**To Where The Mockingjay Flies**

by [Chaed](https://archiveofourown.org/users/Chaed)

**Summary**

Without a rescue mission Katniss and Peeta are never reunited. The war takes a cataclysmic turn. Katniss, helming an ill-fated revolution, crumbles under the weight of the Mockingjay. Meanwhile, an abandoned Peeta must try to fight his own way out of Snow’s clutches and save himself from the scourge brought on by the Girl on Fire.

A slow-burn Everlark set in pandemonic Panem, for Johanna supporters and Odesta enthusiasts. Also, the one where Finnick lives.

**Notes**

For everyone who always wanted to see Annie as the heroine, Peeta as more than a part in a love triangle, and Johanna not as a discardable sidekick, but as a key character in the revolution. And for Katiac, who helped me shape this plotbunny into a full-fledged AU.

Cheers and enjoy.
Cheers and enjoy.
"It was a mistake," you said. But the cruel thing was, it felt like the mistake was mine, for trusting you.

Chapter 1

The day I'm forced into filming the propos at President Snow's request is the day I give up hope of ever seeing Katniss Everdeen again.

It comes on the heels of three days of what I will only later come to understand as very light questioning. My time when I wasn't being pressed for information about a rebellion I knew nothing about, spent locked in a room back in the Training Center with nothing but a deck of playing cards as company, sick with worry over what had happened to Katniss.

It's no use pretending we don't know what the other one is trying to do. I don't know what kind of deal you think you've made with Haymitch, but you should know he made me promises as well.

And from those simple words, offered freely to the girl I was willing to trade my life for in two arenas, Snow manages to pervert justification for schemed treason, reminding me Katniss is also complicit and will be charged for her crimes upon capture. 

Unless a cease-fire can be reached.

And so I do it. Let Portia and my prep team style my hair and dress me in clean clothes. Sit across from Caesar and denounce Katniss and the rebels. Change clothes and repeat the act three more times.

The moment I walk offstage, Portia and my prep team are arrested. And I meet Caesar Flickerman's eyes just as the peacekeepers descend, the last contact I am to have with anyone but avoxes, guards and the blunt end of clubs for the next four months.
It doesn't take long to lose track of the days. The lights are left on for what seems like a week at a time, then shut off to leave me in pitch blackness, sharp sirens that go off every half hour or so ensuring I never get much sleep.

For a while I count the passage of days by the appearance of the avox with a meager serving of bread and container of water. But once they discover the tally marks, my cell is stripped during the next interrogation and I'm beaten to the point I lose consciousness and can't quite remember what number I was on anyway.

After that, there doesn't seem to be much point in counting. My facial hair started growing back a week or two after they pulled us out of the arena, so I guess the chemicals must have worn off. Now it's my only way of guessing how much time has passed, reaching up to feel the length of my beard.

After about the second month I stop hoping someone is coming to rescue us. That is if Portia and the others are even alive. Sometimes I'm jarred awake not by blaring alarms, but by nerve-wrecking animal sounds. Only they're not animal. And they come in all nuances, from desperate pleas to the guttural shrieks one succumbs to when pain surpasses all levels of orderly thinking.

I've launched several attempts to establish contact with fellow detainees, none successful. Nobody ever replies. A theory worms itself into my mind that what I'm hearing might be only recordings of human misery. A tape locked on repeat for my hearing pleasure. The cells next door crammed to the top with jabberjays, suffocating on their own renditions of copied agony.

When I'm not driving myself crazy I fight hard against exasperation. Before long I'll dream of the ten o'clock wave. If nobody has come so far, what are the chances I'll ever walk out of here on my own terms?

After my third interview I was never asked for a bonus performance. It's hard to believe that, in my bedraggled state, I was convincing enough to rein in Panem from ripping itself apart. And yet the days keep passing with no rebels ever replacing the guards and avoxes performing their routines.

I hear no word, good or bad, of Katniss. For all I know she never got out of that arena. I wouldn't put it past Snow to have shown me a montage of fictive video feed, a pipe dream of Capitol tech-wizardry. Goodness knows, they've got enough footage of her to trifle with.

More often than not cold sweat lines my forehead at the implications of this. I might have sold my soul for a dead girl. And I know, as reckless as it sounds, I would do it again. Without batting an eye. I'd run the risk of plunging Panem into a replay of the Dark Days for even the faintest chance of buying Katniss acquittal.

And who knows? Perhaps it's her screams that wake me every night. We might just be acquaintances in this prison. The star-crossed lovers, separated for eternity, while Panem wrestles for freedom in a bizarre battle-royale.
Games seem like harmless pastime is a deteriorating effort. Where there was once macabre excitement at the turn of the key in the lock, I now simply go through the motions of taking responsibility for the charges against the hand that fed me.

“Peeta Mellark,” I begin with almost bored repetitiveness. “District Twelve. 12-A904-76.” Then I list the names of mother, father and two older brothers. All this before the guards have even reached me. They’ve drilled me good.

The ritual continues. I am handed the prosthetic. It’s too much of a nuisance to have to carry me around like a cripple, so they grant me this luxury whenever I am to leave the cell. That way I can walk into Hell on my own account.

We take the traditional route. Left, right, right. This part is always the same. The next junction determines whether I’m subject to more interrogation, or if it’s one of the rare circumstances I have the honor of meeting the elusive President Snow. I can’t say which one is worse.

We go left. Routine. A sigh escapes me - frustration, not relief. How many more ways can I plead for innocence?

The grip on my arm tightens. We come to an abrupt halt.

“What’s that?”

I can’t see or hear anything out of the ordinary. The guard to my left sniffs the air.

That’s when I notice too. Something between beer and hard boiled egg. I feel woozy, slightly sick to the stomach.

My good leg buckles.

“Shit!” yells the man to my right. “Gas!”

Run, I think. But I hit the floor before the message reaches my legs.

Fire. Back in the chariot, rolling down Victor’s Boulevard. Left and right the masses cheer. Up ahead the Presidential Mansion, President Snow at its head. We don’t wave this time. Eyes up front, serious expressions. Cinna’s outfits engulf us in flames. I take Katniss’ hand in mine, we raise our arms in unity. Triumph. Hail Snow, we doomed ones salute you!

I wake up gasping and gagging. Deafening sirens blare something about evacuation. The floor beneath my hands quakes. Far away the sound of an explosion.

My mind continues where it left off: Run!

From my left I hear a moan. One of the guards is waking up. Control over my body returns in bursts, yet my fingers effortlessly grasp at his throat. By the time I can stand, I’m the Victor With The Bloodless Hands no more. I precariously confiscate a handgun, but hope not having to use it. While tributes are trained in an array of weapons, firearms are not part of that arsenal. The alarm system advises me to practice any marksmanship on the run. To underline the severity of the situation red lights begin flashing overhead.

Another tremor shakes the building.
If I want to get out of here, now is the time.

I’m not sure it’s her until she turns to face me, baton dank from a fresh kill.

“Johanna?”

I remember this scene like a deja-vu, me coming up in that jungle clearing, finding her hunched over Brutus’ corpse. A cannon going off in the distance. Well, she still had hair back then.

“Where’s Katniss?” I ask now, as I did then.

Only this time, I find myself raising the gun. I can’t distinguish between friend or foe anymore. I’ve seen the tapes. Turncoat. They couldn’t have faked that too. I should have known. Katniss did. And now she's God knows where.

“Oh, please shoot me,” says Johanna provocatively, as if five months of prison haven't been enough to value life. “Been begging these fuckers for weeks now. They never crank up the voltage quite high enough though.”

“You betrayed us. Tried to kill her.”

“Oh, yeah? Really. They've been messing with your head a lot, huh?” She raises an eyebrow. “We’re in the same place in case you hadn’t noticed, genius.” She takes a step towards me. “You wanna sort out a personal vendetta, fine with me. But not now. Not here. And sorry, but this is gonna hurt.”

“Wha-“ I manage to turn around just in time to witness the butt of a rifle french-kissing me in the face.

That’s how I meet fellow inmate, Annie Cresta.

“I’m sorry about your nose,” says strawberry-haired Annie in the sweetest voice ever. At gunpoint. I swallow some of the blood that runs down my throat.

Johanna kicks my pistol away from me. “That little head-butt enough to bring you back to your senses? I’d rather postpone the reunion party if you don’t mind. Priorities, you know. Escape's high up on that list.”

The walls around us shake. “What’s happening?” I ask.

Johanna shrugs. “Sounds like the 76th Hunger Games to me. Wouldn’t that be a thing?”

I warily stare at the outstretched hand she offers me. “You coming now, or what?”

“Where to?” I ask.

“Anywhere,” says Annie and lowers the rifle. “Anywhere but here.”

I’m plenty sure Claudis Templesmith would have his share to say about a return of the Four-Seven-Twelve alliance and how the odds are stacked against it.
But fuck Claudius Templesmith.

“This way.”

Two guards are on our kill-list already. We’re enemies of the worst kind. Terrified, exhausted and with nothing to lose. The Capitol wanted us to be bloodthirsty victors. I hope we live up to the expectation.

Around us foundations crumble. In Twelve we learn that this is the moment you want to put as much distance between yourself and the mine as possible. Annie might say it’s time to leave the sinking ship. I have no idea what the equivalent of that would be for Seven.

“Here. Come on.”

Johanna swerves right into another cell. It’s identical to my own, apart from the man-sized hole in the back wall. Fire and freedom wait on the other side.

I look incredulously at my bald companion. “Don’t tell me you dug that yourself.”

“Oh, I wish. Believe me I tried.” She displays a set of nail-less fingertips. “Bomb went off. Had me dazed and deaf for a good while. When I came to everything had gone in the crapper.”

And yet she’s here with us and not long gone. Something tells me this is about more than a simple team-up for survival.

“It’ll be a free-for-all up there,” Annie warns as we listen to the booms and bangs outside.

I take a demonstrative step forward. It’s time we upgraded from pawns to players.

“Let’s join this game,” I say.

And so we step into the heart of war, and set a match to our souls.

Freedom, it’ll burn us to the bone.

I have only been to the Capitol on three occasions: the 74th, the Victory Tour and the Quell. My feelings spanned from intimidation over awe to repugnance, to near cardiac arrest over my impending fate. But always has there been some deranged admiration laced into all of this. The unique architecture with its off-beat patterns. The sky-scraping towers that can be seen miles before the train pulls into the city.

The Capitol, metropolis of Panem, blazes fiercely against a blood-red sun. A hovercraft whirs above us, herald of death. We dive for cover, lose debris flying around our heads. Guns go off to my left. I can barely see through the smog. My eyes clog with tears from the heat. Someone pushes against me.

“Get going!” Johanna calls.

We break into a run, aimless. Two blocks further a bomb explodes.

This is the Cornucopia, I think, we’re in the middle of the bloodbath!
Another arena, only this time it spans the entirety of the Capitol. And we’re not twenty-four, but hundreds, thousands maybe, fighting for our lives.

I try to stick to the girls, but find that months of physical inactivity haven’t been kind on my endurance. The flames licking the skyscrapers do the same to my lungs, and let’s not start about my stump. The prosthetic sits awkwardly. Slips a little with every step. Soon I’m not running, but limping. Johanna and Annie gain distance on me, while all around us the city gets razed to the ground.

I’m about to cry out for them to wait, when they suddenly rebound all on their own. Before I know it I’ve come to a stop as well, pressed against a wall. To make space for half a dozen people racing down the street. They’re on fire. I catch the unmistakable stench of bubbling skin as one swoops right past me, unable to scream because his lips have melted together.

“Peeta!”

One of them’s latched on to Annie, yowling in agony. I stumble to their aid. As soon as her attacker is on the ground we make a run for it, not daring to look back.

These howls of anguish follow us for a long time.

"Okay. One. Two. Three - Now!"

It takes our combined strength to relocate the ornate wardrobe. The door is blocked now. My muscles feel like jelly. Collapsed against the fancy furniture, I gulp for air as if the next attempt could be my last.

Johanna drags herself over to the window, peeking through the shutters. With the coast clear she slumps into the nearby futon.

I press my eyes shut. Last hour’s events are taking their toll. After months of sensory deprivation my body is overloaded with smells, sounds and visual info. My stomach has transferred to the upper levels of my throat.

Annie is less successful at keeping the contents of her belly in their destined location. But I'm too exhausted to mind the acrid smell that settles in the room. We’re used to way worse by now.

With two practiced motions I unlatch the prosthetic. The relief is immediate. Before being discharged from the hospital last year the Capitol doctors lectured me at length on the importance of proper maintenance. Hygiene needs to be impeccable. Potential pressure points need to be addressed immediately. Infection is my biggest enemy.

So far I’m doing a splendid job of following zero of the neatly listed requirements of my care sheet. I haven’t been allowed to shower since petitioning to Panem that revolution is not the way to go. Every pore of me screams defilement.

Annie rises to a four-legged stance and proceeds to crawl into the general direction of the bathroom. The door slams shut, allowing her to continue being miserable in the privacy of the washroom. It’s not like we’re worried about disturbing the owners of the flat. It seems like this entire complex is abandoned. No wonder with the upper floors missing altogether, courtesy of heavy bombing.
"How bad off are you?" Johanna asks.

Well, let's drop the sugarcoating. I'm at an all-time low. I'm so famished, I'm not even hungry. Pain is an invisible coat. I'm cold, miserable and exhausted beyond my capacities.

"Okay," I settle for in the end, because I'm still alive and that outbalances everything else. "What about you?"

Oozing scabs line the skin on her scalp, rough inscriptions of abuse by an uncaring hand. The whites of her eyes are light pink, sunken so far in their sockets it looks like someone dabbed their finger in coal dust and used her face as canvas.

"Gonna live," says Johanna and closes her eyes. “First time in a while that thought makes me happy.”

Annie, slightly less green, returns from the bathroom and collapses on the couch. I notice she’s barefoot. Soot and blood leave stains on the immaculate carpet.

"Okay," starts Johanna now that our merry crew of fugitives has assembled. Getting out of there was a stroke of luck, but we can’t ride that wave forever. Our next step might be our last one just the same.

“We need a plan,” I say, but my concern seems to be of secondary importance.

“How much did you tell them?” Johanna asks.

Annie sighs, massages her temples. “Just the obvious.”

Johanna nods. “Yeah. You got my part. Wasn't pretty. But I like my eyes where they are.”

“What are you talking about?” I say this in a tone coming from the epicenter of frustration I've hoarded since Katniss and I split up at the lightning tree. The reason we're here in the first place. Why I've endured interrogation after interrogation and had no answer to clubs and whips and needles. I've been accused of rebellions, uprisings and all other forms of heresy. But the only revolution I had was when I got picked up by that hovercraft, realizing that every person I thought I could trust had wantonly betrayed me. No. Not betrayed. That’s the wrong word. Discarded.

Annie is baffled my ignorance. Johanna chuckles in a quite disturbing way.

"You really don't know? Is it gonna be the whole story or just the highlights?" Not giving me a chance to respond she adds, "Because the short version is: First we've been screwed over by Thirteen. Then we've been fucked by the Capitol. Now we're only alive because of some crass leap of faith, with that bombing and all. And, uh... Panem seems to have gone down the drain while we enjoyed Happy Hour down in the dungeons. Questions?"

Unnumbered. Who was in on it? Why did nobody clue me in? Did Katniss know? Where is she? Is she safe? What about the others? Annie regards me with a sympathy reserved for lost puppies.

"It was better for you to know nothing," she says.

Well, great. Look how that one backfired.

"Snow had you under supervision," explains Johanna, a shabby excuse for all the trouble it's brought me. "We couldn't risk telling you."

"You can tell me now," I demand. I've kept secrets about a rebellion I didn't know existed in the
first place. Don't I deserve knowing what that silence was all about?

"Yeah, well..."

That's hardly the intro one would expect to the story of *How The Capitol Was Overthrown*.

"You can't be serious," I tell Johanna. Isn't it about time we played with open cards? I look at Annie for backing, a person I only knew from the rundown of the Reapings until she broke my nose an hour ago. Not a lot of support I can expect from her I guess.

Johanna clears her throat and I half anticipate some snarky brush-off. But she just holds her hand over her stomach and I realize everyone's long past the act we put up as victors. There's no place for intimidation, seduction or deception here. Stripped of the roles the Capitol strong-armed us into, we're back to bare bones honesty. Unknown terrain.

"Can we talk about it over dinner? I haven't seen food in over a week."

A laugh escapes me as I nod my head. Yeah, I guess I can live with that.

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*Gourmet to Go - Poulet Basquaise.* Ten’s finest poultry out of a can would have Effie Trinket drop over dead at the (non)display of table manners. Together we burn through noodle soup and beef stew, stretching our neglected bellies to their limits.

"So..." I say, lightheaded as my blood migrates to the hot spot that has become my digestion. Still, there's some wrinkles in this story that need to be flattened out.

"*District Thirteen?*"

And so I learn, over a hot cup of coffee, the story about Panem's forgotten district. Thirteen, it turns out, is not quite the rubble and ruins the Capitol wants us to believe. It’s heart beats strong beneath this facade.

The change of rules and subsequent double-win last year piqued Thirteen's curiosity enough to engage in an all-or-nothing gamble. That handful of berries and Katniss' embodiment as *The Girl On Fire* have stirred something dangerous in Panem. For the first time in almost a century there is the flicker of hope. When eventually the interviews for the Quell rolled around and we made the first step of unifying the districts, we set something in motion that could be the turning point in the oppression of a nation.

Plutarch Heavensbee, the head gamemaker, was in fact a sleeper planted by Thirteen. He sweet-talked the majority of districts into cooperation with the promise of political refuge should Katniss' safety be guaranteed until extraction. All was planned. The arena design, Beetee's wire, even the parachutes carrying food had been clues. Haymitch knew about everything.

"And it all looked like Happy End until shit hit the fan and Snow pulled the plug on our little act."

I recall the iron grip of the claw, pulling me out of the burning jungle. Little did I know at that time that I was far from safety.

"He must have realized something was wrong. There was a security sweep before we could all board the hovercraft," Annie says, narrating how the situation escalated in Mentor Central. "Those who weren't shot on the spot, well, the Training Center has a holding capacity none of us knew about."
“Wow.” It’s a lot to swallow at once. "And Katniss? Did she make it? What about Haymitch?"

"Sorry, kid." Johanna shakes her head. "All I know is that the three of us are still alive and kickin’. And if we wanna continue doing so, we better come up with a damn good plan and fast. It's getting dark out there and the Capitol’s no happy place at night."

We don’t fool ourselves. Going out at night is like deliberately placing your hands on top of a hot stove and then being surprised when you get burned. We’ve fortified the apartment to our best capabilities. Annie volunteers for the first shift, which I'm eternally grateful for. My eyelids are as heavy as the flour sacks in the bakery. I promise to relieve her in a few hours. Johanna manages to doze off in the middle of the conversation, leaving her last.

Annie offers me the couch and takes the chair to the window. For the first time in months I stretch out on something that isn't chilly concrete floor. My body shuts off the minute I hit the soft pillow.

I'm back in the arena. In the jungle. In the cave. Running. Captured. Strapped down before a row of vultures demanding my confession of treachery. I'm with Katniss in the train, comforting her and we laugh about the absurd color of Effie's hair. Katniss' favorite color is green, the nuance of my bruises two weeks after infliction. My brothers bake an enormous cake upon my return from the Games. I salivate at the memory of cherry pie on the days the guards forget to give me my ration of bread. The look of horror on my parents' faces when they see the prosthetic for the first time. The helplessness when the leg is taken from me, bereaving me of the last hope to escape.

I wake up gasping like a fish on land, Cato's ghost hand around my throat. My shirt is drenched in sweat and I need a moment to regroup. With receding trepidation I realize I'm not in the cell. I'm not in the arena. I'm definitely not at home. The room is dark but I can make out Johanna, curled into a fetal position, still asleep. In fact, so is Annie, her forehead propped against the window glass. With sleep a futile achievement, I decide I might as well take over from Annie.

Gently I brush against her shoulder. "Hey."

She's got my hand in a deadlock grip before her eyes have fully opened. Defense mechanisms don't stop, especially after you’ve been relying on them for months.

"Sorry," says Annie and lets me go when she realizes I'm posing no harm.

"It's okay." I point towards the sofa. "Get some rest."

Before long I find myself tapping mindlessly on the windowsill, trying to find a rhythm to keep me from zoning out. Half the skyline is without electricity. Hovercrafts soar through the air, dark fantasy creatures with iron wings. The streets around us are purged clean. And yet some indescribable force draws me to the battleground. With every cry I hear, I wonder: Could it be hers? Is she there, shooting unerring arrows at assailants? Is she looking for me? Does Gale have her back?

I don't know what I hope to achieve by torturing myself like this, but when Johanna comes to take over guard duty I have exhausted myself with worry about someone I'm not sure is even still alive.

I wake up to a ray of sun purposely blinding me. Ugh. A truck the size of what they use to collect Eleven's crop merrily commutes through my head. I feel like Haymitch after an all-nighter at the Hob; hungover, sluggish and with limbs made of lead.
My companions must already be awake. I follow the sound of muffled voices to the kitchen, door left slightly ajar. The conversation ceases as I step inside.

"Oh. Hey. You're up."

The table is clustered with medical supplies. Annie is just finishing a bandage on Johanna’s right arm. “You’re good,” she declares. Johanna pulls down the sleeve, then turns to me.

"Shower's working. How about you check it out before they bomb the water lines? We laid out some clothes for you."

I mutter a thanks and leave the girls to sort through their issues.

In the bathroom I spot the towel rack and promised wardrobe. A flashy, neon-orange dress shirt and some comparatively dull brown pants. Disgusted, I throw my soiled clothes on top of Annie and Johanna's discarded uniforms. To say I'm dirty underneath is an affront to the word. But with the press of a few buttons I enjoy the luxury of vanilla-scented water.

Time to size up. I'm prepared for the worst confronting the mirror. I'm not let down. Had someone shown me a picture of myself in the state I was in, I wouldn't have recognized that person. The man looking back at me is twenty years older, a kind estimate. A scraggy beard is clotted with blood from my broken nose. I catch a glimpse of the whip-marks on my back. Rainbow bruises all over. I've lost an alarming amount of weight. Would make someone from the Seam look like an overfed first-classer. That's what you get when you try to double-deal the Capitol. It ropes you right back in, settling the score.

Sifting through the cabinets I look for a razor. The beard has to go, no question. Coming up empty I give a frustrated growl. Don't these people shave? I know of the chemicals employed during the Games to inhibit hair growth, but can’t imagine they’re being used on a daily basis.

Never mind. I'll get dressed, get a knife from the kitchen and do it the old way. With my new pants about halfway up I make a vertical leap at Annie's sudden outburst.

"Peeta! Peeta!" Her voice is eerily reminiscent of 4 o’clock’s jabberjays. "Peeta!"

I burst through the door, prepared to fend for our lives. What I find are Annie and Johanna in a state of bewilderment, staring wide-eyed at a hologram that just auto-started on TV.

I almost drop my goddamn pants.

On screen we're introduced to the debris of what used to be a factory of sorts. The camera zooms in through the rising smoke. My breath hitches. There she is. A girl with a braid and arrows on her back.

Resolved, a sooty Katniss Everdeen proclaims to the viewers, "I have a message for President Snow..."

Hand outstretched I step closer, grasping thin air as I try to take a hold of the girl that conquered my mind from day one. The hologram flickers and Annie pulls me back before I jinx this little spectacle.

We watch the scene unfold. Katniss, clad in tar black battle armor, points to a smoldering Capitol hovercraft in the background.

"Do you see that? Fire is catching. And if we burn, you burn with us!"
Cut. A golden mockingjay appears, a replica of Katniss’ district token, breaking from its cage. Bold capital letters animate to *JOIN THE REBELLION NOW*. Then the screen fades to black. The holo terminates.

Stupefied silence sets in.

*And that*, I think, *is how a revolution is made.*
Chapter 2

She’s alive. Alive. Alive. Ringing in my brain on repeat long after the transmission has stopped.

Anticlimactically, Johanna summons us to breakfast. Although I follow the migration into the kitchen I can’t bring myself to do more than stare at the bowl of steaming oatmeal before me. My stomach is doing back flips in anticipation at being fed, but my mind has a completely different point at issue.

“I need to get to her.”

Johanna slurps on her gruel. “Who?”

“What?” I point towards the living room. “Where were you? Katniss. Who the fuck else?”

“Peeta…” Annie says, sounding like my mother scolding us on using bad language.

“Peeta. Dear. That video.” Johanna puts the spoon down, laces her fingers and looks like she’s about to give me a lecture on trivialities. “That video means nothing. Forget about it. Wipe it from your memory.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m sorry to be the one shitting on your rainbows, but this is the Capitol. This is what the Capitol does.” She snaps her fingers. “Takes about three seconds for a mediocre Three tech to whip up. I’m not saying it’s not real - but it sure smells trap to me.”

“But the message,” I counter. “The rebels-”

“Oh, the rebels!” Now she laughs. “The ones who dealt out freedom tickets and then hauled ass when things got sketchy? Them you mean? Who didn’t lift a finger for us in five months after preaching up and down about the holy grail? Because those rebels can go hang as far as I’m concerned. Maybe Katniss made it out of the arena, alright. But do you know where she is? Who she’s with? Who says that feed was live transmission in the first place? How can you be sure that a bomb didn’t pulverize her the minute someone yelled ‘Cut!’?”

The last word makes me twitch. I picture Katniss, forced at the lives of her family, to pose as a symbol of war. Normalcy for the Capitol. And Thirteen? A wild card. We don’t know who we’re dealing with. And so far they really haven’t been very forthcoming.

But that, all the more, sparks my initiative. “If they hold her against her will,” regardless of who they are, “we need to - I need to do something.” To save her. My sole purpose it seems, since my name card was drawn from that bowl last year.

“Oh, spare me that star-crossed bullshit!” Johanna says. “Open your eyes! This isn’t the right time
to play the tragic hero. Whether she’s storming the Presidential Mansion or lying in a coffin beneath it, it’s all the same to me - and to Annie and to you. Look at us. We’ve paid our dues. Altruism comes after survival. Eat up, pack up and get the hell out before this place goes to the dogs is what we’re gonna do.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Oh really? And we’ll go where, exactly?” The Capitol stretches as far as the eye can see. Beyond that are the districts, the wild zones, and a continental war waiting for us.

“We’ll go to Seven,” says Johanna resolutely, as if the plan is cast in stone.

I cross my arms, defiant. “And what will we do in Seven?”

Johanna rolls her eyes, a parent losing patience with an especially dense child. “Hide, Peeta. Wait until things calm down. Reevaluate once they have.”

She doesn’t knock my socks off with this proposal. “Hunker down in your Victor’s House and hope everybody’s… going to turn a blind eye on us?”

“No, dimwit. Victor’s Glade hasn’t ever been a place of safety and it certainly won’t have turned into one now. We’ll head north. Way north. There’s nothing to be had there but shrub and dirt.”

“Sounds lovely,” I say. An enchanting way to kick the bucket in the backcountry. Mountains and miles away from my actual goal: reuniting with Katniss.

“I don’t think this is a good idea,” I say. I want to speak my mind, but I don’t want to do it alone in the future. Johanna’s been a valuable asset in the arena already. I haven’t watched Annie’s Games but she must have her merits too, or else she wouldn’t be standing here. I need them both if I want to make it through the apocalypse. And they know it.

“Well, let’s hear it then,” prompts Johanna. “Your master scheme.”

Problem is I don’t have one. You’d think months of captivity were enough opportunity to fantasize about escape, but I’m drawing on empty. Neither of my daydream scenarios had revolved around me making a getaway without any outside help.

“We need to stick together. Whatever we do.” Forge an underdog alliance of Four-Seven-Twelve. Three against the Capitol. Three against the world. Pipe dreams.

Annie nods at my proposal. I realize she’s not very vocal, where the likes of Johanna take up the entire room with their opinion. Still, I might win her over if I play it clever. And two against one will put a democratic end to this discussion.

I aim at a spot I’m confident hits bullseye. “He might be with her, you know.” Those jabberjays didn’t steal her voice for nothing.

Annie’s eyes widen.

“Don’t play it dirty, Mellark.” Johanna makes a cut-off motion with her hand. “Don’t you drag Finnick into this. You have no idea.”

I shrug, but back off. It’s a low hit, I admit, but desperate times call for desperate measures. I’ve done what I wanted. The seed of hope is planted. Patience will let it grow.

By nature victors are proficient judges of character. It’s an essential skill to pull through the Games and it becomes invaluable once you’re out of the arena. Johanna, most of all, has a personal history with trickery. She sees through my little farce with ease.
“We talked about this, Annie,” she says and Annie nods tentatively.

I lick my lips, leery. “Talked about what?”

“About this. About chasing ghosts. Hopes. Call it whatever.”

“Not ghosts. People. Real people.” I look at Annie. She understands. She has to understand.

“How many did they make you watch?”

Johanna keeps turning the conversation to my disadvantage. The ratio of knowledge is distributed unfairly. “Who made me watch what?”

“Back there, in the dungeons. How many people were you forced to watch? How many victors did you see?”

The answer is brutally simple. Zero. “None,” I say, dreading what’s to come. I only saw Avoxes and guards, and briefly, Portia’s prep team. After that they kept me in isolation, with no one for company but my own destructive thoughts.

Annie says, “They arrested many of us. Jupiter and Copper both. Sal Cardew from Six. And I think Bobbin Milston from Eight.” Her gaze drops to the floor, disgusted. “They executed Elmo. He was the other Four mentor. There was nothing I could say to make them stop.”

Johanna continues, in a softer cadence than before. “Enobaria got her golden teeth ripped out, one by one. You’d think for all the loyalty she gave them over the years they’d spare her some of it. Put her right through the ringer. She knew nothing. But she kept silent till the end and that’s something I’ll deem highly of her.”

My stomach revolts. I feel remorse flare up for these people. Most names don’t even bear faces in my memory, yet somehow I’m invisibly bound to them, my comrades in fate.

“Shouldn’t we go back for them?” It’s the last thing I want to do, go back to those horrors. But we’re of a kind, and our kin is on the verge of extinction.

Johanna simply shakes her head. “Dead or dying. Martyrs of the revolution. Nothing we can do for them. Face it, kid. It’s you and her and me now. We’ve got no friends out there.”

“That’s all we’ve got?”

I look down at our booty and try to figure out how these ragtag scraps are supposed to get us to Seven. The exploit is disheartening.

Johanna offers shower curtains to build tarps and groundcloths with. Thin material not made for this purpose. Annie shows me three blankets to keep us warm. Too heavy, and the cotton will soak in the first rain. I present a map of Panem, stolen from its place above a firepit. It’s ornamental more than accurate.

We compile a basic kitchen that will cook the rice and noodles we’ve scrambled together. The food that’s perishable or too heavy to be carried out we stack on a different pile, reserved for a final meal before we make our move.

At least we managed to upgrade our clothes and shoes. Each of us now owns a coat to keep against the winter cold. Annie sews makeshift packs while Johanna and I pick the best knives.
By the time we’re done with our preparations the sun sets. I’m dog tired.

In the distance the melody of war reaches a crescendo. We watch, enthralled, as flames embrace the Presidential Manor.

*I hope you burn.*

At the crack of dawn we’re ready to leave the sinking ship that is the Capitol.

The only problem with that is we’re not the only ones having hatched such a splendid idea.

The knife feels disturbingly right in my grip as I watch half a dozen Capitolites work their way down the street. The three of us are huddled together in a shadowy nook, doing our best to avoid confrontation. I hope Capitol people are as superficial concerning their surroundings as they are about seemingly all other aspects of life.

Family, perhaps close friends, a motley bunch of all ages. A woman in neck-breaking heels carries a toddler in her arms. Her partner, equipped with a pan for defense, sports a lightly green tan like one of Katniss’ prep team. Only with him I’m pretty sure it’s not makeup.

Johanna pulls on my sleeve, motions for me to tuck away the blade. Metal reflects.

Commotion from the other side of the street. A second group appears. Rebels, I think. All armed, a red bandana as distinctive mark. Five of them surround the Capitolites, who surrender instantly. Unspotted, the three of us remain silent observers.

Rifles are cocked, hands raised.

“We have nothing to do with this,” pleads the woman holding the baby.

One of the rebels barks, “Neither did I, until the Peacekeepers set my village on fire!”

The woman’s partner takes a protective step to shield her. “She’s innocent. Let her go. The baby…”

“Innocent!” parrots another. Laughter makes the round. “My daughter was innocent! Reaped three years ago. How many reruns of her death have you watched? How the mutts tore her apart! Justice I say!”

Johanna elbows me in the ribs, gestures that it’s time to go. Annie is halfway around the corner.

I look back one more time, but there is nothing we can do. If this were a Game, six cannons would sound in the sky.

Progress comes at a snail’s pace. We hide more often than not, avoiding confrontation. As much as I had hoped to break through to rebel forces, I’m now reevaluating this decision. Who doesn’t kill gets killed, no matter what side they’re on. That puts us in a bad spot for making friends.

To crown it all somebody booby-trapped the damn streets. We watch, stupefied, as a side alley auto-pulverizes. The buildings literally melt, cooking anyone who is unfortunate enough in the emerging concrete goo. Thankfully, as with the twelve wedges in the Quell arena, the contraptions seem to be contained to their respective zones.

I think of Mags and the acid fog, of how we lost the female morphling to the monkey mutts.
“Let’s try not to trigger them,” I say, which is easier said than done.

Not an hour later we duck behind rainbow colored debris after Annie initiates a machine gun salve that turns everything in its range into Ten-style cheese. I shield my eyes against broken glass. After we play hooky with carnivorous mosquito muttations and manage to avoid a mechanical worm spewing acid Johanna tries to boost our deteriorating enthusiasm.

“At least there’s no soldiers here.”

For three blocks we haven’t caught a glimpse of others, be it Peacekeepers, civilians or rebels. Well, they have a valid reason for deserting this part of town. Left high and dry it’s almost like the Capitol developed a life of its own. And it doesn’t like trespassers. At all.

I almost knock into Annie when she jerks to a standstill.

“You smell that?”

Purple pebble stones at my feet begin to quiver. Soon, the whole ground shakes.

Johanna, wide-eyed, beats me to it. “Run!”

Behind us a huge black mass sprouts from nowhere, swallowing buildings whole. I don’t know what it’s supposed to do. Suffocate us. Burn us. Etch the skin off our bones. Annie grips my wrist and we’re racing. Screaming because we’ll never outdo the thundering wave behind us.

“There! Quick!”

We dash for a neon pink streamer, cordoning off a manhole for maintenance.

Johanna pushes me over the edge. “Get in there!” I half fall, half climb down the metal ladder, catching Annie who slips on the second to last rung. Johanna plunges us in pitch darkness as she pulls back the cover. Above us the death wave wreaks havoc.

We wait for a perceived eternity until the silence begins to drive me crazy. “It ought to be over by now.”

“I’ll check,” offers Johanna and we listen to the clank clang clank of her climbing.

Then comes the sobering verdict. “It doesn’t budge.”

“What?”

Thumping. “I can’t move it. There’s no way. It’s stuck.”

“No. Get down. Let me try.” I’m not saying I’m stronger than her, but I’ve carried flour sacks all my life.

“That you?” She guides my hand to the rung. I can’t see a thing. “It’s ten up. Don’t hit your head.”

Of course that’s what I do, but not even my thick skull will move the hatch. Whatever that gunk was it must have solidified on top. The more I try to get us out, the harder it is to keep panic at bay. Claustrophobia is the doom of many a miner.

I try to keep my voice calm. “We have to find another way.”
A needle in a haystack. In a blind man’s world.

I can’t tell if Annie’s laughing or crying.

It takes Johanna a while to come up with what she’s looking for. “Who’s got the lighter?”

I pass the instrument of salvation. Three, four sparks and the candle burns. “We should save the other one. For later.” Three grim faces nod in agreement.

With a new light source we scout out the environment. Sewer. One maintenance walkway, rails separate it from the drainage water. Every so often an unlabeled junction. A labyrinth beneath Hell.

My initial hope of using another manhole as exit turns out to be a dead end. We need special equipment to loosen some bolts holding down the cover. That knowledge costs us half a candle.


Our options are limited. “We keep going.”

“That light goes out, we’re blind.”

I bite my lip. “I know.”

We’ll be dead by then, too.

I decide I hate mazes. Eternally grateful that neither of my arenas was shaped like a labyrinth, unlike Kern Edenthaw’s, 44th, where most of the deaths were a combination of thirst and starvation because the tributes couldn’t find their way around. Untheatrical and somewhere among the Top 10 Worst Games Of All Time.

Annie’s leading, holding on to the last quarter of our second candle. Melted wax coats her hand.

“Left or right?”

By majority vote we decide on a route and Johanna marks the wall in case we have to backtrack. Which I pray we don’t, or we’ll have to do it in the dark.

Sooner rather than later, as with all good things coming to an end, so does our walkway. The adjacent sewage water gushes into gloom. Impossible to tell where it’s going.

“We could try,” says Annie, but doesn’t sound too crazy about her own idea.

Johanna interjects. “What? No. No, no. There’s gotta be another way.”

“These things need to drain somewhere. Could be our way out.”

“Could be our deaths. Drowning in there.”

“It’s our best lead. Turning back now… we’d start at zero.”

“katnisss…”

“Don’t start with that now!” Johanna groans in exasperation.
Only it wasn’t me. I haven’t said a word. And then it comes again, sounding at first like steam hissing from an overtaxed pipe. But then it closes in, grows louder. Echoing through the tunnel, heralding a name that will be etched into the history books of Panem.

Annie whispers what all of us fear. “Mutts…”

I don’t know what’s coming for us, but if I ever find out it’s going to be too late anyway. We can’t fight monsters at candlelight. Another decision that’s been taken off our minds.

I grab what remains of our light source from Annie, gesture to the sewer. “That’s it. We’re taking the water way.”

Johanna, confounded, watches Annie lowering herself into the gutter. She mumbles something I don’t catch, because the katnisss shrieks are growing ever louder.

Then I remember something. “Can you swim?” I ask Johanna. The arena is no proof of it. We all had flotation devices sewn to our belts back then so Four wouldn’t snatch the trophy before the first commercial break. Katniss and Finnick taught me how to dog-paddle that afternoon we laid Beetee’s trap. I’m proficient enough in the basics not to drown in waist deep water and I automatically assumed Johanna must be too. A premature assessment?

But Johanna nods, albeit stiffly. “I can swim,” she says.

That’s enough for me. Focus back on Annie, I inquire on the situation. Judging by the echoing calls I think we’re hitting the final countdown.

“It’s not a riptide, but it’s strong. Can’t see where it goes though,” says Annie, up to her shoulders in the sewage water. She gives us some last minute advice. “Legs first, keep your arms to your sides. Hold the air in your chest, don’t puff your cheeks. Eyes closed and try to relax. I’ll see you on the other side.”

An upsetting round of katnisss dismisses her. I prompt Johanna to follow, but she just turns to me, ash-faced. I don’t remember ever seeing her so terror-stricken. Her bottom lip trembles when she talks.

“Can’t go in there, Peeta. Just. Can’t.” Perhaps with more light I would have seen the dampness to her eyes. She swallows, dry. “You go. I’ll find… another way. Yeah.”

At first I think she’s putting me on, it’s such a bizarre proposition. I point to the rungs leading down. “Get down there,” I instruct firmly.

“No. I won’t. Not again.”

I take a step towards her. “There’s no choice. They’re coming.” Irritated I add, “Don’t be stupid!”

She slaps my hand away. “I’m not going! Peeta! No!”

Under normal circumstances I pride myself for my knack on reading people, on playing to their or my advantage. But with katnisss on the prowl and Johanna on the verge of a breakdown for inexplicable reasons there’s no time for psychoanalysis.

It’s over before it really begins, because Johanna banked on much, but obviously not on my settling the issue with brute force. I listen to her plump collision with the water, some wriggling and splashing, but her cries are soon drowned out by the undertow of the current.
The candle, a casualty of our dispute, is nowhere to be found. I’m alone in the pitch-blackness.

Water gushes and my heart pounds as I’m at long last reunited with katnissss.

What makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on edge is the smell. Sweet and fragrant, like perfume. Overpowering. The smell of roses.

Snow.

’A lack of common sense usually ends in some heroic feat,’ scolds President Snow on our first meeting. ‘True love is sacrifice,’ he adds with a sneer. And then offers me the opportunity to repent.

I cry out, overtrumping the other voices. I’m back in the cell. Jabberjays sing in my ear until they peck my drumheads bloody. Avoxes bring rosebuds instead of food. I beg for absolution, for a verdict, for an end. Guards, judges, ministers. Guilty! Guilty! Guilty!

Something slimy, slippery climbs up my leg. Death-breath on my neck. In the darkness my mind puts a face to the rose-monsters. But it can’t be real, even if they cry her name.

A row of teeth sinks into my leg, enamel against synthetic. The prosthetic gives out, I topple over, head first into the wet waste.

Katnissss yearns for me even as the drift swallows me deeper into its Capitol belly.

On the brink of drowning time loses all meaning. Disoriented and depleted I almost forfeit my chance of being saved and can barely hold on to the hand that juts out for me.

I nearly pull Annie back into the water instead of her hauling me out. Coughing and gagging I crawl on land. But there’s no time for respite.

Annie yanks me to my feet. “I need your help. Right now.”

I have just enough time to realize we’re outside until my gaze finds our third companion.

“What’s happening to her?!”

I’ve never seen something like it before. Stiff as a board, Johanna’s on the ground, limbs contracted unnaturally. Bloody froth bubbles from blue lips, jaws clenched, eyes rolled up. She groans, or perhaps it’s just air leaving her windpipe, because honestly I’m not sure she’s even breathing.

“Is she dying?” Annie cries.

I swallow the impulse of telling her no, no, it’s going to be fine. But honestly I don’t know.

I shake Johanna's arm, grab her at both shoulders. Slap her across the cheek.

Unresponsive. We turn her over to the side so she won’t choke.

I look at Annie. “Can you do what Finnick did to me? In the arena?” That forcefield jammed my heart for a minute. Finnick restarted it. Perhaps Johanna needs something like that too.

But before Annie can perform Four’s magic trick all the tension leaves Johanna’s body. Shallow breathing sets in, hands begin to quickly and rhythmically spasm. Then that stops too and her
eyelids droop and I’ve barely escaped a heart attack of my own from the fear of it all. The whole show lasted less than a minute.

I nudge her shoulder. “Johanna? Can you hear me?”

It’s not the response I want, but I get a drowsy groan and an uncoordinated hand gesture. Like a person waking from heavy sedation. Annie inspect her mouth, draws a finger across her molars. Johanna doesn’t, or can’t, oppose.

“Bit her tongue. Nothing worse, I think.”

I sit back, draw a hand through my soaked hair. Then I admit, “She didn’t want to go in the water. I don’t know. You think that caused it?”

Annie’s expression reveals that water and seizures don’t add up in her equation. “I’ve never seen her like this. I mean, I haven’t been to the Capitol a lot, but. People talk. Finnick would have said something. I’m sure.”

Johanna mumbles something, but neither me or Annie understand.

“Let’s give her a moment,” says Annie.

“Yeah,” I say, although I don’t think Johanna’s going to be functional in such a short time. I look at the water, ill at ease.

A moment might be just enough for katnisssss to catch up.

We must be in what’s one of the Capitol’s waste disposals. A place with mountains of trash, garbage in every form and stage of decomposition imaginable. The odor is an imposition. But all coins have two sides and as revolting as this place may be it doesn’t seem to hold strategic value for either party involved in the war.

So we hunker down between disused electronic appliances, and I’m trying to establish a pecking order for all the dangers and enemies we’ve accumulated since leaving the apartment.

“Can you just stop for a minute?” Annie asks. I’ve been pacing for the last fifteen minutes and thanks to Snow’s rose-monsters munching on my fake ankle the prosthetic now makes clicking noises with every step. To Annie’s defense, it’s really annoying.

“Sorry,” I say, and resist the urge to keep going. I turn to Johanna, who’s regained enough consciousness to call me a plethora of names already but technically still looks like a corpse. “How are you?”

Leaning against a broken fridge Johanna has her head in her hands. “Like an axe goes through my eye and out the back.”

“You scared us,” I say. “What was that?”

Johanna sighs, kneads her temples. “Seizure. Guess it was pretty?”

I snort, now irritated. “You knew it was going to happen?” I hate being left in the dark when a withheld piece of information could cost me my head. If Johanna had cramped up while we were still down there at the mercy of katnisssss we could all be dead by now.

“As soon as you pushed me underwater, yeah. Tried to warn you. But you had to be an asshole.”
“Well you can thank this asshole for saving your life,” I retort and start pacing again. “Listen, we’ve got to start being honest with each other. There’s enough unforeseen shit happening as it is. At least between the three of us I want to be fair and square. No more secrets.” I give them both the look. Who knows what can of worms Annie’s got to open. I’m done with handing out trust without cashdown first.

“Cool it, okay?” says Johanna. “It’s not like we’ve been best friends forever so I’ll come sob my heart out on your shoulder over the things keeping me up at night. I couldn’t know you’d just fucking knock me over. I would have told you.”

“When? When you cramped up like a charley horse? Because that was kind of a late notice.”

Annie attempts to puff the situation. “Let’s all take a deep breath. Peeta, back off. Johanna, you do owe us an explanation.”

Eventually Johanna resigns. “It started a couple weeks ago…” she tells us. The dungeon personnel was irked by the lack of enemy intel and pressure from the big cheese continually increased. Unfortunately, so did their creativity. Johanna mentions electricity and water and a combination of both and even though she doesn’t quote it chapter and verse I can work out the rest.

"So at one point they dunked me in this tub and it started right away, without them even having the chance to flip the switch. Everyone thought it was awfully funny. Doesn’t work all the time, but I guess it cut down the utility bill somewhat. It’s not always this bad either, but it’s not like I can tell beforehand.”

“Is there anything we can do?” asks Annie.

Johanna shrugs. “Don’t think so. Gotta ride it out. Perhaps it’ll just pass with time.”

But I can only think of the map of Panem, and how many rivers there are to cross.

By sundown we’re on the move again, eager to recover lost time. By some twist of fortune the sewer canal washed us right up at the city border, where we’re now taking on the long ascent - the only way out other than the tunnels for Panem Interrail. Based on some ancient city of the old world the Capitol is built at the foot of seven hills, making it almost impenetrable to outside attacks. Not only is climbing the hills blood, sweat and tears, but each peak hosts colossal defense guns, automated weaponry designed by Three ingenuity. Kill on sight. We’ll cross that bridge when we get there.

When darkness makes it impossible to find secure footing I call for a halt. Unsurprisingly there are no objections. For safety reasons we skip the fire. Everything but the rice is soaked enough and to spare. I wring out my clothes and blanket and prepare for a chilly night.

“Well, look at that,” says Johanna and refers to our spectacular panorama. “Looks like someone tore the lid off and left Hell open.”

I wonder how many days it will take for the Capitol to stop burning. If I even want the fire to cease.

“I hope we’ll never have to go back again,” says Annie.

That night I dream of Johanna, tied to the lightning tree by Beetee’s wires, of Annie, telling me she’ll see me on the other side before being swept away by the 10 o’clock wave and of Katniss on
the beach. ‘Stay with me,’ she says. My lips are just forming her name (katnissss) when her fingers lock tightly around my throat.

I come to, paralyzed with terror. The sun is up. So is a rifle, and I’m looking right into its muzzle.

“Don’t move, son,” comes a voice from the other end of the gun. “You just got yourselves into a lot of trouble.”

Chapter End Notes

From the frying pan into the oven, yeah?
Comments are morale boosters for our three heroes. Who's your fav?
The plasticuffs dig painfully into my wrists, sending pins and needles to my fingertips. I’m urged to get to my feet and fall into formation behind Johanna and Annie. Great. From smoke to smother.

Resistance at this point is futile. We’re hopelessly outnumbered. Six adversaries, armed to the tooth. Our own weapons have been confiscated right away.

I stare at the red bandana slogging beside me. Hardly an upgrade to the grey ‘P’ stamped on Peacekeeper uniforms delegating me between torture chambers not a week ago.

“Where are you taking us?” I ask. A legitimate question. Johanna, walking ahead of me, gives me a warning glower. Don’t get us into more trouble than we’re already in. I know, I know. I get that. But if we’re about to stroll into another rendition of Hell, I want to know where that’ll go down.

The guard, whose rifle I examined in detail earlier, says, “Back to camp. Chief’s gonna decide what to do with you Capitol dogs.”

I freeze in my tracks at the insinuation, immediately becoming the target of six guns. “We’re not from the Capitol,” I clarify. Nevermind the flashy wardrobe. Especially after the refreshment in the sewers we have to smell more offending than the worst Seam scum. Johanna’s shorn head isn’t a fashion statement. My intonation isn’t Capitol, it’s because I have a bloody nose.

“Keep going,” prods the man, hardly convinced. “Doesn’t matter where you’re from. If you’re not from the Capitol, you’re deserters from the districts. Same to me, really. Now quit talking, that makes it easier for everyone.”

Unlike in the commercials preaching Capitol safety, the enormous defense weaponry doesn’t pulverize us on sight. Automatic guns twice the size of a grown man remain quiescent - miraculously shut down. An inquiry as to the whys and hows remains unanswered. For better or worse I’m coerced back into silence.

At least that gives me the opportunity to ponder strategies for our arrival at rebel camp. Nobody seems to have caught on to who we really are. I bet they wouldn’t escort us with a rifle dug between our shoulder blades if they knew they had three Victors with them. Thing is, we look nothing like our Quarter Quell posters. Not getting to shave off that beard suddenly pays off. For once I admit looking like a vagrant has its merits. Until we figure out where our self-appointed hosts’ loyalty lies I want to keep a low profile.

The camp, situated on the other side of the hill, is a miscellany of tents and tarps and provisory amenities. Grey jumpsuits dominate the scene, busy bees trying to impose law and order on an otherwise desolate chaos. The Capitol’s silver eagle flies its banner in the wind. It’s painted over with a striking red mockingjay. I rein in my anticipation.

We’re chaperoned to a section cordoned off for newcomers where our handcuffs are removed. A dozen or so armed soldiers nip thoughts of a breakout in the bud.

“Your arm,” urges a pale woman in a nasal tone. Indoctrinated by two Games I hold out my hand
as requested, half expecting her to implant me with another tracker. The procedure remains minimally invasive. An eight digit number now glows on the inside of my forearm.

“What’s that?” I ask, drawing a finger over 02D00643.

“Protocol,” the woman answers a little miffed. Probably gets that question every time. She waves me through. “Next, please.”

Annie and Johanna get their own numbers before we’re shepherded off to another station. “Names and districts, please,” a man behind a computer screen demands. When he sees our clothes his expression contorts in antipathy. “Or I guess I’ll just put a C for Capitol.”

“We’re not Capitolites!” I growl, fuming at the renewed humbug. How can these people be so superficial?

Johanna pushes me back with another of those thank-you-for-fucking-it-up glares, then unanticipatedly puts on the sweetest, innocuous face as she turns back to the clerk. I could puke.

“My name’s Aza, that’s my brother Alder. And his wife Lilac. Ivory. District 7.”

I exchange a bemused glance with my newly-wed other half, who seems to be as perturbed over these updated family ties as me. It’s enough for the clerk though, who sends us onward. I feel a subliminal message of mass processing.

“Men to the right, women to the left. Please discard all clothes in the designated baskets. A new wardrobe will be issued after the decontamination shower.”

I risk a glance at Johanna, who takes on the color of the washed out towels given to us. Annie nudges her onward though and I’m kept in suspense about how that one will play out. My own shower leaves me sodden with chlorine, which under the circumstances is a more agreeable body odor than sewer stink. A grey jumpsuit completes the picture. Funny how only the color of my wardrobe distinguishes me from the previous five months. I wouldn’t be surprised if our next destination were to be a roomy cell. And you’ll talk, boy, believe me. Sooner or later you’ll talk.

There’s no incident with the girls. They emerge, now uniformly grey, and we face our last station. A pinprick later someone informs me I’m clean, whatever that’s supposed to mean. I just showered after all.

“Follow me, please,” another says. I can’t help but begin to be slightly annoyed by this pretend politesse. Four troopers also feel addressed by the offer and so we all trudge through camp until we halt inside a solitary tent. Our guide and the guards park outside.

“What a way to burst my bubble.

Johanna traipses the tent opening like a caged animal. If she keeps this pace I estimate she’ll have dug us a way out by morning. The situation is enervating, the tension within the forcefield reaching disconcerting levels.
We’ve been here for hours. Ignored. Probably monitored, every move dissected and analyzed. Another familiar scenario. Any moment now my district number and name could crackle from the speakers and I’ll get my chance to sway the Gamemakers into gifting me a high training score.

Annie hums a foreign melody. Not displeasing, but I’d rather have her being silent. My nerves are raw.

“Unbelievable,” Johanna mutters. Hard to say what she’s referring to. Too many things have gone belly-up. Rebels or not, we’re back to where we started from. Held against our will, bereft of information, at the mercy of our captors. I wouldn’t put it past Snow to have set all of this up. The bombing. The escape. My inauguration into the rebel plot. And now the recapture. A ploy to finally make us talk. And then back into the dungeons. Thank you for fulfilling your statutory duty for your country. Will someone dump the keys now?

I’m jostled from my conspiracy theory by Johanna’s grinding halt.

“Fucking finally.” She sighs in exasperation before turning to us, pokerface back on for the public. “Eyes and ears. First loophole, we jump.”

I’m determined to score high this time around.

Another trek through camp, approaching the biggest establishment. Unlike the crippled Capitol banners, this tent sports District Thirteen’s trademark: a radioactive trefoil symbol, captioned D13. Classy, with how their official industry is supposed to be graphite mining. Apparently someone forgot to mention the nuclear merchantry in school books.

We’re led inside where we’ll receive a chance to plead our case. Half a dozen jumpsuits stew over a table cramped with maps and holos. Our allotted supervisor presents the situation. Three individuals, supposedly from Seven, picked up on the northern Capitol border. No database sync. Doesn’t sound very convincing to me, and I barely understand half of what he’s saying.

A middle-aged woman surveys us closely before nodding to the attendant.

“I’ll take it from here, Lieutenant.” And to the others. “We’re done for the day, thank you.”

As the tent clears I realize Annie and Johanna have all but ceased breathing.

The woman clears her throat.

“ You had better be ghosts.”

“Bloody hell,” is Johanna’s roundup of the situation. She chuckles, but there’s nothing funny about it. “You of all people.”

I engage my memory, draw a blank. Easily six feet tall, muscular build, short, blonde hair. Out of the ordinary, yet still anonymous. My mind takes a shot in the dark, but it’s way of a blind guess. Thirteen’s President so close to the enemy’s lair?

The woman presses a button on a nearby remote. “Initiate Safebox.”

A forcefield envelops the room, shutting us off from the outside. My hand automatically reaches for my belt, but only wraps around a ghost knife. They stripped us of weapons, I forgot. However I’m the only one cowed by this spectacle. Annie and Johanna visibly relax. So, in fact, does our host.
“Brutus and Baria?”

At last the penny drops. I remember the tape, one of the 73 Effie sent us per express mail after the grueling Quell announcement. We watched a lot of Games in preparation back then, so I can’t quite recall the number. Just that it was an old one, even before the 50th, Haymitch’s debut. A generation ago. We’re standing before another victor. Lyme, District Two.

“Got Brute in the arena,” says Johanna slowly, as if to determine Lyme’s attitude, provided both her proteges are dead. “Was after the big bang. Cameras were probably fried by then. It was sink or swim, sorry.”

After the wire snapped Finnick had bolted. I was convinced he’d forfeited the alliance. Then the sky caught on fire and I found Johanna, just in time for the wet slop as she pulled her axe from Brutus’ back. She went through some kind of neurotic breakdown, calling me an idiot, and why couldn’t I just stick to the damn plan and that it was all for nothing now. Then the claw picked us up and the rest is history.

“Enobaria got captured,” Johanna says. “Made it till month two I think. Took a couple of ‘em with her in the end.”

Lyme recites her district’s motto. Honor, Duty, Valor. If that justifies either of their deaths remains debatable. But Two has always been a little off in that regard. With Brutus and Enobaria now allegorically put to rest, we’re back to the present.

“Is anybody else with you?”

We all shake our heads. Incriminated, I avert my eyes thinking of how many we may have left behind. It makes escaping the horrors much less of a heroic venture. Dogs, fleeing with their tails tucked in. That’s all we really are.

I attempt to blank out the shame. “The others?” I ask. “We saw a video of Katniss. Talking about fire catching on. There was a factory in the background. A burning hovercraft.”

Lyme nods. “That’s an early one. You probably saw a rerun. They’ll air them whenever they can hack into the network.”

“So she’s alive?”

Annie asks, “What about Finnick?”

“They were both retrieved from the arena. Beetee is confirmed too.” That’s a weight off my mind. Lyme says, “Thirteen keeps their whereabouts secret however. That feed? That was a hospital in Eight. Snow launched another missile as soon as he pinpointed their location. Disastrous casualties, most of them civilian. Now and again they’ll release a propo, but there’s been nothing new for a month or so. You can imagine the impact of that. It’s not good for the troops. And with winter on the doorstep…”

Although my concern for the troops leaves a lot to be desired I can sympathize with the anxiety this creates. Why crank down propaganda in times like these? There’s no strategic value in that, at least none I can see. So that leaves a single alternative to me, and that entails Katniss not being able to perform on camera. An injury? Worse?

Eventually I address a crucial issue.

“Can you bring us to Thirteen?”
A free ticket out of this mess. A chance encounter could save us the trouble of overwintering in Seven’s bleak north. I could finally reconvene with Katniss. Take a load off her shoulders. Fulfill whatever deal she might have sealed with Thirteen. End the war. Go back home. This is the winning streak. I can feel it.

Lyme watches us intently and my stomach suddenly flips, because that’s the look I’ve grown to anticipate with dread. It’s the you-won’t-like-what-I’m-about-to-tell-you look and Lyme’s got it down to a t.

“Comm is down at the moment. We took Five three days ago, at the loss of its power plant. Imperial Dam sustained heavy damage during battle, leaving practically the entirety of Panem without electricity. On one hand that enabled us to manually discharge the Capitol’s defense system. On the other hand it leaves us deaf, with the relay points back to HQ dead.”

Growing up in Twelve, where knowledge about all things electrical encompasses flipping the switch and hoping something happens, I don’t probe for particularized explanations. I need the simplified version. “So that means no?”

“Momentarily, no,” confirms Lyme. “Theoretically, yes. However, I wouldn’t advise it.”

That comes as a surprise. Johanna furrows her eyebrow, wary. “And why not?”

Lyme drops the punchline. Oddly, I feel her next words are largely intended for me.

“Because you’re wanted for treason.”

My legs have finally given out on me. Plopped in a squeaky metal chair I’m close to revealing the contents of my stomach. Nobody gives a damn about that though.

On a holo screen Ceasar Flickerman invites Panem to “Please welcome Mr. Peeta Mellark!”

Enter myself, brushed and groomed by Portia’s prep team. Questioning the war. Urging the rebels to lay down their weapons. Casting doubt on the legitimacy of a revolution. Condoning myself to death.

Lyme stops the feed. You can cut the tension with a knife. I’m glad nobody has a knife. It would be magically attracted to my throat.

“You little…” It’s seldom a time that Johanna has no words. “You… I put my life on the line for you! You bloody fink.”

I can’t even meet her eyes. Annie punishes me with an iron curtain. If there’s been even the smallest chance of trust between the three of us I’ve annihilated it. Irrevocably.

Lyme observes, doesn’t intervene. Clears her of a charge if Johanna offs me on the spot.

I gulp back bile. “It wasn’t by choice,” I say. Ease them into it. No hard facts, or I’ll walk out of here an Avox. “I didn’t know what was going on. Where anybody was. I worried about Katniss. About my family. There was so much at stake.”

“There was much at stake,” snaps Johanna. “Panem was at stake.”

“It’s not like he gave me an alternative!”

“And where’d that good puppy act get you? Wanted for treason. By both sides of the war.
“Attaboy!”

“God, Peeta,” mumbles Annie. I know. How could I?

Lyme twists the knife some more. “We received a total of four videos.”

Johanna holds her head. “Good gracious.”

The ramifications of this calamity begin to sink in. I see myself, a future confined by iron bars. Four grey walls against my will. No parole. Doesn’t matter who wins that stupid war.

Peeta Mellark will be on the losing side.

Lyme has us escorted back to the prison-tent after indulging the girls in the three other videos Snow had me do. Towards the end I wished the ground would open and swallow me up. Johanna was close to helping me on that.

Lyme doesn’t proclaim a verdict, wants to give us time until the morrow to decide what we want to do. Finally some decency in this world. We can decide how we want to hang. With the Capitol hating me for being from the districts and the districts hating me for siding with the Capitol I’m in a bit of a bind on that.

I also learn that individuals don’t make demands in Thirteen. There will be a tribunal and a fair judgment. I’ve come to second-guess everything dubbed as ‘fair’, thank you. Lyme is reserved about Thirteen during our interaction. Looks like it’s not quite the greatest thing since sliced bread. Apparently an improvement enough for Two to break its long-lasting loyalty with the Capitol though. Alma Coin, President Snow’s potential successor, is a by-the-book kind of woman. While everything else seems to be grey in her district, her rulership is uncompromising black and white. Begs the question which color she’ll paint me.

My companions are uncooperative for the reminder of the evening. Johanna tells me to go shove it up places and not fucking talk to her, cretin that I am. Annie continues the silent game. We eat our supper, some slimy gruel, in silence. I apologize again before we call it a night, but fear the regret lands on deaf ears.

If I had a knife, I would sleep with it under my pillow tonight. As it turns out I have neither knife nor pillow. Or friends.

A kick to the ribs wakes me.

“Get up.”

I blink. It’s still dark. Johanna hovers over me. Time to settle the score?

“What do you want?” I growl.

“That was balls-up with a cherry on top. Really. You put us all in hot water there, brother honest.”

Sitting up I say, “I told you the truth. Snow made me do it. Then he locked me up in that cell and that’s the end of it. I thought it would help Katniss. I was wrong. Happy?”

“I don’t care what tricks he made you do,” says Johanna, unexpectedly composed. “Lord knows he’s got a knack for keeping people on a short leash. We’ve all been there.”
Then I don’t understand the bother. “So?”

Annie gets a word in from her cot. “So what will you do?”

That’s the question. Die a martyr for the revolution being executed by Coriolanus Snow or risk death penalty if Alma Coin pronounces me guilty? Tough call. I realize the silence is too long. The girls gawk expectantly.

But then I remember. “What’s it to you? They only want me. They’ve got nothing on either of you. You can walk out of this with a clean shirt.”

Johanna snorts. “We’re all in the hot seat, Peeta. Ain’t gonna throw myself to the wolves only because Lyme doesn’t have a video of me poking fun at Thirteen’s principles. Whole country saw me take a knife to Katniss’ throat. I’ve been around the Capitol long enough to figure how you can twist stuff until it fits your needs. That Coin woman - same ship, different banner.”

“Are you saying you’re not going to Thirteen?” I didn’t expect that for sure. I didn’t know that was even an option.

“I’m sitting this one out, yeah.”

“In Seven?”

“You got it.”

“What makes you think Lyme will let you go?”

Johanna offers a cheeky smile. “What makes you think I’m gonna ask?”

Of course. Go figure. I look at Annie. “And where are you in all of this?”

With Finnick on the other end of a hovercraft ride I know which option I’d take.

“I made Mags a promise before the Quell.”

Apparently it’s about not taking chances. After all, a coal in hand is better than two in the mine. And three’s a lucky number.

Breaking out from the rebel camp can’t be as difficult as escaping from the Training Center. It’s sun-up by the time we decide we’ll make our move tonight.

My reunion with Katniss will have to be postponed. Whatever trouble she’s in, she’s got to keep her head above water until I can find a way that doesn’t actively endanger my continued existence. The old plan still stands. Hibernate in Seven, then go from there. Winter should bring a conclusion to the rebellion. One way or another.

We have a second audience with Lyme. Again we’re alone, Safebox in place. Even if she’s going to sell us out to Thirteen I apprise her keeping our identities off the table for now. The last thing I need is enraged district folk throwing rotten apples against the forcefield of the prison-tent. Or pitchforks.

“Have you decided?” asks Lyme.

“Yeah,” says Johanna. “Hang me, behead him and shoot her.”
But gallows’ humor finds no audience in the Two victor.

“I thought so,” she says dryly. Motions for us to turn around. Behind us waits an unexpected gift: our packs, puffier than we left them, weapons, extra clothing.

“It saves us all some trouble if you don’t ask,” says Lyme. “For records I don’t believe your story. That makes you liars, potential spies. Martial law has that punishable by death. You’ll be escorted out of camp, then shot in the back of the head where no one can see or hear you.”

Lovely.

Yet again there’s an underlying message I catch just a little too late.

“I’ll make sure your supplies are in the vehicle. The guards are untrained. Take it easy on them.”

“Thank you,” says Annie, before I can get over my stupefaction.

“That’s all I can do for you. Keep a low profile. Stay away. I packed you a bouncer. You’ll be able to receive broadcast with it. If I can I’ll message you come spring. Don’t try anything sooner.”

I’m treading on thin ice, but... “Can you… can you let Katniss have something from me?”

And that’s how I end up with a piece of paper and a head full of things I want to write down but can’t. Lyme agrees to try and slip some sort of secret letter if she ever encounters Katniss personally (which hasn’t been the case yet). A lot of emphasis is put on try and if, so I abstain from jumping up and down in excitement. Realistically Lyme will burn my message as soon as we’re gone. It’ll save her her own hide if any of this ever gets out. She’s putting her head above the parapet as is already.

Back to the virgin paper in my hand. I can hardly write about our plans, lest this gets into enemy hands. Which, at this point, are all hands apart from ours and Lyme’s. Hello Katniss, you left me dying in the arena but I survived. Live with the guilt, see you when my name’s off the kill-list. Has a ring to it, but not the one I like.

I don’t even know how to start. Do I address her by name? Is that too dangerous? I obviously can’t sign it. How will she know it’s from me? It needs to be distinguishable. Genuine. She has to know it’s really me, not some farce thought up by Coin or Snow to play her to their liking.

I can’t reference to anything in the arena. Panem saw that. Nothing in the Capitol. Nothing, even, that transpired in Victors’ Village. Snow has his eyes everywhere. But there’s not much connecting us before the Games. Well, I remember a lot. But I doubt Katniss does. She remembers the Boy with the Bread. But is that enough? I realize I’ve known Katniss - really known her - for not even a year. And two months thereof she didn’t even talk with me, seeking refuge beyond the fence, beyond me. With Gale. But that’s a snake pit I can’t poke at right now.

I stare at the blank canvas. Play with the ball-point. She’s only taken me to her precious woods a handful of times. One event sticks out in particular. After the Quell announcement. We’re sitting on the shore of that little pond an hour’s hike from the fence. It’s late afternoon, getting chilly. Katniss wanted to hunt but we’re lounging there empty-handed. It was just an excuse to get away from it all, anyway.

“I love this place,” she tells me. “My father used to take me here.”
Her father’s a sore subject. Everybody knows she never got over his death. Rarely talks about it. Suffers all the same. I don’t say anything. This is not about me.

“There’s always mockingjays around if you just wait long enough. They’re a little shy. But when they come - it’s worth the wait.” But mockingjays are a sorry facade for the trouble plaguing Katniss’s mind. And suddenly I’m holding her close to my chest, listening to a simple girl from the Seam surrendering. Nobody can fight the world all on their own, and Katniss is tiring out quickly. But I’m there all the same, because that’s my role in this story. I’m the comforter (it’ll all be alright) . I’m the pusher (just this one time) . The dreamer (and after it’s over) . The hoper (we’ll both come back here) . I sound very reassuring as I talk to her.

That night I crawl into bed and scream into my pillow, because I’m nothing more than all that Capitol scum we so abhor. A liar (I wish I could freeze this moment, right here, right now, and live in it forever) . A player (let’s strike a deal, Haymitch) . A gambler (bring her home) . And I put all my cards on the wrong horse.

Later I hand Lyme the folded piece of paper. I don’t thank her again for what she’s doing, because there are no words to do homage to that.

Together with Johanna and Annie I board the jeep supposed to bring us to the execution site. As promised, only two guards are with us. They’re hardly my age. District boys, although I can’t say where from. The grey robs them of their heritage.

We unload half an hour later. A forest clearing, somewhere in the wild zone between the Capitol and Seven.

One of them tells us to turn around, faces to the south. If they shoot me now the smoke rising from the Capitol will be the last thing I see. But the boys are so nervous they even forget to put on our plasticuffs.

Johanna faces them, ignores their orders and then it’s a matter of a well-placed punch to the head. The second one surrenders instantly. Annie knocks him out with his own rifle. She has a knack for that.

“Well that was easy,” says Johanna.

It’s easy because we’re murderers. Those kids are innocent.

Annie retrieves our packs from the back of the car. Lyme is a woman of her word. There’s more in my rucksack than I left it with, but we’ll do a thorough breakdown later. I shoulder my stuff, put the knife back in its place and relieve one of the kids of his gun.

“Ready?” asks Johanna.

Annie nods. “Ready.”

Into the unknown. There’s no one in this world but the three of us.

I send a silent prayer to Lyme. I’ll never be able to ask her why she did what she did, but I think I know all the same. It’s not because we’re Victors. It’s not because we went into that arena and came back out with blood on our hands. It’s because we’re all just paper strips in the Reaping Bowl.

And it’s about time someone stopped sacrificing us.
I have to stop and readjust the prosthetic. Again. Before the Quell I might have had to tweak it once or twice a day. It’s become an hourly ritual since we left the rebel encampment. Part of that I can blame on my prolonged layover in the Capitol. The rest I must undoubtedly thank Snow’s rose mutts for. What a strategy to drive me mad! Insanity by bad fitting.

Annie’s waiting for me a tree trunk later, resting her own feet. I plump down next to her.

“How much longer?”

She takes an assessing look at the sky. The sun hides behind clouds today, but that’s nothing to mislead a mariner’s daughter.

“Not long. Hour or so.”

The one ill-judged component of our grand undertaking is slowly killing my feet. Overwinter in Seven? What a great idea! Only we never really sweated over the harrowing task of actually getting there. A thumb’s width on the map turns out taking five days of walking. And that from dusk till dawn, off the beaten path so we won’t get caught. For those unable to imagine what such a venture feels like with a broken nose and a busted fake leg, well, I’m making Johanna blush with my choice of language.

That’s quite an achievement by the way.

Annie gets back on her feet, brushes the dirt off her pants. So much to the downside of field trips in November. The moment you stop for a breather it takes about three seconds until the cold has you chattering your teeth to pieces. But I guess I should be thankful that the weather hasn’t taken to backstabbing us just yet. Crawling across the landscape all day is one thing. Doing so while the rain whips you on a whole other.

I shudder, following in Annie’s tracks. “I hope she’s got a fire going tonight,” I say. I’m getting queasy just thinking about another episode of that cold Thirteen mush. It makes my stomach flip every time, no matter how nutritive the label promises it to be. And I really need to warm my ears.

Annie scrunches her nose. “You know if there’s fire there’ll be tea, too.”

We both laugh at that. If there’s one thing worse than mush it’s pine needle tea. Johanna might be the fastest walker, but lord, she’s the worst cook of us all.

The name of the game when it comes to survival is resource management. Thanks to my exhaustive cartographic abilities (the width-of-thumb to time ratio) I’m able to determine that it’ll take us a hand’s breath to reach Johanna’s little nugget of safety. That’s 25 days as the crow flies, at this speed, with no layovers. Paying heed to the map’s inaccuracy, Johanna’s precise specifications of “about there” and the fact that we can’t walk in a straight line without involuntarily hugging trees or accidentally plunging ourselves off some precipice I’m willing to
add another 10 days as safety margin.

Lyme was generous with her food donations. On top of what we scavenged from the Capitol we have three ten-pound sacks of mush. You wouldn’t feed it to the pigs, but it does its job. I’m not saying we won’t go hungry, but I’m from Twelve, Panem’s poorest district. You can go a long way before starving. And the Capitol made sure we’re used to it by now anyway.

I outline the rationing system to the girls. It’s one longwinded monologue, and I’m pretty sure I’ve lost Johanna after the third sentence. But nobody can blame me. I’ve actually tried to be productive, as opposed to biting my nails about Katniss.

Coin and Katniss.

Snow and Katniss.

Katniss and me.

Gale.

I’m trying.

“So you’re saying you want this to last for two days? For all of us?” Annie holds up a cookie box.

I grab it from her. “Yeah. Eighteen pieces. That makes three each, per day.”

“That makes a hell of a stomachache, for all three, every day,” says Johanna.

Well, I didn’t count on winning friends for this. But, “It’s the only way to stretch the supplies. Unless we can refill on the way. But I’m not counting on that.”

“We could hunt,” proposes Annie.

“The time spent on that costs us more resources than we’d gain.” We’re not all gifted hunters. I never even visited the trapper station during training week. And I doubt anybody present has a natural talent for bows.

Johanna rolls her eyes. “God, you’re a pain. Beetee would be proud of you, budget mom. Now pass over my cookie allotment for the day and stop telling me what I can’t eat.”

I roll open the biscuit carton. Champions’ Treat - The Snack Of Victors. How’s the irony of that?

“I’ve had those before,” admits Johanna. “They’ve got pictures of us stamped on the front.”

“That’s got to be Cashmere,” says Annie, inspecting her bounty. Granted, a cookie silhouette isn’t very rich in detail.

My yield sports Finnick’s face. Not a surprise. He’s the Capitol’s pet child. Probably on every third biscuit.

“I got Fire-Girl,” says Johanna. “Y’all wanna swap, or can I nibble on your fiancee, Peeta?”

“Go ahead,” I say with a laugh. “Just don’t bite off more than you can chew.”

We try to stick together as much as we can. Leveling speeds is a pain in the butt, but I’d rather listen to Johanna bitch about our snail’s pace than break apart the group for a little more efficiency. The only thing I agree to is letting her off the leash half an hour or so before the sun sets. She’ll
find us a spot and get us set up so everything is ready once Annie and I drag our sore butts into camp. I have no idea where she’s taking that energy from and honestly, I couldn’t care less. What I refuse to do is shell out extra food for her efforts, no matter how much bargaining I’m subjected to.

That leaves me partnered up with Annie for most of the time, because Johanna will scout or sulk on the periphery, climbing trees for a lookout or leaving signs or whatever she ends up doing. Annie is a much more pleasant companion anyway. We strike up a natural friendship.

Annie comes from Blackrock Bay, Four’s capital. It’s one of the industrial high points of the district and Annie laughs when I ask her if that’s where the Capitol beach movies are filmed. No, that’s way down the coast, she tells me. A place called Turquoise Beach. Annie loves it there. I promise I’ll visit once things calm down.

It occurs to me that I haven’t even seen the sea on my Victory Tour.

Annie nods, “It’s not part of the trip,” she says. “The port’s polluted and everything smells like dead fish. You didn’t miss much.”

I tell her about the bakery, about waking up every morning hours before the sun so we can have the bread out of the oven by the time the shifts start in the mine. With most of Twelve being so poor that tessarae are a part of daily life we don’t sell a lot to individuals. But we’ll supply the school and town house. On certain occasions like the mayor’s birthday I’ll even get to frost the cakes.

“When I came home from the Games with more money than I could spend my mother wouldn’t take a single coin,” I say. They stayed in town while I migrated to Victor’s Village. My brothers would sometimes come to visit, but by the by things started to drift. It’s another thing I envy about Katniss. After the Games her bond with her family tightened. Mine fell apart.

Perhaps it’s because nobody ever expected me to come back.

“It’s hard,” says Annie, who seems to be on the same page on this one. Her family is, unsurprisingly, in the fishing industry. They can’t sit idle while the rest of the crew is at sea, so Annie will go weeks worrying while they’re out on a run.

“I had a hard time after the arena,” she says and I get a feeling it’s more than the nightmares and panic attacks I went through myself. “It didn’t matter how much I explained, they couldn’t understand.” So while her family gave ground, Mags and Finnick stepped up. Annie talks a lot about Mags. A mother figure, a bastion of calm.

“I’m sorry for what happened in the Quell,” I say, feeling responsible. If I hadn’t tripped, if the prosthetic hadn’t dislodged…

“It’s not your fault,” says Annie and looks away.

And in a way she’s right.

Mags didn’t volunteer for me.

On the days we can’t make a fire the tent Lyme gifted us becomes the gathering point for social interaction. It’s really crammed in there, so most arguments are about taking up too much space, getting elbows out of other people’s ribs and quite often bemoaning how much our feet hurt. The upside of it is that it gets so stifling hot we don’t run the risk of freezing to death.
I’m currently playing around with the bouncer, that little tablet Lyme said would enable us to receive broadcast. Quite quickly I come to the conclusion that I’m a technical bonehead. I can’t even figure out how to turn it on. The damn thing doesn’t have buttons. Annie suggests voice control, but I can call it what I want it still won’t cooperate. The tried and trusted method of giving it a good shake to nudge its memory isn’t working either.

I’m about to admit defeat when the thing suddenly comes to life on its own.

A large-screen holo version of Finnick springs from the bouncer, asking me to press ‘Play’.

“How’d you do that?” Johanna wants to know, sitting up. I just shake my head. Magic, for all I know. Annie does the honors of starting the video.

Finnick lost the beach boy attitude he sported during the Quell. He aged. A lot. And not in a good way.

“This is Finnick Odair. I’m coming to you from District Thirteen, alive and well. We’ve survived an assault from the Capitol, but I’m not here to give you recent news.” Although he says everything is fine, his voice speaks another language. One of exhaustion, anxiety, of horrors endured.

My grip tightens on the bouncer. An assault? Is that the explanation for the downtime Lyme talked about? How hot a war zone is Thirteen? And why is Finnick doing the propo and not Katniss?

“President Snow used to… sell me… my body, that is…”

Oh. That’s why.

Johanna draws in a sharp breath. “Shut that thing off, Peeta. Now.”

Even if I wanted to, I wouldn’t know how. I glance at Annie, who’s gone a whiter shade of pale.

On screen Finnick continues in a detached voice. “I wasn’t the only one. If a victor is considered desirable, the president gives them as a reward or allows people to buy them for an exorbitant amount of money.”

Johanna grabs the bouncer from my hands.

“Hey!”

“If you refuse, he kills someone you love. So you do it.”

“I said turn it off!”

 “…I wasn’t the only one, but I was the most popular. And perhaps the most defenseless, because the people I loved were so defenseless…”

Annie juts to her hands and knees, clambers out of the tent. She bursts into tears. I forfeit my hold on the bouncer and Johanna catapults it out of sight.

“Annie!” I call, but her silhouette disappears into the shadows.

"Great job, Peeta," scolds Johanna.

I want to go after Annie, but find myself unable to. Finnick’s speech leaves me dumbstruck. I look to Johanna, suddenly horrified as things start to sink in.
“Was that…? Did you…?”

“Yes,” she growls, shimmying out of her blanket. “Yes. Yes to _everything_. Now fuck off, Peeta. Get out of my breath.”

She crawls past me, slips into her coat. Glares back through the tent entrance.

“Never bring this up again. And get rid of that stupid thing.”

The night swallows her as it swallowed Annie.

As it swallowed the last ounce of dignity Panem had the audacity to call its own.

By the time I find the bouncer in the darkness Finnick is done teaching Panem the facts of life. I have the option of watching a rerun.

The girls are nowhere to be seen. I consider following them, but quickly abandon the idea. What could I possibly say? I’m not equipped to handle this situation.

So I press repeat.

Finnick steels Thirteen’s well-being. Now that I watch more closely, I can recognize debris in the background. Have they been bombed?

Then the convulsive unveiling. Finnick, the Capitol’s golden boy, no more than a slave to Snow’s system, exploited in the most degrading ways. No solitary case, but rather an exemplification of what it really means to bring glory to your homeland. He begins to weave a tapestry so rich in detail that you can’t doubt its authenticity. Tales of strange sexual appetites, betrayals of the heart, and bottomless greed. Drunken secrets whispered over damp pillow-cases in the dead of the night.

Finnick goes back to Snow’s political ascension, which I know nothing of, and works his way up to the present, pointing out case after case of the mysterious deaths of Snow’s adversaries or, even worse, his allies who had the potential to become threats. The list goes on, but my thoughts begin to drift.

Once he’s done I put the bouncer back into its place in my pack. Johanna and Annie are still out there. How much of this have they known all along? Have they too been presented on a silver platter to the Capitol’s finest?

I squat outside and get a fire going, all the while drawing connections. I watched a lot of TV back in Twelve, since my house in Victor’s Village came equipped with one. Most of it was stupid district propaganda but I had the privilege of tuning in on some Capitol-exclusive stations. The latest parties, the who’s who, gossip and tittle-tattle. One channel was exclusively dedicated to victors. Events, public performances, who’s cradling Finnick Odair’s arm what time of the week. Back then I shrugged it off, I mean, to each his own, right? Life in the spotlight to those who thrive in it. How could I know?

But I also remember the fancy letters appearing on my doorstep in droves. Pink glitter paper: _It would be an honor if you could attend…_ Perfumed postcards: _A dinner to celebrate your great success…_ Digital messages: _If you and your fiancee were to make it…_

Now I gag at the thought of those seemingly innocuous congratulations.

“If you refuse, he’ll kill someone you love,” Finnick’s voice echoes in my head. “So you do it.”
And for her, I know I would have.

The girls return by the time my fire is down to the embers. Annie passes me by like I’m not even there, disappearing into the tent. Johanna doesn’t need to say anything. Her body language is enough to tell me I better keep my mouth shut unless I want private tutoring in how Avoxes are made.

I wait until they settle down, then some more. Actually I only go back in once I’m confident they’re both asleep. The last thing I need is that awkward silence of behemothic dimension. Even so it’s a restless night. I don’t dare to move, wedged between them. Annie chokes up several times. Johanna trashes about in some kind of nightmare. The tent isn’t designed for three people, so body contact is unpreventable. I’m mortified by every touch. Guilt, embarrassment, dejection. An array of alien feelings to the dubitable hosts accommodating defenseless victors.

I’m not part of this.

Can’t be.

I’m out of place.

Surely, this is someone’s idea of a sick joke.

I don’t close a damn eye until the sun courts me out of the tomb-tent.

We don’t talk about it. The following morning is insufferable. The evening, excruciating. If not for the biting cold at night I’d shun the tent completely.

Annie is very withdrawn. I coax out half a dozen words over the course of three days, nothing more spectacular than generic thank-yous and good-nights and I’m-fines. Even Johanna cranks it down a bit. She’ll still bust my chops if I push her, but I begin to believe that her abrasive nature is simply another wall of defense. One I’m not about to attempt climbing.

Instead I’m taking a tumble down the road of self-condemnation myself. Finnick’s confession drums into my brain like jabberjay rehearsal. I can’t look at the girls without thinking about it. I gawk sometimes. They notice, too, but I can’t help it. As a rule my scrutiny is met with disregard. When my eyes linger too long there’ll be a brush off or a change of subject and I know I’ve gone overboard. Strained is what I’d call our relationship at the moment.

And yet I can’t stop my thoughts of milling around the matter. Finnick, whose stylist’s settled conviction was that the more you saw of him, the better. Annie, shying away whenever I’d touch her off guard. Johanna, stripping in that elevator. A prank on Katniss’ purity, ha-ha. Guess Haymitch’s lack of laughter should have made me ponder. He never forfeited a chance to tease Katniss, but that incident was met with more than polite restraint.

All those sublime messages I’ve missed. I have a lot of catching up to do.

The first real breakthrough comes about a week later, in the dark of the night. I wake up to a splitting headache, assessing that the only reason my skull hasn’t burst in two is because a thin layer of frost coats me from head to toe. Ice crystals jingle in my beard.

Johanna has burrowed deep into her blanket. Only the occasional puff of steam accounts for her presence. The place to my left is empty.
I find Annie hunched over the fireplace, shivering like a dog.

“My fingers are numb.” She holds out the lighter to me like some sort of sacrificial offering. “I’m freezing. Could you help me with the fire?”

It takes me a few tries until I succeed and then I have to prevent Annie from practically throwing herself into the flames.

“Thanks,” she says, smiles with purple lips. “I’m not used to this. It doesn’t get so cold in Four.”

Of course it doesn’t. I get our blankets from the tent, wrap them both around her.

“Give me your hands,” I prompt. “There. Just trust me.” It’s like massaging icicles at first, but eventually the warmth begins to spread. Katniss says I’m a gifted kneader. After a sprained ankle incident last winter it took her half a fortnight to learn to relax while I worked on restoring mobility to the offended joint. I’ve got experience with timid fawns. Annie and Katniss seem very similar in that regard.

Annie suddenly breaks the silence.

“What he said wasn’t fair.” It doesn’t need a genius to figure out who we’re talking about.

“It doesn’t matter.” I feel her eyes on me. Keep my own glance locked on her hands.

“Yes, it does. I’m so tired. Aren’t you? Waiting for the world to turn good and just, to stop hurting? But look what it does instead. The abuse won’t end. It’s still the same. They worship us as much as they exploit us. Finnick just tore himself wide open for all of Panem to watch. Who’ll put him back together, Peeta? Who’ll pick up the pieces? Coin? I don’t think so.”

I don’t either.

“Sometimes,” she mutters. “Sometimes I wish he were dead. I wish they were all dead and we were too. It would be best.”

“You can’t say that.”

Even though sometimes, I wish it too.

“And yet I just did.” She pulls her hand back and now I’m forced to meet her eyes. The sorrow that I anticipated is largely forced out by ire. “I’m not defenseless, Peeta. He had no right to say that. No right at all.”

“I’m sure he didn’t mean—”

“Finnick doesn’t mean a lot of things. But still he does them. It hurts other people.” Her voice cools out somewhat. “Realizing, he regrets. And then he grieves and pains to compensate. But do you know? It takes ten times longer to put yourself back together than it does to fall apart. He just can’t understand that concept. So he’s destructive. To himself and others alike. Perhaps you can ask him once, if we’ll ever meet him, why Four sent no Career for the 70th year.”

Remember when I speculated about Annie’s can of worms?

I think I just cracked it open.
Some heavy focus on Annie here. Because Odesta can't operate on cloud number nine all the time and Annie must be more than a (mad) love-sick puppy.

Also, Peeta just got confronted with a whole different perception of wrong.

What do you think about Finnick's propo?
Chapter V

I wake up to a winter wonderland, a puffy white blanket covering everything snug and uniform. Half a foot of snow instills in me the joy I used to be overcome by when I was younger, my gaze riveted to the window until someone would finally let me go out and play.

I latch on my boots and get the morning fire going, melting some snow to prepare for a warm breakfast drink. Then I take some handfuls of the white stuff and, enter mischievous grin, I treat the girls to a special good morning routine. I drop a load of snow into the tent and bend over backwards with laughter as my unsuspecting victims gasp in surprise.

Annie is the first to retaliate. My boyish grin wipes clean by a counter-charging snowball. The time it takes me to recuperate is enough for Annie to blindside me and we both land in the white.

I vaguely overhear Johanna mutter “God, how old are you? Five?” but before I can refute that accusation Annie washes out my mouth with powder. With something between a laugh and a choke I buck her off and begin to launch more missiles. It’s a feast. For the first time since that idiotic Quarter Quell announcement I’m having fun.

Certain of my impending victory, my downfall hits me like a bombshell. There’s a thud and suddenly both Annie and I are buried under a load of the white stuff. Instant defeat.

Outside of my snow coat Johanna proclaims cockily “Amateurs.” She demonstratively thumps the butt of the rifle against the nearest tree trunk and the last of the branches’ pack plummets down on us.

“My, I admit, wiping myself dry.

“The two of you still crawled around in your nappies, I already won snowball fights,” says Johanna, handing us a mug of hot water. “Don’t mess with the experts, kids.”

I roll my eyes. Annie untangles her hair. “That was fun,” she says. “But please don’t ever do it again.”

“Because you don’t want to lose?”

“Because I don’t want to run around in wet clothes all day.”

Ah, come on! I don’t remember ever having heard Annie laugh. It was worth it.

My bewilderment of the newly established weather conditions fades by the end of the day. With a good foot of snow now on the ground, progress is a thing of the past. We half our daily distance, slogging through wetness on leaden legs. Obscured from our view, branches, roots and rocks become tenacious obstacles. The pain of tripping is neglectable - numb toes don’t hurt on impact - but kissing the ground face first gets old fast.

The only ray of hope is that the Map of Panem predicts our arrival at Johanna’s sanctuary a thumb’s width from now - five days at our normal pace. If we push it, perhaps seven marches
under these stringent conditions. And we better step on it. My pack is dreadfully light. Johanna began boiling moss and bark to supplement our meager portions after I announced another shortage of rations yesterday.

I walk alongside Annie again. There has not been any unveiling about Finnick or the crux regarding the 70th Games. No more word about victor whoring. Honestly? I want to throw that knowledge into the closet for the skeletons to play with. The girls aren’t willing to churn up those graves anyway.

I guess some things are better left buried.

On the last day before our planned arrival at Seven’s ivory tower the weather takes a turn for the worse. You think snow is bad? Time to meet its meaner brother: sleet.

What doesn’t melt into freezing water transforms into break-neck sheets of glaze. Ice-crystals are pinpricks on my skin as they incessantly bombard my face. My beard stiffens into a frosted mess. I’m soaked to the bone. But I’m hardly the worst off.

By mid-morning I fear we’re going to lose Johanna. Snow didn’t pose much of an issue for her, but rain is a different story altogether. Lagging behind, hands clenched into fists and eyes fixed on the ground Johanna is paler than the slush around us. She hasn’t said a word since we woke up to the hail, forgoing breakfast and tea. Annie had to close the latch on her pack because her hands trembled so bad. I’m starting to worry. I can’t have her seize up again; she’s pivotal in reaching our goal.

While Annie can orientate just fine on her own only Johanna knows our exact destination. The hicktown we’re headed for doesn’t appear on the map. To me all trees look much of a muchness. We need Johanna. Functional.

I let myself drop back.

“You holding up?”

A slight nod. If the muscles in her jaw tense up any more they’re going to snap.

“We still on the right track?” I ask. We’ve been walking, what seems to me, aimlessly for hours. Usually Johanna will set the pace and course, occasionally counseling with Annie on direction. We could have been walking in circles today for all I know. Orientation is not my forte.

Johanna keeps staring at the ground, marching almost trance-like.

I put a hand on her shoulder. “Hey-”

It’s like a blowup. Recoiling from my touch as if it were electrifying Johanna catches my gaze with pink, preyed-upon eyes.

“Keep your damn hands off me!” she snarls, through her teeth, a vexing craze in her undertone.

“Whoa. Easy.” I say, taking a step back. Annie has stopped too, surveying from a distance.

Johanna’s hands clench and unclench repeatedly. She blinks too frequently, stares right through me.

“Are you okay?”
Moments pass. It’s as if the transmission is delayed. Then she seems to regain focus and a little shallowly says, “Don’t you fucking touch me.”

“I won’t,” I promise, raising my hands in a calming gesture.

Johanna averts her eyes, back to the ground. She steps past me, almost hypnotic, and hikes on with short, harsh movements.

I look at Annie, perplexed. “What the hell?”

She just shrugs. Who can tell what circuits are fried in Johanna’s brain? Not us.

I pray to anyone who cares listening for the elements to veer round. No such luck.

Johanna hasn’t eaten anything at all yesterday. From the looks of it she hasn’t been sleeping either. Peering out of the tent at how the wind and sleet whip at the trees I think that, even if we could coax breakfast down her throat, it wouldn’t stay there for long.

“We’ll arrive today, right?” I try to leaven the mood.

Annie supports me. “Hot food, dry clothes. A real bed, maybe?”

None of this really passes through to Johanna though. “Yeah,” she’ll say, but I doubt it’s much more than an automated response.

We set out, keeping a close eye on our third companion. Ever so often I exchange an apprehensive look with Annie, but as long as Johanna keeps moving we decide not to intervene. Better not tip that fragile balance that seems to hold her together.

By early afternoon the rain stops at last. Everything is soaked, from clothes to blankets to whatever scraps of food we have left. There’s not a dry spot on my body. As a distraction I indulge in daydreams of hot baths and steaming coffee, the gluttony of plum stew that was Katniss’ favorite in the Capitol. God, I actually have to wipe the drool from my face.

Absorbed in my own reverie I pick up on what’s going on too late.

Birds usually jubilate the end of bad weather.

Approaching a settlement, the bustle of every day life will draw you in long before you pass its boundaries.

Thriving communities don’t smell of charred flesh.

It’s the stench that sets us off in the end.

Johanna breaks into a haphazard run, knowing best of all the fragrance of a forest fire.

We catch up with Johanna some hundred yards later. She’s not even trying to hold back the tears.

The scene unfolding before us leaves me bereft of any words. Mighty indeed are the branches of District Seven’s pines, for they hold a dozen nooses each, strung tight around the necks of congealed corpses. Entire families; men and women, half the children not even of reaping age. Three such death contraptions loom in the main square of the outpost, log cabins surrounding them in circular formation. They’ve been set on fire, probably days ago.
Johanna collapses to her knees, a mix of weeping, yowling and mumbles. The soot drives tears to my own eyes. I try to catch Annie’s gaze, but she’s transfixed on the macabre spectacle.

And then I see it too, so striking one can’t overlook it.

The pine in the middle has been debarked. Six words have been ornately carved into the trunk.

*WE CAME TO THE HANGING TREE*

Johanna makes a guttural noise in the back of her throat. “Who does something like this?”

My throat, meanwhile, has gone dry as coal dust.

Because I know.

I know.

No stranger would it be, after all, if we met at midnight in the Hanging Tree.

Not all cabins are burnt beyond hope. Together we move Johanna into one without direct line of sight on the corpses. The rain and fatigue prove to be a devastating mix combined with this new turn of events. Just before I can share my incriminating piece of information with the rest of the group Johanna takes the stage by throwing another spasming fit. Unlike the one in the Capitol she doesn’t lose consciousness - which I consider a positive variation - but for a minute or so we’re reintroduced to the familiar fisting, the blinking and then, as if an invisible hand clamps shut around her throat, the weeping turns into strained choking. Enter nose-bleeding to top it all off.

To say that this scares the crap out of Annie and me is a bold understatement.

Away from the current triggers Johanna slips into something of a catatonic state. Annie helps her out of the wettest clothes while I prepare a makeshift cot. Four takes the helm so I excuse myself and step outside, exhaling a breath I’ve been holding since reading that inscription on the tree.

Then I pull myself together and march off into the forest, away from the corpses, away from Johanna and Annie. As soon I’m out of earshot a groan escapes my lips and I have to seek support in the nearest tree before my knees give out.

Dropping my pack, my fingers find their object of desire in no time. I retrieve the bouncer.

Of course, there are new videos.

That day I spent with Katniss on the banks of Twelve’s hidden mountain lake stays fresh on my memory for more than one reason. At times when I feel outstandingly gloomy I’ll walk to the tune she taught me that afternoon. A song her father, a person paramount in Katniss’ life, passed on to her. Ostensibly, I was keen on paying homage to the demigod she had elected him to be, and I was a zealous student. Before the sun set we were performing together with our own personal choir of mockingjays chanting in the background. True to Katniss’ word it was more than redeeming to wait for the songbirds.

Today I apprehensively press play, having a presentiment of what this newest propo has in store for me.

Katniss’s face fills the screen, humming the first few notes of *The Hanging Tree*. There are more closeup shots of her, walking amidst post-bomb rubble. Cut to the familiar lake. Mockingjays
begin to reproduce the alluring sounds. At about mid-song an orchestra takes on the musical background. Someone pulls the meaning of the lyrics apart and replaces necklace of rope with necklace of hope, probably priding themselves on this linguistic magnum opus.

The bouncer asks me whether I want to re-watch the propo or continue with the next feed. I hope number two is better news than its predecessor.

Turns out that hoping for good things yields ill results. The second video is the Capitol’s answer to Thirteen’s broadcast. It shows what we’ve just seen. Picture after picture of destroyed Seven villages, their occupants hanging high in their worshiped trees. Our settlement isn’t a solitary case. Across the district people are strung up for pledging alliance to a girl with a salient voice and a knack for poison berries.

The bouncer slips from my hands, bowing out after its performance. An intensive throb begins to build behind my eyes and for a moment I panic that I’ll succumb to one of Johanna’s strokes myself.

How am I going to explain this to the girls?

That I might be responsible for decimating District Seven’s population.

All because I had to slip Lyme that stupid letter.

Collecting myself enough so I won’t crack up the instant I meet eyes with the girls I head back to the cabin. Annie anticipates me, idly pacing outside.

“Where were you?” she asks, her voice in a pitch. “You can’t just leave!”

Just wait, I think, until I unveil something ten-fold worse than bolting for the woods unexcused.

I nod to the cabin. “Johanna?”

Annie sighs. “She’s okay. Really tired. Broken up over what happened. I coerced her into lying down some.”

As inconsiderate as it may sound, Johanna’s welfare has dropped on my priority list. We can worry about her issues later. Right now we need to figure out where to go from here and what we’re supposed to put into our mouths two days from now, when we’ll ultimately run out of food.

“I need to show you something,” I say and pull Annie aside. A sorry preface for my following confession, but I’m too exhausted to add sweetening to genocide.

Before booting up the bouncer I sum up the major points. That I know what The Hanging Tree means and why I have this knowledge. Then I let the propos do the talking. I’ve got to give Annie her due, she keeps a straight face throughout both videos.

“Okay,” she says when the bouncer has no more to offer. “What’s this got to do with you?”

There’s no way around confiding in my sins. Manning up I ask, “You remember that message I asked Lyme to smuggle?”

“Yes. I was actually surprised she agreed to it.”

Well, we’re two on that. But it looks like Lyme stayed true to her word.
“I mulled over what to write for the reminder of that day. You know, make it safe. So only Katniss would know what it meant. Who it was from.”

“Well, what did you write?”

A single sentence. It was meant to be uplifting for Katniss. It ended up being a death sentence for so many more.

*When the war is over meet me where the mockingjays fly.*

But Katniss wants to meet at the Hanging Tree instead.

Someone hand me a rope. Or was that hope?

To my amazement Annie isn’t as mad over my revelation as I expected her to be. That’ll be a completely different story once I confess to Johanna, but for now I’m glad at least one of us can keep a level head.

“Okay,” says Annie, a filler word she’s been throwing about whenever the silence gets too asphyxiating. We haven’t really talked yet, hovering between the stages of acceptance, denial and actual constructive thinking.

“Seven isn’t safe,” Annie finally surmises, a fact I must grudgingly agree with.

“We could go back,” I propose.

“No. No, I don’t think so. It’ll take another month at least. On what fuel? We’ll starve even before we freeze.”

But we can hardly stay here. Or anywhere else in Seven, lest we intend on visiting the Hanging Tree ourselves.

“Four?”

Another head shake. “There’s nothing for us in Four. And it’s out of the way. We need to think short term. How about Ten?” says Annie. “We’ve been flanking the border for a while now. I need to look at the map, but I don’t think that’s far.”

District Ten. Livestock. Acres upon acres of factory farming, the air heavy with animal dung and the smell of blood from the slaughterhouses. No-name tributes that haven’t won a Game in the last ten years. I’m not doing handsprings at the idea.

“I don’t know. We should talk it through with Johanna.”

“Okay. Tomorrow.”

Tomorrow, then. Enough has been done today.

Annie and I scout around the edges of the village before heading back, just in case anybody survived the carnage (unlikely), or Peacekeepers decided to hang back in order to make do with any strays or bystanders (more likely).

Our sweep proves unfruitful, which I’m glad about, because that sets us off to a hopefully uneventful night. The sun is already making its way past the canopy. Soon it’ll be dark. I’m still
queasy. I’ve never slept in a cemetery before. This shapes up to be a journey of very unpleasant firsts.

Our way back to the cabin inevitably leads us through the main square. Some of the corpses are on the ground now.

A surge of adrenaline hits me. We’ve been found! But then I spy Johanna squatting atop one of the branches, studiously serrating the ropes with her knife.

“Hey,” says Annie in a tone that reminds me a lot about Katniss’ mother. “You’re supposed to be inside.”

Johanna looks down at us if the thought of that is an absurd conception. “I won’t just leave them hanging here.”

Of course not. I try to put myself in her shoes. If this were Twelve, if these were my people I wouldn’t take a break until they were all put to rest after enduring such atrocities. No matter how tired I were. Thank God we’re not in Twelve.

“Let us help you,” I offer and put my arms around the body of a woman, supporting her weight while Johanna cuts her lose. As I lay her down I’m judged by an icebound grimace scolding me from glazed over eyes.

It’s a filthy, nauseating chore. At the end of it thirty-five stiff carcasses are laid out in a row, from toddler to old man.

We awkwardly wait for Johanna to share some parting words with her people, but there’s no farewell. Only her eyes mirror the rage at the perpetrators of this crime.

It’s Annie, in the end, who says, “We should bury them.”

But as if in mockery the ground is frozen solid and our fingers are rendered bloody after the first tries. We couldn’t break the earth if our lives depended on it.

“Maybe a fire?” I suggest. Cabin scraps would make for a good pyre.

Johanna shakes her head and points up. “They won’t burn.” The sky is heavy, the clouds low and lead-grey. A storm is brewing. Seven is angry about the lacerations inflicted on it, and it’s determined to make someone pay for it - anyone.

Johanna bends down next to a middle-aged man, turns briefly to assess me and to my utmost horror strips the corpse of coat and boots.

“I won’t wear that,” I say in aversion.

“You want to die, no problem,” says Johanna and gestures to the dead. “I’ll lay you in line with them in the morning. You don’t jerk around with blizzards, Peeta, no matter how knightly your principles are.”

District dreg, liar, killer, traitor. Now I’m a grave robber too.

My first experience with the magnitude of Seven’s fury shakes the foundations of our little hideout. Already weakened by the fire we decide to reinforce only a corner instead of keeping the whole thing leak-proof. Within the hour the door breaks down, bidding entry to the harshest wind I’ve ever witnessed. It howls as loud as the wolf-mutts of my first Games. The temperature drops
continuously. Lighting a fire is beyond the bounds of possibility.

By break of dawn the snowing subsides as impulsively as it started. My body is beyond numb. Annie shivers uncontrollably. Johanna has adopted a disturbingly blue skin tone. It’s unanimously agreed that we need to move to warm up. A simple fire just won’t cut it. Getting to my feet is a chaotic accomplishment of commandeering stiff joints beyond their comfort zone. I limp out of the shelter as if shot through both knees.

We spend the morning scrounging the other cabins for any goods that haven’t fallen victim to fire and snow. All in all it fills the bill for another week, maybe two, if we mercilessly ration. Johanna tells of a nearby lake that might hold fish. Annie isn’t one to pass up such a challenge. I volunteer to accompany her for protection if for nothing else. Johanna sits out on this one. We don’t object, wanting to give her some privacy to mourn her people.

Annie is very resourceful when it comes to fishing gear and frequently names Mags as mentor when I raise an eyebrow at her contraptions. I’ve never caught fish before. It’s prohibited in Twelve and Finnick did the honors in the Quell arena. But even with my limited knowledge I can see that Annie is naturally gifted. By the end of the day we have five fish to call our bounty. More than we can eat in one go! And thanks to the natural freezer that is Seven, the rest won’t go rank either.

We return with boasting grins, in perfect One fashion. *Glorious, Victorious!*

Well, at least until I have to dodge a fist-sized rock aimed at my head.

My assailant has an unexpected identity.

“Have you lost your mind?” I growl, barely evading the missile. “That could have killed me!”

Johanna, having intercepted us at the edge of the village, is fuming-mad. She holds up, of all things, the bouncer.

“I thought I told you to get rid of it. Explain this.”

She has me red-handed there. No doubt she viewed the videos, too.

“We wanted to tell you,” says Annie in our defense.

“So you knew about this too? What’s become of ‘no more secrets’? Obsolete concept?”

I take a step forward. “How about you dial it down a notch? We didn’t want to upset you yesterday. That’s all.”

“Upset me?” echoes Johanna shrilly. “Those were my people! Since when do I have to wait for you to issue the green lights to be upset? Who are you, Coriolanus Snow? Holding the right to domineer what people are entitled to know?”

It’s irritating how she can fly off the handle in the blink of an eye. All I say is, “Don’t turn this into something it’s not, Johanna.”

“You know what this isn’t? It’s not the promise of living a peaceful life after winning a Game. Or two. Or a hundred! It’s about being pulled into this half-baked pie in the sky called rebellion. All because some know-it-alls decide a miner’s daughter in the full throes of puberty is the best shot of unifying the districts we have. Against a government that kept us on the short leash for the better part of a century!”
Oh no. Is she really going to start with this?

“How can, how can anyone possibly think this concept of The Girl On Fire would ever work out?”

“You can’t blame Katniss for this,” I say protectively.

“I can’t? Watch me do it. I’m tired of having to offer up my soul for our holy savior! You’d think the time we spent down in the dungeons was enough to do penance for my sins, but no, they’ve got to hang every damn person in my district because of a song. Sacrificing my people, my family, myself - when will it end? What’s it cost to buy freedom for Panem? What else am I supposed to give for a girl I don’t even remotely like?”

“It’s not her fault,” I crank out, hard pressed to keep a steady voice. Johanna knows how to push it, and she’s pushing it far this time. “You volunteered for this,” I remind her.

“And if everybody had played along like they were supposed to, including you, we’d all be enjoying refuge in Thirteen! But you douchebag had to break away from Finnick. Do a backflip for the sponsors, rushing to your damsel in distress and getting both of us picked up by that stupid patroler.”

Is she seriously jumping down my throat with that one? I can’t believe my ears. “I didn’t know about any plans back then, remember? Nobody cared to tell me.”

“You stick with the pack as long as you can!”

“I thought you and Finnick would turn on us!” My hands ball into fists. This is ridiculous!

“You think I’d have put up with Katniss’ bullheadedness for so long if I had the intention of killing her?” She leers at me. “I’d have done it right at the Cornucopia. And wouldn’t that have bumped up my stakes? Hm? Gutting pretty-face and her unborn child at that.”

The baby bomb was a fluke when it hit. It upset the Capitol audience (intended), Katniss (unplanned but bearable) and turned me into a versed fabulist (necessary). I’ve been having nightmares about it ever since, waking up with the panic that it wasn’t a lie at all. Obviously, it has become a very finnicky subject. I can’t endure a lot of criticism concerning it. Even less insults. Much less coming from someone who’s content on twisting it like a knife in my back.

I guess it’s instinct. Repressed aggression. I lunge at Johanna before I can think twice about it. Being taller by a head and having some forty pounds on her certainly helps bring her off her feet.

I’m about to give her a piece of her own medicine when I feel her fist making contact with my throat and then we’re flipping over, me gasping for air, her for more expletives. Somewhere on the periphery Annie goes into a screaming fit. But it’s a distant nuisance as I’m busy listening to my own voice bellow when the next blow catches me square across my already offended nose. With stars before my eyes I grope blindly for some kind of weapon, all the time trying to keep Johanna at bay.

My fingers close around the jagged edges of a rock. With as much force as I can muster I swing my arm up. Johanna’s weight withdraws instantly. The dull smack as my missile connecting with whatever part of her I hit has me ecstatic.

“Katniss never wanted to be the Mockingjay!” I scream.

“But she is! And look how she’s fucking it up!”
I grab a hold of her leg and wrench her off balance. A sick sense of triumph rushes through me when I watch her turn her bloodied face around. Her fingernails ripping the skin off my face are quick to bring me back to earth. They’d certainly feature a replay of this on Games Highlights. Who’d they root for, I wonder? *Who’s your favorite, Claudius? I don’t know, Ceasar, this looks like a neck-and-neck to me!*

A kick to the ribs coaxes a groan from my lips. It can’t be Johanna, who I’ve got in an escape-proof deadlock grip. So when I look up I’m quite bewildered to be staring up the muzzle of one of our guns.

“One more peep out of either of you,” threatens a very pissed-off Annie. Judging by her hoarse voice this isn’t the first warning she’s been giving us. The gun helps to finally make a statement. She must have bolted for it.

Johanna gingerly entangles herself from my grip only to carefully raise her hands. The rifle’s pointing at her, too.

“Put that thing down, Annie.” I say.

“Will you two retards finally break off that ego trip!” she thunders instead. “The whole world wants us dead and all you two are capable of doing is locking horns with each other. Let it be!”

“Love, peace and harmony,” promises Johanna and makes a lowering gesture with one hand.

“We’ll behave,” I second, since Johanna’s promise didn’t sound very convincing.

Eventually Annie puts down the rife. Everybody lets out a relieved sigh.

“Here,” I say and grab one of the frozen fish from the snow. I hold it out to Johanna as a token of peace. “I’m sorry about your face.” Purple patches start flowering around her right eye. The skin’s ripped too, scarlet red oozing. Looks like I scored a home run with that rock.

Johanna accepts my gift and throws me one of the smaller fish in return. “I’d normally tell you to push that up somewhere, but under these circumstances… I’d like to see you stick those fins up your nostrils.”

Some things will never change.

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Chapter End Notes

So, I watched Mockingjay. I was a very loyal fan and submitted myself to a Quadruple Feature that nearly fried my brain cells. There were a lot of things I liked and overall I am pleased with how they ended the series. My main concerns have three names: Johanna, Annie and Finnick. While Finnick got some screen time at least, Annie and Johanna have been reduced to two scenes each. Honestly? Lame.

Consider this chapter compensation to all the missing Johanna scenes in the movie. And also, this has been my headcanon ever since reading The Hanging Tree for the first time. I can so see Snow hanging a bunch of people as answer to Katniss' propo.
I hope you enjoy. Please let me know. Even if you don't. :)}
Interlude - Annie

Chapter Notes

Warnings for drug usage, violence and sexual abuse apply.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Interlude - Annie

Turquoise Bay is a secluded cove off what’s jokingly dubbed by the locals as Capitol Coastline. It’s an unfrequented little spot of serenity an hour’s hike over uneven terrain. Unsuitable for Capitol film crews and their bulky equipment, especially when the district has so many accessible beaches to offer.

That makes it a matchless retreat for Four’s superlative.

Mags is almost done with the shellfish. Few things are better than shrimp dipped in hot sauce, served on a plate of rice and steamed vegetables. Mags has spent the better part of her life perfecting the recipe. Gourmet chefs across the Capitol can hang their heads in shame.

I call to Finnick, who’s gliding through the water like a jubilant dolphin. He joins us, all sea-salt, sand and bronze, tussled hair. With a look that has half the female population back East go dodderly he says, “Embrace the Power of Cool. What makes the Ocean, makes the Man.”

Believe it or not, that line was enough to skyrocket a perfume company to the top of the eau-de-cologne hierarchy a few years back. Some people would buy the stuff in bulk, just in case the shops ran out of stock. That’s Capitol mentality - hoarding like squirrels.

“This is a-mazing,” drawls Finnick, inhaling the steam rising from his bowl. “You’ve outdone yourself again, Mags.”

His praise is answered by a heaping spoon of extras finding its way on his plate. There’s a simple rationale for Mags’ benevolence. Every additional pound of fat could be advantageous in the arena. A place both her and Finnick will soon visit for the second time in their lives.

Thanks to me, no less.

The first time in the arena is all about improvisation and spontaneity. The second time around the name of the game is preparation. Hours of footage on each of the twenty-four lucky contestants and years of logged friendships predict probable alliances. The surprise factor is essentially null.

“You’re getting all worked up about this,” says Finnick when I subject him and Mags to the flip-chart in my living room, listing tributes color-coded for their district. Four is, naturally, blue.

“And you’re not taking it seriously enough,” I counter. Mags backs me with an encouraging nod.

“Alright, alright,” Finnick says with no more sobriety than before. Sometimes he forgets to put down that peacock behavior. I hate when that happens. It’s like he brings back part of the Capitol, desacrating what little sanctuary we have built here.
“You’ll ask Johanna, I presume?” The friendship between those two goes deeper than any Career alliance could. Since Johanna is the only female victor for Seven, her reaping was a no-brainer.

“Yeah. She’ll be on board.”

I underline Johanna’s name in red. “You sure she’ll say yes?” There’s no way to put that in the bag until we take the train to the Capitol a month from now. The first constraint President Snow ordered after the Reaping was to cut all victor benefits. No more trips to the Capitol, no inter district publicity and certainly no communication between fellow tributes.

“She’ll put on airs, but she’ll play friends until the finals,” Finnick assures.

I’ll have to trust him on that. I don’t know her half as well as he does and our relationship goes down a different path, what with her involvement in me getting reaped five years back.

“Anyone else?”

“I can probably sweet-talk Cash into it. Would get Gloss in the boat too, once Cash orders him Heel.”

“So we’re aiming for the Career pack?”

“We’re always aiming for the Career pack, sweetie,” says Finnick in that cocky, smart-alecky tone. I’m trying my best to get him through this alive and he’s treating me like some Academy newbie. I turn back to the chart, vent my temper on marking off the twins.

Mags clears her throat, points to the bottom of my list.

I raise a brow. “Twelve?”

Finnick shares my hesitation. “Come on, Mags. You know the moment the gong goes off those two are toast. That’s why Snow’s putting up this show. Wouldn’t surprise me if he calls off the Quell after we see their pictures in the sky.”

Talk about Games manipulation. There’ll be a bit of tweaking every year of course: career bans (me), age limits (Finnick), accidental reapings (Haymitch’s girl). It’s mainly to put up a good show for the audience, aerate the tribute pool a little and prevent Victor’s Memorial down on Tribute Boulevard being full of One’s and Two’s.

Sometimes though these unwritten rules are aimed to warn particular individuals. Outside of the Capitol us Victors are the biggest threat to Snow’s dynasty. We don’t have any direct power, but people will look up to us, for better or for worse.

A lot of people look up to Katniss Everdeen these days.

Even more will watch when she meets her fate in the arena.

Two days ago everything went upside down and inside out. Alliances were signed and sealed. We were supposed to enter the Quell with a bombshell team of One, Four and Seven, just the way I had it planned out. Mediations between One and Seven proceeded stewy until Cashmere threw a temper tantrum, Johanna took up a dare and Peeta got the strip show of his life. It’s a little disgraceful that all of this had to be fought out on the back of Katniss’ purity, but in the end we had our Career pack and a no-attack agreement for Mags.

Enter Plutarch Heavensbee, newly baked head-gamemaker and his bona fide offer 48 hours prior
to the starting pistol. District Thirteen exists, the Quell is a ploy and Panem is about to witness a cabinet overhaul of a magnitude nobody has seen since the Dark Days. There are two options: join the country’s illusory liberator, Alma Coin, by babysitting Katniss until a rescue hovercraft breaches the arena, or keep playing the tried and tested game with a 23:1 disadvantage.

By the time Plutarch approaches us about it, Three, Six, Eight, Eleven and Twelve have signed their names to this homicidal adventure. One and Two are still oblivious and will probably stay that way. Five, Seven, Nine and Ten have declined. I can see why Plutarch puts on the best sales talk of his lives. He needs fighters. And while Mags isn’t fulfilling this submission, Finnick is one of the highest-scoring tributes, and certainly the best sponsored.

“No,” I immediately burst out when Plutarch is done talking. Everyone in the room is taken aback by the promptness of my answer. But we need the twins and Johanna for this. Finnick can’t go out there and safeguard half a dozen tributes by himself, all for some dubious promise.

But Finnick is lured like a moth to the light. “You guarantee extraction?”

“You have my word,” chirps Plutarch. Let’s not forget that Plutarch’s words will unleash a thousand deaths before they might bring one fairytale ending.

I take Finnick’s hand in mine, squeeze hard. Here, out of sight of the sponsors, we can be ourselves. I need to talk to Finnick now, not the persona he portrays for the Capitol.

“It’s too dangerous, Finn,” I whisper. “We can’t fall into this trap.” The Capitol, Thirteen, it doesn’t matter. Nobody ever keeps their promises, and even if they did, it’d be at our expense.

But, as so often in Victor relations, the oldest and most seasoned in Capitol politics take the decisions. Mags, without as much as deigning to look at us, presents Plutarch with a thumbs-up.

“What?” Finnick and I say in unison.

Plutarch bounces with glee. “Outstanding!”

Mags raises a hand and we all fall silent.

“Is there a problem?” asks Plutarch.

“No problem,” says Finnick, who caught on. “Negotiations.”

Mags points first to Finnick and herself, gives another thumbs-up, then trains a finger at me and, in the background, at Elmo’s room.

Finnick translates. “We want asylum for both tributes and mentors.”

Plutarch’s face drops and so does his outstretched hand. “The deal is for tributes only.”

“Then the deal is off.”

“But you just agreed to it!”

“On our terms,” Finnick holds out a hand, ready to barter with our lives. “Yea or nay?”

Plutarch thinks for a moment, weighs the success rate of his scheme against the lives of two additional refugees.

Then the fateful handshake. Bait, hook, reel. “Done.”
“You go and talk to Haymitch about the new alliance,” prompts Plutarch. “And meet Beetee down on Three before tomorrow.”

“I need to talk to Johanna first,” says Finnick.

Plutarch turns red in the face. “Oh, I think you can spare yourself that one. She was, um… quite categorical about her decision.”

Of course she was. She still bets on the alliance, on what we should be doing instead of picking up breadcrumbs offered by strangers.

Finnick remains adamant. Today he’s set on making choices for people without asking them first.

“Same conditions for her?”

“Absolutely.”

“Put her on the list.”

“Pleasure doing business with you, Mr Odair.”

Plutarch leaves and so do my nerves. My eyes are moist when I turn to Finnick and Mags.

“This will never work!” I cry. I had a flicker of hope for bringing Finnick back alive, but it’s been put out in a heartbeat by this suicidal project. What are we doing here? We’re President Snow’s scapegoats already, why now progress to martyrs for whole Panem?

What has Katniss Everdeen done to merit so many sacrifices?

“Don’t worry,” says Finnick, drunk on this prospect of liberty. “In a few days it’ll all be over.”

And that’s exactly what I fear.

Of the 78 hours the Games have been going on I’ve abandoned the screen for maybe six. Sleep is a pointless undertaking, no matter how important Haymitch claims it is. I don’t know how he’s doing it alone, how he’s done it alone for so many years.

Every booth has ten screens in total, five for the male tribute, five for the female. Since Mags’ death all of Four’s cameras are pointed at Finnick. And he’s tired. Finnick makes mistakes when he’s tired. Running after Katniss into the 4 o’clock zone. I have to mute the audio after two minutes. Can’t listen to him, or myself, or the jabberjays abusing my voice. I ask Elmo if I can send a parachute with a note to let Finnick know everything is alright over here.

“Won’t pass controls,” says Elmo gruffly. “No sense in wasting sponsor money.”

I look at the LED numbers above the door. Another fifteen hours to go until District Thirteen rises from the ashes and throws a curve ball at Snow and his regime.

“Hey, Sal, can you cover for me? I need a smoke.”

My palms are so sweaty I need to pat them dry on my pants every five minutes or so. I watch Haymitch briefly confer with Sal Cardew before he cedes his terminal to the Six mentor. Snagging his drink he turns for the door, flashing me a wink.

That’s the countdown right there.
In the arena Beetee splits the group in two, sending Johanna and Katniss off with the wire, while Finnick and Peeta stay back to protect the lightning tree. In two minutes I’m supposed to sneak off for a toilet break. My heart beats faster than Finnick’s ECG display.

I pray that Plutarch’s hovercraft is waiting on the rooftop as I slip by the stationary guards outside Mentor Central. Sliding my card through the reader I wait for the authorizing beep that tells me Annie Cresta, D4, checked out at 1643. The Capitol is ravenous for any form of surveillance, even here. It’s a miracle nobody has come up with the idea of implanting mentors yet, tracking us too. Well, if this whole affair goes down swinging, next year’s mentors have a big surprise waiting for them.

As if that thought had carried a jinx with it I overhear static crackles in one of the Peacekeeper’s ears.

“Ma’am, I’ll have to ask you to return to the observance room,” I’m ordered.

My heart leaps in my chest. I try to gulp down panic, feeling the sour aftertaste of the benzos I took an hour ago. Sweat drips from my hands in rivulets.

“Um, urgent toilet break. Five minutes?” My voice is that of a mouse.

“I fear I have to insist,” says the guard, unswayable. “I have my orders.”

My eyes dart from one visor to the other, intimidated that I can’t see the faces behind it. Terrified that they can see every fiber of me shaking.

The one on the left lets a hand drop to his service gun. I’m doomed. We’re all. Somebody talked. Snow knows. I wish I had taken that third pill. The two in my system are doing a poor job at keeping me from going hysterical.

“Ma’am, I’m not going to repeat myself a third time.”

And he doesn’t need to. Victors win their Games for one of three reasons: luck, skill or intuition. I don’t have the skill to take down two armed guards. Luck has obviously abandoned me. And my intuition tells me that if I turn around and bolt, I’ll have to do that with a bullet in my back.

My head hangs low as I reenter Mentor Central.

Plutarch’s grand scheme has blown up in our faces. The Training Center, to everyone’s surprise, has hidden capacities for the unlikely event of a putsch attempt.

Three days have passed since Thirteen should have welcomed us with open arms. Three days of being left in this dark, reeking cell, ignored and ignorant, sick with worry and ruled by terror.

They stormed Mentor Central the moment Katniss fired an arrow wrapped in Beetee’s wire. As expected One and Two showed some resistance, but overall opposition was meager. Elmo needs a cane just to keep upright and old Gunnar from Seven is practically deaf on both ears. Doesn’t stop the Peacekeepers to nudge them on with batons, so that, by the time we reached the detention rooms, half the representatives of Panem were beaten bloody. Most of them didn’t even know what for.

We’re stripped of everything but our clothes. They take the three bottles of benzos I had packed for Thirteen. I don’t know it yet, but a month from now I’ll be back in the firm clutches of PTSD: flashbacks, hyperarousal, apathy. And that’s before the real questioning even starts.
It must be about three months in I think. And that’s a far fetched guess, because my train of thought progressively derails with every victor they kill before my eyes. They decapitate Elmo, the similarity to my district partner in the arena too big to be incidental. I scream until I pass out.

Sal from Six and Bobbin from Eight go next. I can answer none of the questions that are supposed to save their lives. I’m no hero - I reveal everything I know the first time somebody is threatened to be hurt, only to learn that truth isn’t universal. Until I say what they want to hear, people continue to die.

On occasions I’m really groggy (a result of forceful appliance of sedatives, hypnotics or anxiolytics) I’ll inquire on Finnick’s whereabouts and condition. Unsurprisingly that paints me a glaring shade of traitor. My superficial involvement is subsidiary matter. They need a scapegoat and the choices narrow down with the suspects successively eradicated.

Anyway, month three.

Month three is when I learn that Johanna Mason has survived the arena. An odyssey of suffering begins.

The room smells of cooked meat and singed hair. Johanna sits strapped to a metal chair, arms and legs tied down by iron wire. What I see of her face is a display of bruises and open cuts, none of them trophies of the Quell. She’s still wearing the jungle uniform, soaked with blood and excrements and melted in parts to the skin.

“Look who we’ve brought you, Mason. Perhaps you’ll talk now.”

Johanna looks up as if only now given permission. It seems to take several moments until she registers just who’s supposed to gain her goodwill. All the more respectable that she manages to siphon some hidden reserves of energy.

“Don’t believe anything they say!” she hollers. “Finnick made it - he’s safe, he-”

Somebody rams a baton into her face. “Not that kind of talk, you cunt!”

I should be upset about the amount of blood gushing from Johanna’s mouth, but I’m pretty sure whoever is responsible for my medication drew up that syringe way too full. All I can do is watch the crimson patterns and listen to Johanna whimper in pain.

“Where’s Finnick?” I ask blabbily.

The head guard looks up. “Excellent question, Miss Cresta. We’ve been wondering that too.”

“I don’t know,” says Johanna at the threat of the baton. Her eyes keep drifting to a button in the head guard’s reach. “I don’t know anything.”

I could have told Johanna where that phrase will get her, but I’m too mesmerized watching a human body spark up like one of those fancy Capitol light shows.

The worst of it is the stench of boiling urine.

Johanna and I meet a lot over the following two months, none of them pleasant encounters. Every session more IVs and tubes stick out of Johanna’s arms, a medical emergency break if the guards fry her too long.
Myself? I’m boogieing down the highway of hallucinogens, startled by the rare glimpses of clearheadedness. It has benefits and drawbacks. The pain is a muffled companion on my ways to and from the interrogation rooms. Finnick, who has somehow escaped this terrible fate, checks in on my head trips to remind me that he’s doing this for us and that we can finally go home when all of this is over. And he’s right in that. I find solace in his words. When the prison releases me, I’ll go back to Four. Riding in the back of the tribute train, snuggling the velvety insides of my ornately carved coffin.

The lucid moments are less delightful. When I’m in full control of myself and my aches, alone in my cell, exposed and bleeding and a feast for the sharks. When Johanna isn’t there to share the humiliation.

That’s when the guards come, riled and overworked at the end of a long day, in search of anything to vent their anger out on.

And God, they do horrible things.

“Annie. Annie I need you here now. Wake up. We have to go.”

Sirens, red lights, and Johanna relentlessly shaking me. She looks bad. Her hair is gone completely, streaks of crimson an unsatisfactory replacement. What is she doing here? We’ve never been issued direct contact before. A new ploy?

“I don’t know where Finnick is,” I say in exasperation. It’s the only question I’ve been hearing for weeks. He’s gone. Left. Never even bothered to come back for me.

Johanna’s open palm connects hard with my cheek. “Come back to your senses,” she hisses. “Don’t mess up our only chance.”

Something cold and heavy is pressed into my arms. Johanna guides my hands. “Pull the trigger on everything that moves, as long as it’s not me.”

Somehow I find the strength to get back to my feet, bare soles numb against the cold tiled floor.

Johanna has to claw the gun away from me five minutes later, after we intersect some of the regular guests to my cell.

“You’ve emptied a mag of lead into them. Damn, girl.”

I don’t care. They deserved it. They all deserved it.

And it’s the only reason Peeta Mellark gets away with nothing worse than a broken nose. Because I have no more bullets to shoot him with.

“That looks really bad.”

“Yeah. Feels bad, too.”

Peeta is still asleep. The Capitol is still burning. Somehow we’re still alive.

I wipe Johanna’s arm with an antiseptic. The wires broiled deep lines into the skin of her forearm, snaking as far as her fingertips.

“Thank you,” I say haltingly. “For getting us out of there.”
Johanna concentrates a little too much on my medical handiwork. “We’re in the same boat.”

A lifeboat abandoned to the stormy sea by its mother ship. What are the odds we’ll ever see the shore again?

I think of the only person on that ship I still care about. “Finnick made it?”

A sigh. “I don’t know.”

“You said he did.”

“I said anything and everything down there. He wasn’t on the hovercraft with me and Peeta. Never saw him during questioning. He’s a lucky stiff. Maybe.”

She puts her free hand over mine, forces me to lock gazes. “Annie. Whatever happened to Finnick, we can’t tie up loose ends now. We need to get someplace safe first. That’s the goal. You hear me?”

I swallow. “Yeah.”

Peeta appears in the doorway, looking like his batteries failed to charge during the night. Johanna sends him off to take a shower.

I rummage through the med kit. Thankfully Capitolites are painstakingly fussy about building a back-up pharmacy in their homes.

“You should take some antibiotics,” I tell Johanna and pass her a box of pink pills. Then my fingers wrap around another bottle and I skim over the labeling. Diclazepam. Anxiolytic, antidepressant, amnesic, hypnotic. Never get off your prescription, that’s what the doctors in Four said when they put me on therapy five years back.

“I need these,” I say out loud, as if I have to justify my actions.

Johanna just shrugs in accord, doesn’t object. Every victor has their way of coping with what happened in the arena.

Or the prison.

There’s not nearly enough water in this world that can cleanse me of that filth.

Listening to Finnick so heedlessly shed light on the dirtiest cipher of victor existence has me cut out of the tent before Peeta can as much as look at me.

Before I have to look at him.

Because I know what I’ll see in his eyes. The same thing that was in Finnick’s, in Johanna’s, in my own when I learned about the extended obligations of my win. Turns out that triumph in the arena has more to do with being a victim than being a victor.

I remember when Mags and Finnick pulled me aside, giving me the talk. How do you re-instruct someone on the value of their their body? The Capitol is a beast with unquenchable hunger - it will take all you have, and then some more. Neither morals, ethics, nor dignity will keep it from its prey. And when it bites its teeth sink deep. It has the likes of Finnick at the throat for decades. Johanna has torn herself raw in her struggle to escape. The Enobarias of this world are fanatically
loyal to the cause, misreading perversion for idolization.

The first night I walked arm in arm with Finnick, drunk on apprehension, each step bringing me closer to what was to become the beginning of my new victor era. We were accosted by Four’s most devoted sponsors. It was a night of toasts and heraldry, at least until the official festivities ceased and the offstage orgies began. Finnick slipped me a round yellow pill and said things were easier if I loosened up a little. He’d taken two already and had just as many Capitol girls around his waist.

I stuck a fork in my patron’s eye that night, high on little yellow pills that made the blood spurt like a magic rainbow from my victim’s skull. While they shipped me straight to Four’s funny farm, Finnick took the rap for my actions. If you asked Ceasar Flickerman he’d say that Finnick had a bachelor prime time for the next two months. I was never asked to perform for patrons again.

So when Finnick speaks of self-sacrifice and cites me as the why and whatfor of his actions I can’t help but be overcome by burning shame. But the further I flee from the tent, the more another emotion mixes into my bowl of self-loathing: Anguish. For striking a blind deal with Plutarch without as much as thinking about it. For never making a stand against the guards outside of Mentor Central. For holding out hope that Finnick would come, for five months straight. For surrendering, in the end, to the bleak truth, the guards’ molesting hands and the reassuring dullness brought on by the benzos ever since we left that hellish place behind.

Finnick has no right to call me frail and defenseless.

I’ve survived all of what he put me through.

“See, that’s what I’ve been talking about,” I say, drawing a line across the map. “This is where Seven ends, the wild zone, and there’s Ten.”

“I’ve been there only once,” says Johanna reservedly. “It’s a shot in the dark. Who knows if we’ll reach a settlement before we run out of food?”

District Ten is the most densely populated part of Panem and even so the livestock-to-person ratio is of outlandish nature. The landscape is crammed with farms and butcheries and most of the crops grown in Nine go into the stock farming of its neighboring district. With so much meat production one would think that no mouth in Panem has to go hungry. In reality most of what is produced in Ten gets shipped to the Capitol where it’s sold for dumping prices, while people in the districts outperform each other with tessarae offers for the prospect of agricultural waste.

Peeta fells the decision in the end. “If we stay here we’ll starve or get seized by Peacekeepers. We can’t go back. So we can only go on, right?”

“On and on,” mumbles Johanna.

We leave thirty-five snow coffins in our wake. Seven bids us farewell with icy tears.

The border looks like someone took a giant razor and drew it straight across the landscape to Seven’s east. One moment we’re walking among the familiar tree lines, parallel as if someone had planted them with the help of a laser gauge, and the next we step into the unkempt wilderness where brush and fern compete for dominance.

“There’s no fence,” observes Peeta surprised.
“Well, hello?” says Johanna, pulling a face. “Have you ever looked at that map? Seven is huge! Who’d have time to build a fence around it? That’s ridiculous. Where’d that epiphany come from?”

“We have a fence in Twelve,” says Peeta. “I just generalized I guess. Do you have a fence in Four, Annie?”

I almost drop a laugh at that. A fence on the sea? It would be a sight to behold. “No.” I shake my head. “No fences in Four.”

That leaves Peeta at a loss. “So why don’t you all just break away?”

It would be the stuff fairy tales are made off. Running from the power-hungry regime, a story of hardships and hopes and rainy day romances. Johanna puts into words what goes through my head.

“Where’d we go?”

Panem belongs to the Capitol and the Capitol is Snow’s. There’s nowhere to flee to. It’s the exact problem we’re facing at the moment. Safety is a dead thing in this country.

Peeta gets some extra lessons in fence-less population control (electronic shackling for Seven, portable forcefields for Four) while we stroll through the desolate serenity of the wild zone.

Seven’s winter onbreak was bad enough, but at least we had trees to ward us against the coldest winds. There wasn’t an hour in the day without my teeth clattering painfully against each other. The last time I felt my toes was back in the raided village.

Peeta with his fake leg has particular difficulties navigating the rugged terrain. Every so often we have to call in impromptu breaks so he can readjust the prosthetic, or so either Johanna or me can return it to him when it gets stuck in the snow. It’s annoying and time-consuming, but I try not to nag about it too much. Johanna has that covered just fine.

Most nights we’ll seek refuge behind the walls of long forgotten ruins. The wild zone, it turns out, is ancestor to a time before the Dark Days and Panem’s cradle. Rusty metal constructs and stone walls are all that remain from our heralded past, barely enough to offer some cover against the elements. None of us are in the mood to speculate and hypothesize.

Hunger becomes the dominating force keeping me on my feet. Peeta halves our portions once it becomes apparent that we can’t keep our planned course straight east. Johanna starts to nibble on little twigs throughout the day, but when questioned admits it tastes like nothing and discredits any nutritive value.

I’ve stopped taking pills. They have a devastating effect on an empty stomach and I can’t sustain the extra energy output to cry myself to sleep on a cramping tummy. Peeta borrows the rifle one day and tries to shoot a bird, but it turns out even our last ally has forsaken us. No mockingjay for dinner.

Then something unexpected happens. For two days we riddle over a massive structure on the horizon, the tip of a metal dome peeking over the canopy. Eventually I call for reconnaissance. We send Johanna up a tree to scout from a clear vantage point. On the ground I pace incessantly, part anxiety, part freezing to death. Peeta once more tinkers with the prosthetic.

Johanna’s eyes are the size of the moon when she returns.
“What?” Peeta wants to know. “What did you see?”

Johanna smirks, a smile half sardonic, half secretive, as if the answer to that question could blow our minds. “You’ll never believe me.”

“Not unless you tell us,” I say, not particularly in the mood for waiting games.

“Okay,” says Johanna and the elation in her voice reminds me of Four’s escort, Cordia. An unbearably cheerful character. “You have seventy-five guesses.”

Wait.

“What?” Peeta’s eyebrows migrate to his hairline.

Johanna looks like somebody deflated her balloon. “Don’t tell me you need more hints.”

“This isn’t what I think it is,” I say. “Is it?”

“The one who gets it right first inherits all my Victor savings,” promises Johanna.

Peeta takes the lead, an iffy, speculative guess at our imminent future and Johanna’s mattress full of money.

“Are you seriously trying to tell us there’s an arena out there?”

Johanna manically claps her hands, a drugless high brought on by near starvation and the creeping surrender of sanity.

“Aaand we have a winner!” she hoots and takes off. “Come on! Let’s go! Third time’s the charm!”

While I watch the two of them disappear into the thicket embracing whichever death contraption awaits us, I remain frozen in place as my legs finally bow out to the cold.

The wave.

The big wave.

It’s coming for me.

I can’t go back there.

Chapter End Notes

This was by far the hardest chapter to write. I’ve been getting very comfy telling from Peeta’s POV and here comes Annie, completely derailing me. I’m really glad to be out of her head again, but to avoid the "Katniss-issue" aka biased/restricted storytelling there will be an interlude chapter from a different POV following every completed part.

Let me know what you think of Annie, especially you Odesta folks out there!

Merry Christmas and see you next year.
Part II - Six

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Part II

A DREAM OF FREEDOM

Confession is not betrayal.
What you say or do doesn’t matter; only feelings matter.
If they could make me stop loving you - that would be the real betrayal.

Chapter 6

The arena looms before us, a mammoth dome of metal. I’ve never seen one from the outside. The windowless hovercrafts always dropped me right into its deadly innards. A solitary walk down a prosaic corridor and into the tribute preparation room with only Portia there to ease some of my fear. I wonder if she’s still alive, but I stop myself from thinking too far since she probably isn’t anymore.

“It will take days to find the entrance,” says Johanna, the first flood of euphoria ebbed away. The arena must be bigger than my entire home town and that’s quite a statement, seeing how 80% of Twelve’s population are crammed into White Rock.

“We’ll find it.” I’m still optimistic. If we don’t find it we’ll starve to death and I’d rather not go down that path.

I put a hand on the metal wall. The reflective plates feel icy against my touch. They’re not doing a very good job at catching the warmth of the sun. I wonder what it looks like inside.

“Which one do you think this is?” I ask. There’s no way of telling from here. Seventy-five possibilities. Well, seventy-four. I guess we can exclude the Quell arena. That one’s blown to pieces.

“I hope it’s not mine,” says Johanna. “We’d freeze more in there than we do out here.”

Arctic wasteland. They pulled her out more popsicle than tribute, critically hypothermic and frost-bit on all extremities. Yeah, Johanna’s arena would suck.
Annie’s been trying to mimic the whiteness of the snow around us ever since we found this killer gem. Her eyes have a ghastly glaze to them. No matter what arena we’re standing in front of, Annie’s currently skipping down memory lane to her own.

“Let’s set up camp here,” I suggest. It’s barely noon, but I don’t want to go in there come dark. We can scout it out tomorrow morning, take the entire day to explore.

Who knows what’s in there, anyway. Best not to play with ghosts past midnight.

It’s a sleepless night. We lie in line next to each other, staring at the tent canvas as if it were the star-sprinkled sky above. There’s a rip in the fabric down the middle suture, so if I squeeze my eyes I can just make out the glow of the moon. It’s bursting full, an appropriate requisite for tonight’s story time.

Today I learn about the fate of old arenas. The Capitol loves its victors, so it’s no great leap of thought that they will suck money from every crevice available to them. Past arenas are whitewashed, restructured and expanded until they lure in Capitolite visitors like moths to the light, avid fans who want to relive the top moments of their favorite tributes.

“They’re built like theme parks,” says Johanna. “Those idiots, they pilgrim by the thousands. Mutt attractions, holo reenactments, action figures for the little brats… everything you want to forget, they pink it up and posterize it.”

“Macabre.” It’s hard to imagine guided tours to the cave I battled for life in, family photos in front of the Cornucopia. Or how about imitation nightlock berries? Sold by the pound, perhaps even inbrued in sugar. Postcards with little Rue’s face on them.

“Have you ever been to one?” I ask.

Annie shakes her head. She hasn’t partaken in this conversation a lot. It’s not an easygoing topic, I admit.

Johanna is more open about it. I guess the paralyzing horror ebbs the third time around. And this once we go in as a team, not as opponents. Nothing needs to be proven, no cannon sounds to keep us up at night. This time, we’re visitors only. At least that’s what I hope.

“I had to promote my arena, yeah,” says Johanna in answer to my question. “Drugged out of my mind though. No idea what was going on, only that somebody kept a steady supply of pills coming. They say I had a good time. I was high for days. Blight locked me up on the Seventh Floor until he managed to convince me that I couldn’t fly, no matter how much I insisted.” I wonder if that has something to do with the forcefield on the roof of the Training Center.

“Anyway,” continues Johanna. "They stopped the tradition two years later. Rye Brown from Eight had some sort of flashback during the opening ceremony and clubbed the presenter to death with his microphone. Bad publicity. A lot of guests wanted their money back, since subsequent victor photoshoots were canceled.” She scrunches her nose. “Can you imagine that? Paying all that money and then not getting your picture taken? It must have been close to a national catastrophe.” While the rest of the nation continued its daily survival in poverty. I can commiserate.

And then I try to imagine Katniss and I standing on stage, reading cards that Effie prepares for us. We’re so glad to be back here! It’s such a delight to be able to share these extraordinary memories with you all. Thanks to the generosity of the Capitol everyone can now experience this exhilarating adventure. Don’t forget to check out the Fireball Ride - that’s Katniss’ favorite! I’d
fake laugh for the cameras, we’d sign some autographs on the way out and hole up in one of the VIP suites for the remainder of the opening weekend, being miserable and battling nightmares. A dream come true.

Thanks, Rye Brown, for sparing me that.

I get the jitters the moment we step out of the tent. It’s a bright, cloudless sky, the kind that turns your stiff socks into deadly clubs. Even the shoelaces on my boots froze into solid sticks.

The arena looms mystically before us, morning dew rising like mist from the grass. *Abandon hope, all ye who enter here.* Over breakfast - fish remains, nothing else is left - we discuss how to tackle this monumental project. It must be the first time in history that someone attempts to break into an arena. I can hardly believe it myself.

We consider to branch out in two groups so we can cover more ground, but three is a bad split and nobody wants to go alone. Funny, how the first time around we all tackled the Games individually, and won. Today we won’t touch the damn thing without holding hands.

So after packing up camp we begin to circle the dome, counter-clockwise. That’s easier said than done. Flora and fauna see the arena as an intruder of their private space. Trees and ivy snake up the metal construction. We have to bushwhack around more than I’d like to and that goes hand in hand with postholing, the act of sinking into snow up to your knees or hips and learning more of Seven’s sheer numberless assortment of curse words.

Once we find it, the entrance is every inch the Capitol kitsch I expect it to be. A massive gate is built into the side of the arena, all solid, polished steel. Chrome letters WELCOME TO THE HUNGER GAMES.

“They all look the same from the outside,” says Johanna when I complain about the lack of year numbering. So that guessing game goes on.

Naive enough to think that we can force open a ton-heavy doorway with muscle power only, we wedge the biggest knife into the crack between the metal plates as a substitute crowbar. The result is predictable.

I glare at the severed blade in my hand and the piece that remains jammed in the door. 1-0 for the arena.

“Let’s try there.” Annie points to some rectangular extensions bulging from the dome ahead of us. I don’t want to sacrifice another knife in vain, so I play ball with that. One storied buildings are merged into the arena’s hull. I wonder what purpose they have. Not of letting people in, obviously. There are no doors.

“How about you give me a little nudge up there?” Johanna suggests, gesturing to the top. “There’s got to be some maintenance entry to this thing.”

Annie and I interlace our hands so Johanna has something to step on. Together we lift her enough so she can grab the edge of the roof, pulling herself the reminder of the distance. It’s not what I’d call the most elegant of moves, but it does the trick.

“Hand me the gun,” says Johanna from on top. “Just in case.”

It’s the first time I think this plan might not be such a good idea.

Arenas are made to kill. Who says they stop just because the Games are over?
I pour more tea into Annie’s cup. We made a fire against the cold, but it’s not very effective in the wind. Johanna has been gone for over an hour. I’m starting to worry.

There was indeed a ventilation shaft on top and Johanna said she’d go try to open the main gate from the inside. Annie and I categorically denied, but an embarrassing ten minutes later it became evident that we were shamefully incapable of mastering the wall. Annie lacks the grip strength to hold on and I’m an invalid when it comes to anything requiring more than the most gross motor skills with my fake leg. So Johanna went at it alone after face-palming about our physical shortcomings. We weren’t all born on pine trees, okay?

Meanwhile the both of us regrouped in front of the entrance, where WELCOME TO THE HUNGER GAMES brazenly gnaws at our nerves. What if there are mutts? What if Johanna dead-ended somewhere and can’t come back? What if this is all part of Snow’s plans and Johanna just volunteered for the 76th? Will we see the live broadcast from outside?

Annie produces a little bottle from her pocket and pops a pill into her mouth.

“What’s that?” I ask. The bottle disappears a little too quickly.


My own nerves are halfway to the moon. Where’s Portia, talking me back down to earth before my big debut? Remember the plan, Peeta. Stick with the Careers, Peeta. Don’t worry about Katniss, Peeta. And then the glass tube raises around me, trapping me inside, lifting me up into the devil’s playground. Dozens of cameras zoom in on my face, catching every pore of me, every drop of sweat rolling down across the goosebumps on my skin. The double digits in the center, Claudius Templesmith counting the seconds to my doom.

I make a 180° leap of thought in an attempt to stop the number from reaching zero.

“Annie, did you love Finnick right away?”

I have no idea where that came from. But somehow it feels imperative to know, right now. I’m down to 3 and I don’t want to leap off that platform, running for my life.

Annie is taken aback by the sudden intrusion into her private life.

“I’m sorry,” I quickly add, realizing that I might have overstepped certain boundaries. “You don’t have to answer.”


“Oh,” I say. “What made the difference?”


And as if on cue (0) the giant doors creak their consent and part before us. Johanna hops out victoriously, wearing a tacky, plastic crown with the letters WINNER stamped on it in glitter font.

“Guys, there’s a gift shop in there!”

We write the year of the 69th Hunger Games. Vogue Locke, District 1, has just been crowned victor after a particularly intense performance. What critics will later refer to as Wonderland has cost 23 children 23 most grueling deaths. It goes down in history as the second-ranked Games in
term of player-by-environment kills - the 50th, it seems, can’t ever be dethroned.

‘Stunningly grim! A journey into the darkest crevices of human fantasy, with spectacular visuals and an unforgettable cast’ is what supposedly awaits us if you can go by the promises in the Visitor’s Guide pamphlet.

For the time being we’ve hunkered down in the gift shop, the first establishment one comes across when entering the arena. Green lights illuminate merchandise, aisles full of fan produce waiting to be picked up. Johanna puts the crown back on its rack. A pity she doesn’t want to keep it; it’s on sale.

According to the computers down in Maintenance the arena is running on auxiliary systems only. The batteries are depleted so the generators won’t start. Johanna mentions solar panels on the roof and that we probably have to clean them of snow. I’m stumped for an answer. I wish Beetee were here to guide us through the technical labyrinth.

Annie comes back from a cursory inspection of the shop. She produces an armful of sweets and cookies, all themed to this year’s games. Munching on jelly worms I wonder what Wonderland’s tributes had to feed on.

With full bellies we inch our way onward, leery of what this place has in store for us. Johanna guides us to the computer room from where she activated the front gate. We all climb the maintenance shaft to the roof where the solar panels are located, slumbering peacefully under a foot-thick layer of snow. Once uncovered, the computer predicts a battery charge in sixteen hours (it’s getting dark outside by the time we’ve advanced so far).

“I think we should stay put for tonight,” I suggest, standing in front of a cardboard sign showing the way to MAIN ATTRACTIONS. Exploring the arena after the dark? Thanks, but no thanks.

We return to the gift shop and light a small fire from visitor guides and discount coupons. With the main systems down it’s as chilly inside as it is outside. Annie hoards more sweets while Johanna and I pile tribute pillows, arena sweatshirts and district scarves (Twelve is an ugly grey tone) into a snug berth. Snuggling into our sleeping bags like fat grubs in their cocoons we pig out on sugar until I feel sick.

“Another record broken,” says Johanna, oddly proud. “Three times, Peeta. We’re triple crowners now. What’d you think of that?”

I think it’s a nightmare that started almost two years ago and still hasn’t ended. “Yeah, that’s cool.”

We make sarcastic jokes about seeking refuge in a slaughterhouse while the rest of Panem is at war. Vogue Locke’s posters admonish us for finding rest - however brief - at his expense. Behind another set of doors Wonderland waits to convenience a band of very special guests.

It’s sinister how well I sleep that night.

Floodlights blind me, the anthem of Panem rackets in my ears and I’m back in the interrogation room with the vultures, pleading for mercy.

Annie wakes up screaming beside me.

I have nothing to do with this rebellion!

Johanna scrambles on top of me ready to fight it out to the death.
But I only wanted to protect Katniss!

And Wonderland rouses from its sleep.

We’ve conked out completely until that rather rough wake up call. It’s close to noon on a January morning and the batteries have charged to 75%, the lower margin for power restoration. Would we like to restart all systems?

Johanna stares at the computer screen with about three sets of rings under her eyes. She almost strangled me in our morning panic. Annie gulped down two of her nothing-just-for-the-nerves tablets and I’m close to plunk down and wish this all to hell. I speak my mind.

“We had better get out of here while we can.”

“Nonsense,” says Johanna and clicks around on the keyboard. “Winter’s just about to fire up. We’ll turn into ice cubes out there. This can’t be more than some stupid computer gimmick.”

Stupid computer gimmicks have been responsible for kids’ deaths for the last 75 years. Let’s not gild the lily.

“What do I press? Yes or No?”

“Just do it already,” says Annie, fidgeting with a strand of her hair.

Johanna looks at me for confirmation.

I nod my head skeptically. *Do it. At least that way, if it all goes down the tube, it’s your fault, not mine.*

The drumming bass of heavy machinery launches somewhere deep in Wonderland’s belly.

*Systems successfully booted...*

*Welcome to The Hunger Games Interface 11.8.*

Hm. Does that make us Gamemakers now?

Holding hands like kids exploring a forbidden place at night, we creep down the deserted corridors towards *MAIN ATTRACTIONS*. My heart is somewhere on the back of my tongue, beating in tune to the by now annoying anthem of Panem in the background.

At the crossroads of *VISIT THE ARENA* and *GUEST ACCOMMODATIONS* we decide to get it over with and take the grand tour through Vogue Locke’s personal hell. A set of glass doors opens up to welcome us to the warm, slightly humid atmosphere of Wonderland. Rainbow cobblestones mark a distinct track to be followed and this time I don’t want to be the one to veer off the beaten path.

Wonderland is someone’s vivid - and slightly disturbing - imagination come to life. We walk under mushrooms the size of grown trees, flowers of every color as big as my head. From the ground rises a fine mist that sometimes makes it hard to see the trail, but I’m pretty sure that’s just a Capitol gimmick to add more drama for the visitors. Before long we reach the Cornucopia with its twenty-four platforms, this year fashioned from a gigantic snail’s shell and individual mushroom lamps. The Cornucopia is restocked with its original provisions and a velvety cordon surrounds the whole thing asking guests to please abstain from touching anything.
That’s like a written invitation, really.

I know it sounds stupid, but stepping into the restricted area feels like a minuscule victory against Snow and his rules. We begin to cram through goodies, throwing usable stuff on a growing stockpile. Obviously there’s no food - they replaced that with non-perishable plastic copies - but we can salvage enough serviceable items. New packs, knives, a rope and one sleeping bag. The ridiculously unwieldy bihänder we leave behind. It’s hard to imagine Vogue owing his victory to the weapon, but like most Ones and Twos he came from the Tribute Schools. They do nothing else there but play with such toys from sunup to sundown in order to make a good impression when they die.

The path snakes on, leading us past notable sites. The **BATTLE OF CARDS** to our right, where the girl from Four used a deck of cards (instead of throwing knives) to end a duel with Eight’s male tribute in her favor. And over there, the **FINAL SHOWDOWN** between Vogue and his nemesis, the boy from Two. Towards the end of our tour we reach the **MUTT ENCLOSURES**, three glass corrals holding *some of the most savage adversaries in Hunger Games history*.

A swarm of butterflies inhabits the first, one more stunning than the other. They’re about the size of my palm and if I didn’t know better I’d say they’re the most tranquil animals I’ve ever encountered.

“Nasty little buggers,” says Johanna as we watch a replay of what the insects are capable of doing. On a mounted screen we can take in the blood lust of these critters. A replay of Five’s female tribute’s last moments reveals the hunting behavior of the mutts. A single one will decoy the victim into a trap where the rest of the swarm waits. And then they attack, all at once, all over. These butterflies are carnivorous. Only the bones of Five’s girl remain for her family to mourn.

I think I’ll reevaluate my thought on butterflies from now on.

The next cage holds a dozen white rabbits. Ordinary size and apparel if it weren’t for the signal red eyes and a dentition that belongs in a bear’s mouth, not a hare’s. The signpost claims they’re nocturnal and responsible for the death of four tributes. A Ten-Eleven alliance got razed to the ground while sleeping at night. Gross. Thankfully the night vision cameras only display the carnage in vague detail. There must be a limit to how much violence is entertaining and, in turn, marketable. These killer bunnies definitely hopped the line.

The last enclosure is inconspicuous. Naturally, my alarm bells are running in top gear. There are no mutts inside, just some fancy hedge sculptures. Three green mountain lions, one standing, one sitting and one lying down. I’ve never seen a real one before, but they showed us pictures at school, funneling an immoderate fear of the dangers outside the fence.

Packs of wolves in the dozen, starving grizzlies that will eat anything they see, poisonous plants that make the arena look like a bed of roses. And cougars, malicious beasts as big as a grown man, strong and cunning, an adversary you see only when it wants you to see it - and by then it’s too late. As young boys, my brothers and I would stay up till all hours in our shared room, telling stories of the monsters behind the fence and boast how we would slay them, bringing home the enemy furs as a token of our bravery. None of us ever slipped beyond the fence.

Years later I would learn from Katniss, the only one who walked on forbidden ground - and spent a good part of her life on the other side - that the forests were indeed alive; with squirrels and turkeys, and seldomly, if you were really lucky, deer. No many-headed hound dogs or horse-sized cougars. Those only existed in my fantasy.

“What are the mutts?” I peer into the farthest corner of the cage, but see nothing. Are they
underground? Invisible?

Annie studies the marker. “Those *are* the mutts.”


“Yeah. Look.”

On screen Vogue is about to pass one of the hedges. The sitting lion. He’s as undaunted by the thicket as we are, much to his chagrin. As soon as he steps past it, the mutt comes to life. Nimble as the beast it was designed after the hedge lion sets to jump and then it’s on Vogue’s back, pinning him down with root claws that are as sharp as knives. His only chance of survival is the Two girl he stroke an alliance with, who ambushes the mutt from behind and manages to garner its attention long enough for Vogue to roll out of its reach.

Now transfixed on the girl the lion charges again and brings her to the ground (how heavy can it be? It’s a bush!). Vogue steps in for the finishing blow, raising his sword. In one swift motion he brings it down into the mutt’s back. As if it’s made of glass the hedge cat bursts into shards of branchlets and needles. Nobody reckoned with such a quick victory, least of all Vogue. Still leaning into the strike he doesn’t have time to combat a new enemy: gravity. You can see on his face that he tries to stop the downward motion, but the blade penetrates his ally’s chest like butter. The cannon fires immediately.

My eyes dart back to the cage. The hedge sculptures are only someone’s work of art, nothing more. None of them move. The sitting lion is cut in a way that it peers right at the audience. I don’t know if animals can grin, but this one has a menacing sneer chiseled into its snout. The hair on the nape of my neck stands on edge. Damn Gamemakers, setting it up like that. Giving the creeps to fat Capitol kids and superstitious victors.

“Come on,” I say. I just want to be out of here. “Tour’s over.”

You can take pictures with a holo of Vogue wearing his winner’s crown before the exit. He waves the passing guests over and his cheeky grin has something of a Finnick Odair in it, sans the playboy attitude. To me it only says *Look at me. Take it in. Not even Death would have me.*

We skip the photo session. Johanna says Vogue’s a poor bloke. He went down the same road as Haymitch and spends his time at the bottom of the bottle ever since. Not the poster child One wants the public to see, Vogue rarely returns to mentor. Annie’s never met him. Cashmere and Gloss represent their district, and both of them do it from inside a coffin now.

The guest accommodations are a selection of the Capitol’s best. Our tribute quarters look like closets in comparison. Beds made of satin and velvet, jacuzzi showers with dozens of fragrance options. TVs that stretch across an entire wall.

Annie flops down on a mattress. It almost swallows her up. She takes a deep breath, lets it out blissfully slow. “Divine.”

Johanna pops open the mini bar. Out comes a bottle and three chilled glasses. She pours each of us a sip of *Brún* champagne (from One).

“A toast to us,” says Johanna, handing out the drinks. “Because fuck the odds.”

“Saluté,” agrees Annie.

“Cheers to that,” I say.
Our glasses clink together. The sparkling wine touches my lips and leaves a bubbly aftertaste in my throat. I feel myself being carried back to a night of fireworks and cocktails, an evening of being looked up to, but also of being scorned. It’s the day I proposed to Katniss. It’s the day I failed to convince President Snow.

Can you top velvet beds and vanilla showers?

We find the canteen. We open the heavy steel doors to Wonderland’s freezer room. I think there are tears in Johanna’s eyes as she inspects one of many boxes. The room is stocked to the brim.

Gone are the days of empty stomachs.

The rest of the day we while away in the kitchen, stoves fired up, the smell of hamburger patties heavy in the air. My stomach stretches to alarming levels by burger number four, but I don’t care. I could keep going forever. Annie brings jelly worms for dessert and Johanna refills glass after glass with horrendously sweet lemonade.

Today, far away from global wars, undisturbed by taunting grins of hedge cats and without the trace of even a mockingjay on my mind, I thrive in Wonderland’s kitchen. There is flour and salt and egg yolk powder. Bars of dark chocolate. Bags of sugar. My fingers knead the dough like a long lost lover. After being everything the Capitol made me be - tribute, victor, killer, traitor - I can finally, if only for a short moment, be what I started out as: a baker.

Two trays of chocolate croissants cook in the oven while we put Eleven’s best wines to the test.

No croissant survives the night.

By the time I find my way into bed, stuffed and three sheets to the wind, I’m confident that we’re going to have a great time here.

And that says a lot about an arena. Wonderland should feel honored.

And it is. It’s excited. It has new pets to play with.

Ready?

A toast to the odds!

Chapter End Notes

Pheew. I had a near meltdown when my PC crashed and I thought everything got pulled into the dark abyss of hard-drive destruction (I’m one of those stone age people who don’t back up their stuff). Luckily some computer whiz performed CPR on my laptop and brought it back to the land of the living. That explains the long update time.

On the chapter: This one’s for Lewis Carroll and the Queen of Hearts. I thought long and hard if I should make it a familiar arena (Johanna's or Annie's or maybe even Finnick’s), but really, what's the odds for that? So here's to a no-namer. But don't
worry - there'll be a lot more victor memorabilia coming up. Also, for plot reasons Johanna won the 66th instead of the 71st, just on a side note.

What do you think of the arena? When I saw Jurassic World in summer, I thought 'Yep. That's how they'd market the arenas too.' And don't you think it's gross that an actual, RL Hunger Games theme park is in the planning stages?
Chapter 7

My day starts less gloriously than the previous one ended: with my face in the toilet bowl, throwing up my guts. I revisit all the food I knew couldn’t possibly fit in my stomach yesterday, but still stuffed in regardless. There goes everything that came in after burger number four, a half digested mess soaked deliciously in at least four kinds of wine.

Once I’m sure that I’ve disposed of all surplus I drag myself onward and crawl into the shower. You’d think that after months of insufficient hygiene washing myself would top my priorities, but my olfactory system seems to have taken a huge blow along the way. I can barely smell myself - or Annie or Johanna. But a shower promises quick relief for my terrible hangover, so I embrace the opportunity. I shimmy out of my clothes, unlatch the prosthetic and hoist myself up to reach the tap.


With a lack of spare clothes I amble down the deserted corridors with only a towel wrapped around my waist, feeling oddly free. My immediate goal is the gift shop, although I nearly veer off the right path at the intersection to the kitchen. The girls must be awake. I can smell food. My stomach is ready for a rematch.

But first things first. In the gift shop I help myself to some proper wardrobe. Choosing something that doesn’t feel wrong or discriminating is impossible, so I don’t even bother. I pick a t-shirt (I luv the HUNGER GAMES), a matching hoodie (VICTOR), nondescript sweats and a pair of plush socks with Vogue’s picture on them. I’m sorry to be trampling around on his face, but I won’t lower myself to the girls’ version, puke pink with fake diamonds on the trim. There are certain boundaries I’m not willing to cross, even now.

Back in the kitchen I burst out laughing. I’m not the only shop lifter. Johanna lounges on a bench in a patriotic DISTRICT 7 outfit, while Annie works behind the counter in equally clean clothes.

“Is that Finnick on your shirt?” He looks a lot younger, not quite as camera seasoned, still more boy than man.

“Yes,” says Annie and hands me a plate stacked full of pancakes. “Help yourself. There’s more if you want to.”

“Thanks.” I sit down, promising myself to take a more civilized approach to food today. “Since when are you up?”

Johanna squints up from a copy of Your Guide To The Hunger Games. “Handsome, the party’s still roaring.”

“You didn’t sleep at all?”

“You did. Annie did. Someone had to make sure you didn’t wake up to a bunny munching on you for breakfast.”
“They’re in their cages,” I point out. “The beds are really comfy. And the rabbits are nocturnal. We’ll have your back for the day.”

Johanna stretches, easily convinced. “Alright. But don’t be thinking up any fancy wake up calls. I’ll sleep with the gun nearby.”

We wish her a belated good night - or morning? Looks like paranoia is still high up on a victor’s skill list.

Annie abducts one of my pancakes, bathing it in syrup. “Slept well?”

“Yes,” I say, withholding the details of my morning after. “You?”

“Like a baby. But I could barely move when I woke up today. My body’s one big ache. My feet are overjoyed at the prospect of a couple days’ rest.”

Blisters and sores have plagued us all, but Annie turned out to be their favorite victim. Daily check-ups usually include amicable rivalry among who scored the biggest blisters. Most of the time poor Annie’s feet take home the title.

That’s not to say that Johanna or I get off unfettered. Johanna’s pack is ill-fitting to a degree that it bites into her shoulders, chafing tender marks into her skin. So far we haven’t had the ability to circumvent that issue, but with the bounty we looted from the Cornucopia I’m tentatively calling it a problem solved. My own grievance originates from my stump. The doctors back in the Capitol did a wonderful job at it — as much as I abominate the Capitol and everything it stands for, there is nothing but recognition for the medical wonders it performs. Right now my leg looks like someone from the Seam tried to stitch it back together and failed. It’s irritated, inflamed and I’ve got pressure sores all over. Ever since that mutt attack in the sewers the ankle joint hasn’t been working properly and that’s had considerable impact on overall functionality and fit - in a bad way. With a little downtime I can take off the prosthetic more often, perhaps even try myself at repairing it.

None of us admits it yet, but I think we’ve found our place to overwinter in.

And wouldn’t that set a new record for ‘Time Spent In An Arena’?

With Johanna out for probably the rest of the day and our bellies full to acceptable levels, Annie and I decide to do some more exploring. We steer clear of the actual arena environment. We’ve seen what’s to be seen. There’s no need to extend the unpleasantries. We can monitor the mutts from the Maintenance Room, although I doubt they’ll make any escape attempts.

An eventual inventory of the kitchen is in the plans, but neither of us feel up to it right now. I think we’ve earned a day or two off from mandatory chores.

So we saunter down the hallways of the guest accommodations, peeking into this room and that. Most of them are look-alike, so after a while we don’t bother anymore. Five rooms are VIP suites. We each hunkered down in one of them yesterday. I’m not being pretentious here, but why settle for cotton if you can have velvet?

We find the laundry room too, agreeing to wash whatever is savable from our equipment. The stench of my sleeping bag nearly had me gagging when I was dirty, it might life-threatening now that I actually know what clean feels again.

And then, to my frank surprise, we come across a room labeled POOL. On the other side is just that, a swimming pool. Something in Annie’s eyes lights up. I don’t know if this chlorine blue can
substitute sea salt, but I have a feeling she might be a regular guest here in the future.

“It’s so warm,” says Annie, drawing a probing finger through the water.

One corner of the pool is separate. The temperature there is stifling. Annie hits a button that unleashes a bubble blast. Everything after that is futile excuse. She’s in the water before I can blink twice and quite persistent on my following in her footsteps.

“Don’t be coy, Peeta!”

 Eventually I subside. I strip to my boxers, take off the prosthetic and lower myself into the water. At first it stings real bad, all the open sores exposed to the chlorine. Then the heat starts to dull the pain until finally it ceases completely, giving way to relaxation.

I lean my head back against the tiled edge. “I don’t think I ever want to get out of here again.”

Annie smiles, closes her eyes and says, “You should have been born a lobster.”

Well, that must be a Four thing.

What do you do when there’s nothing to do? For the first time in months our lives don’t depend on our immediate actions. There is food aplenty, nobody wants to kill us (although the hedge cat stares at me whenever I check it on the screen), and we don’t have to walk the fat off our soles every day.

I’m sure it would seem really dull to outsiders. We sleep a lot. Eat when we don’t sleep. Divide the few chores between us. Johanna checks the solar panels, Annie does laundry and the odd stitching job. I monitor the mutts from Maintenance twice daily and work out a rough inventory of the walk-in freezer. While we sleep in separate rooms, nobody wants to be alone during the day. There’s enough to mess about with in the gift shop, so that becomes the common room.

One of Cashmere’s records (Diamonds Are A Girl’s Best Friends) plays in the background. Cashmere’s victor talent is singing. Turns out that she’s been quite the pop star in the Capitol. She has a pleasant enough tone, even though Johanna insists it’s more screeching than singing without all the voice filters.

While most of the shop is centered around Vogue and that year’s Games, there’s a corner devoted to past victors. It’s placated by Finnick - little action figures with detachable tridents, any imaginable piece of clothing with his face on it, watches, bags, you name it. Cashmere and Gloss are next up on the popularity scale and I choose a District 1 mug for my morning tea - partly out of commiseration. I didn’t get to know them better before the Quell, but from Annie and Johanna’s retellings I understand that they were decent enough people. Morally corrupt and sinful as the Games made them, but victims all the same. Siblings in this parentless world.

To my disappointment there’s nothing on Haymitch or Mags, or the morphlings from Six. They don’t have enough resale value to be featured here. Johanna gets mock-insulted when she can’t find fan produce of herself, a three year old one-time wonder who couldn’t quite find her way into the mainstream fanbase.

Annie and I don’t exist in this timeline, so there is nothing to be amazed or horrified about. Still I wonder, had we conquered not the 69th, but the 74th arena… what memorabilia would have awaited us there?

I begin to engage in a peculiar bedtime ritual. Your Guide To The Hunger Games unveils a
chapter to me every evening. It chronicles the Games year 1 through 69 in a shockingly partisan way: for the first time I experience the Hunger Games from the eyes of the Capitol. Stories woven around heroes, districts raised from beggary and glorified, the ragged edge of mass killing smoothed into daring rivalry. There’s hardly a mention of the Dark Days or how they spawned this annual affair. This reminder is drummed into our minds in the districts, but seems to be negligible for the upper-class of Panem.

A young, tenacious woman judges me from the 11th Victory Tour poster. Mags Flanagan, some 60 years younger, poses for Panem and eternity. Mags won by harpooning fellow tributes with a self-made javelin. ‘They twitched like fish’ reads a cursive quote on the side. Pictures of Mags in the arena take up a double page of the guide. What I see is a brazen, fearless girl luring her opponents into misery. A siren of the sea. What fiction! Doesn’t anyone care to look beyond this processed fraud?

No. The patterns are repetitive. Haymitch, pitted against 47 other children, wins the Second Quell with canniness. How ingenious of him to use the forcefield in order to bounce back his nemesis’ weapon! Where is the footnote explaining how that action subsequently cost him his family? Why can I only find references of triumphant Gloss towering over his enemies, but not how the lava fields scorched the skin off his feet? Brilliant Beetee fended for his life not against tributes, but an infected rat bite. What is the market price of septic shock? One low enough for the publishers of this book to neglect it.

By the time I get to Vogue’s chapter all I want to do is dump the guide into the mutt-rabbit warren. I can see from a different set of eyes now and I don’t quite like the sight of it.

It’s week four since we occupied the arena. We’ve settled as well as possible. Injuries and fatigue are mending, I can now count only every other rib. Things are improving.

Boredom, however, pioneers an authoritarian reign. In an attempt to keep from going crazy and, coincidentally educate public Panem, I have decided to pursue a journal. It’s an unstructured compilation of memories and ideas, ample critic and scarce praise. I try to chronicle the journey the three of us have undertaken so far. The girls help in reconstructing our trail on the map of Panem and I mark it in a dotted line. A cross identifies important occurrences. Our meeting with Lyme. The Hanging Tree. Wonderland. I account for the days with tally marks. We’ve been on the road for so long and every dawn has thrown new stumbling blocks at us. What is Katniss up to, I wonder? How is helming a rebellion working out for her?

I’m starved for news from the front, but the bouncer remains tight-lipped in this new home. Has the war come to an end? Either way they would broadcast it, I think. Wouldn’t they?

It’s a plant, I tell myself. Nothing but a plant.

The hedge lion looks me straight in the eye, as if it knows I’m watching. But how can it? Surely the Gamemakers haven’t programed it to recognize cameras. It can’t possibly understand I’m surveying it from Maintenance. And yet out of the three mutt-cats it’s the only one that hasn’t moved an inch since we usurped Wonderland. Sitting still, forbearingly waiting, a still portrait of a perfect killer.

I put down the pencil, exasperated. I just can’t get its eyes right. For days I’ve been trying to sketch it into my journal, but no amount of detailing will bring me satisfaction.

Resigned I lean back in the armchair, devoting my attention to the other monitors. Johanna is off-
screen, cleaning the solar panels - the roof hatch is open, but we have no cameras outside. I spy Annie in the Pool Room, swimming her daily rounds. She has a remarkable perseverance when it comes to sports. I lallylag around all day, machining off my chores and counting the remaining minutes. Wonderland, apart from my exceedingly persistent hedge cat friend, is terribly dull.

But what can we do? Winter holds us in a tight grip. Leaving the arena is fool’s talk. And it's still at least a month until Lyme’s promised message!

Consequently, pressure begins to build - and to peak. I get annoyed by the most ordinary things. How Annie always forgets to wash off her coffee mug. The smirk on Johanna’s face after she tells a joke. That damn cat’s stare.

I’m not the only one getting edgy. Yesterday at dinner Johanna was especially cranky. It started in the afternoon with me knocking on her door to check if she had taken care of the solar panels. A flood of insults from the other side deterred me into retreat, followed by an admittedly silly argument of who would win if pitted against each other in a duel - with the contestants being One and Two of the third Quell team. I said Two, Johanna said One and who really cares, because all of them are dead. In retrospect I’m deeply ashamed of what nonsense we quarreled about. It made us sound like Capitolites. Detestable.

I turn back to my drawing, wondering if I’ll ever get those bloody eyes right.

Everything changes on Day 46.

The bouncer comes to life at 12:00pm sharp. We drop what we’re doing and gather around.

It’s Ceasar Flickerman, blue ponytail in place, every drop of mirth and good spirits wiped clean from his face. He’s televising from a slapdash news studio. The Capitol seal and MANDATORY VIEWING shine unmistakably in the background.

“Good evening,” says Ceasar grimly. “The assaults on the Capitol continue, parried off by our brave Peacekeepers. President Snow has declared a state of emergency. Schools and offices are closed until further notice. All citizens are advised to remain within their homes. Providing any form of assistance to radicals is viewed as treason and will be penalized.”

“How far up shit’s creek is Snow to threaten his own people?” asks Johanna.

Ceasar’s face gives way to a series of WARNING! DANGEROUS! posters.

“That’s Katniss!” I yelp as her trademark braid appears on screen. Wearing a soldier’s uniform this time. Armed with a rifle. No trace of the camera-shy girl I knelt to a year ago. What have they crafted down there, in Thirteen’s dungeons?

Next up is Finnick. Gale. Five more faces I don’t recognize.

“God! Her? Really?” snorts Johanna as a portrait of a young woman comes up. Half her head is shaved, green vine tattoos wreathing upwards from the base of her skull. Cressida Hayes. I’ve never heard that name before.

“Do not try to engage any of the above convicts. They are extremely dangerous and will kill without mercy. Call your local Peacekeeper department,” advises Ceasar. “Stay put. Stay safe. This is Ceasar Flickerman, live from the Presidential Mansion.”

The message loops back to the beginning. After a second time the bouncer deactivates.
“Figures. Going gets tough and that parrot turns tail for Snow’s hideout!” says Johanna.

I think we have bigger issues to worry about than Ceasar Flickerman’s preferred place of residence.

“They’re in the Capitol,” I say. Straight into the lion’s den. And where are we? Hundreds of miles away, fled like cowardly dogs.

“Now don’t be getting any ideas,” cautions Johanna. “Whatever trouble they’re in, there’s no way for us to help now.”

“You’re proposing we just… sit around? Do nothing?”

“Smack-dab, genius. If you didn’t turn off your brain whenever that thing dangles a picture of Kitty Kat before your eyes you’d agree, I reckon. Unless you want to ride the killer bunnies back into town and save the day. That’d be some headline for Flickerman to get wild about, don’t you think?”

“Stop it!” I growl. “This is serious.”

“It’s been serious for quite a damn while,” counters Johanna. “This is the big crescendo now. The peak’s just up ahead. We’ll finally see what kind of Panem lies on the other side.”

What philosophical bullshit!

I try again, through clenched teeth. “They’re in the Capitol. Surrounded by enemies. We need to do something.”

“Perhaps it’ll make you sleep better,” says Johanna. “If you make yourself believe that they fought so chivalrously for our case too, before they abandoned us in those dreary cells.”

She pivots on her heels and storms out. It’s the only thing preventing me from snapping her neck. Fuming I turn to Annie. She picked up the bouncer and watches a muted replay of Ceasar’s broadcast. When Finnick’s picture shows she stops the feed and gingerly lays the bouncer aside.

“Don’t you see, Peeta? This will decide things,” says Annie. “One way or another. By the end of the day, they’ll either be dead or the war will be over. It’s… it’s more than we could hope for.”

We come together only on the next day, becalmed, but hardly pacified. The bouncer, mute. No news of our future. Katniss, WARNING! DANGEROUS!, still paints the town red. With the blood of her enemies or her own, there’s no way to tell.

We rewatch the video.

“You recognize her?” I ask about the shaved woman.


“And the others?”

“Don’t ring a bell.”
“Pollux… Castor. Sound like Capitol names,” offers Annie.

More allies? I’m hedging my bets. Conspirators? I hope Katniss watches her back. Finnick and Gale are the only ones I’d vouch for and I never thought I’d say that about Gale.

“We need to find a way to contact them,” I say, but have no proposal how.

“I’m pretty sure that thing’s a one-way link,” Annie says about the bouncer. “What about the arena? Perhaps we can make a call from Maintenance?”

“Call who? What number?” asks Johanna. “What district were you all born in again? Not Three, as far as I can remember. We needed half a day to find the start button on that computer! What makes you think we can establish a connection to a secret rebel network?”

“We’ve got to try, at least,” I say.

Johanna surrenders. “Alright. Let’s try. Perhaps we can save the world, after all.”

It’s not as easy as I’d like it to be. Most people from my district are literate enough to write their names and sign their contracts. I’m proficient in reading and writing, which should be a given in this country, but isn’t. Before Wonderland the only computers I saw were in the Capitol, intimidating silver machines that were a hundredfold smarter than me. I steered clear of them, those things that could outwit me with the push of a button.

And here I am now, trying to cheat my way over walls of fire raised by the very best Three wizards. I spend a day and a night learning the ways of Hunger Games Interface 11.8. I could kill a man, I think by the end of that time. I could turn Wonderland into the devilry it was schemed to be, and it would only take a flick of the wrist. I could kill us all, and it would be so easy. Do Gamemakers feel any effort at all when they exert themselves on their keyboards?

I spend another two days and another two nights down in Maintenance. The girls bring a tablet of food three times a day, but my appetite has waned. There must be a way! A way out of this labyrinth of numbers! My eyes are red and scratchy and whenever I close them to rub the soreness away I’ll see Ceasar Flickerman, instructing his fellow Capitolites about those WARNING! DANGEROUS! rebels invading the heart of fair Panem.

But then I’ll look up at Screen #9 and I’ll know I’m still in the game, because the hedge cat’s still staring. You can do it, it wants to say, you can let me out. We’ll solve the riddle together. And it doesn’t bare its claws, although I’m sure it would if I let it.

Behind me the hinges creak. It’s 5pm, an hour too early for dinner.

I don’t bother looking up. “I’m not hungry.”

The pause is long enough for me to figure out this isn’t about food.

Annie and Johanna are in the doorway, not with a tablet, but with the bouncer. Their faces are ashen. Tears seep down Annie’s cheeks.

“Peeta,” says Johanna, and it’s condolence, alarm and solicitude all in one. “You had better sit down. I’m so sorry. But you ought to see this.”

She steals my thunder with those words. I cave in.

1 new notification, announces the bouncer, deadhearted.
I'm sorry to have kept you waiting for so long! But with stories it's like it is with steaks: sometimes you've got to let them marinade a little while longer, or they've got no taste at all.

I'd love to know what you're thinking about this chapter!
Chapter Eight

The seal of Panem lights up on screen and remains there while the anthem plays. Images of the dead appear, imitation copies of the tribute portraits displayed during Game time. Four strangers stare at me through the bouncer. The best are kept for the end. Gale Hawthorne. Finnick Odair. Katniss Everdeen.

The anthem ends. The seal fades. President Snow himself appears, seated at his desk, a patriotic flag draped behind him. A fresh white rose gleams in his lapel. Provocative silence - one, two, three seconds. Now he has Panem’s attention.

Snow congratulates the Peacekeepers on a masterful job, honors them for ridding the country of the menace called the Mockingjay. “With her death there will be a turning of the tide in the war,” he predicts. “Who are these radicals to follow, now that their figurehead is gone? And who was she, really? A poor, unstable girl with a small talent for the bow and arrow. Not a great thinker. Not the mastermind behind a rebellion,” says Snow and does it without sounding arrogant, or condemning. Condoling even, that snake. A great deal of rehearsal has gone into this speech, I presume.

“She was merely a face plucked from the rabble because she had caught the nation’s attention with her antics in the Games.” Snow smiles, sympathy turned to strictness. “But necessary. So very necessary, because the rebels have no real leader among them—”

The transmission disrupts.

“Pay attention,” says Johanna. “This is where things get really messed up.”

District Thirteen must have recruited a team of the best Three techs, because now it’s not President Snow but President Coin who’s addressing the nation.

So this is Panem’s supposed liberator? The majority of the population must share this first impression with me. Alma Coin is a middle-aged lady, long straight hair as grey as the heart of her district. She carries herself in the way I imagine Thirteen’s underground life has influenced all of its offspring: Confidence without cockiness, discipline with an underlying vigor. Arousing that kind of awe in you that all great leaders share - enough respect to keep you in line, yet have you ecstatically storming into your enemy’s weapon at her whim.

I don’t like her.

Coin introduces herself to Panem and identifies herself as the real head of the rebellion. Then she gives Katniss’ eulogy. “There cannot be enough praise for a girl who survived not only the Seam and the Hunger Games, but turned a country of slaves into an army of freedom fighters.” Coin’s sentences are meticulous, poignant. She knows it’s only a matter of time until the Capitol wrestles back the reins from her, and in one single pitch she must gain the goodwill of twelve subjugated districts.

“Dead or alive, Katniss Everdeen will remain the face of this rebellion,” promises Coin. “If ever you waver in your resolve, think of the Mockingjay, and in her you will find the strength you need to rid Panem of its oppressors.”
Up comes a heavily doctored photo of Katniss looking beautiful and fierce and nothing like herself. No words. No slogan. Her face is all we need now.

Snow takes back the scene. He is very controlled, hardly affected by the interference. Certainly not surprised by this little rhetoric excursion.

"Tomorrow morning, when we pull Katniss Everdeen’s body from the ashes, we will see exactly who this Mockingjay is. A dead girl who could save no one, not even herself. And certainly not her friends."

As if in mockery of Coin’s propaganda photo, the Capitol follows up with one of its own. My stomach knots up. Annie begins to cry again. It’s a picture of the Presidential Mansion in all its glory. Crucified for their allegiance, two dozen corpses hang from the building in various forms of maltreatment. Burnt, beaten, cut, drowned…

Wiress, Mags, Seeder, the morphlings, mentors and tributes of the Second Quell. Only Katniss, Finnick, Haymitch and Beetee are missing.

“That can’t be,” I mutter. “That can’t be.”

Only it is. Annie and Johanna are there too- there’s a close up of me! My face is so beat-up you can barely recognize it. There I am, the other half of the star-crossed lovers, hanging for my crimes from Snow’s balcony.

“I don’t know how he did it,” says Annie between sobs. “But he just executed us all.”

Anthem. Seal. Out.

I hurl the bouncer against the wall in a streak of madness. Annie howls, Johanna yells at me get my fucking bearings, but I leave them in Maintenance and take to my heels.

I storm into Wonderland, past the rabbits, past the damn staring cat, past the life-giving Cornucopia. If I run fast enough, I think, perhaps I can outrun the cannons. Katniss’ picture isn’t in the sky, but manifest inside my head.

That poor, mad girl!
That inspiring, revolutionary hero!
Dead, dead, DEAD!
Snow today! Snow tomorrow! Snow forever!

I stumble. The stupid prosthetic slips. I kiss the ground, hard, face first. Scorching tears wet the artificial earth beneath me.

Katniss is dead! Predict the verdict, Ceasar - District Twelve has ended its lucky streak! Panem’s good-for-nothings! Even botched the easiest revolution in history! Now show the recap, Claudius, in slow motion. Can you see that horror on Mellark’s face? Just before the fateful blow? For a minute there, he thought he could get away with it all. Commiserating laughter. Oh, the poor chap, so guileless! What a tragedy! What ratings! I can’t wait what to see what they have in store for us in the 76th, next year, my dear viewers! How can they possibly overtrump this one? Here is Ceasar Flickerman, right from the burning rubble that is the Capitol, haha! Next up is the autopsy of a Mockingjay, stay tuned, stay tuned!

“Peeta?”
It must be late, I think, but can’t be sure. Time is irrelevant in Wonderland.

Annie’s eyes would shed more tears if they could, but as it is, she’s cried herself dry. She sits down next to me on the purple lawn. I haven’t moved in hours.

She searches for the warmth of my touch and I squeeze her hand pathetically. We don’t talk at all. What is there left to say now?

I lie back in the prickly grass and close my eyes. If I try just hard enough I might feel the coarse ropes pulling my arms aloft. The aroma of gunpowder and rose petals. ‘Higher, higher!’ they’d call as they hoist me up. From here I could see what remains of the Capitol, chaos and destruction. ‘That’s good enough,’ and the pull would stop and I’d be there for everyone to survey, a traitor hung from the Presidential balcony, just another one of Snow’s war trophies.

Johanna finds us in the morning. She comes bearing three steaming cups. I don’t know if I should gag or be grateful. It’s pine needle tea. She must have gone outside to get some. All the flora in Wonderland is poisonous.

“Here,” says Johanna and hands us the mugs.

We mutter a thanks, but don’t touch the beverage. My stomach’s euphoric to have something to throw up again, and I’m not willing to give it the pleasure.

“Drink up,” coerces Johanna and gulps. She won’t meet our eyes. “Little sips at first, unhurried.” She nods, more to herself than to us, licks her lips, takes a deep breath.

“And then you should come outside.”

“Why,” says Annie. “What’s there to see?”

“Oh. Nothing to worry about. Just the end of the world, I think.”

Johanna reveals the bouncer. A new video. Nobody finishes their tea. To my disappointment, Katniss is still dead.

President Snow flaunts eleven unidentifiable corpses on the national channel. Katniss could be any of those. They’ve been salvaged from under a collapsed building that has been set on fire prior to its breakdown. The recording of the Mockingjay’s tide-turning end plays in an infinite loop in the background.

“We have reached a point in war, my fellow citizens, where the end begins to come into view. Let us understand: those radicals cannot humiliate or defeat the Capitol. Peace is at hand.”

And the look on Snow’s face as he says this doesn’t leave me with an inkling of doubt that peace is a word this country can’t afford to utter for a long time to come. Old Panem and New Panem are at each others’ throats in the scramble for a dreary future.

District Thirteen appears. Honestly, I don’t think it was hard to crack into this announcement. I think Snow let them. I think Snow wants the whole world to see Alma Coin losing, while there is a world to be witness of it.

No flag is draped behind Coin’s desk. The scene is grey and bland like Thirteen’s existence for 75 years.
There is nothing left of Coin’s professionalism on screen. “What have you done, Coriolanus?”
Uproar in the background, the techs are trying to blend it out, but fail. President Coin allows
herself this setback on live television. A moment of weakness, of swallowing the bitter pill that has
been passed to her. A catch-22, an impasse; Snow has her in a standoff on the gaming board that
is Panem. So Coin does the only thing she can do at this point, really. Unleashing the fury
Thirteen has been untouched for since the Dark Days.

“Stop turning the other cheek,” says Coin to Panem. “Tonight - to you, the great silent majority
of this country - I ask for your forgiveness.” And then the cataclysmic instruction to her own
people: “Lock down, code red. Breach for impact. Clearance on all level 10 missiles.”

Before the panic takes over and someone knocks over the camera, we can hear Alma Coin’s final
words:

“Good night, Panem. May we see another morrow.”

Checkmate, Snow! That’s what Ceasar would call a showdown!

We sit on top of Wonderland, our feet dangling off the edges. A package of gummy worms is
passed between the three of us.

I don’t know if Mother Nature got as sick about winter as us, or if we should see this as some sort
of prophetic message. All around, snow is melting.

In the east, the sun rises, blood-red and mournful. The sky is filled with fire. To the west, worthy
of the ways of the Capitol, something else has climbed the horizon, a smoke monster, humongous
and arrogant, stretching until it represses even the clouds. You can smell it in the wind. The death
of everything, human and not.

Panem has come and gone. Wild, dark times are rumbling toward us.

“And now?”

“Now what?”

“Now that everybody’s dead. What of us?”

“You don’t know if they’re dead.”

“Well, if you must insist. But it won’t change the question at all. What happens now?”

“I- I really don’t know…”

Wiress was right after all. Tick-tock. Bang.

For two nights I’m haunted by Katniss’ and the hedge-lion’s scowls.

To one of these taunts I’ll put an end to today.

I don’t know or care what Annie and Johanna are up to as I marsh from the kitchen to the mutt
enclosures, a little brown cardboard box in my grasp. The cat, imperturbable from the beginning,
awaits my arrival.

“I hate you,” I say. It, where it comes from, what it stands for, everything it has taken from me.
My accusations are accepted without objection. At least one confessed criminal.

Standing before the glass barrier that separates us I open the little box and uncase a filigree matchstick. “You’re going to burn,” I tell the cat, as Snow told Panem. “And I’m going to watch.”

A four-digit code is needed to open the cage. I looked it up in Maintenance - 4983. Simple. Beep. Click. I open the door. The hedge cat stares. I strike the match and the smell of sulfur outdoes the fragrance of green shrubbery. Are those claws flexing?

The match has almost burnt to the end. I stop thinking. If you think too much in moments like these, you’ll miss your only chance. Snow didn’t think twice when he ordered the bombing on Thirteen. Coin couldn’t allow herself to doubt her decision when she initiated the counter attack. Katniss can’t mourn the loss of the world because she’s dead.

I throw the match and the cat catches fire. That easy. That disappointing.

Wonderland’s alarms go off as soon as the smoke hits the sensors. The sprinkler system starts up. By the time Annie and Johanna arrive out of breath, the mutts are wet ash.

“What have you done, Peeta?” asks Annie alarmed.

“I’m burning the past,” I say simply and push past them. “Just let me.”

They don’t stop me, just like nobody dared to stop Snow, or Coin, or Panem, from ending.

I hoped this would bring me peace. How easy. How fast. How wholly unsatisfying!

I lock myself into my VIP suite after the purge, shunning to answer for my actions, accept praise or admonition.

“Leave me alone!” I demand and after a long time the knocking eventually subsides.

From there it’s a downward spiral. Unanswered questions keep me up when all my body desires is some rest. Was that really Katniss? How could I see myself in that propo? I’m here! I’m here! And yet every time I close my eyes I’m taken to that doomed balcony, shackled, hanging alongside Mags, whose skin bears the acid fog’s marks.

And if all is true and my friends are dead, what then? Will we spend our lives here in Wonderland, trapped in false security? Where should we go? The Capitol has been annihilated, who knows if Thirteen has the ability to rise from its ashes once more? The country is reigned by chaos, headless, unstable. Every place outside this dome spells incalculable risk.

For the first time in months I fear for my brothers. So far I’ve assumed that they availed themselves of Thirteen’s protection. Gale was with Katniss after all. She must have claimed refuge for my family as well, mustn’t she? With everything that happened they were a thorn in Snow’s side and the fact alone that he hasn’t made me watch them suffer during my captivity had me draw conclusions.

If I’m right, they’re dead in Thirteen.

For once I hope I judged Katniss’ values too highly.

Otherwise I can add another persona to my list.

District dreg, liar, killer, traitor, grave robber. Orphan.
Once I discharge myself from my self-imposed quarantine I realize that the girls haven’t been idle, commencing the grieving rituals for Katniss, Finnick and, ultimately, Panem.

Shoulders sagging, bleary-eyed and quite lost in this new world I proclaim my intentions.

“T’m going home.”

“What?” Johanna chokes on the soup she’s been sipping on. “Where to? Twelve, you mean?”

I nod.

Annie quickly does the math. “That’s at least two thousand miles, Peeta. That’s too far.”

“I don’t care,” I say, drained. “I won’t stay here. If my family’s still alive they’ll be there. And if Katniss somehow made it…”

“Katniss is dead,” says Johanna temperately. “They’re all dead. There’s no way they could have survived that.”

“We’re not dead either.”

“No, but we were lucky. The forcefield of the arena must have-”

“I’m not talking about the blast. The propo, remember? Snow knows we escaped. But nobody else does. He covered it up. I don’t know how, but he did it.”

“It wasn’t that hard,” claims Johanna. “It’s called bod-mod. Body modification. Money spinner back in the days. Everybody wants to look like their idol, yeah? The technology’s there, it’s just banned. No biggie. He had to make that move. Show that he killed all the victors. A coup de grace before he bombed Thirteen. Would have scattered any left-over emancipators.”

“Coin bombed back.”

“Yeah, tough luck. Bet that old fucker didn’t count on nuclear resistance.”

“Wait a bit,” interrupts Annie, the only one here who hasn’t lost the golden thread. “You’re implying he did the same for Finnick and Katniss?”

“I don’t know,” I say. At this stage I’m quite willing to look for what isn’t there. “He could have. Did you recognize Finnick? It could have been anybody. Perhaps they survived. And he knew it. So he ordered the bombing on Thirteen before they could expose him.”

“Only Thirteen bombed back, Peeta,” Johanna reminds us. “The Capitol is all contaminated little bits of nuclear waste. They couldn’t have gotten out of that in time, even if they were alive at that point. We needed two days to reach the city limits, remember? And that wouldn’t be enough to be safe from the blast radius.”

“I’m going home,” I say again, unerred. If Katniss made it, she’ll be there. And if she hasn’t, she won’t and I’ll stop searching. But I’m not staying here any longer, in this tomb. I’ll take the bouncer with me, and if there’s any news I’ll reassess. It’s a good plan. It’s a plan.

“Well, alright.” Johanna sighs. “Good riddance, I guess.”

This unsettles Annie. “You’re not going?”
“Me?” says Johanna. “No, I don’t think so. It’s a terribly long walk for awfully poor prospects. It’s over. We’re on the other side of that stupid peak and the sight is dispiriting. It’s over.”

“You can’t go back,” I say.

“No,” agrees Johanna. “But I don’t have to go forward either.”

“So this is the end?” asks Annie.

“The end of what?”

“Us.”

“I don’t know,” says Johanna.

“Oh my,” says Annie.

Both look at me.

“If you’re coming my way,” I say. “I’ll walk with you.”

No news from the front. I allow myself a week for preparations, more time than I need. If Katniss somehow survived, I reckon she’d broadcast a message sooner or later. But she needs more time, I tell myself, when the bouncer remains mute.

Annie will continue to be my wayward companion. I couldn’t have chosen a better one if I had to. I asked her if she’d rather go home to her own family, but the road to Four is long and perilous, and no place to be for a lone woman in post-war Panem. She’ll have my back, she said, if I’ll have hers. I promise that I’ll accompany her to Four, she just has to utter the wish. Annie smiles and thanks me, but suspects her family has taken the cutter and sailed downwind as soon as Quell footage stopped. At least that’s what was previously agreed on in case things went pop. They’re fine, assures Annie, if only not to burden her conscience with more corpses.

To my relief (although I won’t say it out loud), Annie hammered the idea into Johanna’s head that we won’t make it far without her and there’s really nothing to stay here for, anyway, so can’t she get over herself and stop being so damn stubborn? That was actually a sight to behold, Annie hauling somebody over the coals. There’s an enthralling personality under that mild appearance, and the longer we’re together the more we get to see of Annie’s raw self. Johanna must have been as surprised as me when she eventually subsided. I’m dreading the impending outbursts and mood swings, but it would feel wrong leaving her behind. I couldn’t handle another loss right now.

So at long last we stand before the iron gates of Wonderland, packed and ready to abandon it forever.

“It feels wrong, growing close to this place. But I did. It was homely here,” says Annie.

“It’s a grave,” I say.

“And yet it saved us from death. Show some respect, Peeta. It’s not like I’m asking you to pull a rainbow out your ass.”

“Johanna!”

“My glass is half-full is what I’m saying, okay? Those buns at the bakery had better be worth it. Two thousand miles, can you believe that? You should write about it in your book, Peeta.”
“It’s a journal,” I correct.

Annie rolls her eyes. “We had better get going. Which way, Peeta?”

I turn east, where the sky, sunless and grey, guides us towards a bleak horizon.

I won’t say it out loud, lest it disenchants my golden dream.

But in my head, I dare to whisper:

To where the Mockingjay flies.

Chapter End Notes

Very tricky chapter. Rewrote it about three times. Still not really happy with it, but this plot needs a kick in the butt. Let me know what you think!
Chapter Nine

Spring revives New Panem, fresh blood coursing through an empty heart. The trees are in blossom, meadows cast off their burly white coats to blazon clusters of flowers.

That, at least, is the odic way to describe the passing of The Old Time.

The truth? The snow turns to mud, our boots are permanently soaked with melt water. Each flower my gaze lingers on I relate to people I know (knew) - Posy, Primrose, Poppy, Katniss. I develop an unhealthy addiction to the bouncer, checking it for news at every stop. Night’s rest drains me more than day’s walking.

As deep a wound as the alleged deaths of our friends have clawed into Annie, as impatient Johanna is to shed the grief from herself. I am caught between two extremes and seamlessly fluctuate from one end to the other, an unpredictable roller coaster ride through my emotional repertoire.

If I could only come to terms with myself, this grand undertaking would be so much easier.

But then again, it would be no feat worth remembering without all the difficulties paving its way.

I try to bolster our resolve by desperately clawing to my hopes of Katniss (and Finnick) somehow having escaped the nuclear holocaust. Johanna doesn’t have an open ear for it, but as the weeks pass I think I can slowly worm my theory into Annie’s head.

Perhaps Coin waited long enough for them to get away, we speculate. They piggybacked a revolution for her. She wouldn’t dump her best cards like that. She also wouldn’t let Snow blow her to pieces, is what Johanna says.

The question is: How often can a people rise from its ashes? It took them 75 years the first time around. I wish myself a long and prosperous life, but I don’t have that much time to wait and see.

In my mind I trace a line across the map of Panem. The wheat-fields of Eleven, the industrial labyrinth of Eight, miles and miles of unexplored wild zones. At the end of it lies Twelve, the inconspicuous district that ignited hope in the hearts of many and burned even more to the ground.

Will the The Girl On Fire be waiting there?

We keep to the wild zones for fear of what we might find in the districts. With no government in place and everybody affected by the war it’s a good guess that discord and panic took the reins.

Sometimes we see settlements far off in the distance. We stay clear of those. There’s fire and gunpowder in the air, and if the wind blows our way cries of misery ride the breeze. That only encourages us in our decision and we amble among unspoiled nature and a world long passed.

By May we cross from Ten to Eight. Our coats now hang firmly strapped to our packs and more often than not we exchange the stuffy tent for a night under the starry sky. We work up what
Annie calls a mariner’s tan and settle into a rhythm of moving for a few days before stopping to rest and restock our provisions.

While the food we took from the arena makes for nice variety, gummy worms have poor nutritional value. Most of the time we stick to game and while I never thought I’d excel in this department I must admit I turn out to be a decent trapper. Nobody beats Annie’s fishing magic though, which becomes the staple of our rations.

Our current rest stop is in stark disparity with what is happening to the rest of Panem.

“Guys, guys, get a grip! This is getting out of control!” Johanna warns. From a safe distance she observes the undoubtedly biggest splash duel the world has ever been witness of. Up to my hips in the icy water of the pond I give my all to triumph over Annie (who started this nonsense), but she proves to be a formidable nemesis. Far from throwing in the towel Annie tackles me, flips us both over and we dive into the cool blue. Needless to say, this effectively scares off all the fish in the pond.

Upon emerging Annie victoriously brushes a water lily from her hair, gives me a smug grin before proceeding in Johanna’s direction, the shore.

“No stupid jokes,” warns Johanna. Her aversion to water still stands, albeit a little mellowed. I don’t know the details, but apparently there’s been some coaching sessions in Wonderland I’ve been excluded from. Initially a little offended by this omission, I’ve since come to terms with the fact that I don’t have to be everybody’s shoulder to cry on. It’s not too bad of a deal, actually.

Annie wrings out her hair. “Can you lay out that net, Peeta?”

I go about the task of untangling the fishing net, a tricky endeavor after it underwent our impromptu splash feast. On shore the girls are back to bare bones business, throwing me the necessary lines, preparing the fires and our self made smokers.

“What’s Four’s motto again?” I ask, trudging ashore.

Johanna raises an eyebrow. “You trying to justify her blind luck in water brawls? She gets you every time. Why is this a surprise anymore?”

Annie hands me my bowl and spoon. “From The Waves We Rise,” she recites. “Don’t be disappointed, Peeta. You can’t beat a fish in water.”

“Well, I sure hope he can,” says Johanna. “Or we’ll go empty-bellied.”

We cook our last supplies, lay down in the lush grass with full bellies. The first stars rise into the night sky. My companions’ breathing evens out after a while and when I look over I see they’re peacefully asleep.

I sit up, take in the pond’s reflection. Underwater our net is filling with fish. It’ll be a full day of work tomorrow.

In the distance a bird sings.

But mockingjays fail to enthrall me these days.

“What do you say?”

Johanna gives it a thorough examination.
“Broken bones for sure. I’d say snapped neck if you’re lucky, slow excruciating death if you’re not.”

The analysis applies to a stone Annie threw down the 30 foot drop we’re facing. It’s not a completely vertical cliff, so the option of climbing down has been discussed and voted upon. We’re looking at a 3-0 win for no.

The wild zones around here are full of craters and rock faces. We speculate remnants of the Dark Days, scars the bombs left on the lands 75 years ago. I wonder if this is what the Capitol will look like a century from now?

“Who could know that crossing Panem would be such a pain in the ass?” says Johanna offhandedly.

I try to hide my frustration. “I thought we agreed to take the scenic route?”

I hate the scenic route. I hate cliffs. I hate the wild zones.

My inner limits for physical performance, free-time psychoanalysis and recreational hiking are reached.

I want to go home.

I want somebody to finally come up and tell me this is has all been a long, bad dream.

I want that person to be Katniss, to concede that everything was a bad joke and together, laugh about it.

I wouldn’t even be angry. Promise.

With a deep breath I conclude my tirade, overcome my weaker self and zip up my pants.

“You good to go?” asks Annie upon my return.

I give an affirming nod and hoist up my pack. Since I want to keep my face with the girls, I can only let off steam while performing solitary tasks, like taking a piss.

It’s not ideal, but somebody has to play the happy-end utopian, or this whole endeavor of ours will go down.

And I’m not quite willing to abandon that last kindling of hope yet.

Concluding this journey without encountering other people would not only be improbable but quite distressing. The only uncertainty, then, remains in the nature of our reception to New Panem and its inhabitants.

It’s Day 114 on my tally sheet. If my calculations are right we could enjoy oven-fresh bread from the bakery just before the first snow falls.

But while I compensated for rest days, detours and minor complications, well, I never dared to think about this.

We’re in a clearing when we notice them, so there’s no time to hide. We spot them just as they make us out. Everybody’s grip tightens on their guns. If there’s one thing we learned from this
war it’s that the world has been deprived of trust.

Five of them against three of us. And there could be more, out of sight. If I were to guess I’d say they’re district folk rather than Peacekeepers, but I can’t be sure. All men. All armed. No difference, really.

“If we shoot first we can take them,” whispers Johanna. That’s the mindset one needs to win the Games.

“Nobody has to shoot,” counters Annie. Their guns are not cocked yet. My finger, however, rests on the trigger. I’m with Johanna on this one. We can’t take any chances.

There’s movement on the other side. I guess they’re debating. Well, there goes the surprise moment. I just hope they have a pacifist soul among them, too.

“We should leave”. As long as we can.

“Not turning my back on those guns,” says Johanna.

“We want no trouble!” calls Annie over the clearing.

I can’t believe we’re negotiating now! “Shit, Annie. Shut up!”

“This is gonna go down the drain so bad.” Johanna unclips the safety on her rifle. “We ought to do something else than wait for them to shoot, Peeta.”

I put a restraining grip on Annie’s shoulder. “Come on. Let’s go. This is getting too hot.” Raising a hand to signal our retreat to the strangers I usher to the girls to make for the trees, slowly, no too jerky moves.

But our flight is stopped by an unexpected gesture from or opponents. The distance is too great to be sure, but once the give-away tune joins a familiar three finger salute we freeze in our tracks.

Eleven’s song. Twelve’s hand signal.

Annie gives me a lecturing stare. “Not everyone in this world is bad, Peeta.”

How I wish she were right.

Lured by the prospect of a truce we lower our guns and raise our hands instead. Thumb across pinkie finger. A gesture used in Twelve to say goodbye to those who won’t return again.

Katniss used it to honor Rue during the 74th, and then District 12 used it to smack Snow straight in the face with it before the Quell. None of that ever got streamed on Panem TV, but the people addressed got the point. One of them apparently being Coin.

Looks like she made Katniss further promote it, too.

The three fingered salute - face of the New Panem. Who would have thought.

And then-

Hot blood spurts across my face. What the- I yowl, jerking my arm down, holding a red mess against my chest. They shot me! Annie and Johanna are yelling, but the sound of gunfire stifles their cries.
Annie grabs me by the shoulders, pushes me down. Johanna shoots back. The men on the other side of the clearing scatter, but the shelling doesn’t stop.

Then Annie’s got my face in her hands and I realize I’ve been staring at whatever bloody mess my arm’s become.

“Peeta. You’re ok. Get up. Come on now!”

She guides me to my feet, but her voice is cracking. My right arm’s ablaze. Annie latches on to my left, pulling me along. We break into a run. Johanna has our back. I hear her shooting, sprinting, screeching like some mad banshee.

We make for the trees. They provide some cover, but only in exchange for a troublesome footpath. Here the wear and tear of my prosthetic leg parades itself. I manage to stay on my feet only through combined efforts of Annie’s pulling and Johanna’s pushing.

The odd bullet grazes trees to my side.

I hear a muffled oomph as three sets of footfall turn to two.

“Go! Go!” screams Johanna from behind, but doesn’t follow.

The fire in my arm spreads to my lungs.

They’re closing in. Who are those people? God, they’ll kill us! We’ll die!

Annie pushes on fervently.

“Wait! Wait! Johanna-”

“Just go!” she yells and tugs on my arm.

Boom, boom, boom. Like the cannons! We’re back in the Games! It’s the feast: They offered us peace and we needed it and didn’t get it. Ha! Chance missed! Four and Twelve, a doomed alliance, all because we chose the wrong side.

I inhale sharply as I behold the view in front of us. No more trees. Just the distant, unreachable horizon. Perhaps we can bounce off an invisible forcefield like Haymitch?

Annie raps an iteration of “no, no, no” as we are forced to slow down, only to come to a dead-end at the top of another precipice. Below us, some fifty feet down, the forest continues. Between that and us lies jagged rock and gruff descent. I could never climb that with one leg!

I wrench my head around. No Johanna. Only voices. Footsteps in the forest. We’re mice in a trap. The viewers on Capitol TV must be foaming at their mouths by now.

I grab the gun. Slippery blood, but it’ll have to do for a last stand. I try to yank my other hand free from Annie’s but her grip is stone.

She’s wheezing from the run, eyes locked on the insurmountable cliff.

“Annie,” I say. “Hey. We can take them.” We can’t. “Stay with me.” I can’t do this alone.

She shakes her head, tightens the hold on my hand. Then her gaze lifts and she looks me right in the eye. Every fibre of me stiffens.

“No.” I take a step back, trying to pull her with me. “No, Annie, not like this.”
“Trust me.”

“This is death. No.”

But when was the last time I had my way?

It’s not Four’s suicidal resolution that has me capitulate in the end, but the ricochet of an accurately aimed bullet hitting me square in the back.

Annie pulls, has me in a deadlock grip. I can’t break free. I can’t breathe. A last (s)tumble.

Airless, I scream.

Wingless, I fly.

Crescendo. Climax. Cannons!

Chapter End Notes

I haven't forgotten about you, folks. This and the next chapters are the ones I dreaded most out of the entire story. You'll see why soon, just don't hate me for it.

Also, do you have any preferences on getting to know Katniss' timeline? As I came up with the story I only intended to show it from hers and Finnick's Interludes and retellings, but by now I'm not sure that would do it justice enough, since it's waaay too much plot for two-something chapters. Then I played with the thought of a spin-off but soon became realistic again (I don't have the time), so I thought about overhauling the story frame and gifting one part (4-5 chapters) to Katniss POV. Once this part of the plot is finished of course.

Would you be interested in that, or are you die-hard Peeta POV freaks? I want to cater to the audience, so let me know.
Chapter Ten

I don’t think I’ve ever been so nervous before. Around us the other tributes mount their carriages. Two dozen stylists perform last-minute magic. The horses fidget, anxiety on par with mine. Hundreds of people cheer outside. What happens if the steeds spook? It would be a unique kind of unforgettable ride.

The weight underneath my feet shifts as Katniss climbs in beside me. She looks nothing like herself in Cinna’s outfit - absolutely stunning. Judging by Katniss’ perturbed expression I must look like an ape. She asks me somewhat irritatedly if I’m alright.

Cinna shows up at the eleventh hour to share with us our trump card: He’s going to burn us on live television. Katniss and I stare dumbfounded. We’ll be the first tributes not even making it into the Games. Cinna’s assurances of the trick being perfectly safe aren’t coming across. I’m slightly becalmed that Katniss feels about this as uncomfortable as I, issuing her concerns that we might be perfectly barbecued by the time we reach the City Circle.

Cinna smiles with all the gullibility of a Capitolite and shows us which buttons to press before some aide shoos him away. We’ve a time-frame to fit in.

Katniss gazes stoically ahead and I do my best to present a worthy equal. The crowd goes crazy. We roll out into the spotlight after Eleven. The shrill lights blind me. I reach to grasp Katniss’ hand. She winces under my touch, but has the good grace not to pull away. I really hope Haymitch knows what we’re doing here.

In my mind I count back from Ten. My thumb moves over the button on three and after a last prayer on two I push down just shy of zero.

We light up. Flames engulf us.

It’s the worst pain imaginable, being burned alive.

I jerk up. Something’s restraining me. Agony. I’m cold, wet and terribly afraid that they’re going to put me in the same box they stuck Johanna in, the one with the water and the wires and the heinous smell.

“Shhhhhhh…”

The sound originates close to my left ear. It takes all my willpower to stop twitching like a fish out of water, just enough time for my brain to process that I am in actual water.

That kicks off the second round of hysteria.

The restraint across my chest turns out to be an arm. I dispose of it in panic, propelling myself away. My intention of gracefully hopping back ends in an ungraceful plunge - my stump being considerably shorter than my other leg. Where is the prosthetic?!

We come full circle: I’m in pain, cold, wet and dead certain that I’m back in the Capitol.
“Hey… Hey. Peeta. Calm down.”

I choke on some water that I unwittingly inhale. The enforced break gives me a chance to focus back on reality.

“Annie?” Memories pour back. My arm. The fall. The blackout. I fumble for my gun. We’re in water. I don’t think I can swim. I don’t think I can breathe.

“You need to calm down…”

The tone of her voice is what brings me back to present. It’s barely a murmur. Something’s wrong and it’s not among the things listed on my NOT OKAY list.

I swallow my panic. Bank of a river. Forest to the right. Foot of steep cliff-side to the left. We’re not (yet) dead. My arm is still attached, albeit throbbing like hell. My prosthetic is gone. My back and several ribs feel like they’re made of many more pieces than they’re supposed to.

I’m not in the Capitol.

A strained breath escapes me. I dog-paddle back to the shore where the water is shallower. Annie leans against a bank of mud, still up to her waist in the river. She looks horrible. Cuts and bruises that I’m sure I sport as well, but that’s not what I’m talking about. She’s awfully pale, almost blueish, and the pain in her eyes lets me almost forget about my own.

“Oh no, no, no. Oh, shit.”

Panic: Take #3.

I shamble over. My finger comes back sticky when I touch her.

“I’m okay. I’m okay. Please, Peeta.”

I’m far from appeased. “They shot you.” Anger dominates. Somewhere in the back of my mind a voice remarks that I’m shot too, but that doesn’t seem as important right now. There’s a dark brown spot on the right side of her Finnick shirt, collarbone height, maybe a little below. Red blossoms. It looks like somebody gave Finnick a headshot. We’re light-years away from ‘okay’.

“You’re shot,” I repeat, as if saying it out loud can make it disappear again.

Annie makes a motion of pushing me away. Her next words have more of a sharpness to them. “Get a hold of yourself.”

“We need to get out of the water,” I assess, deciding to take it one thing at a time.

I help Annie out first then clamber on shore myself. An undertaking that’s torturous to say the least. Annie kind of slumps down on the grass and I crawl over - I can’t walk, I register with horror - to examine the damage. It's a through-and-through wound. They must have got her in the back while we ran. Haven’t I been shot in the back too? Scratch that - I don’t want to know right now.

“It’s not that bad,” says Annie. Our opinions on the issue are deeply divided.

“I need to clean and dress that,” I conclude. But how am I going to do that? Everything’s soaked through, most notably us. Where are our persecutors? Where’s Johanna? Where’s my leg? I need to make a fire. My head starts spinning so bad that the thing topping my priority list becomes lying back and closing my eyes against the dizziness.
“You have a nasty cut on your forehead,” says Annie. That explains the upside-down world.

“My leg’s gone.” That’s worse than being shot. What am I going to do now? Crawl the rest of the way? Annie can’t walk far with that wound. How am I going to carry her? How am I going to search for Johanna?

My teeth begin to chatter. It’s damn cold. Annie’s lips are purple already. We need that fire.

“You stay put, okay?”

Bereft of my leg and dignity I crawl like a dog. The shame equals the pain, so we’re good on that front. Thankfully months in the wild have taught me one thing and that is how to be a pyromaniac. I have Annie propped against a tree and some twigs crackling before anyone can say ‘May the odds be in your favor’.

The next assessment: My pack’s gone. That means we have no med kit.

“You need to put pressure on that,” I tell Annie, because it’s the only action I can think of that won’t make things worse than they are.

I find a thicker branch that I fashion into a makeshift crutch and tell Annie to wait for me while I go get help. It’s not like she has anywhere better to be and with that kind of wound I decide it would be more irresponsible to bring her along than to leave her behind.

My search takes me upstream at a snail’s pace. Turns out I’m far too accustomed to having two legs in order to use just one efficiently. On a short distance I add a considerable amount of scratches and bruises to my repertoire. My frustration level explodes.

Eventually I arrive at the spot we took the mad tumble down. The only reason we’re still alive is that we weren’t dealing with a vertical drop, but slowed down by means of slamming into rocks, roots and tree trunks. So that’s where the chest pain originates from. The impact was also determining: We hit water, not ground, which explains why we didn’t break our necks right away.

I spot something a little higher up, wedged between some roots. My pack! I can barely restrain tears at this point. There’s no way I can cross the river and scramble up that mountainside one-legged.

Just as I am about to roll out the tracks for a nervous breakdown someone tackles me from behind. Face-down in mud I grapple for the upper hand. We wrestle for a few more seconds before I get a visual on my attacker - and break short my punches.

“Johanna!”

Overjoyed I loosen my grip. Her fist hits me right in the jaw, sending me reeling backwards.

She’s off the wall. “You almost killed us, you jackass!” Has me by the collar. One eye’s violet, half-swollen shut. She’s drenched in water and blood. “If they won’t I’ll gut you, you hear me?! One more word about peace or rebellion or Katniss-fucking-Everdeen and you’ll wear your tongue around your throat!”

I wait for the storm to pass, which is hard enough if you can’t breathe through it.

Eventually, disgusted, she lets go of me.

It’s hard to say when exactly my friendship with Johanna Mason began, and I’m yet to experience it breaking apart. But this moment marks the first, deep crack in our relationship.

“It’s just a nick. You’ll be prime in no time, honey. I’m sorry for this.”

Johanna cuts away the fabric. The entry wound gapes back, black blood gushing. Annie, sweaty and hot, squirms in my arms. I cradle her head against my chest. Johanna dabs at the flesh with tinctured gauze.

We relocated to some ramshackle relic up the riverside. All brittle, but offering some protection against the elements. Our pursuers haven’t taken the mad jump. They seem to have lost interest in verifying our deaths.

On Johanna’s cue my grip around Annie tightens. Heated metal cooks flesh. Annie shakes against me, pleads for us to stop. She goes limp on the second burn. Both Johanna and I exhale. This has been the worst part. Her body needs to do the rest of the mending now.

I lay her frail frame down on the cot, covering her with our single dry blanket. Johanna washes the blood off her hands. “That’s bad, Peeta.”

“I know.”

“I’m no medic.”

“I know. You did well. Thank you.”

“I’ll never forgive you if she dies.”

Not everybody can see right through their hand. I’m unsure whether this is a thing to boast about or not.

“Do you want me to… uh… clean through it?”

“This is isn’t funny.” I’m not even sure it will heal up properly again. I can barely move my fingers, which are (unexpectedly) still attached. “Just wrap it up, please.”

Since the bleeding’s not too bad we pass the cauterization process at my own risk. I’d rather not faint, is all.

“Oh. That’s done. Undress. Let me look at your back.”

Turns out she has to help me shimmy out of my shirt. At the sight presenting itself Johanna whistles. I bet it’s not about the defined set of muscle I’m (not) sporting.

“Nastiest bruise I’ve ever seen,” she says. “And I’ve seen a lot throughout the Games.”

“No bullet?” I grate my teeth. That area feels wracked.

Johanna abandons the task at hand and rummages through my pack. “Here’s your bullet, kid. Finally this thing’s done some good.”

She hands me the Bouncer. Gingerly I extract the missile from its splintered body. My heart drops to my stomach. That was our only connection to the rest of the world.
“Took the hit for you,” Johanna says. “Did a number on your spine and ribs, but you can walk. You’ll be fine.”

I can walk? I snort, which hurts. “My leg’s gone. Won’t be prancing around anytime soon.” It’s not like she hasn’t noticed. She helped me back to camp first, then carried Annie to safety. I crawled like a worm behind them. It was among the most humiliating moments of my life.

“I’ll go looking for it,” promises Johanna. “Can’t have come far on its own. We need more wood, anyway. Annie’s gotta stay warm. Just hope nobody’ll come peeking. You know I can’t protect both of you.”

Which then clarifies whom she’ll walk out on if she has to.

I sigh. At least we’re not beating about the bush.

“Let me clean you up first,” I say. “You look like you got dragged through the dirt real good.”

Eyes roll. “No shit, bread boy.”

My leg’s in really bad shape. The joints are fucked. Johanna tried to tinker it back together. I’m not happy with the outcome.

I inspect the makeshift repair. “I’m not sure I can run in this.”

“Quite frankly. I’m not sure you have a choice.”

Unfortunately, I fear she’s right. I sigh in exasperation. I demand a freaking light-show at the end of this interminable tunnel!

“Thanks for finding it.”

“Yeah. Annie?”

“Sleeping, still.”

“Let her. She needs it. You should, too. Get some rest. We ought to figure out what to do tomorrow.”

“What about you?” Johanna looks like she’s just been pulled from the tribute morgue herself.

She waves me off. “I’ll wake you if you’re needed.”

In my dream I keep eternally falling, hand-in-hand with Annie, until eventually the ten o’clock wave swallows us up whole. Boom. Boom.

“Welcome back to the land of the living.”

Annie puts on her best smile. I crack a grin.

What fakers we are.

Annie’s far from fine. Shivering with cold throughout the night. Fever since morning. We did a check-up on the dressing earlier. It looks infected.

“How are you feeling?” Johanna asks.
“It hurts a little,” downplays Annie. “Where are we?”

“In safety,” I say. “Thanks to you.”

“Good.” She closes her eyes. This takes all her substance.

“How about a little nap?” suggests Johanna. “By the time you wake up I’ll have some soup in the pot.”

Annie goes out like a light.

The two of us reconvene outside.

“I don’t like this,” I say. “She’s worse.”

Johanna agrees. “I’ll slip her more painkillers.”

“What about that morphling?” There’s one syringe of it we spirited away from Wonderland. I keep thinking about the flogging back in Twelve, how Katniss’ sister Prim used the morphling on Gale. I also remember my time in the hospital after the 74th. More had become one of my favorite words. There was no limit to how much of the stuff they pumped into me. Weaning off it… well that was a different story. It was my honest good luck that you can’t easily get your hands on a stash of morphling in Twelve. Not even as a victor.

“Mhm,” is all Johanna has to say about it. “Morph ain’t the white knight you’re looking for…”

So instead we look at the map of Panem.

“It’ll take us a week to get to Blackwater.” They call it that because the wastewater from the factories turns the rivers black. It’s not an option. Annie needs a quick fix.

I have a bizarre proposition. “Those people… they had to come from somewhere.”

Johanna raises a brow. “One bullet not enough for you? They’ll gun you down before you can ask for help.”

“They have to have a conscience. They won’t just let her die.”

“Oh, they will. Conscience is the first victim of war, Peeta. The people who survive. They’ve got none left.”

It’s a lesson I learn in the wilderness, helpless. It’s the same lesson Katniss learns on the other end of the world, riding the war wave on the morale-depleted backs of her followers.

It is infected. And the infection’s spreading. Fast. Annie runs an unremitting fever. Her breath comes in bubbly wheezes. Johanna fears that the bullet grazed her lung. Seen the symptoms before in arena bait (that’s what she calls no-chance tributes). A stab-wound, followed by three to four days of misery, high fever, declining physical stats. They’re lucky if another tribute puts a quick end to them. The natural demise drags on, long-winded. No prime time stuff, but in Mentor Central you get to see the scenes that don’t make it into the final cut.

My hand’s on my bag ten minutes later. I grab the essentials, make for the door.

Johanna eyes my undertaking warily. “What’s that?”
“I’m getting help.”

“You’re getting yourself killed.”

“I’m trying not to get her killed.”

“You’ll get both of you killed,” she insists. “Listen to me now and listen well. I’ve seen these kind of injuries before. We’re not equipped to handle them.”

The disgust must be vivid on my face. I pull away as if her touch burns me.

“I’m not letting it end this way,” I say. I can’t believe Johanna’s surrendering this easily. Haven’t we been through much worse and still made it? “You want me to stay and watch her die? Cause that’s what’s happening. She needs a doctor!”

“And you’ll get one from… where exactly? Shazam, conjure one out of your hat?” Johanna snorts. “Last people we met shot us to pieces. Let’s say they have a change of heart when you find them - it doesn’t matter.” She points a finger at feverish Annie. “She’ll be pushing up daisies by the time you return.”

I blink, unbelieving of the words that leave her mouth. “Are you serious? That’s it? We sit by her side and watch her lose her grip on life’s thread?” I grind my teeth. “What kind of friend are you?”

“I told you time and again, Peeta. I’ll repeat myself at the risk of being cruel: We’re alone. You. Annie. Me. No Finnick. No Katniss. No benefactors. This is the war your girlfriend brought us. This is New Panem. You’ll find no help out there.”

I storm out, not able to listen to this any longer. Every minute I waste trying to convince Johanna is a minute lost on Annie.

Johanna yells at me from the doorway. “Don’t you dare leave this place, Mellark!” An order I’ll happily ignore. “You don’t get to weasel out on me when the going gets rough! That’s not how this works!”

I whirl around, eyes moist. Screaming across the bottomless chasm that divides us. “I’m not running away! I’m getting help!”

Johanna crosses her arms. “If you’re just half the friend you’re pretending to be, you move your ass back in here and hold her hand for as long as you have to.”

“She needs help!” I wail. “We have to fucking help her!”

“She needs a miracle. Can you get her one?”

A single word then seals Annie’s fate. “No.”

Johanna turns, but pauses midway through. “Go and silence your conscience if you have to. But don’t ever beg me for favors again.”

I run.

Where I’m going? I don’t know. At first I try to scale the mountainside we tumbled down from, but it’s too steep for me to climb. Next I look for footprints, trails, anything. The sun sets faster than usual, another enemy. I keep adding to the hours I’m using up, praying that Annie is strong enough to pull through and that Johanna won’t do anything stupid while I’m gone.
I search for that miracle until well into the night until I can barely see my outstretched arm. The Map of Panem is useless. I’m running in circles like some headless chicken. It wouldn’t even matter who I found, rebel or Capitolite, I couldn’t care less. I’d reveal who I am, tell them where we’re hiding, get an escort out of here. I’d put the handcuffs on myself as long as Annie’s getting the medical care she needs. They can’t let her die. She’s too important for that. She’s the only real leverage against Finnick if he’s still alive. Nobody would dare forfeit that trump card. Hell, I’d kneel before Snow if that’s what it takes

But an hour before dawn I lurch back to our makeshift shelter, miracle-less and empty-handed.

I find Johanna hunching over Annie like a lioness above her brood. She says nothing as I enter. I squat down on Annie’s other side. Her skin’s a wax-like composition. She murmurs softly in turbulent sleep. Fever dreams. I take her sweaty hand in mine. She feels like a corpse already.

“Is there nothing we can do?” I ask desperately.

“We can be there for her,” says Johanna.

But we can’t stop her life cannon from firing - that fuse is too short.

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Annie’s last hours are hell on earth. She doesn’t go peacefully like you’re used from Capitol movies. Once the effect of the morphling drains the pain eats her up. She becomes delirious, aggressive. We have to strap her down so she won’t further hurt herself. It breaks my heart to see her like this.

She calms a little once her energy stores are depleted enough. Eyes half-open, unfocused. Systems shut down one by one. She sullies herself. I couldn’t care less about the stench, but I’m exasperated that this is a step down a one-way alley.

Annie’s lucid moments are far and in between. I’m not sure she knows what’s happening. Neither Johanna or I talk about the severity of her situation. Close to sundown she murmurs about Turquoise Bay and how she loved to run in the sand alongside Finnick and Mags.

At some point during the dark I lose the battle to exhaustion and nod off. I wake up the same way I fell asleep; Annie’s hand clutched tight in my own. Sniveling catches my ears. I look first to Johanna. Her cheeks are wet with tears. She’s been crying all night long.

I squeeze that fragile corpse hand as if I could instill life back into it.

Annie’s story ends as a tally mark in my journal.

I don’t write in it again.

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We bury her on a soft winding slope in view of the river. It takes us half a day to dig the hole with our knives, supervised by a set of dead blue eyes.

By sundown we lower her body into the earth. When Johanna isn’t looking I shake Annie’s shoulders, hoping beyond hope that I can wake her up. She slumbers on, unperturbed.

Johanna throws the first handful of dirt. I don’t have the strength. The moon weeps with us behind a veil of clouds. Not even the stars will attend Annie’s burial.

I kneel beside the hump of upturned earth.
My tears know no shame. Johanna sits down next to me, a silent mourner.

We wait all night and all day, but Death won’t return our loved companion.

Day 118. New Panem has broken me.

Chapter End Notes

It's been too long.
In the beginning I’m a wild, untamable hellion. I lash and kick and spit. I instill some good portion of despair in the unlucky guards responsible for me. Finnick and his world-changers must return any minute, Snow’s head held high in victory, freedom passes for everyone, biggest coup of all freaking time.

Retaliation. The guards instill some good portion of despair in me. My hopes are weeded out like District Thirteen 75 years ago. The only pass I get is the daily walk to interrogation, where a strung-up investigator wants to know precisely - to a tee - how deep in this shit I’m really standing.

*Up to my ears,* I think and the onset of trepidation breaches my buoyant frame of mind.

But I say offhandedly, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Some part of me refuses to grasp the reality of this cold-blooded betrayal.

After all these years. I thought I could trust Finnick.

I knew.

I should have known.

Between that gold-toothed bitch and I, I’m convinced that we can still kick some Peacekeeper ass.

You see, Enobaria has always been as loyal as they come to Mother Capitol. Thing is, even steel alliances crumble once you’ve been locked up in a nondescript cell for weeks, accused of anarchism, plotted treason and sticking out your finger at the holy system.

None of which Enobaria deliberately did, mind you, but to uphold the corners of society scapegoats are needed. And she’s about to play her chosen part.

Victors bleed together.

And bleed we do. Once the charges are proclaimed we progress to the more tedious part of being prisoners-of-war.

I watch in horror as the guards pull Enobaria’s teeth, one by one, to coax some deeply hidden secret from her. When they’re done, poor Enobaria’s head has swelled to the size of a melon.

I wouldn’t lie if I said I wasn’t ever able to warm up to that self-glorifying, fanged moron, but I
hedge a deep respect for how she endures everything she does without as much as asking for a break.

Enobaria remains silent from start to finish and manages to pass some of that Two resilience on to me before she dies miserably of infection.

By then I’m scared shitless.

Finnick won’t come.

I learn very quickly to weep, whimper and whelp. Playing the unyielding hero becomes old fast when water-boarding dominates the daily agenda and suffocation becomes ritual. My lungs burst every morning and every evening. Knives for breakfast, clamps for dinner. We pull all-nighters. Little party never killed nobody, isn’t that the catch phrase of one of those Capitol disco songs? If only they knew!

I damn Finnick and that Everdeen girl to hell and back every time they span the washcloth over my face.

Revolution! Ha! What a malady!

Someone has the ingenious idea of sticking an electrode up my ear.

I can’t accurately describe the feeling of my brain exploding and spreading like cream all over the insides of my skull. Part of it comes cascading out my nostrils in a thick jet of blood. I soil myself instantly. They send in a medic once they realize my heart isn’t having such a good time. The only thing keeping me up are my restraints and the shock-freeze of every muscle fiber in my body.

Doc sticks tubes in my arms, tubes up my nose and one down my throat. Tells me to follow his fingers, but I can’t see for days. They lay off the gas pedal a little. I drool into space for a week or so, unable to beg anyone to put out the fire that’s my head. My hair melts to my scalp.

I don’t remember a lot about this time, but I’ll never forget the smell of singed spirits.

I thought I’d be a little more horrified when I find out that they have Annie Cresta, but I realize I’m simply disappointed that Finnick abandoned her, too.

I give up the names of a few co-conspirators to save an eye, only so they can make me watch how Annie gets humiliated by half the garrison. I yowl until they threaten me with the washcloth. Then somebody sparks me up, soaking wet.

That’s show enough for them to stop brutalizing poor Annie, at least.

My brain begins to dictate its own time-outs. I wouldn’t mind simple fainting, but I panic at the
thought of seizures. One time I wake up with my tongue all swollen and puffy after nearly biting it in half. Thankfully the good Doc has a solution for that and equips my guards with a bite block. 

After I almost hack off somebody’s finger. Biggest victory of my entire stay.

Until the escape that is.

Whoever blows out the wall of my cell has my eternal gratitude. I burn my fingers on the molten stone before I allow myself to believe it’s real. Dumbstruck for minutes I waste invaluable time into the blaring alarms.

Then I suck it up and find Annie, shove a rifle into her hands and show her the trigger. She’s like a hurricane, that girl, bulldozing down whatever dares to stand in our way.

Including Peeta Mellark’s nose.

I’d laugh if not for the dungeons caving in on us. Thirteen really didn’t try! What’s gone is gone, I suppose.

Still, I offer to take him along.

It’s the only decent thing to do.

My brain can’t grasp the fact that it’s over. I seize up the moment I turn on the faucet in the bathroom and twitch like a grub until Annie comes in and kills the water. One nervous breakdown later I ruefully accept her help to clean up the biggest mess. You can imagine my aversion to washcloths by now. I manage to cut up my arm in the process - don’t ask - so Annie offers to bandage it up. My self-pity reaches unacceptable levels.

I try unsuccessfully to massage the thumping out of my eyes, yawn once, pop my ears and then think very, very hard on what our next step should be.

And I know instantly what we won’t do.

“We can’t go looking for him, Annie. We can’t go looking for him now.”

She shifts her gaze to the table and I’m left to interpret her silence as I wish.

I feel a deep jealousy for Annie’s ability to still have faith in Finnick, after all that he has and has not done.

I lost that confidence in one of Snow’s interrogation rooms.

“Hey! Hey. Will you stop?”

My lungs are on fire. We just watched the bouncer. Finnick fucking it up. BIG time.

Annie slows down. Her tears not so much. “What made him do that?!”

“I don’t know,” I say. Snow kept us silent for years. Not a word trickled through to the districts. You only ever learned the small print of victor existence in the hands of your first patron. And the particulars were always at the bottom. Dos and Don’ts. The don’ts carried ugly consequences. I needed private tutoring on that. Slow learner.

But now Finnick lectured the country. I wonder how much Panem will like Alma Coin’s carrot-
and-stick policy. Because so far I’m not seeing a lot of carrot in her regime.

Annie exhales. “What will we tell Peeta?”

“Tell Peeta?” I ask. “I’m not having story-time when we go back, Annie.”

“Shouldn’t we-”

“Absolutely not. Finnick said enough”

I go on to feel raw and filthy with these secrets exposed.

Who was I trying to fool?

I rebelled once and paid with the life of loved ones.

I rebelled twice and the only real friendship I had was placed on knife’s edge.

Unteachable, I now witness the price of my third and final revolt.

I search for a free noose so I can hang with my people.

It’s the deepest, most wretched pain I have ever felt. The dungeon doesn’t compare in the slightest.

Peeta and Annie try to counsel me, but there is little you can tell someone whose district has been razed to the ground.

I’m a realist. I never believed that a free Panem could work. But was it really necessary to strip me of everything I had to drive home that point?

She’s responsible for this? A song killed my people?

The thought of Katniss’ neck in a noose keeps me going for weeks.

Good old Vogue! I couldn’t imagine being happy to see another arena, but I’m ecstatic. Burgers, pizza, dirt-cheap drinks. I am on top of the world.

And Snow’s paying.

I stand at the edge of the pool, watching its contents splash over as Annie glides through the water like she was born with fins instead of arms. She has a much lighter style than Finnick, who is a display of power and strength. With Annie it looks almost effortless, as if the water parts before her to ease her exercise.

I back up a step to avoid getting wet. Annie surfaces on the near side of the pool.

She sees me. “Hey.”

“Hey,” I say back and suddenly my throat is puffy. I don’t know what I’m doing here.

“Is anything wrong?” A worry wrinkle flares up between her brows. It’s been really quiet lately. We’re all just waiting for a big bang. I told Peeta yesterday to keep a close eye on those killer
rabbits, lest they gnaw through their enclosure and attempt a putsch while we’re sleeping.

“Nothing wrong.” I shake my head. “Never mind.”

I’m about to pull out, have my hand on the doorknob already. Exasperation. I turn around, the hairs on the back of neck on edge from all that stupid splashing.

“I need your help.”

“No word to Peeta.” My one condition.

“Okay,” says Annie.

We’re in my room. My bathroom. The water’s on. I’m freaking out at the sound already.

The only reason Annie survived her Game is because she’s an exceptionally gifted swimmer. Pearl-diver before the Reaping. Can forever keep her breath under water. It was the only reason she won the 70th - all the other tributes drowned in the dam break. Ingenious scheming by Mags and Finnick, impeccable execution by yours truly in selling the idea to Seneca Crane. But that’s another story. Annie owes me, is what I want to say.


Annie looks me up. “The water triggers the convulsions?”

“No. God, no.” It sounds ridiculous that way. “I get a panic attack. That’s the spark. You see…”

I tell her a brief version of the electrocution and water torture back in the dungeon and how the mixture of that must have fried some of my synapses. Once I face the threat of water something inside of me clicks and jump-starts the spasms. And it’s not healthy. I get spotty vision, or a tremor in my hands or memory blanks. Minutes, hours, it’s different every time. It’s worse every time.

I’ll be honest. I can’t see progress. Annie quotes patience, a trait I never had and am certainly not cultivating now. Peeta senses that something is awry and stays down in Maintenance for most of the time. Clever boy.

But before I can reach any significant breakthrough in my therapy things take a turn for the worse.

I learn there are worse things than water.

Like the deaths of our friends on camera.

Like the end of the world.

We watch the fires eat up the horizon atop of Wonderland’s dome. Peeta and Annie lose their last bit of faith.

I have nothing left to lose, yet feel deeply aggrieved by the emptiness the apocalypse leaves in its wake.

Blank slate.
But no cannon.

The games continue.

Did we survive because we are good people? Yes? Come on. I'm a repeat killer. So are Annie and Peeta.

So too, sadly, are the first people we meet after The End Of The World.

Blood squirts from Peeta's hand as birds' twittering is replaced by gunfire. The three fingered salute, Katniss' legacy, has stayed the same throughout the warping of the world: It means goodbye to someone you love. It costs lives, and we're yet to pay tribute to that.

Annie and Peeta run ahead of me. Bullets whiz past us. Our persecutors want us dead. War is deeply ingrained in its survivors. They'll only ask questions once they turn over our carcasses.

I trip. My face connects with the ground, hard. Crumbly earth between my teeth. Annie and Peeta are out of sight. Over the horizon. I get up, shamble on. Death-threats barked from behind. I reach a precipice, the dead-end of a one way road. Shit! Where are the others?!

I turn around, devastated, to find new companions coming to my aide. Three rifles at point-blank.

"Game over, dearie," proclaims the closest.

Doesn't he know? The games don't end until the cannon blast.

"Give us the gun. Behave and live."

A snort escapes me, partly because my nose is clogged with dirt. It comes across as rebellious, which earns me a gun barrel up the offended nostril.

"Fuck!" I hold my face together with my hands. Reflex tears cloud my vision. One of them gets closer, slaps the gun from my grip. I protest, but there's a follow-up kick to the ribs, hair-grabbing, useless struggling.

Time-jump to the Capitol cell.

Time-jump to the Capitol bedrooms.

Time-jump to the 67th.

A lot of pain, some crying, extinguished fighting spirit.

A muzzle is strategically placed under my jaw.

"Any worth in dying for that stupid birdie?"

They laugh.

"All hail the Mockingjay!" and "Katniss, our saviour!"

One stops laughing when I jam a knife into his boot, courtesy of Wonderland. He howls in pain, his comrades howl in surprise and I howl in horror as I do a back-roll off the cliff, certain that I'm going to die.
(But not for Katniss Everdeen.)

I can’t keep my hands from shaking as I’m cutting away at Annie’s shirt.

“Should I?” Peeta, not missing a trick.

“Shut up. Just hold her, okay?” My nerves are brittle after that plunge. Water, seizure, now Annie. And she won’t stop bleeding. God.

Peeta watches silently as I go about not knowing what to do. In the arena you fix wounds for time. Only so many cannon blasts until a medic patches you up for good. If you don’t make it that long you end up face up in the tribute morgue. And that’s the only experience I have with playing doctor. Prettying up the corpses for the funerals at home.

I cauterize entry and exit wounds and tell Peeta that’s all we can do. We agree that she needs some rest. It’s procrastinating the inevitable, but none of us will admit it yet.

Peeta has a freaking hole right through his palm and it’s questionable whether he’ll ever be able to do that stupid salute again. The bigger problem is the loss of his prosthetic.

I volunteer to go looking for it while he guards Annie.

A couple hundred yards out, some safe distance up a tree I take ten very slow and very deep breaths. After those fail to calm me I resort to crying convulsively, raw desperation that sticks even after I’ve drained myself empty.

I find Peeta’s leg in some ditch, caked in mud. All the miles and now the fall have done a number on it and I’m everything but a Five engineer.

You’d think we’d reached rock bottom already…

But downhill doesn’t end.

I won’t be able to hold up that single promise I gave Finnick before the Games.

Annie hums some Four tune, off-course in fever dreams. Peeta, passed out to her other side, sleeps with one of her hands clutched tightly in his.

I brush gently through her hair, damp with sweat and blood.

Any minute now I’ll muster enough courage to let her go.

I bite down on my lip until it hurts, but it’s not stimulating enough to get me out of my haze.

Annie is dying. Her lungs are filling with blood. Her fate’s written out. I don’t know how I’m going to tell Finnick, when - if - we meet again, in the after-life. But I’m not going to stand by and watch her suffer through this.

My hands haven’t stopped shaking since the fall. As if they’re afraid of what they’re required to do.

I start to massage the sides of her throat, gently. This is how I used to get high, back in the days.
The right pills and a choking partner. Gloss was great at it. A tight line between unconsciousness and bliss. We walked it like pros.

Annie ceases to hum, falls into some deep slumber.

I could stop now, but I don’t.

This way it’s painless.

This way she can enjoy Turquoise Beach a little while longer.

Later, when Peeta wakes, there are no words.

This sin I won’t share.

I’m numb and I’m tired.

Too much has happened today.

I feel as if I’d been out in a pounding rain without protection, drained.

I’m soaked to the skin with emotion.

Can’t stand my own mind.

Goodbye means… farewell. What’s the gesture, Katniss?

Peeta loads up our last gun.

“I’ll kill them.” He’s thirsting for revenge.

“Listen to me,” I say. “Listen to me.”

But he’ll have none of it. He’s ready to go and he’s found a cause.

“We need to get to Twelve. You owe it to her. Don’t throw this away now.”

I don’t know why I’m trying to convince him. It doesn’t matter to me if we reach Twelve or not.

“It wasn’t supposed to be this way,” he says. Bullets and tears.

“No. It wasn’t.” But it is. “Don’t be stupid. They’ll shoot you before you know it.”

“I’ll take some down with me.”

“And then?” Now I know why I want to stop him. Because of then. Then I’ll be alone.

I grab Peeta and shake him, violently, not out of compassion, but out of self-preservation.

“You’re willing to die, you coward, but not to live?!”

I push him away and the patched-up prosthetic slips. He lands on Annie’s grave, back popping
against the stones we laid down so the scavengers won’t feast on her.


“She’s dead,” says Peeta. “They’re all dead.”

“But we’re not,” I say resolutely.

“We’re alive. We’re the pack.”

Chapter End Notes

A handful more chapters, folks, and we’ll get there. Thanks for sticking with me for such a long time. This will get finished. Slow and steady.
Part III - Eleven

Chapter Notes

Some lines borrowed from the book/movie for consistency.
Let's have a round of applause and welcome Katniss on the scene!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Part III
CHILDREN OF WAR

I promise you, no one judges me more harshly than I do myself;
I caused a brilliant wreckage. Some say I fell from grace; they’re being kind.
I didn’t fall – I dove.

Chapter 11

The smell of burn. Noise filtered by a popped eardrum. Fluorescent gray.

I wake to chaos, grope for the bow, ready to strike. A flashback jolts me upright. The Quell. The plan. 12 o’clock’s tree. I grind my fingers into the earth only to realize that jungle hummus has been replaced by scrap metal.


A woman kneels beside me, pushes me back down.

“You shouldn’t be up.” A stalwart grip on my arm. Someone hollers: “Sedative!”

I try desperately to wriggle free, but other hands join in restraining me. Someone pokes a needle into my arm. I slam my head in objection and wail in a horrible, dying-animal way until my voice gives out.

It takes two more injections to render me harmless, but the drug causes sedation, not sleep,
trapping me in a fuzzy dull misery. My captors insert tubes into my arms and sing a lullaby of false
security while covertly pumping my body full of poison.

I look for Peeta in a spinning world, but they put a strap across my forehead. Someone’s finger
ends up between my teeth and I bite down maliciously. My trophy, a mask draped over mouth and
nose, emits a gas that jumbles my remaining determination.

Blackness, here I come again.

It’s impossible to keep track of what happens next. I feel like I’m caught in a rewinding loop. I
open my eyes to people sitting at my bedside, explaining, promising, apologizing. Bizarre fairy
tales uttered in some foreign tongue. A timeless in and out of consciousness, highlighted only by
the constant orchestra of monitors keeping vigil over me.

Have I won?

I open my eyes and for the first time I am there. Pain and nausea are fast to catch up. I flex fingers
and toes only to realize that the restraints are gone, but I lack the resolution of bolting up and
running.

“Hey, Catnip.” Eyes dart to my guardian.

“Gale?” My throat is lined with coal dust.

One side of Gale’s face is encrusted in scars and burns. His arm, hanging in a sling, pokes out
from underneath a shredded miner’s shirt. I can see it before my inner eye - another accident,
odies buried beneath the earth, newborn widows.

“Prim?” The first thing on my mind. The only thing that matters.

“She’s fine,” says Gale. “So is your mother. I got them out in time.”

Out in time? What were they doing down in the mine? My eyes skim across the room, plain and
drab, a stark inverse to the Capitol’s rainbows and sprinkles. A world away from home.

“This isn’t Twelve,” I say.

“Katniss...” Gale reaches down with his good arm, pushes a strand of hair out of my face.
He doesn’t have the heart to tell me.

Thirteen lives.

Twelve doesn’t.

The Quarter Quell, a set-up plotted by Plutarch Heavensbee, Head-Gamemaker-slash-Thirteen-
mole, had no other purpose but to extract me - me! - from President Snow’s grasp. Because
Thirteen’s commander, a woman named Alma Coin, thinks I’m the perfect face for swaying
Panem into rebelling against Snow’s totalitarian regime.

What an idea.

“You’re the spark we’ve been waiting for for decades,” explains Plutarch with the kind of delight
that usually has Capitolites swooning over some deadly Hunger Games contraption. He materialized by my bedside the moment he heard I was awake.

Apparently this idea agreed with about half the tributes, who were offered refuge if they managed to refrain from killing me until a rogue hovercraft could be smuggled in to pick me from the arena.

Crackerjack scheming, if not for Snow’s devastating retaliation.

My doctors call in a break. I bet I don’t make a very heroic face as I burst into tears, crying myself out of reality.

“He’s lying! He’s - that can’t be! Tell me that’s not true, Gale.”

District Twelve, eradicated. The backlash of a masterly gambit, played out on my account.

After the Games they sent in planes, Gale tells me. Firebombed the town. He managed to round up a few dozen lucky ones. They fled into the woods from where Thirteen’s hovercrafts collected less than two hundred survivors.

Gale holds my hand tightly, a weak attempt at convincing me all those dead bodies aren’t my fault.

I don’t believe him.

I ask about Peeta instead.

Gale’s face darkens.

“What do you mean you left him behind?!”

Plutarch raises his arms in defense. “A tragedy! We couldn’t! There wasn’t time! We barely came through!”

I’m not sure Peeta, Johanna or Enobaria would contend with this excuse. My hands are fists in the sheets.

“Did you send in someone to rescue them?”

“It’s not that eas-”

I’m having none of it. “Take me to the Capitol!”

“Miss Everdeen,” says the man to Plutarch’s right, unflustered by my tantrum. Definitely military. Col Boggs and three stars adorn his name tag. “We cannot sanction an operation under the current circumstances. The risks are unwarrantable for our agents. You have to understand. I am sorry.”

He says the last bit just so it makes him looks like he cares. I don’t buy it for a second. I look to Plutarch, unsure if I should be angry or begging. But there’s too much on the line for flighty mistakes here.

So before I screw up my possibly only chance at righting wrongs, I decide to take an intermediate step.

“I want to talk to Haymitch.”
I wasn’t sure what to tell Haymitch when I saw him again. Hate him for breaking his promise to me on saving Peeta? Scream at him for being part of a secret conspiracy without me knowing? Strangle him for sacrificing me and Peeta for some grand ulterior motive? I can’t narrow it down to a single issue, so I follow Boggs down the hallway in a universally embittered mood.

We stop in front of a door marked H. Abernathy where Boggs suggests I take as much time as I need. He’ll wait outside so long. Coin ordered him to be something like my personal escort, a job that makes neither of us happy.

“You want me to come in with you?” asks Gale, who has been following like my shadow.

I almost say yes, but at the last moment think better of it. This is something he can’t be part of, can’t ever understand. The fourth corner of a triangle. This is Games business. I don’t want Gale in there.

“I’ll be fine,” I say and will myself to look profoundly pissed. It’s the best way to deal with Haymitch, especially when drunk. And I’m willing to wager my allotted Mockingjay status that his sobriety didn’t make the ride out of the Capitol.

But as I step in my put-on dies like a popped balloon.

“Wha…” I can’t finish, staring. The anger drains out of me.

Haymitch lies corpse-like in a hospital bed, sleeping or unconscious, I can’t tell. Machines hover over him protectively. Tubes snake underneath the sheets, like the jungle-vines in the arena.

My throat is dry. I rasp, “What happened to him?”

“Injured during extraction,” says Boggs from the doorway. “A bullet pierced his liver. He’s been put into artificial sleep.”

Haymitch’s taint is a waxy yellow. I’m no doctor, but he doesn’t look like he’s taking only a beauty nap.

I turn to Boggs, a sudden pressure inside my chest as I see myself facing not only Snow, but now Coin too, the whole fucking world - alone. Haymitch wasn’t much of a mentor, but he’s the only one I ever had.

“Will he make it?” I will not, cannot take no for an answer.

“The doctors can give you the particulars on that. I can arrange a meet if you want.”

I would have preferred a straightforward answer. Maybe complicates things. Maybe implies leverage.

“Shit, Haymitch.” I inch closer to his bed. He emanates a strong, sweet smell. Urine. The acrid stuff from the waste mounds behind the factories. I switch to mouth breathing automatically. Haymitch’s chest rises and falls the way the apparatus commands. My eyes follow its cable back to the wall socket. One pull would be all it takes. I picture him in one of the tribute coffins then, just another pile of earth in Twelve’s vast collection. What an easy way out.

Gale comes up behind me, and I feel the reassuring weight of his palm on my shoulder, grounding.

“He’ll pull through. He’s Seam.”
Disheartened, I ask to be taken back to my room.

With Peeta in captivity and Haymitch on the deathbed I am faced with a mounting cluster of things I'm not prepared to deal with. I count the tiles under my feet as we walk back to my room, growing frustrated every time I step outside the rectangles. Like a mirror to all the bad moves I’ve recently committed to.

Gale suggests I get some rest and I’m happy when he leaves me to it. I crawl into bed and curl up against the pillow. And then, hoping, dispirited, I pinch a skin fold at my throat, close to the jugular. So it really hurts. The kind of intensity that evokes a reflex pain response. An instant upsurge in heart rate. And surely an awakening from this horrid nightmare.

But no. I surrender my efforts when it becomes clear that the sleep-gods won’t release me into a more agreeable reality. My skin, affronted, throbs from the abuse.

I lie awake for a long time in the tomb that is Thirteen.

The next time I am visited marks the first positive moment since my retrieval from the Games.

“Prim!”

I hold her so tight she mock-groans, and we both laugh. I allow myself to push aside the world, to be in this moment. Back in our rundown shack of a house in Twelve, when life wasn’t about more than filling next meal’s plate.

“I missed you,” Prim says and hops on my bed. I can’t help but put her through a quick routine examination. The gray jumpsuit that sits just a little too lose around the hips (growth spurt or Thirteen’s rigid dietary regime?). The scratches on her forearm (from when she fled the bombs, scared stiff through the perilous woods). The repressed flinch when I draw a finger down her grown-out braid (who dared touch her?)

“I missed you too.” Immediately I fall back into my role as protector. “Are you okay? Are they treating you well?”

“Yeah,” says Prim, and I try to fish out any ambiguity in that word. “We have a big suite all to ourselves! They asked mom to help in the infirmary and President Coin says I could become a doctor if I train hard enough. Wouldn’t that be the thing?” I nod enthusiastically, but make a mental note to probe out what President Coin expects in exchange for such tutoring. Prim carries on, genuinely delighted about Thirteen’s mode of operation. “The food is really funny…” Her face scrunches at the thought of exotic cuisine I’m yet to try out. So far it’s been bland gruel for me - the tree rats in the arena have quite disagreed with my digestion.

“…and we get a to-do tattoo stamped on the inside of our wrist each morning.”

She shows me hers proudly. It’s an inked timetable that’s supposed to wash off during the 9 o’clock evening shower, but not before. 1600: Reflection is scheduled right now and we have roughly an hour left until Prim is supposed to attend Schooling and after that dinner at Mess Hall #23. I wonder what they’ll print on mine once I get the honor. 0830: Lead the revolution and perhaps 1745: Overthrow communist regime. Or much simpler… Until revoked: For once in your life, do as you’re told. The corner of my mouth quirks up. What’s the penalty for mutiny?

Prim crawls under the sheets and cozies up against me. I stroke softly through her hair, feeling the smoothness of the individual strands between my fingers.
“Everyone says what you did in the arena was really brave,” Prim says suddenly and I halt my motions. My jaw tightens. The present catches up, spills open like some throbbing, bulging abscess. I take a deep inhale. Brave is not how I felt when I let that arrow fly. I was desperate, mad with worry, trapped in the wolf den. Flicking off Snow was the last thing on my mind.

“What do you think?”

Prim goes silent, picks her next words deliberately. “I’m just glad you’re back… and… I’m sorry about Peeta.”

I’m too. “We’ll get him out of there.” I don’t know when or how, but I’ll find a way. I promised after all.

First things first though. I tap Prim’s nose playfully.

“What do you think?”

Because one thing I know: I won’t be storming the Capitol in a booty-baring hospital gown.

Instead of Prim’s trendy wrist tattoo I have a blue plastic bracelet that identifies me as Katniss Everdeen, 17D12, mentally unstable. The last bit is not only utterly ridiculous, but effectively prevents me from leaving the hospital wing to embark on my epic retribution campaign against Snow, the world and everyone else who dares to stand in my way.

Prim, trying to hide her amusement about my attributed status, suggests we could at least stretch my legs around the infirmary for the time being. Thinking back to all the preparation I’ve done for the Games I’m more than embarrassed to plead for a break some two hundred feet into our stroll, completely winded. Prim says the nausea comes from the concussion I got from when Johanna Mason smacked me unconscious with the wire. Even though I now know she was only acting according to plan I can’t help but damn her for it. I saw the tapes. There was way too much glee condensed in that blow.

We pass by Haymitch’s room and I manage to chat up a doctor about his recuperation. Plenty of medical terminology is thrown my way and by the time we’ve covered ten words I’m not even sure how to spell I raise my hands to stop him.

“Can you say that again… simpler?”

We take it from the start. Haymitch has an alcohol problem. I nod impatiently. No news to Panem. I got him Sae’s rotgut on several occasions myself, when he was too drunk to go anywhere but the bathroom (and to everyone’s regret, sometimes not even there). Alcohol is processed by the liver. Bullets, regrettably, are not. And because Haymitch’s liver hasn’t had a breather in the last decade it pretty much threw in the towel when he followed up with The Last Shot.

I think of the yearly Hunger Games, how kids are pulled out of the arena with their insides out or in pieces, and the Capitol still finds a way to pretty them up in time for Ceasar Flickermann’s post-Games interrogation. Surely then, something can be done about a plain and simple bullet.

At this point the doctor grows evasive. Yes… perhaps… but the details… he’s not the one in charge, I see. The orders come from the top and right now they’re to hold off on a transplant, which would be Haymitch’s best option.

“But he’s a victor!” I counter, a key player in this little treason game. If we can’t get our act together enough to file for a liver transplant, then how are we going to overthrow an empire?
I complain enough to scare off the doctor, who suddenly remembers some important obligations. I hope they include searching for a suitable organ replacement for Haymitch. He better not let the Mockingjay down, I think sardonically.

Filled with a sense of accomplishment I let Prim lead me off, lest I stimulate other medical personnel to pool forces against me.

On the way back to my wing we pass a set of nondescript double doors… flanked by a guard on either side. I am drawn like a moth to the flame. You can practically hear my jaw drop to the floor as I read the inscription on the door.

Prim, who knows me even better than Gale, lets out a small breath of resignation, probably having a premonition of what’s on my mind. I’ve already stormed past the unsuspecting guards before they can react, bursting into the room in true fashion to my mentally unstable status. Its sole occupant jumps in surprise at the intrusion and before I know it I’m bear-hugged by one disheveled Finnick Odair.

“Katniss!”

The guards rush in to my assistance. Finnick lets go of me the moment he sees them, takes a knowing step back. The artillery retreats only after repeated assurances on my part that I’ll be fine. Prim waits outside, just in case.

I turn to Finnick. “What’s going on here?”

He wears an equally embarrassing hospital gown along with pants and a companion bracelet to my own. There’s a bandage on his right arm and the end stages of some nasty bruises looming from underneath his shirt. His hair, a jumbled mess, would probably have his prep team drop dead if they saw him right now.

“Are you alright?” Finnick asks, upset. “They wouldn’t tell me anything.”

I knit my eyebrows. That makes little sense. But so does his confinement. “Why are there guards posted at your door, Finnick?”

As if we’re two conspirators Finnick leans in closer to me, voice toned down to a whisper. A secret lover’s admission. His breath tickles in my ear. “She ask anything of you yet, hm?”

“I- what?” I pause for a breath. Who? A blush creeps on my face, more annoyance than embarrassment. “What are you talking about?”

Finnick shakes his head, a pro at this game I’m not yet aware we’re playing. He pats the mattress. “Come. Sit.” I sink down on the box spring, obedient.

He gives me a once over, estimates how much a country girl from the East can know about underhand politics. Eventually the one corner of his mouth slithers up, a delusive glimpse of the Capitol’s golden boy who made it his business to play out the big-league against each other.

“You have no idea, do you?”

The blank expression on my face should betray enough that, no, I don’t.

For a second there I think I spy a chink in Finnick’s armor, a moment of hesitation. Can he drop his guard, or will Thirteen’s all-seeing eye pick up on his incertitude? But I have to make do with his poker face in the end - whatever criteria Finnick chooses for his entrustment, I don’t seem to meet conditions.
“What’d they tell you? About the Quell?”

“That… about the forcefield you mean? How they sent the hovercraft? You guys knew, and Plutarch… Thirteen’s setup… but Peeta and Johanna…”

“Yeah,” says Finnick, like all of it could be true or so far from it.

I don’t understand. What isn’t he telling me?

“Coin said they’re working on the rescue…” I try.

“Oh, she said that?” Finnick gives a dry laugh, claps his hands in victory. “We’re good then. Outstanding, Katniss.”

A muscle in my jaw twitches. How I hate to be kept out of the loop. I may be mentally unstable, but I’m not retarded.

“I think you should bend the knee to freedom, Katniss,” Finnick advises. “It would be best.”

“You’re not making sense.”

“Ah, that,” Finnick flashes his own armlet. “You shouldn’t take me serious right now.”

Oh.

Forget the medical paper band. Finnick still wears the gold bangle, Effie’s gift to Haymitch before the Quell, the counterpart to my pin and Peeta’s medallion. The one reason I didn’t let go of the bow string at the Cornucopia.

I look at Finnick then, still not sure what I’m seeing. Ally, trickster, paranoid? Do I want to believe him? The repercussions to that…

Finnick taps me on the thigh, springs up from the bed. “Come now, dear, you should be on your way. I’ve got psychological evaluation coming up in ten and if I flunk it again they’ll shunt me off to the crazies for good. What a waste that would be!”

I do my homework. I learn that the reason for Finnick’s detention is because he had a freak-out on the hovercraft ride back: he tried to strangle Plutarch, twice. Unsuccessfully as can be seen, but it put him right on top of Thirteen’s *beware-of-this-guy* list.

Add to that the tragic fate of Annie Cresta, whose voice we heard in the 4 o’clock wedge. I wasn’t aware of her involvement with Finnick before the Quell, but now the Reapings, Mag’s volunteering and the jabberjays all make sense. Apparently Annie was supposed to dog it alongside Haymitch, but something must have gone awfully wrong in Mentor Central. It’s assumed that she’s held captive with Peeta and Johanna and all the other victors who have been seized during the razzia.

Talk about a lead balloon.

The day of my discharge. The festive act of shedding my mentally unstable bracelet. My promise to keep up with my weekly check-ins (you think).

Boggs accompanies me on a detour to finally meet elusive Alma Coin before I’m to move in with my family. A double door, *COMMAND*, slides open before us to reveal several familiar faces.
Beetie, closest to me, catches my attention first - or rather the wheelchair he’s strapped to. Beside him is Finnick, this time adequately groomed and with both oars in water. A selection of Thirteen’s core staff, and then of course Plutarch and Coin herself.

Alma Coin is a woman in her mid-fifties, with gray hair that drops in an unbroken sheet over her shoulders, and the straight-back-no-fun attitude that seems to be common practice around here.

“There she is,” Plutarch introduces me. “The Girl on Fire.”

Warily I take the empty seat next to Beetee. That nickname does not bode well. I half expect Caesar Flickerman to jump out of the shadows, bleached teeth and sparkles, to tell me how he knew from the moment he met me just what a big promise I was.

“What an honor to have you here,” Coin says instead and surprises me with a pleasurably warm voice. “Such a courageous young woman.” She leans across the table to squeeze my hand. I resist the urge to pull away. I’m a bit leery when it comes to new allies nowadays.

“I can’t imagine what it is to live through the atrocities of the Games,” Coin continues, now addressing all of us victors. “Please know how welcome you are. I hope you find some comfort with us. We’ve known loss in Thirteen too.”

I exchange glances with Finnick and Beetee, but their expressions are unreadable. It’s like falling in a pot of honey. Only so long before the bees come.

“I wish you had more time to recover but unfortunately we do not have that luxury.” Coin pauses, giving each of us a compassionate once-over. “Are you aware of what happened?”

Yes. The Hunger Games got hacked, my district destroyed and Peeta captured. I decide it’s best to keep my mouth shut.

“When you fired your arrow at the forcefield, Katniss, you electrified the nation,” says Plutarch. The play of words there, I’ll be damned.

“There have been riots, uprisings and strikes in seven districts,” Coin tells us. A holo map of Panem appears, showing scattered red dots across the country. “We believe that if we keep this energy moving we can unify the districts against the Capitol. But if we don’t, if we let it dissipate, we could be waiting another 75 years for the next opportunity.”

“What about Peeta?” I ask, laying out my priorities. “Do you know anything?”

Plutarch sighs. “Unfortunately there’s no way for me to contact my operatives inside the Capitol at this point. We have a team dedicated to the issue, but understand that infiltrating an enemy citadel is a game of patience.”

“You left him…” It broils inside of me. I catch Finnick’s cautionary gesture to cut it, but I decide that after losing my betrothed, my home and my fictional unborn child I can go out on a limb with this.

“Katniss-” starts Plutarch, but I slam my fist on the table.

“You left him in that arena to die!”

Plutarch shrinks back into his chair. There is some crinkling of paper, but otherwise I’ve managed to silence the room. I let my gaze sweep the rebels’ faces expectantly. Apologies, I’ll take them now.
“Miss Everdeen.” Coin leans forward in her chair, the epitome of tranquility. She folds her long, slender fingers, taps her thumbs together. Her eyes bore into me.

“This revolution is about everyone. Restricting it to the individual would be…” She searches for the right word. “…tastelessly selfish. The dream is here for all of us, Katniss, and this one can be real. But to achieve it we need a voice.”

Deep down I know I have no right to refuse this plea. I remember what Panem looked like on my victory tour, the misery instilled deep in people’s hearts. Generations of poverty, of fear, of segregation.

On the other hand it’s oppressively unfair, because I never wanted more than to protect my little sister from the purgatory that are the Hunger Games. What the nation sees in me as rebellious and hope-bearing was nothing more than the carnal instinct of survival. I would have never swallowed those berries - I was pulling the big bluff praying to the heavens nobody would call me out on it.

But saving the world? A tale of heroes and hardships and unattainable happy endings. Such things belong in bedtime stories. I’ll very honestly admit, I’ve never been The Dreamer, too busy.

I cross my arms and declare to enchained Panem:

“You should have gone for Peeta instead.”

Chapter End Notes

Ok folks, so here's the deal. I was writing Part IV and there was just so much going on behind the scenes on Katniss' and Finnick's end that I would have ended up with a 30k+ interlude and that just... wasn't feasible. Let's give Peeta and Johanna a 3-4 chapter break to mourn for Annie while we rope in Katniss and Finnick for some suffering... and when I say some suffering I mean LOTS of it, obviously.

Here's where this derails from canon: Haymitch won't be there to mentor Katniss through the Mockingjay deal. Finnick isn't all bats in the belfry and Coin leads a thirsting Thirteen with much more of an iron-fist than in the books.

What irked me in MJ was that everyone tried to please Katniss instead of slapping her back into brutal reality and just force the Mockingjay role onto her. It's just a question of leverage, even for her. I really see Coin and Snow as the Frank and Claire Underwood of Panem, fighting it out with not much regard to collateral damage. Like, dirty dirty.

Let me know what you think.
Chapter 12

My glorious back talk earns me only a ride home. Plutarch thinks that if I see what Snow did to Twelve I might reconsider my participation in this historic event.

But the only thing I contemplate after my visit is how to best hijack a hovercraft and solo-storm the Capitol. If Snow wipes an entire district off the face of the earth just because he can then I don’t want to know what he will do to Peeta if I as much as bat an eyelash at an improper moment.

I take the rose in Victor’s Village very serious. It’s an endorsement of everything that happened so far. Finnick’s ambiguous behavior. Coin’s cold shoulder on the issue of Peeta’s recovery. And don’t tell me none of the ground troops haven’t found Snow’s blinding white trademark flower when sweeping the grounds before they O.K.ed my disbarment. I don’t buy that for a second.

Does Coin hedge a perfidious fondness for bloody roses too? Are the rebel forces so unprepared that one of Snow’s cronies could easily sneak past them and do some impromptu revamp on my library desk? Who stands where? Are there more than two sides to choose from? How many shades of gray is Thirteen made of?

And who can I bank on? Gale I would entrust my life with - but I’m not sure he’s good at this kind of game. He can lure a squirrel into one of his snares any time of day, but what chances does he have if he’s faced with an entirely different kind of rodents? Finnick? I haven’t seen him or Beetee since our meeting in COMMAND. We share common ground what with Annie being locked up too, but I’ve known Finnick for all of some forty-eight hours during the Quell. It’s hard to figure him out; I wouldn’t put it past him to smear me if that meant bargaining a deal for Four. He’s a veteran at wooing sponsors - and dangerously versed in career-mentality. A shaky ally.

That leaves Haymitch. And true to his style, he can’t be counted on. Again.

The looks I get from people since Peeta’s first plea for a ceasefire?

You don’t want to know.

Someone even slipped me a note under the doorway, the word traitor scrawled in stark, angry letters. Coin has Boggs trail me like one of those shepherd dogs from Ten, in case there’s trouble with the disgruntled residents. And here we’re talking about me, the girl everyone associates with rebel spirit. You better not bring up Peeta’s name in the mess hall.

No pressure from Coin though. She lets her people do the scut work - intimidate me to the point where I have to wonder if Peeta would be safe in Thirteen at all. The mob is getting out more pitchforks with every propo Snow broadcasts, and boy has he whipped his PR team into shape. By interview #3 the masses holler treason and blasphemy.

And the rebels’ response? None. Because I haven’t agreed to play my part yet. I’m letting them sizzle, the experts say. Wait for the water to spill over. But then, oh, then. You just wait. And that’s exactly what Coin does. Instead of strong-arming me into a role I’m not interested in she
applies a clever stratagem: she lets me work up an appetite for it.

We both know that if I don’t step up to be the Mockingjay soon and put a halt to Peeta’s forced performances I may never see him again.

Do I believe any of the interviews Peeta gives? Not a word. He’s a good actor and he may fool the country, but not me. Does it hurt to listen to what he says? Immensely so. How can he so easily discredit the rebels after all that Snow has done? The Games - twice! - and now Twelve?

Perhaps he was forced, is what Gale thinks after Peeta’s first debut. Perhaps he struck a deal with Snow, to protect me, if we lose the war. But how can he! Doesn’t he have an ounce worth of honor left in him? I would never say things like that, Gale tells me after interview #4 and deserts me in my solitary belief that Peeta is not the traitor Snow paints him to be.

And now everyone’s waiting, breaths hitched, to watch my next move on the gaming board that is Panem.

“No,” Coin says simply. “Individuals make no demands in Thirteen.”

I crumple my handwritten conditions list. My hands are fists. Plutarch, watching reservedly from the sidelines, must wonder when his Girl On Fire might finally erupt in flames. I’m about to. I’ve had it up to here.

“You will rescue Peeta and the other tributes,” I say, fuming. “If- when they are liberated, they will be granted immunity and receive a full pardon. You’ll announce this in front of Thirteen’s entire population and hold yourself and your government accountable. Tonight.” I take a breath, build up to my rhetoric climax. “Or you’ll find yourself another Mockingjay.”

Plutarch swallows back a squirm, barely able to withhold any longer. How proud he must be to have achieved such a gargantuan task, of finally igniting his oh-so promising fire beast. “Madame President,” he dares, but Coin tells him off with a flick of her wrist.

She puts down her pen, closes her notebook. I have her unwavering attention now. Only the buzzing of tactical holos in the background disturbs the silence. I wonder if she expects me to continue, but realize this is some sort of standoff for dominance. Who holds out longest. I straighten my spine. Coin studies me.

“Is this how Coriolanus trains his pets?”

I’m not sure if this is directed at me or Plutarch. We’re both speechless at the deliberate slip of etiquette.

“Intimidation and hotheadedness may have their place in the Capitol,” says Coin. “But you’re short-sighted if you believe threats will bring you any advantages, Miss Everdeen. District Thirteen is a haven for anyone seeking escape from President Snow’s lies and deceit - I would have expected more of you than to bring this ill ethic into my house.”

I feel like having been grounded for misbehaving. My cheeks flare.

“Understand that you’re in no way obligated to play an active part in this war. It’s a voluntary contribution. If you decline Mr Heavensbee here will find a way to breach it to the public,” - which Plutarch looks anything but thrilled about- “and arrangements shall be made to find a suitable occupation for you, according to your abilities and needs.”

“What about Peeta?” I ask.
“There will be a tribunal when the war is over. He will receive a fair hearing. As all others.”

A fair hearing? Fair has no place in a world like Panem.

“And the Mockingjay?” I say. “The spark?” The voice they so dearly needed only days ago. Have the districts surprisingly united without a canary to chirp the way?

“The country is a powder keg,” says Coin. “It will blow either way. The only question is who lights the match. And who stands too close to the fuse when it goes off.”

“A lot of innocents could die,” Plutarch says. Yes, I think, and Peeta will be one of them.

“So you’ll leave him there? There’ll be no rescue?” Snow will take him apart, piece by piece. There is no doubt.

“Oh, there will.” Coin smiles. “Don’t mistake me for a tyrant, Miss Everdeen. Once we have enough intel we’ll extract all the captive victors. But you can’t expect us to draw forces from the front and send them headlessly into the enemy’s sword because of a—” she points at my half-hearted blackmailing attempt, “—teenage girl’s emotional handicap.”

I feel incredibly stupid, but also, incredibly trapped. The only hope I had of saving Peeta, and Coin pulverized it on the spot.

“Your sister may continue her education as a medical assistant.” I grit my teeth. Of course she had to drag Prim into this. Now she strips me naked. “And your mother is quite a help around the infirmary I am told. You’ll be up for evaluation shortly. Time and location will be marked on your schedule. If you have any preferences let the officials know. Do you have any questions now? I believe we are done here.”

Coin nods politely to mask how she just smoothly binned me.

“Madame President…” The realization hasn’t trickled through to Plutarch yet. After setting plans into motion that have been sleeping for decades Coin’s willing to overhaul everything on a whim?

“No.” Coin holds up a hand. “She made up her mind, we’ll respect that. Odair will do. He’ll be more than willing to coopera-”

“Wait,” I catch myself saying, one last desperate try. If she takes me out of the equation Peeta’s death warrant is signed.

“I’ll do it,” I say. I can’t believe I’m saying it. I repeat, “I’ll do it. But you have to rescue Peeta. As soon as possible.”

Look at me, how I carelessly hand myself over with absolutely no ace up my sleeve.

But I can find a way to deal with war tribunals later. Peeta will be safer in Thirteen’s custody where I can see him than if he falls prey to some angry mob wanting his head when we take the Capitol, out of my grasp. I can’t protect him while he’s with Snow. I can, however, pick a cell-door lock and stage an escape while everyone’s celebrating democracy or whatever.

Plutarch tries to make the shift from horrified to delighted. Coin nods tactfully, but is otherwise only little affected by my sudden change of heart. I wonder if it really makes no difference to her or if she played me from the start.

“Well,” Plutarch says after Madame President leaves us to it. “Come now, Katniss, the world
won’t save itself on its own.”

Plutarch ambles down the corridor, undoubtedly satisfied about his wicked trumpet call back in COMMAND. Finally I’ve seen the light and embraced my calling. Never mind the little hiccups along the way, Plutarch says with a wink, it’s just not as easy to bend the rules here as it was back in the Capitol. But I got what I wanted so I better up my ante and perform.

And there’s no time to waste, not at all. Plutarch introduces me to a woman named Cressida. Going by the shaved head and vine tattoos it’s not a far off guess that she’s Capitol, and so is her three-man crew.

I make attempts at being social. “Plutarch… saved you too?”

“No, no!” says Cressida with a hearty laugh, motioning to one of her team to zoom in on me. Because of my lack of acting abilities (thanks!) she thinks it’s best to get every minute of my life henceforth on camera and cut together whatever screen-worthy moments I produce.

“We fled on our own. For you. For this.” She stops, thinking it over, then turns to her assistant. “Write that down, Mess. Brilliant. We can use it in a voice-over. Battle, maybe show some kids. Fade out. Oh, it’ll be perfect!”

Dear lord.

It’s Peeta’s final interview. He looks nothing like the boy I last saw in the arena. No makeup can conceal what his treatment in the Capitol must be like. One last time he pleads with the rebels to surrender. I barely catch what he’s saying, so loud is the tumult breaking loose in the mess hall. There’s a brief dent in volume with everyone watching petrified as Portia and the rest of Peeta’s prep team are executed following the interview.

I spend the rest of the day hidden away in some air vent thinking of Cinna making the wrong bets.

We launch the first propo within a week and it seems to be received well within the participating districts.

On Cressida’s begging request I’m cleared to be flown out into Eight so we can film some live material. Apparently I’m abysmal in the studio, so they want to try throwing me into the thick of the action in an attempt to tickle out my hidden acting skills.

We visit a hospital, where dying people ask me where I’ve been when they needed me most and some genuinely cry over the loss of my made-up unborn child. I puke behind smoking rubble while Gale keeps watch so Cressida can’t capture my terror on tape.

We end up filming in front of a fallen Capitol hovercraft. I smear some dust on my face so it looks like I’ve been in actual battle. Then we do about a dozen shots until Cressida is somewhat satisfied.

Back home I scrounge myself under the shower until my skin turns red, but still feel filthy when I step out. Gale waits for me outside my room. He has a pain-stricken look on his face.

“They bombed the hospital,” he tells me.

After we left, Snow dropped a nuke on hundreds of innocents.
Back to the toilet bowl and up come the turnips. I see the faces of the dead as I retch.

Snow knew I was there, that strike was no coincidence. Half an hour earlier and he could have solved the Mockingjay dilemma for good. Why wait?

To teach me a lesson, of course.

“What- what the hell? What did you do to her?”

We’re down on floor well-past-human-dignity where I’m reintroduced to Twelve’s escort, beat up, wig-less Effie Trinket.

“Oh, Katniss!”

I barely recognize the woman leaping into my arms. Thirteen stripped her of everything that made up her persona and I don’t mean the clothes and makeup. She lost weight. She’s scared. Wailing.

“Why is she locked up? Is she a prisoner?” I demand.

“You!” screeches Effie and lunges at Plutarch, taking him by surprise. I never thought I’d see Effie physically assaulting anyone, but Plutarch only escapes within an inch of his life because those fake fingernails were confiscated by Thirteen.

“Hey!”

I break them apart.

“Add her to the list,” I tell Plutarch, pissed. “Full pardon or your bird won’t sing.” I never thought much of Effie Trinket, but if there’s one person who sleepwalked into this whole rebellion thing it’s her. I doubt she even knows how to spell resistance.

I’m all the more intrigued to learn of her involvement after Plutarch pulls the necessary strings to get her out of confinement.

Effie switched sides in a being-in-the-wrong-place-at-the-wrong-time manner. She only wanted to let Haymitch know about a sponsor, Chastity Lush, who she managed to get on board in case I or Peeta needed anything in the arena. This was around the time we were getting prepared to hike up to the lightning tree, and Effie, as obvious to any bigger plans as I, simply wanted to help.

She had the misfortune of bumping into Haymitch as he was climbing the rooftop to hitch the ‘borrowed’ hovercraft, and, not wanting to endanger the mission, Haymitch spontaneously pulled her on board.

Effie resisted, screamed, alerted the guards on duty and that’s basically the story of how Haymitch ended up with a bullet in his liver and Effie down in Thirteen’s prison.

When told about Haymitch’s condition Effie breaks out in tears I don’t know how to stop. It takes some time for her to calm down, only to effectively launch into a second round when she realizes what a bleak future gray Thirteen holds for her.

Because I begin to look more like the corpse of a Mockingjay than a flaming bird of freedom President Coin makes a carve-out in her rule book and allows Gale and I to hunt above ground.

Thirteen’s forests are abundant with life. Where in Twelve it was a rare occurrence to find deer
tracks, they’re all over the place here. Thirteen’s population relies solely on the produce of their subterranean algae and soy farms. Because of the radiation levels in the early years following the Dark Days meat was big no-no. Later nobody really bothered adding it back into their diet. I’ve never had soy or algae before coming to Thirteen, so I’m happy beyond description when Gale extricates a squirrel from a snare.

We disobey the order to come back before sundown. Gale turns off the communicuff, which I’m sure has everybody in charge throwing fits. Somehow this feels like stepping outside the fence in Twelve. Breaking the rules. Life before the Hunger Games, when things were simple still.

I lean against Gale while we watch the squirrel roast.

“I wish we had run,” I say and think of Bonnie and Quill, who never made it to Thirteen, but at least died free. I feel as oppressed under Coin as I did under Snow. It’s like switching one evil for another. I don’t feel liberated at all.

“It’s different now,” says Gale, who actually believes in what we’re doing. “We could win this. We could change things. Make it better.”

I suppose I’m too self-absorbed to get the grand scale. I only see Peeta in the Capitol while more and more corpses pile on my slate because Coin and Snow make a spectacle out of ripping apart the country.

We sit in silence for a little while longer before I ask “What are you thinking about?” because the squirrel’s almost burnt and Gale, who’s usually in charge of meal prep, never lets good meat scorch.

“Something selfish,” says Gale and doesn’t make an effort to save our dinner.

“What’s going on?” I prod. More trouble?

“Peeta,” Gale says and my heart sinks. “I thought… I’ll never compete with that. No matter how much pain I’m in.”

He pokes a branch at the embers. “I don’t stand a chance if we don’t get him out of there. You’ll never be able to let him go. You’ll always feel wrong about being with me.”

I don’t know what to say. I can’t believe Gale’s putting me through this right now. I want to run away, now more than ever. From Snow, from Coin. From Gale, from this. Just run, hide, and be left alone.

A lump forms in my throat. My eyes sting. Then I feel his lips on my neck, chapped and rough, working their way up. I procure an image of Peeta, shackled in some dreary cell, dying a traitor’s death because I can’t get my act together to convince the world otherwise.

And then I kiss Gale back, awkward and needy, because it doesn’t matter anymore and because I’m so desperately lonely I can’t stand it. I empty my mind and let the sensations run through my body, happy to lose myself for the moment.

Then Gale pulls away slightly, and I feel his hand under my chin.

“Katniss,” he says.

The instant I open my eyes, the world seems disjointed. Gale examines my face closely. “What’s going on in your head?”
“I don’t know,” I whisper back. I’m on the verge of tears. What am I doing? Peeta rots away for me and I can’t find a better pastime than to drag his devotion through the dirt. I pull away, disgusted with this. With me.

Gale stares on, twists a knife I didn’t know was there. “It’s like kissing someone who’s drunk...”

I gasp in physical pain and then there’s no more stopping the sobs.

Gale puts a hand around me while I break down. I try to push him away, but I fail even at that.

“Can we please go back?” I manage.

Only I know there’s no going back from here.
Chapter 13

They transplanted Haymitch the day after I became the Mockingjay. A gesture of good faith on Coin’s part. I can’t believe I haven’t found the time to see him yet.

He’s a shadow of himself, shrunken and frail under the hospital sheets, and bizarrely sober.

“Just say it,” he presses, after we’ve stared at one another forever.

My voice is lined with gall. The open wound of betrayal. “You promised.”

“I know,” says Haymitch. “I know.”

There’s a sense of incompleteness. Not because he doesn’t apologize. But because we were a team and we had a deal and we both failed.

“Now you,” I tell him.

“I can’t believe you let him out of your sight that night.”

There, it’s out in the air. Another facet of my inadequacy.


Haymitch finds my hand. His touch is cold, sweaty. As if he hasn’t escaped Death’s grip just yet. I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to forgive him for picking me over Peeta, but I’m glad he’s alive.

I’ve found my first ally in this new arena.

Beetee holds a warning hand over the arrows. “I wouldn’t try those inside,” he says, points at the red stripe on the shaft. “Explosive.”

I’ve been ordered down to Weapons Research, where Beetee surprised me with a custom set of bow and arrows he handcrafted for me. They can do all kinds of things besides rudimentary shooting, like voice control and a bunch of secondary functions. I was just about to mushroom Thirteen without knowing it. Bet Coin wouldn’t be too happy about that.

Since I can’t really try more of the bow’s gimmicks underground I spend the rest of my tattooed report in weapons research L42 time chatting with Beetee. Coin recruited him into the tech department the moment he got cleared from medical, a fluent transition from IV to USB. I think Beetee’s pretty into it, but then again I don’t understand half of what he’s telling me. They’re trying to decode some fire wall around the Capitol network so they can stream right into the heart of the city. So far only the districts are seeing the propos.

I ask if he has any news about Peeta, being in Coin’s inner circle and all.

“Unfortunately, no,” he says. “Ah, but before I forget. One more thing.” He hands me a gray - the
surprise there - plastic cube, about the size of my fist. It has a single button. My finger hovers over it. I look at Beetee.

“Outside,” he suggests. “Best when you’re alone.”

So I don’t blow up innocent bystanders, got it.

I pocket whatever it is and thank Beetee for his presents. He tells me to send Finnick his way if I see him, which I promise to do.

The next time I go hunting I mistakenly reach for the wrong kind of arrow and pulverize a turkey on the spot. Woah. Gale asks a little anxiously how many more of those I have and could I please not point the bow his way, thanks.

The waves have calmed somewhat between the two of us, mostly because I try to shove that incident into the darkest crevices of my mind. Gale pretty much goes on like nothing happened. That’s something I value in Peeta, that- no, I stop myself. Hadn’t I decided not to start with that?

I tell Gale to go ahead and bring our catch down to Greasy Sae while I try out the little cube Beetee gave me. I find a suitable clearing where I can’t do too much collateral damage and place the device on the ground. I press the button and dog it to safety, waiting for the big bang.

Only none comes. Nothing happens. I inch closer, wary of a late detonation. Then I see it. It’s a video projection. I swoop up the portable player and catch the last seconds of the stream.

Possibly, I cease breathing.

I lie wide awake in my cot with the feed replaying before my inner eye. A surveillance camera. A bared room, one chair in the middle, one occupant. The details aren’t that great, but I get the gist of it.

I didn’t recognize her the first time around, but after hitting repeat I’m sure the girl in the video is Johanna Mason, shaved head and beat into submission.

Not much happens during the minute or so the record runs, only Johanna shifting in the chair she’s tied to, trying to find a somewhat comfortable position in what I presume is a time-out to interrogation or torture. That’s it. No messages, no threats, no demands.

But Beetee had it. And he gave it to me. Told me to look at it when I was alone, which I misinterpreted into ‘don’t blow up people’. He said outside so Thirteen’s security wouldn’t pick up my little discovery. So he’s hiding it. But why? And whom from?

What does he want me to do with it? Show it to Coin? Force her to make her move? Why take the roundabout route through me? Unless…

I press my lips into a tight line, staring holes into the gray ceiling.

Unless Coin knows.

She knows and she’s doing nothing about it. Breaking her promise. What gain could she draw from that, though? I’m playing along, doing everything she wants. I’m the perfect poster-child. The rebels love me.

And then it dawns on me.
They do love me, and that’s the problem. If Peeta was wondrously returned and pardoned for his actions Coin would lose a great deal of authority over her people and, even more so, over me. I wouldn’t dance to her piping once she played out the only bargaining chip she has against me.

I grip into my blanket. I think of Finnick, how he called Plutarch a liar. He wasn’t concussed from the lightning tree. He had a gut feeling, right from the start, and they found a way to silence him.

Shit.

What am I supposed to do with this now? I have no doubt that Peeta is held in the same facility as Johanna and I suppose Annie Cresta and any other abducted victors can’t be far either. But where is there? I sure can’t tell from the video. Does Beetee know? How am I going to ask him about it? He barely leaves Weapons Research and it’s not like I can pick his brains during one of the meetings in COMMAND.

Even then, what will I do with the information? Revert back to my original plan of hijacking a hovercraft? Confront Coin? I don’t even know how old the video is!

I count back the days since the arena. Almost four months. My stomach turns. I didn’t realize so much time had passed. Peeta looked like a ghoul in his last interview and that was a while ago. And someone really put Johanna through the ringer.

I’ve got to make my move before it’s too late.

“I’m too old for this,” complains Haymitch, leaning on his crane. He’s still winded from the surgery.

“Nonsense, you need to move,” I say, which is the excuse I used to get Haymitch out of medical and into the woods. A breath of fresh air to speed up his recovery and give the poor nurses a break. I hear Haymitch is making their lives hell and having fun at it.

Only Effie Trinket has a witty comeback for his every snark, but she’s had years to grow a thick skin. Feeling responsible for what happened and standing in the way of pretty much anything else Effie spends her pastime pampering Haymitch back to good health, much to his chagrin. She’s harder to bear with sober, apparently.

Thankfully Effie thinks it’s a glorious idea for Haymitch to have a change of scenery and why not put a little mentor-tribute bonding time on top of that that?

On the way up I snatch Finnick, turning this into a victors’ picnic or whatever you want to call it.

We amble for a while through the woods and I shoot a bird for show before instructing Finnick to go and collect some kindling down by the stream.

Then I purposefully throw the communicuff into the water, frying its circuits (that much I know about electronics).

I earn a confused look from Finnick. “What are you doing, Katniss?”

“Listen up,” I say and procure Beetee’s cube from my pocket. “I want you to look at this and I want you to act as if it’s nothing special, in case anyone’s watching.” Which they are, no doubt.

This rings their alarm bells and we gather round so any secret cameras won’t have a direct view of the holo. I’ve been through two Hunger Games, I know my surveillance, thanks a lot.
Finnick does a very poor job at keeping a straight face afterwards, which disappoints me a little given his history.

It’s Haymitch who speaks first. “Is there more?”

I shake my head.

“Who gave it to you?”

“Beetee.”

“Does anyone else know?”

“No. I wasn’t sure who to trust.”

“Mhm,” says Haymitch and nods. We proceed to cook the bird to keep up appearances, and also because I’m not sure when we can talk openly again.

“Did you see,” starts Finnick. “I mean did you look at her? She was barely there.” He draws a hand through his hair, probably piecing together what this means for Annie.

“She’s a fighter,” says Haymitch. “Besides, she knew the stakes.”

“Fuck the stakes, Haymitch! They’re taking her apart down there. Annie and Peeta, Snow knows their value against us,” Finnick says, glancing at me. He won’t kill them, is what he means. “But Johanna, she’s nothing to him. And the others? What about Rye and Sally and Elmo? You think he treats them any better? We’ve got to do something before it’s too late. Take things in our own hands. The Acid Queen’s not moving a finger.”

The Acid Queen. I let that roll on my tongue. What a befitting nickname.

“Anything we can work with?” Haymitch asks.

Finnick drops his gaze. “They’re damn tight-lipped down here. I don’t say I regret choking Heavensbee on that hovercraft, but it might not have been my best move.”

“He deserved it,” I offer. I might try it too, since it seems to be so popular among my friends. God knows, Plutarch’s driving me mad with his propos.

“I get most my intel out of Cressida,” says Finnick. “For all the trouble she caused back in the Capitol she’s really putting her back into this.”

“Talk about a change of heart,” Haymitch says, sarcasm lining his voice. Cressida doesn’t seem to be very loved among the victors. I wonder what her back story is.

“She knows things, but Heavensbee won’t spill out his heart to her. Then there’s Beetee, but he’s really careful. I’d rather not blow his cover. What about your cousin, Katniss?”

Gale? Apart from not being my cousin as half the world believes is probably more in the loop than all three of us together. I’d put my hand into fire for him any time. But he’s been kissing it up to Coin with that Soldier Hawthorne bullshit lately.

“I don’t know. I’ll try.”
Finnick says that the moment we step foot inside the City Circle he knows his way around enough to break away from the troops and commence our own little covert operation.

That’s how we end up under Soldier York’s tutelage, and does that woman have a sadistic streak. I trained plenty before the Quell and I have no doubts that Finnick did too, but it’s been almost five months of little physical exertion since.

“I’d give anything for a ReGen right now,” Finnick huffs at the end of a grueling 7 mile run.

ReGen is what I was given after the Games. An ominous little green pill to aid in recovery - I could have easily skipped all the way back to Twelve on a high and that a day after they pulled me from the arena sapped and half dead.

Cressida and annex follow us around for the reminder of the day, so we try to uphold camera-worthy faces. Finnick introduces me to the wave-and-grin technique. “I thought I was done with this,” he whispers to me.

I try to joke, “They can’t stop loving you, rebel or not.”

Finnick looks at me, all smiles and sunshine.

“If only you knew.”

Gale told me about the news. They managed to shut down the ring of firearms surrounding the Capitol. One hovercraft made it through, stocked to the brim with bombs. It caused havoc within the city before being taken down. Noteworthy damage includes the Ministry of Tessarae and the Tribute Center. The rebels’ way of telling Snow to go fuck himself.

I’m in Coin’s office the moment Gale stops talking.

“Send me to the Capitol,” I say. “I want to help the rebels in any way I can.”

I want a lot more than that, but I’m not about to indulge Coin in my personal agenda.

“It’s the perfect spot for a propo. Let Finnick come too.” I think on it. “Haymitch, even. It could be the turning point. Snow’s done.” I can see it, victory.

Coin looks at me with sincere regret. “I can’t.”

I don’t understand.

“I won’t send you there. We can’t afford to move forward if we don’t control Two.” Since I don’t seem to follow, she explains, “Even with all districts united we’re still severely outgunned.”

“But the hovercraft-”


Wait, condolences? What did I miss?

Coin reaches across the table, her hand over mine.

“Last we heard, the abducted victors were held below the Tribute Center.”

I stare out the window, glum. We’re on our way to District Two. I’ve suffered a considerable drop
in fighting spirit ever since that conversation with Coin.

Finnick and Haymitch think it’s a ruse, both of them having been around long enough to discredit any secret dungeon beneath the Training Center. There’s no such thing! She’s fucking with your head, says Haymitch, that mean old hag who’s cut from the same cloth as our beloved still-president. She wouldn’t order a kill-commando and then try to sell it to me as an accident. What an idiot move would that be?

So here I am, burrowing my way through to the Capitol all slow and steady. I abandon my post at the window and wander among sleeping soldiers to where Beetee and Gale hunch over plans.

“What’s that?” I ask.

They outline a combat procedure, a light bombing followed by a second, more severe detonation. What a blast! Ceasar would say. I stare at two Gamemakers planning for prime-time screening.

“I guess there are no rules anymore about what one person can do to another,” I mutter, disgusted.

Gale looks at me. He has matured into Soldier Hawthorne so much, I barely recognize him. How he wears the smell of blood and death like a perfume.

“This is war, Katniss, no child’s play. There are casualties. It’s inevitable.”

Child’s play? I stare at him like he’s not of this world.

What is he talking about?

The Hunger Games?

“Katniss, meet Lyme,” says Finnick and I shake hands with the tallest woman I’ve ever met.

“It’s an honor,” Lyme says. Not because I’m the Mockingjay, but because I’ve survived when my name was drawn. That invisible bond between victors.

Finnick and Lyme embrace like old friends.

“I would like to invite the two of you to dinner. Tonight. After we take the Nut.” A celebratory gesture.

“We gladly accept,” says Finnick for the both of us. Lyme nods and is called away before we can delve further into conversation.

“She’s a bit of a black sheep, Lyme. So wholly untouched by the usual Two loyalism. Long before you or I were even old enough for the reaping bowl,” says Finnick. “I hear she abandoned her post on the outskirts of the Capitol for this. I’m sure you’ll like her. I look forward to tonight. How about we get this propo under way?”

Regretfully, I never get around to having dinner with Lyme. Things spin out of control the moment Cressida and company get in gear.

The brisk recap includes me getting shot after giving a terrific speech to the survivors of the Nut. The rebels face a brutal setback when they lose The Battle For Two, after a cloak-and-dagger peacekeeper troop blows half their forces a tomb beneath the mountain. Lyme is among the many casualties.
As if that’s not bad enough there’s a bombing on Thirteen while I’m in the middle of surgery. The bunker walls are put to the test while someone slices a scalpel in pursuit of my bullet.

Prim confesses that Buttercup never made the evacuation countdown. I am spent for emotion. Not even a cat is safe in my vicinity.

Once I see Finnick’s propo I can’t look him in the eye again.

Shame consumes me.

Haymitch later visits me in the hospital. For once he’s not dealing out sarcasm. I wouldn’t have an ear for it anyway. I’m busy drowning in misery.

“When will it stop?” I ask, but don’t expect an answer. It’s been going for almost a century. The chances of me living to see an end are exceptionally slim.

“I convinced Coin to let you go to the Capitol,” Haymitch tells me. “I said ‘Madame Coin, in Twelve we know that when the canary stops singing the party’s over.’”

He pokes me softly in my side and I moan a little.

“So heal up, sweetheart,” he says.

But he means Here’s your one chance, Katniss. Don’t let me down.

Chapter End Notes

Woah, you say, another update?! I know. I’m on a writing binge. Let’s ride that wave.
Chapter Notes

Warnings for explicit violence, gore and a multitude of character deaths.

Borrowing lines from books and movies for consistency.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 14

Squad 451. I eye up my teammates.

Gale, whom I insisted on. Colonel Boggs, Coin’s order. Finnick, toying with his new high-tech trident (between the two of us we pretend his propo never aired).

A handful of Thirteen soldiers round out our little Star Squad. Accompanying us is Cressida and entourage, who beseeched Plutarch until he had no other choice but surrender.

I don’t mind. I won’t be sticking around for the long run. Beetee supplied me with a handful of possible locations where he thinks the victors could be held at — one viable option being the tribute center, but I try not to put too much thought into that.

“We’ll stay in the clear zones,” instructs Boggs and shows us a holo with all logged pods in the Capitol streets. Snow enlisted the help of his best-of-trade, the Gamemakers, to turn the city’s outer districts into a death maze.

I know after the first pod goes off, a fire fountain that melts half the block, that I won’t be getting far without that holo.

In the following days I commence preparations for my getaway. I let rations disappear when no one is looking and figure out how to best go about pilfering Boggs’ toy.

The evening before my planned defection Gale visits my tent. He doesn’t waste his time with niceties. Gale,

“We’ve been hunting together all our lives.” That alone says so much, he could stop talking right there. I don’t reply, keeping my eyes on the gun I’m cleaning.

Gale clears his throat when the silence continues. “You’re gonna leave me behind too?”

So he knows. I’m not surprised. I kept it from him, because this war has already taken so much from all of us. And to be honest, part of it was selfishness: I need someone to take care of Prim in case I fail.

I make a half-hearted attempt to sway him, although I know his mind is set. “Soldier York would recommend sticking to your unit.” I paid attention in training, you see.

“And I recommend we dog it tomorrow, at midnight. I asked Jackson to put me on guard duty already. You up for that?”
I smile. So he’s come around at the end of it all.

Tonight, I think.
Tonight we’ll make our move.

Gale stands guard as I sneak into the debrief tent. The same way I snuck past the Mellark’s house to the trashcan, so many years ago.

The holo, object of my desire, an arm’s length away. The key to Peeta’s cell. I drape away the canvas.

My smile turns upside down.

“It’s not there!” I hiss to Gale upon my return.

Deceit in the dark of night! My plans, fooled.

I don’t think of sugar cubes at all looking at Finnick.

“You.” Accusing. My teeth show, a predator bereft of its kill.

He has the holo. I hold out a hand, demanding.

“This isn’t only about you,” Finnick says and the pout on his lips is anything but playful. “You can’t do it alone. Saving the world.” He spins the device. “Take it from someone who’s tried.”

“It’s dangerous.” Suicidal, even. Your one chance, Katniss.

Finnick hands it to me.

“It’s acquittal.”

We get as far as three blocks.

Captain Jackson’s rifle hovers ominously in front of my face.

“You weren’t really…”

Thinking I’d get away with it? Why, my naivete survived two arenas and an underground bunker. Of course I was.

Finnick and Gale ruffle their feathers behind me. Because we stand a snowball’s chance in hell against six brass, armed to the teeth.

I pluck around for some rabbit ears in my hat of ideas.

“A secret mission,” I blazon. Straight off Coin’s desk. So classified, it never even hit paper. Half a dozen barrels don’t budge. They have enough horse sense not to buy it.

Until-

“She’s right,” says Colonel Boggs.
To my surprise. To everyone else’s horror.

He goes on to tell them how Madame President gave the order herself. Fictive target’s the Presidential Mansion, where we’re to arrest Snow before the rebels set off each and every death trap throughout the Capitol. Covert, clean, minimal casualties. Whoever keeps standing at the end of this needs survivors to rule over.

Jackson, second-in-command for a reason, smells foul play. Narrow-eyed, rifle up, she says, “Colonel?”

I bite my tongue not to call Boggs out on it. Since when are we friends? What’s his motivation grounded on? Wouldn’t it be easier to keep me to the safe zones instead of herding me through pod-city?

Unless, of course, Boggs laid open a vanilla truth to appease his team only to really be after some donkeywork for the Acid Queen. Like push me over the ledge of Snow’s balcony after he’s arrested, professionally hush-hush and uncannily convenient for Our Savior Holy.

With one Mockingjay swept under the carpet it’ll be easy enough for her to keep the other victors at bay. Peeta, enemy of the state. Finnick, leashed down tight over his Annie. Haymitch, planted at the bottom of a bottle, will hardly cause a ruckus.

I set my jaw, look at Gale. Here goes nothing.

“Orders are orders,” huffs Boggs.

It doesn’t convince Jackson, but she’s a woman indoctrinated to follow. Probably York’s teaching. When her gun lowers, so do the rest. That clarifies loyalties.

A uniform sigh makes the round. The symbolic peace pipe.

Cressida hisses in exasperation somewhere in the back.

“What do you mean you’re low on memory space?”

For all it’s worth I’m giving Boggs the benefit of doubt and try dearly to believe that he’s among the few people who don’t play me whichever way’s currently convenient.

You don’t condemn a guy who’s bleeding his guts out on the front porch of Panem’s Supreme Court.

Wrist-deep in what used to be Boggs’ thigh I clamp down on slippery bone while Jackson tries to get a fix on squirming arteries.

Boggs has a hand clenched around my sleeve. “Say your name.”

Jackson frowns. Blood spritzes from between her hands.

“Katniss Everdeen,” I croak.

The holo recalibrates.

We lose Leeg 2 and Messalla to the black wave of death because I refuse to let go of Boggs’ cooling corpse in time.
I rack up the numbers like a pro. Who holds dibs on Most Kills in an arena? Violet Keene, a mind blowing 19. Time to pass that title.

We stare each other down from behind our gas masks. It’s probably safe to breathe without the filter cartridge by now, but after Soldier Mitchell turned into a foamy mouth spastic no one wants to take chances.

Oh. Did I mention how Coin gave my eulogy and streamed it nationwide, Capitol included, all firewalls cracked? Someone pat Beetee on the shoulder in his cocoon back in the warren.

The news of my death rattles the conviction of my companions.

What in the heavens possessed Boggs to consign the holo to me? Was he on my team after all? Part of a sub-resistance, an anti-Coin faction? My imagination runs riot.

Despite Coin’s claims I’m also perfectly alive, never mind the record amount of pods we’ve tripped in the last two hours. I rack up some sympathy points for that. Why would Coin forsake the fabled Mockingjay when victory is so close?

Sadly, I can’t hold on to those for long.

“There’s no mission, is there?” Jackson breathes and the crack in her voice doesn’t get filtered out by her gaspirator. She’s sacrificed half her team not to martyrdom, but on a teenage girl’s whim.

Under my iron mask of spunk I’m deeply conflicted. How many lives have I bartered for Peeta by now? How many more have to die before I conclude this crusade? And what does the end look like — Peeta, brainwashed into some Capitol mutt, brought to heel after months of torture.

I think of Johanna, wilting away in that video. Months ago.

Then I strip off the gas mask and take a big gulp of air, praying that whatever fumes killed Mitchell are still hanging around.

“We’ll stay with you,” Gale decides for everyone. “To the end.”

I look at the rest, trapped between the devil and the deep blue sea. My own little set of chess pieces. Trembling at the thought of how I’ll pick them up and move them.

Beneath the streets another world exists, saturated with all new horrors.

I drag my feet through sewer water, trying to keep up with Pollux.

Avox sod. Expelled from sunlight they’re jam-packed into the Capitol’s sewer systems. Let the enemy of your enemy be your friend? That one bounced back on us.

Nobody expected subterranean pods.

Katnisssss, hiss the boogie-men from vents and pipes. Slick, eyeless faces, rose breath, hive minds.

They crawl through the ceilings and the walls and call on bad little girls.

Like me.
White, four-limbed, about the size of a full-grown human, but that’s where the comparisons stop. Naked, with long reptilian tails, arched backs and heads that jut forward.

They swarm over us, tear into what is left of Squad 451. One clamps down on Homes’ neck, snapping it off at the base with hardly any effort.

I grab Pollux’s arm. “What’s the quickest way above ground?”

The lizards skitter after us as we tag our guide, already blase about their latest kill.

We’re in the main sewer now. A yard below a poisonous brew of human waste, garbage and chemical runoff bubbles by us. I pussyfoot at the edge, but panicked bodies press into my own and I lose balance.

I swallow some of the vile stuff and when I resurface I do so in the face of a mutt, crooked bloody teeth begging to rip into my throat.

A trident lodges through its skull and then there’s Gale pulling me up and we’re on the run again.

A grenade goes off in the back. The lizards howl in both rage and pain. When I look over my shoulder I see them taking a huge chunk out of Castor, of one another, even of their own bodies. They’re mad with whatever purpose the Gamemakers coded into them.

The others are shouting at me. Strong arms slam me into a ladder. Gale unleashes some of his explosive tipped arrows. I wrap slippery fingers around the rungs, afraid to let go of my weapon but unable to hold on to both at the same time.

Pollux hoists me onto the next level, gestures for me to take point while he works on the manhole above. I begin frantically pulling people up off the ladder. Cressida, Gale, Jackson, Leeg 1. That’s it.

“Climb!” Gale barks at me. Four claw marks across his chest. Heavy bleeding.

A human cry from below jerks our heads.

“Someone’s still alive!” I yell.

I shine the light down the shaft. Multiple hands restrain me. Pollux opened the hatch. A way out.

“We need to go!” Jackson commands.

“No!” I retaliate. There in the dark! I can just make out Finnick, dragging himself up the rungs. His trident is gone. So is half his arm. God. Three mutts claw at him. They’ll have him. He’s lost.

“Katniss!”

I fire blindly, unsure who I’m hitting. But the mutts let go and someone grabs Finnick by the vest, pulling up what is left of him.

I slide the holo from my belt and choke out “nightlock, nightlock, nightlock!” before launching it into the tunnel.

There’s nowhere to duck from the explosion. I’m three rungs to the surface when the bomb blows. The blast propels me into the air. My back burns. I hit a slab of concrete and nearly black out, but all around me voices join a chorus of screams and I realize we’ve emerged in the middle of some
gathering.

People shriek, mutts screech. They pool out of the manhole like water from a burst pipe.

I get on my hands and feet, crawl for my life. A knee connects to my head, someone steps on my fingers. A death stampede. The masses mobilize. The lizards make a feast of whatever they can get their claws into.

Where are the others?

Gunshots join the ambient noise. The cavalry has come!

I find myself somewhere on the periphery of the main action when I finally get to my feet.

I’m in the City Circle. Behind the massacre looms Snow’s immaculate mansion.

“Katniss!”

Gale emerges from in between bodies. He pushes into me, doesn’t stop, pulls me along. He reeks of blood and roses.

Above us a hovercraft flits through the sky, bearing the white cross of salvation.

A blast pellets me into a wall.

Thirteen medics dispatch from the carrier.

Among them, an all too familiar blond braid.

I’m pushing through the crowd, grinding past human and mutt alike. Trying to shout her name above the roar.

Another hovercraft passes by, unloading a belly of silver packages. Those still alive raise their arms heavenward. Everyone in Panem knows the meaning of a parachute.

No, I think. No! A trap! I’ve been there when it was birthed.

A wail rises from the crowd. Half the parachutes explode simultaneously, mangling their recipients and anybody standing close to them.

I’m almost there.

Fingertips on my shoulders. Gale, the bastard, knowing what is to come. I shake him off.

I rasp at the top of my lungs, will her to search for cover. For just a moment she catches sight of me, her lips form my name.

Then one of the lizards lobs onto her.

And the rest of the parachutes go off.

I embrace Gale. That’s the only thing I am clearly aware of.

We’re both on fire. His body is on top of me. It’s so hot, I think his skin melts onto mine in places.
I grope around snow and pebble stones and severed limbs.

Get off, I want to say, but I can only enunciate a doleful moan. It feels like my face is gone. I can barely breathe.

After an infinity someone lifts the dead weight off my chest. For a moment I fear it’s a lizard, scenting the life in me and wanting my end.

I scream when Gale is taken away. My body falls apart without him holding me together.

“She’s still…” Jumbled voices. Alive, I finish in my head, but surely they’re not talking about me. I hope they mean Prim.

The moment they scoop me up my thread on consciousness snaps.

There’s one last, pitiful gurgle, a sorry climax.

Curtain call.

The Girl On Fire bows out.

Standing ovations.

Cinna would be clapping.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, folks. Very intense here.

Please let me know your thoughts on this.

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