reluctance.

“Needed to know what?” she frowned.

He mulled on it for a moment and then shrugged, deciding that impending death was reason enough for honesty. He wasn’t entertaining the thought that he would win the Quell. He didn’t want to win the Quell. All he wanted was to keep as many of his friends alive as possible, that would have to be enough. “How you tasted like.”

That seemed to render her speechless.

“It was a horrible kiss.” she stated when she recovered.

“Yeah.” he agreed, chuckling despite himself. “It was.”

Tears, franticness, lack of liquor and gold lipstick that tasted like glitter didn’t make for a good kiss.

He continued petting her hair and she continued mapping the stars with her eyes.

“Human tokens are meant to be precious.” she observed after a while. “Cashmere and Gloss’ father, Enobaria’s brother, Finnick’s girlfriend, Katniss’ sister... They are meant to be... the most important person in a tribute’s life.”

“Yeah.” he said flatly.

He hoped she wasn’t trying to get a confession out of him because on that front he was confused. He didn’t quite know what she meant to him aside from the fact that she was precious to some extent. A friend, if nothing else, and he had too few of those. And, if he was honest, she had been a little more than a friend for some time now...

“They made a mistake then.” she hummed. “They should have sent Peeta to you.”

His hand stilled in her hair.

Peeta was the logical choice, they had all thought it would be him.

It would have been different if the boy had been in her place though – for one, he would probably have drowned earlier but that wasn’t the point. He loved Peeta just like he loved Katniss but had the boy been there it would have been about the kids not about him. Protect Katniss for Peeta, protect Peeta for Katniss. And Peeta was far from being helpless, he could hold his own – not to mention he was still angry with Haymitch because he had volunteered. It would have been different. Human tokens couldn’t win, nobody said they had to die, he could have made sure that Katniss, Prim and Peeta got out of there alive regardless of his own fate. He would have aimed to do that even. And it would have been all about the kids.

He wouldn’t have felt the crushing dread he felt at the knowledge that while resourceful, Effie wasn’t made to be in the wild. He wouldn’t have been scared the others would turn their backs on
her and leave her behind at the first sign of danger because she didn’t *belong* with any of them. She was part of the team, yes, but for all her pretty speeches earlier, Katniss had left her without a single glance back. If Haymitch died, Effie would be left to fend for herself. *That* was the difference.

“Making you my token was the only way to make it personal, sweetheart.” he objected.

She wasn’t watching the sky anymore, she was staring right at him. “Am I precious to you, then?”

“You’re a pain in my ass.” he deadpanned. “But one I don’t mind so much.”

She laughed. It was so unexpected and ridiculous, it brought a smirk to his lips.

He could tell the noise had caught Katniss’ attention on the shore. She was keeping watch for the others who had settled a while earlier. He ignored the girl for now, content to make the most of that short moment of amusement.

“I think you are the king of unromantic declarations.” she grinned, her eyes sparkling in mischief. “And *do* mind your language, would you?”

“See?” he scowled. “Pain in my ass.”

She rolled her eyes – an unladylike habit she had most likely picked up from him.

“For what it’s worth…” she replied. “You would be my human token too.”

He wasn’t sure if it was a good or a bad thing.

Chapter End Notes

No cliffhanger and an extra long chapter today because I am very nice ;) I hope you like this chapter and that it answers some questions you may have about the context. What did you think? What do you think is in store for them next?

I will start publishing a new chaptered story in 8 parts on Monday titled "Running Out Of Time", so... Check it out, maybe? If you'd like :p
They reached the shore a little before dawn, after almost half an hour of struggling in the water. They were exhausted, famished, a little faint and the deep sunburns were bothering them – albeit Effie more than Haymitch. Her skin was so pale, the sun had not been merciful, Haymitch’s was naturally tanned and he hadn’t suffered as much. She had been complaining nonstop but there were worse things to worry about and they had been lucky until then. He had told her to suck it up.

Katniss was on him even before he paddled out of the water, locking her arms around him in a suffocating hug that he barely managed to reciprocate.

“Watch it, sweetheart!” he hissed.

Effie gasped the same warnings when the girl moved to hug her but it didn’t matter much because Finnick gave him in a bear hug before moving on to his escort, and then it was Annie’s turn, and Johanna clapped him on the shoulder, and by the time Prim forced them out of the water and in the shade of the trees to have a look at those sunburns, he was hurting all over. The kid had found some plants she knew and managed to make a sort of sticky balm that brought them some relief.

They were both fed with the leftovers from their previous day hunt and Katniss tapped a tree so they could drink to their heart’s content. He paced himself, knowing he would get sick otherwise and forced Effie to do the same even though she seemed intent on simply swallowing her weight in water.

“They took out a huge part of the food stock when they killed the fish.” Finnick observed, once they were both fed and watered. “It’s going to be tough from now on.”

“Monkeys are probably eatable.” Katniss shrugged.

“Yeah, and not everyone can catch them with arrows.” Johanna scoffed. “It’s not called The Hunger Games just because it’s catchy, brainless. Decreasing food supply is a way to give the Games a boost. Someone will try something before long.”

“My money’s on the Careers.” Finnick said, running a hand through his hair. “Enobaria and Brutus will stick together.”

“There is Brutus’ human token to take into consideration...” Effie argued. “Enobaria is a very... driven woman. Without her own token to slow her down...”

“You’re all forgetting Beetee and Chaff.” Haymitch pointed out. “Shouldn’t count either out.”

“But they’re on our side, right?” Finnick objected.

Haymitch remained silent. He wasn’t sure there was a common side anymore but he didn’t want to voice it aloud in case it gave Finnick or Jo any ideas.

“So what’s the plan?” Katniss frowned. “Either we try to take them out or we wait and see if something or someone does it for us.”

“I vote for waiting.” Annie immediately declared.

“Yeah, you’re a fucking token, you don’t get a vote.” Jo scowled.
“Yes, she does.” Finnick growled, taking a protective step in front of his girlfriend. “And I vote for waiting too.”

“Me too.” Effie added.

“I wouldn’t mind a fight.” Johanna snorted, folding her arms on her chest.

“I don’t know...” Katniss sighed when eyes turned to her. “Both have pros and cons.”

Prim cleared her throat. “I want to wait.”

“We wait.” Haymitch concluded, leaving no room for argument.

The wait stretched into early afternoon.

Haymitch kept a steady watch all that time, wondering if anyone else had noticed just how naturally groups were starting to form inside their alliance. Finnick and Annie stood at the edge of the water, locked in a tight embrace. The young man was talking to her in a soft voice that didn’t carry far enough for Haymitch to guess what they were saying but Annie was nodding in his neck, clinging to his shoulders like a drowning woman. Jo was sitting on the sand a few feet away, playing with her axe, her eyes on the jungle edge. As for Katniss, she had taken her sister aside and they were talking in low voices. Effie was sitting with him, watching the two girls with a blank look on her face.

Everyone’s priority was so clear Haymitch wondered where his lied. It wasn’t as easy to decipher for him as it appeared to be for the others.

Trust was wavering.

And, in an arena, that was never a good thing.

A light weight settled against his shoulder but he didn’t acknowledge it. He didn’t want to give the Gamemakers any more material than they already had. His potential death was a source of amusement for the Capitol once more, that was enough. He didn’t want to drag his private life into it anymore than he had to.

“Stop scheming.” she ordered. “There is no point.”

With her head on his shoulder, he couldn’t see her face. Yet he knew she was still watching the girls.

“Yeah, there is.” he retorted, low enough that the others wouldn’t hear. “’Cause I might not be walking out of this hell but you, Prim and Katniss bloody well are. Annie too if we can make it happen.”

“I don’t want Finnick to die.” she whispered. “Or Johanna. Even Chaff...”

“One victor only, you know the rules. It’s no different than any other year.” he nudged her with his shoulder and she lifted her head to look at him. Without her battle armor of make-up, wigs and fancy clothes, she looked strangely fragile. “I’m choosing Katniss.” he stated clearly “Who are you choosing?”

She stared at him for a long time and then licked her lips before averting her eyes. “You wouldn’t like the answer to that question so let’s say Katniss.”

He frowned, placing a finger under her chin and prompting it up until she was looking at him again. His voice was deadly serious when he talked next but there was a note of franticness underneath
because he needed her to understand. “I’m not winning this. I don’t want to win. I’m a dead man walking, sweetheart.”

“I know.” she croaked, batting his hand away from her face. She stood up and walked to the girls, plastering a bright smile on her lips and chatting loudly as if they were anywhere but in mortal danger.

Johanna shot her a look of utter contempt because of it but before she could call her out on it, a scream of pure pain tore through the jungle.

Everyone who was sitting bolted to their feet and instinctively regrouped, placing Prim, Annie and Effie at the center of a circle.

Another scream came from the jungle to their right but this time it wasn’t as undecipherable. It came out as a strangled Johanna.

“Alyssa.” Jo spat before violently cursing. Effie opened her mouth only to close it again, not daring telling her to mind her language.

“It’s a trap.” Finnick said.

“Of course, it’s a fucking trap!” Seven’s victor retorted. “Do you have to fucking state the fucking obvious?!”

“Don’t bit my head off, I’m not the one torturing your token.” Four’s victor snapped. “What do we do?”

“What do you think we’re doing?” Johanna scoffed. “We’re going!”

“I thought you didn’t care about your token?” Katniss cut in.

“Shut the fuck up!” Johanna shouted. Katniss was to her left and she pushed her with enough strength that the girl fell on her back.

Haymitch immediately stepped in between them before Jo could completely lose control and try to strike her with her axe. “Calm down. We’re going to go get your token.”

Another scream of Johanna! tore through the jungle and she looked stricken, pale. Haymitch could see clearly that two instincts were battling within her: her survival instinct was telling her to stay away, her instinctive response was to go help a girl she knew and probably liked well enough despite all her claims to the contrary.

“Let’s go.” she snarled. “I want to beat Enobaria down to a pulp.”

“Okay.” he nodded before turning to the others.

The flaw in the plan immediately became obvious. Finnick stood next to Annie, half in front of her, and Katniss had scrambled up and joined Prim and Effie. There was no way either of them were going to leave their token behind to go running through the jungle for Johanna’s. And Seven’s victor realized right at the same time he did because she let out a humorless laugh.

“Should have known.” she sneered.

Finnick bowed his head in shame but Katniss looked straight ahead, unapologetic. She would have done it if weren’t for Prim, Haymitch mused, but Prim was there and it changed everything. His own
eyes fell on Effie but it wasn’t enough deterrent to stop him from trying to save an innocent girl.

“I will come with you.” Effie volunteered.

Jo welcomed that with a snicker but Haymitch shook his head, knowing she was serious – she was ridiculous like that.

“You stay here and you do what Katniss tells you to, get it?” he growled. “You stay alive. No matter what, you stay alive.” He looked at the girl. “I’m leaving her with you. Take care of her.”

Katniss glanced at Prim and then at Effie and Haymitch hoped he wasn’t making a mistake even if the girl eventually nodded. He checked the knife was still at Effie’s belt and then hurried after Johanna who had already started walking in the direction of the jungle.

“Haymitch!”

He stopped and turned at the call of his name. He didn’t have time to brace himself before Effie collided into him, wrapping her arms in a dead lock around his neck. Her breath was hot against his ear.

“Don’t get yourself killed.” she commanded before slowly drawing back. Their lips brushed together in something that wasn’t quite a kiss. She briefly cupped his cheek and let go of him.

The Gamemakers were probably cheering at the spectacle they were making.

He had to run to catch up with Jo.

“Do we have a plan?” he asked as they rushed between the trees in the direction of where the screams were regularly coming from.

“Yeah. We go in, we kill them, we take Aly and we come back.” she spat.

“Great plan.” he taunted. “A little stupid though. It’s a trap, they’re waiting for us.”

“My axe is waiting for them.” she growled.

Locating the Careers wasn’t the difficult part, they stumbled on the clearing easily enough and crouched low behind bushes to observe. The girl who couldn’t be older than Prim was tied up in the middle, screaming her throat raw without too much prompting from Enobaria who sometimes poked at her with a knife without actually drawing blood. Two’s victor didn’t seem to enjoy terrifying a kid, the girl looked scared to death but unhurt. There was no trace of Brutus or his token.

“You think Brutus took off?” Jo whispered.

“Enobaria isn’t stupid.” he replied in a low voice. “She wouldn’t have drawn you out there if she wasn’t sure she could win. If all of us had come, she would have been outnumbered.”

“But she knew the others wouldn’t come.” she snorted. “They have their own tokens. She probably thinks I’m alone. One on one, I can do.”

Before he could urge her to wait some more, she jumped out of their hiding place and ran to Enobaria, making one of her axes turn to give her swing some momentum. Enobaria looked stunned but it only lasted a moment, she dived to the left, away from Alyssa. The spear came out of nowhere but it caught Johanna on the side, disrupting her aim.

Haymitch understood what would happen a split second before Alyssa gasped, not even having
enough strength to scream, the blade of the axe deeply imbedded in her chest.

“*No!*” Jo shouted, pulling on the handle to free her, looking completely panicked.

Enobaria used the distraction to sneak behind her but Haymitch was there and, giving up on any notion of prudence and hoping Brutus didn’t have another spear, he jumped on the woman, using his weight to pin her to the jungle uneven ground and stabbing her with his knife in the same movement. He stabbed and stabbed blindly, not letting himself think. He managed to land at least four hits before something slammed into him from the side and he found himself crushed by Brutus’ weight, Two’s victor’s big hands wrapped around his throat.

His vision started to narrow and his ears popped but he still heard the human token canon going off. He was going to die in vain when his death could have protected someone else and that was the worst thing. He clawed at Brutus’ arms, tried to feel around for the knife he had dropped, tried to push his thumbs into the man’s eyes...

“Hey!” someone shouted from behind Brutus just as Haymitch’s vision was started to tunnel into complete darkness. “You care for your wife or what?”

Brutus let him go to face Johanna who had tore the spear from her side and was standing tall, clutching to her chest a blond woman who looked scared out of her wits. And there was a good reason to be scared given that Jo was pressing a knife to her throat.

Haymitch rolled on his side, coughing and gasping for air. His lungs were burning and his throat felt swollen, never mind the sunburns all over his body that were aching.

“You let her go right now.” Brutus warned.

“Like you let Aly go?” Johanna scoffed. “I think we’re going to play it with a token for a token here.”

“You killed the girl, not us.” Two’s victor argued, lifting his hands in the air. “Look, we barely touched her, okay? Let Livie go. She doesn’t have anything to do with this...”

Haymitch spotted his knife not far from Enobaria’s foot and he crawled in that direction, relieved when his fingers closed on the handle. He glanced at Two’s female tribute but she didn’t seem to be in any position to move. He had caught her in the throat and if she was still breathing, the bleeding was extensive and it was obvious she would not recover from it.

“You should have thought about that before.” Johanna spat. “I’m not the forgiving type.”

Desperate and sensing she wasn’t joking, Brutus rushed to her but Johanna was swifter. Haymitch could only stare, stunned, when the woman was dropped to the ground with her throat sliced open. Brutus dropped to his knees next to her and gathered her close to his chest, his shoulders shaking.

Seeing Brutus cry was perhaps even more shocking than seeing Jo murdering an innocent woman in cold blood. The token canon boomed a few seconds later.

“You didn’t have to kill her.” Haymitch rasped out.

Johanna calmly unshed the axe strapped to her back. “That’s what they’re here for. Don’t you get it yet?”

She lifted the axe and swung it but Brutus looked up in time and raised his arm to protect himself. The blade caught him above the elbow, cutting half the arm out.
“You will pay for this.” he spat before using his last strength to run away, clutching his injured arm to his chest. Jo tried to give pursuit but she bent in two after three steps, a hand on her side where the spear had caught her. It came away bloodied.

“Get him!” she screamed at him but Haymitch shook his head, not keen on chasing Brutus in the jungle when he was still trying to convince his body he wasn’t suffocating anymore.

“He won’t go far with that arm.” he shrugged. “Jo...

“Shut up.” she hissed. “You just... shut up, okay? Dammit!” She wiped her eyes with her sleeve and walked back to where he was standing next to Enobaria’s agonizing body, still holding her side. “Finish her. We’re not... We’re not monsters. Finish her.”

He wanted to tell her to do it herself. He wanted to tell her he had killed enough people in his life. However, Johanna had killed enough people that day and he was responsible for Enobaria’s death anyway. He picked up Brutus’ spear and he put Two’s victor out of her misery as quickly and painlessly as he could.

“I’m sorry.” he murmured right after the tribute canon had boomed.

“Yeah, you’re sorry. I’m sorry. Everyone’s sorry.” Johanna cackled. She was hysterical and he was a little scared she was going mad. She wouldn’t be the first victor – or tribute – to go down that path. “Let’s go.”

She didn’t look at Alyssa or at the woman she had just murdered. He didn’t ask why she had killed her, he understood only too well. She hadn’t really meant to. We’re not monsters, she had said, but when you let the monster out to play, it was hard to rail it in, and in the arena the monster escaped its leash only too easily.

“Let me check your side.” he requested.

She shook her head. “Flesh wound. It’s fine.”

It didn’t look fine but the bleeding wasn’t extensive enough to truly worry him so he let it go for now. He would insist once they would be far away from the corpses, back with the others. Finnick might get through to her if he failed. He was, after all, her best friend.

They had been trekking through the jungle for ten minutes, going slowly because neither of them were in prime shape, when she grabbed his arm.

“Don’t tell them.” she commanded.

“About which part?” he scowled.

He should just have agreed. Johanna wasn’t exactly the most stable person he knew and he could sort of understand what had happened out there. She had accidentally killed the kid and she had snapped. That happened. It could have happened to any of them. Rationally, he understood.

But he had been forced to kill someone too and that made him angry. It made him want to curl up in a ball on the ground and to scream until he had no voice left. It made him want to throw up. It made him want to dive into boiling water to cleanse the crawling of his skin. It made him want to claw at his stomach until he could get rid of the disgust he felt...

She sneered and he had no doubt they would have ended up fighting if the announcement chime hadn’t boomed through the arena.
“Fuck.” he spat. “What now?”

“Attention, tributes.” Claudius Templesmith declared cheerfully. “Change of rules. Human tokens now have the status of tributes. There will only be one crowned victor. May the odds be ever in your favor.”

He and Johanna stared at each other steadily throughout the announcement. He realized with a sinking feeling that he had always known this would happen. It was obvious in retrospect. *Obvious.*

“Well, your escort is *fucked.*” Johanna chuckled.

He would have probably bitten her head off if he hadn’t heard Effie’s deafening scream of pain at that moment.

Suddenly, it didn’t matter that it still hurt to breathe or that his whole body felt a hundred years old. He was dashing through the jungle, his mind focused only on one thing.

*Effie.*
Chapter 6

Haymitch was running at full speed, terror was giving him wings.

Effie’s screams were coming regularly. He could hear the heavy panting of Johanna behind him as she did her best to keep up with him despite her injuries. He was way ahead of Seven’s victor and that was why he was the only one to rush head first into the force field.

Fortunately, it wasn’t the one enclosing the arena.

Unfortunately, it was still like walking into a wall.

He bounced back and remained on the ground for long enough that Jo caught up with him and outstretched a hand to help him up. Stunned, his head spinning, and blood trickling down his nose, he grabbed the hand and walked closer to the invisible wall separating them from their friends.

“No! Please, no!” Effie shrieked and she sounded so close...

“Effie!” he bellowed, slamming his fists into the wall. “Effie!”

Jo ran her hand against the force field, walking away from him, trying to find a passage but to no avail.

“Please! Please! I beg you!”

His escort was clearly pleading for her life and he didn’t understand what was happening. Or rather, he was afraid he was understanding too well. Human tokens were now tributes. Twice the number of enemies, people that weren’t friends to other victors and were essentially defenseless. Easy targets. Who was it? Chaff or Beetee? Neither would be cruel enough to make her beg like that. And what about the others? What were they doing? Why didn’t they help? Were they hurt? Dead? No... Impossible since there had been no other canon since Enobaria’s...

Effie might have run off on her own which would be idiotic but something she could do or she might still be with the others and because of the rule change...

He hit the force field with his fists and his feet but it didn’t help in the slightest. And Effie’s begging was still ringing loud and clear in the jungle. She was being tortured, just out of reach.

“Could they hurry and finish her?” Johanna scoffed. “Why is she always so loud?”

Haymitch didn’t hit women as a rule but the backslap was gone before he could even think about it. If Johanna had snapped and gone mad a few minutes earlier, he was snapping and going mad now. The knowledge that someone he cared about was in pain, in danger, a few feet away and that he could do nothing about it was too much to bear.

“Shut up.” he growled.

She rubbed her cheek and spat. It came out bloody and Haymitch would have felt guilty for hurting her if he had been able to feel anything other than anger and dread.

“Who do you think it is?” she taunted. “Finnick or your precious little bird? ‘Cause I’m telling you
right now that alliance is dead.”

“Shut up!” he repeated.

But Jo wasn’t in any state to shut up. She was hysterical, cackling like an insane woman and the urge to wrap his hands around her throat and squeeze until she finally fell silent was almost overwhelming.

“Come on...” she sneered. “You can count, right? One victor, so many of us... How far will your girl go to crown her sister? Cause I would say pretty far and we’re all her enemies now. You think she wouldn’t stab you in the back? Or your escort fuck toy? And Finnick? You know just how far Finnick has already gone for Annie...”

He knew and that was the worst thing. He knew there was a possibility one of them had chosen to sever the weakest link, he knew...

“Katniss!” Effie sobbed “Katniss, please, don’t, please... I don’t want to die, please... Please...”

“I’m out of here.” Johanna declared, tossing a disgusted look in the direction of the beach they couldn’t barely glimpse between the trees. “You do what you want but I’m playing for myself now.”

She reached out and squeezed his shoulder but he shrugged her hand off, still too desperate to beat the invisible wall into submission to care for her attempt at comforting. “Good luck, Haymitch. I hope I don’t have to see you again ‘cause I don’t want to kill you.”

He didn’t want to kill anyone.

But god helped whoever was hurting Effie.

There was a final shriek and then silence. The force field gave in suddenly and he stumbled. The canon boomed a second later.

“It’s a tribute canon.” Johanna paused long enough to observe.

“Everyone’s a tribute now.” he reminded her, tossing a glare over his shoulder. He softened when he saw the way she was clutching her side. “Good luck, Jo.”

She nodded once but he didn’t wait long enough to figure out if she would really leave or not. He started running again in the direction of the beach.

He thought he saw something in the trees. Some black bird, maybe a jay of some kind, but he didn’t pause long enough to reflect on the irony of it.

The canon could be for Brutus, he mused, it was the logical explanation. Except Brutus wasn’t as stupid as anyone thought and it was possible he had managed to do a tourniquet, to stop the bleeding or, at least, slow it down long enough for his sponsors to do something...

Or the canon could be for Effie and in that case...

His boots skidded on the sand and his heart jumped up to his throat when he spotted his friends. Katniss had her bow trained at Finnick, Finnick had her trident at Prim’s throat, Annie was sitting behind Four’s victor her head in her hands rocking on herself fast and humming so loud that it was all Haymitch could hear. And Effie...

Effie was lying at Finnick’s feet, the sand under her head dark with blood.
He unleashed his knife and advanced on them, his sight turning red. He didn’t know who he was going after but it was Annie he grabbed because she was the defenseless one and she was slightly out of the way of the other two. Finnick’s eyes darted to him in fear but he didn’t dare take his trident away from Prim’s throat in case Katniss shot her arrow.

“Was that the plan from the start?” Finnick laughed bitterly. “Double-crossing me? Where’s Jo? That last canon... Did you kill her, Haymitch?”

“You’ve got nerves talking to me about that last canon when Effie’s dead at your feet.” he hissed, pressing his knife against Annie’s throat. How ironic was it that he had condemned Jo for exactly the same thing half an hour earlier only. “Which one of you did it? I heard her beg you, Katniss. If you did this...”

“She’s just knocked out,” the girl snapped. “She tried to come between us. And she didn’t have time to beg, let me tell you.”

Foolish woman.

Then the bird...

*Jabberjay.*

He had been *fooled.*

He hoped the Gamemakers had gotten a good laugh out of it. Unfortunately, the knowledge that Effie hadn’t been begging for her life didn’t make him feel any more confident about their dying alliance.

“Are you sure?” he asked, loosening his grip on Annie’s waist.

Katniss’ eyes never wandered away from Finnick. “There was no canon.”

“But there was the last canon.” Finnick pointed out. “Was it for Jo?”

“Jo took off.” he retorted.

“Jo would *never* do that.” Four’s victor exclaimed. “She wouldn’t leave *me*. This was a trap! You arranged it with Katniss! You..”

“You, *shut up*.” Katniss ordered. “And you let my sister go *right now* or Haymitch is going to kill your girlfriend.”

“Haymitch won’t do that.” Finnick replied but his voice wavered with uncertainty.

“Five seconds ago you accused him of killing Jo.” the girl pointed out. “Which one is it?”

“I didn’t kill Jo.” he growled. “Finnick, let the girl go and I will give Annie back.”

Finnick shook his head. “You first. I don’t trust you.”

Effie let out a moan and her eyelids fluttered.

It happened fast but Haymitch clearly saw regret flashing in Katniss’ eyes when they darted to their escort and back to Four’s victor. She would have preferred it if Effie had been dead, Haymitch understood, because Effie was now a tribute and that was one more person she personally knew on the way to making Prim a victor.
Haymitch realized he couldn’t trust Katniss with Effie.

He also realized there was no way he would let Effie die without a fight.

“Don’t make me regret this, boy.” he warned, letting go of Annie. She immediately popped back down in a curled position, so distressed she didn’t even seem to be able to rock on herself anymore.

Slowly, Finnick stepped back. When he was far enough from Prim, Katniss lowered her bow but kept it ready to shoot. “Prim, behind me.”

The twelve years old looked too shaken to do anything but obey her sister. Haymitch and Finnick circled themselves, keeping a respectable distance between them as Four’s victor approached to grab Annie. It brought Haymitch closer to Katniss and Prim but he didn’t dare turn his back on them either – which was probably ridiculous but his paranoia levels were high and his instinct marked Katniss as danger. He went to stand next to Effie, keeping his body between his escort and the girl just in case.

They remained silent until Finnick disappeared in the jungle, Annie in his arms. He wasn’t sure how long the boy would be able to keep her alive when she was so obvious a prey.

“If it comes down to it, are you choosing Prim or Effie?” Katniss asked as soon as they were alone.

Haymitch noticed she still hadn’t put the bow aside.

He didn’t want to choose between Prim and Effie. He didn’t want to choose between Prim and Katniss either.

The arena made people crazy. Former victors back in an arena was a recipe for disasters. Jo had already snapped. He wasn’t far from the edge himself. Would he have hurt Annie if Finnick had touched Prim, Katniss or Effie? He wanted to say no but the fact was he wasn’t sure. The victors would only grow more paranoid and desperate with each more hour spent in that hell. He wasn’t even sure why it was so wrong to want out anymore, to want to win. The Games twisted your mind, the need to survive was crushing. The need to see your loved ones survive was even worse.

He and the girl had a knack for understanding each other without having to talk though and a long shared look was enough to convey the impossibility of the situation. He couldn’t choose one over the other. He couldn’t make the sacrifice, not right now, maybe not ever.

Katniss nodded once. “I don’t want it to come down to the four of us.”

Because she would kill him and Effie if that was what she had to do to make sure Prim lived. He understood that.

“Stay alive, sweetheart.” he ordered with a lump in his throat.

“You too.” Katniss replied, her eyes bright with unshed tears.

He wanted to hug her one last time but long goodbyes weren’t for him. He picked Effie up and tossed her over his shoulder so he would have a free hand if necessary, heading to the jungle, not quite turning his back on Katniss, not quite trusting her that far despite everything.

Effie was weakly struggling against his grip and he doubted being carried in that fashion was doing any good to the head injury but he only placed her down after a good fifteen minutes of walking, once he was certain he had put enough distance between himself and the others. He helped her sit down with her back against a tree and brushed the hair away from her face. Given the gash on her
forehead, he figured Finnick had probably caught her with the side of the trident. Blood was already coating and he thought it looked more impressive than serious.

“Your’re going to keep a scar.” he mocked, cupping her cheek. Her eyes were a little unfocused. “Now’s not the time to have a concussion, Princess. Come on, look at me.”

“What... What happened?” she stuttered, leaning her head on his hand. He wasn’t sure if it was out of a need for affection or because she couldn’t quite hold it upright. Or maybe it was a mix of both.

“Nasty blow to the head.” he snorted.

She blinked, clearly having difficulties following him.

“Finnick and Katniss...” she whispered “They...” She moved as if to rub her forehead but he batted her hand away before she could touch the wound. “Katniss thought it was all a ploy to separate the two of you. I told her I trusted Finnick but... I think he was nervous too. He kept telling Annie you were too much of a strategist. And then the announcement and... I tried to stop them but...”

“Yeah, that was fucking stupid.” he cut her off. “You’ll never win if you pull this kind of stunts.”

It wasn’t until the words were out of his mouth that he realized it was his plan. Trying to make her win.

She frowned and then immediately winced in pain. “I won’t win. You and I both know that.”

“You’re walking out of this arena if I have anything to say about it.” he retorted.

“Katniss or Prim are winning this Quell, Haymitch. We agreed.” she hissed. “Where are they?” She looked around and seemed to realize for the first time they weren’t on the beach anymore. “Haymitch?”

He explained what had happened from the moment he and Johanna had left. He glossed over what had taken place in the clearing but didn’t hide who had done what despite Jo’s wishes. Effie needed to understand just how dangerous their friends were.

“But we can’t leave Katniss!” she exclaimed once he was done. “She’s our victor! She’s our... Our... Ours.”

She looked so angry and desperate for him to understand but... His legs were starting to cramp from the crouching so he sat down and ran a hand through his tangled dirty hair. “Truth, sweetheart?”

“Are we in a habit of lying to each other now?” she scoffed. “Well, aside for...” Her voice trailed off but he didn’t try to finish that thought.

Aside for the rebellion, they had always been very good at being blunt with each other. They were honest because honest truths had been their favorite weapons to hurt the other for a long time. They didn’t lie to each other, they didn’t coddle each other, they worked well together despite their volatile relationship.

“Katniss and Prim won’t win.” he stated. That was obvious. The Gamemakers would never let the Mockingjay win when the whole Quell was to get rid of her in the first place. His own victory wasn’t a possibility for the very same reason. As for Prim... He didn’t think they would take the risk of crowning the Mockingjay’s sister for the rebels to use as another martyr. “I can’t save either of them. I can save you.”
She took it in strides. Her lips wobbled but she jerked her chin higher in the air. “Are you certain?”

“That I can save you?” he asked.

“That they can’t win.” she clarified.

“Certain is a big word.” he shrugged. “But yeah. Think about it. Wouldn’t make much sense.”

She closed her eyes and took several deep breaths like he had seen her do a thousand times when she was very rattled and trying hard to keep herself together. When she spoke, she sounded detached and when she looked at him, it was with her escort’s mask on. The mask she used when they needed to decide which kid they would bet on that year, the boy or the girl, because Twelve’s resources were always stretched thin and there always came a point where they needed to choose who to favor. It couldn’t be personal then. It had to be rational, detached. “Then we move on to the next child. Finnick. We can help Finnick win.”

“I don’t want to help Finnick win.” he retorted. “I want you safe.”

“Tough luck.” she sneered. “Because I don’t want to win.”

“So what, you’re suicidal now? You want to die?” he shouted, annoyed and frustrated.

“No, I don’t want to die!” she snarled. “But what is the point of living when everyone I love is dead? It didn’t do you any good.”

“You have people outside.” he growled. “Your family...”

“But my team is in here.” she snapped. “Katniss is here. You are here. And Haymitch, I know you are blind as a bat when it comes to people having feelings for you but honestly how can you be blind enough not to know that I...”

The next words, words he didn’t want to hear, were muffled by his mouth.

It wasn’t a better kiss than the last time. Instead of tears and glitter, it tasted like blood – his or hers, he couldn’t say – and he almost regretted doing it because she wasn’t responsive – again – and it would only feed the monsters watching them. He wondered if Caesar was calling them the new star-crossed lovers already or if they were downplaying it because a Capitol woman and a District man being involved wasn’t something they would encourage. Or maybe it was... Maybe they could spin this in a way to tell the Districts: see, we aren’t so bad if one of your victors is willing to lay his life for one of us...

“Sweetheart, we’re terrible at kissing.” he murmured against her lips, more amused than he wanted to be deep down.

“Because you always choose the worst possible moment.” she sighed, before coiling a hand around the back of his neck and taking charge. Of course, she had to take charge. However, he didn’t complain because her mouth crashed on his again and when she pushed her tongue past his lips, he forgot everything from the fact his nose was hurting when it bumped with hers to the danger lurking around. He drew back long enough to tilt her chin the other way and then went back to kissing her as if nothing else mattered. She was air and he was drowning.

It was a long time before they stopped and snuggled close together to keep the chills of nightfall at bay. It was lucky they hadn’t been attacked or that the Gamemakers hadn’t chosen that moment to unleash a mutt from hell on them. He tried to tap a tree but getting water out of the trunks with his knife was much more difficult than it had been with the spile. They barely managed to get enough
water to remain hydrated which was the main thing, he supposed. He would need to find them something to eat in the morning. Her body wasn’t accustomed to such privations, she would weaken fast.

“I am terrified of dying.” Effie confessed, her forehead pressed against his neck, as they waited for Panem anthem and the announcement of the dead. “But I don’t want to win if that means losing you.”

He sighed and rested his head against the tree at his back. “Finnick wants Annie to win and Annie is a lost cause.”

“Which means Johanna will most likely be the Gamemakers’ favorite.” she pointed out.

“She’s volatile.” he argued. “They won’t want her. They will want someone they can control. I think they were betting on one of the Careers.”

“There are none of them left.” she countered. “They will have to make do. Johanna would be their perfect winner, wouldn’t she?”

He mulled it over and came to a conclusion she wouldn’t like. There was a perfect potential victor in the arena for the Gamemakers to control and parade around like a puppet, someone the rebels wouldn’t know how to use as a martyr for their cause – they wouldn’t dare. Maybe that had even be the plan all along and hurting him along the way had only been a nice bonus : to show everyone that the Capitol always won.

“You’re the perfect winner, sweetheart.” he finally told her. “You’re a Capitol, you know how to play the Games, and they may or may not have Peeta to force you to stay in line. Never mind your family.”

It turned out there was another tribute the Gamemakers could potentially favor. Once the anthem rang and the faces of the dead appeared, Brutus’ wasn’t amongst them. Instead there was a woman in Eleven, marked with a HT, who Haymitch knew to be Chaff’s sister.

That left them with a Career desperate for revenge.

But Brutus wasn’t the one they should have been wary of.
Waking up with Effie curled up against him was something Haymitch could have gotten used to.

“You’re supposed to be keeping watch.” he mumbled against her hair, still sleepy and more tired than he could afford to admit. His entire body felt bruised and battered, his throat was swollen from Brutus’ attempt at strangling him, his nose was throbbing and he could only hope it wasn’t broken...

“I am keeping watch.” she argued. “There is no reason I can’t be comfortable while I do it.”

He snorted, sending a few strands of blond hair flying around. He should have been angry really, she wasn’t taking this seriously. He had tasked her with keeping an eye out for danger at around three a.m. so he could get some sleep himself. He had left her leaning against a tree and there she was, lying almost on top of him on the hard jungle ground, her head on his chest, her leg hooked over his, her arm firmly wrapped around his waist... It was lucky his body was too exhausted to be pleased by that wake-up call because a boner might have been awkward in a regular setting but it would have been worse on national TV.

“You’re useless.” he accused with some fondness.

“I resent that. You should see me during sales.” she argued. “I may or may not have stabbed a woman’s hand with a stiletto.”

He chuckled and wrapped his arms around her, knowing the moment couldn’t last. “I think we’re out of stilettos, sweetheart.”

“Pity.” she joked. Her voice soon turned serious. “There were screams earlier and some sort of roaring. But there were no canons.”

He shot up, scanning their surroundings, almost certain he would find himself face to face with a mutt that would have crept up on them while she cuddled with him. She sat more slowly, reaching for her head and then letting her hand fall.

“I don’t think we’re in danger.” she offered. “It was faint. I think it came from some miles away.”

He couldn’t see any trace of anything dangerous for now so he turned back to her. “How’s the head?”

“I’m fine.” she declared.

“Which means you’re not.” he scoffed. Her pupils weren’t blown but they were larger than they ought given the poor luminosity. She had a concussion, he figured. It could pass by itself or it could kill her. There was no way to tell without medical attention.

“I’m dizzy.” she admitted. “But I’m also hungry so...”

He sighed and helped her up. “Let’s go get breakfast.”

Hunting with her proved to be not only difficult but impossible. She was loud. And he was no Katniss himself. He improvised a few snares – that he spent too much time on because his **damned** fingers wouldn’t stop shaking – but he wasn’t holding his breath on that. They collected some nuts he was sure were edible. It settled their stomachs but it left them parched. He fought with a tree for half an hour before he managed to get them water.
“We should try to find the children.” Effie argued, once they were done eating. “We should convince them we all stand a better chance if we stay together.”

“But we don’t.” he shrugged. “We will kill each other.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” She rolled her eyes. “Of course we won’t…”

“Effie.” he cut her off harshly. “We’re victors. We’re crazy on a good day. This is not a good day. Four days in here? I’m starting to feel the mass murdering urges, alright? I want out. I want you to get out. I don’t trust myself with them and I certainly don’t trust them with you.”

She sneaked her arms around his waist and leaned against his chest. He embraced her back instinctively, wondering if she realized where they were and why it was dangerous to act like she was acting. They didn’t have time for cuddling. They didn’t have time for anything. They needed to be focused if they wanted to survive.

And yet he gave in to the comfort and affection so openly offered.

“I don’t want to hurt them.” he whispered and it was almost a plea.

“You would never hurt them.” she argued with such trust and confidence he believed her for a second.

“I will if they look at you the wrong way.” he growled, burying his face in her shoulder. “You don’t understand... You don’t get it. I’m a killer. I’m a monster. And this place... This is where the monster plays. I can’t rail it in. I can’t...”

“Would you hush?” she hissed, tightening her hold to the point it almost hurt. “You are not a monster. You killed only in self-defense. You would never hurt Katniss or Prim, or Finnick or Annie for that matter and never mind Johanna, she’s been your favorite since the moment she gave the finger to the camera after she won.”

“Dumb move.” he commented. “But it takes some balls.”

“I do wish you would mind your language.” she sighed.

It was such an Effie thing to say... Even lost in a deadly arena, she would insist on propriety and manners and all that shit he didn’t care about on a good day. He didn’t think before he acted or he would have called himself a moron for letting his guard slip. He framed her face with his hands and he kissed her just because he could, because he wanted to.

Compared to their last kisses, this one was good. Almost perfect. It was sweet at first, barely more than a chaste peck, but sweet wasn’t their thing and he wasn’t surprised when she bit down on his bottom lip. He wasn’t surprised either when the kiss turned angry and he ended up pinning her to a tree, their hands roaming all over each other, eager to touch and to learn the other’s body...

He felt the control slipping away from him, he felt an animal instinct taking over and he knew in a heartbeat that he would take her right here and there, cameras be damned, if he didn’t step back right at that second. He refused to make her a show for the vultures to feast on so he slowed the kiss down and buried his face in her hair, regretting the fact that her smell was off. She usually smelt like musky expensive perfume but right now, she only smelt of salt water, wet earth, blood, and sweat.

“It’s not going to get magically better, sweetheart.” he muttered in her ear. “Even if we get back to the others and we manage not to kill each other... It only means watching them die one by one.”
She leaned her whole weight against him. “Not if we die first.”

“Yeah, after Katniss’ stunt last year, I don’t think they left nightlock patches around.” he mocked. “Come on, we should move before they decide they need to spice things up with a mutt.”

He was wary of staying too long in one place. In his Games, the Gamemakers had targeted those who had set camp for too long. He checked the snares before they left but he wasn’t surprised to come back empty handed.

They trekked through the jungle for the better part of the morning. The whole place was disorienting. The sections of the arena all looked like each other and it felt like they were only walking in circles. Perhaps they were. When he started to lose all concept of time, Haymitch declared a halt. They drank some water while they rested.

His eyes fell on the knife at her belt, the knife she wouldn’t know how to use if it came down to it and he supposed that was a way like another to spend the day.

“Absolutely out of the question.” she replied.

“You need training.” he argued. “What are you going to do if I get killed and you’re left on your own?”

“Curl up on myself and die?” she deadpanned, folding her arms over her chest.

He shoved her not so gently. “Don’t joke about that. I die, you pick yourself up and you go on. Don’t think I won’t if you get yourself killed.”

She pouted. “It’s nice to feel loved.”

“Love doesn’t have to be melodramatic.” he scowled. “We have enough drama right now.”

Her pursed lips twitched and he knew she was fighting a grin. “I didn’t hear a denial.”

“Shut up and come here.” he grumbled.

Apparently happy that he hadn’t called her mad for talking about love, she sauntered over and consented to let him explain how to use a knife. It soon turned out she was helpless at fighting and he kept it to the basic, correcting her grip around the handle of the knife and instructing her to slam it up and down with as much strength as possible. She was swift which was an advantage but she was light which wasn’t. Blind stabbing wouldn’t help much if she didn’t aim and so he spent a long time showing her which places to hit. He kept it simple: neck, stomach and thighs if she could reach them. He told her to avoid the chest if she could. Too many ribs and too few chances to hit a vital organ on her first try.

He heard the growl when he was correcting her stance.

It came from behind him and he froze, a chill slowly running down his spine.

“Don’t move.” he whispered.

Her back was on him and she suddenly tensed. “What is going on?”

“When I tell you, roll on the floor and get out of the way.” he said.

“Haymitch...” she whined and he could hear the terror in her voice. The growl came again, lower and more dangerous. His own knife was still in his belt so he slowly reached for hers, taking it away
from her numb fingers without any abrupt move.

In the end he didn’t have time to give the signal to Effie because he felt the shift of air behind him and all he could do was push her sideways. The whole weight of the thing dropped on him and he felt enormous claws tearing at his back. The animal’s jaw tried to close on his neck but Haymitch twisted and elbowed it in the snout. It wasn’t enough to deter it but it was enough that he could turn a little and stab it above the shoulder. The animal roared. It was loud and unnatural and it was just his luck that they would send a mutt.

“Haymitch!” Effie shrieked in warning.

“Yeah, yeah...” he muttered, tackling the beast with his whole weight, ignoring the clawing at his sides and his thighs. He forced the head back with his hand with brute strength and lashed at the throat, burying the knife deep and drawing it back again and again. He continued long after the mutt had stopped thrashing under him. When a hand fell on his shoulder, he switched target.

She was lucky the movement made him crumple in pain otherwise he thought he could have accidentally killed her.

“Fuck.” he hissed.

She helped him sit up, her eyes bright with tears he knew she wouldn’t shade.

“It’s nothing.” she promised. “Absolutely nothing.”

She put her hands on the jumpsuit zipper but he stopped her. “We need to move. The blood will draw out others animals.”

He glanced at the mutt he had just killed and winced. It looked like a giant cat but the teeth and claws were sharper and larger than the normal kind. Although he had never seen any wild cat that big before so maybe it was a specie and not a mutt. The fur was entirely black.

“Let me just check...” she argued.

“No. Help me up.” he cut her off.

Helping him up wasn’t the difficult part. Staying up was. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders, gritting his teeth against the pain, and they hobbled away. She had to carry most of his weight and they didn’t go as far as he would have liked. He held on only for fifteen minutes and kept worrying about the neat trail they were leaving behind them for anyone to pick up and follow.

His right leg gave in first and he would have toppled over if she hadn’t slowed down his fall.

There was no stopping her then. She opened his jumpsuit and peeled it off his skin despite his numerous hisses and curses.

She had a good poker face and it remained blank as she inspected the injuries but her hands betrayed her. They were shaking. He knew it was bad. The adrenaline was wearing off and the pain was... huge.

“My body’s going to go into shock.” he warned her. He could feel the adrenaline waning.

“I know.” she retorted. “I’ve been an escort for thirteen years, I am not entirely clueless, you know. I picked up some things here and there.”
“Good.” he sneered. “Then you know I’m losing too much blood.”

She didn’t answer that. She took off her belt and wrapped it around his right thigh which was by far the deepest wound. Her attempt at doing a tourniquet was ridiculous at best.

“Pull harder.” he instructed.

She bit her bottom lip but complied, tightening the belt even when he couldn’t hold back a pained shout.

“I don’t think it caught the artery.” she said, moving on to the next injury. His sides were badly clawed but there was nothing she could do about that. She didn’t even have anything to press against the wounds to stop the bleeding – and she looked awfully pale and ready to faint at the sight of all that blood.

“Why do I always end up gutted?” he chuckled, his head rolling on the side. It hurt to laugh but he figured that soon he wouldn’t be able to so he might as well take advantage while he could.

“Don’t be preposterous. This is nothing.” she lied. “You will be fine in a minute.”

His back was hurt too but it wasn’t the worst and she only gave it a cursory glance. He was shivering. She snuggled against his side, mindful of his wounds, in a desperate attempt at getting him warm. What else could she have done? She couldn’t light a fire, she had no blankets, no real knowledge about what to do...

“My heart might give in.” he told her, not so helpfully. He was old, not in prime shape...

“No.” she hissed. “Stop talking as if you were about to die. You are not.”

He gave a dubious glance at his thigh. Even if the bleeding stopped – which was a big if – and his body survived the shock... They were in a jungle, it wasn’t the healthiest cleanest environment. They didn’t even have water, the wounds would get infested and he would die anyway.

“Win, sweetheart.” he whispered. “Please, win.”

“I told you I am not winning without you.” she snapped. “Collect yourself, Haymitch. You are not giving up, that is not who you are.”

“Not who you are either.” he mumbled, his head dropping forward to his chest, his grasp on consciousness slipping.

He wasn’t aware of much after that.

When he woke up, everything was distorted and he couldn’t say how much time had passed. He knew Effie was there because he could hear her talking to herself, trying to figure out what to do. He had a fever. It was going quicker than he thought it would. He couldn’t tell if it was a good thing or a bad thing.

She must have managed to mangle a tree deeply enough to get water because she brought some to his lips on a leaf. It wasn’t nearly enough and it didn’t do him any good.

“You will be just fine.” she said. “You just need some rest.”

He clumsily reached out for her face. She clasped his hand and brought it to her cheek. She was trying to hold back tears but some were slipping past her control, her lips were wobbling and she
wasn’t doing a good job at hiding it from him.

He wanted to tell her so many things...

He wanted to tell her he would have liked a chance at exploring this thing between them. He wanted to tell her he was sorry he had lost so many years being a jerk even though she had always been a bit of a bitch. He wanted to tell her he loved her bossy side and how ridiculous she always was. He wanted to tell her he hated her high-pitched voice and her accent but loved them at the same time because it was so her that she would never have been the same without them. He wanted to tell her there was nothing about her he would change, flaws and all. He wanted to tell her she was the first woman in a long time that made him want to think about tomorrow. He wanted to tell her he was sorry for letting her down, first by not managing to save the kids and now by leaving her on her own. He wanted to tell her she was special, had always been special, and he hoped she knew that.

He couldn’t get a word past his parched lips.

His breathing was raspy, air caught in his throat, making him choke.

And Effie’s confident attitude crumbled to dust.

“Don’t leave me.” she pleaded, bursting into tears that had been a long time in coming. She had been due for a nervous breakdown since the first step she had taken in that jungle. “Don’t leave me. Don’t leave me. Please, please, please... I love you, don’t leave me. I love you. I love you. I tried not to but I do. Please, don’t... Don’t...”

His thumb caught a tear on her cheek.

And then his hand grew slack.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

8

Haymitch woke up screaming.

His chest was on fire and hands were holding him down. He instinctively struggled, trying to fight off the flames he couldn’t quite glimpse, but to no avail.

“Shhh, shhh.”

A hand was pressed against his mouth, preventing him from vocalizing his pain.

“There’s someone nearby. I think they saw the parachute. You have to be quiet. You have to be quiet, Haymitch.”

He didn’t understand anything.

For a second, he wondered if it was another nightmare because nothing made any sense.

Only, something was carefully smeared on his chest and pain exploded again, his screams hardly muffled by the palm pressing tighter against his lips. There was a curse and then something was forced into his mouth. It tasted like bark and earth, and he realized after a moment that it was a piece of wood.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, but I need to take care of the wounds. Bite down on it but be quiet, just be quiet.”

Hands were roaming on his thigh now and somehow it was even worse. He tried to bat them away but they were insistent. Fire spread to his leg and he bit down on the wood so hard his mouth was full of shreds of bark.

“I’m done. I’m done.” came the whisper.

It brought him no relief.

The pain was unrelenting.

He wished he could pass out but it was apparently too much to ask for so he kept whimpering around the piece of bark, not soothed by the hand brushing against his forehead or by the lips that often dropped kisses to his cheeks and neck.

He didn’t know what was going on.

He couldn’t recall.

Eventually the fire died down to a num throb and he drifted off.

He startled awake to the sound of a canon.

It could have been seconds or hours later, he couldn’t tell.
“Effie!” he instinctively shouted.

“Shhh.” came the immediate rebuke, followed by a palm pressed against his mouth. “I’m right here. I’m right here. It was near. You have to be quiet. You have to be quiet, Haymitch.”

She was in a right state of panic, he could tell by the sound of her voice. It was night and he couldn’t see past the surrounding trees.

“Get out of here.” he hissed, straining his neck to get rid of her hand. It sent a jolt of pain through his body but it wasn’t as bad as he remembered.

“We can’t.” she protested in a whisper. “You are not up to it yet.”

“Sweetheart, I’m dying.” he scoffed. “If you’re waiting for me to be dead...”

“Don’t be stupid, you are not dying.” she cut him off. “The medicine is working. The wounds are clogging already. We just have to wait a few hours and the wounds will be closed. I know how this balm works, it will be alright. We’re lucky the claws didn’t touch an organ. You lost a lot of blood but we can manage with that, it will be alright.”

He didn’t know which of them she was trying to convince but he frowned anyway because…

“Medicine? Where did you get medicine?”

She waved a familiar square of fabric in front of his face, it glinted silver in the moonlight. Her smile was triumphant. “Perhaps now you won’t say that I have too many friends anymore. It seems they saved your life.”

He blinked slowly, trying to keep up. His mind still felt sluggish even though his body was in better shape – at least he didn’t feel like he was agonizing anymore.

“Sponsors.” he deduced. “You got a sponsoring gift.”

“You or me, I am not sure and does it even make a difference?” she replied. “People always go for the love story.” Her words would have seemed calculated if she hadn’t brushed her knuckles against his cheek with undeniable tenderness. His stubble was starting to turn into an out of control beard and she wrinkled her nose in displeasure. “You scared me. Don’t do it again.”

She leaned in and pressed her lips to his before he could even entertain the thought of mocking her. It was a chaste enough kiss, barely a peck, but he closed his eyes and savored it all the same. Their time was running out and each kiss felt like something they were stealing from fate, something precious they should treasure.

“Did you say you love me or did I dream that?” he hummed against her mouth, leaning in to capture it again.

“What do you want me to answer?” she breathed out, probably knowing full well such confessions would send him running. He didn’t feel like running at that moment though. He felt like drawing her even closer, getting out of those clothes and showing her just exactly what he wanted from her. There were several obstacles to that though, least of all the fact that his body was nowhere near capable of it at the moment.

“We need to get out of here.” he repeated, growing more serious as the dark looming shape of a hovercraft appeared in the sky. The late appearance of the aircraft meant someone had stayed with the dead tribute, delaying the removal of the body. That was odd. “Any idea who it was?”
She didn’t answer at once but when she did her face was stern. “There were two canons, Haymitch. There was a first one around five minutes before you woke up. I... I heard shouts, people arguing. Two men I think.”

Which meant the girls were still safe – no guarantees for Finnick and Annie though. He nodded and tried to push on his leg to stand up but it gave under him and she whacked his arm.

“Stop it!” she hissed. “You will open the wounds again. We have to wait a few more hours, I told you.”

“Brutus may be hunting all of us down.” he gritted through his teeth. “Now’s not the time to take a nap.”

He wouldn’t take his chance against the Career even if the man was now lacking an arm.

“We don’t have a choice in the matter.” she snapped. “Get some rest and, next time, think twice before wrestling a wild beast.”

She settled against his side, mindful of the wounds, and apparently considered the discussion closed. He fought sleep as long as he could but eventually he started drifting off. A part of him remained entirely conscious of everything going on around them though. Every time the wind ruffled the leaves or a squirrel moved on a branch, his eyes automatically opened before slowly shutting again.

The clean snap of a boot on a trig had nothing to do with the wind or squirrels.

His eyes flew open and he held his breath, willing his body to still with an acute sense of danger. In his arms, Effie tensed. He could see her hand where it was resting on his uninjured leg, wrapped around the handle of her knife, shaking so badly she would never be able to wield it properly.

The bushes behind them rustled.

Effie buried her face in his shoulder, biting her bottom lip, otherwise not moving a muscle.

Haymitch didn’t dare try to glance at what was going on behind their tree. It was dark at night, with a little luck, whoever it was would pass right by them and not see them. The wrong move would alert them. The wrong move would get them killed.

He was absolutely ready for Brutus to appear and kill them anyway.

When had they ever been lucky?

However, the footsteps receded, going further down east, in the direction of what he thought to be the beach.

It was still several minutes before he felt free to release the breath he had been holding.

“Too close.” he muttered. Effie didn’t answer and it took him several seconds to realize she was silently panting. “Breathe, sweetheart.” he chided her. “We can’t deal with you having a panic attack right now.”

She let out a noise that was halfway between a whine and a hysterical chuckle. “I am trapped in an arena, I almost had to watch you die, our friends may or may not be trying to kill us, you will excuse me if I think I am entitled to a panic attack! I am not cut out for this, Haymitch!”

“Don’t shout.” he ordered, glancing over his shoulder in the direction the footsteps had taken. All
remained calm though. “You’re doing good, Effie. Just keep it together.”

“Because it is so easy to do so.” she replied petulantly. That was good. As long as she had fire, she would fight.

“Try to get some sleep. I’ll keep watch.” he offered. He was still feeling dizzy and slightly nauseous but the pain was a numb throb now and that was something he could handle. His eyes fell on the silver parachute on her lap. She had been using it as a makeshift blanket. “I guess that answers the question of the boy. If we’re getting sponsors, he’s still out there to make the deals.”

“Because it is so easy to do so.” she replied petulantly. That was good. As long as she had fire, she would fight.

“Try to get some sleep. I’ll keep watch.” he offered. He was still feeling dizzy and slightly nauseous but the pain was a numb throb now and that was something he could handle. His eyes fell on the silver parachute on her lap. She had been using it as a makeshift blanket. “I guess that answers the question of the boy. If we’re getting sponsors, he’s still out there to make the deals.”

“It doesn’t necessarily mean anything.” she countered. “They will have assigned us another escort to replace me. In the absence of a proper mentor, escorts can sign deals. And if enough people are rooting for us, they wouldn’t have a choice but to actually follow the rules.”

“Rooting for us.” he snorted. “Got nobody rooting for me, I can tell you that.”

“You have fans.” she argued. “And so do I – never mind my family. We only have to hope they will be loyal.”

“Sure, you do that.” he mocked. “I’ll work on keeping us alive.”

“A little gratitude wouldn’t hurt, you know.” she hissed. “They did just save your life.”

He rolled his eyes but humored her. “Thank you, Effie’s friends.”

“You are impossible.” she sighed, settling back against him.

She didn’t sound on the verge of hyperventilating anymore, just annoyed. He considered his mission accomplished.

Dawn came too soon.

He refused to listen to her protests and cautious advices to take it easy and forced himself up on his feet. The medicine had done its job: the wounds were closed. His thigh was by far the worst and some blood trickled down his leg when he put his weight on it but he used the parachute as an improvised bandage and ignored Effie’s warnings that he shouldn’t overdo it to the risk of the wound opening again.

He was in no actual danger of overdoing it.

Their progress was slow and it wasn’t helped by the fact they were wandering at random. He wondered what the others were up to, if they had found a place to set camp or if they were roaming the jungle too. At some point, they heard the deafening sound of the wave crashing on the beach and Haymitch decided they were too close to the water and led them further up the trees again. He was attentive to look for signs the force field was near, he had almost gotten fried once already the first day, saved only by Katniss’ quick reflexes, and he wasn’t keen on a repeat.

At midday, they called a break.

He was exhausted and he slumped against a tree, wiping the perspiration away from his face with his arm. He let Effie slaughter a trunk in order to get water – her technique was ridiculous and not really efficient but he had no strength to do it himself – and took a look at his thigh while she was busy.

The wound hadn’t exactly reopened but the bandage was brownish. Not really good. He kept that away from his escort’s eyes.
She let out a triumphant shriek when water finally trickled from the tree and she looked so proud of herself he could only chuckle. They unhappily munched on some nuts for lunch. They needed to get some real food soon, Haymitch mused, or they would get sick. He was trying to place some snares in hope of catching an animal for dinner when he felt it.

It was nothing but a feeling.

His hair rose at the back of his neck and he was suddenly acutely aware of his surroundings.

“Effie!” he barked. She had wandered further away while he was working and he realized with a sickening feeling that he couldn’t see her anymore. “Effie!”

“Relax, buddy, she’s perfectly fine.”

Haymitch startled and turned around, instinctively pulling out his knife. His eyes darted from his escort to his best friend but he couldn’t exactly bring himself to relax. If anything his instinct was only screaming danger.

Chaff had his shortest arm wrapped around her neck, his stump brushing against her throat. It would have looked casual if not for the cutlass in his other hand and the spooked look in Effie’s eyes.

“Chaff,” he growled in warning. “Let her go.”

“Should have known it would be her.” Eleven’s victor shrugged, completely ignoring him. “I told Fay, you know. I told her: I will be damned if Haymitch doesn’t end up with his escort for a token.”

He locked eyes with Effie, trying to convey what he needed her to do. She took a few deep breaths and gave a tiny nod.

“I’m sorry about your sister.” Haymitch offered sincerely. “What happened?”

Chaff shrugged again, his face becoming grimmer. There was a crazy spark in his eyes Haymitch didn’t like at all. He looked feral, mad. He had snapped. Just like Johanna had when she had killed Brutus’ wife, just like they all had almost snapped on that beach...

There was an edge and once you tumbled on the other side of it... You didn’t come back.


“Let her go.” Haymitch insisted. “She’s...”

“She’s the enemy.” Chaff cut him off. “The sooner you see that, the better.”

“She’s with us.” he argued. “She’s here, isn’t she? She’s on our side.”

That was a dangerous statement to make but he didn’t see any way around it. Chaff would not hesitate to kill her, he knew that, he and Effie had never seen eye to eye, they weren’t friends and there was no love lost between them. Besides, she was the only portion of the Capitol easily accessible right now and Chaff would be anxious to make the Capitol pay for his sister’s death.

“Oh, you think we’re still talking about that?” Chaff asked as if it was the greatest joke. “It doesn’t matter if she’s Capitol or District, Haymitch. She’s a tribute now. We’re all tributes. You know what tributes do? They kill each other.” He shook his head. “I knew she would slow you down. That’s the
point of the tokens, see? Slow you down, make you weak... Once you’re free from them you can be strong again. You can have a chance at winning.”

Haymitch tested his bad leg by putting more weight on it and immediately laid off. It wouldn’t hold. If he had to fight... *His leg wouldn’t hold.* The realization brought on a wave of dread and resignation. That was it then. End of the line.

“You are completely insane.” Effie whispered.

“Shut up, sweetheart. You’re not helping.” Haymitch snapped.

Eleven’s victor laughed his regular bark of a laugh. “*He’s* the insane one, love. What’s the plan, buddy? Trying to make *her* win? Can you see how stupid it is? You’re going to get killed for her.”

“You’re going to get killed if you don’t let her go right now.” he retorted. “Come on, Chaff. I don’t want to do this. Just go your way and we will go ours. It doesn’t have to go down this way.”

He was almost begging but he didn’t even care. He had been friends with Chaff for twenty-five years. He had been friends with Chaff *for longer than he had been alive.* Chaff was his best friend, his big brother and his father figure all rolled into one. He didn’t want to fight him. He didn’t want to have to choose between him and Effie because he knew without a doubt that there was no choice to make. She came first. Even if it was a lost fight. Even if that meant getting killed and trying to kill his best friend in the same move.

“This way is me being a good friend and helping you to see the light.” Chaff argued. “Once she’s dead, you’ll see. You will get the fire back. You will want to win too. And if you can’t find the will back, well...” He shrugged. “Then you die. That’s how the Games should work, you know. Beetee couldn’t see that.”

“Beetee.” Haymitch repeated with suppressed anger. “What did you do to Beetee?”

“I helped him.” Eleven’s victor answered, in an almost bored voice. “Got rid of his token for him. Can you believe he tried to strangle me with a wire?”

“What did you *do?*” he insisted.

“I killed him.” Chaff sighed. “He couldn’t pick himself up from the ground. He was shaking the boy’s shoulders like he was ever going to wake up... How many years of mentoring? Should know better really. Right, love?”

He jolted Effie, drawing her closer in a parody of a hug, bringing the cutlass closer to her stomach. She whimpered in fear and that made Haymitch furious.

“Chaff.” he warned.

“I’ll make it quick, don’t worry.” his friend promised. “I know you’re sweet on her. She won’t feel a thing. Then you can go back to being the victor you’re supposed to be.”

Before Haymitch could do anything, Chaff had drawn back the cutlass to get more strength in his stab, holding her tight by the neck with his stump.

Effie was swift and Chaff wasn’t expecting her to put up a fight – that was something Haymitch would be forever grateful for.

She stomped on the victor’s foot and landed a painful hit in his chest with her elbow. It was enough
for Chaff to curse and loosen his grip on her. She dropped on the floor and tried to crawl away but Eleven’s victor pinned her down with his boot and lifted his cutlass.

Not that he had any time to bring it down.

Haymitch threw himself at him, tackling him away from her, knowing in the state he was in there was little chance of actually winning and hoping she would do the clever thing and run away.

And then all hell broke loose.

Chapter End Notes

Ah yes... It's a new cliffhanger :p I saaaaaid this story was a cliffhangers story ;) What did you think of this chapter? What do you think will happen next? Let me know!
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Effie screamed.

It was loud, it was terrified and people probably heard it on the other side of the arena.

Haymitch didn’t have time to linger on the consequences of that shriek – it would alert more of their enemies or maybe bring friends to their rescue – Chaff’s fist collided painfully with his face. He tried to reach for his knife but before he had time to do anything, another blow caught him in the head and he wondered, briefly, what was better: dying from blood loss due to clawing by a mutt or dying from having his head bashed in.

“I’m sorry, buddy.” Chaff muttered. “I thought you’d be stronger than Beetee. I thought you could see...”

“I see you’re crazy.” Haymitch retorted, spitting blood. He tried to land a punch but Chaff had him pinned to the ground and he was dizzy from his head being hit. Eleven’s victor’s only remaining fist found his face a third time. Haymitch tasted blood and stopped struggling. It was enough time for Chaff to feel around for the cutlass he had dropped when he had been tackled to the ground.

“I’ll kill you quick. Then I’ll take care of her.” Chaff declared, finally finding the cutlass and placing it against his throat. Haymitch tried to push it away but his aim was sluggish. “You don’t have to worry, Haymitch. I’ll make sure it’s painless. I will...”

The sentence ended in a gurgle.

For a moment Haymitch thought for sure it was what his own death sounded like: a gurgle and then deafening silence. There was a dead weight on his chest and blood everywhere, he could feel it pouring on his face and neck, hot and sticky.

It took a few seconds for the gurgling sound to die and the canon to boom.

It took a few seconds for Haymitch’s dizziness to subside long enough to realize he wasn’t dead.

Chaff was.

The handle of Effie’s knife was sticking out of his friend’s neck.

He pushed the corpse away, feeling nauseous for more than one reason, and looked up. She was standing there, her eyes impossibly wide, staring at the knife, her hands were frozen in the air and shaking. He could see it coming: the panic, the disgust of the first kill, the hysteria...

“Effie...” he called, slowly pushing himself to his feet. His bad leg buckled but he forced himself to stand, he forced himself not to look at his dead best friend and to walk to the one who was still breathing.

He placed a hand on her arm.

She started howling.

If he had thought she was screaming loud earlier it was nothing compared to now. It was a howl of
pain, of terror, of distress... And he understood it completely, he truly did, if he had been as free with his feelings as she often was, he would have howled too, but right now it was very unwelcomed because it would attract the kind of attention they didn’t want.

“Effie.” he barked, grabbing her by the shoulders and shaking her a little. “Effie, snap out of it!”

She kept on screaming. He didn’t think she was even seeing him, her eyes were unfocused. He framed her face with his hands and he forced a kiss on her lips, muffling the screams. It tasted like blood and death. He kept kissing her anyway, trying to reach her, to bring her back. It didn’t work at once but after a moment she fell silent.

“You’re okay.” he whispered against her mouth. “You’re okay. You’re alive. We’re both alive. You did what you had to. It’s okay.”

It wasn’t and it would never be again but there was no point telling her that now. Killing was never easy. Killing for the first time was a brand new hell he remembered too well.

She let out a strangled noise and then the sobs came and he only had time to slow down her fall before she collapsed. He tried to coax her up again, to comfort her, but he knew there were no words to offer. He dropped on the jungle ground, wrapped his arms around her and closed his eyes, holding her while she rocked herself into a catatonic state. She wasn’t answering him, she wasn’t talking, she wailed and made entirely too much noise, staring at Chaff’s body.

He tried to convince her to move away, for her sake’s as much as for his, but she wouldn’t stop rocking and his attempts at trying to get her on her feet were impeded by his lack of strength.

“Team concussion.” he mumbled against her head and chuckled, finding his own joke hilarious.

It was either laughing of crying and she was already doing the latter for both of them.

He heard the noise from afar, whoever was running toward them wasn’t trying to be discreet. Mutts, maybe. They should have walked away for a while now. You killed a tribute, you walked away so the hovercraft could pick up their body, that was the rule.

Haymitch was so tired.

Somehow, he wasn’t exactly surprised when Katniss and Prim barged between two trees, looking out of breath, and skidded to a halt next to them. Katniss’ eyes darted from Chaff’s body to the two of them and she breathed an obvious sigh of relief before dropping to her knees and embracing them both in a crushing hug.

“We heard the canon and Effie’s screams and then no hovercraft and I thought... I thought...” the girl confessed.

“Effie killed Chaff.” he summed up.

Their escort whimpered in distress. Her teeth were shattering.

Katniss stopped hugging the both of them to wrap her arms around her, she rested her head on the Capitol woman’s shoulder and rubbed her arms to warm her up.

“You did what you had to do.” the girl whispered. “You protected yourself.”

“He.” Haymitch amended. “She protected me.”
“Which is easier.” Katniss insisted, nudging Effie. “You killed for someone you love. That doesn’t make it okay but it’s a good enough reason. It was worth it.”

“It was a lucky hit.” Haymitch commented, strangely detached. He was in shock probably, he was covered in his best friend’s blood after all, he was allowed to be in shock. Or it was the concussion speaking. Who knew? He certainly didn’t know anything anymore. “She caught the carotid.”

If Katniss’ glare was to be believed he wasn’t making anything better.

“We need to get a move on.” the girl said, studying him briefly. “What happened to you?”

“Mutt.” Effie answered in a strangled voice. “I gave him the medicine.”

“Sponsor gift.” Haymitch explained at Katniss’ inquisitive look.

“Peeta...” she breathed out.

“Effie says it doesn’t mean he’s out there.” He shook his head before she could get her hopes up.

Katniss’ face grew sterner but she nodded once. “Prim will take a look at you when we’re back on the beach. You both need to get cleaned up. And I can hunt once we’re there.”

“So what?” Haymitch scoffed. “We’re back together?”

“We’re all Twelve, aren’t we?” Prim replied for her sister. The kid looked worse for the wear. “We might as well stick together. We will last longer.”

Her words echoed Maysilee’s in his mind and he couldn’t find the will to deny that request. It was painfully obvious that, without the girls, he and Effie wouldn’t have been able to go anywhere anyway.

Effie was still out of it, she answered questions in monosyllabic words and mostly followed Prim’s nudges in the right direction. Haymitch anxiously kept his eyes on her but needed to lean heavily on Katniss to take a simple step. He thought the wound on his thigh might be open again and the blows hadn’t done too much good to his head.

He could have killed for a drink at that second – probably literally, at that.

“Are you alright?” Katniss asked, as they caught sight of the beach. “I mean... Chaff was your friend, wasn’t he?”

“He tried to kill her. He tried to kill me.” he replied. It wasn’t really an answer. Yes, Chaff had been his friend and what had just happened didn’t quite change that. It was the Games who made people crazy. There was no time to mourn, though, no time to waste in pointless grief and what ifs.

Once they reached the beach, Prim insisted on checking out his different injuries and Haymitch was too tired to protest so he let her probe and do what she thought had to be done – which wasn’t much because they were lacking basic supplies – all the while watching Katniss and Effie who were standing at the edge of the water. Katniss had her bow out and was watching their surroundings but she was also talking. He couldn’t hear the words but Effie, who was crouching and splashing water on her face, eventually reached out and squeezed the girl’s wrist in an obvious gesture of gratitude.

When they came back, Effie looked a little more focused but still frayed at the edges.

“The wounds don’t look infested.” Prim declared. “Whatever medicine it was had done a good job
but the one on his thigh is still bleeding a little and it’s not pretty. And I’m not sure he’s not concussed.”

“He has a thick skull.” Katniss mocked. “He’ll survive.”

“We need to clean you up.” Effie mumbled. “Appearances are important.”

He let her drag him to the water, hopping when his leg refused to take his weight, and flopped down on the sand once the waves lapped at his boots. She kneeled next to him and started wiping the blood away from his face and neck with shaking hands.

“You had no choice,” he said quietly. She didn’t answer and he gently grabbed her arm. “Effie, you have to make your peace with it or it will eat you up.”

“I didn’t know I was a killer.” she confessed. “I always thought...” She shook her head. “I don’t know what I thought. But Chaff, Haymitch, I...” She breathed in a shaky breath and averted her eyes. “I...”

“It feels worse because you knew him.” he offered when she didn’t go on. “I get it. But it was him or us. You did what you had to do to make sure we would survive.”

“I’ve been telling you the same thing for years and it has never stopped you from calling yourself a killer, has it?” she snapped. She sighed, ran a hand over her face and let it splash down in the water. “I wish everything was over. I want to get out of here. I want...” She licked her lips and took a few deep breaths, probably realizing just how empty those wishes were or unwilling to lose it again when the whole country was watching. “You are as presentable as you are ever going to be. I do wish you could shave but there is nothing to do for it without a proper razor. We should go back to the girls.”

She didn’t wait for his opinion before helping him up and back the to the kids. Katniss went hunting but remained nearby, close enough to hear the smallest sign of trouble.

For the first time in two days, he and Effie ate something else than nuts.

The meat wasn’t as cooked as he would have liked but even half raw it still seemed delicious to his starved stomach.

Katniss took the first watch, Prim curled up next to her. Haymitch settled for the night but he didn’t manage to close his eyes, unable to shake the memory of Chaff’s limp body out of his mind. Effie was lying right next to him, her back turned to him.

When the faces of the dead tributes of the day appeared in the sky, he stared at the stars long after Beetee’s face, his token’s and Chaff’s were gone.

Effie didn’t look up once.

He didn’t sleep that night.

He didn’t need to check to know she didn’t either.
Were you expecting that? :p What did you think?
Chapter 10

Haymitch woke up on the sixth day certain that everything was about to take a turn for the worst.

For one thing, his head was pounding. For another, the wound on his thigh itched – which was either good or very bad – he took a peek the first chance he got and found it reddish and slightly swollen – very bad then. He kept it from the girls.

The general mood was gloomy.

Prim remained sitting on the beach, hugging her knees close to her chest and staring in the distance – the kid knew she was a goner, Haymitch figured, and he couldn’t exactly promise the opposite. Katniss was nervous and kept her bow ready to shoot, her eyes darting to the edge of the jungle with a regularity bordering on paranoia. Effie was uncharacteristically sullen, she didn’t say a word, barely answered him when he addressed her, and quietly munched on her share of the leftover meat.

“Something is about to give.” he muttered to Katniss.

He could feel it in his bones.

There was a strange quietness to the jungle, it was almost peaceful. An arena was never peaceful. It was never good. It meant the Gamemakers were planning something massive.

“I know.” she answered through gritted teeth. “What do we do? Do we stay here or do we move?”

“We move.” he answered without hesitation. “We’re sitting ducks here.”

They found him a stick long and strong enough to carry his weight and off they went, trudging in the jungle like it was an everyday thing – lately it kind of was. The unnatural stillness was everywhere. No bird chirping, no ruffling in the bushes… There was an acute sense of danger in the air.

“I don’t like it.” Katniss grumbled for the third time. “Prim, stay close.”

Haymitch didn’t say anything but he touched Effie’s shoulder once. She understood what he wanted and remained right next to him, within arm’s reach. He didn’t like it any more than the girl did.

They decided to head to another section of the arena, hoping that whatever the Gamemakers were playing at only concerned one sector. Their progress was slow mainly because of Haymitch and he almost told them to leave him behind more than once, he would catch up or not, but he held his tongue every time because at his only attempt to convince them to push on without him, Katniss glared, Effie glowered and Prim rolled her eyes. The kid insisted on checking his injuries but Haymitch refused, stating there was no time to lose – and no time for her to confirm what he already knew, his thigh was getting infected.

They were walking for two hours when he grew tired of Effie’s sad face.

“Snap out of it.” he commanded. “You will deal with it when you’re out of here.”

The gaze she turned on him was hollow, desperate.

“We are never getting out, Haymitch.” she whispered, low enough that the girls wouldn’t hear.

“Don’t say that.” he sighed. “You never know if…”
“I am not getting out without you and you are not planning on surviving this.” she cut him off. “It is settled really. Let’s help the girls as much as we can.”

“Effie.” he growled.

“Hush, now.” she retorted. “My decision is made.”

And it seemed it was because she stared straight ahead, her head high and her eyes focused. It was impressive until she tripped on a root and almost break her neck.

He laughed at her.

He couldn’t help it.

Katniss and Prim started laughing too despite her flushed cheeks and her embarrassed pleas for them to stop. It helped lightening the mood slightly.

It didn’t last long.

Soon the jungle ground turned to mud. It was nothing at first but it quickly became difficult to press forward, all the more so for him and his stick that kept getting stuck.

“We should turn back.” Effie said.

And she found no opposition.

They agreed on heading toward the beach instead of cutting back through the jungle and its now sticky ground. Danger sirens were howling in Haymitch’s head and he urged them all to go faster, cursing his damned leg…

They weren’t that far from the beach when the rumble started but they were far enough that it didn’t make a difference. The earth shook and they all lost balance and tumbled to the ground in that sticky and slippery mud that made it difficult to stand up again.

“Earthquake?” Katniss shouted over the noise, puzzled. “Why would they…”

The answer came in the form of a devastating wave of mud in the distance.

“Oh for fuck’s sake!” he cursed grabbing Effie’s arm and looking frantically around. “Find a tree! Strap yourself to it!”

He didn’t need to clarify the tree would have to be strong and that it was no guarantee of survival. It was still a better plan than trying to outrun it. He found the closest tree that looked strong enough to resist and used his and Effie’s belt to strap the both of them to the trunk. A few feet away, Katniss was doing the same for her and Prim.

“Hold on.” he told Effie, entwining their fingers. “Whatever you do, hold on.”

The mud wave was on them quicker than one would think. It was brutal and unforgiving. Trees were uprooted all around. He heard Prim scream and saw Katniss struggle to keep her sister in place. He could do nothing, their own tree bent with the force of the wave, sending them tumbling in the sea of mud. He never let go of Effie’s hand, even when his mouth filled up with earth and twigs… He prayed that the belts would hold. If the tree or the belts snapped and they were carried away, they were lost.

His head eventually popped out and he spat the mud out of his mouth. Effie was coughing, but as
long as she was coughing, she was alive and that was all that mattered. It seemed to last forever and paradoxically it was over in a matter of minutes.

They ended up slumped against the trunk, the tree half uprooted, held upright only by their belts. Good thing they had made them resistant.

Wherever the wave had hit, it was destruction. Almost a quarter of the arena had been turned into a wasteland.

“Katniss!” he called out. “Prim!”

He couldn’t see if they had made it. He struggled with the buckles of the belts, his hands shaking too badly to be of use, until Effie wordlessly took over.

“We’re here!” Katniss replied, sounding completely knocked out.

He wanted to check on them but the second the belt came loose he flopped on the slippery ground, his legs refusing to hold his weight. Effie tumbled down too and remained there, stunned.

“You’re okay?” he shouted in the direction of the girls.

A few trees had made it but the whole area was mostly cleared.

“Never better!” Katniss retorted ironically.

“Watch the sass, girl!” he laughed. “You’re turning into me!”

There was an answering bouts of hysterical chuckles.

Effie’s head fell on his shoulder briefly and then she crawled away on all four and she retched. Clearly, she had swallowed more than he had. He forced himself to reach for her, holding her hair back while she threw up – not that there was much more to preserve on that front, there wasn’t an inch of them that wasn’t covered in thick brown mud.

“I’m being sick on national TV.” she mumbled, between two heaves. “I’m being sick on national TV.”

“Cheer up, sweetheart.” he snorted. “They say mud is good for the skin.”

He ended up with a fistful of mud in his face for his trouble.

He flopped on his back and stared at the unchanging clear blue sky, happy to be alive for once. He would have liked to stay that way. The thought came unbidden, his survival instinct finally kicking in.

Eventually, Katniss and Prim dragged themselves over, looking worse for the wear. Katniss had a cut on her forehead and Prim’s hair had come loose and was tangled with twigs.

“I think a trip to the beach is in order.” Effie declared. “We all need to clean up. Nobody will sponsor us if we look like street urchins.”

Katniss and Haymitch exchanged a look. Trust Effie to have her priorities straight, he thought.

“We need to find water first.” he objected. “Then we go swimming.”

“I didn’t hear a canon.” Katniss said. “Did you?”
Haymitch shook his head. That didn’t mean anything though, with the roar of the wave he wouldn’t have heard anything.

They were all bruised and battered. Limping away from the devastated sector took them almost an hour, they had to sidestep fallen trees and avoid the deep puddles. The ground wasn’t exactly stable either and more than once one of them slipped and ended up a few feet down the slope. Haymitch had lost his stick and was using Effie’s shoulder as support. His thigh was throbbing something fierce but he didn’t say a word about it.

Eventually, they found a tree. They all took turns digging the spile in, too exhausted for one of them to do it alone. The water felt heavenly on his tongue and he drank his fill slowly, making sure to pause and breathe so he wouldn’t get sick. It took almost as much time to drag the spile out as to dig it in.

They staggered to the closest untouched portion of the beach. Katniss kept her bow at the ready. It had suffered during the mud wave though and she kept frowning and tinkering with it. That didn’t stop Haymitch from paddling in the water with relief, closely followed by Prim and Effie. Soon, a brown cloud surrounded them in the salted pond as they got rid of the mud caking their skin.

“Between the sunburns and that, I will need a full body peeling when…” Effie grumbled only to suddenly stop and focus on getting all the mud out of Prim’s blond hair.

Katniss was quicker about it, apparently not caring about being dirty from head to toes. She remained in the water to the knees and simply washed her face, watching the edge of the jungle with an arrow already notched in her bow.

He knew what the girl was thinking. If someone wanted to take them out, now was the time to do it. They were tired, weak and in the open. The cold water was numbing the pain in his leg though so he didn’t followed her out but kept a hand close to his knife.

Effie and Prim were chatting, oblivious to it all. The cheer in their escort’s voice was as fake as it could be and not as convincing as usual but the kid seemed to buy it. The both of them were laughing when they stumbled to the beach, finally clean and obviously exhausted.

Still, Haymitch remained where he was. He was attentive but probably not as much as he should have been, the cold water was acting like a relieving balm on the throbbing wound on his thigh and it was distracting.

Everything happened in the blink of an eye anyway, too fast for him to do anything.

He saw Katniss suddenly tensing.

He saw her letting an arrow loose.

He heard her curse and he understood that the bow had been damaged and wasn’t shooting as straight as she wanted it to. She notched another arrow but it was already too late.

The spear was already flying straight at Effie who was oblivious, still chatting with Prim who was crouched to tie up her shoelace.

It all happened so fast, Haymitch didn’t have time to take more than a step.

He blinked and he missed the whole thing. He missed Prim standing up, unaware of the danger, he missed Katniss’ scream, he missed the howl of pain at the edge of the jungle, he missed Katniss dropping to her knees as if the spear had stabbed her instead, he missed Brutus collapsing on the
beach and Johanna stepping out of the jungle, her axe gleaming in the sunlight, covered in blood.

The canon boomed once.

Twice.

And Haymitch felt like throwing up.

Prim and Effie had both gone down but only one of them was wriggling and wailing in pain. Katniss crawled closer but it wasn’t until the girl started howling for help that Haymitch moved.

He reached them at the same time Johanna did.

He and Seven’s victor exchanged a glance, his hand was hovering over his knife but if she had intended to attack them she would have so already.

“He was trailing you. I was trailing him.” Jo explained, her mouth set in a hard line.

He nodded briskly but focused on the girls. Effie and Prim were impaled, pinned to the ground like butterflies. One dead, one alive.

“We need to take the other off the spear.” Johanna said in a clinical detached tone. “Inspect the wound. If you take it out and it touched something important, she will bleed out.”

He knew all that.

He knew but he was still grateful for the instructions because he didn’t know how to proceed.

The idea of her dying was so ridiculous, he couldn’t process it.
“We need to take the other off the spear.” Johanna said in a clinical detached tone. “Inspect the wound first. If you take it out and it touched something important, she will bleed out in seconds.”

He knew all that.

He knew but he was still grateful for the instructions because he didn’t know how to proceed.

The idea of her dying was so ridiculous, he couldn’t process it.

Katniss seemed equally at a loss, whispering to her sister in a soft encouraging voice, telling her to hold on, telling her everything would be alright, that she would bring her home, that Buttercup and their mother were waiting, that it would be all fine…

And meanwhile, Effie was still sobbing, still whimpering, pinned to the ground by the weight of Prim’s dead body and the spear embedded in her shoulder.

It had been close.

If Prim hadn’t stood up…

If…

“Katniss, I need to move her.” he heard himself say in a gruff voice.

“No, you can’t!” the girl immediately protested. “You will make it worse! We need to wait! Someone will sponsor us! We will get medicine! We will get…”

“She’s dead.” Johanna spat. “You heard the canon.”

“No.” Katniss denied, shaking her head. “No. No! It was someone else!”

“The spear went through her throat.” Haymitch replied, more calmly than he felt. “I’m sorry. She’s dead, Katniss. Effie isn’t. We need to help her. And to help her, I need to remove your sister.”

Katniss was hysterical. When he reached for Prim, she jumped on him, clawing at his face with her nails, growling like an animal. And then suddenly, it was over and she slumped on him, knocked out. Jo towered over him, and shouldered her axe.

“Let’s get to work, then.” Seven’s victor grumbled.

It was a gruesome work and Haymitch’s stomach churned more than once. The image of Rue kept flashing into his mind and he wondered if Katniss had thought about it at all, if she hadn’t yet he had no doubt she would soon. It was slow work to get Prim off the spear without jolting it too much. There was blood everywhere. Haymitch kept thinking they were more than probably broadcasting this and that Katniss and Prim’s mother was watching. He wanted to retch.

He couldn’t let himself feel about her death – not now and not like that – but the sight of a dead twelve years old… Jo was obviously feeling the same way.
“Quit wailing!” Johanna snapped at Effie.

Haymitch didn’t even have it in him to tell her to sod off.

Once Prim was free of the spear, they carefully laid her down a few feet away – far from Brutus’ corpse but also far enough from Effie and Katniss that the hovercraft could come and pick the body up, they didn’t need to be driven away by mutts now. Brutus, he noticed, was lacking an arm but his stump was enclosed in a metallic contraception that must have cost his sponsors a lot of money.

Haymitch wiped the sweat from his brow with his sleeve and limped back to Effie. The scratches Katniss’ nails had left were itching but it was nothing compared to the now regular throb in his leg.

Ignoring her screams of pain and her begging for them to stop, he and Johanna carefully manipulated the escort until they could have a clear view of the wound. The spear was deeply pitched in her shoulder but it hadn’t gone all the way through, probably slowed down by Prim’s body.

“It’s a flesh wound.” Jo declared, after a five minutes inspection. “We can take it out.”

“She will need stitches.” he mumbled, brushing tangled blond hair away from Effie’s face. Her breathing was loud and ragged. She was trying to remain conscious, he guessed.

“Yeah, sorry, Haymitch, I left my sewing kit at home.” Seven’s victor snapped. “She will have to do with what we have.”

He was surprised she hadn’t yet suggested to let her bleed out. That would have been one tribute less.

“It’s only us, Finnick and Annie, now.” he pointed out.

Johanna didn’t even spare a glare for him. “You think I don’t know?”

That was the end of that.

In the end, they ripped the spear out as quickly as they could but it was still too much for Effie who passed out. They managed to improvise bandages with the huge leafs from the trees but it was still touch and go for a while and Haymitch didn’t breathe properly until the bleeding finally stopped. She had lost a lot of blood though, probably enough to warrant a transfusion if they had been anywhere but in an arena.

The hovercrafts came to pick up the bodies.

Jo and Haymitch dragged the two unconscious tributes to the edge of the jungle, unwilling to remain under the glaring sun.

She told him about her wild chase of the last few days, looking for Brutus, eager to finish what she had started. There were things she didn’t say but that he figured out anyway like the fact the wound on her side was bothering her and that somewhere down the line she had snapped out of the murdering fury that had overtaken her after her token’s death.

He caught her up on what had happened to them, telling her about Chaff in brief sentences that didn’t do much to hide his grief.

“Trinket killed him?” Johanna scoffed. She sounded disbelieving and impressed all at once. “Always knew that bitch had an edge.”
So much had happened in the span of a couple of hours that he was surprised, when he checked the position of the sun, to find it couldn’t be much later than noon. Jo went in search of something edible. He didn’t attempt to move. The throb in his leg was starting to morph into a numbness. He didn’t bother checking the state of the wound, there was nothing he could do about it anyway. He hadn’t bothered washing the dry blood off his hands either. He stared at it for a while, pondering metaphors and irony.

Effie was the first one to wake up.

He had settled her with her head on his lap. She whined when she tried to move and it took him a while to convince her to stay still. She was better once Jo brought them water but she looked feverish. Her skin was hot to the touch.

“She hasn’t bled through the leaves.” Jo shrugged. “That’s as good as it gets.”

Effie drifted in and out of consciousness.

He leaned against the trunk at his back, slowly petted her hair and prayed for the whole thing to be over quickly. One way or another.

At some point, in mid-afternoon, Katniss bolted into a sitting position, tossing frantic glances all around.

“Prim!” she shouted, her eyes finally resting on Haymitch and Effie before darting to Jo who was sitting against another trunk, drumming on the handle of her axe. “Prim, where are you?! Prim!”

“Stop shouting, sweetheart.” Haymitch muttered. A headache was building behind his eyes.

“No miracle happened.” Johanna snorted. “Your sister’s still dead.”

“Jo!” he scowled.

Katniss shook her head, working herself into a state of hysteria. “No! You hid her! You hid her!”

“Sure, we did.” Seven’s victor sneered. “’Cause we’re all eager to play hide and seek, right? Shout louder so Finnick can find us. I’m sure he will be happy about this touching reunion and he won’t kill us right away. Well…” Jo shrugged, nodding at Haymitch and his escort. “The state they’re in, those two are goners. Leaves you and me, brainless. You reckon you can take me in a fight?”

The bow and the quiver full of arrows were by Haymitch’s side. He hadn’t wanted Katniss armed precisely because he had been expecting something like this to happen.

“Don’t goad her.” Effie mumbled weakly, her eyelids fluttering open and closed. “She just lost her sister. Remember what that felt like.”

Johanna abruptly shut up, glaring at the escort. “I’m regretting helping you more and more.”

“Prim is not dead!” Katniss hissed, scrambling to her feet.

“Yes, she is.” Haymitch snapped. “That’s what people like Prim do. They die.”

“Haymitch.” Effie chided him but it was too soft and he ignored it because he hated seeing her in pain and too weak to even sit up. He hated knowing she would probably be next if he didn’t die before her.

“No.” Katniss retorted but it was less angry now, more desperate.
“Yes.” he countered, his voice rising with fury. “Because they’re too good, too trusting. Because we’re not good enough to protect them. Because we love them. Take your fucking pick, sweetheart!”

“What would you know about love?” the girl snarled “What would you know about family? You don’t have any. You don’t understand what Prim…”

“Enough.” Effie snapped, pushing herself up to stare at Katniss. “I know you are hurting but enough, Katniss. Enough.”

She looked absolutely pitiful, swaying on herself as if she didn’t have the strength to sit straight, clutching at her injured shoulder with her free hand, dirty and tired…

“And why do you think that is?” he chuckled bitterly, unable to help himself.


“If he doesn’t, I will.” Johanna said in an icy tone. “She thinks she’s such a special snowflake. She was forced to play fake relationship with a nice boy who, from what I’ve seen, actually worships the ground she walks on. Boohoo. I wonder what’s worse? Pretend to be in love with a baker or being sold like cattle to the highest bidder?”

“Johanna, she just lost her sister, please.” Effie begged, her eyes shining with tears. “Please.”

“You sheltered her too much.” Jo accused without any sympathy. “She lost a sister. She still has a mother, doesn’t she? A cousin? Her lover boy is still out there for all we know. Who do Haymitch and I have left?”

Seven’s victor looked at him, inviting him to join in but he found he was reluctant too. Effie was right. It wouldn’t solve anything. However Johanna did have a point. They had sheltered the girl too much. She was confused and in pain.

“You got off easy.” Jo insisted.

“Easy?” Katniss repeated in a hiss.

“Yeah, easy.” Johanna spat. “When I was your age, they tried to sold me twice. Maimed one guy, killed another. Kissed my family goodbye. All of them.” She shrugged. “Haymitch’s house caught fire two weeks after he won because he was a little too clever during his Games. Gamemakers don’t like to be mocked, see? Never saw them again, did you?”

He ignored Katniss’ dubious gaze and turned his head away, forbidding himself from thinking about his little brother’s face and his mother’s embrace. They had been lurking at the edge of his thoughts since he had realized Prim was dead.

“What did they do to your girl, again?” Jo insisted.

“They executed her for poaching.” Effie whispered when he remained silent.

He didn’t know how she knew. Perhaps she had heard the sad little tale, perhaps he had confessed to her while drunk. He wasn’t surprised she did. Everyone in the Games business knew about him. He was the example.

“Hay… Haymitch?” Katniss stuttered.

“True.” was all he managed to blurt out. His jaw was clenched and his hands balled into fists.
“You want to add your piece, Trinket?” Johanna challenged.

Effie closed her eyes and breathed out slowly, as much to remain calm as to chase the dizziness away, he figured.

“Leave me out of this.” she requested.

“You’re sure?” Jo snickered. “You don’t want to tell us about how you earned some of Twelve’s sponsoring money over the years?” Haymitch’s head turned so fast something in his neck snapped. Seeing his reaction, Johanna cackled. “Oh, please, Haymitch… You knew. You just didn’t want to see.”

The thing was… He had had his suspicions. Other escorts did it that way sometimes but he had been very clear from the start they wouldn’t play like Careers, all the more so when there was no chance of winning. Contrary to popular belief, Twelve usually managed to come up with some money during the Games but it was never enough to buy anything. Or they never had time to use it.

Effie swallowed but neither confirmed nor denied. “Are you done?”

Johanna waved her hand to signal that she was, indeed, done.

Meanwhile, Katniss’ anger had deserted her. She flopped down, her legs no longer supporting her, and curled up on herself before starting to sob. Effie immediately crawled over to her on her knees, still clutching her shoulder and biting her lip against the pain, and embraced her in a one arm hug. Katniss struggled for a minute and then completely surrendered, clinging to her as if she was drowning.

Time passed without Haymitch noticing, he was locked in memories he didn’t particularly want to revisit. Eventually, without him knowing why or how, he found himself with Katniss snuggled against his side, his arm wrapped around her shaking shoulders.

The girl fell asleep.

Effie’s wound started bleeding in earnest.

He watched Johanna change her bandage with a lot of complaining from his escort.

He couldn’t feel his leg.

He tried to bent the knee but the pain that shot through his nerves was such that he wisely didn’t attempt it again. At least it wasn’t totally paralyzed, he told himself with an inner chuckle.

Night fell and the anthem rang out.

The faces of the dead appeared in the sky.

Katniss slept through it, emotionally exhausted.

Effie settled on his other side and rested her head on his shoulder. They didn’t say anything but their hands found each other. He stared at their entwined fingers and allowed himself to feel regret that they would never get to explore this. He would have liked to kiss her but with Johanna scowling nearby and Katniss sleeping against his chest, he didn’t dare. It was stupid. He regretted not having taken the opportunity later on.

The first bomb fell a hour and a half after nightfall.
Hi there! ahah I know you will be angry with me for this chapter and I aaaam sorry :p

I am unclear as to how next week will go because I am out of town for a dance competition so... the chapter might come early afternoon or late morning instead of usual update time. I don't know yet. I will work something out.

In any case, I hope you enjoyed this chapter despite the ugly death XD Let me know what you think!
Chapter 12

Effie and Katniss were both asleep, Haymitch was drifting off and Johanna was keeping a lazy watch.

Suddenly, the sky burst orange in a sizzling sound and, for a second, the dome shaped force field surrounding the arena was perfectly visible.

Both Katniss and Effie startled awake, wary of another Gamemakers’ intervention. Johanna was already on her feet, axe in hand, staring at the sky that was gradually returning to its dark color…

“Is it…” she asked.

Another bomb hit and, this time, the orange color burst forth and they were all flattened to the ground by the shockwave. When it died, it left behind the real sky with real stars and an armada of hovercrafts hovering above.

“Haymitch?” Effie asked in a small frightened voice.

Haymitch didn’t pause to think, he pulled out his knife, grabbed Katniss’ elbow and cut her forearm before the girl could even blink. She shouted in pain and tried to struggle free but his grip was strong.

“Haymitch, what are you…” Effie’s question ended up in a scream when Johanna violently dug her blade in her own flesh.

He succeeded in taking out Katniss’ tracker, checked that Effie was now just as untraceable and followed Johanna’s example by cutting his own arm.

“Where?” Jo asked in a clipped voice, hauling Katniss to her feet. “Where do we go?”

“The tree.” Haymitch answered at once, not even hesitating. “That was the meeting point. Midnight at the lighting tree. We need to get there.”

“What’s going on?” Katniss insisted, shrugging Johanna’s hand off.

“Thirteen has come for us.” Haymitch told her. “The boy has come for us if we’re lucky. We’re escaping.”

Or, at least he thought, gritting his teeth as he fought to keep standing, the girls were escaping. Effie seemed to find it equally difficult to remain on her feet, she clutched at the tree next to them, her lips pursed tight, her injured arm wrapped around her middle.

“Okay, which one is the lightning tree?” Johanna asked, looking around. The arena was a bloody pain when it came to orientation.

Haymitch looked up at the sky and gave it his best bet. He pointed east. “That way. Two sections over.”

Or at least he hoped so.

It was slow going despite the urgency. Katniss supported Effie, and Johanna passed his arm over her shoulders and forced him to go on, forced him to walk despite the pain and the exhaustion.

“Come on.” she hissed. “You will rest when you’re dead.”
“Could come sooner than expected.” he snorted, clenching his jaw.

The hovercrafts with Capitol seals were now searching the ground with huge spotlights that they had trouble avoiding. Johanna was relentless and she kept shouting at Katniss to get a move on, to hurry. He glanced behind them to find that the girl had tossed Effie over her shoulder despite their escort’s protests and was pushing forward.

They had barely crossed one section when they stumbled upon the mutts.

Johanna immediately dropped him to take out her axe and the thud behind him probably meant that Effie had known a similar fate. Arrows flew, slightly askew. One of the big cats died from the arrows in his side, the other found its death on Johanna’s blade.

“They’re going to let them all loose.” Haymitch hissed. He looked at the sky, at the Capitol’s hovercrafts circling above searching for the victors down there as well as for the cloaked rebel aircrafts around them… “Jo, take Effie, and go ahead. I’m slowing you down. You need to get Katniss there. That’s the priority. Katniss…”

“Oh, shut up, Haymitch.” Johanna spat. “I’m not leaving you behind and neither is Katniss, right, brainless?”

Katniss didn’t even gratify that question with an answer, she picked Effie up and on they went again. They were almost there when Finnick and Annie burst out of the bushes right in front of them. Annie, Haymitch saw at once, was in a state that even the boy couldn’t prevent. She was digging her heels in the ground, pressing her hands against her ears, and Finnick had to drag her by the arm.

“They’re behind us!” Finnick shouted.

It was the only warning they got before the lizard mutts were upon them. Annie let out a piercing scream. Finnick let go of her and swung his trident, Jo immediately jumped in the middle of the fight, trying to help cover her friends…

Katniss notched arrow after arrow, keeping a physical barrier between the lizards and her mentor and escort but still the mutts kept coming and soon her quiver was empty. Fortunately, the mutts didn’t seem interested in them, they were circling around Finnick and Annie, only fighting Johanna because she was in the middle of the fray. The mutts’ behavior puzzled Haymitch until he realized they were most likely targeting Four’s victors because they hadn’t taken out their trackers.

He and Johanna locked eyes and she nodded once.

The plan was to get Katniss out.

The plan was to give the rebellion a Mockingjay.

The rest was collateral damages.

“Go!” Haymitch shouted. “Katniss, go! Get to the tree!”

Katniss, of course, was not listening. She was looking for an opening, clutching her knife in her hand…

He used the strength he had left to push himself to his feet and grab the girl before she could join the fight.

“You have to get to the tree.” he repeated, shaking Katniss’ shoulders. “Everything depends on you
now. You get to that tree, you lead that rebellion and you make me proud, hear me? Get Effie and go. Go.”

Katniss was stunned. Too much happening too fast, too few explanations and not enough trust. However, she had always known when to obey him and when to defy his orders. His tone wasn’t one she could mistake. And yet she shook her head like a frightened child.

“I’m not going without you.” she refused. “I’m not losing you. I can’t lose you too. I can’t.”

“I’ll be right behind you.” he lied. “Get Effie and go.”

Effie was barely following the conversation. She was breathing hard, her eyes riveted to the formidable fight happening only a few feet away. Annie was crouched in the middle now, between Finnick and Johanna who were doing a good job at keeping the mutts at bay. How long before the lizards realized that, tracker or not, they were there?

At last, Katniss nodded. She tossed a last hesitant glance at their friends, forced Effie to her feet. When she understood Haymitch wasn’t following, their escort started struggling but Katniss dragged her away kicking and screaming. Her screams echoed through the night but Haymitch didn’t answer her desperate calls, he drew out his knife and he tried to think how best he could help his kids with a busted leg.

“They’re targeting the trackers!” he shouted.

It was just as useless as it was helpless. There was no possibility for Finnick to take out the trackers right now, not when he was busy not getting killed. He considered jumping in to try to get Annie out but he knew the second he actually reached the mutts, they would be on him and he would go down.

One of the lizards leaped and clung to Finnick’s back, sinking its teeth in his shoulder. The howl of pain was loud and one of agony. Without thinking, Johanna twisted around and swung the axe. She freed Finnick but left her injured side open to attacks.

“Jo!” Haymitch screamed in warning.

Too late.

One of the mutts, probably attracted by the blood, bit her right on the already existing wound, another went straight for her knee. She didn’t even have time to scream before she was on the ground, covered with lizard mutts intending to tear her apart. Finnick tried to help, Haymitch stumbled closer, tripped and ended up on his stomach in the dry earth.

He understood there was nothing left to do when the boy starting waving his trident again with something akin to despair.

“Haymitch, go!” Finnick shouted right after. “Go!”

Haymitch shook his head and stubbornly pushed on his good leg, he wouldn’t leave Finnick and Annie behind to be eaten by monsters. He would…

Finnick’s eyes darted to something over his shoulder. “Take him! Go!”

He didn’t have time to wonder what that was about. Hands grabbed him under the shoulders. He tried to resist until Katniss snapped at him to stop being a stubborn bastard.

“What are you still doing here?” he growled. “Where’s Effie? Where…”
“They have her.” she answered.

He didn’t find the courage to ask if that they meant rebels or Capitol.

He had no choice but to give up on Finnick now.

He needed to get Katniss to the tree.

Or rather he needed to let Katniss get him to the tree if he wanted her to escape. She wouldn’t leave without him, stubborn as she was.

They hurried through the wilderness of the jungle. He limped and hopped on his good leg in an attempt at going quicker, unaware of what was going on around them. Katniss seemed to know where she was going.

He could glimpse the tree towering above the others when they were suddenly blinded by the light of a hovercraft circling ahead.

They tried but there was no escaping the ring of light.

They were trapped.

And there was no way to say if they were friends or foes.
Chapter 13

The giant pliers around his waist made it hard to breathe. The arena gradually became smaller and smaller behind him, he tried to crane his neck to locate Finnick but it was an impossible mission in the dark and with the large number of trees.

He had no idea what was waiting for him in the hovercraft but he had watched Katniss disappear in it a few minutes ago, hoping for the best.

He breathed a sigh of relief when he was finally inside the aircraft hold and the pliers let go of him. The fact that Peacekeepers hadn’t immediately jumped on him was good, he decided. The fact that Katniss was locked in Peeta’s arms a few feet away was even better. The girl was crying and talking fast and Peeta’s face was grim but his arms were strong and he didn’t seem ready to let go anytime soon. That was good too.

Haymitch rolled on his side, ignoring the pain flaring up his leg, to sit up.

“Effie?” he asked at once because it was his number one concern now that he was sure the kids were safe.

“I’m here.” a familiar voice answered.

He turned his head. She was huddled against a wall, eyeing the impatient medical team with obvious wariness, her knife clenched in her good hand. He could relate. Once out of the arena, everything still felt like a threat. He crawled closer to her, shooting a dark look at the doctors who tried to approach but who fell back on Peeta’s quiet order to leave them a minute.

Effie’s arm immediately locked around him as soon as he had reached her but it only lasted a second, then she punched him in the shoulder with the butt of her knife.

“You, stupid, idiotic man!” she hissed. “What did you think you were doing staying behind? What did you think…”

He kissed her.

It was probably the easiest and quickest way to shut her up and he didn’t want to deal with pointless questions now. Besides, they were both still alive and that was a small miracle in itself. He intended to make the most out of it.

“They do that an awful lot.” Peeta snorted in answer to something Katniss mumbled. “You should have seen them in the jungle while you were with…”

The near mention of Prim was enough to set Katniss off again.

Distracted from the kiss, Haymitch looked as Peeta allowed the medical team to sedate the girl for the time being. She was rolled away on a gurney and the boy approached them.

Haymitch trusted Peeta. He did. But he still pushed Effie behind him. It didn’t matter that the both of them were still sitting on the floor and that he wouldn’t have been able to pick himself up with the best intentions in the world. The need to protect was too strong.
Peeta lifted his hands in a peaceful gesture. “It’s okay, Haymitch. You’re out now. You’re with friends.”

Friends.

“How did you get here?” he asked, suddenly mistrustful of the whole thing. What if this was a Capitol hovercraft disguised as a rebel one? What if they had forced Peeta to play the game to get information out of him? What if…

“Plutarch had suspicions.” a woman answered, her voice strong but laced with grief, walking in the hold. “His last act before he was arrested was to send me and Peeta to Thirteen.”

“Fulvia.” Haymitch said. He had never given too many thoughts to Plutarch’s assistant before but she looked worse for the wear and it wasn’t helped by the grey clothes hanging on her small frame.

“Haymitch.” the Capitol nodded. “It’s good to see you.” She turned to Peeta. “We’re leaving. I’ve given the order. It’s becoming too dangerous.”

“Finnick, Jo and Annie.” Haymitch countered at once.

Fulvia shook her head. “We tried our best, I’m sorry. Finnick Odair and Annie Cresta were captured. Johanna Mason… From what we can tell, she is dead.”

He closed his eyes.

One would think he would be used to grief but it shook him like a punch in the sternum.

Peeta walked closer and Haymitch tensed again but didn’t object. When he was within reach but not too close, the boy crouched so his mentor could look at him without straining his neck.

“Don’t think I don’t know how bad that leg is.” Peeta rebuked him. “I’ve watched the feed. You’re hurt and so is Effie. You both need medical attention, Haymitch. You have to let the medics work.”

Haymitch stared at the boy without blinking but Peeta didn’t seem disturbed by his silence. “I need you to drop the knife. And Effie if you could do the same, it would be great.”

Effie leaned against his back. She felt small and fragile to him and he needed to protect her, something he couldn’t do without a weapon.

“Haymitch.” Peeta insisted more firmly.

“I’m trying.” he hissed.

It wasn’t that easy to relinquish all means of defense when people had been trying to murder him at every turn for the last week.

A knife was tossed away.

He didn’t dare glance over his shoulder at Effie but he felt her pressing her forehead between his shoulder blades.

“I am so tired of fighting.” she whispered. “I do not want to fight anymore, Haymitch. I do not want to. Please, let’s do as Peeta says. Please. I do not want to hurt someone else even to protect you. I…”

Her voice was muffled but he perceived the rising hysteria easily.
“She needs to be sedated.” he told the boy. “And you should check her for a concussion. She banged her head pretty bad a few times.”

“She’s not the only one.” Peeta commented. “You both need a complete check up. Drop the knife.”

“I don’t want to be sedated.” he went on. “I want to be conscious all the time. I don’t care about the pain. I want to be in the same room as her. I trust you to take care of Katniss but I need to make sure Effie is okay, you get it?”

“Yes.” the boy answered without a single moment of hesitation. “Drop the knife before the infection is so bad they have to cut your leg. You won’t like having a fake one.”

The joke wasn’t that funny but he laughed so hard tears burned his eyes. In the end he dropped the knife and kicked it away. As soon as the blade was gone, the medical teams swooped on them, apparently confident they weren’t about to be murdered. Stupid. He could have killed them without a blade.

He should have seen the trap for what it was but the syringe came from behind and stabbed him in the neck before he could move.

Peeta caught him and slowed down his fall.

“I said no sedatives.” he growled.

“Yes, well… I’m in charge for now and I say you need rest.” the boy retorted. “Plus, it’s okay to lie to protect people. You taught me that.”

“Smart ass.” he grumbled.

Peeta’s face became blurry but he had time to see it softening. “Don’t worry. I got her immunity. President Coin officially pardoned her in front of the whole District. I will make sure nothing happens to her, to any of you. You are my team. I have your back.”

That was the last words Haymitch heard before everything turned black.

Chapter End Notes

One more chapter and we're done! I hope you enjoyed this one!
He didn’t wake up at once.

He drifted awake sometimes and immediately fell back asleep.

*Drugs*, his brain supplied a few times.

*Morphling*, he decided once.

*Better than liquor*, he had time to think before dozing off again.

One day, he woke up in pain. It took him a few minutes to decide they had probably taken him off the painkillers and another few to realize everything was grey: the ceiling, the walls, the floor… Everything was utilitarian in the room.

It wasn’t worth staying awake for so he didn’t even try.

The next time he woke up, Effie was sitting on the edge of his bed, his hand on her lap. Her arm was in a sling, she was wearing the same sort of uniform Fulvia and Peeta had been wearing on the hovercraft and she still looked bruised and battered. There were still twigs and mud in her hair but she had tied it back as if to make it less noticeable. She wasn’t smelling *fresh* either but it was a welcomed respite from the hospital antiseptic stench.

She didn’t immediately notice he was awake. She was running her fingertips on his palm, along the length of his fingers down to his wrist and up again. It was soothing and he liked it. She had a vacant look in her eyes.

“You’ve looked better, Princess.” he slurred.

She startled but it soon turned into a bright smile. “They said you might wake up today. I didn’t want to miss it.”

“How long have I been out?” he frowned, smacking his lips open and closed a few time to get rid of the fuzziness in his mouth.

“A couple of days.” she hummed, reaching for a cup of water on the nightstand and helping him sip from it slowly. “You had surgery.”

*The leg*. It wasn’t painful anymore.

“Did they cut it off?” he winced, ready to hear the worst. The wound had been pretty infected last time he had checked and that had been *before* they had a mud bath.

“No.” Effie hurried in reassuring him. “Although I understood it was a close call.” He glanced behind her to find two normal leg-shaped bumps under the sheets. She brushed his hair out of his face, bringing his attention back on her. “As far as I can tell, their technology level is comparable to the Capitol. You will recover in no time.”

“Good.” he sighed. She kept petting his hair, not meeting his eyes. “What aren’t you telling me?”
She licked her lips nervously. “A lot of things happened, Haymitch.”

He rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I figured, sweetheart. Wasn’t expecting the world to stop turning for me. How’s Katniss?”

“Recovering.” Effie breathed out. “Losing Prim… Peeta and Gale are both tremendous help. I’ve stayed with her since I woke up that’s why I wasn’t with you as often as I wanted. I would have waited with you but Katniss needed me and I knew you would want me to take care of her.”

He waved that half-worded apology away. Of course she should take care of the girl first.

“Gale?” he frowned. “They evacuated the kids’ family, then? They followed the plan?” Effie froze and ducked her head. She didn’t even need to say it. He had understood already. “What happened to Twelve?”

“They bombed the District.” she whispered. “I am so sorry, Haymitch, so sorry. There is almost nothing left.”

“The people?” he asked, pushing himself in a sitting position despite his weak limbs and her attempts at stopping him.

“A few escaped.” she told him. “Gale saved them. Such bravery…” She shook her head. “A few hundreds by the latest estimations. Peeta’s family didn’t survive. The town was the main target.”

“And Katniss’ mom?” he insisted. “Hazelle? Her kids?”

Other names were ready to tumble out of his mouth but those were the main ones: Katniss’ mother, his friend and her children…

“Aster was staying with your housekeeper.” Effie told him “Prim’s death… She’s not… I am not sure she is right in the head anymore. She doesn’t want to see Katniss. And Katniss needs her, she needs… I can only do so much! She needs her mother and I am only a poor substitute and…” She stopped her rant and breathed out. “Hazelle and the children all made it out. She stayed at your bedside when I was with Katniss. She is a gem. You should give her a raise.”

There were other people he wanted to ask about but he would wait for Hazelle. Effie wouldn’t know who he meant. “Finnick and Annie?”

A sad look flashed on her face. “We have no news. The rebels are certain they were captured. Peeta is trying to convince them to launch a rescue mission but he isn’t succeeding.”

“How’s that going?” he insisted. “The rebels.”

Effie pursed her lips and looked over her shoulder to make sure no one was about to walk in.

“I don’t like President Coin.” she declared straight out. “Peeta is doing a good job at making deals and sweet-talking her into what he wants. He always had charisma, you know, and I think she genuinely likes him but other than that…” She clicked her tongue in annoyance. “This District is a prison. They actually have a welcoming kit with a regulations book. A regulations book, Haymitch. You have to wear an uniform even if you are not a soldier, you have to pass your wrist under a scan every morning and they give you a schedule you have to follow, you are allowed only so much food and if you try to ask for more…” She shuddered. “The punishments are disproportionate. I tried to complain but Peeta told me I needed to keep a low profile. The nerves! But, of course, I was scared they would kick me out of the infirmary because they have been talking about releasing me so I agreed to play along.”
She let out a long suffering sigh.

That was a lot of information to take in and he wasn’t in any state to try and decipher what came from her usual spoiled brat attitude and what was genuine concern on her part. He would focus on that later, once he could talk to the boy.

“How are you?” he asked instead, studying her critically.

“I am fine.” she replied quickly. “Clean bill of health.”

She didn’t look fine. There were bags under her eyes, her good hand – that kept waving around as she talked – was slightly shaking, and she still looked dirty and disheveled. The Effie Trinket he knew wouldn’t be caught dead looking like that.

“They don’t have showers in this place?” he snorted.

She narrowed her eyes and huffed in annoyance. “I can’t take a shower because I can’t wet my stitches. I did my best to clean myself up but it turns out mud is resilient. And you don’t smell that good yourself, Haymitch.”

“Is that why I didn’t get a kiss yet or is it something we only do when we’re desperate, sweetheart?” he retorted.

Her lips twitched and, for the first time since he had woken up, he was treated to a smile.

“Now would actually be the time to decide about that.” she informed him. “People liked our story. Don’t think our dear brand new President won’t take advantage of that. If you want to stage a timey break-up, we should do it soon.”

More games to play, then. He wasn’t exactly surprised by that news.

“They’re always going to use us anyway.” he shrugged, reaching out to grab her good hand. He tugged a little. “Come here. Even if you reek.”

“I don’t reek.” she grumbled. “I have washed myself, thank you very much. You should see the poor quality of soap they have in this District.” She still let herself be swayed and squeezed herself in the small space between his side and the edge of the mattress, snuggling up against him, careful of their respective injuries. She propped her chin on his shoulder, a small grin on her lips. “Who would have thought you would be a cuddler…”

“I’m not a cuddler.” he scoffed.

“It’s alright, Haymitch.” she teased. “I will keep your secret.”

He rolled his eyes. “Still don’t see any kissing.”

She humored him by pressing her lips against his in a chaste kiss that soon morphed into more. The machine monitoring his heart started to beep like crazy and she chuckled against his mouth before breaking the kiss.

“We should stop before one of the nurses comes to investigate and kicks me out of your room.” she whispered. “They do not like me. They think I am bossy.”

He snorted but was unable to suppress a smirk. He brushed her hair out of her face, picking out a twig and tossing it on the floor. She looked disapproving but didn’t comment.
“What about what happened in the arena?” he asked tentatively. “You’re doing okay with that?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” she replied immediately, settling back with her head on his shoulder.

“Fair enough.” he sighed. He wasn’t a prime example of dealing with things in a healthy way either.

It was a long time before she spoke again. Haymitch had started to drift off.

“Are we going to survive this, Haymitch?” she whispered. “Not just the war, the... Everything.”

The memories of the people they had killed, the traumatic experience of being locked in an arena and expected to fight for their lives, the constant panic of being hunted, the dread of losing someone you loved...

*Once in the arena, always in the arena.* That was what Chaff used to say, a phrase he had used himself on more than one occasion.

“We’ll survive.” he promised.

*Surviving* was easy.

It was *living* that was tricky.

He didn’t tell her that, somehow he didn’t think he needed to. She welcomed the half-truth anyway, clinging to it like to a beacon of hope.

“How can you be certain?” she insisted.

He shrugged and dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “’Cause we have to. For the kids, for *us*. We’ll do this together, sweetheart.”

“Together.” she repeated.

And it sounded like a promise of a better tomorrow.

THE END.

Chapter End Notes

And we're done! I will be honest, I am thinking of doing a sequel eventually taking place in MJ because it could be interesting to explore, but that won't come soon. I hope you enjoyed this last chapter and more generally that you enjoyed the whole story. I had been thinking about it since as far as my "Somewhere A Clock Is Ticking" story and it was one I really wanted to write. I hope I did it justice.

Next Sunday there will be a new story! It will be a modern AU featuring ice skating, hayffie and everlark. If you follow me on tumblr you know it's been an obsession of mine for the past two weeks and it had taken over other chaptered stories I have been writing. The title is "Fire and Ice" and I am very, very excited about this story. It's a bit different from everything I've done until now and, yes, I really hope you will like all it.

I hope to see you all soon!
End Notes

What did you think? Let me know!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!