fire burns brighter in the dark

by titaniaeli

Summary

Gale Hawthorne returned home as the Victor of the 72nd Hunger Games.

There's no love story.

There's no act of defiance. No confession of love. No marriage proposal. He's just another Victor who was lucky enough to outlast twenty three other tributes.
He's just another Victor who's too pretty to fade into safe obscurity.
Chapter 1

The morning of the 72\textsuperscript{nd} Hunger Games’ reaping had already seen Gale spilling his breakfast stew over his best shirt, banged his shin against the table and accidentally slicing his finger over the cutting knife. It wasn’t a good start on such a significant event, an omen almost.

As he joined the rest of the 16-year-olds in the town square, he could feel a leaden ball in the pit of his belly, a swell of unease that’s steadily growing larger as the sun shone ruthlessly down at them.

It was almost a relief when Effie dug into the glass bowl to pick the male tribute.

“Gale Hawthorne!”

The leaden ball seemed to expand, his heart skittering in fear. He blinked away the layer of sweat on his lids, tried not to look at Thom’s stricken face and took an unsteady step forward. The cameras shifted to focus on him, and he masked his terror with an impassive visage.

The rest of the reaping passed without him registering any of it. Not until he was shoved into a room and left to simmer in silence. Before he could let the dark thoughts overwhelmed him, the door burst open to admit his family. Rory ran straight into his arms, burying his face into his shirt.

“You’re going to have to take care of everyone now, Rory.” He said. “Go to Katniss. She’ll teach you how to hunt. Make sure ma doesn’t starve herself. And keep Vick and Posy out of trouble, okay?”

“No, no... \textbf{You} come back and teach me how to hunt!” Rory said angrily. “And I can’t take care of Vick and Posy alone!”

“Gale, you have to come back. You must come back!” Vick stifled a sob as he joined his brother in Gale’s embrace.

“I will. I will. I’ll try my best to return.” He said softly. He looked up to see his mother’s grey eyes damp with tears, a hand pressed against her mouth to smother her own sobs. Posy, still young and in her mother’s arms, seemed to sense the tension and broke into wails. She stared at Gale with huge, teary eyes and stretched out her pudgy arms for her brother.

“Gale?” She sniffed, tilting her head.

Hazelle came forward to slip Posy into his arms. He hugged her tight, concealing his own tears in her dark hair.

“Gale, you’re coming back, right?” Vick tugged at his shirt, bottom lip wobbling. He ran a shaky hand through his younger brother’s hair, wishing he could speak without breaking down.

He has to remain strong for his family.
He dropped a kiss on each of their foreheads before they were ushered out of the room. Thom rushed in as soon as they left, throwing his arms around his neck. Bristel hovered near the door, the usually tough, feisty girl silent with watery eyes.

If Katniss was his female best friend, then Thom was his closest male friend. They were of the same age and they were classmates for years.

“You come back, you hear me? You do whatever it takes... fight, hide, or run. Suck up to those sponsors. You come back home.” Thom whispered furiously, clutching his shoulders. “I’ll watch out for your family.”

“Thanks.” He swallowed back his bile and nodded dazedly.

Bristel came forward and pressed a kiss against his cheek, her lips pulled taut and expression drawn tight.

Katniss was the last person to enter. Her expression was blank, but frightening in its intensity. She gripped his hand until his fingers went numb.

“I’ll take care of your family.” She promised.

He nodded, pretending not to see the tears she’s trying to hide.

“Thank you.” He whispered.

“Where do we go now?” Sara asked timidly, eyes darting around nervously at the various training stations.

Sara Alder was his District partner, a 15-year-old Seam girl who seemed even smaller than her age. She was pretty, he supposed, if she could fatten up a bit more.

“The survival stations.” He decided, not wanting to join the Career tributes at the weaponry stations. He avoided the snare station, remembering Haymitch’s advice to hide their strengths. So, he headed straight towards the plants station. As a hunter, he knew the importance of identifying edible and nonpoisonous plants. It could be the matter of life and death in the arena.

They spent the rest of the day hopping from one station to another, sticking close to each other. While quiet and soft spoken, Sara was a fast learner and possessed deft hands. He eventually taught her a few tricks in snare-setting.

For the second day, he decided to learn how to wield a knife. They were handy and light, and a common enough weapon to be placed in the arena. Despite Haymitch’s warnings, he couldn’t resist familiarizing himself with the bows. Even though he might not be as fast or accurate as Katniss, he deemed himself adequate enough.

The third day was spent observing the rest of the tributes, trying to detect any weaknesses, taking note of their strengths. He has few offers for alliance, and even fewer for Sara.

He kept his options open, although he refused to ally with a Career. He wasn’t sure if they were going to turn around and backstab him once he outlived his usefulness, and trying to stay alive in the arena was exhausting enough without having to keep his guard up around an ally.
He looked up as footsteps echoed down the corridor. Sara smiled shakily at him as she walked out of her private session. He studied the subdued frown on her lips, the way her fingers twisted against each other.

“Good luck, Gale.” She nodded, heading back to the penthouse.

He stood up, taking a deep breath. As the last tribute, the Gamemakers were bound to have grown bored and restless. He needed to keep their attention on him.

He made a beeline for the ropes and wires immediately, barely stopping to glance at the Gamemakers. His deft fingers moved to set up a snare, winding ropes into a tight knot. Once he was done, he dragged an effigy over and lightly pushed it forward. The trap was triggered instantly, snapping up the torso into the air.

He moved towards the other end of the room and grabbed a bow, inhaling deeply as he straightened his back and notched an arrow. He could feel curious eyes boring into his back, and he shut them out to focus on his target. Exhaling slowly, he released the arrow and saw it slammed straight into the middle of the effigy’s head.

He placed the bow down, willing his hands not to shake from the nerves. He looked up at the Gamemakers and bowed mockingly.

No one had noticed 12 during the parade, caked in charcoal as they were and wrapped in flimsy black cloths. Taking Haymitch’s advice to heart, Sara and he had kept their heads down during the training, but Gale would show the Capitol not to look down on 12 here.

Without a backward glance, he stalked out of the room.

In the end, after several days of avoiding feline mutts, running from other tributes, starving and feverish from infection, it finally came down to him and the male tribute from District 1. He would be lying to himself if he claimed he doesn’t know the other boy’s name. He does. He remembered. And now Calix lay dead beside him with his throat bleeding out and his blue eyes staring blankly at him. A bloodied knife lay a few feet away from him, worthless now that both tributes were incapacitated.

There was a spear in his gut. The blade was sticking out of his lower back, the broken splinters from the handle stabbing into the side of his abdomen.

Every breath hurts, and he couldn’t lie on his back properly.

He wondered how this must looked like on the screen. He knew it could be a little gory, with every detail magnified on the giant screen in the town square.

He hoped Posy wasn’t watching.

She shouldn’t have to watch her brother die on screen.

It really hurts to breathe, and he’s starting to grow cold too. Maybe it’s better this way. He’d rather die than dance to the Capitol’s tune.

He really hoped Posy wasn’t watching this.
Sleep eluded him even though Effie had advised him to take a nap before their return to District 12. After he was declared medically fit and released back into his apartment, he had to sit through the final interview with Caesar. It had taken everything in him not to react during the rewatch of the Games. Watching all the deaths once more was not on his agenda.

Calix... Sara and her killer, the boy from 11... the girl from District 4 that had cornered him and who he killed...

He couldn’t look away even if he wanted to, his heart in his throat as he waited for the video to finish. Watching himself dying on screen was oddly fascinating. The grass beneath his dying body had been a sickly off-shade white green, making the spread of crimson even more startling in its contrast. It was strange to see himself die in a different perspective.

It still struck him as surreal. He was actually going home. He felt like he was still dreaming, stuck somewhere in the arena. Perhaps he never woke up at all. Perhaps he’s still in the arena.

He was going home.

His chances had been rather low and District 12 had not received much sponsorship despite the fact that both tributes were pretty to look at this year. Sara had taken the sweet, innocent girl route during
her interview, but her shyness and lack of humor had not won her many fans. She was innocent, but the Capitol has seen many innocent tributes.

No innocence would ever survive the Capitol. The Capitol would only take that innocence and stained it red.

Gale tried, and while he wasn’t camera shy like Sara, he hated talking about himself or his family. He has never been good at pretending. Caesar was great, but no matter how capable a host he was, even he couldn’t do much if Gale wasn’t cooperating. Haymitch had despaired of him, furious and spitting fire once Gale got off the stage. He felt a smile twitching along the edge of his lips at the memory of a raging Haymitch, cursing and swinging his whisky bottle at his willfulness.

He pulled his legs up and let his body sagged against the dressing table, willing himself to fall back asleep. He had abandoned the too soft feather bed, yearning for his hard cot instead. Now he huddled beside the bed, blanket wrapped around his body.

Sara plagued his dreams, her tiny body like a phantom weigh in his arms. She was murdered right in front of him. Sara died in his arms, and Gale had killed her murderer.

“Gale? We’re reaching 12 soon.” Effie called loudly, her voice slightly muffled through the door. “I’m coming in, alright?”

He didn’t respond and pulled himself up, just as the door pushed open. There was a wig of aqua blue hair curled around the escort’s heart-shaped face, and her lips painted in pale blue. The puffy dress she was wearing was dark blue, and the jewel resting above her cleavage was blue. He supposed blue was in the rage nowadays. His stylist had dressed him in blue for the interview as well. The jacket he had worn into the arena had been blue. The blood was red though.

He shook his head to get rid of the images and took a shaky breath, tossing the blanket back onto the bed and slipping on a jacket. He avoided Effie’s eyes as he moved past her, not wanting to see the look on her face.

The escort was unbearable, ignorant and annoying and he hated her for what she was. But she obviously cared a lot for her tributes. He couldn’t fault her for that.

If she wasn’t going to leave for another District in the next few years, he probably has to see her every time the Games come around. He might as well learn to tolerate her.

“Have some tea, Gale. Your pallor still doesn’t look that good!” Effie picked up a pot and poured into a cup, setting it down onto the table as he sat down opposite Haymitch. To his surprise, the man wasn’t drinking for once. Gale suspected he was even half-sober.

“You know what you have to do when you get off this train, right?” Haymitch asked, lowering his voice. Without waiting for a reply, he continued. “You’ll greet your friends and hug your family. I know asking you to smile is impossible, but try not to scowl at the cameras.”

Cameras. He felt a shiver of dread down his back. He’d thought everything would be over once he gets home.

“You are the Capitol’s newest Victor, and also the first Victor from 12 in the past twenty-two years. You are fresh face. New blood. The Capitol’s latest darling.” Haymitch cautioned.

“So, don’t do anything stupid?” He asked dryly, lips tilting downwards in uneasiness. His hands curled into fists on his lap.
“I knew you’re a smart one.” Haymitch smirked, leaning back.

You never stopped playing their games. He understood what the older Victor was trying to say, and the knowledge made him nauseous. He wrapped his hands around the cup of tea, fingers pulled taut around the body. Even as the heat started to burn, he didn’t take his hands away, relishing the stinging pain with a bitter satisfaction. He closed his eyes and lifted the cup to his mouth, sipping into his tea and tried not to think about the future.
Chapter 3

He didn't know what he was expecting after returning home. Peace and privacy from the Capitol, perhaps? He understood what Haymitch meant now, after Hazelle Hawthorne found a camera bug in his room while cleaning. Peace was a pipe dream. They don’t stop playing the games even after they won.

With so much time on his hands now that he has a constant supply of food, money and shelter, he found that he has nothing to do every day. Hazelle headed over to Haymitch’s house every morning to clean and throw out all the empty liquor bottles, refusing to let the older Victor set a bad example to her children. Even Gale’s siblings still have school to attend, leaving him alone at home in the day. His nights were spent pacing his room or walking around the house trying desperately not to fall back asleep.

He trudged down the stairs, fingers brushing against the smooth wood of the railing as he made his way down in the darkness. The sky outside was a pale blue, with little light, and he quietly opened the front door.

Winter was coming, as well as his Victory Tour. He pulled the thin coat tighter around his frame, shivering slightly as he sat down on the front porch. Maybe he could go to the woods in the afternoon. Hopefully, he could catch a glimpse of Katniss. He hadn’t been able to have any alone time with her since his return.

He fished out a slim whittling knife and a block of wood from his pocket. Folding his legs beneath him, he started to cut. It was almost therapeutic in a way, focusing on the block of wood in his hands instead of the dead tributes that stalked his dreams.

His hands had shaken in the beginning, and he had only achieved in getting cuts all over his hands instead.

A tweet distracted him from the shapeless wood in his hands and he looked up to see a bird fluttered over to rest on a bare tree beside him. It was black with patches of white under its wings, and it cocked its head to the side to twitter down at him.

He felt a smile twitched at the corner of his lips and started to carve the shape out of the wood. The mockingjay flew closer as he whistled a tune softly. When the bird responded with a series of chirrups, he hummed a song.

The mockingjay kept him company till the sun was up in the sky and he could hear his mother moving around in the house. He placed the finished product beside him, grinning in satisfaction at the near likeness of the bird.

It’s definitely not one of the works he’s going to show to the Capitol.

“Good bye.” He murmured to the bird, feeling a little foolish as he did so. He stood up to watch the mockingjay flew off before entering his house.

“You’re early today.” Katniss said as a greeting as she appeared from amongst the foliage. She had her hunting bag slung over her shoulder, her bow held loosely in one hand.

He shrugged, not looking up as he concentrated on untangling the trapped rabbit from his snare.
“You’re late.” He responded, finally freeing the rabbit. The animal’s neck had snapped cleanly when his snare had wrapped around its body.

“Had to get Prim to school.” She smiled. They stared at each other silently for a few moments, before she broke and threw her arms around his neck.

He hugged her back tightly, breathing in the familiar scent of the forest from her hair. She was still growing, and he had to bend down slightly to embrace her properly.

“Welcome home, cousin.” She grinned cheekily, falling back on her heels when they separated. He hid an amused smile at the fact that she had to tiptoe to reach him.

“I heard about that. What was that about?” He asked, watching as she picked up her fallen bow and set down her hunting bag.

“No doubt about it.” She said sarcastically.

He bit back his irritation at that, frowning slightly.

“You’re fourteen.” He scowled, dumping the dead rabbit into his bag with a little more force than usual. She barely gave him a glance, too used to his sudden rage against the Capitol, even if its unjustified at times.

She didn’t like it whenever he started to grumble and curse at the Capitol, fearful of any listening ears even in the woods. She was more concerned about the safety of her sister. But he knew now that he was not wrong, had personally experienced first-hand the Capitol’s atrocities.

“Soon to be fifteen actually.” She smirked.

Yes, and soon he would be seventeen after he returned from his Victory Tour. He felt a little nauseated suddenly, for no apparent reason. He looked away, deciding to focus on Katniss’s upcoming birthday instead.

“I’ll try to catch a turkey for you.” He smiled. And maybe a new jacket, he thought, noticing the different coloured patches on her apparel. Something thick to keep her warm during the winter.

She wouldn’t like charity, and Gale wouldn’t force her to take his money. But he might be able to help Katniss and Prim in other ways, if he planned it correctly.

“I’m excited.” She deadpanned. He relaxed when he saw that she was reacting positively.

There was a moment of silence that fell over them as she sat down and started fashioning some shafts and fletching her arrows. The silence was peaceful, and the tension seeped from his shoulders as he went to release his snare. If his father had taught him anything, it was to erase any evidence of hunting once he was done.

“So,” Katniss cleared her throat. “Your Victory Tour is coming up.”

He stiffened in surprise, his fingers slipping as he unknotted the ropes too roughly. The metal hook snapped up and hit him in the neck, splitting skin immediately. He cursed and reeled back, clutching the bleeding wound.

“Gale!” Katniss scrambled to her feet in shock.

He pulled his hand away to see blood staining his fingers. Nausea hit him instantly, and he dropped
onto his backside.

“Gale! Gale, save me! SAVE ME!”

“Gale!” Katniss yelled in his face. His hand swung out in alarm, and would have struck her in the face if she hadn’t backed away in time.

The silence that descended over them was tensed this time.

“Sorry.” He murmured in shame, staring at the ground.

Katniss coughed loudly, shaking her head. She patted her pants and stood up shakily, giving him a worried look.

“It’s okay. Accidents happened.” She shrugged. “You okay to continue?”

He nodded tightly, standing up on his feet. He felt around the side of his neck, grimacing slightly at the mild sting. It was just a small cut, and the bleeding seemed to have stopped flowing.

He could see Katniss contemplating whether she should speak up, knew that she’s going to ask if he’s really okay, so he interrupted whatever she’s going to say with a terse “Let’s go.”.

He was okay. He’s probably not, like what Haymitch would say, but he’s not going to let his problems disrupted his daily life too.

He came upon a herd of grazing deer at the meadow and settled down beside Katniss. She notched an arrow, pulled back her arm and released. The arrow hit a deer in the throat, and it fell over lifelessly. She managed to strike another deer down before the herd scattered. He already had an arrow notched and was about to fire when he caught a flash of blond hair in his peripheral vision. The shot went wild and hit a deer’s hind leg instead.

“Bad day today?” Katniss asked conversationally, pretending not to see the minute tremble in his right hand.

He exhaled in defeat and shook his head. It was a good thing he doesn’t need to really hunt for food to survive now.

“I’ll see you tomorrow?” He said, smiling slightly.

She tilted her head to the side, grimacing under the weight of the dead deer.

“Sure, I’ll be here. Don’t be a stranger, Gale.” She said softly, squeezing his arm tightly. She watched him go with a concerned frown.
“You’re dying, 12.” Calix observed. Tall, beautiful and strong, the District 1 tribute had been the favourite for this year. Other than the thin scratches and cuts on his body, he looked relatively unharmed. He, on the other hand, suffered a limp from the cat mutt that had nearly mauled him, and a sharp pain of hunger stabbed his stomach at every movement.

“You can’t win against me.” The blonde continued. “Why don’t you spare yourself a painful death and just surrender? I promise a quick death.”

He scoffed at the older boy, tightening his grip on the only weapon he has. It was almost comical, pitting a throwing knife against a spear.

Calix nodded, lips curled into a small frown. He looked almost apologetic as he lunged forward, and suddenly he was bleeding from the throat. He dropped the spear in shock, hands flying up to grab at his slashed throat.

Gale tried to back away, but pain shot up his back and he fell down in shock. He hit the ground on his knees, hands trembling around the broken handle of the spear in his gut.

Calix staggered forward, reaching out to wrap his bloodied hands around his neck. He fell onto his back and the Career tribute straddled his hips to choke him to death.

Hazelle dropped the ladle into her pot of soup as a terrified scream echoed through the house. She glanced up at the ceiling sharply, her heartbeat thumping frantically in her chest. She quickly switched off the stove and dashed up towards her eldest son’s room.

The door was locked, but she was already used to Gale’s new habit of locking his door every night. She had a spare key made just for situations like this.

She unlocked the door and entered the room hesitantly. The screams had tapered off into quiet whimpers, occasionally punctured with soft, high-pitched keening. She was careful to approach her son, remembering Haymitch’s outburst of terror when she had woken him up forcefully one time.

She gently stroked Gale’s hair, slowly coaxing him out of his nightmare, sitting at the edge of the bed so she could back away quickly if necessary. It’s not that she feared her son, but she knew how guilt would consume him if he unintentionally hurt her.

“Gale, you here with me?” She whispered, as the trembles started to subside. His grey eyes blinked open, taking her in distractedly. The way he stared at some point over her shoulder scared her. “Oh, my boy... my brave, brave boy.”

She bit back a sob as she pulled his head against her chest, wishing desperately she could take some of his pain and shield him from his nightmares.

“You’re safe now. You’re safe now.” She repeated, clutching a limp hand tightly. She felt it the moment Gale came back to her. He stiffened in her arms, and seemed to struggle for a moment before he recognized her.

“Sorry for disturbing you.” He rasped.
She shook her head violently and tightened her arms around him in response.
“Even becoming a Victor failed to make you look more respectable.” Camille sneered, looking unimpressed as she looked him over.

Time seemed to fly by, and soon winter had arrived, bringing the Capitol down on District 12 as well. Gale bit back a derisive comment, deciding to stay quiet as his stylist poked and prodded at him. She tugged at the hem of his woollen coat in vexation, as if the apparel personally offended her.

“No sense of style at all!” She hissed, her obnoxiously bright yellow short bob bouncing around her chin. He resisted the childish urge to pull at her hair to see if it’s a wig like Effie’s. She dug through the wardrobe frantically and tossed a sequined coat with eye-searing silver buttons at him.

“It’s freezing outside.” He hissed, staring at the garb in disgust. There was no way he’s going out wearing that hideous coat.

“What am I expecting from District 12?” Camille grunted to herself. “You can take the boy out of 12, but you can’t take 12 out of the boy.”

He chucked the sequined coat at her.

The dressing room was quickly filled with her shouting and his snappy retorts before she stomped out furiously. He has already won the Games, and so he sees no more reasons to placate Camille. He zipped up his woollen coat in defiance. It was comfortable, warm and black. And he’s keeping it on throughout the Victory Tour.

His prep team filed in shortly, their faces brightening when they saw him.

“Gale!” Octavia squealed, hugging him tightly. He grimaced, but did not pushed her away. Her skin looked even greener since the last time he saw her. Her wheat green skin was enhanced by her cotton candy pink hair and gaudy red jumpsuit.

“Have you been eating, Gale?” Venia questioned, her eyes flicking up and down his body in disapproval. He briefly wondered what she saw when she looked at him. Does she see his purple eyebags, the sharpness of his cheekbones? The way his clothes seemed to fall limply around his shoulders?

He shrugged in response, his eyes averting in embarrassment. His mother had been complaining about his lack of appetite recently as well.

“Don’t worry.” Flavius winked. “Once we’re done with you, you’ll look as good as new.”

Gale doubted that however much they fixed his looks, it wouldn’t change the fact that he’s halfway broken. But he knew that his prep team has been working for District 12 for years, and that this was the first time they had a tribute returned as a Victor. It doesn’t surprise him that they were so excited.

“Fantastic.” He replied wryly.

While District 12 was snowing, District 11 was comfortably warm instead. As the train rode towards the train station, Gale saw splendid orchards with bountiful apple trees, vast fields with a couple of cows grazing the field. But despite the beauty of its orchards and fields, there was an oppressive heaviness in the air.
The faces of the citizens were solemn and unsmiling as he gave his speech. He felt sick as he read off the card, the words making his stomach churned in disgust. He avoided looking at the stage where the male tribute’s family stood. He didn’t want to see the anger and hatred on their faces.

“Panem today. Panem tomorrow. Panem forever.” He finished off his speech flatly. A dead slug probably has more charm than him, with how lifeless his voice sounded.

As he was led off the stage, Haymitch gripped his elbow reassuringly. The older man smiled and nodded at the cameras, quickly ushering Gale back to the train.

“I don’t know if I can do this.” He blurted out.

Haymitch’s grip tightened, the smile on his face tensed and fake. He shooed Effie away, yanking Gale to a safe corner.

“You can. You have to.” He said emphatically. “You have ten more Districts to go.”

Face pale, Gale nodded dazedly, the card crumpled in his fist. There’s ten more Districts to go, and he hoped he doesn’t crack before it’s over.

“Take a shower, or a nap. Drink, eat, whatever.” Haymitch urged. “But the moment you step out of this train and get up the stage, you do what you’re told.”

He swallowed back bile, staring at Haymitch stubbornly. Haymitch shook him urgently when he refused to answer.

“Fine.” He bit out, nodding sharply, angry at himself for agreeing. He felt sick. He was angry. He was helpless.

“Remember you’re never free even after the Games.” Haymitch hissed, dipping his voice low enough so whatever bugs there were around couldn’t catch him clearly. “You may have to continue playing their games, but at least learn how to play them smart. You don’t want to anger Snow.”

“I know.” He snapped, swatting Haymitch’s hand away. He knew that Haymitch’s the only ally he has in this, but he’s too angry to care at the moment. He stomped back to his cabin, shaking with suppressed fury.

The male tribute’s name had been Emmer.
Chapter 6

He got the red envelope while he was at District 4. It was delivered by an Avox, who caught him while he was alone and pressed the red envelope into his hands before walking off swiftly without any explanation. Confused, he broke open the melted wax.

Inside the red envelope was a cream card with a name, a time, a date and an address.

The shining black ink and the Panem seal at the bottom of the card made him uneasy. He couldn’t explain why exactly, but staring at the details written on the card gave him an urge to chuck it into a bin.

Instead, he slipped it into his pocket and decided to wait until he could catch Haymitch alone.

The train had stopped to refuel at District 4, which meant that they would be staying for one night before they continued on to District 3. District 4 was popular as a tourist spot because of the ocean, and the Capitol had constructed a few resort hotels used as getaways for the Capitol citizens.

Unsurprisingly, the hotel they were staying in tonight was unnecessarily lavish. They even had gold-plated showerheads, much to his revulsion. Perhaps all these opulence and luxury was the reason why the Capitol was so ignorant and egocentric.

He had left the party early, discomfited by the crowd. He had met a couple of District 4’s Victors, who had come over to greet him. And probably checked out the new blood, he thought.

Just like District 11, he had felt uncomfortable in District 4, considering that he had killed their female tribute. But the Victors doesn’t seem to hold him accountable, and if they did, they kept their thoughts silent.

Haymitch had left his side mid party to indulge himself at the bottom of a liquor bottle, throwing him alone with an elderly Victor called Mags. The woman was nice and kind enough, but Gale felt suffocated in the crowd.

He had left the party early, returning back to his room. He fingered the cream card in his hand, sitting at the edge of his bed. It was close to midnight when he finally heard the front door of the suite banged open.

He left his room, raising a brow as he absorbed the sight of a tottering Effie in her ridiculous six-inch heels helping an intoxicated Haymitch towards the couch. He debated leaving the questions for tomorrow, but he wanted to get it over now.

“What is this?” He said bluntly, throwing the red envelope onto the coffee table.

Haymitch squinted up at him in irritation, then glanced down to peer blearily at the red envelope. What Gale did not expect was for him to sit up straight and an expression of horror to cross his face. He glanced at Effie in dread, to see her eyes wide and mouth dropped open in panic.

So even Effie knew what the red envelope meant.

“It’s bad then?” He asked softly.

Haymitch had some difficulty arranging himself upright on the couch, and Effie sat down unusually quiet beside him. Slowly, and hesitantly, Haymitch spoke about the special appointments that Snow
arranged between Victors and clients, about the consequences if a Victor was to reject accepting an appointment and what they actually entailed.

“You knew about this?” Gale finally spoke, staring accusingly at Effie. “Is that what you do as well? You buy Victors and make them sleep with you?”

“Gale, please. No, I have never...” She shook her head violently, biting her orange lips anxiously. He disregarded her worthless apologies, turning to glare at Haymitch.

“You never told me about this!” He yelled. “You could have warned me about this!”

For the first time since Gale met him, Haymitch looked ill at ease.

“I never thought Snow would actually make you do this. You weren’t really a crowd-pleaser, Hawthorne.” He sighed. “Fans wasn’t exactly cheering you on in your Games.”

“That’s not an excuse, Haymitch!” He snapped furiously. “You should have told me before! You have no right to keep this from me.”

He spun around and disappeared back into his room. Just as the door swung shut behind him, he picked up the vase on the table and hurled it across the room. The vase exploded into a shower of broken pieces.

He didn’t cry then, but it was close, when he dropped to his knees and muffled his screams into the carpet.

He didn’t speak to Haymitch and Effie for the rest of the journey, angry at them for keeping things from him and too keyed up with nerves as they got closer to the Capitol.

Straight after his interview with Caesar, with the same old platitudes from the host, talking about his hobby of wood carving and some of his works, he was eventually summoned to meet with President Snow.

The office reek of roses, the fragrance so strong he had to resist coughing to get the smell out of his nose. Up close, Snow looked almost normal, like an ordinary thin old man with paper white hair. He was also clad in a simple dark suit, with a grey vest beneath and leather gloves over his hands. So ordinary and normal, a stark contrast compared to the rest of the Capitol.

“Mr Hawthorne,” Snow addressed politely. “Please sit.”

He gestured to the plush armchair in front of his desk. For a second, Gale contemplated refusing to sit, but decided that some fights were not worth fighting. He sat down, uncomfortably stiff and awkward.

“I hope you’re enjoying the full hospitality of the Capitol.” Snow said lightly, setting aside a delicate teacup. There was an imprint of red stains on the rim of the teacup, something that looked disturbingly like blood. “I have taken into account District 12’s delicacies and had our chefs prepared a feast to your liking tonight. I expect that you’ll find your Victory dinner simply delightful.”

He wasn’t quite sure what sort of delicacies Snow meant. There was barely any food to feed District 12 on most days. Not wanting to argue, he merely nodded tightly.

“Now, let’s move on to another topic.” Snow’s voice seemed to adopt a more business-like tone. The
wrinkles at the corner of his eyes creased. “It’s about your future appointments. I believe you’ve received a red envelope already?”

“You’re despicable.” Gale bit out, narrowing his eyes into a furious glare. Whatever measly patience he had been holding onto, they immediately scattered when he snapped.

Snow was unfazed by the barely contained violence in grey eyes. Instead, he seemed surprised. He glanced at his computer, tapping on the keyboard before he turned it around so the screen was facing Gale.

“Despicable, Mr Hawthorne? I find that I am more than generous to give you the option to choose your future here.” Snow said in amusement.

Gale wasn’t sure what he was watching at first. A pair of Peacekeepers held a young girl between them. She was shouting and raging, fighting to get free. It took a moment before Gale recognized the name she’s screaming. There was a sudden bang and she slumped over. The scene in the video switched to a burning house, and Gale felt sickened when he realized he could hear muffled screaming coming from inside the fiery blaze.

“You family will die. Your friends will die. That ‘cousin’ of yours might find herself mysteriously accused of illegal poaching. You aren’t doing her any favours by disappearing into the woods with her every day.” Snow said calmly, a smile playing at his thick lips. “There are many ways to hurt you, Mr Hawthorne. I can cut off the food supply to District 12. A fire in your siblings’ school. An explosion in one of the coal mines. Many innocent people will be hurt if you refuse me.”

He tasted blood in his mouth. It was like he was suddenly plunged into ice water, terror and fury warring with each other. His hands trembled violently, red hot rage burning through his veins.

“You won’t disappoint me, will you?” Snow asked. “I hope to repay your compliance with honesty. It’s only fair, after all.”

“*Remember you’re never free even after the Games.*”

There was nothing stopping him from killing Snow. But the girl in the video screaming Haymitch’s name reminded him of his mentor’s warnings. If Snow was hurt in any manner, the Capitol would execute his family and razed his District. Crushing his rage and urge to stab Snow with the pen in front of him, he looked up and stared into those snakelike eyes.

“I understand.” Those words snapped around his neck like a noose. He stood up and left the office, mouth tasting of ashes and defeat and lips bitten raw.
WHOEVER was trying to creep up to him was failing terribly. He had a knife poised to throw as he spun around, adrenaline pumping through his veins. The grass was short and dying with its limp white-green leaves, but if he focused hard enough, he could still make out the soft rustle whenever the wind breezed over them.

“WHOA, I'M UNARMED! STOP!” The girl shouted, raising her hands defensively and skittering backwards in fear.

He did not lower his arm, knife still pointed威胁ingly at her. But he did not throw the knife either, flicking his eyes over the other tribute. She has a head of auburn brown hair tied in a ponytail, her pale ashen skin smudged with dirt and sweat and she was a head shorter than him.

“What do you want?” He asked suspiciously.

She slowly dropped her hands, but did not come closer.

“An alliance.” She said tentatively, slowly gaining more confidence as she noticed the lack of aggression. “I have water with me. I can share them with you, in exchange for your protection.”

“This is the arena.” He said, as if she's stupid enough to think that he’s going to protect her.

After Sara died, he wasn’t sure if he wanted an alliance. She had just died a day ago, and her death was still raw. But the offer of water was tempting. He hadn’t had any water since the first day, and he couldn’t find any water source in the arena.

He could survive without food for weeks, but he could only survive without water for three days.

“We separate at the final six.” She persuaded. “I’m fast and agile. I won’t get in your way.”

He scrutinized her warily, torn between common sense and the allure of water. Finally, his parched throat decided for him.

“Dayta from 3.” She smiled in relief, relaxing when he sheathed his knife.

Still staring at her distrustfully, he nodded and introduced himself. “Gale.”

The scene from the rooftop was beautiful as always. In the night, with only the vivid lights visible in the city, he could admire the beauty of the Capitol. District 12 has never been this bright before.

“Snow showed me a video of your family.” He said quietly, not looking behind at the sound of footsteps approaching his direction.

“I was the example to all the new Victors.” Haymitch chuckled dryly as he came to lean against the railing beside him. He stared out at the night sky, the light breeze ruffling his hair. “Of what would happen to Victors who caused problems and refused to do what they're told.”

Gale didn’t answer. He had gone numb hours ago, after his meeting with Snow and the threats lay out in front of him.

“Did he do the same thing to you?” He finally asked, his voice soft and hushed. “Sell you out to the Capitol?”
Haymitch took a swig from his bottle.

“Family and girlfriend dead, remember?” He replied gruffly.

“Snow said that there are many ways to hurt me.” Gale snorted bitterly. “Even if your family and girl was dead... he still has many people to threaten you with, haven’t he?”

Haymitch’s silence was telling enough.

His shoulders slumped and he snatched the liquor bottle from the older man. Even as his eyes watered at the burn of the liquor going down the throat, he forced himself to continue drinking.

“Feel better?” Haymitch was peering at him under a fringe of messy hair. If he was actually drunk, he’d thought that Haymitch looked sympathetic.

“No.” He said frankly, passing the bottle back to him. “That thing tastes like shit. Why do you drink it?”

Haymitch threw back his head and laughed. “It’s an acquired taste, boy.”

He rolled his eyes at his mentor. The alcohol had left behind a comfortably warm aftertaste on his tongue, his head feeling slightly buzzed. He could see why Haymitch liked to drink so much now. It’s so much easier to drink your bad memories away than have them played in your head over and over again.
Chapter 8

Gale’s Victory Tour finished without a hitch, except for the appointment he was forced to attend to. He came back to the penthouse, silent as the grave, and headed straight to his room, pretending he did not see Haymitch and Effie’s concerned stares.

He locked the door behind him, and without taking his clothes off, went into the bathroom and switched on the showerhead. The blast of cold water hit him like a shock to the system and he climbed into the empty tub fully clothed.

Perhaps if he soaked himself in chilly water long enough, his skin might become numb to the phantom touches on his body.

He bit his bottom lip, stifling the choked cry that fought to escape. His frame was starting to shiver violently under the onslaught of water.

Drowning himself sounded appealing at the moment, knowing that he has to go through that again in the future. He thought it would be easy. Sex was just sex. Maybe if he closed his eyes, he could pretend he was doing this under his own free will.

But it was hard to pretend, to lose himself in his head, to dissociate himself from the sex. Only the thought of his family, that he’s doing this for them, prevented him from doing something rash like running away.

When he eventually climbed out of the tub, he was trembling so hard he could barely stand properly. He wasn’t able to grip onto the knob to off the showerhead, and finally with a grunt of frustration, he slammed his fist against the switch, cutting off the water abruptly. His hand was throbbing as he left the bathroom, shrugging out of his wet clothes on the way. He fought a losing battle with the buttons on his shirt as his hands were shaking too badly. In the end, he ripped the shirt off in exasperation, scattering the buttons all over the floor.

He dropped to a crouch, face in his hands, feeling utterly useless at not being able to do something as simple as taking off his clothes.

He rubbed his eyes roughly, hating himself for being this weak. Divesting himself of his pants, he staggered towards the bed and slipped under the bed naked. Even with the heater on, he continued shivering. He reached out to the bedside table, hand patting along the smooth wood till he felt the metal curved handle and pulled the drawer open.

He took out a small bottle stocked with light blue capsules, sitting up groggily to unscrew the cap. He tilted his head and swallowed down two pills, coughing slightly to clear his throat.

The only thing good about the Capitol was the invention of sleeping pills. His nightmares kept him up on most nights, disturbing his rest. While nightmares still plagued his sleep often, at least he managed to get some rest to function properly throughout the day.

Closing his eyes, he focused on his thin breathing and let it lulled him to sleep.

His farewell from the Capitol was met with much fanfare, reporters and citizens gathering to send him off. Haymitch had forced him to smile and wave as he got on the train, ignoring his surliness and protests.
"You only have to endure until you get on that train, boy. Now start smiling for your fans."

Fans. He hated that word. While popular in the Seam and at school, it made him intensely uncomfortable to be the focus of an entire city. And it wasn’t a good thing to be popular with the Capitol. He could only hope that people would soon grow bored with him after the next Games.

Gale had spent the rest of the journey home alone, secluding himself either in his room or in the last car of the train watching the world flew by. He was hit by a sudden fierce longing for his family. He wanted to wrap his arms around little Posy and not let go. He wanted his mother to embrace him and engulfed him in her warmth. He wanted Rory’s freshly cut grass scent and his bright grey eyes to greet him when he goes home. He wanted Vick’s shy smiles and cedar skin when he pressed his lips against the boy’s cheek.

He wrapped his arms protectively around himself, curling up on the seat. He tried to remind himself that he only has a couple more hours to go before he could see his family, since he’s not stopping at every District this time, but the feeling of homesickness was acute at the back of his mind.

So often nowadays that he felt unstable, unable to control his own emotions. He wished he could find back all the broken, tarnished pieces the Games had stolen from him and put himself back together.

He broke too easily these days, found himself constantly distracted by the spectres of those he killed and those who died in his arms. He confused himself with reality and dreams, thinking himself back in the arena at the slightest trigger. It was disconcerting, for someone who has always been self-assured in his own identity before.

He was trying his best, but found himself growing rapidly tired of social interactions. He only seen Thom or Bristel once since his return. He barely spoke to Katniss whenever they met up in the woods, tired of her concerned looks every time he freaked out around her and her feeble attempts in treating him as if he was glass. He hated going to the Hob now because he’s sick of all the stares every time he walked through the warehouse.

No one has ever told him how exhausting it was to be a Victor. They spoke of the glory and fame, but never the ugliness beneath that golden, glittering title.

“We’re reaching soon, Gale.” Effie was hovering hesitantly at the doorway, afraid to step into the cabin. He blinked in surprise, suddenly feeling as if a fog has just lifted from his mind. He hadn’t realized time had flew by so quickly.

He felt as if he should be worried that he was starting to lose time, but was too exhausted to care at the moment.

Effie and he hadn’t exchange more than three words since his outburst at them in District 4.

She was twisting her gloved hands anxiously as she watched him. Grudgingly, he got off the seat and moved towards her. She stayed mercifully silent as they walked towards the dressing room.

She picked a grey jumper, black pants and a long black coat designed for warmth. Regardless of the simplicity, the material of the jumper itself probably costed more than his old sack of a house. She knew that he preferred his clothes to be of the darker variety, and despite himself, was grateful that she wasn’t forcing him to wear anything outrageous.

“Gale?” She called out uncertainly. When he gave her his attention, he was taken aback by the sorrow in her eyes. “If you need to talk, I’m just a phone call away.”
It was a generous offer, although he wouldn’t be surprised if the phone in his house was bugged as well.

“Thank you.” He murmured, pleasantly surprised. He blinked and looked at her more carefully, feeling as if his worldview of Effie Trinket had just changed drastically.

She gave him a bright smile, and once again, she was back to the airheaded, ignorant and irritating escort of the Capitol.

“Alright, the next few months is going to be busy, busy! Enjoy yourself before the next Hunger Games, Gale!” She beamed. “I’ll see you again in six months!”

He gave her a confused smile as she left to give him privacy to change. Bewildered by the abrupt transformation, he quickly changed his clothes and returned to District 12 contemplating his new life and the eccentricities of Capitol escorts.
“We are barely equipped. It’s foolish to attack the Careertributes.” Gale frowned at Dayta’s suggestion. She looked mutinous, but she finally nodded with a sigh. It has been two days since they got to eat anything other than plants. There was a severe lack of food source in the arena this year.

He knew that hunger was making Dayta desperate, but that doesn’t mean that they have to act recklessly. Humans could survive without food for weeks anyway, and he was used to the painful hunger pangs in his belly to ignore them.

“Alright, then what do you suggest we do?” She asked impatiently.

Whatever he was going to say next was interrupted by a quiet rustle. Dayta didn’t hear, but Gale was a hunter. Every instinct in his body started screaming, and he spun around to see a huge black shape jumped out from behind the shrub of dead leaves.

Gale dodged to the side, adrenaline sending him rolling to his feet immediately. Dayta screeched in agony, caught in the jaws of the creature that attacked them.

“Gale! Gale, save me! SAVE ME!”

And then suddenly her screams were abruptly cut off. The catlike animal was crouched over her, its sharp teeth speared through her chest. Gale soon realized with horror that the creature was devouring her. Dayta had gone silent, and the ruined clearing was occupied by the sounds of bones crunching and the tearing of flesh instead.

The mutt peered at him with one golden eye and he snapped back from his shock and horror.

Instincts took over and he turned and ran.

He has never enjoyed visiting the Justice Building, but he has put this off long enough. The last time he was in here, he was taking tesserae for his entire family. Taking tesserae for five people each time since he turned twelve, he wasn’t terribly surprised his name was eventually picked for the Games. In fact, he would be more shocked if he hadn’t been reaped.

Every time he walked into the Justice Building to collect tesserae, he tried not to look around. The place was stifling, an air of sadness like a rope around his throat. The first time he was here, he was receiving a medal after his father died.

The Justice Building has never been a place of good memory for Gale.

“I’m here to fill up the forms for the registration of my house.” He said awkwardly to the receptionist.

My house. It still felt strange hearing that coming from his mouth.

“Please wait for a moment, Mr Hawthorne.” The receptionist recognized him instantly, but who in District 12 doesn’t? Nevertheless, it still startled him whenever someone knew his name before he could even introduce himself.

She directed him to sit at the waiting area as she vanished to the back. He sat down, tapping his thigh idly. Every second spent in this place was unpleasant.
“Gale?”

He looked up to see Madge Undersee standing beside the receptionist. The young girl smiled nervously at him. His first instinct was to scowl at her, but he swiftly squashed the annoyance down to give her a neutral grimace instead.

“Follow me.” Madge instructed, her eyes snapping to his face then immediately averting her gaze to the ground.

He didn’t say anything as he followed her into a small room. There was only a blackboard, a table and a few chairs in the room.

“Once you’re done with these forms, I’ll process them immediately and send them to the Capitol.” She informed, placing the papers on the table. He sat down on one of the chairs, picking up a paper to read through.

“That’s a lot to fill up just to register the house under my name.” He said flatly, frowning in irritation. Why do they need to know how much he’s being paid exactly in grain and oil yearly from the tesserae he claimed?

“Do– Do you need help?” Madge asked meekly.

He crushed the retort that sprang to his lips. She was only fourteen. There’s no satisfaction in upsetting the girl. Besides, she’s the Mayor’s daughter. She might understand all this jargon better than he does.

“Yes, sure.” He exhaled slowly and nodded.

The grin she gave him was unexpected, and she sat down beside him immediately. She pulled out a pen from her pocket and passed it to him. Suddenly, he has a sinking dread that this was going to take a long time.

Mrs Alder sold handmade jewellery like rings and bracelets and various little trinkets at the Hob. She was probably in her early forties, but looked even older with her pepper and salt hair and wrinkled face. She does bear a resemblance to her daughter, and was likely quite beautiful in her youth.

He avoided the inevitable confrontation for a long time, giving money to Rory or Katniss to purchase her trinkets instead. They knew his reason to frequent her store, even know he has no use for jewellery. He gave them to Posy or Prim instead.

Rory thought he was being an idiot, and constantly spoke about how kind and friendly Mrs Alder was. Gale was not quite sure of kindness anymore. He thought the concept an ephemeral notion. No matter how kind a person was, they would hate the man responsible for their child’s death. But he would never forgive himself if he doesn’t apologize and beg for forgiveness from his fellow tribute’s mother.

Bracing himself, he approached the store and the woman behind the table of trinkets. She looked up to greet him, but her words dissolved on her tongue the moment her gaze stopped on his face.

She was even smaller than Hazelle Hawthorne, her back hunched slightly from exhaustion and grief etched into her face.

“Mrs Alder,” He begun, before he faltered again.
He saw her swallowed and took a quavering breath, her dark eyes searching his face. She seemed to crumble in front of his eyes, every inch of her grief and agony stripped bare.

“You’ve finally decided to talk to me.” She said softly. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

He nodded, afraid to speak, but knew that he has to get everything off his chest, to apologize, to let her know how sorry he was to be the one returning home instead of her daughter, so he mustered up his courage before it could flee his tenuous grasp.

“Young daughter... Sara – she wanted to come home badly. Before the Games, she told me of how hard you worked and how you refused to let her help out. You wanted her to leave the worries to you so that she could concentrate on her studies. She knows. She understood.” His hands shook as he talked, forcing himself to remember Sara’s words as she murmured them at the rooftop the night before the Games. “She wanted to come back so she could give you a better life.” Even breaking apart, Mrs Alder refused to let her tears fall. In her fragility and strength, she was beautiful. “I’m sorry I came back instead.”

She stifled a choking heave behind a hand, her small frame trembling. He was familiar with that look of pain on her face, her shoulders hunching in as she shook and jerked, the way her body was rebelling at her attempts in composing herself. He tasted that grief and misery every time he woke up reaching out for Sara’s hand.

She reached out for his hand, much to his surprise. Her grip was fierce and strong, and the bones in his hand protested at the treatment, but he didn’t make a sound.

“Thank you for being there for her.” She whispered. “Thank you for staying by my daughter’s side at her last moments.”

Something splintered in his chest at her gratitude. He nodded silently as she let him go, and fled before he could break in front of her.
“Do you have any siblings?” He asked curiously. Sara hasn’t spoken much about her family, but he knew the bare facts. She doesn’t know her father, and her mother raised her and worked at the Hob. She never outright confirmed it, but from the vague information she provided in her interview, he had guessed that her mother was working at the Hob.

“I was a twin.” Sara revealed as if it was a precious gift she’s giving up. “Our mother nearly died giving birth to the both of us. She was too poor to afford a midwife, and she doesn’t even know who’s the older twin. So, we used to argue over who’s the older one.” She laughed softly, harshly. “We never did find out who’s the older twin. She died from an illness.”

He abruptly grabbed her arm to pull her back. A bolt hit the broken wall beside her head. The both of them separated immediately, Sara’s dark curly hair flying as she ducked from another bolt. His eyes tracked before him, trying to find their attacker.

He caught a glint of silver and he flung his knife at that direction. There was a sudden movement and he spotted a boy dashing out of its hiding place, attempting to reach behind a broken ruin of a
He hurled another knife, this time aiming for the spot in front of the boy instead. The boy recoiled, skidding to a stop, before letting a loud yell as Sara jumped onto his back.

Gale would have curse the girl’s idiocy if he had the breath to speak at the moment. The plan had been for her to get away if they’re attacked. Sara yelped as the boy swung his crossbow up, slamming it against her head. He threw her off his back, spinning around to glare at her.

Gale intercepted him before he could shoot at Sara, ramming his entire body weight against the bigger boy. He had taken note of the tribute from 11 since the first day of training. He was tall and lean with muscles, and Gale had seen him at the hand combat station. A fist struck his head and he staggered back in pain. In his moment of inattention, the boy from 11 lifted his arm and shot at Sara. Fury and panic chased his dizziness away and he lunged forward wildly. The knife sunk into the boy’s chest and they both hit the ground.

Even with a knife in his chest, the boy from 11 refused to yield, grappling with Gale furiously. Desperately, he reached out for one of the broken bricks scattered around them and brought it down the boy’s head. It crunched with a loud crack.

The brick fell from his hands limply. He rolled off the dead tribute, feeling faint all of a sudden.

Sara. He forced himself to ignore the blood and the caved in skull of the boy in front of him and turned to find Sara. He found her lying on the ground a few feet away and rushed forward.

He flinched when he saw the bolt sticking out the side of her neck. The blood was pooling into a small puddle beneath her head. She stared up at the cloudy sky, breathing thinly. Her face had turned a ghastly white color, crimson blotting her face.

He kneeled down beside her, his breath hitching as her dark eyes shifted to look at him. Her lips twitched, making the blood flowed even faster from the wound in her neck.

“What’s your sister’s name?” It was the only thing that came to his mind.

Sara’s grey eyes were damp with tears of pain, but the smile she gave him was genuine and wide. She curled her trembling hand in his and mouthed a name. Then, she exhaled slowly and went terribly, terribly still.

He closed her vacant eyes with a shaking hand and kissed her gently on the forehead, promising to remember the name she had given him.

The Capitol might have taken Sara, but they won’t take Nelly from him.
Chapter 11

Thom hardly sees Gale anymore. He could acknowledge that they both have different lives now, but it felt like Gale was avoiding him, and there was no way he’s going to stand for that.

That morning found him ploughing through the snow towards Gale’s house, trying to burrow further into his coat for warmth. He found the newly crowned Victor sitting on the front step, whittling a piece of wood with a knife while his siblings played in the snow.

“Hey, Rory!” He called out. The boy was chasing Vick, and he froze mid-run. He faltered in surprise and looked over.

“Thom!” Rory exclaimed happily. He dropped the snowball in his hand, and was rewarded for his distraction with a splat of snow at the back of his head. He cursed angrily, spinning around as Vick and Posy dashed off giggling loudly.

It was great to see the Hawthorne children so merry.

“Hey, kid. I’m here to see your brother.” Thom smiled, ruffling the boy’s hair. He purposely raised his voice. “You think he’s available to see me today?”

“Of course,” Rory grinned. “All he does is brood around at home nowadays anyway.”

Thom spotted Gale rolling his eyes, not even bothering to look up at them. He chuckled, patting Rory in the shoulder before trudging up to Gale.

“How are you?” He asked gently, sitting down beside Gale. He glanced at the row of wooden animals on the step in interest. There was a bird caught mid-flight that looked suspiciously like a mockingjay, a slumbering cat with a hilariously pinched face that resembled Buttercup, a grazing deer and a huge catlike creature with razor sharp teeth. It took an embarrassingly long while before Thom realized why the last carving looked so familiar.

It’s the mutt that nearly killed his best friend in the arena.

“I’m fine.” Gale murmured, putting down his half-finished wood. He could vaguely make out the tail of a dog, the rest of it still formless.

“I’m really fine fine or I’m just saying I’m fine to placate my friend fine?” He asked accusingly.

Gale shoved the knife back into his pocket, the exhaustion plainly written on his face. Even the flushed cheeks from the cold failed to make him looked the slightest bit alive.

“What do you want, Thom? He sighed tiredly.

Thom stood up abruptly, resting his hands on his hips as he glared down at him. “I want you to get up right now and follow me to the Hob.”

Gale raised a confused brow at him, stubbornly not moving. There was a moment of insanity where he wanted to pull Gale to his feet and manhandle him all the way to the Hob, but luckily, it was a fleeting thing.

“I heard Greasy Sae has some venison stew today. It’s selling fast, and it’s good nutrients for a cold day like this.” He lied. It wasn’t a complete lie either, but he was good at twisting the truth to suit his
needs. At Gale’s unimpressed stare, he knew the tactic wasn’t exactly working, so he decided to go for honesty instead. “Come on, how long has it been since we hang out together? You’re not even doing anything.”

A flicker of indecision, but he could see he was convincing Gale. Finally, the latter nodded and got up, and he had to hide the bubble of elation and satisfaction.

The walk to the Hob was quiet at first, trying to brave the chill and falling snow. By the time they entered the crowded warehouse, they were chatting idly and making superficial small talk. Greasy Sae greeted them with a terse smile, her eyes lingering a little longer on Gale before she poured another spoonful of venison stew into his bowl.

“You looked like a stick, boy. Haven’t you been eating?” She scowled roughly. If Thom hadn’t agreed with her inwardly, he would have protest at the extra spoonful.

Gale flushed angrily and dropped another coin on her table, wilfully refusing to accept Greasy Sae’s refusal. It was almost comical, watching as a spectator, but Gale’s stubbornness eventually won out and they both left with their bowls of stew and the old woman muttering profanities under her breath.

At least the Gale he knew still existed.

They found themselves a quiet spot and sat down side by side, enjoying their stew and watching the Seam children ran by.

Despite the bitter cold outside, the market was bustling and happy. Parcel Day this year had helped greatly for the starving families.

“Tell me frankly, are you doing okay?” He asked, trying not to sound too confrontational. “I’m not trying to be nosy or annoying... but you’re my friend. I’m worried about you.”

He watched uncertainly as Gale poked around his stew, and the silence gone on long enough that he wondered if he was being ignored.

“You probably wouldn’t believe me even if I say I’m doing okay, won’t you?” Gale finally said, looking up at him. “I’m not... but I’m better. I think I’m getting better. I’ll probably be fine.”

He gave him a sceptical stare, but figured that’s probably the best he could get out of Gale. They both have never been huge on the caring and sharing thing.

“Okay... Okay. You know if you need to talk... or anything, you can find me, right?” He asked hesitantly. Gale probably wouldn’t come asking for help or a shoulder to cry on, but he wanted to let him know that the offer was there and willing if he ever needed it in the future. “I have your back.”

“Yes, I know.” The smile that slowly crept over Gale’s face was genuine at least. “Thanks, Thom.”

He grinned back, a flutter of relief in his chest, glad to know that his friend was not too far away for him to reach yet.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Warning! (Un?)intentional suicide attempt in this chapter!

The damn cat was hunting him. Stalking his footsteps. Staying just at the edge of his peripheral vision, testing his guard, trying to find his weakness.

It caught his scent in their first encounter, and its not going to let him go now.

He smeared his blood on the walls and ground, trying to misdirect the cat, tricking it with his scent.

The mutt was created to be the ultimate hunter. He could only evade it for long, but the blood should be enough to buy him time.

He froze in his tracks as he heard a low growl somewhere at his far left. Not daring to move rashly, he turned his head slowly to find the mutt.

Molten gold eyes glowed eerily in the surrounding darkness, like a floating pair of lanterns. Ice cold fear flooded his veins, and a pulse jumped in his neck. For the first time ever in his life, he’s the hunted instead of the hunter, the prey instead of the predator.

The mutt stalked closer, the growl rumbling in its chest. His vision slowly adjusted to the darkness and he saw a body at its feet. Half-consumed and mutilated, Dayta’s body was unrecognizable, except for the familiar auburn hair.

He finally reacted, lurching away in fright, cold terror overtaking any sense of reason.

The mutt lunged with a snarl.

Gale woke with a scream trembling through his body, shuddering out weak gasps of panic. His senses were on an overdrive, every brush of fabric against his skin causing his heart rate to pick up. His throat’s closing up, and he won’t calm down, can’t calm down.

He kicked off the blankets and struggled to reach for his little bottle of pills on his nightstand. His hand trembled violently as he poured the pills out onto his palm. He couldn’t even think clearly from the rush of adrenaline in his veins. He was feeling too much.

He downed the pills down hastily, before tossing the empty bottle aside. He curled up in bed, waiting for the shakes to leave him.

His vision was blurring, distorting and twisting into strange, formless shapes in front of him. He squeezed his eyes shut, and felt his conscious drifted.

Sunday morning started with a lot of shouting and yelling on the second floor, followed by the sounds of tiny feet thumping heavily on the floor. Hazelle stared at the ceiling in annoyance, mouth
open to snap at her children. She has told the kids *how many times* not to run and scream in the house.

When Rory rounded the corner, she was ready with a lecture to dish out. However, they died on her lips at his panic-stricken face.

“Ma— ma, it’s Gale. He’s— he’s not waking up.” He stuttered. “And he’s shaking.”

Hazelle’s blood ran cold.

She did find it rather odd when her eldest son still had not appeared, but dismissed her worries as he tended to stay in his room and not come out on certain bad days.

She hitched up her skirt and rushed to his room, Rory following behind her. Vick was shaking outside Gale’s room, making loud, panicked sobs. She couldn’t see Posy anywhere, and she prayed that her daughter was still sleeping in her room.

“Find your sister and make sure she stays in her room, Rory.” She ordered, bolting into the room.

The moment she saw her son, she knew why Rory and Vick looked so terrified. He was as pale as death, gasping weakly as he shivered in his bed. Her eyes tracked around the room calculatingly, before she glimpsed the empty bottle lying near the foot of the bed. She wasn’t familiar with the medical jargon printed on the side of the bottle, but she suspected Gale has been taking pills recently to help him sleep.

With strength she doesn’t know she possessed, she pulled him out of bed, hauling him towards the bathroom. He went frighteningly still, and her heart skipped a beat.

“Oh no. Oh no, no, no. Gale, you don’t do this to me.” She cursed, kicking the bathroom door open with a foot. Her shoulder slammed against the door, but she ignored the pain to tug her son into the bathtub. “Gale, stay with me now. Stay with me.”

She stumbled slightly into the tub, panicked hands fumbling with the switch. The knob screeched against the metal as she turned it on, the shock of water spraying everywhere. She grabbed Gale’s chin and forced his mouth open, pressing one finger at the back of his throat. He fluttered, his limbs twitching on instincts. She adjusted the water output, and filled his mouth with water. He choked and spluttered, his struggles becoming more vigorous.

“Come on... Come on.” She prayed desperately, rubbing his throat to push the water down. He jerked up, nearly slamming the top of his head against her chin. There was a shocked gurgle, before he turned his head to the side and retched.

She was still scared and anxious, but the haze of panic and hysteria was slowly receding. She clutched his hand tightly as he gagged and heaved painfully. The smell of something sweet – the pills, she guessed – made her nose wrinkled.

When he finally slumped back against her chest, breathing hard but *alive*, she let a sob broke free.
Chapter 13

Sunday morning for Haymitch started with a series of thunderous banging at his front door. He was wrenched awake in alarm, flailing his knife at an unseen enemy. When he registered the noise, he groaned and slumped back down.

“What the hell?” He swore angrily, and with an exasperated sigh, got off the couch and trudged to the front door. What he did not expect to see on the other side was Hazelle Hawthorne, her cheeks ruddy with tear stains. Her dress was damp, and a drop of water fell from her sopping hair.

She usually came right into his house every morning without knocking, proceeding to clean up all the trash and ignoring his drunkard ass sleeping on the couch. She knew better than to disturb him when he’s sleeping after the first scare when he came at her with a knife. But seeing the state she’s in currently, she’s probably too distressed to remember the spare key she has to his house.

“Haymitch,” She looked close to tears, but she kept her composure. “You need to come with me.” She took a breath. “Gale overdosed.”

Definitely not the best Sunday morning he has.

He tried not to react, but the flare of alarm made him sobered up instantly. He shut the door behind him without a word and followed Hazelle back to her house.

“I sent Rory to fetch Aster.” She murmured, opening the door to Gale’s room quietly. “I got him to vomit out the pills, but... I’m not sure... I need to make sure there’s nothing wrong.”

“You did your best.” Haymitch said seriously. “You saved his life.”

She nodded mutely, fighting the urge to cry again. She had changed his clothes, and while he’s barely conscious, managed to drag him back to his bed before he completely passed out. She kept the rest of her children away, despite her younger sons’ protests. Thankfully, Posy had continued sleeping, unaware of what had happened.

There was a flutter of movement beneath Gale’s eyelids and she surged forward excitedly. She waited with bated breath as he woke up. He blinked at her drowsily, not noticing Haymitch standing behind her. He was slow to regain awareness, but she was patient.

“Ma?” He rasped out.

She hoped Aster has something for his throat. With how rough he sounded, all that vomiting probably blistered his throat.

“Ma?” He repeated in confusion, trying to sit up.

She gently pushed him back down. “Yes, it’s me. I’m here.”

He stared at her for a long moment, and then without warning, broke down crying. Short, wheezing whimpers that made her heart ached. She enfolded him into her arms, trying not to cry herself.

It was extremely fortunate that the one time Gale forgot to lock his door, his younger brothers had
decided to enter his room to check on him the next morning.

Gale had claimed that it was unintentional, but Haymitch was not quite sure if he could believe him.

Rory had returned frantically with Aster Everdeen and her youngest daughter, Prim. Without acknowledging his presence, barely pausing to give Hazelle a reassuring pat, she chased them out of the room.

Aster was not familiar with the Capitol’s medicine, their technology far too advanced for her capability. She does not recognize the medicine he’s taking, but she recognized some of the ingredients listed on the sticker.

She was not happy.

She had lectured him for almost thirty minutes on the danger of sleeping pills and his over-reliance on them, cautioning him on the potential side effects.

“I can’t sleep without them.” He divulged. “The nightmares kept me up... And I get so tired in the day. I... I need them.”

“Gale, I told you about your overdependency on them. I understand why you need these pills. Their main function is to help you sleep, but you can’t rely too much on them to help you.” She warned. “The side effects will complicate your health in the future. If you are ever cut off from your supply, your physical and emotional health may suffer as a result.”

He bit his bottom lip reluctantly, but could not deny the truth of her words. He was becoming overly dependent on these drugs. Not being able to sleep easy without taking them made him anxious.

“I’m not asking you to completely stop immediately.” Aster said quietly, resting her hand over his when she saw the look on his face. “But I advise you to start cutting down on them. If you have trouble sleeping, I can prepare some herbs that may be able to help.”

“Thank you.” He murmured, feeling inexplicably guilty for some reason.

She shook her head sadly, her pale blue eyes watching him with a profound sort of understanding.

And perhaps she does. While their experiences might differ, loss was a concept they were both familiar with.

“Valerian root is a natural remedy for anxiety. I’ll get Prim to write up the recipe and deliver it to you by tonight.” She smiled. “If you can’t sleep, may I suggest ordering some chamomile tea from the Capitol? It’s a home remedy for helping people to doze off. I’m not sure if it will work for you, but there’s no harm in trying.”

“Thank you.” He repeated.

Aster nodded and stood up to pack her medical bag.

“Mrs. Everdeen?” His eyes darted sharply around the room, almost nervously. “Does... Katniss knows about me?”

“She left the house early to go hunting.” Aster said gently. “She doesn’t know yet.”

“Can you not tell her?” He asked, his voice tinged with slight desperation. He doesn’t want Katniss to see the pathetic state he was in, or to know that he nearly died because of his stupidity. He doesn’t want her to see how weak he had become.
“Are you going to keep this a secret from her?” Aster’s tone was neutral but resigned. If she disapproved of his decision, she kept her thoughts silent on the subject.

“She doesn’t need to know.” He said stubbornly. “She’s only going to worry.”

Aster sighed loudly, her expression pinched. She reached out to pull him into a quick, brief hug that surprised him. She has never been an affectionate person.

“I’ll tell Prim to keep this quiet as well.” She promised.

She left the house with brief instructions on keeping Gale’s meals light and easy on the stomach and throat. Prim broke her professionalism and turned back halfway to give him a tight, relieved hug that formed a lump in his throat.

Haymitch joined his side after Hazelle left to usher the rest of her children back into the house, sensing his mentor’s need to talk to him. They sat quietly on the front porch, watching the birds picking at the ground.

“That was stupid of you.” Haymitch said bluntly.

Gale did not react, just folded his arms tight around his chest beneath the blanket draped over his shoulders.

“It was an accident.” He said, his tone as bland as the expression on his face.

He could feel Haymitch’s sharp, calculating eyes studying his face, but he refused to look back, not wanting to see what he looked like in the man’s grey eyes.

“Is it?” Haymitch questioned rhetorically.

He closed his eyes, and did not answer.
“Gale, right?” The other tribute cornered him during lunch break. She was an older girl, with tanned skin and shoulder-length hair and a playful smile. He has seen her lingering around the camouflage and climbing stations the whole morning, avoiding everyone but her own fellow tribute.

“Yes.” He said warily.

“Don’t need to look that scared.” She grinned, lips tugged back over her teeth in an amused, predatory smile. “I’m Lea of District 8, and I want an alliance with you and that girl of yours.”

“Sara?” He frowned, taken aback by her bluntness.

She shrugged flippantly. “Yeah, you’re teaming up with her in the arena, right?”

“None of your business.” He scowled, stiffening up. He wasn’t sure if he’s comfortable that another tribute from a different District knew that he and Sara were teaming up.

“Hey, relax. It’s obvious that’s your plan, considering how fiercely protective you are of that girl.” Lea smiled, unfazed by his hostility. “You think anyone can’t see that?”

He bit his lip, grudgingly conceding to her point.

“I’ll have to talk to Sara and my mentor.” He said, not wanting to reject her offer, but not wanting to accept either.

“No rush. It’s only the first day after all.” She agreed.

“Posy, are you done?” He sighed, shifting uncomfortably under the curious stare of the shopkeeper. She was probably close to Katniss’s age, slightly plump with curly blond hair, and she has been staring since they came into the shop. She had greeted the both of them cheerfully when they first entered the shoe shop, her smile unexpectedly sincere and huge that he was momentarily caught off guard at the sight of it being directed to him.

He has never been greeted by a Merchant with such sincerity before. Mrs. Everdeen, not including. But then again, he rarely stepped into a Merchant shop before.

“Soon.” Posy said distractedly, picking up one crimson flat and another blue boot to compare them.

She had come to him this morning to pester him to take her shopping for a pair of new shoes for Hazelle. In spite of their newfound wealth now, Hazelle still insisted on wearing her old hiking boots.

He regretted taking a precocious 3-year-old girl shopping now. She was taking forever to decide, shooting down any suggestions he made.

Someone else entered the shop, the bell jingling. He glanced over in boredom, frowning slightly when he recognized Madge Undersee.

“Hello, Delly, is my shoes ready?” She smiled politely.

“Yes, just give me a moment!” The shopkeeper disappeared into the backroom to collect Madge’s shoes.
Just then, she seemed to notice the two other customers in the shop. Her eyes widened as she saw him.

“Hi, Gale.” She gave him a hesitant smile. He nodded curtly in response.

Posy walked over to him, apparently finally making her choice in a pair of boots clutched in her tiny arms. It was brown and leather, and he tugged on the lace to test the material. He might have the money now, but he’s not going to be wasteful.

“You have really pretty hair, miss!” Posy exclaimed in wonder when she spotted Madge. “It’s like... like dandelions.”

Madge blushed bright red, lips pursed in pleasure. “Thank you, little one. You have really pretty hair as well.”

“Oh, does this means Gale’s hair is pretty too?” Posy asked innocuously. “Ma says we have the same hair and eyes because we’re family.”

He pretended he wasn’t listening to the conversation, averting his gaze as Madge flushed and gazed at his face. Fortunately, Delly came out just in time.

“Have you chosen?” She grinned when she noticed the boots in Posy’s arms.

Forgetting about Madge, Posy nodded vehemently and let Delly wrapped her gift up. She was already distracted, cooing over the shopkeeper’s pink ribbon in her hair.

“She admires you.” Madge said out of the blue, as they left the shop together.

Gale furrowed his brows at her in perplexity, uncertain if she’s referring to Delly or Posy.

“Delly.” She elaborated, jerking her head in the direction of the shop.

Cynicism threaded into his smile. “Because I’m a Victor?”

“She admires you and Katniss for being brave enough to go into the woods.” Madge explained. “But—that is one of the reasons too.”

*Delly has better role models to look up to* was what he wanted to say. While he couldn’t understand what’s so admirable about heading to the woods, it’s not like he goes out there for *fun*, he could agree that Katniss was pretty inspiring.

“I didn’t get to say this the last time we talked...” Madge cleared her throat nervously as they stopped at the junction between the Merchant section and the Seam. “But I’m really glad you made it back.”

He tried to think of something to say, but his mind remained blank. He has always been borderline antagonistic towards the Mayor’s daughter, and he saw no reason why she would be glad he came back.

“I see.” He said lamely, looking away.

She wasn’t offended, seemed to understand the words he couldn’t say and gave him a knowing smile.
Winter flowered into Spring, and it’s time for the Hunger Games again.

Gale was understandably apprehensive for his first year in mentoring. He wasn’t sure if he’s able to work a miracle and bring home another Victor for District 12, or if he’s able to handle it if he doesn’t.

He was dressed nicely for the Reaping in black and grey, his apparel unembellished, just the way he liked it. Camille had taken one look at his attire and her expression had twisted in disgust. She hadn’t say much, except for her usual complaints about his lack of fashion style. He hoped that this meant that she had given up hope on him.

She has a disturbing liking for sequins and glitter that he does not share.

Hazelle had worn her new boots to the Reaping, much to his and Posy’s delight. Despite the sombre mood today, he was glad that at least his mother was living in comfort. Rory still has a year to go before he turned twelve, so he entered the town square knowing that his siblings were safe… for this year, in any case.

Haymitch was drunk as usual, slumped over in his seat, much to the Mayor’s discomfort. So, he shifted to observe Effie instead. She was clad in a strange silvery-blue sheer fabric that wrapped around her hips, ending in a long tail-like sash that hung down her backside. Her top was a corset with flashing lace that blinked periodically like fluorescent tube lights. He averted his gaze in embarrassment when he noticed how the corset deepened her cleavage.

Girls in 12 does not dressed like that. He doesn’t think he would ever get used to the shamelessness and daring of Capitol women.

He straightened earnestly as the Reaping started, trying not to show how affected he was. It’s tiring having to maintain his expressions in front of the cameras. He has never been good at hiding how he really feel about the Capitol.

“For the female tribute... Yara Fennel!” Effie announced.

There was a hush from the 14-year-olds. Slowly, timidly, a little Seam girl shuffled up the stage, looking to be on the verge of tears.

“Now, for the male tribute…” Effie hummed brightly, digging into the glass bowl. She unfolded the piece of paper and read out the name. “Ash Liatris!”

A Seam boy had to be forced up the stage, rooted to the spot in sheer terror. He was almost as small as the female tribute. Both were scrawny and malnourished, dark hair falling limp around their hollow-cheeked faces.

Gale wished desperately he could get off the stage. His fingers twitched in agitation, and he gripped them behind his back to still the shaking. Haymitch snorted awake, sitting up abruptly and bumping into his shoulder. He noticed the shrewd look flickering over his mentor’s face as he stared at his trembling hands. He forced himself to exhale out shakily to calm himself.

When the Reaping was over, he quickly got off the stage and went to his mother’s side.

“Ma, I’ll be leaving now.” He said quietly, leaning into Hazelle’s warmth. “Take care of yourself
and the kids, okay?"

“Don’t worry about us.” She frowned. “Take care of yourself, you hear me?” She pulled him closer, pretending to adjust his lapels. “And if you can’t bring those children home... don’t you dare blame yourself for it, okay? It’s not your fault.”

“Ma—” He stiffened.

“It’s not.” She interrupted sharply, giving him a glare.

His shoulders went slack, and he nodded unenthusiastically. He knew better than to argue with his mother.

“See you soon.” He pressed a kiss to her cheek, not daring to look back lest his resolve broke. He never thought he would fear leaving her side so much, but with Snow’s threats hanging over his head, he knew that anything could happen to her and his siblings while he’s gone.

He got on the train, brew himself a pot of coffee and sat down to wait. The two tributes attacked their food immediately, foregoing the utensils and using their own hands instead. Effie sniffed in disdain, muttering about ‘savages’ and ‘improper sense of etiquette’, that sparked off an argument between her and Haymitch. He scowled darkly, wondering if the Effie he had talked to in the dressing room half a year ago was a figment of his imagination, or maybe his dreams had started to overlap with reality now, and he couldn’t tell the differences anymore.

So, he grabbed a plate of braised chicken and slammed it down loudly in front of him, startling the two quarrelling adults. With a challenging glare at Effie, he deliberately ignored the fork beside him and used his hands to start eating.

Haymitch chuckled, settling back down and taking a swig of his liquor. His grey eyes sparkled with amusement. Effie growled under her breath and left the room in exasperation. Ash and Yara paused briefly to exchange bewildered looks, then glanced at Gale hesitantly before they broke into giggles.

After their meal, the two tributes were escorted to their rooms to rest. Gale sat down beside Haymitch with his cup of coffee, watching the Reapings in other Districts. He dropped two cubes of sugar into the black coffee, grimacing slightly as he raised the cup to his lips. He hated coffee, but they kept him awake in the day. He tossed another cube in, and almost poured half a pot of creamer in. He ignored Haymitch’s look.

“What do I do when we reach the Capitol?” He asked.

Haymitch tilted his head back, lips wrapped around the rim of the bottle. He groaned when a drop of liquor hit his tongue and nothing else. He chucked the empty bottle to the side.

“You stick by my side.” He grunted.

Gale let out a breath, and nodded. He lifted the cup to his lips again, and swallowed down the burn of coffee going down his throat.
Chapter 16

He received a red envelope the moment he reached the Capitol. He suppressed the urge to rip the damn thing and tossed the pieces into a fire. He slipped the envelope into his pocket, deciding to open it only when he’s alone.

The chariot parade was as disastrous as his own the previous year. If only they could get a better stylist that doesn’t dressed the tributes as coal miners every year.

Haymitch instantly lost interest as District 12 rolled out, clad in baggy eye-searing orange pants that overwhelmed Ash and Yara’s diminutive frames. Ash was naked above the hips, feet slotted into black heavy boots. Thankfully, Yara was wearing a top, a thin white shirt that only emphasized her pitiful thinness.

“All right, now that the shit show is over, I’ll take you to meet the other Victors.” Haymitch muttered, grabbing his elbow and steering him away from the crowd.

“The tributes?” He frowned, looking back. The tributes were all being herded towards their apartments. He could see Camille’s absurd rainbow hair bobbing along the sea of people.

“Will be fine. I told Effie to send them to bed.” Haymitch reassured.

He supposed Haymitch knew best, living this for the last twenty-three years, and his guidance (as grudging as it was in the beginning) had helped him survive the arena in the first place. Technically, they were fellow Victors, but it was hard to think of Haymitch as anything other than his mentor.

“Where are we going?” He asked.

His question was answered as they ducked into a club. He raised a brow at Haymitch in curiosity.

“It’s a hangout spot for Victors.” The older man muttered.

He could see why. The rest of the Victors were positioned near the stage’s speakers, the music drowning out any possible conversations they have. They were seated behind a pillar that hid them, but the hanging mirror beside their table has the perfect view of the entrance.

“You finally brought him, old man.” Johanna Mason noticed them first, throwing her arm over the chair. Her gaze was penetrating, and deliberate as she tracked her eyes from head to toe in appreciation. “He’s even prettier up close.”

He resisted the urge to squirm under her piercing stare.

“Did Snow get to him?” She directed her question to Haymitch. The latter scowled heavily in response and leaned over the table to grab a new liquor bottle.

“I saw the interviews. Three siblings, right?” She asked, the leer fading from her face.

Before he could answer, a man came up to him, throwing an arm over his shoulders and guided him towards an empty seat.

“We all have something to protect.” Finnick grinned, winking one sea-green eye at him. He pushed a cup of drink into his hands. “The night is still young. Have a drink.”

“This is Chaff.” Haymitch introduced, gesturing to the dark-skinned man beside him. Ah, the mentor
of Emmer. They shared similar builds and the dark skin common to District 11.

“So, you killed my tribute.” Chaff greeted, leaning forward. That’s what he’s afraid of, but the man looked less angry than he had expected.

“As he did to mine.” He replied sharply. He knew when someone’s trying to be confrontational, but somehow he has a feeling that Chaff was just testing him. So, he lifted his chin and raised a brow at Chaff. He hated that he was forced to kill Emmer, but he’s not going to be made to feel guilty for defending himself and Sara.

He must have passed some sort of test because Chaff laughed uproariously.

“Oh, you got a good one there, Haymitch.” He chuckled, grinning wide enough to show off surprisingly white teeth. “He still has his fire. I was worried he might have lose it.”

“Alright, Chaff, stop teasing the new guy.” Finnick interjected, rolling his eyes. He gave Gale a deadpanned look. “They did the same thing to me. Well – not the same, but Chaff has some sort of stupid hazing ritual.”

Steadily, cautiously, he relaxed, pacified by Finnick’s warm, kind eyes.

“People like us,” Finnick murmured, leaning close enough that he could smell the alcohol on his breath. “Needs to stick together.”

“People like us?” He repeated, assuming that the older man meant the Victors.

It was Johanna who replied, a cynical smile playing on her lips. “Survivors.”

---

He was running for his life, memories of the bloodbath playing in his head like a macabre film. He had seen the Games before, but it was a completely different feeling forced in the actual situation. Seeing kids die on the screen for years has allowed him to detach his feelings from reality. But it was different seeing kids you have spent the last few days with being murdered around him.

He ran past the clearing, searching frantically for shelter. The trees were sparsely scattered at the outer edge of the arena, while the centre was filled with broken houses and buildings – the highest only a mere three-story tall. Most of them were missing roofs, the walls broken from wear and tear.

He reeled back in shock and panic as a figure dashed out, nearly colliding into him. He backed away instantly, seizing Sara to shove her behind his body.

“Lea!” He widened his eyes at the girl from 8.

The only thing he has on hand was the backpack he had managed to grab, and no weapon to defend himself and Sara. He could ask her to run, but out there roamed other tributes that has just escaped the bloodbath as well.

“Gale!” Lea stammered in surprise, not expecting to run into him so early in the Games either. In the end, he hadn’t accepted her offer of alliance. Now there’s no stopping her from killing them.

She was just half a head shorter, agiler than him from what he observed in training, but he could probably take her if he catches her by surprise.

“Goddamnit,” She hissed, looking conflicted. Her gaze darted around, agitated. “Get the hell out of here!”
“What?” He balked, for a second wondering if it’s a trick. Then he remembered shared laughter between Lea and Sara, her newfound love for honey and cherries, quietly confessing her dream to be a teacher and an annoying fondness for sexual jokes.

“Go!” She yelled.

“Lea!” Sara tried to reach out for the older girl, but Gale grabbed her arm and pulled her away. He didn’t look back lest his resolve faltered.

That night he saw her face in the sky and wept.
Haymitch was an incorrigible drunkard and a scoundrel, but no one has ever accused him to be a terrible charmer. He always knew the right words to say to flatter and please the Capitol sponsors, while he on the other hand, was an awful speaker – *look at his interviews*. He was incapable of hiding his true feelings, and his tongue has been described as acrid rather than silver.

“Be honest, but not *too* honest.” Had been Haymitch’s advice before he left his side.

As much as he disliked Effie, he was relieved that she had stayed by his side to help him out.

“Effie, is this your newest Victor?” A velvety voice like smoke purred, the sound of heels clicking against the marble tiles coming up to them. The woman that eyed him in intrigue was most possibly the strangest-looking woman he has ever seen. She was also the least... flamboyant Capitol woman he has ever met.

Her skin was so pale it looked translucent, blue veins visible against the sides of her neck. Her eyes were icy blue, adorned with dramatic eyeliner that flicked up into a wing. She was sporting red lipstick, and her hair was long, sleek straight and inky black. She was also taller than him, almost towering over everyone in the hall. A swarm of silver butterflies were tattooed from collarbone to the edge of her neck. He couldn’t pin down her age from her ethereal beauty. She could be anywhere from twenty to fifty.

“Oh, look at you,” She murmured. “You have grown up well, haven’t you?”

Her gaze wasn’t lascivious, though she was interested. But in what, he has no idea.

“Madam Calysta.” Effie greeted respectfully. Her smile had become rather fixed, and she actually looked uneasy around the newcomer.

“Calysta Cabochon.” The woman introduced herself, still smiling that little odd smile that sent shivers down his back. She held out her hand. Tentatively, he shook her hand, not wanting to offend this woman, because for some peculiar reason, she unnerved him. She did not let go immediately, instead running her hand up his arm.

It was a feather-light touch, but he flinched anyway.

“I assume you’re here to find sponsors for your tributes.” She smiled, picking up a glass of champagne from the tray of a passing waiter. “Shall I offer my help?”

Effie did not splutter, but it was a near thing as she choked and coughed to clear her throat. He was too perplexed by Madam Calysta’s sudden offer to notice.

Offers does not just come to District 12 *this* easily.

“What’s the catch?” He asked shrewdly.

Effie hissed out a scandalous “Gale!” at his frankness, but offers from mysterious ladies who agitated his escort does not come for free. There’s *always* a price.

“Convince me why I should sponsor your tributes.” Her voice was soft, but it was clearly a command. “Money is money, but why should I bet on someone that does not stand even a slightest chance?”
He bit his lip, wanting to argue, but words failed to come to him. He knew she was right.

“If you are already convinced of that, why come to me?” He dared. Haymitch had told him to be honest, so that’s the way he’ll be.

He can’t talk for shit to save his life anyway.

“When I first saw you, Gale, I thought that you might stand a chance. You are determined to go home. You have the grit to survive out there. You have the fire to withstand the brutality of the Games.” She said serenely. “But I didn’t believe you’d actually win. You surprised me.”

He’s not sure whether he should feel flattered or offended.

“But I’m looking for someone with potential. You have fire, Gale, but there are many tributes with fire, tributes who are determined to go home, tributes who has the grit and ruthlessness to survive. I have seen all of them die. You are one of the rare few that managed to survive,” She inclined her head, her lips curling into a smirk. “You’re a fighter. It’s a surprise, but not an unpleasant one.”

He doesn’t know what to say to that. It was startling... and strangely refreshing to see a Capitol with such honest opinions. She was very clever and cunning, and that’s one of the reasons why he couldn’t let his guard down around her. She wanted something from him, and she’s not willing to divulge what yet.

“Bring me someone with potential, and I’ll extend my offer to you once more.” She gave him a cool smile, tilting her head gracefully to Effie before she departed.

He rubbed his nose bridge in frustration, wishing she had just got to the point earlier. In the end, she refused to sponsor for Yara and Ash.

“Gale,” Effie said quickly, anxiously, lowering her voice. “Stay away from Calysta Cabochon. She’s... She’s dangerous. If you need sponsors, find someone else.”

“But if we get someone with a chance to win, she’s willing to sponsor for us.” He frowned, disquieted by her nervousness.

Madam Calysta was... odd, certainly, but he does not understand why Effie thought her dangerous.

“Listen to me. There’s weird rumors about her. It’s not worth it to bargain with a woman like her.” Effie insisted, digging her manicured nails into his arm.

“The worst she could do to me is force me into bed with her.” He snapped. “District 12 needs sponsors to help our tributes. The tributes are trying their hardest to live, and they deserve us to try their best for them as well.”

“Gale...” Effie stammered.

“Effie, dear, I think Gale needs a moment alone.” Finnick interrupted smoothly, his customary rakish grin in place. There were more than a couple of gazes and excited murmurs as he appeared within their midst.

Gale could see the appeal. Gold-dusted skin, eyes the color of the summer sea, bronze hair, a chiseled body of the ancient gods, Finnick was born with the gift of beauty. With his natural charisma, he attracted attention everywhere he goes, like a moth to a flame.

“Come on.” Finnick grinned, steering him away from the stunned escort. With the truth of the
Victors’ glittering and glamorous lives laid bare in front of him now that he’s one of them, he saw Finnick in a different light. Like the older Victor had said, they all have something to protect. He wondered who Finnick was protecting.

“Who is Calysta Cabochon?” He demanded.

Finnick blinked in surprise, unperturbed by his rudeness.

“Madam Calysta? Was that why you were arguing with Effie back there?” He asked. “Has she spoken to you?”

He shrugged, turning away. He’s not quite sure what had happened himself, confused and unsettled by the conversation, so he doesn’t know how to answer Finnick.

“Madam Calysta is the owner of Velvet Rose. It’s a burlesque club – and it’s exclusive and highly secretive. Only the wealthiest and most influential are able to gain access. You can say she pretty much controls the entire nightlife scene.” Finnick explained, unfazed by his lack of explanation. “She attends the Games’ viewing every year. She has registered as a sponsor, but I have never heard her sponsoring for anyone before.”

“Never?” He frowned, eyes widening.

Finnick nodded solemnly.

Whatever games Madam Calysta was playing with him, he’s not interested. He’s not sure why such a famous person had approached him in the first place, or why she thought that he out of everybody could find someone with potential. What sort of potential? And why does she need that sort of potential?

Trying to analyze this subject was giving him a headache. Leave the thinking and games to Haymitch. He has always been a more technical person.

“If you keep frowning like that, you’re going to have wrinkles here.” Finnick teased, poking him in the forehead. He glowered at the older man.

“I can live with that.” He muttered.

“Oh, then what would your darling fans think of that?” Finnick laughed, directing him towards a table where Joanna and Haymitch sat. It seemed like Haymitch had finished hunting for sponsors and was drinking again. At least this time he was drinking out of a proper glass.

“They can live with it.” He dismissed.

Better yet, he starts losing fans so his popularity could go down, but he has a feeling that this was not a possible wish.

He hoped Haymitch doesn’t ask about his progress. If Effie had reacted so negatively towards Madam Calysta, what would Haymitch say?
Chapter 18

The setting for the 73rd Hunger Games was quite similar to his own arena. It was set in a ruined city, but with less foliage and plant life. The buildings were destroyed as well, but there was more salvageable trash around to use as weapons.

Food and water was scarce as well, and the Gamemakers did not release any mutts. To be honest, a more practical and safer arena compared to his.

Haymitch eventually found out about Madam Calysta, although he barely said much and gave him an almost contemplative stare.

He fidgeted restlessly on his stool, staring at the screen in front of him. It was split into two cameras, each showing his tribute and their physical health.

Ash and Yara had miraculously survived the Cornucopia, faithfully following Haymitch’s advice to run away from the bloodbath. Unfortunately, they were also split away from each other.

The amount of money they have remained at zero. No one had been willing to sponsor Yara and Ash.

They both failed to attract attention with their hideous costumes during the chariot parade, gotten low scores for their private session and had not managed to impress anyone during their interviews.

Katniss would kick him for being pessimistic, but he was simply realistic.

He flinched sharply when Ash’s screen went abruptly black. The heart monitor went terrifying silent. He tapped open the general camera, and saw that a Career tribute had snuck up on him and axed the young boy in the back. Haymitch sighed quietly beside him.

The dead boy’s image flickered, and suddenly he was looking at Calix and his blue, blue eyes. He blinked furiously, his hands starting to shake.

“Get out of here.” Haymitch whispered. “Go take a breather.”

He dug his nails into his palms, for once acquiescing easily. He left the room, barely hanging by a thread on his emotions. He ducked into the bathroom, relieved to see that it was unlocked and empty. He slammed the door shut behind him and slid to the floor.

He tried to release his hands, but they were stiff and unyielding. Blood slipped between his fingers, dripping onto his pants. He was glad that it’s black, or Effie would scream.

The door slid open silently, and suddenly there’s a small slip of a woman inside the bathroom with him.

“Hello, Gale.” She said in wonder. “You didn’t lock the door.”

He stared at her, too numb to speak or react.

The young woman sat down in front of him, and gently, very gently, coaxed him to uncurl his fists. She grabbed a bunch of napkins and tenderly dabbed at the bleeding wounds.

“I’m Annie Cresta.” She smiled slightly at him.
He cocked his head to the side in surprise. Annie Cresta of District 4 rarely comes to the Capitol, because of her... madness. But the young woman sitting in the bathroom with him doesn’t looked mad, but earnest and kind.

“The first time is always the hardest.” She said sympathetically.

“You know it well?” He asked.

Young, beautiful Annie Cresta. Young, beautiful, mad Annie Cresta, who smiled sadly at him and wrapped his hurt hands. Who doesn’t look at him as if he’s something broken, or something to be fixed.

“I never do mentoring, because of my... condition.” She shook her head, biting her lip. “But I wish... I wish no one has to die.”

He stiffened slightly, because her words were nearly treasonous.

“We can only save the one with the best chance.” He said bitterly. He tugged his hands from her gentle grip, standing up. “Thank you... for helping me.”

He extended his hand out to her, and her smile brightened as he pulled her up.

“Are you feeling better, Gale?” She asked.

He nodded, letting her hugged him briefly before he returned. He sat back down next to Haymitch, relieved to see Yara still alive. She was sleeping fitfully in a shelter, but she was safe and alive.

“I’m taking a nap.” Haymitch said gruffly, gazing at him.

He shrugged and waved his mentor away, knowing that the man hadn’t gotten much sleep the whole day. Haymitch gave him one last cursory glance before heading to the nearest couch, while he settled in for a long night.

The 73rd Hunger Games ended with the 18-year-old male tribute of District 2 as the Victor. Yara died on the second day, ambushed by the Career tributes.

He wanted to hate the boy for killing Yara, and was relieved that he didn’t have to greet the new Victor during the after party. He wasn’t sure how he’s going to react.

“We all stick together, but those Careers are a tight-knitted bunch.” Chaff explained. “There are some things that they won’t understand about us Victors from the lower Districts.”

He nodded slowly, averting his gaze from the table of Career Victors. He wasn’t quite sure he would enjoy hanging out with them anyway.

“You’re drinking a lot tonight.” Finnick observed, noticing the glass of whiskey in his hand.

He grimaced, downing the alcohol with a bitter scowl. While Haymitch and Effie would be riding back to District 12 the next day, he had to stay for a few days more for his appointments.

“Hopefully it will get me through the next few days.” He muttered under his breath.

Realization settled over Finnick’s face. The older Victor nodded soberly, leaning over to refill his drink.
“I’ll be here.” Finnick whispered into his ear. “You know where to find me.”

The fact that the older man would be staying in the Capitol as well sent a surge of relief through him. He wasn’t quite sure how he’s going to cope with only his prep team around.

Flavius, Venia and Octavia were... nice people, in spite of being from the Capitol, but they were oblivious to the reason for why he’s staying back. He might not ask for help from Finnick, but it was assuring to know that there’s someone around if he ever do.

A few seats away, Mags and Haymitch were watching their younger wards. It was good that the two had become sort of friends. Gale would need the support.

“A few months ago, he overdosed on sleeping pills.” Haymitch mumbled.

Mags frowned at him, although she did not take her eyes from Gale. She tapped on the table worriedly, cocking her head at Haymitch.

“He said it was unintentional. But... I’m not sure if he’s telling the truth or not.” He admitted. The day Hazelle turned up on his doorstep looking frantic and informing him that Gale had nearly died had plagued him from that day onwards. He doesn’t know how to help his newest Victor, even if he had miraculously managed to bring him home.

“Now?” Mags inquired.

He closed his eyes briefly, running his fingers through his tangled hair roughly. “I think he’s cutting back on the pills. He’s a reckless kid... but he’s also sensible. He doesn’t like to worry his family.”

“You just have to be there for him.” Mags murmured, smiling sadly.

“I am trying my best!” Haymitch growled. “But he’s not like Finnick.”

Mags gave him a pointed look, lips curled slightly in amusement. He slumped in his seat, tilting back his head in frustration. Gale was more like him than Finnick. But in other ways, he’s completely different from Haymitch as well. He doesn’t know how to deal with the boy. Having to leave Gale alone in the Capitol does not sit well with him either, and despite how irritating Effie was, he knew that the escort would at least make sure Gale does not get into any trouble. But she wasn’t staying either, and it’s... troubling. He couldn’t aid Gale if he’s not in the same damn city as the boy.

His concerns were alleviated to know that at least Finnick would be sticking around the Capitol as well for his own appointments, even if Gale would not reach out to the other Victor for help. But if anything happened... Finnick has his house phone number.
Chapter 19

Being in the Capitol alone was a rejuvenating experience... if only because he could see the ugliness more clearly without someone trying to coddle him. There’s also the lack of Effie around forcing him to smile and act cordial and stand up straight and really Gale I know your manners are not as atrocious as you like everyone to believe...

He blew out an exasperated breath as he scrolled down the screen of the tech pad he was given by Effie. On it was a list of potential stylists and their previous work experiences done up meticulously by the escort, indexed in alphabetical order. Whatever kind of woman Effie might be, no one could say that she’s not a perfectionist. The practical side of him appreciated her effort, despite his distaste in being forced to do this.

Effie has been hoping for a change of stylist before the next Games. Apparently, Camille has been talking about retirement recently. Gale was at least relieved that the next tributes does not have to endure the woman’s repugnant personality and rotten taste in fashion.

He was currently sitting outside a quaint, little cafe hidden away from the public, waiting for the first pair of stylists Effie had arranged for him to meet. He was to collect their portfolio for his escort to go through, that’s all.

“Gale Hawthorne?” A man was smiling at him, his green eyes watching him inquisitively. He was a fairly normal-looking man, and the only thing that subtracted from that... normality was the gold eyeliner that brought out the golden flecks in his green eyes.

“Cinna?” He asked carefully, before glancing at the woman beside him. “And Portia?”

The woman beamed at him, nodding as she took a seat opposite him. Compared to Cinna, she at least fit the image of a Capitol. Her hair was blond and curly and wild around her head, and she wore black lipstick and a black ruffled dress.

“May I call you Gale?” Her voice was cultured and husky, and her tone was polite and curious.

“Sure.” He shrugged. Every time someone called him Mr Hawthorne, it felt really weird.

A waitress came by to take their orders, giggling slightly as he glanced at her.

“Coffee. Black.” Portia smiled, looking between them in amusement. She smirked at her companion. “And a cappuccino for you, Cinna?”

“My usual.” Cinna chuckled quietly.

“And for you, Mr Hawthorne?” The waitress queried coyly.

He didn’t even glance at the menu. “Tea.”

“We have a wide range of tea for your enjoyment, sir. Would you perhaps like earl grey, chamomile, lemon ginger, barley or masala chai? We even have Darjeeling tea, imported directly from District 11.” She recommended.

He cocked his head blankly. He has never even heard of most of the teas she’s talking about.

“Chamomile,” He replied, before adding hurriedly, “Please.”
“Camille came to speak with me briefly. We were old classmates in fashion school.” Cinna said after the waitress left. “She has a lot of things to say about you.”

“Bad things, I suppose.” He said sardonically. He doesn’t expect the old witch to say anything complimentary about him.

“She said that you were wilful, insolent, disrespectful and refuses to wear the clothes she arranged for you to wear.” Portia said. All the things that he has heard Camille say about him at least a dozen times.

He barely stifled the urge to roll his eyes. Portia’s tone was careful, but impassive. He couldn’t tell what she thought of him.

“You know what I see when I look at you?” She asked. “I see a young man that’s respectful, thoughtful and gentle, and would do anything to protect those he loves.”

“You just met me.” He said bluntly. And she talked as if she knew him well. He felt a flicker of annoyance at a stranger assuming that she’s familiar with his character.

Portia tittered, laugh lines creasing her forehead. She glanced at Cinna with a sly smile.

“I’ve seen your Games,” She grinned. “And I’ve been told that I’m a good judge of character.”

The waitress came back with a tray of drinks. She set them down on the table before leaving with a cheery nod.

“Here’s the portfolios that Effie have requested.” Cinna slid two folders towards him. Each file was labelled respectively by each stylist’s name.

He didn’t open the folders. It was Effie’s job to go over their designs and chose the new stylists for District 12, not him.

“I know that 12 has not been well-received by the Capitol for many years, especially during the chariot parade, where presentation is the most important in garnering support from sponsors.” Cinna started.

His lips twisted wryly as he lifted the cup of tea to his lips. What an understatement.

If their tributes weren’t ignored, they were laughed or jeered at. It was pretty demoralizing.

“Instead of dressing the tributes up as coal miners yearly, we thought up a design that focused on 12’s main industry instead.” Portia smiled widely. She leaned forward, an excited glint in her dark eyes. “What’s the first thing you think of when you hear the word coal?”

“Dirty.” He snorted, unconvinced. He has been slapped on with charcoal the year before. It had taken ages for him to wash them off.

“What do you do with the coal?” Cinna asked, smiling mysteriously.

It seemed like they were genuinely trying to help, so he sighed and played along.

“We burn the coal.” He said.

That enigmatic smile again.

“I think you’ll like some of our designs, Gale.” Cinna smirked. “Now, as fun as this business talk is,
shall we speak of other things instead? Get to know each other?"

“You’re really confident you’ll get the job.” He observed in bemusement. He wasn’t even aware that District 12 was such a hot commodity.

“In the fashion modelling world, the most important thing isn’t the clothes you wear, or how beautiful you look, or how trendy your current hair colour is. It’s self-confidence.” Cinna said serenely.

He gave the designer a sceptical look. But who was he to argue anyway?

“So, what’s your favourite colour?” Portia inquired.

It was an easy question. “Green.”

“Like myrtle green?” She gestured at the inside lining of his coat, a colour that he had originally thought to be a dark teal. He doesn’t even know what myrtle green was.

“No,” He smiled slightly. “Like forest green.”

Conversation with Cinna and Portia was... not comfortable, of course – he rarely warmed up to people fast, especially people from the Capitol. But it was almost pleasant.

The chamomile tea tasted like crisp apple on his tongue. He supposed he could like this.

When he returned to the penthouse tonight, the Avox passed a package to him. Carefully, and warily, he ripped open the package to find a set of clothes inside.

There was a forest green bomber jacket, a grey and white striped button up, a black cashmere sweater and a pair of fitting black pants. It was almost eerie how they were all in his sizes.

Portia.

Camille has never once asked him what’s his favourite colour, or even take his preferences into consideration. So, he started picking his own wardrobe, selecting the simplest of designs and wearing whatever was the most comfortable for him.

His lips twitched up slightly in amusement. If Effie were to pick anyone as 12’s stylists, he hoped that it was Portia and Cinna.
A whoosh of something big flew through the air towards him. Without looking back, he instinctively ducked. The blade of the machete sunk into the wall beside him.

If it had hit him... it would probably carve him open.

His assailant had seized the chance to rush at him, not stopping even as they threw the machete. He spun around quickly, and was slammed against the wall, hands digging into the front of his shirt.

The enraged and determined face of District 4 girl pulled him back, before slamming him against the wall once more. He felt pain shot down his back from his shoulder. He tried to force her to let go, but she used her entire body weight to hold him down.

He saw her reaching for the machete and reacted instantly. He closed a hand into a fist and struck the side of her head with all his might.

She released him immediately, staggering away with a pained screech. Her pale, delicate face was scrunched up in anger, her dark hair pulled away from her face in a low ponytail. Despite her elfish beauty, she was tall and willowy, deceptively slim with muscles packed in her arms. Up close, she was a decent fighter, and way faster than him.

His shoulder throbbed as he warily eyed her. His hand itched to reach for the dagger, but she was poised to attack if he twitched even the slightest bit. It was just a matter of who strike first.

They struck in unison, grappling with each other. He choked as she hitched herself up his leg and wrapped her arms around his neck. Stumbling back, he rammed her into the wall. She yelled, faltering slightly. He reached up and blindly grabbed onto a piece of clothing. With a hissed cry, he bended at his waist and threw her down onto the ground.

Without releasing his iron grip on her sleeve, he spun around and straddled her stomach, slicing his dagger across her throat with one swift swipe.

She let out a noise like a whine before she went still. He stared at her in shock, still not registering that she’s dead.

When it finally did, he leaped off her and ran. If there’s one Career skulking around, it meant that there were others nearby. He’s not sticking around to be ambushed.

He returned to District 12 with two more names in his list of regrets. As much as his mother was convinced it wasn’t his fault, he still bore responsibility for his failure to bring home Yara and Ash. Preferably both, of course, but life wasn’t fair. But in the end, he brought home none.

He exited the train station alone, with no one around to receive him. He hadn’t informed his family when he’ll be returning, and his stay in the Capitol had been undetermined. He’s probably going to get a tirade from Hazelle.

He dropped by the Mellark Bakery before he goes home. Mr Mellark and his youngest son were present, both looking up as he entered.
“Gale, how are you?” Mr Mellark’s smile was warm. He might be Merchant, but he’s probably the only one that he could stand in the entire family. The second son had been a classmate of his, back before he became a Victor. They have never talked, but Rye Mellark has always been far too obnoxiously friendly for his taste.

“Mr Mellark.” He bobbed his head.

“Are you here to buy some pastries for your family?” Mr Mellark’s gaze was knowing. He glanced at his son. “Peeta, please help Gale.”

The younger blonde flushed when Gale caught him staring. But he was used to the curious stares already, so he tactfully ignored the boy’s embarrassment.

Peeta came around the counter, suggesting the raspberry truffle for Posy. Not knowing much about pastries, and trusting a baker’s taste, he took one raspberry truffle, two chocolate mousses for his brothers and a custard bun freshly out of the oven for Hazelle.

He was still unaccustomed to his newfound wealth, but he enjoyed pampering his family whenever he could.

“Have a good day!” Peeta smiled shyly as he wrapped up his purchases.

Gale managed to muster up a small smile in return as he left the bakery.

He was greeted by exuberant cries as he entered his house. Posy screamed with delight as she dashed forward to jump into his arms.

“You’re back, Gale!” Vick yelled.

Hazelle followed after her boys, wiping her hands on her apron. “No running in the house!” She gave Posy a disapproving look as the girl glanced back with a guilty smile.

“Gale, you should have told me you’re coming back today.” She murmured, pulling him into a fierce hug. She pulled back slightly to peer at his face. “Haymitch said that you had to stay for promotional photoshoots.”

He grimaced at the thought. His last photoshoot for the Victory Tour had been an utter torture. He was no model, even if Effie had insisted that he has a ‘camera-face’.

“Yeah.” He frowned. Hazelle seemed to sense his sour mood, so did not pursue the matter any further. “I got something for all of you.”

He placed the bag gently on the dining table. His siblings scrambled to climb onto the chairs in excitement. He watched with a fond smile as Rory ripped the paper bag, while Vick and Posy waited in anticipation.

Predictably, Rory and Vick grabbed the two chocolate mousses. The custard bun was still hot, steaming slightly in Hazelle’s hands.

“This must be yours, Gale.” Rory passed a small, swathed bag over.

Confused, he gently unknotted the bag to find a white, doughy and biscuit-shaped pastry inside. He took a small bite, and instantly, almonds and cream melted on his tongue.

“What’s this?” He asked out loud.
Hazelle glanced over. “That’s meringue, my dear.”

He wasn’t sure what’s meringue, except it sounded like some sort of fancy Capitol dish. But he knew that he hadn’t paid for that. A scowl twisted his lips in irritation when he figured out the culprit easily.

He didn’t like to owe people. But he has a lot of time to drop by the Mellark Bakery anyway, so he settled down to bask in his family’s warmth.
Gale Hawthorne in the fire burns brighter in the dark verse

He seldom sees Katniss nowadays. He felt guilty and shamed that he has been avoiding his best friend for the last couple of months. He missed her.

He missed Prim.

He reached out to pluck a beautifully red strawberry. They were fresh and abundant this year, and he picked a few before he left the woods to head to the Mayor’s house. It was habit that led him to sneak towards the back door instead, even though he was no longer a starving, dirt-poor Seam boy.

Madge opened the door when he knocked, and she looked surprised when she realized it was him.

“Gale?” She blurted out, blinking at him in confusion.

He lifted up his bag of strawberries. Still looking bewildered, she peered into the bag. He pushed the bag lightly into her hands.

“They are really sweet this year.” He mentioned. “The money for these strawberries... can you give it to Katniss?”
“Oh.” Her mouth formed a small ‘o’ of realization. “Sure, of course.”

He inclined his head before he turned to leave, startling slightly as she called out and grabbed his arm. At the sudden movement, he flinched, tensing up.

“S—Sorry.” Madge apologized profusely, letting go as if she was burned, her eyes wide with surprise. “Didn’t mean to grab you all of a sudden.”

“It’s okay. Just...” He stared at her cautiously. “No sudden movements.”

She looked understanding, nodding silently without any judgement in her gaze. She opened her door wider, shifting her body in a gesture that looked as if... she’s inviting him in?

“I have just prepared lunch. Papa is busy and will be back late.” She said tentatively. “Do you want to join me?”

He eyed her doubtfully, wondering if he had heard wrong. But she continued staring back at him, not wavering. She tilted her chin and stood her ground.

“...Okay.” He didn’t know what possessed him to agree, but Madge’s beaming grin was quick to assuage his sudden swell of alarm.

Maybe he was lonely. Maybe he missed Katniss, but couldn’t face her because she knew him too well. She’d see all the shame and guilt and his ugly, dirty, disgusting soul. She’d pity him, or worst, hate him.

There was no pressure hanging out with Madge. She barely knew him, and she doesn’t demand anything from him.

“It’s nothing fancy, although there’s too much for just one person. I thought papa was coming home for lunch.” A flash of disappointment on her face, but she was quick to smile again. She waved at him to sit as she went to fetch another plate.

There was potato salad, tomato and thyme soup and chicken stuffed with mushrooms and vegetables.

“It’s a bit too much even for two.” He noted in amusement.

Madge sat down opposite him, blushing slightly. “I might have gone overboard. I seldom cook.”

Lunch was a quiet affair, although it was surprisingly pleasant. He’s not a big talker, nor does he knows what to say to her. Once, their relationship had been fraught with tension and awful criticisms from him. Now, a stranger sat across Madge Undersee. They both probably doesn’t know how to deal with Gale now.

“Thank you for the meal.” He murmured after lunch and helping to wash up the utensils, despite Madge’s initial protests.

“Thank you for spending lunch with me.” She smiled at him.

His own smile was slower to appear, but it was genuine as he gave her a short nod and left her house.
He finally ran into Katniss one day, and out of all the places, it was right in front of the Mellark Bakery that their confrontation took place.

She was exiting the shop alone, clutching her hunting bag, when he walked past. They both froze in surprise, staring at each other. As her face started to darken, he seemed to shrivel up in dread. The glower on her face meant that she was furious with him.

“Catnip—” She stomped past him and he hurriedly stepped in front of her to block her way. She has grown taller, but more stick thin tall than willowy tall.

She glared at him. “Get out of my way, Gale.”

“Can we talk?” He was not pleading, but it was close. “Please?”

The anger on her face did not waver, but her eyes flicked over his face searchingly. She straightened up, her body posture clearly screaming that she wanted to leave, but she was willing to hear him out.

“I’m sorry. I know that recently we haven’t been talking…” He tried to explain. “It’s been a difficult time for me, and – and I needed some space.”

“You have been avoiding me.” She snapped. “If you had needed space, or time – whatever, you could have just told me! You think I won’t understand because I’m not a Victor? You didn’t think I was worried at all?”

“It’s not like that.” He denied, shaking his head. Guilt and frustration twisted his stomach in knots. Katniss was a small thing, but her eyes were burning brimstone as she scoffed at his feeble excuses.

He was desperate to tell her everything. It gnawed at him, but he can’t. He needed to keep her oblivious, to keep her safe. He didn’t want her to treat him any differently, to rage, to pity, to look at him as if he was spoiled.

“Then what was it?” She demanded, hurt painted over her face. “We are best friends, aren’t we? What was it that is so terrible that you have to avoid me?!”

Every word hit him like he’s being stabbed. She wasn’t angry, she was hurt by his distrust.

“You always run away whenever it matters most.” She said in disappointment when he did not speak further.

He flinched back as if he had been physically slapped. He couldn’t defend himself even if he wanted to, even though his first instinct was to snap back. He has no right when he refused to tell her the truth. She stalked past him and he let her go, feeling cold with anguish.

He felt a gaze on him, and his head swivelled over to see Peeta watching him without shame.

“Are you alright?” Peeta asked hesitantly, looking concerned.

_No, I’m not alright. I might have lost my best friend, you fool._ He wanted to yell and rage at the younger boy, instead he gave Peeta an angry scowl and walked off, trying not to break with every step.

Katniss was right as always. He always run whenever anyone forced him to talk. He pushed people
away instead of confronting his fears and feelings. And he couldn’t, couldn’t even say that he’s protecting them, or that he’s being selfish in actuality, keeping the truth from everyone so they didn’t have to know he had to sell his body to the Capitol like a common whore.

Gale’s mood had plunged right after the fight with Katniss. He spent the following weeks relapsing, fighting against his lack of control and the nightmares that came back with a vengeance. He doesn’t know what he would do if he doesn’t have his family for support.

The Victory Tour for the winner of the 73rd Hunger Games had come around, and the Mayor had rushed through the preparations.

Gale hated the Victory Tours. It was not only a waste of food and money, but forcing the families of the deceased tributes to go through their grief all over again was despicable.

It was the perfect strategy to lower the losing Districts’ esteem and showed off the power of the Capitol. To subtly declare that there’s absolutely no chance you could defy the Capitol.

“I don’t see why I have to be here.” He grumbled. He was wearing the green bomber jacket that Portia had given him. It was by far his only favourite garment and it wasn’t even given by his own stylist.

Unfortunately, Camille had not left yet, and he was forced to endure her presence. He had cleverly made use of Haymitch to escape the old witch, but it was not something he felt particularly guilty of. His mentor has been drunk since morning, and Effie had gotten into a fight with him the moment she arrived. Now she was fuming silently and ignoring him, practically sticking by Gale’s side instead.

If he’s going to be stuck with their moody escort the entire day, then Haymitch could deal with Camille in return.

“If the Victors of the Districts are not present on such an important event, it’s going to set a bad example of 12!” Effie hissed.

“Who’s going to notice?” He scowled, resisting the urge to roll his eyes. Everyone’s eyes were going to be on their new, shining Victor anyway. He had hoped to hide out in his house, but unfortunately, attendance was mandatory for everyone – just like the Reapings.

The new Victor’s speech was tedious and typical, similar to his own, with just a few differences altered for a Career. He barely even remembered much about the boy, except that his name was Titus. He didn’t get a chance to speak to the new Victor, but he did meet one of the mentors of District 2.

“Haymitch.” Enobaria greeted curtly as she approached them. She cut a distinctive figure, and he easily recognized her by her sharpened gold teeth. He wondered if it’s something the Capitol had coerced her to do, or was it something done under her own volition.

“Enobaria,” Haymitch drawled. “Once again 12 is entertaining your District.”

She grinned, although it looked more like a snarl with her unique teeth. “Come on, Haymitch, you got your glory the previous year when your boy won.”

Her sharp eyes flicked towards Gale, her lips tugging upwards when he didn’t look away.
“I’ll see you both soon.” She inclined her head, walking off with a sway in her hips. It’s not with the intention to seduce, but more like a predator stalking its prey. Sure enough, most people scattered when they saw her coming their way.

“She’s a character, that one.” Haymitch smirked at him.

Effie snorted beside him, an unusually unladylike noise coming from her. Her eyes were almost slits as she glared haughtily at Haymitch.

“At least Enobaria knows how to conduct herself appropriately in such an important affair.” She said scathingly.

He rolled his eyes sky high, praying for patience the moment he noticed Haymitch cocking his brow up to retaliate.

“Appropriate, sweetheart?” He growled. “I’m sober. I arrived on time—” All thanks to Gale, actually. “I didn’t even puke on anyone.”

“You’re wearing slippers.” Effie snapped in derision. She glared pointedly at the orange slippers on Haymitch’s feet.

“I’m heading back.” Gale interrupted loudly. Without glancing back at the bickering couple, he walked off.

These two was a nightmare whenever they get going. He wasn’t sure why Effie was wasting so much time when Haymitch obviously couldn’t be bothered.

Thinking of his mentor and escort made him feel strangely irritated, so he shoved all thoughts of them out of his mind.
The mutt yowled, a loud, screeching wail that hurts his ears, struggling violently in his makeshift net. He picked up the dustbin lid from where he had shoved under the broken cupboard. The lid was dented, the edge almost curving in. When the ropes snapped from the mutt’s struggles, he lunged forward, using the lid as a shield.

He braced for the painful impact, feeling the breath knocked out of him as the lid slammed into the feline. There was a yelp that he wasn’t sure belonged to him or the mutt – before the two went crashing out of the broken window.

Luckily, they were only on the third floor. The broken chair leg he had positioned upright in a stack of bricks missed and merely grazed the side of the mutt’s ribs.

He hit the ground and rolled over to lessen the impact, but even then, he felt his bones groaned in protest. The mutt was grappling with the net, but he had reinforced them with wires. It wouldn’t be that easy to untangle out of the net, even if you’re a 700-pounds cat monster.

The mutt snarled and seemingly gave up on its hopeless fight with the net. Its golden eyes swung towards him, and it jumped forward, determinedly ignoring the net wrapped tightly around its body.

He dodged, but the mutt still managed to swipe desperately at his leg, dragging two bloody trails down his thigh. It wasn’t a deep cut, but the pain burned like a thousand needles. Eyes watering, biting down on the scream building in his chest, he darted to the side before lunging towards the mutt’s neck. The blade ripped into the thick muscles of its neck, but before it could completely sink in, a paw hit him across the gut and he went flying.

He hit the ground and didn’t get up, wheezing for breath. This is it... I have done my best. He closed his eyes for death, but it didn’t come.

He turned his head in confusion, and released the breath he didn’t know he was holding when he saw that the mutt had stopped moving, its chest falling up and down shallowly.

The Victors’ Village was a vision of white as winter snow descended over District 12. It made him realized that with the next upcoming Hunger Games, he would be turning eighteen. It would be the last year his name would be entered into the Reaping if he hadn’t been reaped one and a half year ago.

So, it was with a bitter gratification he felt when he turned eighteen. He had survived his last year, even if it’s not the way he had wanted it.

“Happy birthday, dear.” Hazelle murmured, kissing his cheek as he came down from his room. He raised his brow when he noticed the dead turkey on the table. She followed the direction of his gaze. “It’s from Katniss. She dropped by earlier. She... said that she won’t be joining us today.”

A lump formed in his throat. He averted his gaze so Hazelle wouldn’t notice the pain and regret in his eyes. So, she was still angry with him.

He remembered promising Katniss that he would catch a turkey for her fifteenth birthday, but failed to do so in the end. Game had been hard that week, but he had managed to catch a few rabbits and
squirrels for her birthday feast. He had also gotten her a new jacket.

“Did something happen between the both of you?” Hazelle asked gently.

He shook his head mutely, not wanting to talk about Katniss suddenly. He was saved from replying as the doorbell rang and Posy shrieked past him.

“Oh, Posy, don’t run!” Hazelle sighed in annoyance, chasing after her daughter. Huffing fondly, he followed after them, spying a blond head over his mother’s.

“Hi, Gale!” Peeta’s face lit up when he saw him. He twitched back at the boy’s sudden familiarity and cheerfulness. The blonde passed a box over to Hazelle, smiling brightly at Posy before he left.

“Is that...?” He stared at the white box in his mother’s hands.

Hazelle held the box out of his reach, her face relaxed in contentment. “No looking now, Gale. Go and set the table for dinner.”

He sighed in resignation, allowing his mother to shoo him out of the kitchen. Rory was carefully balancing a tray of dishes, his brows furrowed in concentration. He noticed that Hazelle had cooked all of his favourite dishes. Posy was peering over the table, looking hungry and awed. Laughing, he grabbed her around the waist and plopped her onto a chair.

Katniss has always been family, not only to him, but to the rest of his family as well, so the gaping hole of her presence was felt deeply. But her absence was quickly forgotten as his siblings worked at cheering him up.

Affected by their joy, Gale found himself relaxing and smiling.

If he wanted to survive the Capitol, he needed to hoard as many good memories as he could, to remind himself why he was still alive and fighting.

“Cake! Cake! Cake!” Posy screeched excitedly when dinner was over.

He laughed softly, amused that she was more excited for the cake than he was. Hazelle went to fetch the cake out, sliding the tray out from the packaged box.

It was a three-layered cake with a forest theme. The first layer was an intricately painted trunk of a tree, the second covered with many leaves, and tiny white flowers, each individual petal so detailed that he could make out the veins. The final and top layer was covered in white icing that resembled snow, with a tiny rabbit sticking its nose into the cream.

Gale raised a brow at the cake, and stared at his mother in bemusement.

“I instructed him to bake a birthday cake.” Hazelle shrugged, but she looked immensely pleased. “He outdid himself.”

Vick balanced precariously on the chair as he leaned over to light up the lone candle on the cake.

“Happy birthday, big brother.” Posy said sweetly, leaning over to kiss his cheek.

It was the first time in his life that he has a birthday cake. They had all grown up struggling for food. Even though he knew his mother had wanted to, she never has the money to purchase a cake from the bakery for any of her children. He swore that every single one of his siblings would get to eat a cake on their birthdays for as long as they lived.
He closed his eyes and blew out the candle.
Gale was setting a pot of water to boil over the stove when the doorbell rang. He opened the door to find Thom on the other side.

“May I come in?” The other boy grinned, and before Gale could answer, he had shoved his way in, stomping snow out of his boots on the doormat.

“Sure, just come in.” Gale muttered, rolling his eyes as he shut the door. The cold abruptly cut off. If there’s one thing he loved about his new house, it’s the heater.

He moved back to attend to the stove, grabbing a sachet from a plastic bag on the counter. He tore the sachet open, dumping the contents into the simmering water. Thom made a revolted sound at the bitter smell that immediately permeated the air.

“What is that?” He choked.

He stirred the contents into the water, nose wrinkling slightly. He has gotten used to the bitter smell that wafted off the pot every time he boiled the valerian root.

“That’s tea.” He answered simply, not wanting to elaborate that it’s prescribed tea for his sleep problems. He had resolved to get better, although it’s an on-and-off thing, but it wasn’t for the lack of trying. He switched off the stove, pouring the tea into a cup. He joined Thom at the dining table, eyes flickering towards the reddened knuckle on the other boy’s right hand. He sipped into his drink curiously, but did not ask. “So why are you here?”

“I can’t come to visit my best friend?” Thom frowned. “Where’s Hazelle?”

He rolled his eyes, amusement lacing his smile. “She’s out collecting clothes to wash at the Seam.” At the questioning look from Thom, he continued, “She has nothing to do at home, so she’s going around to help people clean and mend their clothes for free.”

“If only I’m twenty years older...” Thom joked, sighing dramatically. “I wonder how she ever gave birth to a son like you.”

“And you asked why I’m always sceptical of you ‘visiting’ me.” He said dryly. “My mother is way out of your league.”

“So, does that mean I do not have your approval?” Thom teased, his lips stretching across his face in a cheeky grin. He rolled his eyes, not deigning him an answer.

The conversation ebbed slightly, but like a tide receding, a sort of anxiety hanging in the air. Any other person Gale would have snap at them to hurry up and speak already, but he always found he has more patience to spare when it comes to Thom.

“Have you, uh, been talking to our— well, your former classmates recently?” Thom asked, hesitation carved into his worn face. He watched his friend carefully over his cup of tea, considering the glimmer of anger and worry in his eyes.

“No, you know I haven’t been.” He said, exhaling slowly. The only people he has talked to since he’s back from the Capitol has been Thom, Madge and occasionally, Bristel, and excluding the fight he had with Katniss... He doesn’t really talk to anyone else anymore. “What is it, Thom?”
“They – Those Merchant kids... well, there have been some rumours going around. They have access to Capitol channels at home, so—” Thom was nervous, jittery almost. He tapped his finger distractedly on his thigh. “They said that you have been spotted with a Capitol woman on the news... and um, they have been saying shitty things about you.” His lips tilted into an angry scowl, jaw clenched tight. Whatever they have been saying about Gale probably wasn’t good.

He wrestled with the urge to look away from Thom’s gaze, even as something squeezed in his chest, making him dizzy with the panic and fear of being found out.

“They said that you forgot that you’re just a Seam rat, and that you have been brainwashed by the Capitol, and then they insinuated that you— you probably spent your time in the Capitol on your knees—” Thom broke off, his cheeks flushing in fury.

“Is that why your hand is injured?” He said flatly, trying not to show how much it affected him. It was much easier to bear it when the insults were directed to him. “You picked a fight with a group of Merchant kids?”

“Hey, I only managed to get one of them. Bristel wrecked the other two.” Thom declared proudly. His face fell immediately, and he bit his lips. “Delly said that these aren’t the only things they have been saying about you…”

“Delly?” He repeated, raising a brow at his friend. He wasn’t even aware that Thom knew who the blonde shopkeeper was. “Like Delly from the shoe shop?”

“—And they were all pretty horrible rumours.” Thom continued, pretending he did not hear him, his cheeks flushing – but in embarrassment now instead. “She tried to put a stop to it, but she’s far too nice and nobody’s listening.”

“It’s alright.” He interjected. “Tell her to stop. It’s not worth it. And you and Bristel stopped picking fights over me as well.”

“Not worth it?” Thom echoed indignantly. “You didn’t hear what they were saying! Shit, they pissed me off so much! To hear them talking about you in that manner...”

“Doesn’t change anything.” He said tiredly. “If you’re going to pick a fight with everyone who slanders me, you’re just telling them they’re right.”

Thom scowled mulishly, folding his arms across his chest. “I don’t like this.”

“I heard worse in the Capitol.” He smiled weakly. “You want a drink?”

“Only if it’s not whatever you’re drinking.” Thom shot a suspicious look at his cup, nose scrunching up in disdain.

He chuckled and get up, heading towards the refrigerator to get a glass of orange juice.
He used to think that he knew his body best. He was a hunter, and he was constantly aware of every slight shift of his muscle, every breath in his ears, every shake of his fingers as he pressed them against the string of his bow. When his mind goes startling clear, his gaze zeroing in on his prey, it felt like every breath moved with him.

Now he has good days and bad days. Once upon a time, bad days had meant no game in the woods. Now bad days meant breaking out into cold sweat and feeling as if the world had just unceremoniously shifted out from under his feet and dumped him on his ass.

He has never wanted his siblings – Posy, especially – to see him whenever an attack hit. It was bad enough that she had to watch the Games every year, even though she was just turning four. She learned death even before she could comprehend it.

He hadn’t notice Posy running up, not until she was right beside him. She wrapped her arms – or tried to, anyway – around his waist as she bounded up to him, her tiny weight colliding into him. Startled, he wasn’t prepared for the impact and staggered.
Suddenly, he could hear Coral growling at him, her hands fisted into the front of his shirt. The vicious twist of her lips, teeth bared into a parody of a smile, the coldness in her dark eyes as she threw him against the wall. He was hearing his blood rushing in his ears, the instantaneous panic that shot through his veins as his mind flashed to back there.

“—ale! Gale, breathe!”

He tried to grasp onto the voice, but it lingered tauntingly out of reach. Then, without warning, a stinging pain bloomed across his cheek.

“Sorry, sorry—” Katniss’s eyes were huge and scared as she stared down at him. “Gale, are you back with me?”

“No, no—you have to run—” He shook his head, feeling unexpectedly groggy. He tried to stand, but he dropped back down. “She—Coral— she’s going to kill me.”

Katniss’s brows furrowed in bewilderment, but she found the name he uttered vaguely familiar.

“There’s no one around, but your sister and I.” She said. When he continued staring at her blankly, attention already starting to wander back into his head, she tried desperately, appealing to the side of him that would do anything for Posy. “Gale, come on, you’re scaring Posy.”

His grey eyes moved back rapidly to her face, half-dazed. At the mention of Posy’s name, he seemed to snap back slowly. His gaze flickered to the girl standing behind Katniss.

“Gale?” Posy whimpered, starting to tear up. “Did I hurt you? I’m—I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to hurt you!”

“No, no, Posy, you didn’t.” He murmured, reaching out for her. The little girl stared hesitantly at his face, clearly torn between running into his arms and hurting him again. “Come here, Posy. I’m so sorry for scaring you.”

Posy sniffed loudly and dashed into his arms, her legs folding in his lap. He pulled her tight to her body, and as the exhilaration and panic slowly drained out of him, he was filled with mortification and anger at himself.

“You are safe, Gale.” Katniss said quietly, as if to remind him. “You’re in District 12.”

He wanted to say sometimes I can’t remember what safe means anymore and I’m scared I’ll never be okay, but instead he hugged Posy tighter and nodded wordlessly, not daring to look at Katniss and see the pity in her eyes.
Chapter 26

Katniss didn’t leave straightaway after they had calmed Posy down and sent her to bed. He knew she was going to confront him, but he was far too tired to face that conversation. He tried to delay the evident conversation, murmuring softly and patting Posy to sleep in her room.

When he finally couldn’t dawdle any longer, he left Posy’s room and closed the door quietly behind him. Katniss, who was leaning against the wall outside, straightened up when she saw him.

For a moment, they were silent, awkward and tensed between them. He refused to speak first though, and Katniss eventually lost the battle.

“Are you feeling okay?” She asked hoarsely.

More than fucked up, he thought, but he merely nodded tightly. His head still felt muddled, and trying to focus on his thoughts was like wading through treacle.

“This... is not the first time it happened, isn’t it?” She was frowning, her face half-concealed in the shadow. He wasn’t sure what the frown meant, whether she was pitying him or whether she was angry at him for keeping this from her the entire time. It suddenly hit him that he couldn’t read her anymore. He used to know her habits and quirks, could read her as easily as she could read him.

He has no one to blame but himself for this.

“No.” He replied, heart aching at the vastness between them.

She swallowed harshly, her expression seeming to crumble, warring between anger and sadness. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“What do you want me to say?” He spat, his defences slamming up. “That I couldn’t sleep without seeing all the dead children haunting me? That I nearly hurt my little sister because I couldn’t get myself under control? That—That I’m barely surviving most days?”

That sometimes he felt the loneliness so acute that he could bleed tears from his heart. That even with his family’s support, they could never understand the grief he has to go through. Often, he hated himself so much – for his failure, for his weakness, for living. He could only watch his life spiralled out of control as a mere spectator, his hollow, weeping heart splintered from grief.

Katniss remained mute, her own heart clenching in pain. She stared into his eyes, searching desperately for any hint of the boy she once knew. She loved Gale. Once, she cannot imagine a world where there’s no Gale, but she had survived without him for almost two years, barely remembering the boy he once was before his Games. Every time she sees him, it’s like he’s slowly fading away, her Gale vanishing bit by bit. She thought she knew him best, out of everyone else. But it looks like she never knew him. Now it looks like a pair of strangers staring at each other. It occurred to her that Gale probably doesn’t know her anymore as well.

“Is that why you’re avoiding me?” She croaked. “Because you think I can’t handle all... that?”

“Catnip...” She wanted to sob at the affectionate endearment. It was hers, it was theirs, but the familiar grey eyes that stared at her now was unrecognizable. “It’s not because I think you can’t. It’s because I don’t know if I can.”
When Katniss left his house, he stood at the window sill and watched her go. He continued watching until her back disappeared in the snow.

The look of heartbreak on her face would stay with him for a long time. Yet another person he let down...

He wondered when exactly did he lost her. Was it when they were fighting outside the Mellark Bakery? Or when he started actively avoiding her after he returned from the 73rd Hunger Games? Or was it way back then, after his Victory Tour, where he came back with the knowledge that he truly belonged to the Capitol now.

He felt like he had just lost something vital, but he had gone numb, shutting off the grief and misery from his heart. He knew it would hurt much worse later, but he was so, so tired. He had lost his best friend, his Catnip.

It would be the last time he spoke to Katniss... until the 74th Hunger Games.
The day of the 74th Hunger Games was a distressingly warm day. He had wanted to forgo his outerwear, but Effie had shrieked about decorum and formality when she spotted him clad only in his button up. He was forced into a midnight blue coat that made him a dark spot amidst the vibrant colours of the Capitol.

“Where’s Camille?” He idly asked, only so he could avoid her if he sees her coming.

Effie was distracted, yelling at the crew who was setting up their equipment around the stage. She was dressed in pink for this year’s Reaping, with puffy sleeves and a huge flower accessory on her curly hair. Against the blistering sun, she looked like a ghost, with how white and caked on her face was.

“Camille has retired, Gale.” She replied absentmindedly, before she turned to him with a huge smile of delight. “She recently got married.”

His face scrunched up in disbelief and distaste. He couldn’t imagine Camille being married, but Effie looked genuinely happy for her, so he squashed down his expression of doubtful disgust and hummed noncommittally.

“Isn’t she like, already eighty?” Haymitch was not so polite, snorting loudly. “I mean, you wouldn’t be able to tell. She probably doesn’t even have her original face anymore.”

His lips twitched, but he quickly smothered the grin when he saw Effie’s reddening face.

“Do not be so rude, Haymitch! Camille is a charming lady of high standing! Although she might be a little—” Effie stammered briefly, trying to find the proper word.

“—Infuriating?” He suggested.

“Witless?” Haymitch chortled, smirking.

“Enough, the both of you!” Effie snapped, flushing red. “Camille might not be an excellent stylist, but she is not unintelligent, just— just uninformed.”

“Uninformed.” Haymitch snickered, lifting his whiskey bottle to his mouth.

Effie huffed angrily, not deigning him a reply. She stalked off to hasten the crew, shouting snappily at the unfortunate men. He noticed the Mayor watching the scene in bemusement. He gave the weary-looking man a nod before they went up the stage. Haymitch stumbled and swayed as he tried to walk up the steps.

“How much did you drink this morning?” He muttered, gripping his mentor’s tightly around his arm as they struggled up the stage. No wonder Haymitch has been strangely jovial. A fleeting thought of how funny it would be to see his mentor tumble off the stage flickered past his mind. For how short life was – and literally, in his case, as a Victor with his family’s lives hanging in the balance – he tried to find humour and entertainment in little things.

But it probably wouldn’t be funny if Haymitch breaks his neck or something.

The Mayor stepped up to start his speech, his tone monotonous and impassive. He might have tuned out the Mayor’s voice as he started reading out the list of District 12’s past Victors. In seventy-four
years, they had exactly three, with him as the latest Victor.

Which was the perfect time for Haymitch to start hollering and laughing and tried to wrap his arms around Effie. He barely managed to pull his mentor back into his seat with a growl of exasperation.

“Happy Hunger Games!” Effie trotted up and greeted cheerfully, her wig slightly off-centre from Haymitch’s attempted hug. “And may the odds be ever in your favour!” She dragged her words almost obnoxiously. It’s times like this where he has an incredible urge to hit something whenever he hears her hyper voice.

“Alright, ladies first!” Effie stepped back towards the podium, reaching into the glass bowl. She pulled out a slip of paper, and called out with a sharp, clear voice that seemed to echo across the town square. “Primrose Everdeen!”

There was a moment where everything in his head goes blank. He was stunned into silence, could only stare in shock at the little blond girl who had promised to keep his near-death a secret from her big sister. She tucked her blouse into her skirt nervously, walking forward as the girls around her moved aside.

Katniss started to scream, fighting through the crowd towards her sister. The Peacekeepers moved forward threateningly, and Gale slammed back with a shock like ice water down his back.

“Prim!” She yelled frantically. “I volunteer! I volunteer as tribute!”

His mouth dropped open. There was a sudden shush that befell over the audience. District 12 has never had a volunteer before.

“Lovely!” Effie looked close to stuttering. “But I believe there’s a small matter of introducing the tributes and then asking for volunteers, and if one does not come forth, then we, um…”

“What does it matter?” The Mayor asked, staring at Katniss with a pained expression. “Let her come forward.”

Prim was clinging to Katniss, crying hysterically. Katniss looked stony, although fear shone in her eyes.

He looked up to see Rory pushing his way towards them, wrapping his arms around Prim’s waist and pulling her away. Katniss nodded at the younger boy, before making her way up the stage.

Their eyes met, and despite not talking to each other for months, she had automatically sought him out. She tried to stifle the terror she’s feeling, and he dipped his head slightly to show that he’ll be there for her.

Effie asked her name and she answered the escort with a barely trembling voice. Not one person clapped, and Gale watched as everyone touched the three middle fingers to their mouths before raising their arms into the air. He shivered, feeling something not quite like awe – but he was breathless as he watched them.

“Look at her!” Haymitch shot out of his seat, stumbling over. “Look at this one! I like her!” He sounded drunk and delighted. “Lots of... spunk!” His head swerved sharply to the cameras and crowed. “More than you!” He swayed dangerously, and Gale was on his feet before he could properly react. “More than you!”

And then he toppled off the stage.
He wanted to help, but he knew that getting off the stage was impossible while the Reaping was still ongoing, so he forced himself back down. He should have known better than to even think of Haymitch falling off the stage. Now the man has gone and done it.

The Reaping continued, and Effie picked the male tribute. He was mentally bracing himself, heart thumping in fear for Rory.

“Peeta Mellark!” Effie proclaimed.

*The baker boy, he thought. The boy who baked the forest cake.*

Peeta looked frightened, but he put up a false bravado as he climbed up the steps. No one volunteered for him, his brothers remained silent in the audience. He inwardly scoffed and understood why he could never stand Rye Mellark now. He could never comprehend not wanting to protect his younger siblings. If Rory had been Reaped... If he wasn’t a Victor... he would have volunteered without hesitation.

The rest of the Reaping continued on without Gale registering any of it. At least he handled it better than last year’s Reaping.

Prim was not supposed to have been reaped. Katniss was not supposed to have volunteered. The Everdeen sisters should have been safe.

A creeping, insidious thought slithered in like ice through his veins, a fleeting speculation if this year’s Reaping has been rigged. He might have protected his family, but what if—*what if* Snow hasn’t been satisfied with his performance and goes for Prim instead? Something that’s a combination of fear and fury trembled through his body, and he had to fight to remain tight-lipped until the Reaping ended. Without a word, he headed straight to the train while the tributes bade what would probably be their last farewells to their families.
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was an awkwardness in the air when he finally joined them during supper. Haymitch was nowhere to be found, probably sleeping off his hangover. Katniss and the baker boy were eating, and the two seemed to have showered and changed out of their old clothes. Katniss glanced at him as he entered, her features tightening slightly, and he quietly sat down to pour himself a cup of black coffee.

“At least the both of you have decent manners.” Effie noted with approval. “The pair last year ate everything with their hands like a couple of savages. It completely upset my digestion.”

He rolled his eyes, ducking his head to hide his expression from Effie. He could already anticipate Katniss’s reaction to the criticism. If they were anything alike, she would do the same thing he did last year.

Katniss’s face went dark and she put down her utensils, finishing the rest of her meal with her fingers. Then she deliberately wiped them on the table cloth.

He couldn’t help but felt a flutter of pride in his chest, and grinned even harder when Effie shot him an annoyed look, as if he was to blame.

Once supper was over, they moved to another compartment to view the recaps of the Reapings. He barely remembered all the faces, took note of a few strong-looking ones, and felt his heart froze at the 12-year-old girl from District 11. That could have been Prim, he thought. But the girl from 11 has no one to volunteer for her.

When they showed District 12, he wasn’t surprised to see that they actually screened Haymitch falling off the stage.

“Your mentor has a lot to learn about presentation. A lot about televised behaviour.” Effie scowled, disgruntled as she absently patted her wig.

Peeta laughed. “He was drunk. He’s drunk every year.”

“Every day.” Katniss agreed with a smirk.

And so would Gale if he hadn’t chosen his vices in other things. He felt an unexpectedly surge of irritation at the both of them, and then a faint lingering surprise that he had felt angry for Haymitch’s sake.

“Yes,” Effie hissed like an angry cat. “How odd you two find it amusing. You know your mentor is your lifeline to the world in these Games. The one who advises you, lines up your sponsors, and dictates the presentation of any gifts. Haymitch can well be the difference between your life and your death!”

“We have Gale.” Katniss said abruptly. He stared at her in surprise, but she didn’t look at him.

He cleared his throat, and Peeta glanced over. “Yes, but this is only my second year in mentoring. Haymitch is far more experienced, and definitely better in getting sponsors.” He paused briefly, trying to think of a way to get the other Victor to help Katniss. “I’ll make sure he does something to
help."

Of course, Haymitch had to stumble in then and peer blearily at them.

“I miss supper?” He slurred in confusion. Then he gagged and vomited all over the expensive carpet. Gale sighed, praying for his mother’s patience. How does Hazelle do this every day?

“I’ll do it.” He muttered, standing up to drag Haymitch out of the mess. Effie snorted and stalked out of the room.

“We’ll help.” Peeta offered. He grabbed Haymitch’s other arm, shouldering his weight. Katniss opened the door and led them back to Haymitch’s room.

“I can take it from here.” He told them. “The both of you should rest.”

“I’ll help.” Peeta repeated, but he was looking at Katniss to give her a way out. She looked thankful that she didn’t need to clean up Haymitch.

“Do you need me to send one of the Capitol people over?” She asked.

“No. I don’t want them.” Peeta said, surprisingly forceful. Then he seemed to falter and glanced up at him. “That’s if—if you need them, G—Gale?”

“No.” He answered after a moment. “I’m used to do this alone.”

Katniss returned to her room, while Peeta insisted on staying to help. Too tired to argue with the baker boy, he sighed in frustration and relented.

“Throw him into the tub.” He ordered. With a grunt, Peeta rolled Haymitch over and tossed him into the bathtub.

He reached up to switch on the showerhead. Haymitch didn’t even stirred at the blast of water in his face, a tell-tale sign that he has probably be drinking since sundown yesterday.

_Goddamnit, Haymitch_, he thought angrily, _I need you this time._

To save Katniss, he’d need all the help he could get. Perhaps he should feel guilty that he has already chosen, but he barely knew Peeta. And Katniss was his best friend, no matter what she felt about him now.

He has to save her. For himself. For Prim. For Aster Everdeen.

“Can you get me some clothes from the wardrobe?” He said distractedly, trying to scrap the dry vomit from Haymitch’s hair. He heard Peeta leaving the bathroom, heavy footsteps thumping outside. He started to divest Haymitch of his dirty clothes, squeezing the hair shampoo liberally on the top of his wet head.

“You do this often?” Peeta asked, standing at the doorway.

He grunted, scrubbing the shampoo into Haymitch’s scalp hard enough that the man would probably feel it in the morning. _Good_, he hoped his mentor would feel it the next day.

“Sometimes I help ma with him.” He said vaguely.

Peeta remained silent, only stepping up to help as he heaved Haymitch out of the tub once he’s done.
He dressed the man in his pyjamas and tossed him onto his bed. To his irritation, the man muttered under his breath, rolled under the blanket and started snoring, while he was damp and exhausted.

“Gale, can I speak to you?” Peeta said softly as the two quietly left the room. He stiffened, turning slightly to look at the younger boy. Was Peeta going to ask for help from him? Was that why he had stayed to help him with Haymitch?

“I know you want to save Katniss.” The blonde continued, unfazed even as he remained silent, but he was taken off guard at his next words. “I want to save her too.”

“You want to save her.” He said flatly, unable to believe his ears.

Peeta’s eyes were hard and unyielding, and he could almost be impressed by the spine of steel hidden beneath the softness.

“You love her.” He realized.

Peeta’s expression wavered, his cheeks flushing. “It’s not like that. It’s not... love. It’s not—”

He blocked out the blonde’s stuttering, the shock of comprehension still messing up with his thoughts.

“We’ll talk about this tomorrow.” His voice sounded curt and sharp, his mind a thousand miles away. “Go to bed.”

He walked off, trying to organize his thoughts. He’s a planner, he could do this. Taking a deep breath, he drew a mind map in his head. In the centre, Katniss, arrowing out to Peeta’s name with the label, ‘likes Katniss’, written below his name. On the other side, another arrow from Katniss to his name, ‘Katniss’s childhood friend’, written under his.

He wasn’t quite sure what to do or feel with the knowledge that Peeta loved—liked(?) Katniss. When he was sixteen, he thought that he could love her one day. She had been so much like him; her fire and independence had been what drawn him to her. Fire called to fire after all. He had thought they might even get married in the future.

But he doesn’t have a future now. Whatever future he could see was obliterated when he was reaped. Too much fire destroys, he should know. He’s not good for her. He would never be good for her. After what the Capitol has done to him, could he even still love another person?

Chapter End Notes

If anyone has Netflix, they should watch Pandora, a Korean movie. :D
Katniss was the last to enter the dining car the next morning. Gale was drinking out a cup of those nasty black coffee again, purple bruises beneath his eyes. Haymitch was rubbing his head absently, as if his scalp hurts, and his face puffy from his hangover. Effie stomped past her, her pale face twisted in annoyance.

“Good morning.” Peeta greeted her as she hesitantly sat down beside him.

He passed her a cup of brown drink that smelled heavenly. She stared at it dubiously.


She took a sip of this... hot chocolate, and blinked in surprise. It was delicious. She raised the cup to her lips and drained every last drop of the beverage. Then she proceeded to stuff herself with breakfast, only stopping when she felt an ache in her stomach.

She glanced around the table. Peeta was still eating, although he was slowing down. Haymitch was knocking back a glass of red liquid, most likely some sort of spirit. A spike of anger shot through her as she stared at the older Victor. From the amount he’s drinking, he’ll most likely be incoherent by the time they reached the Capitol.

District 12 might be the poorest amongst all twelve districts, but some of the previous tributes had stood a chance. But they rarely have sponsors, and Haymitch was a big reason why. Only Gale had been able to survive with barely any sponsors in the arena, but then again, Gale was cunning, clever and a fighter. He has always been the strategist, not her.

Gale was still new, and she knew his personality enough to know that he wasn’t good in chatting up the Capitol to get them sponsors. Like he claimed last night, he was still inexperienced. While she could probably get advice on how to survive in the arena from him, she’s not quite sure if he’s good in the ‘getting sponsors’ area.

“So, you’re supposed to give us advice.” She said bluntly to Haymitch.

Haymitch smirked at her. “Here’s some advice.” He leaned forward mockingly. “Stay alive.”

He burst out laughing, as if he had just said the funniest joke in the world. Gale’s expression was mild, but he was watching his mentor shrewdly.

“That’s very funny. Only not to us.” Peeta said calmly, before he lashed out abruptly, knocking the glass out of Haymitch’s hand.

Gale deliberately looked away, as if to say do not get me involved in this. She felt a flicker of irritation at him, which fuelled her already bitter mood. She stabbed a butter knife into the table, nearly missing Haymitch’s fingers after he punched Peeta in retaliation.

“What’s this?” Haymitch observed. “Did I actually get a pair of fighters this year?”

She wondered if it had been a test, and that’s why Gale had not stopped them.

“Can you hit anything with that knife?” Haymitch questioned sharply.

Gale have always been better with the knives, she mused. She tossed the knife at the wall across the
room. It sunk into the seam between two panels.

“I told you they have a chance.” Gale spoke up, looking at Haymitch. The latter rolled his eyes and stood up, gesturing for them to stand as well.

“Stand over here, both of you.” He muttered. He circled them as if he’s shopping for some prized cattle. “Not bad. Not entirely hopeless. Seems fit. And once the stylists get hold of you, you’ll be attractive enough.”

He paused and stared at her face, making her tensed up. “You’re Gale’s cousin, aren’t you?” She blinked at the mention of that cover story. “The Capitol is going to be asking questions. Be prepared for that. They’ll be curious about any family of Gale.”

Gale’s jaw clenched and he looked away, grey eyes momentarily lighting up in anger.

Haymitch backed away and eyed the both of them. “Alright, I’ll make a deal with you. You don’t interfere with my drinking, and I’ll stay sober enough to help you, but you have to do exactly what I say.”

“That’s practically Haymitch telling you that he’ll try his best.” Gale said.

Haymitch threw him an irritated glare. “Shut up, Hawthorne.”

“Okay... Okay, so help us.” Katniss demanded, and started firing off questions. She has to go home, and she’s going to do whatever it takes to do that.

“One thing at a time.” Haymitch interrupted. “In a few minutes, we’ll be pulling into the station. You’ll be put in the hands of your stylists. You’re not going to like what they do to you. But no matter what it is, don’t resist.” When she looked like she’s going to protest, he repeated forcefully, “Don’t resist.”

He grabbed a new bottle of spirits and nodded to Gale. “They’re all yours in the Capitol.”

Uncorking the cap, he left the cabin. Not before long, the train pulled out of the tunnel, light spilling in from the windows. The grandeur of the skyscrapers in the distance, the shining vehicles, the colourful people in the streets were too sudden, too bright. It was beautiful at first glance, but there was something fake about... everything.

Was this what Gale had come back to last year? He must have hated this place.

Peeta was waving at the people, and she stepped away from the windows in disgust. He seemed to notice her disdain, and shrugged amicably.

“Who knows?” He said. “One of them may be rich.”

She looked back to see Gale’s reaction, but to her surprise, he was gone. He must have left sometime when they were dazzled by the Capitol, his presence so low and footsteps so quiet that she had not noticed.

She turned her attention back to Peeta, giving him a distrustful look. She can’t trust him, no matter if he once saved her life before or not. Only one of them would be going home after all.

Eighteen seemed to be the prime age in the Capitol, that he’s finally ‘legal’ in the eyes of these degenerates. Maybe they thought that raping an adult was less unethical than raping a child. It was
funny how the Capitol’s minds worked, when they were completely fine with sending children out to kill and die. The irony would have been funny if it wasn’t so horrific.

He was booked for the entirety of his stay in the Capitol this year. It was going to be difficult to explain to Katniss about his frequent disappearances. At least Haymitch was willing to cover him by lying that he’s out scouting for sponsors.

It wasn’t a bad idea. Most clients rich enough to buy him were sponsors, but at that thought, he immediately felt a surge of disgust at himself. Even if it’s to help Katniss... was he willing to sell himself to do so?

He shook his head, quickly shoving such thoughts away as he spotted Katniss and Peeta getting off the train. Things with Katniss was still awkward and distant between them, but he was going to ignore all that and concentrated on saving her.

“Gale!” He jumped at the familiar voice.

He turned around, eyes widening in surprise when he recognized the wild, curly blond hair. She was walking briskly towards him in her five-inch heels, and her eyelids were sparkling under the sunlight. She pulled him into a tight hug, startling him.

“Portia?” He murmured. He glanced behind her to see Cinna. “Are the both of you...?”

She nodded excitedly. He wasn’t quite sure if he was glad that they were their stylists, but his mood felt a little better.

“I have something special for your tributes this year.” Cinna winked.

He briefly thought back to the designs he had glanced over last year. Something about a suit with flames?

“What are you planning?” He asked suspiciously.

Cinna and Portia exchanged conspiring glances.

“You’ll see.” She smiled. “Now we’re going to prepare your tributes. I’ll see you later, Gale.”

He nodded tentatively, watching them go. He hoped that their costumes would be as spectacular as they were implying, to chase away the ball of nerves in the pit of his belly at his first appointment tonight.

Later, he watched Katniss and Peeta rolled down the parade in their chariot with their hands held together in a display of unity, their black suits trailing fiery orange flames behind them. The beginning of hope sparked in his chest. Cinna and Portia had done what their previous stylists never could.

They have given District 12 a fighting chance.
“Sorry for crashing here. I couldn’t let Katniss see these.” He muttered. He was still shaking slightly as he slipped out of his outerwear to let Finnick study the bruises on his wrists.

“It’s no hardship.” The older man brushed his apology aside, rummaging through his cupboards. He came back to his side with a pot of ointment in his hands. “I’m glad you came to me.”

Katniss has a tendency to sleep late, and he couldn’t let her see the bruises when he returned to the penthouse. He doesn’t need more questions tonight.

Finnick gently iced the wounds first, and after wiping down his skin, rubbed the ointment against the reddened marks on his wrists.

“The bruises are going to darken tomorrow.” Finnick warned. “You’re going to have to apply makeup to cover them.”

He nodded tiredly, and he could care less what’s going to happen tomorrow. It was only the first day, and he’s already dreading the next couple of days ahead of him.

“It never gets better, doesn’t it?” He said quietly.

He liked Finnick better in the dark like this. The older Victor always seemed more real away from the cameras, shedding off the playboy persona like a second skin. The lights in the room has been dimmed to a level that doesn’t hurts his eyes, and with what little light on Finnick’s face made him looked strangely introspective.

How many years have Finnick been doing this, and why hasn’t it broken him yet?

“It doesn’t.” Finnick said softly.

He drew a shuddering breath, curled his bruised wrists under his armpits. He looked like he’s hugging himself.

“How do you handle it?” He asked.

He was furious, of course, when he found out that the atrocity was far worse than he had imagined in the Capitol, that what Snow was doing to the Victors was akin to slavery. But tonight, at the moment, he was weary and exhausted, wrung out from his appointment with his client.


He was silent for a long time. Finnick glanced at his face to check if he had fallen asleep. But grey eyes were open and staring blankly at the window on the opposite side of the room.

“You have someone to protect then?” He finally said. It was stated flatly, with no intention to hear any answer. But Finnick nodded anyway.

They were all protecting someone.

“You should stay here tonight.” Finnick said. “The bed is big enough for both of us.”

He glanced up at him, gauging the sincerity in sea-green eyes. He started nodding before he could even decide on agreeing to the offer. He let his body fall onto the bed and rolled to the side, closing
his eyes.

He heard Finnick moving around the room, before the room was filled with the quiet peace of the forest, a bird chirped somewhere from afar, the sound of a slight breeze passing through the room. The tension loosened slightly in his chest at the familiar ambience, even if it was false. But with his eyes closed, if he pretended hard enough, he could imagine he’s in the woods, surrounded by nature instead of lying in a bed in the Capitol, miles from home.

He wanted to thank Finnick, but he’s already drifting off to sleep.

Gale went back to the penthouse before sunrise, having to fend off Finnick’s worrying before he could finally leave the other man’s apartment. He was used to waking up at the crack of dawn, and like clockwork, woke up before the sky was even bright, and accidentally rousing Finnick up as well.

Thankfully, no one else was up yet, so he seized the chance to take a quick shower, change before exiting the room for breakfast.

“Good morning, Gale!” Effie greeted cheerily. Haymitch, Portia and Cinna was already gathered around the table. He muttered something that sounded more like a curse than a greeting as he dropped down beside Portia.

“Coffee, Gale?” Cinna asked.

He hid a yawn and nodded, reaching across the table to grab a piece of toast. His sleeve hiked up slightly to expose his wrist, and he could feel Portia’s eyes tracking his movement. The makeup was flawless, covered up expertly by Finnick. But he supposed a stylist’s eyes would be sharp enough to notice that there’s cosmetics being used, no matter how professionally done. He fought the urge to yank back his arm, but it’s probably going to attract attention if he does that, so he acted as if nothing was wrong.

“Your coffee.” Cinna smiled, placing a cup of steaming coffee in front of him. The coffee was a rich brown, stirred in with sugar and creamer. He raised a brow at the stylist, who smiled back mildly.

Katniss and Peeta’s respective doors opened just then. They both looked like they hadn’t gotten much sleep from the haggard looks on their faces.

They ate quietly, probably too sleepy to talk. Gale dipped his toast into his stew, periodically sipping into his coffee at every pause. It was surprisingly good, with just the right touch of bitterness and sweetness. He wondered if Cinna would mind making him coffee any time he asked now.

“So, training.” Haymitch took a swig from his flask. “If you like, I’ll coach you separately. Or together.”

They exchanged looks, then glanced at Haymitch and Gale.

“It’s your choice.” Gale commented. “If you have a secret skill you want to hide from each other.”

Although he already knew their respective strengths. Katniss would be a hit at the archery station, and she knew enough survival skills to get her through for a couple of days if nothing goes wrong. Rye Mellark was a champion fighter at wrestling in school. No doubt his younger brother was the same as well.

“I don’t have any secret skills.” Peeta cleared his throat. “And I already know what yours is, right? I
mean, I’ve eaten enough of your squirrels.”

“You can coach us together.” Katniss decided.

Haymitch nodded slowly. “Alright, so give me some idea of what you can do.”

“I can’t do anything.” Peeta said. “Unless you count baking bread.”

He nearly rolled his eyes. He has seen the blonde carrying several sacks of flour singlehandedly. He could probably carry Gale up and down the Seam without feeling out of breath.

“Sorry, I don’t. Katniss, I already know you’re handy with a knife.” Haymitch said wryly.

“Not really. But I can hunt.” Katniss said. “With a bow and arrow.”

Haymitch leaned forward slightly, eyes lighting up. It was rare that a tribute that comes his way knew their way around a weapon.

“You any good?” He questioned.

She shrugged in response. “I’m okay.”

“She’s excellent,” Peeta said. “My father buys her squirrels. He always comments on how the arrows never pierce the body. She hits everyone in the eye. It’s the same with the rabbits she sells the butcher. She can even bring down deer.”

Katniss looked surprised at first, then wary and annoyed. If he hasn’t gotten the truth out of Peeta in the beginning, he would probably be suspicious at why the blonde was talking Katniss up too.

“What are you doing?” She snapped.

“What are you doing?” Peeta retorted. “If he’s going to help you, he has to know what you’re capable of. Don’t underrate yourself.”


Before he or Haymitch could answer, Peeta interjected almost sarcastically. “Yes, and I’m sure the arena will be full of bags of flour for me to chuck at people. It’s not like being able to use a weapon.”

Who knew that baker boy has spine? He definitely had thought him soft at first. But the arguing was really getting on his nerves, and sliding into personal territory.

“Alright,” He finally burst out. “Enough.” He glowered at the two tributes. “I know that you each have your respective strengths and weaknesses.” He glanced at Peeta and added, “And wrestling is far more useful than you think. What if you are unarmed in the arena? You need to rely on your own hand combat skills.”

Take it from his own Games. He knew how important hand combat was.

Peeta and Katniss simmered down, but the latter was still sulking. Haymitch cleared his throat and gave them the same spiel that he had given Gale.

Stay together. Hide your strengths. Learn something new. Save your best for the private sessions.

He probably found it far easier to train Gale and Sara. At least he was only dealing with Gale. Peeta
was surprisingly as hard headed as Katniss.

“Try not to beat each other to death.” He said sarcastically when Haymitch chased them back to their rooms. Katniss shot him a cold glare and stomped off. For someone who was clearly in love with her, Peeta was unusually reluctant to partner up together.

Perhaps he was just over thinking their actions. He doesn’t remember being that innocent anymore, and he has frankly other things to worry about than puppy crushes now.

“You didn’t come back last night.” Haymitch remarked.

Right, he didn’t inform Haymitch, did he? “I went to Finnick.”

The older Victor looked stunned for a second, that he had actually went to someone for help. He felt strangely flustered at the surprised look.

“Were you hurt?” Haymitch’s surprise faded, and something calculating gleamed in those dark eyes.

His wrist coincidentally ached at that moment. He pressed his hands to his sides, feeling oddly guilty. Perhaps he should have called the penthouse phone last night, but he had been too tired to remember.

“I’m fine.” He said blankly, hoping that Haymitch would not pry any further. It was bad enough that Finnick knew what had happened.

Haymitch scrutinized his face searchingly, lips pulled tight. Finally, he nodded and accepted his lie.
After the interviews where Peeta set the Capitol on fire, Katniss freaked out. She punched Peeta, raged at Haymitch and disappeared up to the rooftop.

“I’ll speak with her.” He told them, leaving before they could object.

They needed to speak before she goes into the arena. He found Katniss seething as she glowered out at the city lights. She stiffened when he cleared his throat to alert her of his presence.

“I swear, I didn’t know anything of Haymitch and Peeta’s plan.” He said.

Her eyes flashed with fury, and when she spoke, her voice was shaking and angry. “They made me look weak in front of the entire Capitol.”

“They make you desirable.” He corrected. As much as he had disliked Peeta’s plan, it was a sound one. Peeta’s love for her made her attractive and stood out amongst all twenty-four tributes.

A tragic love story between fellow tributes in the arena… why wouldn’t the Capitol love that?

“I don’t know what he’s trying to do.” She ranted. “Why—why would he just do that? He embarrassed me. What’s he expecting from me?”

“He’s expecting to save you, I guess.” He said lightly, with almost deliberate nonchalance. He could care less of Peeta’s methods, as long as Katniss gets to come back home. If that could save her, he would grit and bear it for Katniss’s sake.

“I don’t need his help!” She snapped. “I—I can’t trust him. He’s fighting to live as much as I do. Why would he save me?” She exhaled sharply. “I—I have to win and come home. I have to—for Prim. I don’t want to die there.”

“I don’t want you to die in there too.” He said quietly.

She glanced up at him. “I don’t know what you want anymore, Gale.”

He sucked in a startled breath at her quiet confession. His heart clenched in pain when he saw her averting her gaze.

“You think I don’t want you back? Just because—because we—” He breathed deeply. “You think I stopped caring for you?”

“I don’t know what you want anymore!” She repeated, shouting angrily. “You avoided me for months. You pushed me away. You refused to let me help, or tell me what’s going on with you. I looked at you and it’s like I barely know you anymore!”

“I’m still me.” He bristled. “You think I want to push you away? It’s none of your business what’s
going on with me! I didn’t want you to pry. I just needed you there for me.”

“How can you speak like that and expect me not to care?” She stomped forward, her thin frame shaking with rage. “You’re my best friend, and you—you shut me out. I don’t know what you’re thinking. You—You won’t tell me anything.”

He couldn’t think properly, his blood rushing in his ears. His heart beat painfully in his chest, furious and panicked. He knew that Katniss would not let the subject go gracefully. They were both shit with words, and terrible with feelings.

“You refused to talk to me. And—And mom and Prim were hiding things from me. They think I didn’t notice, but they clammed up every time I mentioned your name.” She was less angry now, but heartbreak burned in her eyes. “Since when does my family know things about you that I do not know?”

“They are not hiding anything from you. They are not.” He grabbed her face and repeated forcefully, pleading for her to listen. “I know you’re worried, but I can’t. I want to, but—” His breath was coming quick and erratic. “I want to tell you everything, Katniss. I can’t—not now. Not now.”

“Gale.” She said softly, hand on his cheek.

He shut up, realizing that he was trembling. The anger had faded completely, but her eyes were still soft with hurt and disappointment. She was searching for... something on his face, her eyes easing into something warm.

Then, suddenly, she leaned up and pressed her lips against his.

Her lips were chapped and warm and she tasted faintly of chocolate, like everything he had ever dreamed that she would taste of when they kissed. It was barely seconds, but it felt like an eternity – pressed up against each other, an eternity of what ifs and maybes in another world.

He pulled away abruptly, staring down at her.

“How does it feel like?” She asked, quiet and hushed, as if afraid to break the spell.

He thought for a moment. “Like kissing my cousin.”

She stared at him, her eyes wide. Then slowly, her lips twitched uncontrollably and she cracked up. Her laughter was infectious and soon he was chuckling beside her.

“I think we are two very different people now.” He said quietly after their laughter dwindled.

The mirth in her eyes guttered like a flame, her lips tilting up in a sad smile as she nodded in agreement.

“You’ll tell me everything one day, won’t you?” She said.

He gazed at her earnestly. “Only if you come back home to me.”

He reached down to grip her hand tightly. She looked unsure, but slowly, she squeezed back.
When he broke the seal to the envelope, his brow shot up to his hairline in shock when he saw the name on the card.

**Calysta Cabochon**

**9pm, Velvet Rose**

A feeling of dread and unease, aggravating the already churning of anxiety for Katniss in his stomach. He flipped the card distractedly in his hand, taking a deep breath before he stood up to prepare for his engagement with Madam Calysta tonight.

He glanced at the television before he left the penthouse, checking that Katniss was still safe. She was slumbering in a tree, and beneath her, the Careers and Peeta had set up camp. At least both of his tributes were still alive.

He was taken to the city area in a car, watching as the crowd on the streets gradually got busier the further they drove towards the Velvet Rose. He got off the car in front of a grand building, with the club’s name in blinking red lights. Steeling himself, he walked straight up to the bouncer at the
doorway, who narrowed his eyes and studied his face intensely before stepping aside to let him in.

The inside of the club was bathed in a cool purple light in a wide, open space with lots of round tables and plush cushion chairs. It was unlike any club in the Capitol, where the clubgoers would drink and mingle around on the dancefloor. In the Velvet Rose, performers clad in skimpy costumes and great feathered headpieces danced on the stage while the wealthy and affluent sipped their expensive wine below and watched. They were less outrageous than the citizens he has previously seen, but still attired in luxurious brands. Even though he was still clueless about the high society, he could tell that most of the patrons were of old money.

“Mr Hawthorne?” He was approached by a sharply-dressed man with dark blue hair smoothed back and a moustache carefully slicked with a glossy shine, the tips slanting upwards. “I am Ammon Overwhill, the personal secretary of Madam Calysta. I handle all her administrative affairs and scheduling.”

He gave the man a neutral look, shaking the extended hand. Ammon’s handshake was firm and brief, and he gestured for him to follow right after.

Not seeing a choice, Gale reluctantly followed after the man. He was guided to a more secluded corner, where various rooms were partitioned by thick curtains to isolate the patrons for any requested privacy. They stopped outside one of the tent-like rooms.

“Madam Calysta is waiting inside.” Ammon informed, holding the flap open. Glancing at him uncertainly, Gale ducked his head to enter the room.

She looked the same as he remembered. Long, ink black hair, milk white complexion and crimson lips, dressed in a black off-shoulder gown. Her eyes were cold and blue, like ice crystals frosted over the surface.

“Please sit.” She indicated the cushion chair opposite her. He sat down hesitantly, just as Ammon came in with a glass of beverage for him. The drink was a pale smoky blue, with a cherry stuck to the rim of the glass. Ammon set the drink down gently on the table, bowed and left the room. Madam Calysta smiled candidly at him over her wine glass. “How are you, Gale?”

“As well as I can be.” He said, just a touch of wryness in his tone.

She chuckled huskily. “Of course, of course. Let’s cut to the chase.” She raised a delicate brow. “I offered my help to you last year, do you remember?” Without waiting for his reply, she continued, “I told you to come back if you bring me a tribute with potential.”

“Is that why I’m here today?” He asked.

She tilted her head to the side, her movement slow and predatory. She was silent for a moment as she drank her wine.

“Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark have sent a spark across Panem, and its effect is something I’ve never before seen.” She murmured. “Their fascinating entrance, that boy tribute’s confession, their unexpected training scores…” Her smile was strange and humourless this time, sending a chill down his back. “If they win, they will set this whole country on fire.”

For some reason, her last statement made his stomach clenched in unease.

“Only one of them could win.” He stated bluntly.

The smile she gave him was almost playful, like she knew something he didn't. “Your mentor seems
to be stirring things up amongst all my... acquaintances. With my help, I can... move things along quicker, so to speak.”

He was tired of her games and riddles. He was never good at deception, and her word riddles were giving him a headache.

“Are you saying that you’ll sponsor for 12?” He asked, straight to the point.

She seemed amused by his bluntness, her eyes glimmering in the dim lighting.

“Yes.” She agreed. “I will sponsor for your tributes.”

His chest welled with hope, muscles stiffening in excitement, but he refused to let his guard down, regarding her with suspicion. For a woman so notoriously known, who was said to have never sponsored for any tribute before... to magnanimously offered her help to a new mentor who was only in his second year?

She wanted something from him.

“What’s the catch?” He asked, an echo of his question from a year ago.

She smirked a catlike smirk, and her eyes seemed to gleam in approval. She stood up abruptly, her tight gown swishing around her ankles. She gestured for him to stand and follow her. His fingers unconsciously wrapped around his glass as he stood and followed. Ammon was standing outside on guard, and as they left the room, he trailed behind them at a safe distance.

“You see that man sitting over there, flirting with my waitress?” Madam Calysta tilted her head towards the blonde sitting on the other side of the bar counter. She waved the bartender away, gave the girl a distantly polite smile and they were left alone.

“Syrio Whrent is the chief executive officer of Karl Hydro, a major water energy company in the Capitol. He inherited all his wealth from his parents, and he became even richer when he climbed up the ranks of the company to become chief executive officer.” She explained. He wasn’t quite sure why she was telling him this, but he learned that she has a tendency to go around in a circle before getting to the point. “Very wealthy, very charismatic, and very cunning. He intentionally misstated and understated earnings, stealing whatever that was leftover. An investigation nearly exposed him, but he brought off the press and the Peacekeepers. Over a thousand workers were dismissed from the factories to cover the losses.”

Ashes seethed on his tongue, and his anger boiled at the injustice that so many innocent people were blamed instead of the actual culprit, losing their jobs and livelihoods.

“I have many patrons just like him, all who flouted the law and harmed the innocents, and no one to stop them just because they have the President’s backing.” Madam Calysta commented lightly.

“Why are you telling me this?” He asked, his voice trembling slightly.

“There are many corruptions in this city, Gale.” She said seriously. “And the biggest is the one that gave birth to Victors like you.”

His heart skipped a beat. Her words were openly treasonous now.

“What are you—” He paused, suddenly aware that there might be bugs nearby, and that he might be viewed as an accomplice – just for sitting here and listening to her. Fear gripped his heart, cold numbing his hands.
“Do not fear.” She murmured, realization flickering across her eyes. “There are no bugs in this club.”

He finally took a sip from his drink. The first taste was strange. It fizzed on his tongue, before he felt the sweetness exploded in his mouth. He grimaced at the taste, and put down the glass of alcohol.

“I don’t know what you want me to do.” He said hoarsely.

Madam Calysta’s eyes were shrewd as she stared at him. The flickering lights from the nearby stage threw shadows across her pale face. “Regardless of the results of this year’s Games, things will start moving across Panem. There are movements in the shadows... underground. When that happens, exploiting the situation is only prudent.”

*But for whom?* He wanted to ask, but instead he bit his tongue.

“I hope I’ll have your support when the time comes.” She nodded gracefully as she slipped off the stool.

He could feel the liquor’s effect rushing in his veins now. He wasn’t quite sure what’s in that flowery drink, but it was *strong*.

“Ammon will escort you back to the penthouse now.” She said, her eyes twinkling at his baffled expression. “I have booked you till the next morning. You should take the chance to rest and watch over your tributes.”

Once again, he wondered at her influence. He was *expensive*, his price raising up since he turned eighteen. While he was repulsed to know that Snow was putting a price on the Victors’ bodies, he also understood that his time was costly even for the average Capitol citizen. There weren’t many people rich enough in the Capitol that could buy his time for an entire night, and he wondered if the people capable of doing so were all sitting in this club like him right now.

“I’ll see you again, Gale.” Madam Calysta said softly as he left.
When Peeta and Katniss won, they weren’t allowed to see them until they were released from the hospital. He wondered if what Madam Calysta had hinted of his mentor stirring things up was *this*; forcing the Gamemakers to crown two Victors. He wondered if the Mistress of the Velvet Rose had a hand in it as well. Two Victors being crowned was unprecedented, and he mused on what it meant.

As promised, Madam Calysta had sponsored for District 12, allowing Haymitch to send the burn cream to Katniss. There had been some sort of commotion when people found out that Calysta Cabochon had sponsored for 12, and there were probably some speculations that it had involved *him*. But he had remained tight-lipped, not speaking of his appointment with Madam Calysta.

When he first saw his two tributes – no, their newest *Victors* now – emerging from the hospital, he walked right up to them and threw his arms around their necks. Ash and Yara’s deaths still lingered on his mind like sour guilt, and he was relieved that he hadn’t had to send home two coffins this year either.

“Gale!” Katniss exclaimed in surprise, but she hadn’t push him away. She exchanged a look with Peeta over his head.

“Thank you for staying alive.” He murmured.

Now he was on his way home to District 12, allowed to return on time with his two newest Victors. It felt as surreal as the time he sat on the train after *his* Games. He still couldn’t believe that Peeta and Katniss were alive, and Snow had allowed both of them to live. Despite the happiness and relief, his stomach still churned with trepidation. Snow’s silence had been ominous.

There was no way the President would let this go so easily.

“Gale?” Peeta knocked lightly on the door. The door to the last cabin had been left ajar, but he hovered outside, waiting for permission. “Can I come in?”

He had been curled up on the seat, watching the trees and scenery vanished behind the train, lost in his thoughts. He startled at the knock, looking up sharply. When he noticed that it was just Peeta, his heartbeats slowly calmed.

“Yeah, sure.” He said, unfolding his legs beneath him. He watched the blonde curiously as he sat down. “What is it?”

“It’s about Katniss.” Peeta started, swallowing slightly.

Of course, it’s about Katniss. When wasn’t it not about Katniss between them? But he should have expected it. Their conversation about saving her had not been finished between them.

“About confessing to her on live.” Peeta elaborated. “And kissing her in the arena...”

He furrowed his brows at the blonde, not quite sure what the younger boy was trying to say. He had seen the kiss, unfortunately. He had been angry, but it was more like an anger towards Katniss for wasting her time on a dying tribute.

“I know that she likes you, and that she’s just pretending to save my life in the arena. So... So, once we returned home, I’m going to stay away from her.” Peeta seemed to be bracing himself... for Gale to react harshly?
“Likes me?” He repeated in confusion. “It’s not like that between us.”

“You—You’re not together?” Peeta squinted his eyes, taken off guard. He had been prepared for Katniss to push him away, and she did. He had been prepared for Gale’s fury, but what greeted him was the older Victor’s confusion instead.

“We have never been together.” Gale snorted. “And Katniss and I have hardly been talking to each other since I returned from my own Games.” He trailed off, remembering their kiss the night before she goes into the arena. “She... She kissed me after your... your confession. It means nothing.” He looked up at Peeta, and repeated emphatically, sure of his own feelings now. “It means nothing. For both of us.”

Peeta opened his mouth, and after a moment, closed it speechlessly.

“I don’t know what’s going on between both of you... but Katniss doesn’t do things she never meant to.” He said, clearing his throat. “She hadn’t need to kiss you if she doesn’t want to.”

If there was one thing he knew that hadn’t changed, it was Katniss’s bad acting. She was simply slightly better than him in that aspect. And what he had seen on screen hadn’t been an act at all... any of it.
A month after they were back, life had gone on as usual. Haymitch had went back to his drinking, Peeta returned to baking, Katniss hunted and Gale... well, he whittled and taught his siblings snares whenever he’s free.

Thom and Bristel had started their job in the coal mines, and he hardly get to see them anymore, except for Sundays. For the first time, his nightmares seemed to recede. He doesn’t see Katniss or Peeta’s deaths in his dreams, but the others still continued to haunt him – but he had grown used to their ghosts.

“Gale? Are you home?” Hazelle yelled. She stepped out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a rag. “I’m heading out with Posy. There’s soup on the stove if you’re hungry.”

“Yeah, thanks, ma.” He called back, skipping two steps at a time as he climbed up the stairs. He peeked into his brothers’ rooms as he walked past, but they were both empty.

He dropped his bag onto his bed, lifting his arms to slip out of his coat. He paused as he caught a glimpse of white at his windowsill. As he moved closer in curiosity, his blood ran cold when he noticed what it was.

A stalk of white rose lay innocently beside his carving of the mockingjay.

Someone had got into his room while he’s not at home. Someone had got into his house while his family was home.

Suddenly, he couldn’t breathe. The room seemed too small, the walls closing in around him. The floor beneath his feet seemed to melt in front of his eyes. He couldn’t breathe, and he was suffocating as he reached out with a shaking hand to pick up the rose. The thorny stem rubbed roughly against his skin. It was real, it was real. Someone had come into his room and put the rose on his windowsill, while his mother and Posy were home.

He had to get out. It was getting harder to breathe, and everything seemed to warp around him. Stumbling slightly, he managed to get out of his house, nearly collapsing on his front porch as he breathed in fresh air. He dry-heaved, his stomach rolling uncomfortably and turning against him. Nothing came up, but it hurts as his body rebelled violently.

Then he remembered that Rory and Vick weren’t at home.

He stiffened, a surge of terror banishing the slush of lethargy in his bones. His brothers weren’t anywhere in the house. Scrambling to his feet in fear, he broke off into a run towards the school. He knew they were in school, he dropped them off this morning himself, but he had to check. He had to check that they were safe.

He was too frantic to notice that Madge was walking in his direction, and collided with her. The blonde yelped as he ran straight into her, sending the both of them to the hard ground.

“S—Sorry, I wasn’t watching.” He apologized, already getting up. His eyes were stormy, not really noticing her. “I—I have to go.”

“Wait, wait, Gale—” Madge jumped up, gripping his arm. “What’s happening?”
His eyes snapped towards her, wild with panic. “Rory and Vick—I have to find them.”

“Okay, I’ll help.” Madge said decisively, even though she doesn’t know what’s going on. “It will be easier with both of us, right?”

He doesn’t question her, merely nodding tightly before he dashed off.

He found Vick in class, sitting right at the back and nearly dozing off. His eyes blinked in surprise when he noticed his big brother outside. Glancing at the teacher warily, he got up and snuck out of the classroom.

“Gale, what are you doing here?” Vick asked in confusion.

Not responding, he surged forward and pulled Vick into a bone-crushing hug. The younger boy squeaked in surprise.

“Gale!”

He looked up to see Madge with Rory. Relief flooded his senses, nearly driving him to his knees in tears. Still clutching Vick desperately to his chest, he opened his other arm as Rory ran forward.

“You’re both safe.” He muttered repeatedly under his breath, hugging the two boys in his arms with all his might. He shot Madge a grateful look over Rory and Vick’s heads. She smiled back, her eyes drifting towards the white rose clenched tight in his hand. He hadn’t let the rose go the entire time, needing the pain to ground him to reality. Knowing that his brothers were safe now, his grip slowly loosened and the rose dropped to the ground, the stem smeared with blood.
Chapter 35

He has always wondered why people used to say that he’s the troublemaker between him and Katniss, because it seemed that Katniss was the one who couldn’t go anywhere without stirring things up.

He was just tugging Peeta away when a bang goes off. And then another, and another. His limbs locked in tension, he shoved away his anxiety and continued dragging Peeta away into the Justice Building. Just as the door slammed shut behind them, Effie hurried over in panic.

None of them had expected the people of District 11 to raise their hands in the traditional District 12 gesture to show their thanks to Katniss.

Outside, the noises of the chaos still managed to reach them. He could hear the gunshots resounding over and over in his head, could feel the shakes in his hands that he’s trying to control.

Haymitch guided them away to an isolated room, and once they all sat down, he shot an annoyed glare at Katniss.

“What the hell is it out there?” He asked.

Katniss begun talking, haltingly, her voice trying to quiver. She explained that President Snow had dropped by her house to speak with her, how Panem was in jeopardy because of her act of defiance with the berries and his command to fix things by making everyone believe that everything was done out of love instead of any intention to rebel.

The longer she spoke, the more his heart clenched with fear. So, he wasn’t mistaken to think that the white rose on his windowsill was a warning from Snow. Was the rose a threat because he hadn’t been doing his job as a mentor? Or had he failed to please him with his performance?

He nearly flinched as Peeta lashed out with his hand, knocking over a lamp and sending it shattering all over the ground.

“This has to stop right now. All these secrets you are hiding from me just because you think I couldn’t handle it!” Peeta growled.

He has always suspected that Katniss and Haymitch were hiding secrets from Peeta, and he hadn’t wanted to get involved. He wanted to save Katniss, that’s the most important thing. But Katniss wanted to save Peeta, and she had clearly browbeat Haymitch into helping her.

“Okay, stop fighting.” He snapped, breaking the fight before it could escalate. “There’s probably a dozen people shot to death because of your stunt out there, Katniss.” She flinched at the reminder, paling in horror. “And whatever that happened with the nightlock berries... Snow clearly thinks you both are trying to incite a rebellion with them. This shit is too important to be hiding secrets amongst all four of us.”

“Gale—” Haymitch frowned.

He gave his mentor a measured stare. “It’s dangerous in the Capitol, Haymitch. You warned me this before. None of us can be walking into this blind.”

Haymitch agreed, but Peeta still looked angry. As he stomped out, Gale closed his eyes and felt a headache pounding at the side of his head at the games they all had to play to keep alive.
All he could think about was the white rose in his room and the smiles of his family.

As planned, Peeta proposed to Katniss during the interview. She accepted, and the audience went hysterical with excitement.

He watched them, feeling sickened. The feeling didn’t leave the whole night. During the party, he tried to catch hold of Peeta and Katniss, but they were constantly surrounded by those congratulating them on their engagement.

“Gale Hawthorne,” A portly-looking man approached him with a smile. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you. I’m Plutarch Heavensbee, the new Head Gamemaker.”

“Ah, the guy that replaced Seneca Crane.” He mused, giving the man an almost insolent smile. “Must be tough, to be appointed as Head Gamemaker on a Quarter Quell year.”

Instead of being offended, Plutarch chuckled in amusement.

“It’s a challenge I’m willing to undertake.” The Gamemaker smiled. “In fact, I’ll be attending the strategy meeting tonight to start the planning. I hope we can all look forward to the Quarter Quell next year.” He pulled out a pocket watch from his vest. “Look at this, I’m going to be late. Excuse me while I head over to say hello to our new Victors first.”

His gaze flicked towards the pocket watch. For a moment, he could see the image of a mockingjay with its wings spread open on the crystal surface of the watch. He blinked, and then it was gone.

“I’ll see you again, Gale.” Plutarch nodded and walked away, leaving him to stare at the Gamemaker’s back.

Normally, he would have brushed off the mockingjay image as one of the Capitol’s latest trends. But it doesn’t make sense for someone from the Capitol to have a mockingjay that would disappear at a second glance. He narrowed his eyes thoughtfully, before he made his way out of the banquet hall.

With his thoughts still lingering on Plutarch Heavensbee and his mockingjay watch, he nearly ran into a woman.

“Gale!” The woman exclaimed gleefully. “What luck! I didn’t expect to see you here today!”

He stared at her fire red hair and golden eyes – clearly fake, and felt something poked at his memory. She looked vaguely familiar, but he couldn’t remember her name. She must be one of his past clients though, as he had to fight his urge to push her away when she wrapped an eager arm around his waist.

“Heaven’s sake, don’t tell me you have forgotten me?” She pouted.

He caught a glimpse of a golden ring on her tongue. “Of course not, Ms Alvoth.”

“I told you to call me Slade.” She sighed. “After what we have done... do you really have to be so formal?”

A shamed blush reddened his cheeks at the memory of what they have done. His skin prickled in discomfort at her close proximity. After contemplating if he should just run off – fuck the consequences, the sounds of heels tapping down the corridor startled him.

“Gale?” Katniss stared at the both of them in shock.
He could practically read what she was seeing. A Capitol woman with her arm wrapped tightly around his waist, face so close they might as well be kissing, and he was not even pushing her away.

“Oh—Oh, you must be Katniss Everdeen!” Slade squealed. “Gale’s cousin, right? God, you’re one of my favourite! I knew you would win! This must be so exciting. Two Victors in a family!”

Katniss stared at her as if she was a bug, too bewildered to react properly.

“Yes, well, and it’s late.” He cut in loudly. “We really must be going, Ms Alvoth. Good night.”

He gripped Katniss’s hand and dragged her away. The silence from her was unnerving, and he could tell that she was literally bursting with questions once the shock wore off. He had hoped that she wouldn’t ask, but the moment they entered their penthouse, she swung around on him.

“What was that all about, Gale?” She hissed. “Who is she—and why is she hugging you like that?”

“No one. She’s no one. She’s drunk.” He deflected, trying to make his escape.

But anger was creeping onto her visage. “Don’t try to lie to me, Gale. You clearly know who she is.”

“I already said she’s no one. Keep out of this, Katniss!” He snapped. “She’s none of your concern.”

“I already said she’s no one. Keep out of this, Katniss!” He snapped. “She’s none of your concern.”

“None of my—I’m your best friend! I didn’t know we are hiding everything from each other now!” She spat. Then, realization slid over her expression and she narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “Is it true then? All the things those Capitol papers wrote, what everyone in 12 was saying about you?”

He doesn’t read the Capitol papers, and never listened to what everyone back home was saying about him, but if it’s anything similar to what Thom had been talking about, then he has an inkling on what Katniss was saying.

“Since when do you believe the crap that the Capitol papers wrote?” He questioned coldly.

“Answer me!” She yelled, her eyes a storm of emotions. “I thought you hate the Capitol, but here you are sleeping your way around the city and hanging out with women twice your age! Why the fuck would you do something like that? Does Hazelle know about this?”

“Don’t bring my mother into this.” He growled, ice threaded into his voice.

“Everyone says that you are a traitor and a wh—whore for fucking with all those women. But I didn’t believe them! Like you would do anything this—this—” She stammered, shaking her head in incomprehension.

He felt like he was stabbed in the heart, at the look in her eyes. The disgust and the anger... like she doesn’t know who he was anymore.

“This detestable?” He said icily. “You have no idea what’s going on.”

“It’s like I don’t know you anymore.” She said quietly, and the admission shattered his heart.

Luckily, before he could speak, the front door slammed open.

“What’s with the racket going on in here?” Haymitch thundered. “I could hear your damn yelling from outside, girl!”

From the look in his eyes, he clearly heard what she had said.
“I’m heading out.” He muttered, the anger draining out of him instantly. He stalked past Haymitch, and nearly collided into Peeta. For a moment, his heart seized up in fear when he realized that if Haymitch could hear Katniss, so would Peeta.

But then the fear seeped away, and he continued walking. If Katniss already knew he was a whore, what’s the difference with another person knowing?
“You should watch what you’re saying, sweetheart.” Haymitch scowled angrily at the girl, fighting the urge to throttle her. He hasn’t heard everything, but he heard enough.

Anger still flickered in her eyes, but her lips was twisting with guilt and shame. He was too drunk for this shit.

“Stay here, the both of you.” He ordered, turning around to glare at Peeta warningly. With a grunt, he left the penthouse, already guessing where Gale was heading to.

He found the boy at the rooftop, staring out at the city lights. He coughed loudly to alert his presence, but Gale didn’t even react. Ignoring the spike of concern, he approached him.

“You know she wouldn’t say shit like that if you had told her, right?” He asked.

Gale shifted, lifting his head. The poisonous look he sent towards him held a promise of what he would do if Haymitch even think of telling Katniss anything.

“Alright, alright, kid. My lips are sealed.” He sighed, raising his arms mockingly. “But you know that they will find out eventually, right?”

The fear that twisted Gale’s expression was warranted, but the intensity of it was unexpected.

“Will Snow sell them too?” He asked desperately. “Katniss and Peeta?”

“They are engaged, Gale. Their love story is far too glorified by the Capitol. It would be an unwise move if Snow tries to sell either of them at this moment, and Snow is not stupid.” He said quickly. “Besides, you know how the Capitol acts towards imperfections. They wouldn’t touch Peeta with that leg of his.”

Gale seemed soothed, but he was still not completely convinced.

“If a red envelope comes for any of them, you pass them to me.” He said firmly. At the look on Haymitch’s face, he repeated harshly. “You pass them to me, you hear me?”

“I’ll do it.” He sighed and agreed, wondering how his life had come to this. Promising all these kids to save one or another. “But you know if that day ever comes, you can’t save them forever. Snow will get his way eventually.”

“And I’ll make things difficult for him with every step of the way.” Gale snapped. “If he wants them, then he’s going to do it over my dead body.”

“Gale.” He hissed cautiously. The rooftop might be a blind spot, but it’s not completely safe either.

Gale’s anger waned, and his grey eyes grew cool – because it’s better than to think of them as empty. His shoulders slumped, and he looked defeated.

“Katniss can’t know.” He whispered, and it’s like the life had leaked out of his voice.

Haymitch reached up and squeezed his shoulder, not saying anything. He was seriously too drunk and old for this shit.
Chapter 37

Things started changing around the District when they got back from the Victory Tour. One day, it was still Cray as Head Peacekeeper, and then the next day, he was gone and he was replaced by a hard-faced man named Romulus Thread.

The first thing he did when he came to power was burn down the Hob and arrested all the shopkeepers.

He had been near the Hob when it happened, when Bristel had rushed up to him with panic on her face.

“They’re burning down the Hob.” She panted.

He dropped everything in his hands and ran off. Even in the distance, he could make out the black smoke from the fire raising to the sky. As he came nearer, he could see the flames spreading quickly across the warehouse, fuelled by the coal dust in the air. A group of men and women were forced to the ground, the Peacekeepers keeping their guns trained on them. And unbelievably, Madge Undersee was standing in front of them.

“Stop!” Gale yelled loudly. He saw the arm raising and the whip clutched in that hand. He threw himself in front of the Mayor’s daughter, shoving her behind him. The whip slapped down across his arm, and he bit back a cry of pain. Blood bloomed from the cut, the skin swelling up instantly. Madge gasped in surprise, pushing back his sleeve to inspect the wound.

“What do you think you’re doing to these people?” He growled.

Thread’s eyes were as cold as winter as he regarded him. “The Hob is not authorized by the law. And these people are punishable for sales of illegal items.”

“And what, you’re going to shoot all these people to death?” He snarled. He could feel the slippery slide of blood dripping down his skin, pooling under the stone beneath his feet. He felt lightheaded, but fury forced him to clarity.

“Hold it!” A familiar voice yelled out. Haymitch pushed his way through the crowd, glancing at his arm in worry before planting himself in front of Gale and Madge. “What do you thinking you’re doing to my Victor? Or the Mayor’s daughter – perhaps you recognize her?”

“They were obstructing my punishment.” Thread answered coldly.

“Yeah? And what do you think President Snow will say if he finds out that one of his favourite Victors is hurt because of you?” Haymitch said sarcastically. “And mark my words, the first call I make when I’m getting home is to the Capitol.”

Peeta and Katniss finally arrived, cheeks flushed and breathing heavily. Their eyes were wide and horrified as they took in the scene.

“You’re not shooting anyone here.” Gale said with a cold, hard voice. He spied Mrs Alder kneeling and surreptitiously shifted himself to hide her from Thread’s view. Katniss and Peeta have joined in to stand in front of the Hob’s shopkeepers. Perhaps the only ones to hold enough authority in this District to sway the Head Peacekeeper.

“I believe, for a first offense, the protocol when finding out that someone is selling illegal goods is to
confiscate the items and lock them for an overnight stay in the cells.” Purnia, one of the Peacekeepers that regularly ate at Greasy Sae’s, stepped forward and said stiffly.

“Is that the standard protocol here?” Thread asked, scowling in dissatisfaction.

“Yes, sir.” Purnia said bravely, and several others nodded in agreement.

Thread slid his cold gaze over the Victors standing in front of him. With a vicious twist of his lips, he coiled up his whip.

“Throw all these people into the cells. Do not release them till next morning.” He ordered.

Considering how he wanted to shoot them so badly just a moment ago, they were lucky enough to get off with their lives. So, in spite of how badly he wanted to protest, he bit his lip.

“Gale, you’re bleeding.” Madge said, pulling out a handkerchief to press against his wound. The pain that shoot up his arm nearly made him passed out.

“We have to get him to my mother.” Katniss said, looking at the puddle of blood on the ground.

Haymitch bended down slightly to grab his good arm, throwing it over his shoulder. Leaning his weight against his mentor, they made their way towards Katniss’s house. Aster greeted them at the doorway, explaining that Thom had ran before them to inform her. When they entered, Thom was pacing anxiously at the living room.

“Just a minor cut.” He slurred, flustered at all the worrying.

“You’re bleeding all over the damn floor, boy.” Haymitch scowled. He dropped him onto a chair, and Prim carefully rolled up his tattered sleeve to his elbow. From his wrist to elbow, his skin has been split open.

“I’ll go and fetch Hazelle.” Katniss said quietly, slipping out.

Firmly, Aster chased them all out except for Prim to help sterilized the wound and bound his arm up in bandages. And once they were done, he was fed sleep syrup to knock him out.
When he finally dragged himself back to consciousness, he could hear Katniss murmuring to
Haymitch and Peeta. He listened quietly, not wanting to alert them just yet. She was talking to them
about President Snow and the uprising in District 8.

A rebellion was stirring all across Panem, and strangely, he thought of Madam Calysta and her
peculiar eyes and mysterious smile. Half of him was excited by that, a part of him clambering to join
the fight, but the other half of him was conflicted by his fear for his family and the threat of a white
rose in his house.

If Snow could get into his house without anyone knowing, then he could easily kill them all in their
sleep. If he stepped just the slightest bit out of line, Snow could easily burn down his house with
everyone inside, just like what he had done to Haymitch’s family.

He thought of the broken smile on Finnick’s face, the bitterness in Johanna’s smirk, listening to the
screams of Katniss from a room away in the train, Mrs Alder’s grief in her eyes and both of her
daughters’ deaths. He was patient, he could wait for as long as possible. He was a hunter, and he
knew how to seize the opportunity when the chance comes. There’s a storm brewing in the horizon,
and he could be patient.

“I know you’re awake, Gale.” A mild, feminine voice that clearly doesn’t belonged to Katniss called
out. He opened his eyes slowly to see Madge Undersee watching him. Katniss and the others were
gone. She was holding a bowl of stew in one hand.

She helped him up, pressing the bowl of stew into his hands. He felt a sharp twinge in his injured
arm at his movement, and barely suppressed a wince.

“Thom has returned home. You have been sleeping the entire night.” She informed. “Mrs Everdeen
has sent Peeta and Haymitch back to their houses.”

“Then why are you still here?” He asked. Not rudely, but curiously. Madge was not his friend, but
he doesn’t dislike her anymore.

“Katniss said that the situation outside might be a little unsafe for me to walk home alone at the
moment.” Madge said quietly. “And it’s storming out there, so I’m staying until the weather clears.
Your mother has gone back home to care for Posy.”

Posy, who was sick with measles. They were lucky that they had the money now to provide for
Posy’s sickness.

“Thank you.” He said softly. Madge studied him for a long moment. He was tired and cold and his
arm hurts like a bitch, and he couldn’t be bothered to mask his exhaustion from his face. She
probably thinks he’s pitiful.

“What are you thanking me for?” She finally said. “In fact, I think I should be thanking you for
saving me.”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged, passing her his empty bowl. “And it’s no problem. Your skinny arm
would probably snap like a twig if the whip had hit you instead.”
She scowled at him, but amusement curled around the edge of her lips.

“Then I supposed I’m glad you came to my rescue then.” She grinned. She stood up, brushing absently at her pretty blue dress. “Get well soon, Gale.”

He noticed that her eyes were the gentle brown of the forest tree trunks in the woods. Odd, he always thought that her eyes were blue. As she left the room, he watched her go thoughtfully. Shaking his head, he lay back down.

Things have been uneasy and distant between Katniss and him ever since her Victory Tour. It felt like whenever they took a step forward, something would happen and it would be three steps back. Nowadays, he could claim that he was closer to Peeta than Katniss.

The day of the wedding photoshoot came far quicker than he had expected. The prep team and the stylists rode into District 12 on the day, livening up the Victors’ Village.

“Oh, Gale!” Portia pressed a kiss against his cheek, before glancing at his arm in concern. The sleeve had ridden up, revealing the thin scar. “What happened?”

“A whip happened.” He said wryly, before promising to tell her everything later.

While the prep team was fussing over Katniss and Peeta, he left the house with Haymitch to take a short stroll. It was still cold, but at least it wasn’t snowing anymore.

“You think Bonnie and Twill was telling the truth?” He asked, thinking back to what Katniss had said about meeting the two escapees from District 8.

“Who knows? People might be just spreading rumours and giving themselves false hope about 13’s existence. If District 13 still exists, why hadn’t the Capitol done anything?” Haymitch shrugged. “You really think Snow will let any of them live?”

“You think that’s what Snow is going to do to the rebelling Districts?” He asked hesitantly, shoving his bare hands into his pockets. He wished he had brought his gloves out.

“You heard what they did in District 8.” Haymitch said, glancing at him.

“With all the Districts rebelling, it won’t be too long before 12 does it too.” He muttered, although he was doubtful. They were small, weak and poor, and they lacked the weapons needed to fight back.

“Sure, as long as we do not end up like 13.” Haymitch scoffed.

He stayed silent, humming noncommitally and glanced up as a mockingjay flew past. For a second, he was envious of the songbird. Seeing the mockingjay brought a flutter of a memory to tickle at the back of his head.

“Regardless of the results of this year’s Games, things will start moving across Panem. There are movements in the shadows... underground. When that happens, exploiting the situation is only prudent.”

At that time, he wasn’t really listening to Madam Calysta, and hadn’t thought too deeply about her words. But her little hints scattered in them... he wondered if she had meant District 13. Does she
hold connections to the lost District?

Shaking his head, he looked away as Peeta called out to them in the distance, waving at them to return back to the house.
“And now we honour our third Quarter Quell,” Snow read off the small square of paper. “On the seventy-fifth anniversary, as a reminder to the rebels that even the strongest among them cannot overcome the power of the Capitol, the male and female tributes will be reaped from their existing pool of victors.”

Hazelle’s scream was muffled behind her hands. Rory and Vick stared at him in horror. Posy was still confused, but she noticed the tension instantly, her eyes filling with terrified tears. He, on the other hand, felt faint and dizzy, as if the floor beneath him had collapsed under his feet.

He staggered to his feet, not sure where he’s going. His mind felt like it had vanished a thousand miles away from his body, and he barely noticed his feet carrying him back to his room. Once the door slammed shut behind him, rage sent him crashing back to his own head. He grabbed the nearest item at hand and hurled it violently.

There were only four Victors in 12. One female and three males. The Quarter Quell was clearly
rigged to send Katniss back… and he had one out of three chances to be picked. His odds were terribly low this time round. He went into the arena once and barely survived, and now he might have to go back to fight against tributes with years of experience. Against friends.

He threw back his head and laughed till he’s crying, feeling messed up and insane. Instead of trying to control his emotions, he let them run wild, feeling like he had lost his world a second time.

He picked up the chair and sent it shattering against the wall. The wood splintered and sliced his hands, but he ignored the pain and continued his rampage.

He doesn’t know how long he went at it, but he was relieved that his family doesn’t come up and try to stop him. He dropped into a crouch, burying his face into his bloodied hands and screamed until his voice goes hoarse.

Hazelle opened the door with red-rimmed eyes to find Peeta on the other side.

“Sorry, is Gale in?” He asked unsurely, giving little Posy who was clutching onto her mother’s leg a small, reassuring smile.

“He’s in his room... although I’m not sure if he’s in the mood to see anyone now.” Hazelle answered, her voice throaty from crying. His heart ached at how old she looked at that moment, fear that her eldest son might have to enter the Games once more, wrinkles creased deep into her olive skin.

“Can I see him anyway?” He said.

Hazelle opened the door further and stepped aside to let him in. He walked in and glanced around tentatively, taking in the warm, homely atmosphere, such a difference from his own home. His family had refused to move into his new house with him, and it’s such a terribly lonely thing to live alone in such a huge house.

“He’s in the last room at the end of the corridor.” Hazelle murmured before she left him alone. Thanking her quietly, he made his way up the stairs. He should have gone to Haymitch first, but he knew that Gale would be the more difficult one to handle.

He knocked on the door loudly. “Gale? It’s me, Peeta!”

There was no answer.

He tried to turn the doorknob, blinking when the door slid open easily. Uncertainly, he stepped into the room, gasping softly when he took in the sight in front of him. It looked like a tornado had just blew right through the room. Gale was sprawled on the bed, lying silently atop the ripped sheets. He had an arm thrown over his face, and both of his hands were bloodied. For a heart stopping moment, Peeta thought that he was dead – until he noticed Gale breathing, chest falling gently up and down.

Biting his lip, he silently stepped out again. He came back after several minutes with a pail of warm water, clean towel, bandages and a small pouch filled with medicines and creams. He had made sure he was well-stocked, living alone, but he hadn’t thought he would be using it this soon.

“Gale, I’m going to be cleaning up your hands.” He informed.

The older Victor didn’t respond, but his breathing seemed to pause to indicate that he’s listening. Gingerly, he picked up the hand that’s stretched out on the sheets, staining the cloth crimson red. He winced at the splinters stabbed in the flesh. With a deep breath, he lifted the tweezer to start picking
out all the tiny splinters in Gale’s hand.

It was a messy task, as more blood seeped out of the cuts every time he got a splinter free. But the lack of reaction was far more disconcerting.

“I’m going back in to protect Katniss.” He said.

Silence.

“If I am chosen, you will not volunteer for me.” He continued, determined. He knew that Gale was listening. “If you or Haymitch is chosen, I’m going to volunteer.”

He finally got all the splinters out and started to bandage the hand, smearing antiseptic cream on the cuts before he wrapped white cloth over the injured palm.

“You’re an idiot.” Gale suddenly said raspily.

He jerked in surprise, not expecting Gale to talk.

“You’re a cripple. You think you can protect her?” Gale continued, pulling his hand out of his grip. He studied his bandaged hand blankly as he slowly sat up. “You think you can protect her long enough before you’re killed? What makes you think you can survive against the other Victors?”

“I have to go in.” He tried to sound steady and resolved, even though he had been preparing for all the arguments that Gale would give him. “Haymitch chose her once. He owes me. You know that Katniss is definitely going in. There’s no one else. I have to go in to protect her.”

“You think you can win by conviction alone? This is not a normal Hunger Games.” Anger bled into his tone, but he still looked unnervingly... unanimated, like he wasn’t properly here. “You’re going against people with years of experience, people who have outlasted twenty-three others.”

“Do you remember the conversation we had on the train? Before the Games?” He asked. “I told you to save her. To choose her.”

“And you think I can’t protect her?” Gale retorted, the spark of challenge in his grey eyes.

He sucked in a breath. This would be the biggest hurdle he needed to overcome to convince Gale. He knew that even without his crippled leg, Gale was a better fighter. He was faster, stronger, cleverer and a hunter.

“I know you can.” He conceded. “But if you go in... you have much more to lose.”

Gale’s eyes were unreadable. There was a smear of drying blood on his cheek that made his eyes looked eerie in the dim lighting.

“Your siblings... Your mother...” He said softly. “They can’t afford to lose you. Logically speaking, if you go in and save Katniss, you die and your family will lose this house.” Gale still didn’t react. “My family... they don’t need me to survive. They never have.”

“Katniss would look after my family.” Gale returned. “You think she’ll be happy you die for her? She loves you.”

He felt his heart skipped a beat. He wasn’t able to completely thwart the flutter in his stomach, or the warmth that suffused his cheeks. If Gale thinks so, could it really be true?

“And she loves you as well. It won’t be any easier for her to lose you.” He responded. “She barely
knew me. She’ll forget me soon enough."

“This is not a damn competition, Peeta!” Gale bit out, a brief spark of the surly spitfire he was flaring back to life in his eyes. It was also the first time the older Victor had called him by name. “And you have to be a fool to think that she’s going to forget about you if you die. The love she has for me is not the same as she has for you. She doesn’t love me that way.”

“Then you should understand why I have to go in with her.” He pleaded. “I know—I know I’m weak. And I can’t hunt. Or fight really well. And now with my leg... I’ll probably slow her down instead. But I would do anything to get her out alive. You understand... that I can’t sit back and watch. I have—need to be there beside her.” He saw the flicker of indecision on Gale’s face, and knew he just needed one last push. “I promise—I’ll do whatever it takes to make sure Katniss comes home. And I can’t do that if I sit in some stuffy room helpless. I have to do something.”

“I’m not promising anything.” Gale said quietly. “If you’re reaped, I’ll volunteer. And if Haymitch is reaped, you better pray that you volunteer faster than I do.”

He exhaled a shaky breath. He supposed this was the best he could extract from Gale.

“Now can you let me wrap up your other hand?” He asked.

Gale shot him an irked glare, but willingly held out his other hand out to him.
“What the hell happened to your hands?” Haymitch said roughly, still pissed that he was forced to sober up. If there’s one thing about Peeta that he could admire, it's his persistence.

Katniss was staring at his bandaged hands in concern. She hadn’t dare to talk to Gale, their last fight still fresh in her head. She had basically accused him of being a traitor and a whore, but she knew that if anything, she wasn’t angry if the rumours were true, although she was still upset that he had changed that much. She was hurt and upset that she couldn’t recognize him anymore, and that he had hidden things from her. She knew that he had promised to tell her everything one day, and she had thought she would understand more once she became a Victor like him, but secrets still encompassed their relationship.

“Break a chair.” Gale muttered, stalking past them. Peeta smiled apologetically and followed after him.

Injured hands or not, Gale could still set a snare much more effortlessly and gracefully than any of them. The bandages don’t seem to impede his movements at all. If it did, he was determined to get over his current weakness. Gale was a perfectionist, but a surprisingly patient teacher.

Madge dropped by one afternoon with copies of old and new Capitol newspapers featuring interviews and news of various Victors.

“You got a lot of these.” He murmured, flipping through the papers idly. There were none of him mentioned in any news, as far as he could see, and he wondered if Madge had taken out any papers mentioning him.

He was reading through a brief section on District 7’s Blight, a fellow Victor of Johanna that he recognized but has never spoken to before when Haymitch stumbled past. His mentor gave him a dirty glare before he continued running. Right behind him came Katniss, who was urging their mentor on. Peeta was running at a slower, but steadier pace behind them.

He has already finished his laps, and was relaxing in the shade of a tree.

“I stole them from papa.” Madge smirked slightly, drawing out a husky laugh from him.

He distractedly wiggled his fingers, stretching out the kinks in them. Aster had not been happy he had hurt himself again, right after his arm wound had healed.

“I’m sorry.” She said quietly. He glanced at her, but she was looking down, sunshine hair spilled over her shoulder and shielding her face.

“Are you apologizing because I may be reaped and die in the arena?” He asked lightly.

Her head jerked up slightly, and her brown eyes were intense, taking him off guard. “You won’t be reaped. You won’t die. And if you are reaped...” She swallowed, her expression faltering briefly. “You’ll come home, right?”

“No, I won’t, Undersee.” He said gently.

Her eyes were so, so sad, and he couldn’t understand why. They were barely friends, and they have never liked each other before. She doesn’t have a reason for being sad for him.
“It’s not fair.” Her voice quivered, bottom lip wobbling. For a moment, he was afraid she’s going to cry, but she took a deep breath and steadied herself. Her golden lashes were damp when she blinked, but her eyes were steely.

“Life’s not fair.” He snorted, but it was half-hearted as he looked away. “Anyway, I might not even be reaped.”

Neither of them mentioned that Peeta would find a way to go into the arena with Katniss.

“Can you do me a favour?” He asked.

She blinked in bewilderment, staring wide-eyed up at him, wondering if she had heard wrong.

He cleared his throat, almost in annoyed embarrassment. “There’s shit going on all around Panem... I don’t know how safe 12 would be when we’re gone. Can... can you watch over my family?” A flush was slowly creeping up his neck. “You—You don’t have to stay with them... Just watch out for them from a distance or something—”

“I will.” Madge interrupted, her eyes kind. “Of course, I will.”

The kindness in her eyes were unbearable. He swallowed with difficulty, trying to maintain the eye contact, but her eyes were too bright, too intense, like she could see right through him.

“Thank you, Undersee.” He murmured.

She giggled under her breath. “You know my name is Madge, right?”

“Oh, sorry, I always thought your name was Marge.” He smirked.

Her lips twisted into a mock scowl of indignation, but her eyes were laughing. He felt the tension eased slightly from his chest, and thought that perhaps the Mayor’s daughter was not that bad after all.
“Gale Hawthorne!”

He had to grit his teeth, stamping down his ire as Peeta shoved Haymitch aside and stepped up to volunteer. He knew that Peeta’s chances were low, even with the additional training. Even so, he was surprised to feel a slight flutter of worry in his belly for the blonde. It was difficult to hate someone like Peeta Mellark.

Before he could ponder more on annoying blondes, he was immediately marched away by Peacekeepers before they could say goodbye to their families.

“New procedure.” Thread smiled coldly. And then they were ushered towards the train station to send them to the Capitol.

He felt a squeeze in his chest as he watched District 12 disappeared from a train window. There was a forbidding feeling squirming in his stomach, something he couldn’t shake off. It made his palms sweat the more he thought about it, so he decided to shift his focus to the Quarter Quell instead.

He joined the others as they settled down to view the recaps of the Reaping. As usual, they started with District 1.

Twins Cashmere and Gloss, who he rarely spoke to, but knew as they were in the same ‘business’ together. Brutus from District 2, who volunteered, and his younger fellow Victor, Enobaria, who stepped up to the podium with her golden fangs flashing at the crowd. Beetee and Wiress from District 3, who he has never met before.

His heart leaped to his throat when Annie Cresta was reaped, and he was shaken by the scream of terror that echoed across the town square. He remembered her kind eyes and kinder hands and wondered why all the kind women in his life had to suffer so much. Mags swiftly stepped up to volunteer for her, but it wasn’t any better. Mags was experienced, but she was old and recently suffered a stroke. Then, Finnick was reaped and he had to bite back the sharp heat of anger.

Watt and Abina from District 5, who he only recognized because they were in the Capitol as mentors for the past two years. Carter and Savena from District 6, a pair of morphling addicts. Blight and Johanna from District 7, the latter who looked pissed as hell as she was reaped, but lacked any hint of surprise in her dark eyes. Cecilia from 8, whose three children reminded him too much of his own siblings. Her fellow Victor, Woof, an older-looking man who was sometimes seen hanging around Chaff and Haymitch.

Bran and Marian from 9, both who had greeted him genially when they first met. Talon and Eve from District 10. And then from District 11, fun-loving, uncouth Chaff who’s always trying to force a drink into his hands, and Seeder, who has always been nothing but kind towards him.

Finally, Katniss, the lone female from 12. Effie calling out his name, and Peeta rushing to volunteer.

Once it was over, Haymitch stood up and left without a word. He let out a shuddering breath.

Most of them were acquaintances he barely knew, but some of them were friends. To Haymitch, who knew all of them for years, was probably going through this much harder.

He glanced at Peeta, who was studiously taking notes, and Katniss, who was still staring at the screen. Clearing his throat, he stood up.
“I’m going to take a nap.” He said quietly, his voice hoarse. Without waiting for a reply, he left the compartment.
Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

Pretty long chapter detailing Gale's Games here.

He didn’t get much sleep in the end, waking up with a strangled scream and Emmer’s maddened eyes and desperate snarl echoing in his head. He looked out of the window to see that the sky had turned dark outside. With his bones aching, he slipped out of the bed and left his room.

Peeta and Katniss was still reviewing the Victors. At a closer look, he realized they were watching Haymitch’s Games. Quietly, he lingered by the ajar doorway.

He had briefly watched their mentor’s Games last year. Haymitch’s fellow tribute had looked startlingly alike to Madge. It’s only later that he found out that Maysilee Donner was Madge’s aunt.

He probably wouldn’t have fare well in Haymitch’s arena. Everything was deceptively beautiful and peaceful, from the glittering waters, the colourful songbirds, to the breath-taking sceneries. He would have been too paranoid of everything to survive past his first day.

He hadn’t exactly been in a right mind the last time he watched Haymitch’s Games, but now he realized that the subtle defiance of his mentor’s Games probably mirrored Katniss and Peeta’s a little too similarly, and Haymitch’s family and girlfriend had been punished for it.

He looked back when he heard footsteps approaching. Haymitch peered into the room, raising a brow when he noticed what was on the screen, just as trumpets blew to announce his victory.

He left Haymitch to it as Katniss and Peeta started discussing what they have just seen. He briefly hoped that neither of them suggested watching his Games. After all, watching him once two years ago should be enough.

Unbeknownst to Gale, that had been what Katniss was thinking of doing. Haymitch had settled down on the couch behind them. She watched his hands twitched for a drink for a long time, before turning to Peeta.

“Is Gale’s Games in there?” She asked.

Peeta blinked at her, but he seemed to understand the contemplating look on her face easily. He dug through the box, before finally fishing out one particular tape.

“Haven’t you already seen his Games?” Haymitch asked, although his expression was almost approving.

“That was when I didn’t know if he’s coming back or not.” She shrugged. “I know he survived his Games, so we should be able to learn something from a more strategic point of view, right?”

Gale was a master at strategy, and one of the key things that he had taught them during training was how to plan around any type of obstacle.
“Reasonable.” Peeta smiled, inserting the tape.

The recaps of the Reaping started first. It was almost chilling when Gale was reaped. He was shorter, skinnier, but stronger than any other Seam kids. But a sort of exhaustion lingered around his haggard face and thin shoulders from starvation. She spotted Thom in the crowd near him. Thom’s face was young and pale, staring at his best friend in terror and shock.

Gale’s face had slid into a stony mask as he got up the stage, joining his fellow tribute, Sara Alder. The young girl looked remarkably like her mother.

Then the scene switched to the chariot parade. She winced in pity as she spotted Gale’s outfit. He hadn’t gotten Cinna and Portia yet. Their stylist had been that terrifying witch, Camille, back then. He was covered in charcoal dirt, more skin exposed than was comfortable, flimsy black cloth hanging off his frame. She felt embarrassed for him.

Then they started showing Gale’s interview. At sixteen, Gale hadn’t been really cooperative. Out of the four of them, his interview was probably the worst.

Haymitch had his dry, cynical humour, Peeta had his eloquent, silver-tongued wit, and she, well, she had Cinna’s efforts and her awkwardness. Gale was sarcastic, but with a more biting edge that bordered on impertinent back then. He steered away from personal topics like his family and friends, but somehow, his dark sense of humour seemed to entertain the audience. He was a train wreck of Haymitch and Katniss combined.

On the screen, Caesar was unfazed by Gale’s curtness. “So, Gale, you scored a 9 for your private session. What do you think of your chances in the Games?”

A smile had flashed across Gale’s face at that, something she hadn’t noticed back then. She was too busy being anxious and distraught at her best friend being sent to the arena to really listen.

But the smile that glittered in his grey eyes were humourless. It was more like a baring of teeth, a shift of jaw muscles. There was nothing pretty or nice about his smile.

“As much as I think of everyone else’s chances in the Hunger Games.” Gale was saying. “Win or lose, we’re all going to die anyway.”

A silent provocation in his own way, but towards the Capitol instead of his fellow tributes.

“I’m surprised Snow hadn’t punished him for that.” Peeta muttered.

Haymitch’s expression was unreadable, but his lips twitched.

The interview part was over, and she stiffened in anticipation as the Games started.

When the gong sounded, Gale immediately lunged off the pedestal. He picked up a bag on the outer edge of the Cornucopia, and then covering Sara, the both of them vanished into the distance. Almost immediately, they ran into the girl from 8, who unexpectedly let them go.

Sara Alder cried out a name, but was tugged away by Gale. The girl from 8 died hours later, stabbed in the back by another tribute. The girl’s name was Lea, and she only remembered because Gale had cried for her.

Gale and Sara lasted for two days before they ran into the boy from 11. They immediately broke into a tussle, until Gale crushed the boy’s skull with a broken brick. Sara died in his arms, and the eerie resemblance of the scene shared with Rue and herself caused her to shiver.
Gale continued on his own for the next few days, trying to forage for food and water. He found berries and edible plants, but there was no water source around. He was already weak with thirst when the girl from 3 approached him for an alliance.

She knew what was coming for both of them immediately. She reached out for Peeta, her fingers entwining around his. She felt him squeeze her hand in comfort. The Gamemakers released a bunch of feline mutts. One of the monsters mauled the male tribute from 5. The Career pack took down another, but the male tribute from 4 was lost in the process. The third went skulking around the far edge of the arena, never running into any tributes. The fourth and last one ran straight towards Gale and his ally.

The mutt jumped on the girl from 3, clearly singling her out as the weaker target, viciously tearing her apart and then devouring her remains. Her screams filled the room, terrible and bone chilling. Even Haymitch looked a little pale at the gruesome scene. It must be a nightmare, because she wasn’t even there and cold sweat had broken out all over her body.

For the first time in the arena, Gale looked terrified. But he managed to regain back his wits and fled.

The mutt stayed clear the next few hours, but it didn’t veer from Gale’s tracks. Gale must have realized that the mutt was still hunting him, as he cut his palm and smeared blood over whatever he could reach, changing his direction frequently to misdirect the predator behind him.

She might not be the greatest fan of Buttercup, her sister’s cat, but she understood cats and how they worked. They were natural hunters and predators. They hunted by stalking their prey. Gale clearly understood that well, and he knew that he wouldn’t be able to escape this alive if he doesn’t confront the mutt.

The three Victors watched Gale silently as he searched for materials. Torn fabric, a broken table leg, the dented lid of a trashcan, several empty cans scattered all over the arena. He moved quickly, not wasting time, picking a spot at the highest building in the arena. It seemed to be a former school, only three-story high. The roof was gone, the walls crumbled away, the flooring disintegrating from age and some of the stairs were missing. She remembered studying Gale’s actions with confusion and curiosity, but now it was all admiration and disbelief at how calm and clinical he was with a monster hunting him down.

He had arranged a pile of broken bricks on the first floor, stabbing the table leg upright. Then he placed wires with empty cans attached to them around the perimeters, smearing more blood over the thin wire. Not pausing, he moved swiftly towards the top floor and started forming a net with his coil of rope and remaining wire.

The mutt was smart, but Gale had been smarter. Despite its effort in avoiding the trip wire scattered all around the building, it was finally lured by a patch of blood that looked like it had been unintentionally left there.

Katniss couldn’t see any wire, but the mutt paused briefly as its claws brushed against a wire positioned so close to the ground it seemed invisible against the off-white grass. A few feet away, the empty cans rattled.


His tone was almost fond. Even though they had been watching closely, none of them realized the trip wire – just like the mutt.

Gale’s head snapped up when he heard the clattering of the cans. He exploded into movement,
making sure his knife was with him as he picked up the trash can lid. When the mutt entered the
room, it triggered the trap. The ropes snapped up the mutt into the air, the wires enforcing the net.
However, the mutt was too heavy and its sharp claws managed to slice open the net. It fell back
down towards the ground, but Gale had already anticipated the possibility of that happening. Human
and monster were thrown out of the window, scattering broken glass everywhere. The table leg
beneath grazed the mutt’s ribs. The mutt let out a yowl, wrestling with the net still wrapped around
its body.

Gale hit the ground and rolled, before stopping with a gasp of pained breath. The mutt struggled to
its feet, lunging with a screech.

“Fuck!” She swore, tightening her grip on Peeta’s hand. Her heart skipped a beat as the mutt landed
on Gale’s legs, black claws flashing out. He managed to squirm out of the way, his knife lashing out
to stab its neck. The mutt roared and slapped its paw out at Gale. And then finally, with its last final
fight, she saw the mutt went still. Gale’s head fell back and he panted heavily, his limbs trembling.

Slowly, shakily, Gale stood up, limping off. His leg was bleeding from the claws, but she also
guessed that it was partly broken from the mutt’s weight.

“That scare off at least ten years of my life.” Peeta mumbled. She released a breath she hadn’t
realized she was holding, and laughed shakily in agreement.

Gale managed to bind his bleeding leg, stopping the blood flow with plants he had found. He ran
into the girl from 4 the next day, and they got into a scuffle with a lot of slamming and choking
before Gale sliced his dagger across her throat.

He waited out the remaining days, nursing his wounds, only coming out of his makeshift shelter
when the male tribute from 1 was left. Despite the odds, despite the spear that Calix had stabbed into
his gut, Gale managed to slash the other boy’s throat open in a bout of desperation.

Calix died instantly, and Gale was announced the winner.

Despite knowing that Gale had survived, it was still a nerve wracking experience to see him dying
on screen. More blood than she even knows existed was pooling around his body, his face pale and
bloodless. The camera had zoomed in closer, and she could see the shallow breaths he’s taking and
the fading gaze in his grey eyes.

As the hovercrafts took him away, the tension in her shoulders relaxed and she slumped in her seat.
She could hear Peeta releasing a panicked sigh beside her.

“I have no idea how he survived all that.” Peeta said softly.

“With a pinch of cleverness, a touch of speed, too much stubbornness in that boy and a lot of luck.”
Haymitch mimed raising a toast to the screen. “He is a survivor.”

She thought of Gale hunting to support his mother and three younger siblings after his father died,
teaching a younger Katniss how to survive in the woods, taking tesserae for his entire family,
winning the Hunger Games and the hollow grey eyes that he sported these days. She still doubted
the gossips about his ‘womanizing’ habits in the Capitol, but he neither denied nor confirmed her
accusations. He held too many secrets now, and it vexed her. She loved him, and while she’s certain
of the kind of feelings she has for him now, that doesn’t make her loved him any lesser.

Katniss have little people she loved, and she would die – or kill, if push to it – for them. She’s upset
that he’s shying away from her, building a wall so thick around his heart that she barely knew him
She doesn’t know if she’s going to survive another Games, whether she’s coming home. Maybe her luck would run out, and Snow would finally succeed in killing her. She hoped that her death wouldn’t break him. Whatever differences they were having now, she never doubted his love for her.
Chapter 43

Peeta and Katniss’s costumes were a steady blaze of glowing embers, their makeup thick and dangerous. They were frowning, hands held in unity. There was no longer softness on their faces, shining jewels in their hair, or friendly smiles on their lips.

They looked magnificent. Or angry at the world, he couldn’t tell. But they were certainly getting the effect they wanted.

Even he was dressed in black and red by Cinna. Perhaps as a display of teamwork, maybe a subtle suggestion from Effie. He was clad in black pants, crimson blazer with gold flame-like designs on his collar and black boots with red lace.

He stepped out to join the Victors once the parade was over. He spotted Peeta and Katniss standing beside their chariot. Before he could walk over, Finnick intercepted him and hooked his arm with his.

“Gale, how are you?” He greeted candidly.

The older man was far too bare in his costume, and Gale made his incredulity clear by tilting his head at Finnick’s chest.

“What can you do? People like to see the goods.” Finnick shrugged, winking lasciviously. He loosened his grip, but before he slunk away, he murmured into Gale’s ear. “I’m glad that you aren’t going in.”

Katniss and Peeta was speaking to Chaff and Seeder when he joined them. He caught Chaff giving Katniss his usual crass greeting, and quickly stepped back before Chaff could give him the same treatment.

Then they were dragged away to the elevators.

“You’re friends with Finnick Odair?” Peeta murmured to him curiously. He glanced at Katniss, but she didn’t seem to notice.

“We’ve met.” He replied nonchalantly. He knew what people thought of Finnick when they first met him. Hell, he had thought the same of Finnick before his own Games. Combined with the rumours in 12 about his own promiscuity in the Capitol, they would probably think them partners in wantonness.

Before the elevators closed, Johanna slipped in after them. Like Finnick, she snuck a hand towards him, although her touch was more intimate, snaking her arm around his waist. However, her eyes were friendly as she regarded him.

“Hi, pretty boy.” She purred.

She smirked at Katniss, who was raising a brow at the arm entwined around his waist. He nudged her subtly, wanting to groan out loud at Johanna’s provocation. His relationship with Katniss was bad enough without Johanna coming in to incite her.

Luckily, she slipped from his side to speak to Katniss. They exchanged meaningless small talk that made him think that Johanna’s probably going to do something absurd.
And then she zipped down her dress and kicked it to the side, completely naked. Katniss’s face burned hot with embarrassment and she quickly averted her gaze. Peeta continued his conversation with Johanna, keeping his eyes politely above her neck.

He choked back an incredulous snort, rolling his eyes when Johanna glanced at him briefly to wink playfully. He has seen more naked women in his life than he wanted to, but there was something weird about looking at the naked body of a friend. As courteous as he wanted to be, he couldn’t avoid noticing her breasts. The still glowing light from Peeta’s costume was shining off her fucking breasts, for fuck’s sake.

When Johanna got off her floor, the tremulous smile on Katniss’s face disappeared. Peeta burst out laughing, and he couldn’t resist a small smile, even though his ears felt strangely warm.

“What?” She snarled at Peeta, stomping out of the elevator when they reached the penthouse.

“Why they’re all acting like this. Finnick with his sugar cubes and Chaff kissing you and that whole thing with Johanna stripping down.” Peeta explained, his lips still twitching. “They’re playing with you because you’re so… you know.”

Katniss continued staring at him blankly, as if daring him to continue.

“It’s like when you wouldn’t look at me naked in the arena even though I was half dead. You’re so… pure.” Peeta said.

Too much information, he thought, trying to move past them.

“I’ve been practically ripping your clothes off every time there’s been a camera for the last year!” Katniss blustered.

“Yeah, I mean, for the Capitol, you’re pure,” Peeta said hurriedly. “For me, you’re perfect. They’re just teasing you.”

For a Victor, Katniss had been strangely... fresh. Not only because she’s one of the current Victors, but she hadn’t experienced the full depth of the Capitol’s atrocity yet. She doesn’t know the slavery, the darkness behind this gleaming city, the games even the Capitol civilians played.

He prayed desperately that she stayed like this.

“You’re laughing at me.” She scowled threateningly at Peeta. Then her eyes snapped to him, and he quickly arranged his expression.

“I’m not.” He said guiltlessly.

Katniss’s lips twisted into a snarl, and she would have say something if Effie and Haymitch hadn’t interrupt. He felt a small smile on his lips, and for a moment, the horror of the Quarter Quell was forgotten.
Chapter 44

While Katniss and Peeta were off to training, and Haymitch spending more time with the older tributes, he decided to wander towards the Viewing Hall. As the Games have not started yet, there weren’t many sponsors around, especially so early in the day.

Returning to the Capitol this year felt peculiar. It was... different, and he couldn’t describe how. Perhaps the Capitol was affected by the unrest spreading across Panem as well.

He felt a gaze boring into the back of his neck and he looked up sharply, his hunter instincts on alert. Icy blue eyes greeted him across the room. Madam Calysta was sipping into a glass of champagne, one leg crossed elegantly over the other. She tilted her head and smiled coolly at him.

Sighing, he got up and walked over to join her table.

For a moment, they were silent. He studied her visage quietly while she continued to watch over the room.

“This trend of mockingjays in the Capitol... I fear I can never understand it.” She commented lightly. Outwardly, she doesn’t look like she’s paying him any attention, but her head was cocked almost subtly at his direction.

“I heard the people of the Capitol has a tendency to copy their... idols.” The word curled around his tongue like poison, and his lips were tugged into a grimace.

Madam Calysta chuckled, licking her lips. “A mockingjay is nothing but a failure of a mutation. A poor imitation of the original. I suppose it’s appropriate to call these rebels mockingjays.” Her tone was derisive, so genuine that he couldn’t help but be quietly startled by the coldness. “They are a result of too much freedom in the Districts.”

“Are you talking about the uprisings, Madam Calysta?” He asked cautiously.

She snorted in mockery and waved a lazy manicured hand at him. “A weak attempt at rebellion. They underestimate the might of the Capitol. We have the best of advanced technology installed into the streets for protection.”

He narrowed his eyes at her, even as his lips curled into a scowl.

“Just like how the mockingjay is a failure, you can never beat the original. The jabberjay is a symbol of the Capitol.” She remarked idly.

A symbol that the Capitol had abandoned into the wilds, he thought.

She stood up and regarded him with a dignified air. She never looked more otherworldly than she was at this moment.

“I think,” She mused softly. “That this may be our last meeting, Gale. Chaos will come to the Capitol soon. I hope you will make the right choice.”

He has so many more questions to ask her, but he stayed silent as she walked off. For a second, her back looked strangely lonely.

He glanced at the champagne she left behind on the table. She hadn’t finish her drink. He picked up
the glass and lifted it to his mouth.

It was bitter.
Katniss’s bridal gown was a stunning piece, with pearls around her slender throat. When she stood up and started twirling around, smoke started to engulf the silk fabric. Flames licked the edge of the dress as she spun around faster.

He stiffened up in panic, halfway out of his seat. But soon he realized that she wasn’t getting hurt at all. Flames ate up every white piece of silk, revealing a different gown beneath. His breath stuttered in his throat as Katniss raised her arms, her sleeves a motley of black coal and white patched feathers.

Cinna has turned her into the Mockingjay.

The significance of what the stylist had done hit him like a sledgehammer. His mouth went dry as he watched the rest of the interview, and then Peeta dropped another bomb.

Katniss Everdeen was pregnant.

The audience exploded into a cacophony of chaos around him, nearly deafening him in the process. They were screaming and bemoaning. They were angry and upset.

The crowd had gone out of control.

Up on the stage, the Victors stood up and joined hands. The screens blacked out, but it was too late. Everyone in Panem have seen.

As everyone was ushered back to their apartments, Gale shot up from his seat and hurriedly caught up with Haymitch in the chaos.

“What’s going on?” He whispered furiously. “What exactly are you all planning?”

Because there’s definitely something on. With Haymitch and the rest of the Victors. With Madam Calysta. With Plutarch Heavensbee and that damn mockingjay watch of his.

“Not here.” Haymitch whispered back. And then he slipped away.

God, he’s going to fucking murder Haymitch.

Swearing, he returned to the penthouse. Immediately, Katniss was in his arms, hugging him tight enough to cut off his circulation. She pulled away slightly to stare at his face intensely, as if she’s trying to commit how he looked like to memory.

“I’m sorry.” She mumbled.

He was already shaking his head. “No, I’m sorry. You be careful in there. Don’t do anything rash.”

“I won’t.” She chuckled humourlessly. “Take care of Haymitch.”

She turned away, biting her lip, struggling not to look back at him. He was surprised when Peeta walked forward and grabbed him in a one-armed hug.

“I’ll watch out for her.” Peeta promised.

They both disappeared down the hallway, and he went to search for Haymitch.
“There will be a rescue.” Haymitch said abruptly, after dragging him into the bathroom and turning on all the faucets to full blast. Over the cameras, Gale would look like he’s trying to sober his mentor up, as usual. “In the arena.”

“An alliance.” He guessed. With Finnick, Mags and Johanna, possibly.

Haymitch nodded slowly. “At midnight. Rooftop. Do not be late.”

“Midnight when?” He frowned, his heartbeats roaring in his ears. He wasn’t quite sure how the rescue was going to work, but he trusts that Haymitch already has a plan in place.

“You’ll know.” Haymitch replied. “Bring Annie with you.”

Right. As if that explained everything. He wanted to sigh in frustration, and barely reigned himself in.

Haymitch climbed out of the shower, splattering water everywhere. His clothes were sticking uncomfortably against his skin and water droplets hit Gale in the face when he waved a hand.

“She doesn’t know anything.” Haymitch muttered, and then he was shoved out of the bathroom.

He wiped his face in irritation and headed back towards his room, wishing that everything doesn’t have to be this vague. He hated going into things without knowing all the plans.

Haymitch would do anything to get Peeta and Katniss out. He could only trust that his mentor knew what he was doing right now.
Haymitch came and go, not staying for long and flitting in between the crowd. Annie had come to join Gale, sitting down silently beside him. When the jabberjays came, she clutched his hand, her expression pulled taut like a bowstring.

When her screams echoed in the arena, Finnick broke down. He glanced at her in his peripheral vision, and realization settled over him. She didn’t look back, but her thumb rubbed his skin idly and she nodded briefly.

He closed his eyes as more screams joined in to torment Katniss. Prim, Aster Everdeen, his siblings, Madge, even his... He didn’t want to open his eyes. Panic was trying to crawl out of his chest, even though he knew his siblings were safe. They were back in District 12. They were safe.

He has to believe that.

Too many Victors were already dead.

The screaming continued, and he fought the urge to curl up and cover his ears. Annie’s grip was tight enough that her nails were digging into his flesh.

The jabberjays were still screaming with the voices of his family. It was driving him fucking crazy.

He was starting to shake, cold sweat breaking out over his skin. He blinked open his eyes, trying to breathe, but his chest was tight and unyielding. Distantly, he could hear Dayta’s voice begging for him to save her.

“Annie.” He whispered.

She stood up abruptly, her face ashen white. She hooked her arm in his and dragged him out of the room, the unexpected strength belying her slender size.

Outside, the screams sounded far away. It felt like an eternity before his hysteria slowly ebbed. Annie’s flowing brown hair was covering her eyes, but she was inhaling, exhaling deeply.

“Stay with me.” He demanded, not caring how he sounded like. Without Haymitch, without Effie, he doesn’t know how to do this alone. But a bigger reason was that he needed her by his side so he could get her out by tonight.

“I was just going to ask.” She giggled weakly.

God, what a pair they made.

Plans were created to be fucked up, especially vague ones. He was distracted by a Capitol woman, and then Peacekeepers started to file in silently into the Viewing Hall and he panicked. He only took his eyes off Annie for one second, but when he looked back, she was missing from his side. On the screen, the arena was chaotic. Finnick and Enobaria were fighting, Peeta and Katniss were separated, but that wasn’t the most important thing right now.

It’s close to midnight and Annie was missing.

He followed Annie’s example, inhaling deeply, before exhaling slowly to calm himself. Then, almost
leisurely, acting as if he belonged here, he left the room. The corridor outside was empty.

He started to speed up, pushing into a sprint as he turned a corner.

*Think, think, where could she have gone to?* Annie wouldn’t have left his side under her own volition. Perhaps she had an anxiety attack and had to leave the room.

He thought back to the first time they met.

He started running.

The bathroom door was unlocked and he slipped inside to find her cowering beside the sink.

“Hey, hey, Annie,” He murmured softly, crouching down in front of her. “I’m here.”

She blinked up at him with wet eyes, her gaze unfocused.

“I— I shouldn’t have come. Shouldn’t. Couldn’t.” She stammered. “Can’t— Can’t—”

He shushed her, gently coaxing her to stand. She leaned heavily against his side, shaking like a bird. They stumbled out of the bathroom together, and he froze as he heard heavy booted footsteps approaching their direction.

“Shit.” He cursed.

He resisted the urge to shake Annie and dragged her along, trying to outrun their pursuers. Slowly, he could feel her starting to move under her own strength.

“Where are we going?” She asked in fear.

*Stairs. Stairs.* “Hopefully, out of here.” He muttered.

“Halt!” A voice yelled out behind. Annie faltered, but he quietly urged her along. Then suddenly, a squad of Peacekeepers were blocking their way.

They were surrounded.

Annie was trembling slightly, but he could feel her attempting to straighten up.

“Gale Hawthorne, Annie Cresta, you’re both under arrest.” The same voice behind the helmet said. Before either of them could react, he felt a sharp sting at the base of his neck. Annie slumped forward, and he staggered at her sudden dead weight. He attempted to catch her, but a wave of dizziness washed over him.

His last thought was an apology, to Annie, to Haymitch, to Katniss— and then he sank into oblivion.
Katniss Everdeen in the fire burns brighter in the dark verse

She was rescued because she was the Mockingjay.

District 13 actually existed.

District 12 was destroyed. Peeta was captured. Gale was captured.

If it doesn’t feel like her entire being has been wrung through the blender, she would have been pissed at Gale. Even though Haymitch had told her repeatedly that her best friend had not known the plans until the day before, she was furious that he had known at all. Because it doesn’t change the fact that Gale would have kept this from her anyway if he had known in the beginning. But maybe she was being irrational, for the sake of not wanting to feel empty anymore.

She would have died of spite if Madge hadn’t come to her in angry tears. The Mayor’s daughter had survived, along with Gale’s and her families. Thom and Rory had gotten all of them out. But Peeta’s family was lost. The Mayor and his wife were lost.

She doesn’t know what to do with this rebellion business. She doesn’t know what to do without Gale. She missed her best friend’s steady presence. She wished that she had apologized for her nasty
words and judgement before everything went to hell.

She needed Peeta by her side. Dependable, safe Peeta, who would probably be much better at motivating the revolution with his silver tongue. She never realized how terribly she had loved him until he’s gone.

God, she’s talking about them as if they were already dead.

If Gale was here, she mused, he would have scowled that familiar scowl at her and say *who do you think you’re talking about, Catnip?*

But he’s not, Peeta’s not, and Haymitch had failed her.

President Coin had not been happy about her decision to come back to District 12. But she had. She needed to *see.*

Madge had accompanied her, refusing to budger from her own decision. Her brown eyes were hard and cold as she faced down Coin and Plutarch, looking so fierce that even Katniss could not deny her from following.

She has heard of the damages, but seeing the craters in her district had caused her to grow cold. It was far worse than she had expected. Everything in the Merchant section was *gone.* Just gone – as if it doesn’t exist in the first place, if not for the ashes and broken debris littering the ground. And perhaps an occasional burned corpse or two, she doesn’t know. She tried not to look at the remains on the ground.

Victors’ Village was the only thing still standing.

She went to her home first. There was a fine layer of dust covering everything, but it looked untouched. Until she found Prim’s ugly cat.

“Can’t believe you’re still alive.” She muttered, squatting down and trying to coax the cat down from the wardrobe. Eventually, she managed to persuade the old cat down and stuffed him into her game bag. It’s the only way she could sneak him back into District 13.

She smelled the cloying stench even before she entered her room. She noticed the vase of dried white roses on her dresser immediately. Taking a cautious step forward, she caught a glimpse of a particular rose – still silken fresh and perfect. She felt sick immediately.

The rebels had done a sweep of the neighbourhood before she was allowed in, but they must have thought the vase of dead roses were nothing noteworthy. But of course not, why would a white rose interest them? Only she knew what it represented. Only she knew that the white rose was a personal message to her.

Trying not to vomit, she left her room quickly.

She did one last search around Peeta and Gale’s houses. She doesn’t know what she’s looking for, perhaps something to remember them by. And then she realized where her thoughts were heading towards and she quickly shoved them down.

There was nothing notable in Peeta’s house. Anything he had found special... he had brought to the Capitol with him. But she picked up some of his paintbrushes and shoved them into her bag anyway. Gale’s house was homelier than both Peeta and hers combined, except for his room. As she stood at the doorway, she felt unbalanced by the stark contrast between this one room and the rest of the house.
Gale’s room carried just the bare necessities. There were empty pill bottles in his drawers. She doesn’t understand all the medical words, but tried to remember them so she could ask Prim or Madge later. There were a few carvings on his windowsill and her feet carried her over.

The catlike monster caught her attention first since it’s the largest. A flash of memory hit her and she registered that it was the mutt in his Games. She put it back down instantly, feeling nauseated. Her gaze roved over the rest of the animal carvings, before stopping on the last one.

She swallowed roughly and grabbed the mockingjay carving, sliding it into her bag beside Peeta’s paintbrushes as she left the house.

Madge was waiting for her inside the hovercraft. As it took off into the air, Madge reached out to squeeze her hand. Madge’s grief echoed in her brown eyes, but she did not cry. She had run out of tears, had channelled her grief and anger to healing, joining Aster and Prim in the infirmary to help.

Katniss wished she could be as strong as Madge. She wished she could be strong for Madge. But she was selfish and couldn’t help but reached out to Madge for support. The Mayor’s daughter and Prim were her flicker of hope at this moment.

Even though she wasn’t extremely close to Madge before District 12 burned down, she was relieved and glad that the blonde had survived.

Madge has been there for her since they came to District 13, and she had clung back as ferociously.
I don’t know. I don’t know anything.

Those words have become like mantra by now. He had woken up in a cell alone, Annie’s screaming on the other side of the wall. On his other side, he could hear Johanna shouting to calm her down.

It wasn’t until he called out did Annie finally quieted down. She had panicked to find herself alone in the cell and had thought him dead.

They – the Peacekeepers never touched Annie, had left her alone. He knew that she was bait. Captured as bait for Finnick. He doesn’t care about any of that, just relieved that she was left mostly unharmed.

Then he found out that Peeta was captured as well, and he nearly cursed out Haymitch. He was supposed to get both Katniss and Peeta out. But the past was history, and now they were a pathetic bunch all stuck in one space doomed to die.

They had singled him and Johanna out, constantly taking them out of their cells to torture them, presumably because they thought them in league with the rebels from District 13.

He doesn’t know how long has he been stuck here, but he has grown familiar with Annie’s screams and Johanna’s swearing every time the Peacekeepers came to bring her out. It brought him comfort in a place like this, to know that at least they were both still alive from their voices. Sometimes he would see the Peacekeepers dragging Johanna back to her cell when he peered through the small window at the door, but he rarely saw Peeta. The only news he has of Peeta was that he was locked up on Johanna’s other side, and that he was still alive.

His tormenters had tried psychological torture first. They had showed him a video of District 12 being bombed. His family, Katniss’s, Peeta’s... all dead. Everything was gone. There was nothing left there but ashes and death. He refused to believe it, even though doubt had started to creep in. There was a possibility that it might be a trick, just like how they had warped his voice to scream at Katniss in the arena. But they had bombed District 13 once, left it a smouldering pile of ashes.

But he has to believe in Katniss.

Haymitch had saved her, and they wouldn’t be asking about District 13 if they had found its location. She was alive, and in a far safer place than he currently was.

“Where is District 13 located?” “What are they planning?” “What do you know?”

I don’t know. I don’t know anything.

Maybe if he repeated that long enough, they might actually believe him.

They took him to an empty grey room today. Everything was grey, from the walls to the ceiling to the table fastened to the floor. There was a mirror on one side of the room. His reflection stared back at him, pale, shaky, dark bruises scattered over his body. He wondered who was watching from the other side of the mirror.

He thought it was going to be another interrogation, until they chained him to the table and uncoiled a whip. His pulse jumped in fright at the sight of the leather whip.
He always felt that in another world, if he never become a Victor, he would probably be whipped one day, perhaps for illegal poaching or trespassing. It was a favoured punishment in District 12 after all, and his life would always be dangerous in every life.

They didn’t speak. They didn’t ask questions today.

At the first lash, he gritted his teeth, although his body jerked at the sudden pain. At the third lash, the whip finally broke skin. At the sixth lash, he screamed. At the tenth lash, he nearly slipped on the blood pooling on the floor. At the fifteen lash, he was barely hanging onto his consciousness. His wrists had gone numb and raw from his struggling and he could feel the blood soaking into his shirt.

At twenty lashes, he had passed out.

He woke up in pain, his shirt sticky against his skin. He blinked awake, his head muddled. He was disorientated and sort of... floaty, like he has been drugged. Familiar with the feeling, he struggled to focus, but whatever thought and clarity he tried to muster slipped from his fingers like wisps of smoke. He licked his dry lips, his throat blistering from thirst. His stomach felt hollow, like he hasn’t eaten for a long time.

And perhaps he hadn’t. He certainly doesn’t remember the last meal he ate.

He was back in his cell, but there was a young woman at the corner of the room. She was sitting with her legs folded beneath her, her head cocked patiently. Her short, wavy hair was tucked behind her ears, and her dark eyes were bright and familiar.

“What do you want?” He groaned out loud.

The woman’s lips curved up in amusement, almost as if she was laughing at his plight.

“Fuck off.” He ducked his head, squeezing his eyes shut. There was a sudden bang against the wall that made him jumped in alarm.

“Gale!” Johanna’s voice was muffled from behind the wall, but she sounded relieved. “You are finally awake! Who the hell are you talking to?”

“No one.” He muttered, peeking at the young woman in the cell with him.

There was another bang, which made his head rang unpleasantly. “Gale! What happened? You didn’t respond for... hours.”

He laughed out loud, sounding hysterical. Who was keeping time in this shithole anymore?

“Shit, have you gone crazy?” Johanna asked worriedly. He wished he could see the panic on her face, but he settled for laying his head against the cool floor. “Did you finally crack?”

“Not... cracked yet.” He snorted. “Still whole.”

Or as whole as he felt. Even with the drugs, he could feel the rawness on his back. The bloodstains had seeped to the front of his shirt. He could barely move. He’s not sure if he wanted to see the state of his back.

“Don’t die on me yet, pretty boy.” Johanna murmured, her voice hoarse and sketchy, like she has been screaming for a long time. “I think I’ll go nuts if you die. You know Annie’s a poor conversationalist in this state.”
“Nuts is dead.” He murmured back, his voice sounding distant in his head. He started to drift, and his eyes darted anxiously as the young woman in front of him laughed, as if he had just told the greatest joke in the world.

She crawled forward, and he couldn’t move away even if he could try. She loomed above his head, her bright smile fading into a smaller, sad one that he has never seen on her face before.

“Go away, Lea.” He whispered.

She continued watching him until he slipped back to unconsciousness.
Chapter 49

They whipped him again, but this time, every time he threatened to pass out, they tossed ice water at him. He had long lost count of how many times the whip had flayed open his back. His lashes were wet with tears, blurring his vision. He had slumped against the table, his wrists bleeding across the cold surface.

They might actually succeed in killing him this time.

He could see black spots at the edges of his vision. His head slowly lolled to the side, but another pail of ice cold water upturned over his head was like a shot of lucidity through his body.

The agony of his wounds came back with a vengeance, like burning flames over his skin.

His back arched as the impact of the whip sent him sprawling further up the table. He could feel the saliva smeared over his chin as he panted, sweat and tears causing him to blink rapidly.

He had stopped screaming and begging hours ago. Now he could only managed sharp, keening whimpers that vibrated in his throat.

Every time he wanted to disappear into his head, to forget about the torture his body was going through, they would drag him back into the living world with a pail of ice water.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the whipping stopped. But he wouldn’t know if it wasn’t for the mirror in front of him. His back had gone numb, he could barely feel anything down his neck. They unchained him and one of them held his arm up to stab a syringe into his flesh.

He felt the mild pinch of the drug sliding into his bloodstream and then they were dragging him back into his cell. Behind him, he left behind a trail of crimson in his wake.

The Peacekeepers tossed him into his cell non-too-gently. The drug was starting to work, numbing the pain, but it still hurts as he hit the floor.

He lay there unmoving for the next few minutes, trying to breathe. With his dark hair plastered against his forehead and in his eyes, he could faintly make out a pair of bare feet in front of him.

Something shivered up his chest – tight and full. It took him a full minute before he realized it was laughter. He sounded unhinged even to his ears, and even though it hurts every time a laugh wracked his body, he didn’t stop – until he felt tears blinding him.

He was going to die in this damn cell, alone. And if District 13 does come to rescue him, they would probably find a mangled, stinking corpse in the middle of this shitty cell. Johanna and Annie were going to live knowing that his dead body was just in the cell next to them. He’s going to die hallucinating because he’s crazy and sick in the head, and even on his last breath, his ghosts wouldn’t stop haunting him.

There was nothing left in this world. His mother was dead. Posy was dead. Vick was dead. Rory was dead. Thom was dead. And the Mayor’s brown-eyed daughter with a fondness for strawberries was dead.

He didn’t notice when smoke crept in through the cracks of the cell door, or when the door was blasted open. However, he did notice Lea staring at him silently before his world went dark.
Chapter 50

He opened his eyes to Katniss’s face hovering above him. He winced at the sudden light, and quickly closed back his eyes with a teeny groan. His whole body felt numb and weightless, and it felt like the inside of his skull was stuffed with cotton.

“Catnip?” He muttered with an incoherent moan. He thought he heard a soft sigh of relief, and then the sound of a chair scraping backwards. The sound struck the side of his head in a sudden, sharp ache that made him flinch.


It would have been easier if she had asked where doesn’t it hurts. He didn’t answer, breathing calmly to reorganize his scattered thoughts and fragmented memories. He blinked his eyes open slowly, his vision adjusting to the light. Katniss’s face sharpened into clarity, and her eyes were tired and happy.

The only reason he wasn’t thinking that he’s already dead was because he has to believe that Katniss was safe and alive and that’s the only reason he’s seeing her.

“Where am I?” He rasped. “And why do I feel like shit?”

“You’re in District 13, Gale.” Katniss replied.

District 13. Suddenly, flickers of images hit him like a brick. He had been captured by the Capitol, tortured, with Annie and Johanna and Peeta—

“Where’s Jo? Annie? Pee—” He tried to sit up. Big mistake. He dropped back down onto the bed with a muffled curse on his lips. “Fuck.”

“Hey, hey, calm down.” Katniss soothed. “Annie’s fine. She was barely hurt. And Johanna’s fine as well. She’s been up being her usual pain in the ass a few days ago.”

He noticed that she didn’t mention about Peeta. A flicker of unease swam to the surface, despite his disorientation. He hasn’t heard from Peeta much, too busy being in pain or unconscious half of the time.

“What happened to Peeta?” He tried to keep his voice steady.

She swallowed, and for a moment, she looked like she might cry. “He... He tried to choke me when he saw me. Haymitch said... the doctors said... that he has been hijacked. He thinks I’m a mutt designed by the Capitol... and that I’ve tried to kill him before. His memories—” She choked, waving a hand at her head. “They were all wrong.”

He glanced at her neck, and finally realized that her throat has remnants of bruises, dark yellowish healing bruises that stained her skin.

“Is that why you looked like I’m going to bite you when I woke up?” He asked dryly, at a loss for words.

She chuckled wetly, rubbing her eyes furiously. “Well, you had a complete meltdown the first time you woke up and saw Hazelle. They said you had copious amount of morphling in your bloodstream... and you might be still confused when you wake up.”
He didn’t hear about the meltdown, or the morphling. He only heard his mother’s name before his thoughts scattered.

His mother was dead. District 12 was gone. He saw the video.

Was he just dreaming up Katniss now? Perhaps he’s still trapped in his cell, fading away on his last breath.

“Gale?” The caution had returned to Katniss’s face now. She touched his arm and he gasped as if he’d been shocked. The physical touch felt like a burn on his skin, and goosebumps immediately prickled over his arm.

It hurts. It hurts. It hurts.

“Breathe. Gale. Breathe.” Katniss murmured frantically, her eyes widening at his reaction. She looked behind her, as if expecting a doctor to pop up. “Hey, look at me. You're safe. Your family is safe.”

“No, no.” He shook his head in denial. “Not real. They're dead.”

He didn’t notice the door sliding open, but he did notice when Thom rushed over at his agitation. He looked at Thom’s face and thought another of my ghosts.

Ignoring the pain, keyed up on adrenaline, he pushed himself up and tried to back away from the hallucination.

“Gale, what the hell!” Thom muttered, freezing in his tracks. He held his hands up defensively, as if Gale was a wounded animal.

“He thinks you're dead.” Katniss said helpfully.

He’s dead, he thought. And this was just another trick of the Capitol.

“I'm not.” Thom protested, because apparently he said it out loud. And then Thom held out a hand tentatively. “Look. Touch me and see. If I'm just a figment of your imagination, do you think you can touch me? Or that Katniss could see and talk to me?”

“My hallucinations never talk back either.” He shot back, but he stared at the calloused hand like it would bite him.

Thom slowly reached forward, hand still extended towards him. Katniss gently took his hand and placed it in Thom’s.

“I'm here.” Thom said carefully.

“Katniss might be dead too.” He replied flatly. He's shaking, he realised. It's not even cold in here, but he's shaking like he couldn't stop.

Thom frowned, took a step forward bravely and slid his arms around his body. He stiffened up instantly, his eyes widening at the warmth and soap and mint scent.

“You're here.” He choked. “You're alive.”

Thom nodded fiercely, his dark hair brushing across his cheek. He could feel it. He could feel it.

He could see Katniss nodding at every name. Tears burned his eyes, dampening his lashes.

“Wait here. I’m going to find your family.” Katniss said determinedly as she dashed out of the room.

When she finally came back with Hazelle and his siblings, he collapsed like a marionette whose strings had been cut and broke down in tears.
There’s scars all over his back, overlapping each other, the edges rough and puckered as they slowly healed. He felt sick whenever he looked at it, so he tried not to.

He found out that Effie had been captured by the Capitol as well, when she, Johanna and Finnick came crashing into his room one morning.

“No one told me that you were captured too.” He sounded annoyed, but he wasn’t quite sure why. Maybe he was just pissed that no one bothered to tell him that the escort was incarcerated and tortured by the Capitol. She was obnoxious, but she was not a bad woman.

“There, there,” Effie smiled, patting his thigh weakly, like he was a child. “Perhaps they just have a lot of things on their minds.”

He made a low noise of disbelief in his throat. It wasn’t just Effie. No one was telling him anything. Just that District 13 was making use of Katniss to helm the rebellion as the Mockingjay, and that Haymitch was in Command. And that Thom and Bristel were one of the people that volunteered to save the Victors.

He has seen Annie and Johanna. He has seen Finnick. He has even seen Madge passingly. He has seen everyone. Except for Peeta.
“He’s... fragile at the moment.” Effie murmured, but her gaze lingered on Gale’s ribs, as if she was seeing through his clothes and the scars that marred his back.

_You’re fragile_, was what he heard.

“Well, then he can’t hurt me like that, can he?” He retorted.

Johanna cackled, lazing on his bed, sprawled out. “Be careful now he doesn’t give you another necklace like Katniss’s. The bruises don’t go well with your complexion.”

“I’ll keep that in mind when I want to look pretty around this stinking place.” He shot back sarcastically. He was far too riddled with bruises of different colours to care what he looked like anymore. Everyone kept staring at him anyway, like he’s a damn fucking roadshow. Or tiptoeing around him like he’s made of glass. It’s _infuriating_. And this whole place was grey _everywhere_. Even the clothes. When he opened his eyes every time, all he saw was that empty grey room where he was whipped.

“Don’t worry, Gale. You’re still the prettiest to me.” Johanna teased.

Finnick straightened up indignantly, the ropes dropping limply from his hands. “Hey, what about _me_?”

“Sorry, you’re not really my type.” Johanna drawled, shrugging. “My type is more ‘tall, dark and handsome’.”

“Don’t worry, Finnick,” Effie tittered. “I think you’re both very good-looking. You have your individual charming points.”

Finnick laughed and winked playfully at the former escort, placated for the time being. After a while, Effie and Johanna had occupied the empty bed beside his, dozing off on each other’s shoulders. Finnick glanced at him, and slowly put aside the knotted ropes.

“During the rescue, I did a propo to give the rescue team time to sneak into the Capitol.” He said quietly, keeping his voice down so he wouldn’t wake the two women. “I... I talked about the things Snow made _us_ do.”

The way he emphasized on ‘us’ told Gale all he needed to know. He hasn’t seen the propo that Finnick mentioned, since he was stuck in bed unconscious, but he understood immediately what the older Victor meant.

“Do... Do _they_ know?” He breathed, averting his gaze. He could feel the panic raking its nails on the inside of his chest, but he has learned how to panic quietly by now.

“They never asked me. But... But I think they all came to the same conclusion.” Finnick said gently.

Despite their different personalities, they were both popular in the Capitol, and frequently appeared in the newspapers and magazines with Capitol women – and sometimes, men – in their arms. While Gale was never as charming as Finnick, and was known to despise the Capitol back at home, rumours and gossips has a nasty way of twisting the truth – and make it seemed plausible that someone like Gale had grown infatuated with the high life of the Capitol.

“I’m just giving you a heads-up... Just in case they started to ask.” Finnick murmured.

No wonder everyone in 12 kept eyeballing him like he was a freakshow. He felt sickened, shame burning through his body. It’s one thing to be sold against his will, it’s another when _everyone_ knew
His mother... his brothers... his friends... They all knew now that he was made to sell his body like a whore in the Capitol. The only flicker of hope was that Posy was far too young to understand the implications of Finnick’s propo, and he prayed that she never would.

He didn’t want his younger sister to grow up knowing that her brother’s body was prostituted out to the highest bidder because he was too weak to defy Snow.

“Give them a chance.” Finnick said, reaching out slowly to touch his arm. The movement was deliberate, so Gale wouldn’t slip into a panic attack at being touched all of a sudden.

“I can’t... I don’t—” He stopped. He could feel his heart starting to race in his chest, and he let out a frustrated breath. His fingers curled towards his palms, trying to shake out the tension in them.

“They will never be ashamed of you.” Finnick’s voice was excruciatingly tender, as if he could read the thoughts plaguing his mind. Perhaps he doesn’t need to, he just needed to understand. Because Finnick had gone through years of abuse in the Capitol, had endured this even longer than he did.

“I don’t want them to see me any differently.” He answered.

Finnick’s hand slid down to slip into his. He squeezed back, trying to anchor himself. It was a comforting touch, kind and pleasant, not one to hurt him.

“They will never see you as anything but brave, Gale.” Finnick responded. “I know you think you’re weak. But we always think the worst of ourselves. It’s easier to look at the situation in another perspective. Do you think me weak and shameful?”

“No.” He said with a fierce scowl. Because Finnick Odair was many things to many people, but to him, the older man was someone who was a friend. Batshit crazy at times, but brave, resolute and a far better man than he would ever be.

“Give them a chance.” Finnick repeated gently. “But... don’t let them push you into talking about it if you can’t handle it.”

If it had come from anyone else, it would have sounded condescending. But with Finnick, he only sounded understanding.

He nodded slowly, wanting to thank Finnick for being there for him, even if he had never asked him to. But the gratitude choked in his throat.

Finnick seemed to know anyway, and smiled at him, eyes warm with compassion.
Chapter 52

They took him off morphling after his scars started to scab over. He was able to start walking, although he still has a noticeable limp. But then he started experiencing drug withdrawal after a few days and was struck by a fever that landed him back in bed.

“Go away!” He grumbled, trying to bury his head under the pillow. Even as he closed his eyes, the smirking image of Calix was seared into his eyes.

This time, it was the Career tribute that haunted him. He hasn’t seen Calix out in the real world before. Normally, the blonde only appeared in his dreams to die over and over again.

He wondered if it was the Capitol’s intention, to shoot him up full of morphling after every whipping and get him so hooked on the drug that he could barely function without it.

“Please.” He implored, curling up as small as he could in his bed. It was so cold. It’s like a freezer in the room, and all he could do was trembled and moaned and raged.

“I’m sorry.” A feminine voice said softly. He felt a cloth being wiped across his brows and he looked up tiredly to see Madge Undersee looking down at him. She was staring at him with wide, distressed eyes, but she couldn’t do anything. He has to detox on his own.

“Please.” He repeated, staring at some point over her shoulder. She fought the urge to look around, and continued dabbing the towel around his face.

He doesn’t know what he’s begging for. Perhaps for more morphling to stop this craving, or for the smirking spectre hanging behind Madge’s shoulder to leave him alone.

“Talk to me.” He whispered.

Madge frowned thoughtfully. “Okay. Okay, maybe... maybe I could tell you about the day of the bombings.” She cleared her throat, and he perked up in interest. No one has told him exactly how they had managed to escape the bombings. “You— You told me to look after your family. Well, I tried. Um, I stayed with your family during the viewing. When Katniss— When she shot that arrow at the lighting tree, all the televisions blacked out. And it’s like the whole district became silent.” She looked away, swallowing. “We felt that something was wrong, and—and Rory started asking us to run. That’s when the first bomb fell.”

“Rory suggested to escape to the meadow.” She inhaled shakily. “We ran into Thom and got as many people as we could towards the meadow. But— But most of the Merchant section was gone.”

“I’m sorry.” He whispered. I’m sorry for your parents. I’m sorry for not being there to save more people. I’m sorry it’s our fault District 12 was bombed.

“You’re as much a victim as the rest of us.” Madge replied.

He shook his head and wondered if she knew that he had known about the rescue plan.

“I’m serious. District 12 is not your fault, or Katniss. Or Haymitch.” The blonde said firmly, a frown furrowing between her brows.

He could apologize a thousand times, but Madge would never accept them, so he fell silent.
When his shakes started to subside, he spoke up. His voice sounded stronger and more confident. “I want to see Peeta.”

“Fine.” Madge sighed in exasperation.

He raised a brow at her dubiously, at how quickly she caved in.

“Is there any way I can even change your mind about this?” She said in response. Her brown eyes were glittering with annoyance, but fond, bright and warm. For a single crazy moment, he wouldn’t mind leaning up and kiss her between those eyes.

The moment passed swiftly as a throbbing ache rippled over his forehead.

“I will take you to Peeta, but—” She raised one finger sharply. “You will sleep first. You looked exhausted.”

“I can’t sleep. I need...” He trailed off helplessly, thinking of the light blue capsules that he had left behind in the Capitol.

“You don’t need anything.” Madge interjected gently, her eyes softening. “Close your eyes.”

He obeyed her, letting his eyelids fall shut tiredly. Slowly, softly, she started to sing. It wasn’t a voice like Katniss’s, whose voice could make a flock of mockingjays stopped and listened, but her voice was beautiful nonetheless. Sweet, whispery, like the wisps of a feather, her song tenderly lulled him to sleep.
“Delly has already spoken to him.” Madge said softly, staring into the room. He raised a brow at her expression. She looked lost, biting her bottom lip unconsciously.

“It didn’t turn out well?” He said wryly.

She shook her head. “No... it went pretty well. Until she mentioned Katniss.”

So, no talking about Katniss. He nodded and walked into the room, ignoring Madge’s yelp of surprise.

Peeta was shackled to the bed, and he raised bruised eyes up at him when he entered. The blonde blinked in confusion, until recognition flickered in his blue eyes.

“Gale.” He whispered.

He shrugged and dragged a chair over to the bed, dropping down tiredly. He could feel the blue eyes roving over his face, before stopping to rest at the marks around his wrists. The blistering had healed and Aster had taken off the bandages, but there would always be scarring left behind around his wrists from where the manacles had cut and rubbed against his skin. The broken wrist bone from where he had accidentally fractured it from struggling too hard would always ached during the colder months too.

“How are you, Peeta?” He asked calmly.

Peeta’s gaze jerked back up to his face. He looked lost, his eyes glazed over.

“You were there.” He croaked. “I remember you. I saw you. In—In the Capitol.”

He wasn’t aware that Peeta saw him. He kept calm, remembering Madge saying about his random fits of rage.

“I saw you. I don’t—” Peeta frowned and shook his head, like a dog trying to shake water out of its ears. “They... whipped you.” He looked up at him with bewildered blue eyes. “Is—Did it happened?”

“Yes. Yes, it did.” He replied hoarsely. “They... make you watch?”

When Peeta nodded hesitantly, he tried not to growl. So, that’s what the mirror in the room was for. Peeta was on the other side.

“They make me watch... make me talk... but I don’t know anything.” Peeta was mumbling under his breath. “I—I don’t know anything.” A confused frown flickered over his face. “They killed Portia. They killed my prep team. They—They wanted to scare me.”

_Portia._

He hadn’t even thought of the stylist’s fate. With so many things going on in the past few days, he forgot about her.

“Snow killed them.” Peeta asked, a question in his tone.

He nodded sharply, trying not to be crushed under the overwhelming grief. “R—Real.”
“Because—Because of Katniss.” Peeta muttered furiously, rage starting to darken his eyes. He jerked against his shackles roughly.

“No.” He said with a sharp, angry tone. He gripped Peeta’s arm, leaning over to look at the younger man in the eye. He knew it was dangerous, that Peeta could attack him easily from this distance. “It’s not Katniss’s fault.” When Peeta opened his mouth, he shook his head angrily. “No Katniss. We don’t talk about her.”

Peeta stared at him, anger fading into puzzlement.

“Let’s not talk about her here.” He said again.

Peeta continued staring, trying to discern his motives. Finally, he nodded and calmed down. As long as he kept their conversation away from Katniss, Peeta would remain calm.

They made idle small talk, about District 13 and President Coin and the lack of colours in this damn place.

In spite of Peeta’s brief loss of temper, he remained serene throughout the conversation. As promised, they didn’t mention about Katniss at all.

Before he left, he looked at Peeta’s haggard face and thought Katniss must be devastated.

Madge was waiting outside, and when he closed the door behind him, her expression was full of sorrow.

He swallowed audibly, tears prickling his eyes. All of the sudden, he felt the grief bearing down on his shoulders.

He missed Portia. The longing and grief so acute his chest spiked with pain so sharp he had to fight not to curl up. He missed Portia and her wild blond hair and her black lipstick and her kind eyes. He never thought that he would ever grow so fond of a Capitol citizen, but he did and he couldn’t even remember the last time they spoke and it ached.

“Portia is dead.” He said out loud, as if hearing them from his lips would make it any realer. As if it would make him accept it any faster.

Madge stepped forward and he flinched away. He didn’t want to be touched. He didn’t want any pity. He just wanted to grieve in peace.

When he walked away, Madge didn’t stop him, just watched his retreating back sadly.
Chapter 54

Gale was rightfully pissed to hear that Katniss had been shot. He didn’t even know she had gone to District 2. Haymitch had dropped by to inform him that Katniss had been part of the team to disable the Nut, a large mountain in the middle of District 2.

He would have suggest bombing the whole damn place, taking all the survivors with it, but that might be his bitterness and anger talking. There were far too many deaths on his hands. He supposed it was a good thing he wasn’t on the team, although he chafed at being stuck in 13 and not being able to help.

He entered the hospital room, arching a brow at Johanna when he noticed what she was doing. She was siphoning from the morphling drip that was supposed to be attached to Katniss.

“Your cousin’s not afraid of me.” Johanna winked at him as she detached the morphling drip from herself.

“No?” He shot back with a smirk, not quite sure what they were talking about but willing to play along with her. “I thought I was terrified of you.”

Johanna laughed, slapping his backside lightly as she passed by him. He bit back a manly yelp and glared at her back, ignoring Katniss’s giggles. He came to Katniss’s side, and she was surprised when he voluntarily reached out to stroke back her hair.

“That was reckless.” He murmured.

She patted his hand absently and shrugged, barely holding in a pained wince.

“Sorry,” She said unapologetically. “I’ll try not to do anything stupid next time.”

He hoped there wasn’t a next time, but knew that it was a futile wish. She shifted slightly in her bed and patted the empty space on her side.

“Come on. My neck hurts looking to the side.” She urged.

Sighing, he climbed onto the bed, folding his legs as he settled down beside her thigh.

“Better?” He asked dryly.

She smiled, but it faded quickly. She tentatively picked up one of his hands, her thumb rubbing at his skin – just right below the hideous scarring around his wrist. At least she didn’t try to touch the scars directly.

“I was there when Finnick filmed the propo.” She admitted suddenly.

He stiffened, his back muscles tightening up almost painfully. His first instincts were to run, but Finnick’s advice came back to him. He needed to give them a chance. He just didn’t expect Katniss to be the first one to confront him about this matter.

“Katniss, I...” He stuttered to a stop, cheeks flushing in shame.

She shook her head violently. “No, stop. Let me talk, Gale.”

He bit his lip, even though he wanted to apologize. Which was odd and a little frustrating, because
his default reaction nowadays was to apologize.

“When Finnick was doing the propo... When he told us how Snow sold—sold his body, all I could think was the thousand apologies I wanted to say to him for every false thought I had of him.” She paused to swallow roughly, her grey eyes bright with sadness. “And then I remember accusing you for the same things I had thought of him before and—and I realized. I felt like shit. I’m a horrible best friend. I can’t believe—”

“No, you—you were right. I always run away whenever it matters most.” He whispered. “I wanted to tell you... but—but I was afraid.”

“If anyone’s going to be grovelling for forgiveness here, it’s me.” Katniss interrupted, anger flashing in her eyes. “I believed those shitty gossips. I actually believed them over my own best friend.”

“I don’t blame you. I heard there were photos and everything.” He shrugged, trying to remain flippant.

“You—You didn’t know?” She asked.

He laughed, and in his ears, he sounded mad and shattered. Perhaps that’s who he had been reduced to now. A broken, mad man who couldn’t go a day without seeing his ghosts.

“You think I would be interested to see what the papers say about me?” He asked bitterly, avoiding her gaze. “You think—You think I don’t know what people thinks of me?” A hysterical laugh tried to crawl out of his throat, but he stamped it down with a sharp pang of resentment. “That I’m a murderer, a traitor, a whore – who spreads my legs for money, who let the wealth and glamour of the Capitol brainwashed me. Or—Or that I have forgotten that I’m just a Seam rat and that my mother must be terribly ashamed of a son like me. They must think I enjoyed all the sex, because why—why wouldn’t I? What reason do I have not to like free sex and getting paid at the same time?”

“Stop. Stop it.” Katniss hissed, her eyes welling up with tears.

He hiccupped a laugh, too agitated to stop now.

“Well, the rumour was wrong. It’s not like any money ever comes to me anyway!” He spat, trembling with rage. “Neither do I have the choice to choose. I have to fuck anyone he sends my way, man or woman. I have to lay back like—a whore and let them fuck me, and if I don’t satisfy them, Snow would hurt my family. I have to pretend I enjoyed the sex, but I can’t. I don’t.”

“Gale,” Katniss said forcefully. The tight grip on his hand snapped him out of his anger. “Stop. Enough talking like this.” He stared at her silently, at the tears trailing down her cheeks unashamedly. “Don’t do this to yourself please.”

“I’m pathetic.” He choked out.

“You’re one of the bravest men I have ever known.” She said immediately, no hesitation in her eyes. She clearly believed what she’s saying wholeheartedly. “I’m proud that you’re my best friend. And if I can help it, none of those bastards are going to touch you anymore.”

He had run out of tears to give, and his eyes were only mildly damp, but he bended at his waist and pressed his forehead against their curled fists to muffle a choked gasp.

He’s not completely convinced, but he felt something loosened in his chest.

It’s a start.
Chapter 55

He nearly laughed at the flabbergasted looks on Thom and Bristel’s faces when he joined them for lunch. It would have been comical if his back wasn’t protesting at his walk to the cafeteria.

“Gale!” Johanna cheered, shoving the chair beside her out for him.

The Victors has a habit of hanging out with the remnants of District 12 ever since they got out of the hospital, so he wasn’t really surprised to see Finnick and Johanna sitting with his friends. Peeta and Katniss were not around, and he felt relief seeped into his shoulders. His conversation with Katniss was still fresh in his mind, and he’s not sure if he could deal with the tension between them at the moment.

“Are you already released from the hospital?” Thom asked suspiciously.

He grimaced at the rice gruel in front of him. Meals in District 13 was nutritious, but mostly bland.

“...Yes.” He said, keeping his expression impassive. It was more like he discharged himself, but what’s a little white lie anyway.

“Gale.” Hazelle said in disapproval.

“At least I’m not seeing ghosts. Much.”

Aster and Hazelle exchanged disbelieving looks that rankled, but he studiously ignored them. He knew how bad his condition was, but his back was healing nicely. Still a little too slow for his liking, but at least he could walk without collapsing now. And the doctors were starting to wean him off the morphling. Other than the nightmares, the shakes, and the constant hallucinations, he has recovered from his fever.

“Well, since Gale has finally recovered— well, enough to be discharged—” Thom shot him a cheeky smile that said that he does not believe a single word from his mouth. At all. “And since he’s not falling unconscious, I guess it’s a good thing!”

“Good to see you back, Gale.” Bristel agreed, smiling warmly. “Have you heard the good news from Finnick?”

He cocked his head to the side in confusion, raising a brow at Finnick.

“I’m getting married!” The older Victor declared excitedly, sea-green eyes sparkling with joy.

A beat of silence, then he blinked in bemusement. “To Annie?”

“Of course, to Annie.” Johanna hooted with laughter.

The first thing he felt was happiness for Finnick and Annie. The second was annoyance.

“Am I the last person to find out about this?” He demanded, noticing the lack of surprise on everyone’s faces at the table.

“I told you he’ll be pissed about this.” Thom mumbled under his breath.

Finnick blushed, laughing nervously. He was glad that he was not sitting next to Gale.
“S—Sorry, I was too excited. I only just asked Annie yesterday... and I didn’t get to see you until
today.” He explained in embarrassment.

Gale rolled his eyes, not truly angry. The delight he felt for his friends triumphed any lingering
annoyance he felt for being the last to know.

“You should have seen Plutarch when Finnick told him. He and Coin have been arguing the whole
day.” Bristel smirked. “Coin’s definition of a wedding meant signing a piece of paper. Plutarch
wanted the whole shebang. Food, celebration, entertainment.”

“Well, this place needs a bit of livening up anyway.” Johanna drawled.

Everyone was smiling, even Aster and Hazelle, who have been frowning at him before.

“Haymitch said that Peeta will be doing the wedding cake.” Finnick said quietly.

_Oh_. He hasn’t seen Peeta since the last time he went to talk to him.

“He’s... better then?” He asked, a little hesitantly. He might not have gone to check on Peeta, but
Madge has been slipping him news.

“I wouldn’t say he’s better.” Aster murmured. She had returned to frowning, her eyes dark with pain
and sadness. “Some days, he’s rational, like he’s the old Peeta again. But then out of nowhere, he
goes off again.”

“Doing the wedding cake might be good for him though.” Hazelle admitted.

He’s not sure if Peeta would ever be the old him again. It’s impossible for all of them. But he knew
that the new Peeta was upsetting Katniss. Nowadays, it was impossible for the both of them to be in
the same room together. He felt stretched thin. It has always been Katniss and Peeta, and then Gale.
It’s never been Gale and Peeta, or just Katniss and Gale recently anymore.

“You should talk to him, Gale.” Aster said, looking at him. “I think... it’ll be good for him.”

He raised a brow at her, wondering how _that_ came about. Then he remembered that Madge was
currently assisting her in the hospital, and that the younger girl had probably told Aster about his
unsanctioned visit.

“It’s dangerous.” Hazelle cut in. She glared darkly at Aster, and the latter sighed. It seemed like an
argument they had several times before.

“Peeta’s unstable, but you’ve _seen_ that he calms down whenever he remembers his past.” Aster said
patiently. “He needs exposure, people that isn’t Katniss to help him. It doesn’t look like his memory
of Gale has been distorted in his head. Madge said that their conversation seems to be helping Peeta.”

“Gale is Katniss’s best friend. Peeta might be fine back then, but who can say that he does not
inevitably remember that fact again and link Gale’s relationship to Katniss.” Hazelle argued.

Sometimes he wondered if his mother had forgotten that he’s a Victor. Peeta might be unstable, and
while he’s not utterly sure if the blond would _not_ hurt him, he knew that he could protect himself.

“I think that’s my decision to make.” He cleared his throat loudly. “I’ll be fine, ma.” He glanced at
his other companions, who were all surreptitiously pretending they weren’t listening. “We... don’t
talk about Katniss.”
He never thought that there’s a day he would actually argue with someone over Peeta Mellark. Much less his own mother.

“Gale.” Hazelle sighed in distress.

“Please.” He stressed. He really doesn’t want to fight with his mother in public.

She opened her mouth, but quickly snapped it shut. Pursing her lips, clearly unhappy, she decided to let it go now.
“What’s this about you joining the training?” Thom asked brusquely, cornering him outside his newly assigned compartment. While it was a tight fit for five people, he felt safer surrounded by his mother and siblings. He was less susceptible to nightmares, and less prone to sneak into the hospital for morphling like a thief.

“I’m joining the fight.” He echoed, glaring at Thom defensively. “I’m not sitting back and doing nothing.”

Bristel folded her arms across her chest, her dark hair in curls framing her scowling face. It was obvious that she does not agree with his decision to train as well.

“It’s not safe.” She frowned.

“What about the both of you? You two are just civilians. It’s not any safer for you.” He snapped, tensing up. “Why did you become soldiers? Neither of you have ever show any inclination to fight against the Capitol.”

He wasn’t implying that they were cowards for not standing up before. Bristel and Thom hated the Capitol as much as he does, but they were never rebels. In fact, finding out that they were soldiers had been surprising. Bristel and Thom were more likely to quietly rebelled instead of picking up a gun and heading into war head on. That had been more of Gale’s area.

“You don’t have to fight anymore. You— You are no longer a slave of the Capitol.” Thom said in frustration, ignoring his question. “You— You have just recovered from being tortured, and you want to go back to fighting? Bristel is right. This is not safe for you.”

He felt an intense urge to hit something for being treated like porcelain.

“This is war. It has never been safe for me!” He retorted, bristling at the implications that he was not... sane enough to fight. “I... I have a right to fight for our freedom as well.”

He lowered his voice when he noticed his neighbours looking over, but he was still seething.

“Why don’t you just tell me the truth and say what you really think.” He spat. “That I’m too broken and crazy to function properly. That I’m too fragile to fight.”

“Gale, we are only concerned for you.” Bristel interjected. “That’s not what we are trying to imply.”

He gave her a doubtful look, jerking away when she tried to touch him. It was an instinctive reaction, and he hated it when he saw the sympathetic look on her face.

“Look at you.” Thom growled, reaching out to grab his arm aggressively. Fingers curled tightly around his wrist, just right over the scarring. His heart traitorously skipped a beat in panic, and he reflexively tried to pull his hand away, but Thom refused to let go, ignoring Bristel’s warning look. “You start panicking when someone tries to grab you. You jumped like a startled rabbit if anyone moves too fast towards you. You— You see things that no one else can see, and I know that you are not completely weaned off the morphling.”

“Thom, let go!” Bristel snapped, coming between them to forcefully break his hold. “That was completely unnecessary.”
“It was completely necessary!” Thom shouted, his cheeks flushing red in anger. “He’s not only a danger to himself, but to everyone else too!”

“That’s not for you to decide.” He bit out, trying to still the trembling in his hand. “I can handle myself.”

“You’re always saying that you’re fine and that you’re handling things— but you’re not! You’re not fine at all!” Thom said angrily. “You’re going to kill yourself at this rate!”

“Fuck you.” He hissed, struggling not to lash out at Thom. He spun around abruptly and walked off furiously, before he’s tempted to slam his fist into Thom’s face.

He didn’t know where he’s heading to, but he found himself hiding under an empty stairwell. The silence and darkness soothed the fury churning in his chest, so he was mostly calm when Bristel sat down quietly beside him.

“He’s scared.” She murmured. “You know he’s only saying those things because he’s afraid for you.”

He closed his eyes, exhaling slowly.

“He— We were the one who found you... when you were in the Capitol.” She continued. “You have no idea... I thought you were dead. There was just so much blood everywhere. And your back looks like it has been flayed open... we could see bone.” She trembled, her breath hitching as she recounted the memory. “You were barely breathing. I thought you wouldn't make it until we returned to 13.”

He didn't realise it was that bad. He knew he had been flogged, but he didn't think his condition was so bad.

“Thom was the first one to volunteer.” Bristel confided. “When he learned of your capture... he started training to be a soldier.” She smiled at his surprised expression. “You think we’re going to abandon you? Or trust anyone else with rescuing you? Peeta was clearly the main priority when President Coin authorised the rescue. The rest of the team would do whatever it takes to find Peeta. We couldn't risk your life with them.”

Something warm flowered in his chest at the lengths his friends would go for him.

“Thank you.” He whispered. “I know... I understand why Thom is angry. But I have to do this. I'm sick of being helpless. I have to... I have to do this.”

“You don't have to do anything, Gale.” Bristel objected, but her gaze was gentle. “But I know you. I may not be happy with it, but I understand your decision. It's not going to stop us from worrying.”

She didn't touch him, but her dark eyes were intense enough that he could feel her gaze prickling over his skin. “We heard about Finnick’s propo. We didn't watch it, but Delly told us what he said.”

He felt his blood freeze in his veins, and he held his breath at her reaction.

“I'm not going to push you to talk, but I want you to understand why Thom— no, both of us are so angry. I think you've fought long enough in the Capitol, and Thom doesn't want you anywhere near that place again.” She said quietly, her voice free of any judgement.

He tried to swallow the lump in his throat, and wondered what he has done to deserve this loyalty from the both of them.
“I'll speak to Thom.” She said calmly. “If you're so adamant in doing this, he should know it's impossible to change your mind.”

He chuckled, but there's tears in his laughter.

“Do you need me to stay?” She asked in concern.

He shook his head wordlessly. He needed time to process everything. He needed space. She nodded, understanding clear on her face, and once again, he felt his heart clenched at the depth of loyalty his friends have towards him.
“Hey, you looked better.” Katniss murmured as she sat down beside him.

He hummed under his breath, watching Finnick and Annie twirled around in the centre of the floor. Happiness shone on their faces, brilliant smiles lighting up their eyes as they gazed at each other with such ardent love. Seeing the way they stared at each other, as if there’s no one else around them, felt utterly intimate – like he’s intruding into something incredibly personal. He looked away to give them privacy.

“I feel better.” He shrugged. It was true that the wedding – despite being used for a propo – had lifted the dark fog that constantly clouded his mind. They say that there’s a magic to weddings, but perhaps it was the magic of love being celebrated that chased the sadness of war away. For a moment, everyone could forget that there’s a rebellion going on.

“Here,” Katniss dug into her pocket. Wedding or not, she has opted to dress in pants instead of a dress, but there was a touch of Cinna’s design in her apparel – simple, modern and exquisitely lovely. Thinking of Cinna caused a small flicker of grief to flare in his stomach. “I took this from
your room when I went back to 12.”

She handed something over, something small. It took him a second to recognize the mockingjay wood figurine in his hands. He ran his fingers over the ridges of its feathers, almost fondly.

“I thought it burned up along with District 12.” He muttered.

She shook her head. “Victors’ Village is still intact.” She was watching the dancers on the floor, a small smile playing at the corner of her lips. “I kept it with me. When I was at District 8. And when I was at 2. It... reminds me of my purpose—why I’m fighting so hard for this... rebellion.” She glanced at the wood carving in his hands. “I couldn’t help but keep thinking... what exactly were you thinking when you made this. Did you know—or maybe you did it with the intention to rebel—when you carved out that mockingjay. I kept that in my mind whenever I goes out.”

“I had Madge—to remind me of my humanity. She stays on the hovercraft mainly, but—but every time she comes on a mission with me, I’m reminded that I have someone to return to. Madge, Prim, mom. And then after the rescue, you and—” She choked on the name, her voice breaking for a moment. He pretended he did not notice her loss of composure. “And Haymitch... but don’t tell him that. I’m still pissed at him.”

He chuckled lowly under his breath.

“I think you need that more than I do now.” She said quietly, tilting her head towards the wooden mockingjay.

They fall silent, enjoying the celebration, until Madge and Johanna appeared in front of them. With a gloat, Johanna managed to coax Katniss towards the dancefloor.

“Join me?” Madge smiled.

The guests were lining up, joining hands to make a huge circle. He glanced at them uncertainly, doubt creasing his forehead.

“Come on.” Madge cajoled, holding out her hand. “It’s a wedding.”

He sighed and relented, letting her pulled him up. Her dainty hand felt rough in his, and he was momentarily taken aback at the callouses he felt.

“Ah.” She seemed to notice his expression. Her cheeks reddened in embarrassment and she quickly tugged her hand out of his grip. “Being a nurse is not as glamourous as it sounds. I don’t do much saving lives. It’s been mostly menial chores.”

“Bristel claimed that you were splendid that time she dislocated a wrist during training.” He said dryly. “Coming from Bristel, it’s high compliment.”

“Don’t tell her, but Bristel is a terrible patient.” Madge giggled.

He smiled, and reached out to seize her hand again. She blinked at him in surprise, looking down at their joined hands.

“You’re doing good work.” He murmured, trying not to sound envious. “There’s nothing to be ashamed about having rough hands.”

“Thank you.” She smiled brilliantly, a shy blush on her cheeks.
Johanna bumped into his back all of the sudden, eyeing the both of them with barely concealed amusement. “Get a room or get in line, pretty boy!”

“Shut up.” He scowled, but it was half-hearted. Madge laughed, free and light, feeling like she could float up to the clouds from the joy in her heart. She grabbed hold of Katniss’s hand, and pulled him into the circle.

He relaxed and let the music flowed over him, sweeping his worries away like the ocean’s tide. For one day, he could do this. For one day, it’s Finnick and Annie. For one day, the war outside was inconsequential.
He was given three weeks to train before they started selecting the rest of the team to go to the Capitol. Johanna had joined the training as well, not content to sit back and let everyone else do the fighting. He’s going to the damn Capitol even if he had to walk all the way there.

Johanna was assigned to a group with Katniss, while he joined Finnick’s group. Katniss and Johanna have struck up an odd friendship that he wasn’t completely sure how it worked, but since Johanna had moved into a compartment with Katniss, he figured they were getting along.

Training was tough, and to be frank, it was far easier training for the Games. His stamina was shot to hell in the running course, and his back still hurts, but he’s good with guns. His mind calmed whenever he’s assembling and disassembling a gun, and while vastly different from a bow, he has always been a pretty good shot – not as good as Katniss, obviously, but far better than anyone in his group.

Finnick had suggested looking for Beetee in Special Weaponry to create his own personal weapon. He has only seen the District 3 Victor once since his arrival, when the older man dropped by to visit him while he was in the hospital.

They were not particularly close, but it felt nice that Beetee had bothered to even visit someone he barely knew.

He ran into Delly and Annie during lunch. Predictably, Delly beamed at him as he sat down beside her.

“Gale,” She smiled warmly. “How are you doing?”

From what he heard, she has been helping tremendously with Peeta’s recovery. They were childhood friends, and she’s basically Peeta’s sister. She looked thinner, more tired, her hair longer and pulled into a messy bun, her perpetual joy carrying a harder edge, but she’s no less friendly and warm towards everyone she met. He couldn’t help but grudgingly smiled back at her. He doesn’t know how she could do it, so happy all the damn time, but he supposed she’s good for Thom.

“I’m okay.” He replied.

Katniss and Johanna dropped by shortly, carrying their stews possessively in their hands. It looked like training was going as well for them as it was for him.

He noticed Peeta first, his hand freezing in mid-air. Katniss choked on her gravy bread. Alarm bells starting ringing in his head, but he remained calm outwardly.

“Hey, Peeta.” He said, glancing at Katniss worriedly.

Delly looked concerned as well, but she forced a cheerful smile on her face and greeted him.

“I’m not quite trustworthy yet.” Peeta murmured, when Johanna asked about the shackles on his wrists. “I can’t even sit here without your permission.”

“Sure, he can sit here. We’re old friends,” Johanna shrugged, inviting him to sit down beside her.

“Peeta and I had adjoining cells in the Capitol. We’re very familiar with each other’s screams.”

There was a moment where everyone froze. Annie jerked, eyes blanking out as she disappeared into
her head. Finnick fluttered over his wife, shooting Johanna a glare.

“Johanna.” He sighed, grateful that he was able to get himself under control. For a second, he remembered grey rooms and whips and he had to resist flinching violently.

“What? My head doctor says I’m not supposed to censor my thoughts. It’s part of my therapy.” Johanna shrugged flippantly.

Everything was tensed after that.

Hijacked Peeta was cold and mean, he soon realized, when Finnick and Annie left. He has never been so hurtful to people before. He thought it was only directed to Katniss.

The open distrust of Finnick and the blatant disregard for Annie caused a flare of anger to flicker over his face. But he stayed patient, knowing that dealing with Peeta was a delicate process.

“So, are you two officially a couple now, or are they still dragging out the star-crossed lover thing?” Peeta asked, gesturing towards them. Then, he tilted his head and stared at Gale with a considering look. “Katniss kissed you before. You told me... once.”

Katniss spluttered, shooting him a bewildered glare. There was a beat of silence, but he was unfazed.

“You know it’s not like that between Katniss and I.” He reproached. “And have you forgotten what we spoke about?”

We don’t talk about Katniss.

Peeta’s lips curled, and his hands on the table spasmed. After a few seconds, his lips tightened into a frown of contrition. With Gale, he’s always remembering that grey room and the whipping. While not what Gale wanted to be remembered for, he’s glad that at least that particular memory was overwhelming enough to drown out Katniss and his friendship.

“You done?” Katniss asked abruptly.

He looked at her, at the pinched look on her face, the devastation that she’s hardly hiding on her face.

“Yeah, I’m done.” He nodded, standing up.

They stayed silent until they reached Katniss’s compartment.

“You know he’s... he’s not really stable, right?” He asked gently.

She inhaled sharply, not looking at him. “I told you he hated me.”

Yes, he has seen the loathing. He just didn’t expect Peeta’s hatred to be this severe. It’s like looking at a different man. He wondered if it’s possible for that gentle boy with a spine of steel to ever come back again.

“He doesn’t.” He said quietly. “You know it’s the hijacking that’s making him say all those things. You have to remember that.”

“Maybe he just sees me as I really am.” She sighed.

He laughed, ruffling her hair and smirking at her look of annoyance. “Oh, Catnip, he has always seen you for who you really are, and trust me when I say that he has always love you for that.”
She looked dubious, but hopeful at the same time, and when he left her to go back to his compartment, he hoped that she continued believing that the Peeta that still loved her was in there somewhere.
He knew the day was going to be horrible when he woke up screaming and waking up his entire family that morning.

He nearly hit Rory when the latter tried to wake him up, and he fled the compartment as fast as he could after brushing up and changing. Things have been tensed between Hazelle and himself since his rescue. There’s a tension building up, something that even Posy had noticed. Sometimes he caught his mother looking at him as if he was a stranger. Sometimes, he glimpsed guilt and anger in her eyes.

She hasn’t confronted him yet, but he knew that it would come tumbling out one day between them. It’s just a matter of when.

When he got to breakfast that morning, he had to deal with Katniss and Peeta glaring at each other across the table. Effie and Haymitch have positioned themselves in between the two of them, and Delly was doing a brilliant job in distracting Peeta.

“There’s something on with the television.” Finnick frowned.

He looked up at the screen in confusion, noticing the static. And then they were staring at a row of men and women on their knees, their hands bounded behind their backs.

“Capitol rebels.” Haymitch hissed in realization.

He barely heard Snow’s voice talking on the speakers. His eyes had zeroed in on the woman in the middle.

“Traitors of the Capitol have to be made an example.” Snow was saying. “These people have been discovered feeding information to the rebels and selling out state’s secrets.”

He didn’t realize that he had stood up until Haymitch was trying to drag him away.


There was a series of gunshots, and dead silence descended over the cafeteria.

Then, suddenly, someone shrieked, breaking the silence. Amidst the chaos, Haymitch had manhandled him out of the cafeteria.

“Effie, stay here with him.” He commanded, before vanishing down the corridor.

His legs felt like jelly, and he gave up any pretence of strength, sliding down the wall. Effie crouched down in front of him, her oddly bare face scrunched in worry.

She looked prettier without all the makeup, he mused dazedly.

“Gale, are you alright?” She asked.

He gave her an incredulous look. “Alright? She’s—She’s—Madam Calysta is dead.”

Effie fell silent, her face stricken with pain. He barely knew the woman, but she was—she was—

He had gone numb from shock, his grief growing cold and heavy in his chest.
All those people with her – the intense bouncer, the perky waitress that’s always flirting with the patrons, the grim bartender that’s always there. People he faintly recognized to be workers at the Velvet Rose. All lying dead with a bullet in their heads.

He thought of her vague warnings, her sad eyes the last time they talked to each other. She must have known, he thought, that she’d die soon – that the possibility of her outliving this rebellion was close to zero.

He could still remember the bitter taste of the champagne.

After Madam Calysta’s execution live on screen, he threw himself into training, more determined than ever now to get into the Capitol team.

Thom and Bristel were not soldiers, but they picked up a gun and went to war for him. And even Madge, soft-spoken, gentle Mayor’s daughter, has something to contribute. She put aside her piano fingers and strawberry softness, and took to healing. She stitched up wounds, fixed broken bones, soothe away the pain of war. She heals.

Now more than ever, he needed to fight.

He barely passed the exam, nearly fucked up his simulated combat test. There were four parts to the exam. The obstacle course, written tactics and weapon proficiency he passed with flying colours, but he encountered some problems in the simulated combat situation. Fog had spilled into the Block, causing his anxiety level to spike. He could hear footsteps, voices, but he couldn't see anything in front of him. He knew what they were aiming at. He understood immediately that they were targeting his weaknesses. They wanted him to panic, to give into his paranoia. He managed to ignore everything else, although he nearly slipped when he spotted Coral dashing alongside him in his peripheral vision, and meet up with his team.

It was easier to ignore the ghosts when you knew they were already dead.

He got a stamp on his hand before being sent up to Command. By the time he reached Command and was greeted with Boggs, he had mostly calmed down.

“Hey, Gale.” Thom murmured. Beside him, Finnick smiled at him. It was good to see familiar faces.

He looked up when he felt a brief touch on his shoulder. He glanced at Thom’s apologetic expression before he sighed and nodded. There were no words needed to be said between them. He understood Thom’s concerns, and hopefully, Thom would understand his motivations.

Katniss was the last to turn up, which wasn't a surprise. As Boggs had explained to him, they were a special squadron of sharpshooters. She walked over to him, trying not to look excited, but her twitching lips betrayed her enthusiasm.

With Katniss being the last one of their squadron, Plutarch began the meeting. The moment the holographic image popped up over the panel, he realized instantly why it sparked a jolt of familiarity. He stared at the blueprints, mesmerized, at the layout of the block and the blinking lights that signified a pod. A pod that could release anything from a bomb to a band of mutts. Just... like an arena of the Hunger Games.

Just like the hint Madam Calysta had dropped on him during their last encounter. Pods that lay dormant in every street on the Capitol.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Finnick murmured, his tone darkly cynical.
Katniss finished his sentence with a flourish, “Let the 76th Hunger Games begin.”

He had thought fear would overcome him, like what happened during the announcement of the Quarter Quell. Instead he felt something like cold calmness settled over his mind. He could deal with the Games. After what he has gone through during his capture, playing the Games again seemed... inconsequential.

“I don’t even know why you bothered to put Finnick, Gale and me through training, Plutarch.” Katniss said, and she sounded so genuinely confused that he barked out a laugh.

“Yeah, we’re already the three best-equipped soldiers you have.” Finnick smirked, confident.

He could see Thom watching him with concern, and he plastered on the best poker-faced look he has in his arsenal.

After the meeting, in the hallway, Katniss and Finnick cornered him, the latter looking worried.

“What will I tell Annie?” Finnick asked urgently.

He shrugged in response, already knowing what his family’s reactions would be. No point dropping the fact that he’s essentially heading back into another Hunger Games arena when he’s already gearing up for a confrontation. He has a feeling that the simmering tension between him and his mother was going to detonate after he delivered the news of his mission.

It seemed that Katniss has the same mindset. There was no point in worrying their loved ones any further.

He glanced up when he heard footsteps, only to see Haymitch walking up to them.

“Johanna’s back in the hospital.” He said abruptly.

He and Finnick exchanged twin looks of panic and concern. A multitude of what ifs flashed through his head, and he knew something must have gone horribly wrong during the exam.

“It was while she was on the Block. They try to ferret out a soldier’s potential weaknesses. So they flooded the street.” Haymitch explained.

He went pale with shock. Johanna had been drowned multiple times during her torture.

Before Haymitch has even finished speaking, he has dashed off towards the hospital.

Johanna’s eyes snapped over to him as he slipped into the room silently. Purple bruises darkened her eyes, and she was putting up a great fight with the sedative. She looked exhausted. She looked a mere shadow of a woman. He slipped a hand into hers, and felt her squeezed back with ferocity, as if afraid that she’ll stumbled into unconsciousness if she let go.

He almost didn’t notice Finnick entering the room and sitting down quietly beside him.

“We are going to fuck up the Capitol.” He said steadily, a promise laced in his voice.

“And kill Snow while we are at it.” Finnick added.

Johanna’s lips twitched and she nodded tightly. They left shortly, running into Katniss outside. He hoped that Katniss has better luck trying to console Johanna.
Hazelle did not take the news well, an understatement of the year. Fury flushed her cheeks, her eyes widening in anger. At least she sent the children to Prim before she exploded on him.

“You don’t have to do this.” She begged, her voice cracking.

There’s a lot of people telling him that he doesn’t have to do this. Of course, he doesn’t. He’s probably just there for propo, but hell if he’s going to stay with the Star Squad. He suspected Katniss has no intention to linger around either, but he’ll confront her once they get out of 13. There’s other soldiers far more capable to take on his job, but he wasn’t forced into this. He owed a lot of people to do this.

“I’m going to the Capitol, and I’m not asking for your permission.” He said quietly.

“Haven’t you done enough? You won the Games, you spent the last two years mentoring those kids, you were tortured, you were sold—” Her rage seemed to fizzle, and tears welled in her eyes. “And now you’re telling me you’re heading back to the Capitol to take down Snow?”

“It’s the only way to end this war.” He said calmly.

“It doesn’t have to be you!” Hazelle exclaimed.

He felt a flutter of heat in his chest. “It doesn’t have to be Katniss either. Or Finnick. Or Peeta, or Jo! But we’re fighting because we need to end this. We’re fighting to stop Snow. It doesn’t matter how much I suffered when my pain is nothing compared to all the agony the Districts had to go through for the last seventy-five years!” Portia. Cinna. Madam Calysta. All the Victors in the Quarter Quell who have lost their lives. All the lost tributes. “The Capitol have to pay. Snow have to pay.”

“When I came to District 13 and—and Haymitch was the one to tell me that my son was captured by the Capitol, I thought I have lost you. I spent days waiting around for someone to do something, but no one around this place seems to be willing to launch a rescue!” Hazelle raged. “And then I have to hear what that bastard has done to the Victors— my son! Sold and prostituted and I didn’t even realize that something more is going on in the Capitol!”

He felt guilt sank in. “Ma—”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” She cried, her voice echoing in the small compartment.

He fell silent, numbness spreading over his body. She never looked more heartbroken than she did at this exact moment, hunched over with grief and guilt.

“I can’t do this with you right now, ma.” He choked, swallowing back the bile that tried to slide up his throat. “I don’t want to talk about this.”

A small part of him that sounded like Finnick reminded him to breathe. He forcefully released the breath trapped in his chest, the air shuddering up his throat.

“I don’t want to do this now.” He repeated, and hated himself for sounding so small.

Hazelle stepped forward and wrapped her arms around his middle.

“Promise me you’ll come back to me.” She said harshly.
He exhaled slowly, his eyes prickling with heat. She tightened her grip when he doesn’t respond, and repeated forcefully.

“I will.” He nodded stiffly.

Neither of them missed the fact that he didn’t make the promise. But it was the best he could do for her. He doesn’t know if he’s able to come back, doesn’t know what would happen if he actually does return.
Chapter 61

“I thought I didn’t have to continue doing shit like this once I’m done with the Capitol.” He muttered
in aggravation. They spent half of their time shooting propo instead of doing something useful— like
fucking up the Capitol. Finnick doesn’t looked happy either, and Katniss looked ready to cut
someone whenever her role as a Mockingjay was mentioned.

On the fourth day, Leeg 2 hit a mislabelled pod, and she died before she hit the ground, a metal dart
shot into her skull. Her replacement came the following evening, in the form of one Peeta Mellark.

“Well, President Coin must really want us dead.” Thom muttered.

It’s not enough that this mission seemed to be going nowhere, but now they have to babysit Peeta.
An extremely dangerous and unpredictable Victor who has an intense hatred for Katniss at the
moment.

“Are you going to kill him?” He asked bluntly during dinner.

Katniss shook her head, looking disturbed. “I can deal with him.”

“Until when? Until you take off from the squad?” He asked. She must think him blind if he doesn’t
notice all the preparations she’s making. “You better not be thinking of going off alone without me.”

“As your fellow soldier, I have to strongly recommend you stay with your squad. But I can’t stop
you from coming, can I?” She smirked.

“Oh, fuck that. As your fellow Victor, I strongly recommend we stick together. All the information
of those pods is outdated.” He said, rolling his eyes. “It’s far easier if we worked together.”

“Just like the arena, huh.” She grinned.

To his surprise, he was barely rattled by her words. Getting out of District 13 was good for him,
instead of being stuck surrounded by grey everywhere. Even if it’s the Capitol, it felt good breathing
in fresh air.

“An alliance then?” He smiled, softer than he expected.

She looked up at him, shared experience exchanged between their brief glances. Things have been
getting better since everything was revealed. There were no more secrets between them anymore,
and frankly, it was good to have his best friend back.

He had missed her, and she had been absolutely understanding after the prostitution business came to
light. While she has a tendency to treat him like glass sometimes, she was by far one of the only
people to regard him normally – other than the other Victors, and he appreciated that.

So abandoning Katniss now was the last thing in this mind. He’ll follow her all the way up to
Snow’s doorsteps, even if he has to go through Peacekeepers, a band of mutts and bombs.

"If you’re having problems differentiating what’s real or what’s false, you can ask any of us. Like—
Like a game, you ask a question, and we answer whether it’s real or not real.” Jackson had
suggested.
It seemed to work, and he wished he had thought of that earlier.

“It’s a good idea. Should have thought of that before. It would have been useful when I was still having trouble differentiating on who’s real or who’s just a hallucination.” He said honestly.

Katniss choked on her water, and he pretended he didn’t see her hurriedly wiping up the splash of water over her pants.

Maybe Johanna was on to something about not censoring her thoughts. Peeta seemed to appreciate his frankness, in any case.

The light-heartedness was broken when a triggered pod took its next casualty. Boggs fell over, just as black, oily liquid started spouting like geyser down the streets, drenching everything in its darkness.

“Move!” Finnick was shouting.

He didn’t dare to touch the black oil. Knowing the Capitol, it must be lethal. He took point in front of Katniss and Homes, Thom shadowing his side to protect the injured Boggs. There was a cry of shock suddenly from behind him, and he turned around, distracted.

“Thom!” He cried out sharply. Without replying, Thom spun around to help Katniss up.

He heard a loud snap as Mitchell hit a pod. Four cables broke through the concrete, a net snapping up Mitchell’s body. He started shooting at the cables, trying to get it to release Mitchell’s bloodied body.

The black tar-like oil was receding like a tide, and he spun around to escape into the building, hating himself for abandoning Mitchell. Once everyone has dashed in, he slammed the door shut. A sickening noxious smell suffused the air, slipping in through the cracks of the building.

He choked and gagged, pressing the back of his hand against his nose. He backed away from the door, feeling the bile trying to crawl up his throat.

“Is he dead?” He questioned, staring at the unmoving body of Boggs. Katniss looked up at him beside the body, nodding wordlessly.

The was a sudden loud bang coming from the closet. He glanced at the closet uncertainly, even as the panic was slowly slithering through his veins.

Everything had moved too fast, and Boggs and Mitchell were dead before he know it.

There was a brief stand-off between Jackson and Katniss, which grated at his nerves. They should be moving, instead of fighting over command.

“We have to go!” He snapped impatiently. “I’m following Katniss. If you don’t want to, then head back to camp. But we have to keep moving!”

He glanced at the Holo, at the blinking lights of the pods. Outside, the black geyser, and the barbed wire net.

“Whatever that’s on the Holo are pods that Plutarch knows about, but there’s probably a lot more unknown pods that he doesn’t even know.” He said quietly to Katniss.

She seemed to make up her mind, looking up with a strangely firm expression. “Put on your masks.
We’re going out the way we came in.”

“Doesn’t seem to be corrosive.” Thom observed the splatter of black on his armguard.

A decision was made and everyone started to strap on their masks.

He watched anxiously as Katniss pushed open the door. Nothing came roaring out at them, although the black oil spread further over the floor.

Thom and he exchanged looks, and breathing out slowly, they stepped out into the open together.
They took cover in an apartment, when an emergency broadcast caused the television to flicker on by itself. A video of their fight was played on the screen, until the black tar oil covered everything.

“So, apparently we’re dead.” Thom said out loud.

His thoughts raced in his head. It’s far easier to move around if Snow thinks them dead. The footage played over and over again on the television, the faint lights flickering over his face.

“So, what’s our next move?” He asked tiredly.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Peeta’s voice spoke up all of the sudden. “The next move... is to kill me.”

He thought of Peeta going mad and his attempt in murdering Katniss. He thought of Mitchell’s body hanging limply in the air, blood dripping over the barbs. He thought of Mitchell intervening, but getting killed instead.

He looked away from the lifeless blue gaze, not wanting to make the decision.

Protests immediately raised around the room. Despite his hand in Mitchell’s death, nobody wanted Peeta dead. Peeta was a danger, yes, but he didn’t deserve death. He has gone through too much to lay down and die needlessly now.

“It’s not about you,” Katniss said. “We’re on a mission. And you’re necessary to it.” She looked around the room. “Think we might find some food here?”

He stayed with the group watching over Peeta. Ignoring Thom’s warning look, he sat down beside the blonde.

“If you’re so adamant in making up for it, then make sure you get us all the way to Snow.” He said bluntly.

“I’m dangerous. I killed Mitchell.” Peeta said mournfully. “What if I—I freaked out and accidentally hurt someone again?”

“Exactly. Accidentally.” He frowned. “We’re all prepared for the possibility of dying on this mission. You think you’re the only one here a danger to everyone else?” He shook his head, chuckling bitterly under his breath. “Thom knows what to do if I freak out. Whatever happened to Mitchell, it’s not going to happen again.”

“You’ll stop me.” Peeta said, staring at him. For a moment, he was the old Peeta, his eyes clear and focused.

“I’ll break your other leg if I have to.” He replied solemnly. “And then you’re going to need another prosthetic leg.”

A small smile cracked across Peeta’s face.

“Now if you’ve stopped brooding over here, grab something to eat. You’ll need your strength.” He said, and dared to reach out to pat Peeta’s shoulder.
Chapter 63

Underground was the second thing after grey rooms that he was starting to hate.

He was going to have nightmares of hissing in the dark and scaly lizard mutts the size of humans ripping off the heads of Peacekeepers if he actually survived this.

He nearly choked on the stench of roses, human waste and garbage, stifling the urge to retch. Up ahead was a platform and a ladder leading upwards.

“Climb, Katniss!” He ordered, turning around to aim his crossbow at the darkness. He could hear the hissing growing steadily louder, the scrambling of sharp talons against the walls. Somewhere from the distance, he heard a human scream.

Thom pulled Katniss up the ladder, forcing her to climb, while he guarded her back. He fired an arrow into a mutt, throwing it back. Without looking to see if it’s dead, he spun around and jumped up the ladder. The rungs were wet and slippery and he nearly slipped when a claw grazed his leg.

He reached the top, and hanging onto the last rung, leaned back to haul Cressida up through the manhole above his head.

“Finnick, get the hell up!” He yelled.

He saw the man turned towards the ladder, but went down with a shout of pain as a mutt leaped onto him. He directed his crossbow downwards and shot the mutt in the head. The mutts were starting to converge around Finnick. Cursing wildly, he slid an explosive bolt into his crossbow. Instead of shooting at the mutts, he aimed towards the ceiling. Steadying himself, he let go of the rung just as he fired the bolt. The bolt exploded once it hit the ceiling, and then everything came crashing down.

He was already firing another bolt, this time in front of Finnick. Flames immediately roared to life, licking the sewage water and scattering the nearest lizard mutts.

He hit the ground lightly, reaching down to hook around Finnick’s armpit.

“Gale!” Thom’s voice was echoing and faraway, amidst the flames and crashing concrete. Heat was starting to suffocate him, sweat dripping off his chin and into his eyes.

Blindly, he dragged Finnick along, the older man’s agonised breaths brushing against his ear. He could feel blood on his hands – although he’s not sure if he wanted to know who it belonged to. With a grunt, he managed to push Finnick up the ladder. Finnick clung weakly onto the rungs, and Thom reached down with a swear on his lips, heaving the man up the rest of the way.

“Hurry up!” Thom yelled, shooting at the mutts that’s starting to rush forward once more.

Not even bothering to climb, he jumped, catching Thom’s hand. Using the momentum, his foot catching against a lower rung, he pulled himself up towards the top.

“Nightlock, nightlock, nightlock.” Katniss was muttering frantically into the Holo. Once he and Thom were through, she flung the Holo into the sewage tunnel. Pollux slammed the lid down, just as they felt the explosion. The ground beneath them rocked and trembled.

He lay on the ground, breathing heavily. Slowly, he could feel the pain creeping across his body. He reached up to touch his neck, hissing as his hand came away with blood. He looked over, trying to
find Finnick. Cressida was bended over him, trying to bind up the wound on his leg. The blood was starting to pool over the damp floor.

“Fuck, you fucking crazy bastard.” Thom groaned, dropping down beside him.

He laughed, with just the slightest tinge of hysteria. He clutched his bleeding neck and scrambled to his feet.

No time to rest.

“We have to go.” He said, looking over to see Katniss kissing Peeta. “Alright, not the time to be kissing around. We have to go now.”

Ignoring the blood smeared all over his neck and face, he carefully lifted Finnick onto Thom’s back. The remaining squad climbed the last ladder up into a utility room.

Before he could react, a woman burst into the room. She was just opening her mouth – to scream, or call for help, maybe, when Katniss raised her bow and shot her through the heart.

“First aid.” He declared, turning away from the corpse.

They rushed into the living room and Thom lay Finnick out on the couch. Everyone looked a mess, but he has no time to falter now. He could feel the blood loss clouding his head, but he forced himself on through sheer will, going through cupboards until he found a small first aid box.

Cressida came forward to help him, sorting out the stuffs needed as he upturned the box. Just as Thom came back with cold water, he ripped Finnick’s pants off to expose the wound. He turned pale when he noticed the chunk of missing flesh.

“Shit.” Thom swore. “We might not be able to save his leg.”

“We don’t have the medical equipment necessary.” Cressida whispered.

He bit his lip, staring at the grotesque bite. The worse thing was, Finnick was still conscious, moaning weakly under his breath.

“Someone hold him down.” He released a shaky breath, and then he poured the water over the wound. Katniss lunged forward to hold down Finnick, nearly getting a smack in the face from his flailing hands.

“Leg or not, as long as he’s alive.” He breathed, and then he started binding the wound with bandages.

Cressida was deftly sliding in a syringe, and as Finnick settled, she leaned over to stab the needle into his arm.

“It’s to stop the bleeding.” She explained.

When Finnick finally fall unconscious, his leg bounded up with bandages and his bleeding stopped, he dropped back with a sigh. He hadn’t been quick to trust Cressida in the beginning, as she was formerly from the Capitol, but he couldn’t help but be grateful that she’s here now. He wouldn’t know what to do without her levelheadedness around to ground him.

“Christ, Gale,” Thom hissed. “We need to tend to you as well.”

It finally occurred to him that his leg was stinging as well. He glanced to see a deep cut over his right
thigh, but the worst injury has to be the one on his neck.

“Bind them.” He croaked. “And give me one of those things that stopped the bleeding, Cressida. We can’t rest here.”

Despite everyone’s apprehensive looks, they did what he asked.

Katniss went searching through the dead woman’s house, finding hundreds of outfits and wigs and makeups.

He picked a heavy winter coat that’s able to hide his crossbow on his back, settled a blond wig over his dark hair and then slipped into a pair of leather boat shoes. Cressida wrapped a crimson scarf around his throat to hide the bandages, and he put on a pair of sunglasses on his face.

“Ready?” He asked dryly. They managed to wake Finnick and now he’s leaning heavily against Cressida. From the angle and their heavy disguises, they managed to pass off as a really affectionate couple.

Katniss huffed, slid close to him and pushed him through the door. He ducked his gaze, feeling utterly ridiculous in his blond wig. When a troop of Peacekeepers marched right past their little group and didn’t stop, he quietly released a breath of relief.
“No, go tend to Finnick. I’ll be fine here.” He brushed Katniss’s hands away, still standing only by willpower. He swayed, nearly collapsing before Thom slipped under his arm to hold him up.

His neck needed stitches, Finnick’s leg needed stitches, but he was too tired to care and just wanted to drop onto the bed of pelts and blacked out already.

“I need to stitch up your neck.” Katniss frowned in irritation.

He pushed her hands away. “Go to Finnick. My neck can wait.” He raised his head and tried to plead with his eyes. “Save him.”

Thom patted her shoulder reassuringly. “He’s right. Finnick needs to be stitched up now. I’m pretty good with a needle as well.”

She gave him a dubious look, but relented.

“Head up, Gale.” Thom ordered sternly, threading a slim thread through the needle. He tiredly leaned his head to the side, and Thom peeled back the bloodied bandages.

“Don’t kill me please.” He murmured.

“Ha, ha. Very funny.” Thom said sarcastically, before he slipped the needle through his skin. He bit back the moan of pain, sparkle of lights bursting in his vision. He gritted his teeth and closed his eyes, forcefully pretending not to notice the pain.

“Alright, done. Pretty as a seamstress’s work.” Thom smirked, rubbing medicinal cream over the sutures before wrapping it up with new, clean bandages. He dropped two tablets of painkillers onto his palm.

He swallowed down the painkillers and huddled under the warm pelt. He felt the exhaustion sank right down into his bones immediately, and then he was out like a light.

The next day, he woke up around late afternoon. It was surprising to find out that they were merely five blocks away from Snow’s mansion. He watched the news, spent the rest of the day regaining back his strength. Finnick woke up twice during the day, but most of the time, he was unconscious. At least infection hadn’t set into his wound yet.

Yet. The word chilled his bones, because he doesn’t know what he could do if Finnick’s wound started to fester. There’s no proper medical equipment in Tigris’s shop, they were thick in the enemy’s territory and their future still remained uncertain.

He sat over Finnick during the night, praying that the older man would live. Too many people have died in this war. People who have become dear to him, people who meant something.

And Finnick was, admittedly, one of his dearest friends. He would drag him home to Annie even if he had to amputate his leg to save him.

He stared at the paper in his hands. The makeshift map that he had drawn from memory. He stared at the marked areas around Snow’s mansion, sketched from what he could remember of the pods on the Holo. The pods could be activated any time, and Peacekeepers would be swarming the streets.
The breakthrough finally came after a broadcast from the Head Peacekeeper the next day. Homes and shops would be expected to open for refugees to take cover.

“Do you think it’s true?” Katniss asked. “That Snow will let refugees into the mansion?”

He hummed under his breath, staring sightlessly at the suds drying on his hands. It might be a chance to infiltrate Snow’s mansion if that’s the case. But he wondered if it’s a trap to lure in the Mockingjay.

“It might be a trap.” He said quietly. “But it’s the best chance we got.”

Katniss considered. “I’m leaving in the morning.”

“I’m coming with you.” He nodded.

Pollux and Cressida would stay with Finnick in Tigris’s shop, and when Peeta suggested going out to act as diversion, Thom decided to stick with the blonde.

“Don’t worry, Katniss. I’ll protect him for you.” Thom winked. He squeezed Gale’s shoulder before he left the three of them alone.

Hesitantly, he reached into his breast pocket and took out the nightlock tablet. He dropped it onto Peeta’s palm.

“What about you?” Peeta asked passively.

He gave the blonde a humourless smile. “Don’t worry, Peeta. If worse comes to worst, I know how to kill myself just fine.” He glanced at Katniss, his eyes dark. “And I’ll have Katniss.”

Katniss, his oldest friend and best friend. Katniss, who would not let him go through the torture of the Capitol again. Katniss, who would hopefully kill him if he’s taken by the Peacekeepers.

“Take it, Peeta.” Katniss whispered, her voice strained. She closed Peeta’s fingers over the pills. “Just in case Thom...” She didn’t continue, but she didn’t need to.
Tigris gave him a crimson coat with a high collar and a hood. He huddled into the coat, trying to burrow further into the warmth. A morbid thought flashed through his mind just then, as he glanced at the sleeve. At least if he’s killed, the coat would conceal the blood.

Katniss pulled him into the crowd and they ducked their heads, trying to blend in amongst all the Capitol civilians.

Suddenly, gunfire ripped through the crowd. People started screaming as Peacekeepers slumped to the ground dead. His first instinct was to drop to the ground, but he dragged Katniss away from the open space, hiding behind a display mannequin.

“Rebels.” Katniss hissed.

His gaze was directed to the refugees as another wave of gunfire rained down on them. Nearby, a little girl that reminded him of Posy fell over dead, her blue dress blooming with crimson flowers on her dress.

He swallowed and looked away, trying to pretend that the cold invading his body was because of the snow and not because of the horror he’s feeling.

“We have to get to Snow.” Katniss said.

Staying close to the wall, they started upping their pace. They managed to steal a gun from a wounded Peacekeeper and killed another.

By the time they reached the second block, they stopped trying to blend in. No one cared who they were because no one was looking at them anymore. The rebels have started to pour into the streets.

They were trapped between Peacekeepers, rebels and fleeing refugees. Many were wounded, even more were killed. Most of them were civilians.

He couldn’t think about the dead, he has to focus on Snow’s mansion just in front of him.

Then, a pod activated ahead of them. It released a gust of hot steam that boiled everyone in its path. Reflexively, he raised his gun and started shooting, Katniss at his back. Bullets were flying, blood was staining the snow, and they have to keep moving.

He felt the tremble under his boots and he didn’t have to look to know that they have encountered another activated pod. He threw himself to the side as a hole cracked open in the middle of the street.

“Gale!” Katniss screamed as she slid towards the gaping chasm. He tried to reach out for her, but he slipped on the slippery ice. He let himself slide towards Katniss, before he grabbed onto an iron grating.

She was too far away from him.

That’s his last thought before white-gloved hands clamped onto his shoulders and swung him up.

Peacekeepers.

They disabled him of his weapons, forcing his hands behind his back. He struggled to get free, but they pushed down harder on his arms and he bit back a whimper of pain.
“Shoot me.” He mouthed to Katniss, his grey eyes bright with fear once he realized that he couldn’t get free.

She stared at him in confusion and he repeated his plea desperately. Her face looked indistinct and blurry from afar, and he felt as if the world had tilted under his feet. He doesn’t know what’s going to happen to him again if he’s captured. He can’t go through the torture again. It’s going to break him, and he doesn’t know if he could climb back out of his head this time.

But he’s hauled away before she could do the deed and despair clutched his heart.

Desperate, frightened, he wasn’t lying when he told Peeta he could kill himself just fine. He bit down on his tongue without hesitation, and the shock of the pain sent tears filling up in his eyes. Blood rapidly filled his throat, choking and suffocating him, and he passed out before he could die.
Chapter 66

When he woke up, he’s surprised to find that he’s not dead. Or in a Capitol prison. It’s a new world out there, with President Coin in charge of Panem now.

He doesn’t feel victorious. He doesn’t feel satisfied. He felt nothing.

Madge was his first visitor – or the first one he met since his awakening – and she told him what happened after he was taken by the Peacekeepers. The rebels found him bleeding from his mouth, and managed to save him before he could bleed to death or asphyxiated from the blood in his throat.

Prim was currently in a coma, only recently out of danger. Even then, no one could tell when – or if – she’s going to wake. A second wave of bombs had rained down upon them as the medics rushed to save the Capitol children, and Prim had been caught in the blast.

Finnick had to amputate his leg and get a prosthetic. Katniss was burned by the bombs, although the technology of the Capitol had managed to save her.

He can’t talk. His tongue was still healing. But he didn’t feel like talking much anyway.

When he’s released from the hospital, Katniss and Madge was there to fetch him.

“Gale.” Katniss rasped, looking like death had plucked out her soul from how thin and sickly she looked. But her arms were strong when she wrapped them around him.

They brought him to the president’s mansion, where his family was given one of the many rooms. Their room was just opposite Katniss’s, although he could not see Aster anywhere.

“Gale!” His siblings shouted, running up into his arms. He felt something break in his chest at the looks of relief on their young faces.

He sank to his knees and opened his arms. At nearly fourteen, Rory’s head was already brushing his chin, but he looked so small as he clung to his older brother. Posy had folded herself as tiny as possible in his lap, sobbing into his stomach. And Vick was hanging off his neck, wailing unashamedly.

How could he do this to his family?

“Sorry.” He mouthed at Hazelle. She shook her head, tearstains on her red cheeks. With his siblings still refusing to let him go, she managed to usher all four of them into the room.

The bed in their assigned room was far more luxurious than even the ones in the Victors’ Village. But it was huge and it could accommodate all five of them easily.

He slipped into bed, his siblings blanketing him like a protective cocoon. He buried his face into Posy’s hair, breathing in the clean, soap scent, and fought the urge to cry.

“I’m sorry.” He whispered, and his tongue hurts when he tried to speak but he struggled through the pain because he needed his siblings to understand.

“Welcome home, Gale.” Posy whispered back, dark eyes peeking at him under her heavy fringe of hair. In her eyes, he saw childish happiness, he saw forgiveness, he saw hope.

He made a choking noise, tears blurring his vision. When he felt one of his brothers’ arms tightened
around his waist, he sobbed harder. Soon, he’s hiccupsing tears and crying hard enough that his entire frame trembled in his siblings’ arms.

The war was over. The war was over. The war was over.

He’s not happy. He just felt terribly, terribly lost.
“Soldier Hawthorne, you have a visitor.”

He looked up blankly at the woman who was standing by the doorway. Posy continued doodling in her colouring book – a variety of colour pencils strewn all over the carpeted floor.

He didn’t move. He loathed to leave Posy alone.

“He claims that you’ll know him. He said his name is Ammon Overwhill.” The woman continued.

A spark of recognition in his grey eyes.

He straightened up in confusion, the name immediately bringing up a memory of Madam Calysta. He stroked Posy’s hair lightly, tilting his head to the woman. Posy smiled toothily up at him, and then looked back down to her colouring book.

He stood up and followed the woman silently.

“Gale Hawthorne,” The man that used to be Madam Calysta’s personal secretary greeted hoarsely. “It’s good to see you alive.”

His dark hair was dishevelled, the tips fading into a greyish hue. His moustache was no longer immaculately kept, and whiskery hairs has grown rough around his chin.

“Your guard was kind enough to inform me that you wouldn’t be able to speak much at the moment.” Ammon smiled, tired and muted. Grief had created shadows under his eyes, and he looked thin and haggard under his clothes. “But it’s fine. I suppose I should explain how I am alive. But first,” His eyes softened. “I would like you to accompany me to the Velvet Rose.”

“No—a good idea.” The female rebel spoke up. “The President ordered that Soldier Hawthorne is to remain safe.”

Sounded more like Coin doesn’t want him to disappear, or attempt to kill himself again.

“Did the President also says I am to remain confined in the mansion?” He asked. He had to strain his voice to be heard, and his healing tongue protested. Both the woman and Ammon paused in surprise and stared at him.

“No—but the Capitol outside is still dangerous—” The woman frowned uncertainly.

He turned away from her and glanced at Ammon, nodding his head. Then he walked out of the room. If the rebel wanted to stop him, she would have done so already.

So, they took one of the rebel’s vehicles and drove to the Velvet Rose. Apparently, the woman had taken her orders seriously and had followed them to make sure nothing would go wrong during their little excursion.

He felt bad that he didn’t even know his guard’s name, but he honestly doesn’t care.

“Madam Calysta knew.” Ammon started softly. “She knew that when District 13 started to act, she wouldn’t be able to survive for long. Snow has suspected her for a long time, but she was far too influential to kill without reason. And Madam is very good in covering her tracks. Before... Before the Peacekeepers came, she smuggled me out.” His voice cracked slightly and he raised his arm to
wipe at his eyes. “I alone managed to escape and hide out till everything is over.”

The Velvet Rose was a literal mess inside. The place has been ransacked by Peacekeepers, everything turned inside out.

He watched in confusion as Ammon bounced onto the stage and started feeling around the floor with his hands. The man knocked experimentally against the floor, until he seemed to find what he was looking for. He pried the floor open, revealing a hollow hole beneath.

“Do you have a computer?” Ammon directed his question to the woman.

The woman nodded in hesitation.

“Good, please bring one over.” Ammon said quietly, sliding the tile back to place. He jumped off the stage and returned to Gale’s side.

“This is what Madam had risked her entire life for.” Ammon placed the item onto the bar counter.

He glanced at the black stick-like object. A data drive, a portable device used to store information.

“Please.” Ammon gestured to the data drive, just as the woman came back with a slim computer.

He slowly pulled the computer over, searching for the port at the side before plugging in the data drive. A window opened up on the screen instantaneously, requesting for a password. He turned to look at Ammon.

“I'm sorry.” The other man said. “I don’t know what’s the password. Madam has never told me... only her last order was to pass this to you.”

He would laugh at the sheer confidence the woman has – that she clearly anticipated him surviving the war. He stared at the screen emotionlessly.

He doesn’t know Madam Calysta, but if her last order was for this data drive to reach his hands, it clearly meant that she had given him the password at one point. Unless she expected him to crack the code. Knowing the woman, she would have prepared to destroy all the information inside if anyone was to hack into the drive.

He thought back to their last conversation, wracking his head for a clue. She had sprinkled hints everywhere during their talk – but nothing stood out. Nothing except for her apparent disdain for mockingjays and...

“The jabberjay is a symbol of the Capitol.”

Sceptically, he typed in ‘jabberjay’. And suddenly, a list of names unfurled on the screen, all indexed alphabetically. He was suddenly reminded of Effie’s pragmatism and he had to resist a smile. Then, as he slowly skimmed through the list of names and their information, the smile dimmed.

In this data drive contained a list of names – men and women who were responsible for the founding of Snow’s regimen. People held accountable for whatever have happened for the last seventy-five years. All of Snow’s most devoted loyalists.

“She has spent her entire life and risking everything she know for this little data drive.” Ammon
laughed dryly. “Incredible.”

He unplugged the data drive from the computer and turned to Ammon questioningly.

“Her late husband was a renown philanthropist back when he was alive. Then he started questioning on the legality of the Hunger Games. He started poking around... I think he was getting too close to Snow’s secrets. He was killed in a ‘car accident’ just a week before Madam Calysta’s birth of her first child.” Ammon said quietly, staring blankly at the screen without really registering anything. “In her grief, she lost the baby.” Then he snorted, but it was a bitter and harsh sound. “I guess Snow’s greatest mistake was to let her live. He never suspected she would try anything.”

“What does she want me to do?” He asked huskily.

Ammon shrugged and gave him a small, sad smile. “My sister has always been a strange woman. I suppose it’s up to you now to choose what you want to do with this. Destroy it. Give it to the new President. Deal with it as you deem fit.”

For some reason, the thought of this data drive in Coin’s hands sent a chill down his spine. The edge of the data drive dug into his palm as he tightened his grip over it.

“Take me back please.” He turned to the woman waiting a good distance away. He tucked the data drive into his pocket, keeping his hand curled around the item.
Chapter 68

Effie came by to usher him to a meeting ordered by the new President. Quietly, he slipped into the grey rebel uniform he was instructed to wear. He stared at his reflection in the mirror, unable to recognize the man staring back at him.

The man in the mirror had lost a lot of weight, the sharp bones of his cheekbones showing prominently. The grey eyes were dull and listless, his lips cracked and pale. There were still bruises healing on his face, a smattering of yellow and blue-black against the edge of his face.

At least he looked better than he did when he was rescued from the Capitol.

He was led to a small room with a group of people sitting around a round table. Very familiar people. All Victors that he believed were the only ones left still alive.

“Gale!” Finnick cried, getting up from his seat with some difficulty. But he didn’t let that stopped him as he limped forward and threw his arms around him.


He wanted to laugh, but it felt like a bad idea, so he shrugged and smiled up at him. He felt a small flicker of relief in his chest when he saw Finnick – glad to see with his own eyes that the man was still alive.

“I thought that we’ve all established that before.” He said softly. “I told Peeta I knew how to kill myself just fine if I’m captured by the Capitol again after all.”

“Bastard.” Finnick scowled. “Don’t you ever do that again.”

Annie silently slipped under her husband’s arms and wrapped her petite arms around his waist. They only separated when Katniss and Coin joined them.

A final Hunger Games.

Suddenly, the data drive still in his pocket seemed like lead. He instinctively slid his hand into the pocket to clutch it in unease. All the children of the men and women in this device thrown into the arena was a tempting idea.

“I vote no with Peeta.” Annie said strongly, reaching out for her husband’s hand. “And so does Finnick.”

Finnick nodded fiercely.

Revenge was seductive – an eye for an eye, in return to what the Capitol has done to them. The Capitol, who had stolen so much from him. The Capitol, where all these men and women in his data drive continued to live, to wreak havoc. Those people have to pay for all the crimes they have committed, and Gale would not rest easy until they were all gone.

“I vote yes.” He said, his voice whispery and rough in his throat. He could feel his decision curdling in his chest like sour milk, heavy and dense. He could feel the deep shame rushing through his veins immediately, and he closed his eyes to breathe. He had just sentenced twenty-four children to die, Capitol or not.
He was sick of himself.

But it doesn’t matter anyway, as both Haymitch and Katniss voted yes.

And then they were marched out into the open, watching as Katniss readied a bow at Snow.

It felt like the entirety of his life was banking on this moment. The death of the man that had caused him so much pain.

He noticed Katniss changing the trajectory of her arrow at the split second. It was like time had slowed down in front of him, before ramming back to reality. The moment the arrow hit President Coin in the heart, the crowd seemed to descend into chaos. He was rooted to his spot in shock, unable to move or register Katniss’s action. He felt someone slammed into his shoulder and he nearly stumbled and hit the ground.

“Gale, let’s go!” Thom suddenly appeared by his elbow, catching him from falling.

Guards in grey uniforms were converging upon Katniss, and he could see her struggling violently like a wild animal before she disappeared amongst the sea of people.

And then Thom was pulling him away to safety. Bristel running up beside them as she urged them through – elbowing people in the faces and kicking them in the shins as she does so.

“What the fuck just happened?” Bristel gasped.

What the fuck happened indeed – because Gale had no idea what just happened out there.
“Katniss is being exiled to 12.” Madge revealed, sitting down beside him. They stared out over the city silently, the sky above still purple, with just the slightest flicker of orange hidden in the clouds. At the crack of dawn, everyone was still asleep in their beds.

“And you?” He asked. His tongue had healed and it no longer hurts quite as much when he spoke, but he was still hesitant to speak too loudly. The rapid flow of blood choking him was a memory he couldn’t quite forget.

“Prim is still in coma.” Madge smiled. “I’m staying in the Capitol. Someone has to watch over Prim... since Katniss can’t stay here.”

“Ma is going back to 12 too.” He replied, a sardonic smile twitching at the edge of his lips. “Is there even anything left there that is worth going back?”

“I don’t know.” Madge gave him a tired smile. “But there’s always a chance to rebuild, isn’t it?”

He didn’t answer, and they fell into peaceful silence as they watched the sun rise over the horizon.

He went searching for Paylor – the newly elected President, and personally a far more suitable leader than Coin. He only met her briefly but he could tell that she was an incorruptible and righteous woman. He wasn’t sure if she’s trustworthy yet, but at least he knew that she’s not a woman out for vengeance.

“Mr Hawthorne.” She murmured, as if surprised that it was really him standing in the middle of the office, even though her guard had announced him in.

“Just Gale, please.” He said quietly, sitting down on the offered chair. “Congratulations on becoming President, President Paylor.”

She raised a brow at him, trying to discern if he’s being sarcastic. But he stared back at her seriously.

“A position I have never wanted.” She sighed, shaking her head. “Now, is there something you need, Gale?”

“I have something that could make your job easier.” He said. “Do you know Calysta Cabochon, President Paylor?”

“I have seen her execution on television.” Paylor replied. “She’s a Capitol rebel.”

He slipped the data drive out of his pocket, dropping it onto her desk. And then, slowly, still maintaining eye contact, slid the data drive towards her.

“She’s more than a Capitol rebel.” He said. “Here are all the known loyalists of Snow and a list of all their crimes. Madam Calysta has spent her entire life gathering all this information.” At the dawning look of comprehension and priceless shock on Paylor’s face, he swallowed and hoped he’s doing the right thing. “I hope... that I’m making the right choice here.”

“She will not have die in vain.” Paylor answered soberly. She picked up the data drive, and inclined her head respectfully to him. The words remained choked in his throat, and he stood up to leave, but not before she called him back.
“Will you be staying in the Capitol?” She asked curiously.

“No.” He said, smiling stiffly. “This place... holds too many bad memories for me.”

Understanding pervaded Paylor’s expression.

“Then how about District 2?” She questioned. At his confused look, she smiled. “I have need of capable people I can trust in my government. In District 2, I am setting up a Security and Defence branch. If you are willing, I have a position open for you there. Plutarch has spoken favourably of your capability. Your companions, Thom and Bristel, have been offered places there as well.”

He didn’t answer, stunned at her offer.

“You don’t have to answer now. But if you would like to accept... you know how to contact me.” Paylor said gently.

He left her office without giving her an answer, his mind churning with indecision. Somehow, he managed to come upon Finnick and the others.

“Hey, pretty boy, you look much better.” Johanna greeted. Her hair was starting to grow out, now a short pixie cut curling around the top of her ears.

Annie and Finnick were lounging beside her, and when they saw him approaching, they perked up.

“I’m pregnant, Gale.” Annie beamed, her sea green eyes bright with joy.

Taken off guard by her sudden proclamation, he could only stare at her blankly.

“And yes, it belongs to Finnick.” Johanna teased.

Finnick snorted and bended over laughing.

“Congratulations.” He murmured, gracing Johanna a brief annoyed glare before he leaned over to kiss Annie on the cheek. “Does that mean you’ll both be returning to District 4?”

“Yes, once Finnick get used to moving around with his new prosthetic.” Annie smiled.

He turned to Johanna. “And you?”

“I’ll be going to 4 too.” Johanna shrugged, scratching her chin in mild embarrassment. “No one’s waiting for me back at District 7 anyway. Maybe living near the ocean could get over my fear of water one day.”

“You could come with us?” Finnick suggested.

It was an alluring offer. Being with Finnick, Annie and Johanna... And he always wanted to live by the ocean. But his family, Katniss, Haymitch, Peeta... Maybe one day.

“Paylor offered me a job at 2.” He blurted.

The other three blinked at him, and he averted his gaze.

“Are you accepting?” Annie asked curiously.

“I... I think I’ll be going back to 12 first.” He said hesitantly. “I’ll wait until Rory gets a little older first before... before deciding.”
“Well, whatever choice you decided to make, we will always be there at District 4.” Finnick said lightly. “You definitely must come visit us.”

“Yeah, or I’ll hound you until you’ll be dreaming of my voice in your sleep.” Johanna threatened playfully.

It felt extremely good to finally be able to laugh.
Chapter 70

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was a sunny day when he returned to District 12 with Peeta.

His family had gone ahead of him, while he had decided to stick around the Capitol until Peeta was free to return to 12.

“Gale!” Thom gave him a one-armed hug as they got off the train station. “It’s good to see you back.”

“You go first.” Peeta smiled. “I’ll be heading to the woods first.”

Giving the blonde a curious glance, he nodded and followed Thom out of the train station.

“I thought Paylor offered you a job in 2.” He said.

Everywhere he looked, he could see people shovelling through the snow to gather the remains of the dead. For a moment, he wondered if it’s a bad idea to come back, his nerves starting to prickle under his skin.

But then he spotted his family in the distance and the fear faded like ashes in the wind.

“Well, the offer’s still there.” Thom shrugged. “Bristel and I wanted to wait till things in 12 is alright before going over.”

“And will Delly be going with you?” He asked distractedly.

He didn’t notice the flush of crimson that spread over Thom’s face, but he definitely heard the smile in his voice. “Y—Yeah, she is.” Thom muttered in mild embarrassment.

“When you’re ready,” Thom said softly. “We will go with you.”

And then he patted his shoulder and left his side, just as his siblings came running up.

“Welcome home.” Hazelle sniffed, running her fingers through his hair.

He sank into his mother’s warmth and breathed in her shampoo.

He was home.

Peeta and Katniss planted primroses outside the house, waiting for Prim to wake in the Capitol. Haymitch continued drinking and started to raise geese, Hazelle continued cleaning up after him, and she hated the geese that’s always trying to escape from their pen with a fervent passion. Peeta baked too much, but Gale’s siblings were always willing to eat whatever he baked. Katniss hunted, and sometimes he joined her in the woods. He whittled mockingjays to remind himself that he was free now. Sometimes the songbirds would flutter down beside him to watch him work. He always kept his first mockingjay figurine by his side.

When Spring arrived, Prim finally woke up. She came back in a wheelchair with Madge and – oddly enough, Effie. All of them went to the train station to fetch the trio, and Katniss greeted them with tears in her eyes.
Things got better. He got better, one step at a time, and in the ashes of Panem, the sun continued to raise every day.

Chapter End Notes

This marks the end of fire burns brighter in the dark. For all those who constantly gave me such wonderful reviews, thank you for following me all the way to the end! Your beautiful reviews kept me going and lift my spirits up whenever I needed encouragement. I won’t deny that I'll miss this story and Gale. This is the longest story I have ever written and I have invested so much time in this. It's not perfect and I'm not completely happy with how certain chapters turned out, but I'm pretty content with how it turned out for the overall story. Hopefully, I will be able to write another thg fic again in the future!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!