They take away her tattoos.

Annie knows how she appears to her stylist and prep team: flawed.

It's not all bad. While her skin is both too pale and not pale enough to set off her green eyes with any dramatic intensity, her red hair is long, thick, curling and shot through with sun-bleached golden threads. Her body is fine-boned but still shapely with muscle and a thin, softening layer of fat. She knows from the Academy that her otherwise slightly odd face takes make-up well, that she can look glamorous or innocent or even fey.

The scars she has are of neutral value, mostly faint and none large. Stylists and prep teams are, she's been told, used to scars from the tributes. Scars and body hair. Even from Careers.

And yet...

She's short, much shorter than the normal tributes they get. Short enough that while Reego is only
fourteen and not very tall himself, he dwarves her. Awkward, really, for the Tribute Parade. That can be fixed with heels, with hair-styling, with a carefully chosen look, but it's disappointing.

The worst, though, the worst is her tattoos. Careers don't have tattoos, even Careers from District Four with their nautical-inspired art. Careers keep their bodies as clean as they can for the stylists. Careers...

Annie had been kicked out of the Careers nearly two years ago. She was never going to have to worry about stylists, about pleasing anyone outside her home fishery ever again. So she'd set about trying to reclaim her life with all the determination with which she'd previously practised spearwork and tactics, using the tattooist's needle as another weapon to deal with her past.

Except now she's standing plucked and waxed and naked in front of District Four's longest-serving stylist and her prep team, tracking them as they circle around her, tracking the course of their eyes.

The rope tattooed around her left wrist.

The tiny crab in the webbing of her right thumb and forefinger. The slightly larger shrimp in the same webbing on her left hand.

The hummingbird clutching a dagger over her heart. This, their eyes return to again and again, and she can read the way their mouths twist down.

They'll remove your tattoos, Finnick had told her.

I know, she'd replied.

“Please,” Annie hears herself say, “please let me keep them.”

“Impossible,” Acquillia declares and gestures at Annie's body. “Look at you. I cannot work like this. Not even if they were good tattoos, this suits none of my ideas. No, they must come off, immediately. You're a tribute.”

She thinks about fighting them. Of grabbing their implements and stabbing them in throat and stomach, of slicing their arteries and laughing as they bleed out.

(It'd be good for the cameras...)

But years of training means she can picture exactly the aftermath, and through the sudden wave of nausea she can feel Isidorus take her by the elbow and Timothia put her robe over her shoulders: the moment for fighting has been lost.

They would have, Annie tells herself, just drugged me anyway.

When the removal process starts, she wishes they had drugged her.

It hurts.

The medic's given her an injection, local anaesthetic he'd called it, but the laser burns and burns.

It burns away her rope bracelet which declares her a deckhand.

It burns away the tiny little crab all the crew of the Bonita had gotten after their best season in memory (they'd called her lucky, and begged her not to return to her momma's shrimp boat once it'd been repaired).
It burns away the little shrimp which is the first tattoo she ever got, as soon as she had money.

It burns away the hummingbird and the medic tells her to be still, to stop crying, but the hummingbird is for all her friends who never came back from the arena and she weeps.

Once it's over, the medic rubs ointment across her injuries and leaves her alone to summon the prep team. She's still crying. Her emotions have been shocked into hiding since Tulla Dearborn called her name at the Reaping yesterday, but it still hurts and her skin is...

Blank.

Getting blank, the ointment soothing the strange white discolouration and occasional tiny puncture wound in her skin. The burning sensation is fading, and with it the last outlines of her tattoos. No more rope. No more crab, no more shrimp. No more memorial to all her dead-

Oh.

Frowning, Annie peers down at her chest.

The hummingbird and dagger is faint. So faint. Barely visible, more a suggestion of form rather than the solid piece of art it'd been. It should have been a seagull stabbed by a dagger, but that is for fisher friends lost. Hummingbirds are mostly used for luck, so she couldn't have one stabbed, but they are also the fierce fighters in fairytales and fables and it had seemed right. She had to bribe her way to Fishery Seven's main town to get it done properly, and it's the most expensive thing she owns and...

And it's still there.

“Oh, good,” Isidorus says, flitting into the room. “Yes, stand up, let me look at you, oh. You aren't one of nature's criers, are you. We'll have to fix that, but turn around, oh, Annie, you make such a lovely...”

His voice trails off, eyes on the traces of Annie's hummingbird.

Annie doesn't smile. She keeps her eyes focused on the wall, keeps her mouth from twitching into either smirk or nervous, apologetic smile, keeps her expression neutral and blank.

“I'm,” she starts, “I'm glad you approve.”

“Well,” Isidorus says, snapping out of whatever oh-shit-the-captain-is-going-yell-at-me internal monologue had been dominating his thoughts. “Make-up covers all kinds of issues. It'll be fine. Come along.”

Annie pulls on her robe, and then Isidorus' hand is back around her elbow, escorting her through the Remake Center. Silently, no talk of Acquillia's plans now she's been suitably polished to a blank canvas.

No.

Suitably polished to a mostly blank canvas.

That, apparently, is as good as the Capitol is going to get before the Games, and during the Games, it won't matter. Maybe, it shouldn't be a cheerful thought, but Annie's a born and raised fishergirl. She believes in symbols, and oh, does she like this one.

It's enough for her to finally stop crying, and start smiling. Even if just a little.
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